

# Advanced Seminar on Leadership and Human Rights for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Youth



Photo: D. Rojas/ACNUR

Daniel Ruiz-Serna  
2014 McBurney Fellow  
McGill Institute for Health and  
Social Policy

## Project Overview

**Student:** Daniel Ruiz-Serna

**Department:** Anthropology, Ph.D. 2

**Organizations:** Claretian University Foundation –FUCLA; Pacific Research Institute -INEPA

**Location:** Riosucio, Colombia

**Mentor:** Prof. Eduardo Kohn, Department of Anthropology

**Fellowship Duration:** May 25<sup>th</sup> –July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014



## About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program

Through McGill’s Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations over a period of 2 to 3 months. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

## Contents

Project Overview .....	1
About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program .....	1
Contents .....	1
Fellowship’s Rationale and objectives.....	2
Background/context .....	3
Activities .....	4
Challenges and successes .....	5
Questions raised.....	6
Training/mentoring on site .....	6
What did I learn? .....	6
Community Implications and Further Work.....	7
Next steps.....	8
Program evaluation .....	9
Any advice for future fellows?.....	9

# Advanced Seminar on Leadership and Human Rights for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Rural Youth

## Fellowship's Rationale and objectives

In 1993 and after years of intense work, the Afro-Colombian rural population from the Pacific coast saw the emergence of a legal mechanism to protect their collective interests and ethnic rights: Law 70. Briefly, this law recognizes the right of rural Afro-Colombians to collectively own their ancestral lands and it establishes the means for protecting their cultural identity in order to foster their economic and social development. Unfortunately after this recognition the population of the Pacific coast faced an intense period of violence in which paramilitary forces – right-wing armed groups that colluded with several politicians and economic elites– carried out killings, disappearances, economic blockades and forced displacement of the population. In a process started in 1999, displaced communities managed to return to their lands and to gain protection of their collective rights.

Both the struggle for recognition of their ethnic rights and the return to their lands in the midst of the armed conflict were led by traditional leaders. Elders and traditional authorities have been witnesses to two transcendental events of the recent history of the region –the rise of ethnic rights and the armed conflict– as well as of the way these contingencies have shaped the way new generations relate within their communities. But while elders know very well the history and the long struggles of their organizational process, youth and new generations have grown up taking for granted their rights over their lands as well as their cultural and ethnic rights.

Facing this kind of intergenerational gap, traditional authorities and grassroots organizations considered it important to implement a seminar in leadership and human rights in order to teach youth their history and the means for protecting their collective rights. The seminar aims to foster an environment where youth can grow up and become productive thinkers and community members. It hopes to increase the young people's sense of belonging while at the same raising awareness of their cultural and ethnic identity, and to promote critical thinking by providing contextual information that they might not have previously had.



May 12- July 12, 2014

## Background/context

The department of Chocó has the highest poverty rate in the country with almost 80% of the population living in extreme poverty. Three out of four people have no access to basic services. The unemployment rate hovers around 22.3%, and the illiteracy rate is three times the national average. Some of the specific educational challenges faced by the youth from Riosucio are the lack of quality education and schools in rural areas; the lack of money to pay for school supplies; the fact that young parents drop out of school in order to raise their own families; school schedules that are not a good fit for the young mothers who have to raise a family; and the absence of programs that adequately reflect both the cultural diversity of the region and the local context. With the implementation of an Advanced Seminar on Leadership and Human Rights, the Claretian University Foundation (FUCLA) and Pacific Research Institute (INEPA) aim to make education equally accessible to rural, poor communities. The seminar is anchored in a set of educational initiatives in which education is conceived of as a vital process in the development of collective identities, framed within a social and cultural environment that allows conservation, growth, and transmission of the cultural values, norms, and worldviews that are the pillars of the identity of the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities that inhabit the region.

The seminar also aims to be an alternative for youth in order to help them expand their choices and opportunities. In a context where the presence of armed groups (guerrilla and paramilitary armies) is a constant threat, and where the State and multinational corporations look for the expansion of several economic activities (mining, plantations of African palm, logging of natural forests) that damage the environment and the traditional, cultural and social means of living, the seminar becomes an opportunity for youth to contribute to the social and political growth of their communities, as well as acquiring tools to help them protect their cultural and ethnic rights.



