(Preliminary version)

Dilemmas and contributions of anthropologists working for migrants in violent contexts

Introduction

Understanding a country like Colombia is almost impossible, even for Colombians. Climate, food, accents, traditions, music and skin color radically change every hundred kilometers. However, natural and cultural diversity is just the sweet side of a country devastated by chronic violence.

There are around 3 million people who have been forcefully displaced from their homes as a direct or indirect consequence of the armed conflict in Colombia. Threats, massacres, human rights violations, forced recruitment and armed confrontations have pushed millions of people, into moving to major cities in search for opportunities or state help which often isn't received or isn't enough.

In Bogotá, the city that receives most of both displaced and economic migrants, they find no type of basic service and are therefore forced to relocate illegally and manually build temporary shelters that have become shanty towns on the outskirts of Bogotá. Contrary to expectations, the present democratic government has not decreased the number of displaced people. In fact, the number is on the rise, due to the actions of both the state military and the illegal armed groups and paramilitaries. Millions of hectares of productive land have been abandoned and millions of displaced people have arrived in Bogotá, increasing the poverty level of those in highly vulnerable conditions, leaving them at the mercy of the armed groups who operate in these neighbourhoods. They also have to live with the stigma imposed on them by Colombian society, as it is said that they are lazy opportunists trying to take advantage of their situation. These people are mainly peasants from the countryside, alien to the dynamics and rhythm of a big city, with a very low level of education and in many cases with no family or social connections in Bogotá. They have to adapt and

integrate starting from scratch and it is this relocation and integration that I have studied in my investigation.

It is easy to understand why the city of Bogotá has received most of the displaced people inside the country. Firstly, Bogotá is so big that it is hard to be found and forced migrants feel safer there. Secondly, in Bogotá humanitarian assistance is also easier to find, and migrants believe there are more job opportunities for them and a better educational system for their children.

I carried out the ethnographic research in Altos de Cazucá which is part of the town of Soacha, an outlying poor area right beside Bogotá. Even though Soacha is a different municipality from an institutional point of view, it is in fact part of the urban area of the city and depends economically on the activity of the capital city. Altos de Cazucá, known as "The Hill" by its inhabitants, is formed by settlements without property land titles. This area has grown quickly in the last twenty years because of the arrival of displaced families coming from different Colombian departments such as Tolima, Antioquia, Cundinamarca, Santander, Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Meta, etc. Most of the neighbourhoods in *Altos de Cazucá* emerged as illegal shantytowns and to this day continue to grow in this way. The area lacks public utilities and infrastructure such as proper roads, drinkable water, sewer system, electricity, etc. The presence of the State in the area is minimal and social interventions are normally carried out by international aid agencies. The poor conditions of the families living there worsen due to the violence from armed actors' and street crime. Therefore, the vulnerability and lack of protection among families living there is enormous.

The Office of the Ombudsman estimated in 2002 that the population of *Altos de Cazucá* was 250,000 people and that approximately 7,000 families were formed by displaced people. The arrival of new displaced squatters has continued since then.

The displaced condition in Colombia

It is important to understand what a displaced person is and why they sholud be

considered a kind of invisible migrant. The United Nations, in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (United Nations, 2004), established that internally displaced persons are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border". Displacement is, therefore, a legal condition, a specific and internationally recognized category of migrants. Having signed the Guiding Principles, the Colombian State made them equal to any other constitutional law.

One of the basic characteristics of the Colombian armed conflict is the fact that all the groups in conflict have refused the possibility of making a real distinction between civilians and combatants and that is why violence is increasing in many Colombian cities. This increase of urban violence is related to the dynamics of the armed conflict, to drug trafficking and organized crime and to social cleansing acts. On the one hand, in urban areas, armed groups try to reinforce their social control inside poor communities through threats and homicides in neighbourhoods that are usually strategic places because of their proximity to big cities. On the other hand, the most common victims of abuses in rural areas are the ethnic minorities, such as natives, communities of African descent and peasants and their social leaders.

