

CLASPO Field Research Report

**Forced Displacement in the Pacific Coast of Colombia:
The Internal Migration of Afro-Colombians to Bogotá**

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For the great majority of *Bogotanos* belonging to the top half of the socio-economic spectrum, the city expands from its northern limits— just past 170th street—to down town – maybe 2nd or 1st street. Few, however, have ventured past point zero to the southern half of Bogotá, where the streets start all over but now with the suffix “south” attached after the number. The South is the fastest growing portion of Bogotá and it is by far the poorest. It is in the southern periphery where the largest and most deprived slums have emerged and continue to expand and an alarming rate. These slums covering the South-Eastern foothills of Bogotá with an impressive cloth of red brick, card-board and tin, house the thousands of displaced Afro-Colombians arriving into the capital every month. Ciudad Bolivar, Altos de Casucá, Potosí, El Oasis, and La Isla are only a few of the makeshift shanty towns past 75th South street where new homes are improvised every day. Older neighborhoods like Ciudad Bolivar have some paved streets and basic services, but the newer and fastest growing slums further up the hills have unpaved dirt roads, minimal electricity, no running water and no sewage systems.

Figures on how many people inhabit these peripheral communities are hard to come by and seldom trust-worthy, but it is estimated that well over a million people reside there and that this number multiplies every day. The population of these neighborhoods is very diverse, not only does it house displaced Afro-Colombian families, but also displaced mestizo families and the poorest of *Bogotanos*, some of whom have lived in the older neighborhoods for decades. The neighborhoods are becoming more and more crowded which make access to basic services increasingly more difficult for displaced Afro-Colombians. It is common to find more than two families living in a one bedroom house. The dire conditions that displaced Afro-Colombian families encounter

in Bogotá often contrast with the still meager yet much more humane circumstances they faced in their native communities. According to a study conducted by AFRODES (The Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians) and CODHES (Council for Human Rights and Displacement; 1999-2000) with 102 Afro-Colombian families displaced to Bogotá representing 460 people, before displacement 100% lived in houses (99% of which owned the house), today fifteen percent of them do so (and only 2% actually own their home); the rest rent rooms. The overwhelming majority of them live without drinking water or sewage services. Sixty-five percent of them are unemployed and of the thirty-five percent employed more than sixty percent work in the informal sector, which means they have no access to benefits (e.g. medical insurance). Since the majority have no fixed income it is very difficult to afford the uniforms and school supplies for children who consequently have very little access to education. Moreover, Afro-Colombian children that do attend school are forced to do so in predominantly mestizo institutions where they often encounter discrimination on the part of other children as well as teachers. Afro-Colombians are still by far the minority in these neighborhoods, but their numbers grow as displacement from the Pacific Coast of Colombia becomes even more predominant.

Since the early 1960s Colombia has been the setting of armed conflict between a number of Leftist guerrilla groups and the armed forces. The guerrilla groups emerged as a result of deep rooted problems of socio-economic inequality and political intransigence, repression, and exclusion. During the first decades of the conflict the fighting was restricted for the most part to the country side and consisted of sporadic attacks by the guerrillas and delayed responses by the military, with occasional confrontations. Since the late 1980s

however, the fighting intensified and violence has become more common place than ever before, as the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the U.S-backed Colombian military have increased their power and their battle for influence and control over territory.

The escalation of the conflict was due to a variety of reasons which include among them the guerrillas mounting power. Between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia FARC, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional ELN, and the Ejército Popular de Liberación EPL, the guerrilla force is estimated at 15,000 to 20,000 members strong. The insurgents have substantially increased their offensives, attacking more military posts, contesting more territory, and augmenting the number of bombings of buildings and oil pipes, as well as kidnappings, intimidations, and threats. Over 200 attacks on oil pipe- lines by the guerrillas have spilled millions of barrels of oil and caused an ecological disaster. Moreover, according to the army, 1,351 people were kidnapped in the first half of 2002, the great majority by the FARC. Overall, during the past 20 years the guerrillas groups have advanced from their bulwarks in the far-off and impoverished colonization zones toward wealthier municipalities, especially those whose processes of uncontrolled capitalist accumulation (oil production, banana exporting, drug trafficking, etc.) have produced a growing social exclusion and discontent among the popular sectors, on the one hand, and on the other hand, a great potential for extortion and kidnapping that are traditional methods of guerrilla finance in Colombia.