## Objectives

During the course of my work in the community I identified three main issues that youth are constantly facing: lack of quality education, difficulties accessing the job market, and lack of awareness of their particular rights.

1. Even if the Advanced Seminar on Leadership and Human Rights is anchored in a particular local context, the mandate of the FUCLA regarding this seminar is to provide quality education to rural teenagers. According to FUCLA, secondary education is available to only 62% of the rural population and the quality of secondary schools is extremely poor. Moreover, only 9% of youth of the region pursue higher education. For these reasons the seminar attempts to offer quality education that is accessible and relevant to rural and poor communities.

2. There is a need for youth to improve their skills in order to increase their possibilities of getting a good job. At least this is the expectation of those who attend the seminar since in the local context obtaining a diploma often increases the chances of accessing one of the few jobs offered by the public administration (teachers, community support workers, project facilitators, etc.). However, one of the frustrations manifested by youth is the difficulty of gaining work experience. In many cases they amass several post-secondary diplomas (seminars, workshops, intensive courses) without opportunities to use this knowledge in the workforce.

3. Despite the fact that legal normativity recognizes the cultural and ethnic rights of the Afro-Colombian population for the last 20 years, a lack of awareness persists among young Afro-Colombians with regards to their particular rights and to the threats that currently exist over their collective lands. In this sense the seminar provides an ideal scenario for discussing such issues and fostering reflection and critical thinking.

## Activities

My mandate was to offer technical assistance and support (accompaniment, training, development of tools) for the implementation of the courses associated with the seminar. I was particularly involved in the following activities:

- Provide logistic support during the week of meetings and courses, helping to distribute material, organize classrooms, do attendance verification and in-class evaluations, clarify assignments and check reading materials for students, etc.
- Design and conduct two workshops: the history of local grassroots organizations and access to employment.
- Provide support to pedagogical activities.
- Design of pedagogical material for the courses.
- Provide feedback to the students during the courses as well during our visits to their communities.

- Support and accompaniment to young students as they returned to their communities to share what they had learned during the course.
- Formulation of recommendation reports indicating possible improvements to the seminar as well as the challenges and accomplishments observed during the six week program.

### Challenges and successes

Most of the activities I discussed with my host organization before my travel were actually the activities in which I got involved during my internship. Although at the beginning I thought my work would be more concentrated on educational research projects and education accessibility, I had to adapt my interests to the interests of the students, that is, communication and employment. Those interests, as I will discuss further, reflect the particular needs of young peasants in Riosucio since most of them have some kind of post-secondary training, are already parents, and are in search of job.



My personal accomplishments had to do with the discussions I held with my colleagues of the host organizations after I wrote the report they requested. In this report I suggested 3 key changes, including measures to facilitate women's participation, mechanisms to evaluate the performance of students, and the inclusion of members of the communities and traditional leaders as instructors in some of the sessions of the seminar.

1. Although I noticed an increase in women's participation in relation to previous years, there is still a disproportionate ratio between men and women. Many women do not participate in the seminar because they do not have child care services. I recommended the implementation of some kind of daycare during the seminar meetings in order to facilitate women's participation.
2. Currently the FUCLA do not evaluate the students of the seminar and I found this fact somewhat contradictory with their goal of offering quality education. The reason for this omission is due to the uneven educational levels of the students, given their rural origins. Nevertheless, discussions were held regarding the possibility of introducing different forms of collective and non-written evaluations that could be useful for tracking students' progress.
3. Many of the topics of the seminar (leadership, assertive communication) are conducted by professors that come from other regions. Although the presence of these professionals confer certain rigour to the seminar's content, I found that for the sake of being coherent with the principles of communitarian participation and the need for recognition of elders and traditional knowledge, it would have been convenient to invite former leaders of grassroots organizations as well as elders from the communities to participate as facilitators in the different sessions.

