

# Public policy development and professional development: the experience of social work in the Unidad de Restitución de Tierras in Colombia

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## Abstract

In Social work training, there are different ways of understanding academic practice. Some authors define it as the space where the student learns to "be a Social worker". In the Social work practice in the Land Restitution Unit, the students who were in the secondary occupation component not only came close to what professional performance is, but were witnesses to how a public policy is built. This experience was systematized in 2022 and includes the experiences of students, tutors, and teachers between 2013 and 2020. As a methodological option, it was developed from the five-step proposal of Jara-Holliday (2018). Among the findings, we highlight that in making the issue of second occupants a component of policy, students made concrete contributions to the development of characterization tools, in the processes of training aimed at officials, and in the analysis of complex cases. They also consolidated their training process by being able to read and connect the macro and micro contexts of land dispossession, by facing the dilemmas and tensions that reality poses to the action of the State, and by seeing the practice and research connection materialized. Finally, the reflections on what has been lived have allowed us to see that dissatisfaction, frustration, and uncertainty are primary components of social workers' duties.

**Keywords:** Social Work; Academic training; Professional practices; Public policy; Land restitution; Secondary occupants.

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# Construcción de política pública y formación profesional: la experiencia del Trabajo Social en la Unidad de Restitución de Tierras en Colombia

## Resumen

En la formación en Trabajo social existen diferentes maneras de entender la práctica académica. Algunos autores la definen como el espacio donde el estudiantado aprende a “ser un/una trabajador social”. En la práctica de Trabajo Social en la Unidad de Restitución de Tierras, las estudiantes que estuvieron en el componente de ocupación secundaria no sólo se acercaron a lo que es el desempeño profesional, sino que pudieron dar testimonio de cómo se construye una política pública. La sistematización de esta experiencia se llevó a cabo en 2022 y recoge la vivencia de estudiantes, tutores y docente, entre 2013 y 2020. Como opción metodológica, se desarrolló a partir de la propuesta de cinco pasos de Jara-Holliday (2018). Entre los hallazgos destacamos que, al convertir el tema de segundos ocupantes en un componente de la política, las estudiantes hicieron aportes concretos en el desarrollo de herramientas de caracterización, en los procesos de formación dirigido a funcionarios, así como en el análisis de casos complejos. Igualmente consolidaron su proceso de formación al lograr leer y conectar los contextos macro y micro del despojo de tierras, al enfrentar los dilemas y las tensiones que la realidad plantea a la acción del Estado, y al ver materializada la conexión investigación-intervención de la que tanto hablamos en la literatura en Trabajo social. Finalmente, las reflexiones sobre lo vivido permitieron ver que la inconformidad, la frustración y la incertidumbre acompañan el quehacer del trabajador social.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajo Social; Formación académica; Prácticas profesionales; Política pública; Restitución de tierras; Ocupación secundaria.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction, 2. Context, 3. Methodology, 4. Findings: Public Policy Construction and Professional Consolidation, 4.1 How we build public policy, 4.2 An approach to professional practice and the roles of intervention leaders. How does public policy shape us? 5. Conclusions, 6. Bibliographic references.



## 1. Introducción

### Academic internships in Social Work

In an undergraduate program in Social Work, academic internships constitute a key component of training. The team conceives these internships from the interrelation between approaches, epistemics, and political commitments, and pedagogical choices are considered consistent with the professional *ethos* and the future practice context.

Given the vast number of possibilities for implementing internships, the literature shows more or less defined trends. Some are pragmatic and empiricist in nature, focusing on applying the theoretical and methodological components studied during the academic portion of the curriculum, as a way to "bring it down to reality". Other approaches emphasize the articulating, dialogical nature that enables understanding of the dialectic approach and, consequently, the dilemmas that emerge in professional practice. Finally, other approaches propose understanding the practical component not just as another -and final- within the academic curriculum, but rather as the pedagogy inherent to social work studies, which permeates the entire curriculum. According to this latter view, *reality* is nothing more than the setting in which the subject develops, encompassing both the academic and training trajectory, the research and reflective approach scenarios, as well as the problems addressed in training and, of course, the territories that connect the above mentioned with the institutional, community, familiar and subjective experiences in which the students and social workers carry out our professional performance.

Blanco-García (2021) sets out the first trend, based on the definition of professional internships given by Carmina Puig-Cruells, who very simply understands them as the "set of activities and functions of social workers, which are carried out both within the framework of collaborating institutions and those carried out within the university framework (p. 261). The author adds that the internship emphasizes putting the theoretical and methodological inputs acquired in the curriculum into the context and service spaces, in such a way that it is possible to demonstrate and strengthen the professional competence of future social workers.