Meanwhile, by the mid 1980s a number of paramilitary forces entered the scene. They have rapidly grown in size and power (estimates say up to 10,000 men) with crucial differences emerging among them. Although for the most part their efforts are concentrated on “weakening the guerrilla’s support base”, their relationship to the state ranges from the

intimate to the hostile. The paramilitary squads are similar to the civilian defense groups that operated in Colombia since decades ago. Nonetheless, they are distinguished by their much more aggressive tactics, their technology and equipment, and their organization. Today, they are organized under the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) and they are in part maintained by important sectors of economic elites and the drug trade. They have become a central part of the counterinsurgency campaign of the armed forces, and have been involved in the elimination of whole sectors of the political left in the past two decades. Their project is to supplement and support the activities of the armed forces through massacres, torture, and disappearances of perceived guerrilla supporters. Among a number of sources, the Colombian Commission of Jurists has asserted that there is “active or passive participation of government forces” in many of the paramilitary’s actions. This accusation was echoed by Human Rights Watch, who states that “Colombian military and police detachments continue to promote, work with, support, profit from, and tolerate paramilitary groups.” Even the State Department’s human rights report on Colombia corroborated those findings observing that through 2001, “elements of the state security forces tolerated or even collaborated with paramilitary groups”.

The army, better equipped and with more men, has begun to make more offensives, although they still have shown vulnerability against guerrilla tactics and difficulty in responding to guerrilla offensives. Moreover, more and more they respond with counterinsurgency tactics such as the indiscriminate bombardments of entire areas. The United States has recently approved a US\$1.6 billion military aid package for Colombia, which for the first time includes direct aid for counterinsurgency warfare. Colombia has

subsequently become the third highest recipient of U.S. foreign aid after Israel and Egypt¹. A substantial increase in military expenditure and equipment will revitalize the armed forces and prolong the strategic military stalemate that has characterized the costly conflict thus far.

Furthermore, Colombia's new administration's hard-line increases the risk of a prolonged full-scale civil war. Despite a campaign tainted by accusations of links to paramilitary groups (due to his ambiguous attitude towards the AUC), Alvaro Uribe was elected with a solid 53% of the votes last May. Mr. Uribe proposes a hefty additional military spending (estimated at around 1 billion USD, or up to 2% of the GDP) and has plans for involving 1 million civilians for counterinsurgency surveillance and intelligence activities. Moreover, his proposal to give judicial powers to the military, involves serious risks that could lead to rises in human rights abuses

The war has already carried immense costs for the country both human as well as economic. In the period from 1994 to 1998 there were 15,000 political killings in Colombia the overwhelming majority of which were carried out by paramilitaries.

In 1999 an estimated 3,000 deaths were reported; 70% committed by the military, police and paramilitary forces combined, the others by guerrillas and delinquent groups taking advantage of the atmosphere of fear and lawlessness. During the 1990s: annual death toll of 25,000 to 30,000; represents a rate of 85 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

Violence has spilled over to the cities. Between January and April the authorities deactivated 27 *carro-bombas* across Colombia, with bombs exploding in Bogotá as well as the city of

¹ In June 2000, the U.S Congress approved "Plan Colombia," a controversial, two-year, 1.3 billion aid package: \$519 million to the Colombian army and \$123.8 million to the police to combat narcotrafficking. The remainder was for alternative development projects, assistance for displaced persons, human rights and democratization projects, and anti narcotics efforts in bordering countries. In October, the U.S. Senate approved the "Andean Regional Initiative" (the renamed plan Colombia) that included more than \$250 million in aid to the Colombian military and police in 2003.

Villavicencio. The marginal peripheral neighborhoods of large cities like the capital and Medellín have been plagued by violence between guerrilla urban militias and paramilitary forces.

Economically, liberalization, and stability in economic management have been combined with inequality, and widespread corruption. Colombia, in part due to the costly conflict, encounters an economic crisis which in turn makes the war even more unbearable. Colombia is second only to Bolivia in income inequality indexes in Latin America, and 52% of the population lives below the poverty line. 63% of the *campesinos* own only 5% of the land, while the poorest 50% of the population receives 17% of the national income and the wealthiest 20% receives 55% of that income. The unemployment rate fluctuates around 20% which is the highest in the region. Neoliberal reforms adopted around the time that the armed conflict began to intensify led to an increase in rural poverty from 65% in 1990 to 72% in 1995. With the coffee crisis the situation in Colombia has worsened; the low coffee prices have pushed more peasants into the drug trade or the ranks of the military and the paramilitary. Trying to enforce the reforms called for by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, with no help from the coffee economy led to Colombia's lowest registered growth rate in decades. In 1999 it was at negative 5% by 2001 it was only nearing 0%.

