The tree of love:

roots of resilience and reconciliation for the kids of war

"I remember when death entered my house, without permission and without even bothering to knock at my door. But it didn't bother me. Death was silent. It was expected. And I knew it was the beginning. The war was now part of me...."
Fragment of the story of a former fighter girl recruited by an illegal armed group in Colombia.

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Photos: Mathew Charles and Alberto Sierra

I grew up in a town where my daily routine involved elements of war. Bullets. Bombs. Death. Over there, the illegal armed groups recruited kids as if it were normal. It was the only chance to work. "Nobody thought it was bad...," says a young indigenous former fighter.

The involvement of kids and teenagers in illegal armed groups is an unresolved problem that must be understood from the ground realities of its protagonists: children. Understanding their vulnerabilities, motivations, experiences, and dreams will allow design resilience strategies for their recovery and reincorporation.

In an armed conflict scenario, there is a trend to classify soldier kids as victims, kidnapped children, and very weak ones. However, this is not the case. A study conducted by **Mathew Charles**, post PhD professor at the Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies, Universidad del Rosario together with journalist **Karen Fowler-Watt**, senior academic at the Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University (UK), examined and accentuated the realities of the **kids of war** through narrative experiences in which the kids wrote down their life stories.

The project, entitled ***El árbol del amor: escritura de la vida y 'estaciones del yo'*** (***The tree of love: life writing and 'seasons of the self'***) by **former soldier kids in Colombia**, was developed in **Jambal**ó (**Cauca**). It involved soldier kids from the **Nasa Yuwe** indigenous community (or "people of the water" in their language), who were among the thousands of children recruited during 55-year conflict. They described their experiences around the ***Tree of Love,*** a magical meeting place where illusions and longings are shared and their strength and perseverance represent the Nasa people's resilience in the midst of violence.

According to the 2005 census, the **Nasa or Paez represent 13.4%% of the Colombia's indigenous population**. Most of them are distributed in the Tierradentro region, between the departments of Cauca and Huila, whereas others are in Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Caquetá, and Putumayo.

Words as an instrument to bloom

Toward his interest in the construction of peace involving kids' creativity and participation, British researcher Mathew Charles, who arrived in Colombia as a correspondent for the BBC and The Telegraph, focused his research on the participation of kids and teenagers in non-state armed groups. He said that the project aims to create a space for these children to tell their own stories and strengthen their roots.

"*The tree of love* (*Fxtuu wêdxnxi,* in Páez or Nasa Yuwe language) is a very interesting story. When we got into school the first day of the workshop, people told us to go outside, and we sat under the branches of a tree. They told us that this giant tree covered with pink flowers is called the "tree of love" because the kids gather here to share experiences and spend time with their friends and, on occasions, to honor an individual," says Charles.

This great *collage* of stories that combines feelings, memories, and longing is centered on stories about friendship, family, and love. But it also portrays pain, fear, and the meaning of these feelings for them. One example is the story of an 18-year-old boy: "they found him in the river, murdered. He was just a few days away from graduating. All he wanted to do was study. He was looking for a better life. His murder was a message for every boy and girl, for all of us. Our only future is the present day."

The truth is that the armed conflict does not differentiate between genders. **Boys and girls join the troops on equal terms; however, the experience of a fighter girl is much more complex:** "some of them have been sexually abused, but others get involved with commanders to be safer and to avoid having to do the most difficult jobs, such as being a guard or carrying firewood. If they are the commander's companions, they have more protection, so some girls understand this situation and do that. The girls also understand and have strategies to live in the midst of these harsh circumstances," explains Mathew Charles.

This is presented in the autobiographical excerpts of young female former fighters: "I was kidnapped from my home. I was 15. And from that moment on, I have been raped. When a girl arrives at a camp, from the very moment a commander touches her, anyone can do it, and the rapes are constant. Not only this, I ended up being pregnant, and then, I was forced to have an abortion at six-month pregnancy. I was 16 years old. I could not cry. I couldn't tell anyone. Every day was so painful, so difficult...."

Not every recruitment is forced

According to **International Humanitarian Law** (**IHL**), the recruitment of children under 15 by illegal armed groups is a war crime, regardless of whether the children volunteer. This is a constant violation to the international prohibition.

"There are two things we need to understand. First, not all recruitment is forced, some kids want to go. All recruitment is illegal, but it is not forced, and that is different. Second, if we tell the kids that they were kidnapped and recruitment is forced, we do not understand their reality or the reasons behind their joining the groups," emphasizes Charles, who leads **Rosario's Research Incubators: crimen organizado** (**organized crime research incubator**).

→ "Kids grow up as the kids of war, some of them become soldiers and after that, luckily, all kids become survivors," says Mathew Charles, postdoctoral professor at the Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies.

Forced recruitment is not the only way in which illegal armed groups expand their troops, and within this context, the State has a responsibility in the face of recruitment that is also a great challenge.