The second trend evaluated was proposed by Parola (2020), who defines the professional practice of social workers, placing the academic internships during the undergraduate curriculum. Thus, the author points out:

(...) The professional practice of Social Work can be defined as the set of actions within an institutional framework that members of a collective carry out, using legal and methodological frameworks, as well as ethical and political frameworks, with the intent of transforming problematic situations according to specific demands made by diverse subjects. (Parola, 2020, p. 75)

This exercise prompts questions about autonomy, contradictions, and dilemmas between self and institutional ethical parameters and the possibilities of fundamental transformation and knowledge enrichment.

Minding these ideas as background, the difference between professional practice and internship resides in intent, since the latter involves the student learning the professional practice, hence becoming a Social Worker. Also, professors and supervisors assess this exercise and encourage students to reflect and construct new means to perceive reality dialogically. Thus, beyond establishing itself solely as a *know-how*, internships reveal stages of interpretation, critical connection with reality, deconstruction of social categories, knowledge construction and deployment of ethical and political stakes regarding subjects and social change surrounding the social worker's *ethos*. Parola, 2020).

The last trend is referred to by Concha-Toro *et al.* (2020), whose state-of-the-art practice reveals several references around the practical approach being an essential part of academic formation in Social Work, which means not merely a requirement or a final subject or a space that exists far from the university grounds, but rather as an element that transcends the academic curriculum and becomes visible throughout classes, in such a way that theories and methodologies are connected and contrasted with subjects learned throughout the undergrad in specific situations and scenarios. In this sense, Bogo (2015) and Wayne *et al.* (2010) share a similar perspective in their research articles.

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Whenever we consider the intentions for developing the practical component in social work, expert authors concur that it allows for exteriorizing diverse emotions, an important part of social work. Concha-Toro *et al.* (2020) point out the importance of creating awareness of feelings, emotions, and attitudes, which translates as a benefit on its own and to the users of this action.

These trends trace a path to understanding the experience gathered in this article and demonstrate the connection between academic internships, formation, the unfolding of theoretical and cognitive skills and emotional aspects that the Social Work students from the National University of Colombia have developed and tested while working at the Land Restitution Unit, on the topic of secondary occupation.

## 2. Context

### Land restitution and the victims' Law

In 2011, Colombia enacted Law 1448 of 2011 that due to its transitional nature, sought to pave a way for peace from conflict, acknowledging the damages and impacts suffered by a wide range of population groups establishing special measure for reparation (individual or collective), rehabilitation, compensation, satisfaction, guarantees of non-repetition, and above all, land



restitution. Three institutions were created to fulfill the latter measure's purposes: The Victims' Unit, the National Center of Historical Memory, and the Land Restitution Unit (URT in Spanish). These three institutions have played an important role in the development and progress of land restitution.

Notably, the restitution measure seeks to reverse land dispossession and forced abandonment derived from the loss of property, as well as sanction those responsible for dispossessing the rural population by violent means and taking advantage of situations of poor protection and irregularity caused by the conflict. Restitution, being the preferential measure of reparation, solely considers compensation either in the form of another property or money, in case there is an ongoing threat to the requesting victim, specifically when authorities identify the property in a natural hazard zone or when it has lost its rural character or rural **purpose**, i.e., highway construction or housing development.

The URT manages the first stage, which serves as the gateway to the process by requiring the property's registration in the Registry of Forcibly Dispossessed and Abandoned Lands (RTDAF in Spanish), based on the request made by the victim and after a detailed analysis of the circumstances of the manner, time, and place in which the events took place. Judges and magistrates specialized in land restitution oversee the second stage. They receive the victim's request and determine restitution, seeking to articulate complementary measures within the framework of comprehensive reparation. This approach is known as transformative reparation.<sup>1</sup>

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Once the restitution judges issue the ruling, their authority remains intact as they are empowered to monitor and require the relevant institutions to comply with said rulings. This stage aims to effectively and fully guarantee the victims' rights.

In the chronology of this policy carried out in the present systematization exercise, participants distinguish six key moments, the first of which was the issuance of Law 1448 of 2011 (Ley 1448 de 2011):

1. The Project for the Protection of Land and Assets of Displaced Populations (2003-2011) emerged with the strong support of international cooperation. It involved a team of experts who designed legal instruments and tools to prevent the transfer of abandoned properties due to the internal armed conflict. This preliminary work provided important operational and informational input to the Land Restitution Unit.

<sup>1</sup> According to Safon y Uprimny (2009, citado en Bolívar-Jaime y Vásquez-Cruz, 2017, p. 18), "the purpose of reparation cannot be limited to returning the victim to the situation of poverty and vulnerability in which they were before the victimization, as this would be incompatible with the social rule of law." The concept of transformative reparation focuses on the articulation and complementarity between the two policies [reparation policy and social policy], therefore reparation as a mechanism of transitional justice, is related to the tools and instruments of social policy, in a way that the most vulnerable people are compensated and guaranteed an increase in the enjoyment of rights" (Bolívar-Jaime y Vásquez-Cruz, 2017, p. 18).

