

From rural Colombia to urban alienation

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The relationships between poverty, inequality and conflict exacerbate youth migration from rural areas.

The great majority of young people in the Department of Antioquia who are forcibly displaced migrate to its capital, Medellín, where the population is now over six times the size it was 50 years ago. This migration removes them from the social and cultural structures within which they grew up, destroying their security as young people are not emotionally prepared to deal with violent events charged with such tragedy and pain. These events, little by little, make them accustomed to living with conflict, where anyone could be the enemy and where they are constantly adrift, physically and morally, feeling insecure and fearful in their own homes, in their own land.

Over time this has devastating effects, leading to disillusionment and tearing of the social fabric, and causing young people to withdraw. That is why many young people appear to cling to the need to survive rather than looking to their future; their youth has been a period of transformation disrupted by violence that has not allowed them to exist, think and feel as 'normal' young people but has instead forced them to assume adult responsibilities with little or no preparation.

When displaced youth arrive in large urban centres such as Bogotá and Medellín, they are obliged to hide their fear of an unknown place ruled by different values and beliefs. They have to adapt to a new rhythm of life if they are to fit in with this territory, abruptly transforming their personal and family reference points in a new landscape where they know very little. This threatens their sense of identity and destroys their connection with their roots as they try to settle into a new lifestyle.

Often they fear to speak, remember, tell their stories. They prefer to make no comment but their thoughts are filled with recurrent memories of the events that have marked them for life. That is why growing up in the context of constant conflict represents such an enormous challenge for displaced youth. They must confront the same problems and uncertainties as any other adolescent but without sufficient opportunities for education or the acquisition of specific skills, and having experienced even fewer of the conditions necessary for a healthy life, either physical or mental.

This permanent state of confrontation leads to children and young people internalising violent modes of resolving differences and conflicts as natural, as the environment in which they have grown up has trivialised this type of behaviour, very often making silence and passivity the only way to survive. This situation worsens as time goes by but the lives of these young people do not change, generating a profound feeling of frustration and lack of conformity with their surroundings, as they realise they are not offered the conditions and opportunities they need in order to move ahead. On some occasions this can lead them to join neighbourhood gangs as a money-making option, segregating them further from society

while venting their anger against it, once again initiating a cycle of violence in a possibly never-ending process.

While the city is seen as providing greater security against armed conflict, the reality is that these urban centres are associated with different forms of violence for displaced people, who are a relatively powerless minority group in such surroundings. In reality there is a change of scene but not of the conditions of violence that have forced them to leave their home areas.



They take to the streets in large numbers, looking tough in sunglasses and baseball caps. There is tension in the air as the other slum-dwellers watch from the second floor, unsure of what to expect. Then the music blasts and the camera starts rolling. Young Afro-Colombians in Buenaventura, Colombia – who have been displaced by clashes between armed groups in the surrounding areas – are organising against violence, and making a music video with help from UNHCR. Band member Ubaldino was displaced by violence in 2006: “People were threatened. If they didn't submit to the will of illegal armed groups, their end was written. It was better to escape and lose our crops, and start from scratch,” he said. Another band member, Jason, says: “[We are] a group of young people who have been through hunger, violence, everything, but despite that we are here together because of the music. Music helps us to transmit messages to people...”

The search for a place to live adds to their burden. Most are obliged to swell the numbers of the poor living on the outskirts of large cities, in many cases having to live in shacks, tents or wooden huts; such a situation may entail a lack of basic public services such as water and electricity, and very few of these young people can access other equally important services such as health and education. Displaced young people are obliged to behave and live as adults, although they are not yet adults, sometimes losing their identity in the face of the social discrimination they meet when relocating to another territory and the uncertain nature of their future.

Confronting youth displacement

Any analysis of the issue of forced migration in the rural youth population must ask the question of where to target efforts, given that youth migration from the countryside to the cities is always associated with the degeneration of rural areas and is unlikely to be a positive opportunity for the cities that receive them. Incentives in all conflict zones

must aim to create an atmosphere that will encourage a true process of return and reinsertion, offering incentives and motivation to allow those young people facing difficulties in the cities who wish to return to their places of origin to do so. This can be achieved through the creation of work opportunities in the rural areas, the improvement of public services, the development of clear administrative processes for return and long-term commitment by municipal authorities there to their successful return.

It is obvious that return must not simply mean moving back to live in the home area but must instead be supported by effective strategies for the protection and reintegration of returnees. Return home will not

alone guarantee the end of displacement; improved living conditions will be the factor that truly helps stabilise those young people who choose to return.

Finally, most policies place emphasis on the issue of preventing youth displacement from rural areas but there are already many young people who have moved to the cities. The real objective must be to provide options that will offer them life opportunities that genuinely motivate them to remain on their land and to recover from the armed conflict.

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