

What it means to be young and displaced

Tamara Velásquez

A young adult from rural Colombia assesses feelings of loss and isolation having being forced to flee to Costa Rica.

It all began when I was 25 years old. Up until that time, I had lived in Colombia in apparent peace but in 2008 something new and tragic occurred. My future in Colombia died when members of my family were murdered only two blocks from the police station in the town where I was born. This not only ended the lives of some people but also changed my life and that of the rest of my family forever.

Following the grief, the first and most striking consequence was that my family and I were forced into the decision to leave our home; the second, preparing for the journey; the third, travelling, arriving at our destination; and, finally, accepting that we were in an unknown place, where none of us had ever imagined being, as is the case for so many Colombians who arrive in Costa Rica. In this one step, we lost a large part of our economic resources and we remained adrift in a city, unprotected, in fear, hungry, grieving, sleepless and – as if this were not enough – without hope. Above all, we were left questioning our very identity – for what are we without our dreams, our families, our friends, our homeland, our culture and our integrity?

Integration or exclusion?

There was a close relationship between the young refugee men and women involved in activities with UNHCR in Costa Rica. We were all young people of between 17 and 30 years old from rural backgrounds who shared a similar culture and spoke the same language. We did not ask about each other's personal histories (in order to avoid inflicting pain) but we identified with each other and this helped motivate us to fight to improve our lot as refugees. By others, however, we were viewed and judged differently, because of the stereotyping of Colombians, and of rural Colombians in particular, and this made our integration all the more difficult and slow.

Undocumented, we had few options for work; asylum seekers in Costa Rica are unable to work until they have approved refugee status (which takes several months). This disadvantages them when it comes to participation in any of the cultural activities from which a specific sense of 'being young' can be constructed. As a young person from a rural background, everything is very alien. Urban young men and women are more closely linked to the social institutions (universities, collectives, sectors of the city associated with young people) that legitimate certain values and practices. This allows urban youth more access to those experiences classified as appropriate to 'youth' as they are already within a consumer group catered for within the commercial life of cities.

We, as rural forced migrants, lack the economic resources to access opportunities which may be more readily available to a young person from an urban background, and possibly with a higher economic status. It is assumed that rural young people are ignorant. Furthermore,

young people in poorer parts of the city are usually blamed for any outbreaks of violence or criminality.

Stereotypes about Colombia – seen as a place of armed conflict, drug trafficking, impunity, corruption, social inequity and injustice – feed xenophobia and discrimination, divide nationals from foreigners, and promote fear of integration.

The combination of such difficulties means that most migrants live in neighbourhoods with tough economic profiles, leaving rural youth vulnerable to robbery, drugs and gang warfare, and also increasing the likelihood of their involvement in such activities themselves. Added to this is the lack of access to education for those without documentation, or for those barred from it by the cost of food and transport.

As the years go by, the feeling that you belong neither here nor there grows. Your accent and appearance are different; you lack a feeling of belonging and of direction as preferential support is given to nationals; you fail to adapt to the new society and do not feel part of it; it is difficult to make friends and to get on with life as you do not easily trust others; you remember what you have lived through and begin to question your own identity as you do not know exactly what you want. You sometimes prefer not to say where you come from, to avoid being judged again. We rural young people are made to feel invisible and our experiences are not considered to be the experiences 'of youth'.

What are we without our dreams, our families, our friends, our homeland, our culture and our integrity?

By way of closure

Like me, many rural young people find that forced displacement is yet one more event in a series of exclusions, abandonments, failures of protection and processes of marginalisation by the Colombian government. All or any of these may have forced us to cross frontiers. In my case, thankfully, I was able to attend university, as my family and I found a religious organisation that supported us shortly after our arrival in Costa Rica until now as I write from Canada.

How many more Colombians will have to live through this, and for how long, and how much more must take place before the decision for change will be taken?

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