2. The institutional organization and step-by-step administrative process (2011-2013). The Law established a temporary institutional framework that included, in addition to creating an administrative entity (URT), establishing a special jurisdiction for the issue. In the case of the Land Restitution Unit, the Land Projection Project team was the core team that, barely a year after lawmakers enacted the Law, tripled in size and national coverage. This team creates protocols for individual and collective (Afro, Indigenous, and Rom) restitution routes. It also took on the first pilot cases in the country's north, most of which the team placed in the Montes de Maria region.
3. During this period, discussions center on the number of hectares at stake in the restitution process, ranging from 300,000 - a more conservative estimate - to 6,000,000 - a maximum figure that comes from the portion of displaced citizens who declare that armed actors forced them to leave behind land and other assets-, which begins to cast doubt on the State's capacity to complete this reparation measure successfully.
4. Implementation in former paramilitary-controlled areas and the first rulings (2014-2016). With the disarmament of paramilitary groups and progress in land protection in this area, the Unit decides to begin implementing the new Law. The balance is positive regarding the transformative content of the rulings and the process of constructing the cases themselves; however, there were also the first situations where people not related to the dispossession had to leave these lands. This process became known as the secondary occupation phenomenon.
5. The demobilization of the FARC-EP and the massive opening of the process in the south of the country (2017-2018). With the positive news of the agreement signing between the national government and the FARC-EP and the inclusion of the restitution as the first point of the agreement, the Unit opened new offices. It strengthened existing ones in the areas controlled by this group, especially in Caquetá, Guaviare, and Meta. Although it has been underway for a long time, the restitution operation in these areas faced new challenges related primarily to the guerrilla's actions in land redistribution and conflict resolution.
6. Restitution process setbacks (2018-2022). Two events marked this period and affected the progress of the process: first, the COVID-19 pandemic halted fieldwork and required the adaptation of systems to allow officials and judges to work from home; and second, the election of President Duque from the right-wing Democratic Center party, who openly opposes the peace agreement with the FARC-EP. That led to a high rate of denials of new requests in the Unit's land restitution registry, which mainly constitutes the gateway to the process. Victims' organizations and academics who have monitored the process closely, such as Dejusticia and the Land Observatory of Rosario University, pointed that out.
7. Current Moment: The Government of Change and the Path to Total Peace (2022-2026). The Unit begins building an appropriate path to this recognition by acknowledging the rural population as a subject of special constitutional protection and its collective nature. In this manner, the institution issued Internal Circular 007 of 2023, emphasizing

preferential attention to women and implementing a gender approach. It also allows for differentiating the impacts of land dispossession and abandonment and, consequently, providing appropriate care. The entity's subdirector also profusely called on field teams to review the denials of access to the registry individually during the previous administration.

8. The reactivation of armed conflict led by dissidents from the extinct FARC, the ELN, and other illegal groups jeopardizes the restitution, given that many of the territories where the process is taking place intersect with spaces disputed by said groups.

The data shows that as of April 30, 2025, judges had issued 10,271 restitution rulings involving 12,053 applicant families, while the State had returned 278,539 hectares to their rightful owners. Regarding the ethnic restitution process, 43 rulings have been reported, benefiting 19,844 families that inhabit 531,906 hectares (Unidad de Restitución de Tierras [URT], 2025).

Although official figures show slow state action against the enormous number of victims left by the war in Colombia, it is clear that reversing more than 60 years of conflict and its subsiding consequences is a complex task. For this reason, the Law was extended an extra 10 years (until 2031) as formalized by Law 2078 of 2021 (Ley 2078 de 2021).

## **The phenomenon of secondary occupation in land restitution**

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On the properties abandoned by thousands of farmers, investigators anticipated finding the perpetrators or front men who had appropriated these lands through coercion and violence. However, in reality, the Unit found that they were occupied by various actors, ranging from impoverished farmers, victims of repeated dispossession, to people who had always longed to own property in the countryside and invested lifelong savings to achieve this dream.

The Law did not address or contemplate these situations; therefore, the secondary occupation phenomenon surprised everyone. The evidence of this situation generated important ethical discussions within the Unit, leading the institution to create a care pathway for those it identified as secondary occupants. Thus, a joint guideline was established with the Ombudsman's Office to serve as legal representative of the secondary occupants; State institutions designed instruments (agreements and programs) to provide compensation or to grant alternative lands; and finally, heald a dialogue was with judges to ensure they recognized the specificities of the secondary occupants and addressed them in their rulings.

As a relevant fact, the Constitutional Court's ruling in Sentencia C-330 of 2016 (Sentencia C-330 de 2016) on the criterion of "good faith free from fault" stands out. It mandates that the judges assess the criterion differently regarding vulnerable individuals who have had no direct or indirect relationship with the dispossession, considering it unfair to treat them on equal grounds with qualified opponents, such as companies or individuals with sufficient financial and

legal representation. Subsequently, between 2018 and 2021, the Court issued new rulings along the same lines.