A vast number of Colombians have suffered internal displacement through expulsion, uprooting, and all manner of material, and emotional cost². Internal

² According to the Colombian State Department of Planning and the Ministry of the Interior, a "Displaced person" is defined as "any person who has been obliged to migrate within national territory, abandoning his or her place of residence or habitual economic activities, because his or her life, physical integrity, security, or personal liberties have been violated or are under threat, due to one of the following situations: internal armed conflict, internal tensions and disturbances, generalized violence, massive violations of human rights, infractions of international humanitarian law, or other circumstances emanating from the above

displacement as a consequence of violence made its first massive impact from 1988 to 1990, especially in those regions where confrontations between armed forces and guerrillas were frequent, drug traffickers were buying a lot of land, there were plans for mega-development projects or industrialization, and the paramilitaries had arrived to “cleanse” the area of anything “subversive”.

Estimates of the total number of people displaced by the conflict vary from as high as 2.5 million to 1,200,000³. The lower figure, most likely an under-estimate, still represents over two percent of Colombia’s entire population. According to the higher estimates 600,000 people were displaced between 1985 and 1994, principally from the areas of Urabá and Córdoba in the Atlantic coast; the Magdalena Medio region in the interior; and the Llanos Orientales in the East. While, from 1995 to 2000 the number of displaced exceeded one million and added the Pacific Coast department of Chocó and the central department of Cundinamarca as some of the country’s main areas of mass displacements. In rural areas during 1998 alone, the war caused the displacement of an estimated 308,000 civilians, the highest of any previous year. Yet, in 2000, the number rose to 317,000 people and in 2001 to 342,000 with over 40 entire villages abandoned.

(UPDATE!!!!!!)

The causes of displacement are also many and contested. Both paramilitaries and guerrillas have made territorial control their principal objective in a way that necessitates

mentioned situations which might alter, or drastically alter the public order” [Departamento Nacional de Planeación and Ministerio de Interior; 1995] (p. 146).

³ The later figures, by the Consejería para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES), do not include what have been denominated “peasant exodus movements” distinguished by their character of political protest against paramilitary presence in their region from the flight of dispersed families. For instance the more than 8,000 peasants who migrated to city of Barrancabermeja for several months in 1998. The former figures cumulative from 1985, may include a number of people who have returned home.

their increased presence in key areas and does not permit neutral spaces or populations. Consequently, the *campesinos* that live in disputed territories or territories that have recently changed hands are forced to supply food, lodgings or transportation to the armed occupants of the moment, always in fear of being branded as “collaborators” by the other side; an accusation that can have dire consequences. This situation of constant threat is characteristic of the areas of conflict and is present in the strategies of all the armed actors.

Due to threats, fear and sometimes honest lack of knowledge, it is extremely difficult to get genuinely reliable data on who is responsible for situations of displacement, and consequently the estimates vary considerably. The UN Thematic Group on Displacement (GTD) reported in 2000 that about 60% of recent displacement was caused by the AUC/paramilitaries; 12 to 13% by the guerrillas; and the rest mostly by unknown groups and the state. According to a 1995 study by CODHES which interviewed 800 displaced heads of household, the responsibility of displacement falls on the armed actors accordingly: 35% paramilitaries, 26% guerrillas, 19% armed forces or national police, and 20% other or unidentified. Meanwhile, Colombia’s Ministry of Defense reported that paramilitaries were directly responsible for 50% of forced displacement in 2001, while guerrillas were responsible for 20%, with the remaining 30% left ambiguously unknown. In either case it is clear that all of the armed actors hold responsibility.

Paramilitary factions clearly constitute the principal force of expulsion for civilians since the 1990s, through massacres, selective assassinations, tortures, threats and intimidation of people they accuse of sympathizing and collaborating with, or belonging

to the guerrillas. At the same time, guerrilla groups maintain continuous responsibility in generating forced displacement through threats of civilian populations that do not share in their political proposals or against those that they accuse of collaborating with the armed forces or paramilitary organizations. There is also evidence of executions and selective assassinations, kidnappings (selective and collective) with ends of extortion or political demands; all of which can contribute to displacement. The armed forces have considerably diminished their responsibility in the displacement of civilian populations in the past 5 years. However, indiscriminate aerial attacks and bombardments, threats against civilians, arbitrary detentions of civilians, and permissiveness or active support of paramilitary operations, are some of the reasons expressed by those displaced as to why the armed forces are held responsible for their forced migration.

