

(Music playing)

(Clip of Dionicio speaking Spanish)

Narrator: That was Dionisio Alarcón,

A man from Colombia who has committed his life

To helping his fellow citizens recover from trauma.

In Colombia, the most recent armed conflict started in the 1960s.

Guerrilla groups sought to dismantle the existing political and economic system, paramilitary groups supported the existing powers-that-be, and drug cartels intertwined with all these armed groups.

This war has claimed the lives of over 200,000 people and uprooted around seven million others.

As the violence settled in his region of Colombia, Dionisio wanted to do something to contribute to the healing.

So, he turned to storytelling to help people process their trauma.

After getting some support from the National Center for Historic Memory, he and some others moved forward with gathering the stories.

Here's Dionicio again, with the English translation spoken by Nelson Martinez.

Dionisio speaking spanish

Nelson for Dionicio: That was quite a tedious and even quite an emotional task.

Because so many things happened to the people who were immersed in the armed conflict.

We tried to create the space, the conditions, for each person to feel comfortable enough to be able to say what—and choose with whom they wanted to share their story.

Narrator: Once they had gathered the stories of 600 people, they began writing a book together. Rather than reporting the stories as they were, Dionisio decided to take a more creative approach.

Dionisio: We began to write it from the point of view of nature itself. We made the analogy of writing about trees.

Narrator: Writing from the perspective of trees was particularly meaningful because Dionisio and the people he worked with, were from the highlands, where armed conflict had not only impacted people but also forests.

Dionisio: We began to narrate the history of the highlands by talking about the parts of some trees, native trees of the region because trees symbolize permanence.

We used the root to show the beginning of our existence in the area, when our grandparents first arrived.

We then went up the trunk, which spoke of how the nucleus of the armed conflict was established in the area. And we went up towards the branches, which symbolized the expansion of the armed conflict.

Trees have undergrowth, they have parasitic plants that suck the life out of the trees, strip them of sap and kill them.

That was the armed conflict taking to the highlands.

Narrator: Dionisio and his fellow writers wrote not only for themselves, but also to serve as a warning for the next generation.

Dionisio: That's why we tell everything we lived through in the armed conflict. So youth will not be fooled if the armed actors arrive again, as it seems they are doing.

We tell those stories so they see that it does not pay, that there are many ways, without using or being in armed groups, to claim your rights.

Narrator: Dionisio didn't rely only on stories to dissuade the youth though, he knew that they would need to see they had other options.

So, he helped start an organization called Alta Montaña, connecting 50 communities in the Montes de Maria region.

Dionisio: We have tried to promote the development of the region, through education, schools, health, roads so youth don't feel the same limitations we had that made the region easy prey for the armed groups to take over.

Unfortunately, in Colombia, violence has become a commercial issue. A business issue.

There are people who like to promote discord because they get some economic benefit from it.

Narrator: Impacts of the war continue, but Dionisio and others remain consistently committed to another way.

Dionisio: We just want to live in peace.

The armed conflict took many things from us. It took our relatives, it took our friends, it took our tranquility, it took our love, it took everything.

Communication with our neighbor changed because we no longer trusted him, we couldn't speak one on one sincerely because we didn't know if he was now our enemy.

There is still a lot of resentment, and it is very difficult. But for us, peace is as necessary as air, as food.

Sometimes we want to throw in the towel, but finally, when we put our heads on the pillow each night, we start to think again and say, "If we don't do it, who will?"

Music outro

Scott: That was Nelson Martinez, reading a translation of words from Dionisio Alarcón, from Alta Montaña, an initiative supported by Sembrandopaz, one of MCC's partners in Colombia. That story was narrated by producer Meghan Mast.

Sembrandopaz works throughout the region in communities affected by the armed conflict, focusing on peacebuilding, dialogue, grassroots projects and advocacy.

You're listening to Relief, Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

Today on the show, we're talking about the importance of integrating peace and development in a region that has a long history of armed conflict.

Sara Melgarejo has a front-row seat to the peacebuilding work in Colombia.

She was born in Bogota, the capital of Colombia, where she grew up as part of a Mennonite church.