In terms of proportion, the presence of third parties (as judicial authorities summon second parties before a judge formally recognizes them as such) has been growing over the years at the administrative stage. According to data from the Intermission Matrix, as of July 31, 2022, while in the first years of the policy's implementation (2012-2015) no more than 13% of registered cases reported the presence of third parties, in 2018 the percentage almost tripled, reaching 37,3%. Between 2019 and 2021, it reached 40% (URT, 2020).

### **The academic internship of Social Work in the Land Restitution Unit**

As an important background to the academic internship, we highlight the support that the Program of University Initiatives for Peace and Coexistence (PIUPC in Spanish), of the Department of Social Work, at the National University, provided to the Land Restitution Unit between 2011 and 2016, to incorporate the Do No Harm approach into the restitution policy. As a result of this work, it was possible to understand the restitution process, gain trust within the organization, identify lessons learned from the initial experiences, and make recommendations so that restitution could decisively contribute to the intended reparation goals, peacebuilding, and reconciliation in territories.

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Within the framework of assessment, the issue of secondary occupation arises as a negative impact of restitution due to its potential to generate harm or actions that cause harm in terms of conflicts in the territories, negative impact on people's life plans, and disregard for rights (from both victims and citizens not linked to the armed conflict). Therefore, we insisted at the time that restitution without harm should address the issue promptly and decisively.

Thus, in 2013, the Unit's academic Social Work internship began, linking students to the team that handled secondary occupation. The pre-professional internship takes place at the end of the academic curriculum. It consists of two levels: the first introduces the Law and the various institutional mechanisms, and the students are linked to one of the thematic working groups of the Unit's Social Direction to support the tasks they carry out in accordance with the institutional action plan. The team develops a product at the second level that will later become integrated into the entity's processes and actions. The central purpose of the internship is to strengthen knowledge about Social Work interventions within institutional public policy frameworks, whose objectives aim at comprehensive reparation for victims (Departamento de Trabajo Social, 2013).

Between 2013 and 2024, 104 social work students completed their academic internships at the URT, 14 of whom worked on the secondary occupant topic. Given this internship's trajectory and impact on student development, the project proposes systematizing this experience in 2022.



### 3. Methodology

As a methodological exercise, the systematization of the practice adopted Jara-Holliday (2018) five-step proposal. As a starting point, the first step involved organizing different sources of information that were separated and classified by rear, inventorying a total of 649 documents including photos, reports, bibliographies on restitution, victims and peace, agreements and other formal documents such as correspondence, all of which were recorded in an excel spreadsheet and stored in eight folders on Google Drive and used this exercise to establish the number and characteristics of the students involved in the practice over the eight years covered by the systematization (2013-2020), the most relevant topics covered in the Unit, the trends in the historical development of restitution policy, the products made and delivered to the URT, among others.

The second step involved designing a *systematization plan*. In our case, this began with updating the list of graduates from the internship and the tutors and their contact information. The research team issued an initial communication inviting them to participate in the exercise via Google Forms. Of the total number of graduates and tutors, 27 and 9 responded, respectively. On behalf of the University, the Curriculum Coordinator of the Social Work undergraduate program and I, as coordinating professor of the internship from its inception, participated in the systematization.

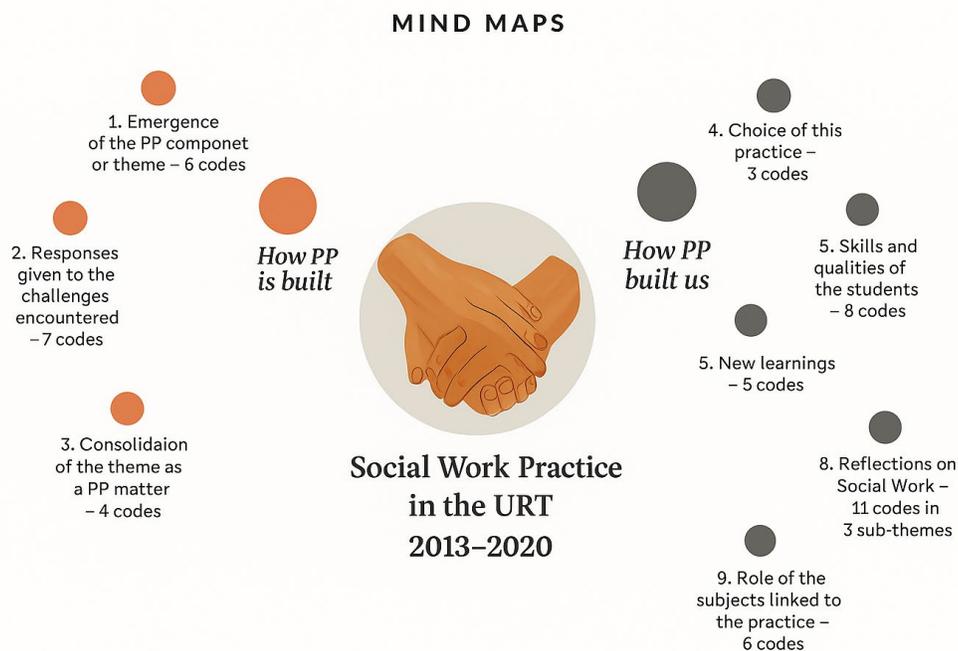
The third step involved the *recovery of the process* itself. That began with meetings where the team presented the intentions of systematization, resolved doubts, and drafted several questions that could inspire the reconstruction of the experience. The chosen question was: *How do we build public policy, and how did public policy build us?*

