

COLOMBIA, During “La Violencia” (The Violence) **Reflections of Youth Peace Activists**

Young people from 10 regions of Colombia met for two days to discuss their situations in the mid 2000s.

This included young people from Cartagena Cauca, Medellín, Barranquilla, Putumayo, Catatumbo, Ibagué, Tolima, Pereira, Soacha, Villavicencio and Meta.

They debated issues of security, memory, truth and reconciliation as the basis for their hopes and work for peace.

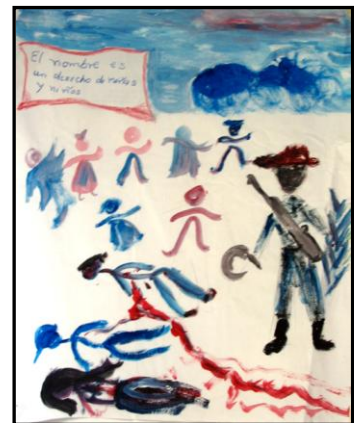


Youth from Cartagena:

We work in the midst of incredible fear and a lack of trust. Our communities are made up mostly of families displaced by violence.

People want the truth to come out but they are frightened. It is strange to know that we are supposed to live in a democracy but people are afraid to speak the truth.

Although people have the right to know the truth, it is very difficult for us to talk about human rights. Lots of people don't even realize what rights they have. It is also strange to live in a democracy where to talk about human rights makes us afraid.



We as young people need training and preparation. My situation is not the same as that of the indigenous youth of Cauca who are prepared to die for their culture and their territory. We don't have the same cultural identity. We need to think of new ways to be able to reach out to each other and our communities.

The issue of memory is very important. But how can we work on memory, of what has happened in this war, without putting people at risk? We have tried to talk about this but recently lists with the names of young people have appeared - these are lists of those who are to be killed.

Cauca (indigenous youth):

We are basically counting one assassination every eight days in our communities in Cauca. We are united- that is our advantage- we resist. The pain of one compañero or compañera is the pain of all of us. Unity amongst us is key- nobody can resist this situation alone.

We are planning a march starting on May 23rd from Santander de Quilichao to Bogotá. We have declared a Permanent Assembly until we receive adequate answers from the government, and we young people, from the Indigenous Youth Movement Alvaro Ucué, will be active in this march.

When we speak of rights, we are referring to all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Since we were young we have been taught not to kill or harm nature. Young people in our organization are being diligent about collecting data and statistics on human rights violations, including assassinations, illegal recruitment of children, displacement, etc. All of this relates to the themes of truth, justice, and reparations - if not immediately, at least for the future.

We will never ask the government for many millions of pesos per corpse as a policy of reparation. Our policy is not to exchange money for bodies. We also believe that it is important to consider the families of the paramilitary who have been killed as victims as well.

Truth- for what? What are we supposed to do with the truth? A lot of people really do not want to know the truth. This is huge problem in Colombia.

Water of Life

This represents what we've lived and what we can become. The road begins on the right side and then it joins the other.

At the beginning there is a moment of silence, then it opens to two sources: on one hand there is destruction, slaughter, the dark side. On the other is the possibility of harmony, of a joyful community, where happiness can begin.

On the road one can be convinced and go to the dark side. But there is another road above, it turns and once more it comes toward the river. The river represents the water of life.

In life there are many options and many possible roads. *Male Youth, Cauca*



Youth from Medellín:



There is a problem of recruitment, displacement and victimization of members of civil society, including youth, in parts of our city. There are still young people who are willing to be hired as assassins and for social cleansing operations.

Reparation has to go beyond pay-outs. Chopped up bodies are appearing in some parts of the city but there is almost no publicity about it. There is really no social consciousness about what is going on.

Near my house a list appeared recently threatening several people. I was in a small shop the other day paying off part of a debt, and the “paras” came in to pick up their tax money or “vacuna” which they claim is- to protect the community from violence. The lady paid without a word. What else could she do?

As young people we are tired of this war, we are not in agreement with any part of it. But if we are going to talk about the truth, we need to learn to be very sophisticated, very subtle, very detailed, since the consequences are serious. Activities related to truth need to involve many, people, not just us.

But we have all been taught to forget, to move on, and forget our dead loved ones. Each of us will have to help others work on the issue of memory so that many more people get involved.