The armed conflict in Colombia started during the 1940s and after more than 60 years of violence, people who do not suffer it directly do not want to think that they are living in a war. They do not want to be aware that the lack of justice is the rule in their own country, and that assassinations, displacement, corruption and violence are not disappearing at all. Walking around the historical center of Bogotá, for example, one would never imagine what happens in the countryside.

Displaced people as invisible migrants

There are three levels of invisibility in the phenomenon of internal displacement in

Colombia shown by my investigation. In the first place, these migrants are "invisible" for the international community. Apart from specialized organizations or academic institutions, very few people know anything about displaced people in Colombia because they do not represent a problem for any other country. The media talk about the war in Colombia, the bombings in the forest, the guerrillas captured during military actions, but rarely about the lives of people that are loosing their homes and all their belongings and are migrating to major cities, sometimes without even their own identity card.

Displaced people are also "invisible" in their own country. The armed conflict in Colombia started during the 1940s and after more than 60 years of violence, people who do not suffer it directly do not want to think that they are living in a war. They do not want to be aware that the lack of justice is the rule in their own country, and that assassinations, displacement, corruption and violence are not disappearing at all. Walking around the historical centre of Bogotá, for example, one would never imagine what happens in the countryside; the gap between the rural and the urban world in a country like Colombia is enormous. Furthermore, through television, radio and newspapers people are exposed to biased viewpoints. Most of these migrants live in marginal and outlying areas of the city; the spatial segregation is high and so is social exclusion. Even the Units of Attention and Orientation where the government offers some welfare programs to displaced people are "hidden" in the city and, very often, badly signposted.

Finally, most of the displaced people adopt invisibility as a survival strategy once they have arrived at their relocation environments. They have usually been threatened with death in their regions of origin and they know they can be identified by armed groups all over the country. In many cases they have also lost members of their families and they are, in a word, overwhelmed with fear. That is the reason why some of the displaced people do not turn to the state welfare system designed for them. We should not ignore the fact that the "invisibility" of the displaced people is convenient and useful for the Colombian State because, from a political point of view, a problem

that is not seen by public opinion is a problem that does not exist. Moreover, a fractured and disrupted displaced community is easier to manage than a organized and demanding one. The colombian anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo (Alejandro Castillejo,2000) shows that Colombia is a territory that lives in a widespread state of silence and that the act of silence is not only a way of surviving but also a military strategy.

The invisibility of displaced people inside and outside Colombia is one of the main weaknesses of this community, and a military and government strategy used to fragment the strength of a migrant community, that involves almost 10% of the population of Colombia.

The pain of loss

The loss suffered by displaced people is total: it involves personal losses (relatives, friends and neghbourhoods); material losses (lands, crops, animals, personal and real properties); and social losses (solidarity networks, social and emotional living spaces, cultural references...). The loss suffered by displaced people is in a way the loss of identity itself, the loss of those social and emotional living spaces that relate the person to him- or herself and with others, it is a full breakdown. They even have to hide their own names and photographies are prohibited in order to survive. However, it is important to notice, as Alejandro Castillejo has explained (Alejandro Castillejo, 2000), that depriving the displaced people of their identity has been and still is a military strategy used to silence the displaced community and to make Colombian society consider them an indistinct and dehumanized mass without face or voice.

It is essential to bear in mind that armed groups continue to operate in *Altos de Cazucá*. The area was traditionally of enormous strategic importance to the guerrillas who used it as an entryway from Sumapaz into Ciudad Bolivar. The paramilitaries then set up their *Bloque Capital* to prevent this advance and those who continue to exercise strong control over these neighbourhood territories are the direct inheritors of this paramilitary legacy. But their presence nowadays is much less politicized than it used to be and the control they exercise is, therefore, no longer political but instead

social. Report No. 7 issued by the Soacha Office of the Ombudsman in 2010 points out that most of the displaced persons who receive threats are not, in fact, social leaders. Those interviewed make numerous references to acts of "social cleansing":

"If they see a young kid hanging out on the streets too much, they might think he's a street urchin and get rid of him. (Interview with a displaced woman living in *Altos de Cazucá*, 2011)"

The displaced population, therefore, are forced remain anonymous and prohibit photographs in order to survive.