Forced internal displacement has signified a continuous and complex demographic redistribution, where entire communities, families or survivors, flee rural areas for urban spaces. Such migration has meant a modification in the patterns of landholding, in which the relationships of land distribution see the concentration of land perpetuated. Strategic areas have been “emptied” or depopulated and then repopulated for the implementation of agro-industrial projects or natural resource extraction, for the construction of mass public infrastructure (*obras publicas*) or to ensure the control of areas for cultivation and processing of illicit narcotics.

During times of increased violence—murders, massacres, disappearances, bombardments, etc.—in peasant areas, the displacement has been of entire communities. Thousands of people migrate together to cities or large towns. When the violence subsides to periods of selective violent actions, forced migration is reduced to families

seeking refuge with relatives or acquaintances in the city. The majority of forced migration flows are toward the intermediate cities near the areas of expulsion (departmental capitals); but a considerable number of displaced people have been arriving at the capital, Bogotá. Larger cities are the natural point of arrival due to their size—large enough to guarantee anonymity—and the subsequent belief that they will hold more opportunities. According to a study conducted by AFRODES in conjunction with CODHES, of those interviewed given the choice the majority will choose to stay where they have fled (60% of men, 70% of women). Clearly, the level of fear and the persistence of the armed conflict make returning an unrealistic option for many.

Officially, internal displacement is often depicted exclusively as one more consequence of the senseless violence between the extreme rightist and leftist factions, but voices have emerged challenging such a view. These voices come predominantly from Afro-Colombian communities and the organizations that represent them. After the three centuries of slavery, displacement constitutes the greatest aggression against black communities in Colombia. Massacres and massive displacement have become the order of the day as the struggle for territory and the region's rich resources intensifies. Entire communities of Afro-Colombians have been forcefully displaced from a number of regions in Colombia including Chocó, Magdalena Medio, Sur de Bolívar, Pacífico Vallecaucano, Norte del Cauca, y Sur del Valle. Of a national population of about 40 million, two percent are considered indigenous and an estimated twenty-five percent are self defined as Afro-Colombians. Most of these populations inhabit rural areas and subsequently in 2001 it was estimated that thirty-eight percent of all displaced were ethnic minorities; official statistics estimate that of those displaced thirty-one percent are

Afro-Colombians and seven percent Indigenous. This represented an increase of 80% in the first quarter of 2001 over the year 2000.

Afro-Colombian communities have insisted on pointing to another cause of displacement in Colombia which has to do with the use of violence in the social conflict generated around the struggle for land tenure. In this case the actors are the armed groups, especially the paramilitaries that are at the service of the great landowners, or other economic elites, and who use violence and intimidation to force *campesinos* and indigenous communities into displacement in order to accumulate more land for a variety of uses ranging from African oil palm plantations, to illegal crop cultivation and dam construction. This has had serious effects of agrarian counter-reform.

Large portions of the regions inhabited mainly by Afro-Colombians and Indigenous communities have become new frontiers for development, including macro-development projects and new forms of capital accumulation, such as African palm plantations, industrial shrimp cultivation and potential oil extraction. For example, the Pacific, considered by many to be a laboratory of peaceful coexistence (black, indigenous and mestizo communities had lived there peacefully for years), has turned into the setting of bitter conflict and displacement since the early 1990s. The expansion of guerrilla action in the region brought on greater army and, particularly, paramilitary presence.

Still the goals of the guerrillas and especially the paramilitaries go beyond simple territorial gain. Both groups are pushing local farmers in some regions to plant coca, and want the territory for this end. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that the entire region of the Colombian Pacific coast is the setting of potential mega-development projects, like the inter-oceanic canal *atrato-truando*, ports, highways, hydroelectric dams, etc. which

demand the displacement of communities. Accordingly, paramilitary groups linked to African oil palm capitalists are causing significant displacement for expansion of the palm frontier.

Displacement is therefore seen by a number of Black organizations as a direct response to Afro-Colombians territorial gains since the 1991 constitution. This new constitution recognized the ethnic and racial plurality of the country and the need for addressing the specific rights of minorities. In a later law passed in 1993 (*la ley negra* or *ley de negritudes*) black communities' struggles for land were validated, and communities began the long process of land titling. Land titles for the communities would mean that "mega-projecters" would actually have to negotiate with the people that live where they want to build, slowing down the process or obstructing it. Such a process clashes entirely with the end goal of the violence, as black activists see it, which is the disappearance of the ethnic groups of the Pacific as distinct cultures and the advancement of neoliberal economic expansion. The ethnic empowerment these groups received beginning with the 1991 constitution has thus been met with a forceful and brutal violence marked by suppression of cultural difference and operated through violence and mainly displacement. Displacement became accentuated precisely after the initiation of the demarcation and titling of collective territories.