Violence has been in my life since I was very little. On the street there were clashes between gangs from different sectors and shootings.

My mother – you can see her at the bottom of my picture – protected me from the violence. What she gave me I have continued to have inside me, that feeling of protection. So now I can give it to others – I can help make them feel protected.

Male Youth, Barranquilla

Youth from Barranquilla:

We recognize that it is women who are leading the resistance around truth, justice, reparation, and reconciliation. We, as males, have joined with them.

We are setting up the Monument to Truth and Memory, with the white cement blocks and the names of assassinated loved ones. We stand in silence for one hour in the main plaza in Barranquilla the first Wednesday of every month, to commemorate our dead.



It is pretty scary doing this. Some people sympathize and even provide more names. But we know other people are watching us for other reasons.

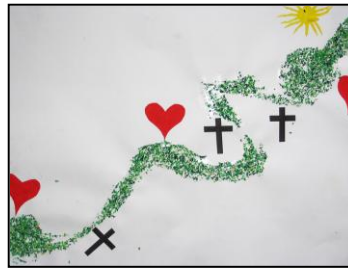
In Barranquilla, the control by paramilitary types over health services, markets, lotteries, trade unions, and education is evident. Lists with the names of threatened people appear from time to time in the community mentioning possible social cleansing operations.

We are afraid most of the time. There is a new word in Barranquilla- motofascismo referring to the patrolling motorbikes with scary people on them. They follow us. They know where we live- when we leave home- at what time we arrive back.

It is not only the fear I feel but also the fear I feel for other young people who work with me. We are not very many young people resisting the violence- most don't want to get involved. We need to be braver.

We left the village and went to the city. My mother thought I would be safer there. Then something that was very hard happened to me and it was caused by a man.

I began to identify males – both men and youth - as bad. When I thought about the war I identified it with them, I thought all of them were violent.



Then I decided to think about this again. I realized that we, as girls can see all males as those who have the answers but that sometimes they are more confused than we are.

FemaleYouth, Ibaque

Young person from Putumayo:

The newspapers told us that over 110 bodies were located in common graves this week, people hardly reacted. Nobody feels the pain of the other...

In the countryside, you have more intense fighting. People often cannot travel back and forth to and from the closest towns.



There is no way we, as young people, can openly do a program on human rights. However, we have learned that we can do the same kind of education through ecological projects. If we protect trees, birds, plants, and animals, why would we not protect human beings?

Another way for us to work is through art. Through these activities we can get out messages about the need for peace and non-violence. We are going to remember the assassination of a much loved priest this September 11th, and we hope to occupy the main streets and the public plaza, probably with a presentation of street theatre.

Through music on the community radio transmitter we also try to express our protest about the situation.

To talk openly about justice and truth is very tricky for us. We have to be extremely careful. Daily life is criss-crossed by the informants' network. The social fabric has been ripped apart and there is no trust.

Young person from Pereira:

Our city is full of new shopping centres. This takes peoples' minds off things, it helps them forget. Young people are not sure who they are. There is a level of violence that is just accepted.

Fear is a huge factor in young peoples' lives- the fear of naming things as they are and the fear of loneliness, of being left on one's own.

Silence is the golden rule for preserving life. However, it must also be recognized that this area has a rich history of social and community organizing, and we still work with young people in their communities. I believe that this work is very important.

In a workshop with children, we asked them what "justice" meant to them. One 12 year-old replied:

"A man killed my dad. So I would like that man's son to be killed so he knows what it feels like.

And if he doesn't have a son, then a nephew. And if he doesn't have anybody who loves him, then he should be tortured."

We need to work with this. We need to respect his feelings, his memories, but also to encourage him to think beyond this hurt.

The best way I see to work on themes like justice, truth, and reparation is through cultural activities. We also use art to help children "talk" about the war- doing drawings with children. This is safer and it reaches more people. Families need to understand that their children are not killed just because of bad luck, or accidents.

Youth leader

Despite our difficulties, it is important to construct memory. It is not possible that 150 bodies are found and nothing happens. The use of art as a symbolic force has an importance that is not always easy to imagine; art speaks to peoples' hearts.

Reconciliation need to touch people at the personal and emotional level. And part of our protection strategy needs to be not to hide but rather to be visible in greater and greater numbers through non-violent activities.

We need to act.