At the same time, the organized documentary information in step 1 was used as a ground base, separating documents related to the inspirational question and corresponding to the four themes of most excellent permanence and relevance during the time analyzed. Among these, the secondary occupant theme had nine final practice reports and 42 monthly follow-ups of activities prepared by students at the time.

Additionally, the research team conducted group interviews with graduates, tutors, and the coordinating professor of the internship linked to the Department of Social Work at the National University. The researchers conducted the interviews virtually via the Zoom platform, while one interview on knowledge management took place in person at URT's national headquarters. Twelve graduates and six tutors from the Unit participated in the interviews. The professor coordinated all the sessions, which lasted an average of one hour and 30 minutes. The interview on secondary occupation brought together two tutors and four graduates.

The fourth step was related to highlighting the underlying reflections present in the texts and in the group, conversations carried out. The analytical process of the information was developed based on Merlino's (2021) proposal, which takes the inductive method as a basis. The dissertations (from *the past*, contained in the final reports and monthly follow-ups of the students' activities, and from *the present*, the result of the interviews conducted) were isolated into statements – as units of meaning – and their specificity and content were named as codes with short expressions. The code sets were regrouped into themes that formed the *felt (emotional) agenda* of this experience reconstruction exercise, for nine themes that gathered 47 codes (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Agenda of topics for the systematization of the academic practice of Social Work in the Land Restitution Unit (2013-2020).**



**Source:** Prepared by the authors based on the systematization exercise carried out in 2022.

As pointed out by Merlino (2021)

The agenda of topics corresponds to what emotionally moves people when formulating questions in a research process. That felt agenda would be grounded theory, an ad hoc micro theory, valid only for the approach and object analyzed in the current scenario. (p. 79)

Finally, the fifth and final step of the Jara-Holliday methodology were the *arrival points*, which have involved the construction of several communicative products such as: a general report, presentation spaces with the Social Director and the Coordinator of the URT Agreement

in March 2023 and with the teaching staff of the Department of Social Work of the National University in August 2023, as well as a conference within the framework of the celebration of Social Worker's Day in October 2023, which graduates of the internship attended, tutors and students of the Program.

## 4. Findings: Public Policy Construction and Professional Consolidation

### 4.1 How we build public policy

Today's vision of public policy questions the boundary between the public and the private sphere and recognizes that the public sphere is not restricted to the governmental sphere. Consequently, countless actors declare themselves subjects of political action, even above traditional political actors, demanding to be part not only of the execution as a "target population" but of the entire public policy cycle (Canto-Chac, 2000).

According to Roth-Deubel (2006), this shifts the focus of public policy analysis from the State itself to the action of the State (with a capital S), which implies a conception more dynamic of public policy that allows to observe the challenges this context, bringing other actors to light, and showing it as human activity, full of creativity and learning, but also of tensions and controversies. In this sense, it is coherent to think that a public policy such as land restitution has been modulated, reinforced, and strengthened as its implementation progresses; this has been the result of action, criticism, and discussions proposed in different spaces and by different actors, hence the relevance of the first part of our systematization question (*How do we build public policy?*).

In the conversation, the interviewees defined this process as initially intermittent, meaning issues that appeared on the agenda and that external circumstances or even institutional changes later set aside. There were also various references to situations in which policymakers had to reevaluate policy premises, such as the duration of the process in its administrative and judicial stages, which according to Law would take no more than a year when reality has shown that the process takes between two and three years; or that the same displaced family reinstates itself and returns when there have been changes and reorganizations that reevaluate this hypothesis and therefore require the reconstruction of the initial nucleus that existed at the time of the victimizing event and the current one, product of separations and new family unions (Vásquez-Cruz, 2023). In conclusion, it is about being vigilant of the dynamics of reality, reevaluating the Law's starting points, and making adjustments - some minor, others more significant.

While the guidelines and instruments are developed, analyzed, approved, formalized, and applied, social workers must act, or as one tutor used to say, *professionals must solve*. The types of responses to their daily challenges, especially those working in the field, are diverse. When

students recall their experiences and memories, they point out, for example, the dialogue between professionals in the social field (where most of the internship students and social work professionals work) who, given their extensive background and the number of cases and situations they have taken on or are familiar with, can find in their *experiential library* options for taking on the challenges presented. That is an object of admiration for the students and an example of what could happen in their future professional practice.