After the law of 1993 the community organizations met resistance from those who had been exploiting natural resources in the region such as gold and timber. Since the communities began demanding titles to the land, they have been experiencing assassinations and expulsion by armed groups. Afro-Colombians organizations assert that displacement is selective and planned out; the largest displacement of Afro-

Colombians occurred in zones earmarked for macro-development projects. In Rio Sucio, for example, seven days after the community had won the first collective titles in the region, the paramilitaries came and murdered leaders and their families. Two months later they returned and massacred an unknown number of people until more than 20,000 people left the area...not one family remained. They fled for Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador or the interior of Colombia. Rio Sucio serves as an example of how many of the collective territories that are in the process of demarcation have been completely abandoned. In some cases the armed actors, particularly the paramilitaries, have fostered a selective and directed resettlement of community territories—displacing some groups and bringing in others that will obey the rules of cultural, economic, and ecological behavior expected of them and that do not have rights over the land.

Afro-Colombians see their situation as unique for four reasons. First, their cultural attachment to place and territory is being rapidly unsettled with uprooting; second there is a connection between mega-development projects (construction of roads, ports, dams, a dramatic expansion of the African oil palm frontier) and ethnic groups in the Pacific; third, Plan Colombia or the Andean Regional Initiative continues to foster delirious effects on the ethnic territories; and fourth, Colombia maintains a long-standing situation of continued racial discrimination. These four factors combine to make the situation of Afro-Colombians exceptional. Their struggle to remain on their lands is one of territorial defense, identity, autonomy, and a dignified life. Today their struggle continues, immersed in a paradoxical conjuncture of multicultural recognition and ethnic violence and displacement.

The socio-economic and welfare indicators for Afro-Colombian communities were already the lowest in the country, even before the onslaught of mass forced displacement. Still, even though the living conditions of Afro-Colombian communities were bad, they become much worse after uprooting. Official responses to displacement are most often precarious, short-lived, and ill-devised. Moreover, while emergency services have improved, post-emergency services are practically non-existent. The government's response to internal displacement continues to focus mainly on emergency aid for recently arriving "*desplazados*". Although aid packages initially address some vital aspects such as basic food needs, health care, and even some assistance for housing, the government's policy still addresses mainly short-term initial needs and has little in the way of substantial long-term assistance. Moreover, the little government assistance there is, is restricted by an often absurd method of verification which demands applicants to provide sometimes impossible proofs in order to qualify as officially displaced⁴. Those displaced, especially Afro-Colombians, are rarely welcome in the cities of arrival, and local officials have little knowledge of their specific cultures, or needs.

Back in their communities they counted with the possibility of satisfying their most basic needs; they were free to practice their own culture; and the overwhelming majority owned their house and had access to land to cultivate.

⁴ Applicants are often asked to provide a letter from the mayor or telephone references in order to verify they are truly displaced.

The project “Forced Displacement in the Pacific Coast of Colombia: The Internal Migration of Afro-Colombians to Bogotá”, focused on the growing community of displaced Afro-Colombians gathering in the slums of Bogotá, specifically the *barrios* of Altos de Casucá, El Oasis, and La Isla. The project attempted to provide a window for Afro-Colombians to express their views, tell their stories and publicize their situation. Moreover the projects proposed video as a tool useful in ongoing community efforts of cultural preservation and documentation. Lastly, the project presented video as a device capable of addressing and helping with more psychological factors affecting displaced Afro-Colombians in Bogotá. Through the methodology employed video was presented as a way to address some of the consequences of cultural uprooting and discrimination, such as lack of self-confidence, self-esteem, group formation and belonging, and discrimination. The project therefore sought to combine the technical advantages of learning and utilizing video with the more personal benefits that video can provide when used appropriately. Consequently, my methodology involved my prior experience with video, especially indigenous media, community participatory video, and video-transformation.