Today she works as a program coordinator for MCC, supporting our partners as they work for peace.

And she joins me here today, via Zoom. You'll notice that throughout the interview, there is some traffic noises and other background noise.

Let that lend to the authenticity of the conversation as YOU transport your imagination to Bogota.

Now to our conversation.

Welcome, Sara, we're eager to learn from you today.

Sara: Thank you. I'm really excited and a little bit nervous to be with you today.

Scott: I appreciate your honesty. I'll do my best to put you at ease. Can you start by giving us some context for what is happening right now in Colombia?

Sara: Yes, so right now we are experiencing two types of violence. Like as right now, we have the violence that we've been experiences for experiencing for the past 60 years or so. But also we are experiencing a different type of violence that is happening mostly in the cities, and is a violent repression to a national strike that started on April 28.

So, the first violence that we've been experiences for all these years, is more like a structural violence, with lack of participation in equal in equal opportunities, physical

violence, gender violence, we also have experienced lack of employments and just in general lack of opportunities that people haven't had in the past 60 years. But also, with the conflict and the internal conflict that we've been living for the past 60 years, we also experience the recruitment of children and youth by armed groups, killing of communities, sexual violence, displacements and just generations that have been born and only known this kind of violence. So that also brings different just repercussions, trauma and other things like that.

But also, the second kind of violence that we are experiencing right now is this violent response to the protests that have been going on for over the past few weeks. And this is based on all the things that I just mentioned, because people are tired of living and reliving all these things, and nothing is changing. So, we have the lack of implementation of the Peace Accords. But also, we have killings of social leaders on top of everything else that is happening. So, people are protesting to that and have been violently stopped. Let's say that. So those are kind of the things that are happening right now in Colombia.

Scott: Can you tell us how MCC partners are responding to this violence in this in these conflicts?

Sara: Yeah, so in Colombia, we only work with Anabaptist churches or institutions. And here we believe that peace is holistic. And this is based on John 10:10 when Jesus promised to bring life in abundance. And it just frames everything that our partners do, on the things that we do as well and working for peace and their ministries. So, it just shapes everything. About five years ago, there was a peace accord that was signed, and it has six main topics. So, it was about land restitution, political participation, the end of the armed conflict. Also, topics around illegal drugs, but also victim's reparation, and the monitoring of these implementation like that these things were going to happen.

So even when our partners don't work directly with the government, they are working towards these six points, or these topics. So, for example, we have some partners that work in rural areas helping people with land restitution, they're teaching them about the rights that they have on helping people to obtain the land titles that were taken away from them. Other partners also work teaching communities about the rights they have and their political participation that they have with different governmental institutions. To claim those rights, other partners work with farmers on crop substitution of illegal crops. So, they do it by hand or manually. And this doesn't affect the land itself, like the soil, so they can also grow other things that they can use for their own livelihoods. Other partners are also working with victims in the restitution of the rights and the process that they can undertake to make that happen. And our partners just prioritize dignity of life and peacebuilding as something that is both personal and political in all the things that they do.

Scott: How are these projects themselves promoting peace building in Colombia.

Sara: Um, like I said, everything is contributing to peace building. It's not something that is far from peace building. The literal things that our communities or our partners are doing in these communities are helping them to be in a more just and more peaceful place. So, for example, we have times where in schools we have this project with a school mediation, where we can see how the whole school culture has been changed because of the programs that they have, because kids are talking about not responding in a violent way in the communities that they have.

Also, in rural areas, for example, we see people that are not struggling as much being able to find food or have the basic needs covered. So, I think that's also something that our partners are thinking of, on the way that they build peace is with these little changes that are affecting the communities that they work with.

Scott: Why is documenting people's stories who have experienced violence, an important part of peacebuilding?

Sara: This is important because of two main reasons, we think. One is because even when it's really hard to remember, and when it's a struggle to just think back about all these bad things that happened to you or to your community, it's also really important that we remember and that we know what happened. And don't forget about that.

We also know that by recording this and knowing that what happened and how we responded, it also helps us respond in a different way if something happens again.