Other times, the situation's complexity is such that only through interdisciplinary analysis derived from sharing perspectives across the Unit's three mission areas (social, legal, and cadastral) was it possible to find solutions. Although this approach is recognized for its merits and is part of the essence of the URT's administrative process and institutional structure, tensions between areas persist, which both tutors and internship graduates have highlighted in the interviews.

This situation is analyzed and perceived as discordant with the nature of this process which according to one of the tutors "it is definitely a legal process but its background is 100% social" (Zoom Interview, August 3, 2022), nor with the various ways in which researchers construct knowledge in the social and human sciences, based on understanding complexity and assuming inter and transdisciplinary perspectives to address it.

12 Finally, in another sense of the conversation, the responses to the presented challenges in the reality of the implementation of the restitution process stem from creativity and the exploration of options. Some students even raised concerns among the Unit's work teams during the internship seminar we held weekly at the University. "Many of our reflections later reached the Unit, which was very satisfying for the students" (Zoom interview, August 16, 2022).

In conclusion, public policy is created daily based on the responses provided by professionals associated with the institution. When situations become imminent, people slowly consolidate these topics. Over the long term, institutions establish them through the formalization of instruments, the formation of specific work teams, the assignment of budgets, and the definition of work goals, among others. The academic internship in Social Work at the National University has been there. We have been privileged and realize today, with a long-term perspective, that we have contributed to its construction.

### **The emergence of the secondary occupation component in public restitution policy and the contribution of student interns**

As previously mentioned, around 2014, three years after the implementation of Law 1448 of 2011 (Ley 1448 de 2011), the first cases of families forced to leave their properties began to appear, as a restitution ruling upheld the property rights of a family victim of dispossession or abandonment during the armed conflict.



The Unit delegated the assessment of the most critical cases to an advisor of the General Direction and the deputy director. This timing corresponded with the opportunity for social work internship students to join the process. Thus, the first two students were in the second semester of 2014; from that year until 2020, 14 students have continuously completed their internships.

Alongside those who coordinated the topic at the URT's Social Department, the institution gave the students a process of immersion and a progressive assignment of tasks. Each semester, they conducted a detailed document review to understand the secondary occupation problem comprehensively. They then analyzed the instruments developed by the Unit and finally addressed specific cases in municipalities or regions where the phenomenon occurred. That sometimes-included field visits to conduct characterization surveys, preparing the corresponding analytical reports, and attending meetings with institutions, judges, victims requesting restitution, and secondary occupants.

In particularly complex situations, the students participated in "case clinics" organized by the central level of the URT and the Unit's respective territorial office. Among the addressed cases, that of second occupants in Indigenous territories, referred to as "non-ethnic occupants," was handled by the students in 2016, based on the cases of the Caño Ovejas, La Fuga, Bunsichama, Campanas de la Vega, and Iroka reservations (Cangrejo, 2016a; 2016b).

13 Finally, the graduates highlighted the organization of information on secondary occupation in the national database managed by the Social Direction group and its contribution to creating training strategies for regional officials in route management and characterization tools. In this regard, they highlighted the video explaining how to calculate the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) using the characterization instrument (Stefany Cangrejo - intern in 2016); the virtual course on the new route approved in 2017 on the Unit's internal training platform called URT School (Ximena Cuervo and Stefany Gaitán - interns in 2018); and the special course module added with the format change implemented in 2019 (Diana Ramos - intern in 2019). In 2020, during the pandemic, the internship was held virtually. It included the adjustment to the characterization instrument, including questions under the concepts of "supervening vulnerability" and "rootedness" as keys to support the judges' decision regarding the protection of the rights of these people (Laura Pungutá - intern, personal communication, 2020).

This account confirmed that, during their year of internships, the students witnessed what was happening there and played a leading role alongside the Unit's professionals in developing the secondary occupation component of the land restitution policy.

## 4.2 Approach to professional practice and the role of intervention leaders. How did public policy shape us?

In developing activities related to secondary occupation, the interns recorded their reflections and learnings. The students prepared the weekly monitoring forms and the internship reports and submitted them to the professor as part of their academic commitments. They also recalled this in the individual and group interviews conducted during the systematization process.

Regarding the issue of professional *ethos*, the reflections establish a dialogue between reality—in this case, that of the secondary occupants and the *know-how* in the institution—and their professional knowledge and skills acquired during their training and put into practice within the institutional space.

One of the most frequently mentioned issues in their reflections is the connection between macro and micro context elements, which allowed them to understand the nature of land dispossession and its causal and relational connections, as well as the reasons linked to the phenomenon of secondary occupation. These elements contributed to the construction of a well-founded intervention.

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Understanding war, dispossession, abandonment, and forced displacement in their political, social, economic, cultural, and even psychological dimensions allowed us to identify and understand the profound interrelationships that exist between them. The perspective of complexity, intersected with the lens of the Do No Harm approach, offered a broad, complex, and profound panorama of the problems of second occupants. Thus, we understood that social intervention is a space of epistemological pluralisms, and that within a single analysis, perspectives that enrich intervention planning can converge. (Peña y Marentes, 2015, p. 10)

In the words of Muñoz-Franco y Vargas-López (2013), the previous statement indicates the presence of an integrationist approach.