Video Transformation is a group of methodologies that utilize video as a tool for personal and community empowerment, with the goal of bettering the conditions and potential for participatory community development. Video Transformation emerged as a result of thirteen years of experimentation and investigation by filmmaker Silvia Mejia in Colombia. The various methodologies used in the process have been consolidated through a number of pilot projects carried out throughout Colombia within a fifteen-year period. Starting in 1985 there have been well over twenty different Video-

Transformation projects carried out in Colombia, a number of which have had positive results in terms of improving the living conditions of the groups involved (both materially and intangibly). Examples of these projects were Video Transformation initiatives carried out with disadvantaged populations such as teenage sex workers, groups of HIV positive men and women, prison inmates, and working children. Currently, the process is being propagated by training “*multiplying agents*”; in their majority young people who have recognized the value of video as a powerful tool for social change.

Video Transformation parts from the realization that through a confrontation with one’s own image and through the technical appropriation of the television myth, it is possible to elevate people’s self-esteem and liberate their potential for self-discovery and empowerment. Video Transformation workshops are based around a variety of exercises aimed at encouraging questioning and reflection, reinforcing self-confidence, and promoting dialogue and communication. All of the exercises through which Video Transformation operates are recorded and then immediately watched and analyzed as a group. It is also useful to record people’s reaction as they watch themselves and others, and to watch and comment on these in the group. While discussing the material special attention is paid to body language, gestures and ways of communicating a message. All the exercises should be discussed fully, emphasizing personal aspects like reactions, feelings, emotions, thoughts, criticisms and validations. The job of the facilitators is limited to monitoring and facilitating the workshops, transferring the technical know-how for filming and basic editing (according to the interests of the community), promoting group dynamics and horizontal participation, and encouraging reflection and discussion.

To the extent that it is possible, all the filming is carried out by the participants themselves, and they keep copies of everything that is filmed during the workshops. If at the end of the workshop the participants decide they want to do a final video project, they can propose it themselves (through an appraisal of their needs and desires), and then carry it out with the assistance of the facilitators. In the end, there should be an understanding that it is *their* project. Through my personal experience in Video Transformation I have identified and adapted three principal objectives of Video Transformation: personal growth, demythification of the media, and self-representation.

Personal growth can come about through observation and reflection about oneself. One of the most important characteristics of video is the ability for immediate playback “*retroalimentación inmediata*”. Immediate playback acts as a 360 degree mirror which reveals many more angles than a one-dimensional reflection. By confronting ourselves with our own image and behavior, we can see and know ourselves better, question attitudes and tendencies, recognize faults and virtues, and reaffirm our self-confidence. Meanwhile, the group provides an opportunity for discussion, promotes trust-building, and encourages a safe atmosphere for criticism and validation. In this sense, Video allows us to:

- observe and evaluate ourselves.
- listen to ourselves speak.
- see others’ reactions when I speak or when I act.
- see my own reactions when others speak/act.
- learn to accept ourselves for who we are by coming to terms with our self-image.
- see ourselves filming—making television.

- see ourselves through other people's eyes.

In addition, an entire community can also see itself reflected through video. Television tends to be ethnocentric and racially biased; this is certainly the case in Colombia. It seldom portrays realities other than the dominant imagined communities, which are usually white and Western. It can be extremely refreshing and powerful for communities to see themselves, their people, their neighbors and their own reality on television. Moreover, observation can help identify existing problems in a community that have become invisible in every-day life.

Video can act as a silent witness and as a dislocated observer that will often facilitate the recognition of particular difficulties that we often are not aware of by being immersed in them. The "genuineness" of representation that results from filming and observing oneself, consistently elicits an interest that culturally-foreign mediums may not. Paulo Freire has stressed the importance of establishing a close relationship between the cultural content of the learning process and the social, political, and economic conditions of the people involved. In this sense, video can provide faithful, relevant, and specific material that is in accordance with the cultural reality of the particular community. The usual result is an authentic interest in oneself and in one's social environment that can catalyze profound evaluation. If we agree that location specificity is a crucial aspect of any learning tool, video can achieve the ultimate degree of specificity by reflecting the exclusive and particular reality of the situation at hand.

Secondly, simple exercises and production activities in which the participants learn the technical aspects of video can facilitate the de-mythification of television. By understanding and actively participating in the process of making television, it is possible

to appropriate this tool which is often revered and thought unattainable. Given that television has traditionally been a knowledge possessed by the elite, it has reinforced vertical and unidirectional communication. The inaccessibility and hierarchical nature of television has resulted in its idealization and “romanticization”. Overturning the passive role of people as recipients and consumers, Video Transformation encourages the critical spirit and creativity of a community. This destabilizes the traditional divide between those who know and those who don’t and brings about a new way of learning that surges from the interests of the oppressed (Freire, 1980). Learning the technical aspects of video helps elucidate the ways in which television can manipulate, omit, edit, enhance or distort information. The result is a double displacement of positions: video is debunked as an absolute truth and a medium reserved for the rich and famous; and everyday people become actors in every sense of the word instead of mere consumers. In the end, we learn to watch television with a much more critical eye, vigilant of the agendas and tendencies of those who produce it.

