

Monday, October 30, 2017

I arrived to Colombia the last week of August. After visiting my family for a week, I went to visit the Nasa indigenous communities in Cauca. We stayed in a farm, near Santander de Quilichao, the closest town to the school we were going to work. The first night, we met with a veterinarian and an agricultural engineer from the region, and who offered to help us in our project. They warned us to be careful, because there were different armed groups moving into the area. The next day we traveled to the indigenous reservation of San Antonio, where we were going to do our project. The reservation's school is located in an area called Betania. It serves 210 children from this community. Throughout the next week, we walked the region with the community leaders, interviewing people from the community, and socialized our project. Early on, I learned of the presence of drug gangs in the area, and of the existence of a cocaine processing lab, of which I was not aware before. When I spoke with people, I felt that they were telling us what we wanted to hear in regard to the security and violence, but clearly, the situation was very complex, and it didn't feel safe at all.

As I explained in my proposal, this region was controlled by what was the largest guerrilla group in the country, the FARC, until they signed a peace agreement with the government. What is happening right now is that right-wing paramilitary groups, and other armed groups, are competing to control the area. Moreover, the government has not followed through with the peace agreements, and many indigenous leaders are being assassinated, and violence is on the rise.

The second week we went to visit a different community in Santander de Quilichao. On that day, a group of eight armed men went to the school in Betania, and ask for us. I'm afraid that they think that because we are associated with the University of California,

the university would pay a ransom if they kidnap us. The people from that community advised to leave the area until the situation became safer, which I'm not sure will happen anytime soon. This compelled us to stop working with that community, at least for the time being.

After we left, I visited other communities where I did fieldwork for my Senior Thesis, looking to do our project in a safer place. I visited the indigenous communities of Rio Sucio, which is located near Manizales. There, I met with people from an organization called Comunicativa, with whom I established a relationship few years ago.

Comunicativa runs an afterschool program, and works with agriculture, theater and music, to educate kids in marginalized neighborhoods of Manizales, which are home to indigenous and other rural communities that were displaced from the countryside.

Comunativa is an organization led by people from these neighborhoods, so they know their community very well. We went to Rio Sucio to discuss the possibility of integrating my project with Comunicativa, and with the work done by seed custodians in Rio Sucio. I decided to work with commutative, because I feel very inspired by the work they do with marginalized children, and because displaced people from the countryside found a home in their neighborhood, including people from many indigenous groups. Given this diversity, I feel that the impact of our project in these communities will be great.

Comunicativa has two acres of land where we are establishing our food gardens. So far, we built a compost pile, four planting beds, and we begun a seed bank and plant nursery, in which we are propagating plants to distribute to other gardens in the community. The idea with the nursery and the seed bank is not only to supply plants and seeds to other gardeners, but also to become a gathering place where to share our experiences, and to lead workshops on different topics. A seed custodian from Rio Sucio, and an indigenous leader (known as a "taita") from Putumayo, offered us to lead

workshops about medicinal plants and seeds. We are planning to start doing workshops starting on January. For now, we started a network of gardeners, which meets every Tuesday night, and that has been consistently growing. People from other neighborhoods are starting to come to our meetings, to discuss what we are doing, and to plan what we are going to do.

Last week we met with the administrator of an elderly home to discuss the possibility of working in their garden with our kids. They were excited about our project, agreed to let us grow a garden there. We are planning to do so in January as well, to coincide with the beginning of the school year, since here the school year calendar begins in

January.

All in all, I'm very excited about the way how the project is growing. I still hope to be able to return in the future to the first school I visited, because I grew fond of the kids there. I'm still in communication with that community, so if the security improves, I would like to integrate them again into the project.

I look forward to keep updating you with good news regarding the progress of our project.

Sincerely,
Juan Velez