Currently, social work professionals are committed to developing deliberative, participatory, and interactive intervention processes, based on comprehensive and socio-critical perspectives to guide professional performance, establishing what has been called a complementary or integrationist tendency between perspectives (...). To this extent, professionals advocate for recognizing individuals' experiences as a starting point for developing intervention processes, considering that the relevance of professional action is determined through the conscious participation of those involved. (p. 126)

The two authors' final idea is present in some of the students' reflections, who emphasize *recognizing others*—in this case, both secondary occupants and restitution victims—as a starting point for social workers involved in the topic.



Fourth, the land restitution process, the intervention and support provided in the issue of secondary land occupation, raises the need to articulate the psychosocial approach and community justice (...). The latter constitutes the community as an active and proactive entity with capacities and possibilities for action, and invites us to value the achievements of communities that, due to their organizational capacity and their active position within the restitution process, have managed to return to their lands even when they have encountered difficulties with other actors in the process. These are examples for other communities and state institutions, questioning what mechanisms should be considered in conflict resolution. (Peña y Marentes, 2015, p. 9)

Within this reflection framework, the Do No Harm approach – mentioned several times by the interns – made sense. This approach has an important connection with the intervention that is one of the identifying pillars of Social Work and raises the possibility of empowering autonomy rather than dependency through a detailed reading of the context; promoting capacities rather than ignoring or nullifying them; and, above all, decreasing tensions and conflicts and contributing to peacebuilding. That is only possible through an ethical, reflective intervention that unfolds options before the generated negative impacts (Bolívar-Jaime y Vásquez-Cruz, 2017). Therefore, the students point out that:

(...) Thus, understanding that ethical and professional commitment involves ensuring that the interventions carried out *do not cause harm*, but, on the contrary, allow for positive impacts. Accordingly, it is appropriate to introduce our knowledge as social workers in the sensitive reading of contexts that allow for a situated intervention. Likewise, the development of self-critical reflection capacities on how the action is executed and the positioning before decisions constitutes a fundamental variable to ensure that the work of professionals promotes the well-being of the people to whom said action is directed. (Ramos, 2018, pp. 8-9)

Linked to the understanding of the phenomenon of secondary occupation, the dilemmas regarding rights that seem contradictory arise in the conversation: the right of victims to be recognized as such and compensated over the damages suffered, but also the rights of vulnerable populations, landless farmers, families resisting the conflict, citizens with no connection to the conflict, and even other victims.

Secondary occupation can restrict the right to restitution; likewise, restitution makes the person living on the returned property more vulnerable, especially if they have no other livelihood option. How the issue challenges the students' political stakes, sense of ethics, and justice is striking. (...) The reflection illustrates how people express this dilemma.

As we continue to read about topics related to second occupants and monitor follow-up activities on related cases, we recognize the significant challenges institutions face in addressing this land restitution issue. These difficulties could reflect the need to restore the rights of the requesting victims; to ensure the protection of the fundamental rights of second occupants; and to promote national reconciliation and peacebuilding. Therefore, these needs

must be addressed through ongoing reflection and evaluation of the practices and results of this public policy so that it truly meets its formulated objectives. (Cuervo, 2017a, p. 11)

As a rights guarantor, the State is responsible for taking the necessary actions to ensure citizens' rights. Although we are part of an institution that represents it, the institutional framework sometimes imposes limitations that the students have identified. Pressure to meet goals, lack of coordination, or the absence of an institutional framework in vast areas prevent the State from fulfilling its duty to protect and guarantee rights.

Además de los beneficios que trajo para nosotras como practicantes la posibilidad de tener contacto con la comunidad en el territorio, y de materializar en campo los contenidos conceptuales apropiados durante el primer y segundo semestres de práctica, resultó complejo ir "en representación del Estado a través de la URT", a un territorio que parece olvidado por este, sin ninguna propuesta para el mejoramiento de la calidad de vida de su población. La falta de presencia institucional evidenciada en la ausencia de cualquier entidad o programa gubernamental que promueva la implementación de políticas públicas sobre salud, educación, vivienda, trabajo, entre otras, es suplida por los proyectos de responsabilidad social de las empresas presentes en la zona. Entonces, el Estado se limita a acciones lentas y desarticuladas de varias instituciones, como la Unidad de Restitución de Tierras y la Agencia Nacional de Tierras -con el catastro multipropósito- que no cumplen con el deber de este en el aseguramiento de derechos de sus ciudadanos. Ejemplo de ello, fue la imposibilidad de responder a los cuestionamientos de la comunidad en general, no solo a los terceros reconocidos por el juez, sobre cuándo y cómo se formalizarían sus predios. (Cuervo, 2017b, p. 7)