## Questions raised

The FUCLA and INEPA have been implementing the seminar since the beginning of the year. As an intern, I participated in the 4th monthly meeting. I found then that all issues related to organization and logistics were incredibly well done. The number of students and their class interventions were also something that surprised me. I was able to ascertain that the interests and concerns of the youth are quite different to the issues faced by the communities some years ago, when I worked with community leaders in 2006. I wonder: How to conciliate the concerns of new generations who are more worried about education and employment with the interests of elders and traditional authorities that continue to see their lands and rights constantly threatened? How to respond effectively to these different needs without compromising their particular analysis of reality?

## Training/mentoring on site

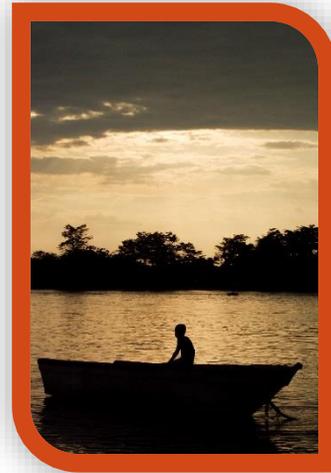
My host organization gave me a lot of autonomy for doing my work. At the end I really appreciated this autonomy but I personally would have preferred closer mentoring during the first days of my stay. I think that they decided to give me such autonomy because they knew I had some previous experience in the region. Even if I was more or less familiarized with the region, I was worried about the local context since I have not visited the region for a long time. Fortunately my local acquaintances helped me resolve some daily issues such as housing and accommodation. I discussed the situation with the person responsible for the host organization but I realized that the lack of accompaniment was not a matter of negligence but that they had neither the resources nor the personnel for the kind of personal coaching I was expecting. In any case, they were also ready to provide the information and documents I asked for. I realized, after the presentation and active discussion of my final report with my supervisor and my colleagues, that they were satisfied with my work.

## What did I learn?

Three key lessons stick out for me:

1. There is an urban, Western concept of youth that does not necessarily correspond to the reality of the youth from Riosucio. For example, most of the participants of the seminar were youth between 17 and 23 and at least an 85% of them are already parents. That means that their principal preoccupations revolve around how to improve the economic conditions of their families and how to access the labour market. Although the content of the seminar fit the agenda of local grassroots organizations (leadership and human rights), most of the participants engaged in the seminar as a means to obtain a diploma (the seminar was certified by an university) and to improve their CVs. My point is that in Riosucio the youth are acquiring responsibilities and commitments that are not necessarily the same concerns shared by youth from other places.

2. The principal issue faced by youth is how to assure a permanent source of income. For most of them access to the labour market is reduced to becoming workers of the public administration or working in some NGO. Even if most of the students of the seminar came from rural areas, only a few of them consider peasant life a desirable way to live. Currently for all young people studying is the way to avoid the kind of hard, underpaid work that their parents have. I understood that there is a kind of romantic idea about peasant life and that it does not coincide with the ideals and goals that these youth have established for themselves. How to find a balance between the sense of belonging and the kind of ethnic and cultural pride that local organizations want to promote among the youth and the kind of ideals that new generations have?



3. I realized that people in the region are not habituated to receive any kind of positive reinforcement. I never hesitated to congratulate people that were doing a good job regardless of whether they were students of the seminar or work colleagues. I realized how much they do appreciate these kind of comments. Of course I never received compliments for my work but I now know that it was not because they did not consider that I was doing a good job but because people in Colombia do not adhere to this practice.

### Community Implications and Further Work

The main beneficiaries of my fellowship are the more than 45 young peasants who participated actively of the seminar. All year, they have been receiving training on topics of leadership and human rights. This is the first time FUCLA has set up such an intensive project but so far the experience has been very positive since the participation of youth has been constant from the



beginning of the process (93% of the initially registered are still attending the seminar). For the next year FUCLA expects to hold this seminar again and to adjust its content in order to focus the intervention in some sub-regions that currently experience problems associated with the presence of armed groups and agroforestry projects that are usurping the collective lands.

A key aspect of the seminar is the fact that after the sessions each one of the participants had to engage themselves to work in the dissemination of their newly acquired knowledge in their respective communities. This aspect had a great impact on the students as well as on the local communities. This dissemination work, which is done with the accompaniment of FUCLA, allows students to progressively gain a place among their communities as potential leaders and to be recognized as people implicated in collective affairs. At the same time and given the fact that during the sessions of the seminar a large range of students from different hamlets and communities are establishing bonds of knowledge and solidarity, it is predictable that once these young leaders become active members of their communities, they will not only be aware of the different issues of the region but also they will eventually increase their social networks in order to work with other colleagues that also participated in the seminar.