Ximena Pachón, an anthropologist at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, in her paper ***La infancia perdida en Colombia: los menores en la guerra (Lost childhood in Colombia. Minors in war)***, developed by the **Center for Latin American Studies** at Georgetown University, points out that "social decomposition, the number of kids at a school in a region, poverty level and family impoverishment, broken family structures, in addition to the presence of parents, siblings,

↓ *The Tree of Love* documentary, by researcher Mathew Charles

Projects like *The tree of love* may foster the post-traumatic growth when allowing former fighter kids to not only "recover themselves" but also reach a better place.

relatives or friends within these groups, are some of the variables that, along with other factors, influence the decision of a minor to use weapons."

The decision of kids to join an illegal armed group depends on their home environment. "We have observed that children who did not join them come from very strong family structures where there is a father figure and the parents inspire kids to study and drive forward. For the other youngsters, probably this was not the case because sometimes they stopped studying to bring money home, and with that pressure, some kids start working with coke and get involved with armed groups," explains Charles.

Charles, who is a professor at Universidad del Rosario, draws attention to something he finds interesting: he has found some former fighter kids who were initially kidnapped, but they joined the ideology in the end. Once outside, although they know they are victims and the recruitment was illegal, they have no regrets, no bad feelings toward the guerrillas because they liked that life. In their paper, the authors argued that the memories of fighter kids offer a "window into the minds of kids and their different experiences of war," but they are also a mirror of the society, which can be hard to see.

Resilience and resistance

For the kids of war and vulnerable communities located in conflict zones, such as the department of Cauca, resilience and resistance are aspects that shape their reality. For indigenous people, the aspect of **resistance** is strong in their community and this becomes evident with the ***Guardia Indígena*** (indigenous guard), with which they create a powerful barrier.

The **resilience** relates to what they all have: growing up and learning to live with the conflict, and it is something they must do to survive. Although no child should live in a conflict, they create their own methods and learn skills to survive in this situation. Some children are politically perceptive and know how to deal with and advance in these areas better than adults.

According to the researcher: "resilience is learning to live under difficult circumstances, but resistance is more; resistance is having the confidence not to join an armed group or not to do it again because what we have seen in the communities, particularly in the indigenous communities, is that there is a stigmatization toward young former fighters. Some communities do not want to accept them, regardless of whether they are children because violence ruptures their concepts of coexistence and harmony. This is very hard for a child. If your family or community does not want to accept you, what do you do? So you go back to the armed groups because they need a structure, and those of the state are weak to deal with the issue of reintegration."

Projects such as ***The Tree of Love*** can foster posttraumatic growth by allowing former fighter kids to not only "recover" but also to return and build a better place. **This research exercise gave these youngsters a glimpse of a better future, as the project provided them with equipment and training in animation and audiovisual material.**

Today, these former fighter kids created a company that provides services for organizing parties and events. Mathew Charles, on the other hand, continues studying about the young people of war from different regions.

In war, boys and girls are the most vulnerable. As Hilda Molano, an expert on forced recruitment for the Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Youth in the Armed Conflict in Colombia (**Coalico**), points out in the paper **Los niños de la guerra** (**Kids of the War**) published by Universidad de los Andes: "precisely because of their age, psychoemotional and physical development, they are more willing to pay attention to certain dynamics, customs, or situations within their communities. They normalize the presence of armed actors and are fascinated by the power gained via weapons and the control exercised by these groups over the population."

According to the **Cape Town Principles** (**1997**), a child soldier is defined as "*Any person under 18 who is part of any regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, inter alia, cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely family members.*"

Beyond this, the kids of war are those who believe that war and violence are their reality and daily life, live with fear and danger inside or outside the ranks, suffer state's abandonment, leave school at a young age, live with death, exchanged their toys for rifles, and yearn for a better future and place.

Between "winter" and "spring"

The Tree of Love was developed with 25 indigenous former fighters between the ages of 9 and 24. Some of them were disengaged; others were not, but lived with the conflict and grew up with conflict and bombings, according to journalist and researcher Mathew Charles. Understanding their environment and the tree's cultural significance, they used the seasons as a narrative structure to represent the stages or moments of life. Thus, they associated winter with war and suffering, spring with the exit of the armed group.

"With the stories, we built a 25-minute animation. The children wrote, illustrated, and animated their own stories that show the reality of their coexistence and adaptation to the war. The stories are very short, but when you add them all up, you have the the total story of the child soldier in Colombia," he adds. https://vimeo. com/359893831

Nasa people are concentrated in the department of Cauca, where 88.6% of the population (164,973 people) lives. Valle del Cauca comes next, with 3.8% (7,005 people) and Putumayo with 1.7% (3,190 people). These three departments constitute 94.1% of the population. Nasa people represent 13.4% of this indigenous population in Colombia.