Land is the main problem in the Colombian conflict. Most of the displaced families are farmers whose way of life was completely bound to the territory they occupied, both socio-culturally and economically. In the ethnographic research that I have carried out in these marginal neighbourhoods around Bogotá through interviews and life stories, "real" time vanishes into an emotional succession of events, idealized lost paradises, unknown future paths and impossible dreams of return. Displaced people talk about an irreparable fracture in their cultural and socio-economic way of life.

The effects of the displacement are not only personal, but also concern the family structure and the socio-cultural activity of individuals. The consequences of displacement and the individual reactions towards it are different depending on the gender of the person, the age, the place of origin, the period of residence in the receiving city, etc. An investigation carried out by the Migrant Attention Foundation (FAMIG), the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (CODHES, 2007) shows that having lived in the new settlement environment for five years, displaced families have not yet reached a socio-economic reintegration or a psychosocial recovery. Displaced people have faced a tough dilemma: they have had to choose to save their lives while loosing at the same time everything that had belonged to them before; in their own words "to leave what belongs to you and start from scratch", "to migrate in order to save your life

and leave behind an entire life of work". The feelings that overcome these migrants are sadness, discouragement, anger, impotence, resignation...

Family structure also undergoes deep changes. The family often looses the male reference and fragments into a smaller group. The family organization, even for the non fragmented families, changes completely because the new priority of the family is daily sustenance and people have no time for leisure. They have even lost their family intimacy owing to the fact that in the resettlement areas families usually live crowded together in rented rooms or friends' or family houses. Overcrowding is, as is well known, one of the consequences of social and spatial exclusion of inmigrants all over the world (Ubaldo Martínez Veiga, 2001).

In the socio-cultural sphere the destructuration is even larger. Displaced migrants do not find a job because they do not have the proper training for an urban job and they do not have employment references either. In a country as diverse as Colombia, to migrate from the countryside to the capital city is a hard cultural shock. The solidarity that characterizes the close relationships in the rural areas vanishes into the frenetic rythm and the distrust of the big city. Colombian society mistrusts displaced people and discriminates against them, encouraging them to settle in outlying neighbourhoods that sometimes turn into ghettos. The residential mobility of the displaced families is very high: they change their place of residence, their house and neighbourhood very often and that is why it is difficult for the government to carry out long term plans and interventions. We should not forget, in addition, that intraurban displacement forces many families to resettle inside Bogotá moving from one neighbourhood to another.

Overcoming the loss

In spite of the suffering and the difficulties faced by displaced people we can find words in their testimonies that indicate hope, vital strengh, optimistic plans and overcoming purposes: "Life is always kind, even if you are rich or poor", "As long as I can I will always fight for human rights","...of course I know these thoughts are

utopias, but I believe utopias are possible".

Every kind of pain is in a way a kind of loss and displaced people feel lost in the receiving environments where they first arrive; they cannot develop a sense of membership because they do not feel culturally identified with the city.

However, displaced people discover, because of the displacement, new abilities such as management and organizational capacities, new job skills and new fields for their personal and communal development. It is worth noting, for example, the recognition that women have achieved among social organizations and professional fields. Parents have found better educational opportunities for their children and a wide range of professional training courses for young people and adults in the cities. In the receiving environments, they have the opportunity of widening their solidarity networks as well as implementing new forms of organization.

Some of the displaced migrants rebuild their own identity by assuming leading roles inside their community, helping and advising the newcomers, demanding the observance of their human rights, condemning the abuses and drawing up personal and community life plans. They have been able to raise their voices with pride and make themselves visible, not just as victims, but also as a human capital essential for the future of Colombian society.