The seminar is an opportunity for young peasants to increase their capacity to become productive members and democratic leaders of their communities. The seminar offers an environment of critical thinking where youth from different communities discuss local issues and collectively build alternative development models and strategies for the protection of their rights and cultural identities. On the one hand, this project is important for young people because it allows them to expand their opportunities and to access a diploma that could eventually increase their job opportunities. On the other hand, communities care about this project because their young members are empowered and capable of working with their Community Councils (traditional organizations that watch over land conservation and preservation of their cultural identity). Finally local grassroots organizations find the opportunity to educate new leaders and to ensure an effective generational change in their work.

### Next steps

Youth in Riosucio are doing everything they were instructed to do in order to improve their social and economic conditions: to get an education in order to get a decent job. Nevertheless for most of them it is very difficult to develop the essential skills necessary to find employment in the region. Evidently Riosucio presents the same structural problems that are found in most of the rural areas in Colombia (poverty, unemployment, lack of employment opportunities, violence), but local public authorities should provide measures that guarantee at least a first work experience to young people. Given the difficulties experienced by youth to access the labour market (which are not always linked to a lack of education as I tried to pointed out), I believe that some policy should be adopted



by the municipal government in order to implement quality internships and some kind of volunteering that would allow young people to acquire skills that are essential for the labour market. In this sense, all projects implemented by the municipality should at least require the participation of young interns and an appropriate ratio of young people among the workers. Youth definitely need access to local job training and experience since many young peasants are leaving the region in order to gain much needed work experience. Measures to guarantee youth employment are crucial since finding quality-work is important for young people in order to fully participate in their communities and in order to avoid the potential problems linked to poverty and social exclusion.

### **Program evaluation**

#### **How did this fellowship further your academic or career goals?**

The internship allowed me to meet people and to get in touch with the organizations from a region where I plan to conduct my Ph.D. research. Establishing these contacts would not have been possible without the IHSP fellowship. In that sense, the fellowship allowed me to become better acquainted with the region and to anticipate some of the challenges I will face during my coming fieldwork. I personally found in the fellowship an invaluable opportunity for putting into practice my experience and knowledge, as well as for enhancing my ethnographic training, while at the same time I was able to make a concrete contribution into a particular local project.

What did you value most about the fellowship? The support I received throughout all the preparation of my trip, particularly the advice and assistance during my request of an exemption from the McGill travel guidelines. Due to the fact that I was doing an internship in a region where Canadian government had posted an advisory against all travel, I needed to obtain a special consent from the Dean of my Faculty. This was a very complicated and long process and thanks to the help of the Student Affairs Administrator from IHSP, I finally obtained the exemption that allowed me to do my internship. Moreover, during my stay in the region the constant communication I kept with the Administrator made me feel adequately supported.

#### **Any advice for future fellows?**

This would sound obvious but the most important thing is to always keep an open mind and to be able to adapt yourself to the local idiosyncrasy. As McGill students we have been trained to respond in particular ways to specific circumstances (we know methods and techniques very well) but once in the field we have to be overall creative and patient. The apparent downtimes (the time between the moment we realize the project does not work as we expected and the moment we believe to understand our actual tasks) are the best occasions for integrating with our colleagues and understanding the local culture.

**How useful was it to interact with other fellows?**

It was very enriching to learn about the multiplicity of projects in which other fellow students were engaged. That definitely helped us to enlarge the perspective of our own work. Furthermore during the two meetings we held, we had the opportunity to exchange useful information and some pieces of advise about other countries we might visit.

**Any suggestions for how to improve the program?**

Although each fellow is supposed to attend the McGill pre-departure orientation, I still feel that there are some topics (for example how to face cultural shock) that are not discussed enough during our training. The University's orientation is large and too general in order to accommodate such topics. Some arrangements could be made in order to allow fellows to discuss some of the issues that we will face during our trip as well as the particularities of the countries we will visit.