My preoccupation with self-representation emerges from the post-modern self-critique of anthropology. As a member of this Western discipline which has inherited a legacy of colonialism, I am well aware of the dangers inherent in any relation based on difference. I realize that our work in disadvantaged communities as researchers, planners, or ethnographers will inescapably be forged through interactions in various fields of uneven power relations. Also, as a member of a community traditionally categorized as non-Western, I am conscious of the fact that the experience of difference is also one of inequality (Abu-Lughod, 1991). A growing awareness and discomfort with the power that professionalism bestows on the researcher has therefore ignited a search

for ways of interaction that seek to level the ground on which we all relate. Across academic and professional disciplines, we can continue to reproduce colonialism and foster dependency by using an exclusive discourse that reinforces the hierarchical distinctions between the professional and the community. But we can also choose to break with these segregationist practices and instead seek to blur this separation by making the technical know-how and equipment necessary to produce visual representations available to those who have traditionally been constituted as “subjects”. This may allow for an empowerment through self-representation and even to a reversal of the traditional dichotomies observer/observed expert/subject producer/consumer. Video gives voice to those who haven’t otherwise had one. Moreover, it transfers—at least to an extent—the authority and power away from me as the “professional”, and towards those who need it to change their own lives.

I believe that through the contestation of the traditional vertical processes of media distribution and the self-observation which video facilitates, a community can further its own objectives and transcend tangible and sometimes not as tangible objectives. Even if it were to fail at the three objectives outlined above a community can be empowered simply by the transfer of know-how to operate a tool with numerous practical uses and worldwide acceptance as a legitimate medium. Therefore, beyond the important objectives of personal transformation and media de-mythification, video can be instrumentalized to inspire POWER and VOICE in a community. Video Transformation seeks to leave with the community an instrument for education, entertainment, collection, documentation and diffusion of information, and most importantly, self-representation.

The project was carried out during a nine week period beginning with four weeks devoted to video-workshops. I counted with the collaboration of AFRODES and it was the organization that helped me in selecting the five youth that would take part in the workshops. The group was composed of Yorkin, Claritza, Martha, and Freiser all of whom were between 20 and 22 years old, and Daniel who was 14. We carried out four weeks of intensive video workshops all using the principles of Video Transformation in teaching the basics of filming. From the beginning I was impressed by the quickness and enthusiasm with which all of the five youth learned the basics. We met for 5 hours at least four times a week and they were there every time ready to go...needless to say their enthusiasm was contagious. All five had been displaced within a two year period and for a variety of reasons ranging from overt violence to lack of economic alternatives.

Although their situations varied all of them lived in the southern periphery of Bogotá and from our first meeting I realized that transportation costs to our meetings (which were held at the AFRODES office in downtown) as well as lunch would have to come from my budget. This meant some minor budget readjustments. Of all my prior experience with Video Transformation projects I had never been part of a group that moved so fast through the technical aspects of video. Moreover, I was quickly able to notice changes in their behavior. This was most evident with Daniel and Claritza both of whom seemed shy and less participative in the beginning. By the third week however, they were much more outgoing. During the fourth week we carried out an evaluation on camera, and Claritza herself expressed precisely how the video workshops had been helping her open up. How she had always been afraid to give her opinion and how that was changing, how

she now was feeling that what she had to say counted. These types of changes are seldom expressed so clearly, but they are not hard to perceive and notice as time goes on.

After we finished the four week training, we proceeded to plan and design a documentary project to carry out in the following four weeks. Martha, Yorkin, Daniel, Freiser, and Claritza did the majority of the work using me only as a collaborator. They chose the theme for the documentary to be an exploration of the transition—the change—that people go through as they migrate from a life in the river-banks or the countryside to the capital. They wanted to emphasize how this affects a family and whether their quality of life had improved or on the contrary had worsened after displacement. They designed three different interview guides, one for people in situation of displacement, one for people living in the *barrio* before the “*desplazados*” arrived, and one for other *Bogotanos*. The first three weeks we shot primarily in their barrios interviewing different displaced people, in the majority Afro-Colombians. These meant a two hour bus-ride every day from my house to their house; nothing could have emphasized the magnitude of the inequality in Bogotá that the slow transition from my home in the North (140th St.) to *El Oasis* (83rd St. South). As I sat on the bus, the equipment camouflaged as best as I could in sacks and bag-packs, I could witness through my window how one world transformed into another. It’s not that I ever doubted that inequality was prevalent in Colombia, I just had never had the opportunity to see it so clearly before my eyes. From a distance the hills covered almost completely in brick and tin seem almost beautiful, it is not until the bus embarks in the almost roller-coaster-like ride up the hill that one is able to really grasp the immense poverty, the dirt floors and open sewers.

