

Colombia: A Wandering Country?

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We just attended a presentation of the documentary *Pais Errante* (which roughly translates in English to a Wandering or Nomadic Country) which was presented at the 15th International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) Conference that took place in Bogotá, Colombia. *Pais Errante* tells four stories of forced displacement in Colombia (in Spanish, English subtitles coming soon). Colombia has over 5 million internally displaced people, leading the world in this category. This large internal displacement is the result of a complex and multifaceted-armed conflict that has lasted for over 50 years.

A complex and multifaceted conflict

Colombia has a long history of conflict and the roots of current conflict can be traced to events which occurred several decades ago. A key event occurred in 1948 when a Colombian populist politician, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, was assassinated. This assassination served as the spark for a civil war in which over 200,000 people died over the period of a few years. This conflict period is known in Colombia as *La Violencia* (The Violence with a capital letter). A peace agreement was signed by the main parties in the conflict, but the agreement left out many sectors of the Colombian society which decided to continue with (or start) armed struggle. The main rebel armed group FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), a left-wing guerrilla group, was founded in the mid-1960s by peasants and left-wing politicians. Later on other guerrilla movements joined the fight and while in recent years some of these have ceased to exist, FARC is still in operation.

During the 1980s, Colombia became one the main producers of illicit drugs in the world (in particular, the production of cocaine). Drug lords establish a reign of terror in which assassinations of public officials and politicians became common. Drug lords established small armed militia groups in order to combat the guerillas, in particular to stop the practices of kidnappings and extortion on the part of the guerillas. These small militia groups later became large paramilitary organizations at the service of wealthy landowners and companies focused on natural resources extraction. The activities of these paramilitary groups jointly with the guerilla armed operations have been one of the main causes of displacement in Colombia. In recent years many members of paramilitary groups have been “demobilized”, but many demobilized paramilitaries have joined urban criminal bands. In recent years the Colombian military has also play an active role in the conflict and has been successful in weakening FARC.

Pais Errante: four stories

Pais Errante examines four experiences of displacement: 1) resettlement to a new location, 2) return to the place of origin, 3) itinerant lifestyle (constant movement without a proper home) and 4) continuous risk of displacement.

Resettlement to a new location: The first case presented in the documentary is that of Jackson. His family was displaced by the conflict between paramilitary and guerrilla groups. As many other displaced families, Jackson’s family lives in an informal settlement in the outskirts of a large city (known as *comunas* in Colombia). He is often discriminated in this new location for being an afro descendant, but while he still misses his home, he has fully adopted his new location. The main thing

he misses from his place of origin is the community life in which resources (including food) were easily accessible to everyone. Now in the city he has to work for a living and nothing is free or shared.

Return to the place of origin: The second case presented in the documentary is that of an entire community in Guayacan Santa Rosa, which was displaced by the paramilitaries, but later returned to their territory. They are very proud of the fact that the entire community was able to go back home. They reject the label “returnees” as they argue that this term implies a certainty of staying in their home community. Given the high probability of future displacement and the lack of guarantees from the Colombian Government they see themselves as a community that is just back home for the moment.

Itinerant lifestyle: the third case presented in the documentary is that of a mother with her three young daughters. One given day, members of an armed group arrived at her home to “recruit” her oldest daughter. Her husband convinced the “recruiters” to recruit him instead. The rest of the family abandoned the community immediately and never saw the husband/father again. Ever since, they have been living here and there without a fixed home and at the mercy of temporary work.

Continuous risk of displacement: The last case presented in the documentary is that of the San Cristóbal community in rural Colombia. The community has survived years of intense conflict between guerrillas and paramilitaries. Now the conflict has subsided and the community is being harassed by developers that want to buy the land for agricultural production, particularly for the production of palm oil. Over time, many people have left the community and those who stayed behind have to deal with the difficulties of a decreasing population and empty homes/lots.

Perhaps the main message from *Pais Errante* is that forced displacement in Colombia is as multifaceted, diverse and complex as the conflict that the country has experienced in recent decades.