Women's Solidarity Networks

53% of families interviewed in my research are matrifocal in which the domestic unit's core consists of a woman and her children, and even if men contribute to support of the household they do not participate much in child-rearing or spend much time at home. The woman-mother becomes the centre of an economic and decision-making coalition with her children, regardless of whether the husband-father is present.

The concept of matrifocality used here is that of Raymond T. Smith (1995) in his now famous book "The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism and Politics" where matrifocality is seen as a characteristic of systems of kinship whereby emotional ties

between mother and child are structurally predominant due to the dwindling, although not necessarily disappearance, of male authority in domestic relationships. This term, originally coined in reference to rural Afro-American families in British Guyana, seems to me an ideal form of describing those families where the woman-mother is the "de facto" leader of the group and the husband-father, when present, plays a marginal role, although he may "de jure" continue to figure as the head of the family unit. It is therefore important to differentiate between the terms "matrifocal" and "female head of household", the latter having a much more rigid and static connotation.

This phenomenon is very common in Colombian society but it is even larger within the displaced community due to many reasons including the murder or desertion of the male figure during the migration process and resettlement period. Most of the women interviewed in my research migrated on their own with only their children and their narratives lead us to the conclusion that personal solidarity networks play a more decisive role in the success of the resettlement than the official assistance system offered by government institutions:

"My mother called an aunt here in Bogotá and she put us up for a few days."

"I came here in 2004. When I got here in 2004 I lived with a woman in a neighbourhood called Usme. I was displaced from Tolima and since I didn't know anything when I got here, this friend put me up, helped me... she was the one who helped me. She was displaced herself and so she knew what it was like to be a displaced person. I met her at the bus station because I that's where I came into the city and she took me home with her."

"My son and I stayed with a friend."

"I got here with my two children and stayed with my sister in Cazucá." (Interviews with displaced women in Cazucá, 2009)

What do we understand as "successful resettlement", integration in a community or socio-geographic destination? We believe a good way of understanding this success is through the concept of a life project. Someone who has been capable of building, or

rebuilding, a life project in a place where they were forced to migrate will be an active member of the new community, will feel part of their new surroundings, linked to them and to community members, for both material and spiritual reasons. To paraphrase David Suarez Rivero (2010), one might say that reconstruction of a life project represents a moral possibility for complete reparation of the violated rights of displaced persons. The concept of a life project, coined during research coordinated by Donny Meertens at the end of the 90s and currently included in several rulings by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, is linked to the concept of personal achievement and, therefore, although indisputably linked to the possibility of lasting satisfaction over time of a person's material needs, transcends the purely material universe and enters a symbolic plane. To have a life project supposes giving meaning to one's existence within a specific context: work, family, neighbourhood, leisure time, future projects. The feeling of belonging in the new urban context, feeling like one belongs to the new socio-emotional spaces and appropriating these spaces, is perhaps the condition without which nostalgia for that which has been lost will never cease to be an "obstacle to building a life project" (Meertens, 2000).

The importance of (re)constructing a social fabric in the process of articulating a life project is undeniable; which is why we are interested in analyzing the influence of different types of solidarity networks created by displaced persons on this process. We are interested in comparing two basic types of networks: those derived of organizational processes whose main objective is the defence of the rights of the displaced population; and those focusing on the struggle to survive and satisfy basic material needs. Very different distinctions might be established and perhaps some of them much less general, but this interests us greatly in our attempt to understand the different integration and adaptation strategies used by displaced persons in new urban contexts. Clearly, these strategies differ in men and women, both in the mechanisms used and their results.

Nowadays, there are numerous organizations or authorities dedicated to defending the rights of displaced persons and ensuring compliance with obligations required by the implementation of said rights; and a portion of the displaced population participates actively in said organizations. They receive training in the technical language of human rights, a language which changes at speeds similar to those of the policies, priorities and orientations of international cooperation groups and government institutions. Said organizations imply "formal" settings for socialization of the displaced population, unlike the "informal" settings such as neighbourhood and family relationships, etc.