For the four weeks we met about 4 to 5 times a week in a *panadería* in *El Oasis* close to Claritza's house where we had breakfast before starting our day of shooting. Again, they did most of the work and I tried to intervene as little as possible and only when necessary. It was encouraging, interesting and at times frustrating to watch the whole process, to see them learn as they went many of the things—like interview tips and techniques—I had been drilled over and over again in anthropology courses. I obviously provided advice and assistance, but I realized there are many things you learn much better from experience. We carried out 16 in-depth interviews in the *barrios*, as well as recording the music for our sound-track which was performed by one of the local hip-hop groups. The following week we devoted to interviewing people in down-town Bogotá as well as in the fanciest sector of the North (around 93rd St.). Our purpose was to interview people from the entire spectrum about what they thought in regard to the situation of forced internal displacement. These interviews were shorter and more informal; we must have done at least 20 of these types of interviews. The last week we devoted to learning digital editing. This is by far the biggest problem I have with the entire project. Due to time as well as monetary restrictions we were not able to edit the documentary there with the group. Access to digital editing equipment is scarce and very expensive in Bogotá. I was able to borrow some equipment from a friend during that week which at least allowed me to teach them the basics of editing. I thought it was vital that they understood how editing works, the possibilities it provides and how it actually takes place. Ideally we would have done at least a rough cut of the material together, but this was not possible. As of now I will be editing a rough cut of the video here in Texas with the objective of traveling back to Colombia in December to carry out a final edit with the

whole group. I fully realize the importance of the editing process for how a documentary takes its final form, and I believe that this is probably the biggest failure that the project has. In any case we have arranged that I will send them copies of the material as I go and that we would exchange feedback and opinions.

Needless to say, there were other problems that arose as along the way which we solved as best as we could as we went. In the end leaving the group was not easy and in order to avoid becoming extra-cheesy and sentimental I won't go into the details of the parting. In any case the group is supposed to continue working. AFRODES received some very basic equipment to keep the video crew running, and Yorkin, Claritza, Freiser, Martha and Daniel all compromised to work as multipliers training others. They have also completed two short paid video works for another NGO and when I left had another one in the planning. Yorkin and Freiser also had been offered positions working as assistants to the assistant producer for a media company (HUMAN MEDIA) doing commercials in Bogotá. This work is not by any means a source of steady permanent income but it can provide occasional benefits. Furthermore, we have applied for one grant and hopefully will find others that support technology use in marginalized groups, in the hope of getting funds to provide more and better equipment.

Overall I feel quite satisfied with the project despite some obvious shortcomings. I hope to continue working with the Afro-Colombian displaced community and eventually work in setting up a much more developed and self-sustained video project with them. Further research into the role the government is playing in alleviating the situation of displacement is fundamental. Since the war is nowhere near a resolution, how is the government going to respond to increasing internal displacement? What role

are non-governmental organizations assuming with the displaced community? How is the Afro-Colombian displaced community organizing itself to deal with and improve their situation? Through my research I already encountered glimpses into these questions, yet, more specific and in-depth investigation would help shine a light on these important questions. Furthermore, at a more theoretical level it would be interesting to follow Arturo Escobar's lead and analyze displacement as an inevitable consequence of modernity in general and development in particular. On how Afro-Colombians' empowerment clashes with the goals of development and the subsequent violence, which as many activists see it, represents the disappearance of the ethnic groups of the Pacific as distinct autonomous cultures. Deeper exploration of the issues of cultural homogenization inherent in the displacement of rural Afro-Colombians to the predominantly white cities of the interior is also vital.

Lastly I'd like to acknowledge the help of Jaidy Madera of the RED CLASPO who provided me with valuable ideas and insights into her own projects with displaced communities. We were able to talk on occasion and share our ideas and worries regarding our projects. Her experience proved valuable in advising me whether she thought I was heading in the right direction or not with the project.