Despite the benefits we as interns received from the opportunity to connect with the local community and to implement appropriate conceptual content in the field during the first and second semesters of our internship, it was challenging to visit the communities in representation of the State through the URT in a territory that seems forgotten by the State, with no proposals for improving the quality of life of its population. The lack of institutional presence, evident in the absence of any government entity or Program promoting public policies on health, education, housing, and employment, is compensated for by the social responsibility projects of the companies operating in the area. Thus, the State limits itself to slow and disjointed actions by various institutions, such as the Land Restitution Unit and the National Land Agency – with its multipurpose land registry – that fail to fulfill their duty to ensure the rights of their citizens. An example of this was the inability to respond to questions from the community in general, not just from third parties recognized by the judge, about when and how their properties would be formalized. (Cuervo, 2017b, p. 7)

Regarding this, Bello-Albarracín (2005), in their article "Social Work in Contexts of Socio-Political Violence," points out that:

In most cases, these questions lead to predicaments about the functional, and therefore perverse, nature of interventions that seek transformations in community settings, without the rightful processes of change in economic structures and power relations (...). (p. 18)

The realization of the long road for the vast majority of the population to fully enjoy their rights forces us to reconsider many students' perspectives during their training. How students pursue their personal and professional commitments to social change, justice, and the transformation of adverse realities has been very diverse and continues to represent dilemmas, discontent, and even deep dissatisfaction.

Redirecting this frustration is often achieved by making concrete contributions to specific processes where interns could expand their creativity and, alongside officials, build a public restitution policy consistent with the baseline of the rights framework. That is how Ximena describes it in her report, highlighting what she and her colleague Stefany Gaitán did regarding the virtual course on secondary occupants aimed at URT officials. The underlying idea is that this will be a way to ensure that more people in secondary occupations have their rights recognized and their demands channeled by the State. The process was a great learning experience and very satisfying for the students.

(...) Managing to transmit through virtual media and from an interactive learning perspective, contents on the issue of secondary occupation as a result of a series of reflections on our conceptual approach to this, carried out in the first and second levels of internship, was a successful exercise as we were able to build a tool that has and we hope will have positive effects on URT officials in their understanding of the different types of third parties involved the process, both nationally and territorially. (Cuervo, 2017c, p. 6)

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Similarly, Stefany Cangrejo and Laura Pinzón developed a research process that undoubtedly contributed to a better understanding of the phenomenon of secondary occupation and, through their reflections, provided directions for action for the institutions involved. Furthermore, the exercise demonstrated the capacity to build knowledge-generating processes through intervention, which is inherent to the disciplinary construction of Social Work, where intervention and research are two sides of the same coin.

During the internship with Laura Pinzón, we gathered some data from the URT, which allowed us to create a document about second occupants in the Santander region (...) I am certain that this research work, although not very extensive, contributes to my learning process in terms of systematization and research, but also to the URT itself, as it provides an overview of who the secondary occupants are, their typologies, and the factors that determine their situation, based on a sample. (Cangrejo, 2016a, p. 3).

Based on this, an academic internship carried out in a public institution, from a Rights-Based Approach (and Do No harm action), must maintain a discussion about the gaps between established and exercised rights; the possibilities of the institutional framework and its limitations; and the way in which professional commitments to social transformation necessarily fit within it, among other reflections.

## 5. Conclusions

Through this systematization exercise, we verified that a transitional public policy, such as Land Restitution, results from the confluence of diverse actors and the modulation that occurs based on changing contexts, emerging dilemmas, and options. The internship's space on the topic of secondary occupation allowed students and academics to act as both observers and protagonists who, despite the multiple contradictions (between means and ends, ethical and political commitments, among others), contributed ideas, created instruments, and dared to promote reflections, which definitively influenced the process of policymaking.

Likewise, the setting provided an opportunity to give meaning to many of the recurrent reflections from the classrooms and that sometimes seem rhetorical: the interaction between research and intervention that allows us to move from the contextualization of a phenomenon and its expressions to actions that aim for urgent change; the connections between approaches and perspectives that allow us to acknowledge the complexity of situations; how people process frustration and helplessness in cases where rights conflict or when action remains merely superficial because society still requires structural changes that we are far from achieving. The critical-reflective capacity in action is carried from the classroom to the institutional framework and returns to us in the realization that politics builds us as critical professionals.

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Thus, the internship is not just about applying what we have learned. It is about allowing everyday situations we face in institutional work to touch us, to challenge our creative capacity, to confront and overcome our insecurities, to stop idealizing scenarios and individuals, realizing that they interact and construct reality from their places of enunciation, and that contradiction and uncertainty are part of professional life.

We were fortunate to be in a setting where nobody set anything in stone; everything was yet to be done and created. Seeing this and witnessing how it happened firsthand allowed us to grasp the scope and contributions of the practice on two fronts: from the students to the restitution process, and from the process to the consolidation of a professional attitude in the students, who are now social work professionals.

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