In the majority of cases, participation in "rights" organization brings no direct economic benefits to participants yet does require certain availability and variable degrees of commitment, depending on the type of organization. Long-term commitment to one of these organizations requires considerable effort from displaced persons if we consider that the person in question must also find time to seek a means of support for his or her family. This is even more acute where women are concerned, as they are generally more committed to domestic tasks and in many cases the sole support for the family unit due to absent fathers or husbands or because it is easier for women to find work in the city. Those who make a long-term commitment to these organizations often see them as one of the fundamental axes of their new life project, allowing these networks of solidarity and collective action to bring meaning to their being-in-the-city:

"I worked at home and sometimes sewed, making clothing, but through the Office of the Secretary of Education I applied for a job with the *Ciudad Bolivar* Parents Association and began my career in... leadership, developing that something you have inside yourself, that you wonder when you're going to do it or how you'll do it, why, and with whom... I had a chance to start to train in the organizational part." (Interview with displaced women in *Ciudad Bolivar*, 2009)

Our research showed that many of the collective production initiatives headed by women grew out of encounters set up by formal socialization organizations (projects sponsored by international cooperation, public institutions or by the same organizations set up by displaced persons). Apparently, women used "human rights"

organizations as a bridge to forming other organizations no longer concerned with the political struggle to defend their rights and instead focused on production projects designed to ensure material survival of the home. The type of cooperatives arising out of these experiences, in the cases recorded, centred primarily on cleaning, catering and sewing. This does not mean that women later abandoned the rights organizations but they did take advantage of the possibilities afforded them through these organizations without losing track of the need to satisfy the material needs of their households.

There were almost no collective production initiatives for men, in spite of their considerable participation in human rights organizations, which leads us to believe that, for men, activism in this type of organization is linked to a search for personal development and self-affirmation through status. To dominate the technical language of human rights, to act as an intermediate between institutions and the displaced population, even being able to help and guide others, has a symbolic charge that helps develop feelings of belonging, of worth, in the masculine population, for whom adapting to urban life is more complex than for women (Meertens, 2000).

For the vast majority of displaced persons living in Bogotá and its surroundings, the search for a means of economic support is, however, individualistic and it is here where the "informal" solidarity networks play a crucial role.

In spite of the above, it is interesting to note that in the few cases where the gap between solidarity networks seeking survival and those focusing on compliance with rights policies disappears, and these separate networks become a single network that allows a person to survive while fighting for his or her rights, the degree of satisfaction, sense of belonging, and projections toward the future in the current place of residence are greater, while the desire to return and the intense nostalgia are considerably reduced:

"Even if I had a chance to go back to Caquetá, I wouldn't, because it would mean throwing away the project I've built for my life, because I feel committed to the Foundation: Everyone but me could leave; I'm the last person who could quit. I've dedicate a lot to this, it's become my life, it really is my life. The Foundation is what I love most because it makes it possible for me to help people; anything that comes in is for the people. I'm very happy with the work I'm doing."

This interview was with a displaced man operating a temporary hostel for the displaced population in Bogotá. He created an independent foundation that used private donations to secure temporary housing and food for approximately 20 displaced families, including his own. This foundation also participates in the "official" struggle to improve aid to the displaced population in the capital district. In this case, therefore, the struggle for rights and material sustenance for his own family coincides with professional and personal activities that bring him enormous satisfaction.

Interviews during our research recorded two cases of displaced women who had also been successful in bringing together these two types of organizations:

"My personal project for the future is making all my dreams come true; first of all, economic stability based on a steady job; my own home (I've already qualified for housing aid but you have to work hard because the fact that you qualify doesn't mean you'll get a house) and maybe administrating, like a job having to do with (civic) participation, using those kinds of mechanisms, becoming a professional. I already feel like a professional, but I mean studying Social Promotion together with maybe Sociology or Psychology, but aimed at community solutions, to solve problems and turn this Association into a real foundation with its own facilities where we can teach everything from writing a right of petition to dressmaking, fashion design and even learning to make your own washing detergent." (This displaced woman had established a women's tailoring association and was simultaneously working as an active leader of displaced communities).