So that's one way. Another thing or another reason why it is important to have these records is because we can do advocacy, and see how different policies are affecting and like the direct effect that these policies have in Colombia and the increase of violence that we have, because of different policies.

So, we can advocate against these or just show examples of the things that are happening in here by recording those and showing other people what is happening here.

Scott: So, if someone was to record another person's story, what does that process look like?

Sara: Well, it can be different. So, I know that we have, one of our partners have a very detailed process. And they do it in different ways. So, one of the ways that they do is that they go to the different communities, and talk with the people that were part of, let's say a violation of human rights.

So, they go to the communities. And sometimes if they are able to talk to a person, they can do that directly. And as different questions of when it happened, what happened, who was involved, who was affected, and just like, details of this specific moment and violation, so they can classify that and share with that.

Sometimes is not possible to to the people that are affected because they've been displaced, or they are no longer in the community. So, they talk with the people around. They have a lot of contacts with the different communities, they talk with pastors, they talk with different leaders around that.

But they are always thinking about recording what is happening in a very structured way. So they can also use that information for different reports and different advocacy work that they do always also obviously thinking about the effects that it can have in the person that they're talking or in the community that they are talking with.

Scott: What have you learned about peace building from the work that you've done,

Sara: I think I've been really blessed even when I grew up in Colombia, to see this part of peacebuilding. Because I see now how peace is holistic. And it doesn't look just one way.

Each one of us has a different way of seeing need, each one of us has a different way of doing things in peacebuilding or working towards building peace. So, I think that's one of the things that I've learned. It doesn't look exactly the same, with each partner or each place that we work with.

And also, peacebuilding is not something that is going to happen fast. This is something that is a work of our lifetime. And it requires a lot of patience. Many of our partners continue to seek change and build peace, even if it's these small changes. We have learners have been working for over 30 years, and there's still convinced that they have to keep doing it, because it's not just one project that is gonna change everything, but is the little actions that they continue doing, and continue believing in. So those are the main things that that I've learned, working with the partners that we do,

Scott: What would peace look like in Colombia, in your mind?

Sara: In my mind, that will be that all these lack of opportunities and inequality are no longer something that we have to live with. I believe that people's needs are going to be met. And it's gonna help shape the rest of their society. Because when people's needs are met, the very basic things that they can do education, food, and live in, not having to stress about just these daily things and every single thing that is happening and how that's gonna affect them. I think that's going to make our society different and make people be able to leave and not just survive in this society that we are right now.

Scott: What do you think are some of the bigger misconceptions that people have about Colombia?

Sara: *(laughs)* Well, I think in general, people think that this is a terrible place where everything is bad and everything is sad, and that we just live in this terrible place. Yeah, and that we are all bad. And I don't think that's true at all.

Yeah, based on people that have come and like all these fears that they have before they're coming in and all that. Or the little that they hear from, from the news, how terrible these places. And I think that's one misconception. Another one is that after the peace accord was signed, like, we have no more conflict, we have no more problems anymore. People just hear, oh, they have a peace accord so now everything is fixed. And that was not sadly the reality for us because of after all these years, they are still not, like the things that we're talking in that peace accord are not things that are actually happening on this six topics that I talked about at the beginning. Those are still not being implemented. The government is not doing the things that that they agreed. So that's another misconception.

Scott: You said that people have a misconception that everything is bad in Colombia. How would you describe it? How would you describe life in Colombia?

Sara: I think that life in Colombia...Colombia is itself it's a beautiful place. And I don't think people know that we have all these different regions with all these different climates and temperatures. And like, for example, here in Bogota, where I live, it's mostly cold and sometimes rainy. But then we have places that is really hot and humid. But we also have our deserts and all these different in places that Colombia is just amazing to see.

Life in Colombia can be challenging, obviously, but I don't think it's always that way. Because of the circumstances that we live, we are really happy people that know that, even in the hard times, there's something to smile about, something to laugh about, something to joke about, even when it's hard. We are people that just live the life the best that we can, and, and fight for a better life.

We are people that sometimes, hopefully most of the time for some people, we are hopeful for the future, where people that that are gonna keep going, we are not going to give up. We've been going through a really hard time. And we know that, but also there are other things in our life that we can do. And keep believing is one of those.

