From rural Colombia to urban alienation

Alejandro Valencia Arias

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, Medellin, 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.

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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Challenging some assumptions about ‘refugee youth’

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Young people who migrate without their parents develop peer networks and may not be inherently more vulnerable than those with inter-generational networks.

Many children and young people who live with peers have greater access to resources and decision-making power than many of those who live in families and households where an adult is present. The research presented in this article – carried out with Congolese refugees living in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, and in the rural refugee settlement of Kyaka II – challenges the assumption in refugee policy and programming that unaccompanied minors are inherently more vulnerable and disadvantaged than their accompanied peers. On the contrary, living without one’s parents or guardians can offer opportunities and some young people consciously chose to migrate without their parents and/or to live with peers rather than with adults once they were in Kampala or Kyaka II.

In some cases, young people’s decision to migrate without their parents was the result of individual or collective livelihood strategies to access particular services. For example, the headmaster of the secondary school in Kyaka II partially attributes the disproportionate enrolment of unaccompanied young people in the 2005 academic year to the fact that school fees there are lower than for other secondary schools in the area, acting as a pull factor to the settlement. For example, in 2005 no girls in the second year of secondary school were living with their parents. In Kampala, some young people, especially males, came alone, intending to work to help support themselves and their families in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Once alone in refugee contexts, young people may continue to live alone or with peers, even when they have the opportunity to join households headed by adults. For example, one young male who came to Kyaka II in order to attend the secondary school met a friend of his father’s in the settlement and lived with him for a few months. However, despite the close relationship with this adult male, whom he calls ‘uncle’, he decided to move out with a group of other young males with whom he built a hut close to the school. His decision to live with peers was based not only on proximity to the school but also on the fact that he had fewer household chores and more access to resources as an ‘equal’ member of a peer network.

Although some young refugees thus do choose to move out of inter-generational networks which they view as disadvantageous or in some cases exploitative, it would be erroneous to portray this simply as a struggle between older and younger generations. Most young people were actively seeking and/or maintaining contact with their families and wanted to return to them, and even young people who choose peer networks over inter-generational networks continue to maintain ties to older generations.

Traditionally in DRC young people would not move out of inter-generational households until they married and were ready to start a family of their own. However, movement out of inter-generational networks is not necessarily a manifestation of conflict; migration and conflict have led to changes in social structures, and peer networks have become more socially acceptable.

Decision making among peers

Analysis of decision-making processes within peer networks revealed power dynamics relating to social age, education, language and gender. I observed one group of 10–30 young people (numbers fluctuated) aged 12 to 20, which I named the ‘Karungi’ group, over a 10-month period. Members developed a strong sense of solidarity based in some cases on kinship (siblings or cousins) and in all cases on shared ethnicity. The majority come from the town of Bunia and many had known each other, or of each other, while still in DRC. These kin and ethnic ties facilitated the formation of collective households as required by UNHCR for distribution of resources such as plastic sheeting and cooking utensils.