Throughout my investigation I have encountered few cases of this nature. I have found, however, that women have a particular desire to complement their socio-political participation with the development of sustainable income generating activities.

Dilemmas and contributions of anthropologists working for migrants in violent contexts

This paper is the result of my personal experience working for the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) with forced migrants in Bogotá. I carried out a research on the government assistance programs for displaced families in order to improve them.

The implications of violence in the fieldwork process of anthropologists depend on considering them as academic researchers or as social workers. Dealing with this ambiguity is one of the main challenges applied anthropology workers have to face day after day. But it could be also, from my personal point of view, one of their main strengths and unique contributions to voluntary migrant organizations.

The union of these two perspectives turns the anthropologist into an useful intermediary between voluntary migrant organisations and the migrant community itself, and could enrich the academic contributions of these anthropologists too.

Conclusions

Colombia is a country of extremes: beauty and deformity, happiness and agony, unbelievable solidarity and unbelievable cruelty, birth and death live together in a shaking and dramatic pace of events. And Colombians are dancers playing the game of survival over a sea of permanent chaos.

For me, to speak of Colombia is a personal, almost autobiographical exercise, because I fell in love with the chaos in this nation of crazies, of whom I consider myself one, although I am Spanish and live far, too far, from here. I'm writing this from

the Macarena neighborhood in Bogotá where only a few weeks ago a "potato bombs" thrown by protesting students and left behind by the police in a neighboring parkway exploded and killed a passing dog that stepped on the virtual landmine. A few days ago in the Chocó province on the border with Panama, after catching two planes and a boat and walking for nearly an hour, I found myself bathing in a heavenly waterfall when six men in uniform appeared. My first thought was: "I hope they're from the Army" and, "fortunately", they were. On the wild beaches of one of the country's most famous national parks, Tayrona, army helicopters fly over the heads of bathers. In Altos de Cazucá, one of Bogotá's shanty towns, the women I work with tell me about the shoot-outs every weekend and the "social cleansing" by paramilitary groups (now renamed "emergent groups" or "gangs" in the politically correct discourse that pervades in the media) and then smile and invite me to the weekly parties they organize inside and outside their homes. Hundreds, thousands of homeless people walk the streets of Bogotá, consumed by bazuco, a cocaine derivative similar to crack, like souls in purgatory or people without souls, while countless youths from the wealthy neighborhoods have never left their crystal cages in the "plastic city" so well described in Ruben Blades and Willie Colon's salsa hit "La chica plástica". In a nation where you see, hear and smell pain on every street, a nation with one of the world's highest crime rates, citizens continue to rank as the "happiest" in all of Spanishspeaking America in the, albeit, less-than-trustworthy international polls. Images of this contrast, however, are real and plentiful; any day, anywhere, in any conversation or vision one could just as easily laugh as cry.

Undeniably, though, faced with this chaos of apparently irreconcilable realities, it is impossible to remain indifferent. Some people can't stand the intense experience that is life in a place like this, and then there are those of us in whose souls a love, or pain, for this indescribable place has taken root.

Colombians laugh at the European and North American psychosis arising from the recent social and economic crises in "developed" nations; Colombians have spent decades, entire generations, living from one crisis to another and have known nothing but an ongoing state of emergency.

The reigning spirited Inmediatism in Colombia, inherited, undoubtedly, in part from the mentalities of those who colonized the region, is in my opinion the smartest strategy for adapting to a context marked by perennial and unpredictable change. In Colombia people learned long ago to live, and survive, under the stifling yoke of fear; the fear that now invades us and invites us to give up our traditional role as Messiahs, masters, and accept we no longer have anything to teach these nations that have spent centuries struggling to recover a dignified place in this world, in spite of us.

I wonder if we'll be able to look down into the coming maelstrom upon the heirs of our worst defects and learn something from them.

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