Scott: What are ways that you work to bring about peace in your personal relationships? How do you be a peacemaker in your everyday?

Sara: Well, one, believing that peace building is possible. And I work that in the relationships that I have, I think if we start small in those relationships, and treating

people with respect and dignity in every situation, I think that's one small thing that I can do every day for peacebuilding.

And another thing is that work that I do with MCC, I still believe what we're doing. I love working with the partners and seeing the passion that they have. Even with other people, my friends and other people just are really confused by what I do and why I work in a nonprofit and working with these partners. They think that I could do something else or something different, but I still believe that what we do is working towards the reality that I believe in. So those are two of the things that I can think of that I do in my personal life for peacebuilding.

Scott: So, it sounds like you have some friends, maybe some family who don't understand your work. How do you explain why you do what you do to those people?

Sara: That's a hard one. Because when people don't believe that a better future is possible it's really hard to convince them otherwise. I've had really hard conversations with friends and family about just not responding in a violent way to other people or even among our family or friends.

So, just trying to explain how these little things are actually working and how I believe that a different way is possible and I think that's not necessarily something that people still believe in. Like I said, we've been living in conflict for the past 60 years and people are just used to by now to those ways.

Scott: It sounds to me like you have to live with a certain amount of optimism and hope to do this work. Is that something that you think about?

Sara: Yeah, um, yeah. I think that if we don't have that little bit of optimism, it's really hard to continue because it's not an easy process, it's not a fast process. And we just need to keep going and have that little something that light kind of at the end of the tunnel that we think, yes, this is where we are, but we can get there. And we are going to get there. So definitely having that hope. And that optimism, even when sometimes it's hard. I can't say that all the time I'm really hopeful for the future. But I think it's definitely something to have to make these work a little bit easier to do when the hard times or the harder times come.

Scott: The conflicts in Colombia have been going on for a long time. What do you hope to see change in the future?

Sara: I hope that the peace accord is actually implemented and that would help us and the communities in different rural areas to have a better and brighter future. And sometimes I feel too optimistic. But I do believe in my heart that these things are going to happen. Even when we live in these really hard times. We still believe that a better world is possible and that God is going to be with us along the way. So I do believe that

things can change. And seeing even in the small projects that we have that people are acting in a different way and responding in a different way gives me hope that things can be different in the future.

Scott: Sara, is there anything that I didn't ask that you would like me to ask? So you could answer? Is there some something else that you want to say that you didn't get to say?

Sara: No, I think that was good.

Scott: You're very good at dealing with those last half a dozen questions or so.

Sara: *(laughs)* Thank you. That's good to hear.

Scott: Yeah, it's you, you prompted me to think about a lot of things that I wasn't prepared to be asking you when we came in. So I appreciate that. And I do appreciate you just rolling with it. Thank you.

Sara: No, problem. Thank you for for asking those other questions. I think those were good. But I don't know if they are specific enough for people in the States or Canada to understand what I mean. Yeah.

Scott: No, I think so. I think so. And we also recognise you don't speak for all of Colombia, so... *(laughs)*

Sara: That's true. That's true. That's another hard part. Like, I'm just trying to, like, say what I think but also, it's really hard because my experience is definitely different from people in other parts of Colombia, so...

Scott: Just like the questions I'm asking are not the same questions that everybody else in North America would ask, right? This is what we learn that we all have different life experiences. We all have different perspectives. And I think that's one of the joys of being able to speak to folks, people like you, I get to hear a perspective and yours is one and it's been a delight speaking with you.

Sara: Oh, thank you so much.

That was Sara Melgarejo, a program coordinator for MCC, supporting our partners as they work for peace in Bogota, Colombia.

Relief, Development and Podcast is produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced by Meghan Mast and Linda Espenshade. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

We'll be taking a break next month from the show and will be back again in October.

Thank you again to Sara Melgarejo for speaking with me, and special thanks to Dionisio Alcaron at the beginning of the show for sharing his story, and to Nelson Martinez for lending his voice.

Well, that's it for this episode. If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen!

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, and take good care.

(MUSIC PLAYS US OUT)