

Meeting with the Community of Buena Ventura, Colombia

March 17, 2018.

Poverty Reduction Strategy

Saturday March 17 2018

25 participants from Buenaventura

10 participants from organizations

10 children

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From Buenaventura to Vancouver, from Port to Port.

Displaced there, displaced here

On Saturday, March 17, workers from WATARI in coordination with members of the Sanctuary Health Collective, the BC Federation of Labour, the BC Centre for Disease Control and CoDevelopment Canada, had the opportunity to meet with members of the community of Buenaventura Colombia, who live in Vancouver and Lower Mainland as refugees and migrants.

As community workers, we have seen an increase of refugees coming from Buenaventura. Their testimonies are mostly related to their sufferings as internally displaced communities in their own country or externally displaced in other countries. They faced terrible experiences during the civil war—thousands of people were killed and thousands more were kidnapped and tortured—but their situation has gotten worse after the end of the civil war as there has been an increase in repression from military and paramilitary forces. Thousands left Buenaventura to other countries in Europe, where they also suffered racism and discrimination; others immigrated to Canada in order to save their lives.

Their situation in British Columbia is similar to other refugee communities coming from refugee camps, but little attention has been given to this community because most of them come as refugee claimants. The arbitrary and narrowly-focused refugee determination process leaves many refugee claimants with precarious immigration status. Most immigrant service agencies receive funding from Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada to provide services for permanent residents; these agencies do have Sanctuary City or Access without Fear policies, making them inaccessible for communities that have precarious immigration status.

About the Gathering

The community was curious about this first gathering. A family from the community prepared with great care the Paisa Platter, a delicious typical dish from Colombia, which includes sausages, meats, and beans. The smell of the Paisa Platter permeated the whole room.

An hour after the event was supposed to start, it was finally time to eat. “Time is different for us,” said one of the organizers from the community.

Along with the food, the laughs, the jokes, our conversation about our favorite food started. The stomach rumbles when hearing the following answers:

I like: Broths, seafood, pork meat, sancocho, fried yucca, ceviche, rice in milk, veal, rice with chicken, chicken stew, mondongo soup, seafood cazuela, and a child said “I like hamburgers”

Wendy Mendez from Co-Dev presented the community her thoughts and observation of her recent trip to Buenaventura. She spoke about neoliberal policies in Latin America, how these policies and practices have taken over the territories, and how they affected the different towns and populations.

Between 1992 and 2000, a total of 8700 people were killed as a result of the deepening of armed conflict and the proliferation of paramilitary bands.

The crude reality in Buenaventura is:

- 62% unemployment
- 90% informal economy
- 54% Poverty
- 42% Extreme Poverty
- 50% Victims of the War

Wendy finished her presentation with the following:

More than a Port, Buenaventura is its people, its communities.

How does poverty affect our community?

Findings and issues

- The emotional issue is heavier than economic

Culture shock causes a lot of depression. This includes, having to work on things that you have never worked on before like construction or cleaning. The pay is really low and that is really shocking. To all of that, you have to take into account that you still have to send money to the families in our countries. Our children are used to playing, and running around. In Canada, the neighbors get mad, they want our children to be silent all the time.

- Jobs/Salary/Wages

An advantage that BC has over the US is that in BC, we can find a job right away.

Salaries are too low and are usually not enough.

Waiting until 2021 for a 15-dollar minimum wage is unacceptable.

- Language Barriers

The language is another shock; you look for someone who can speak to you in your language. The language is important and makes you feel frustrated not to be able to speak it.

- Education

Access to education is also blocked by the lack of English. Settlement organizations are working for the government and they don't support people that have no status or have precarious immigration status in Canada. Access to English classes is only available if there is immigration status.

In most districts, the children cannot access school because they don't have immigration status. One child could not go to school for one year. It is difficult when the school schedule doesn't match parents' working schedule.

- Daycare

Daycare is also a barrier because it is very expensive. "There is no access to daycare," one parent says, "I have to pay 870 dollars for daycare." Another family says they pay 1440 dollars. Families who are not permanent residents cannot access the childcare subsidy.

- Language and Health Care

Concerning pregnancy and access to healthcare. One of the participants shared her experience of losing her pregnancy and keeping her dead baby inside for 15 days because she did not have support and was not able to find anybody to help with translation or orientation. Another said, "I suffered from postpartum depression and I could not explain because I couldn't speak English." The bills that people get after receiving medical services were also shocking for people. Language is also a barrier in accessing health services. There should be more interpreters in the hospitals and clinics.

- Housing

Rent is too expensive, we spend 70% of our wages in paying rent. We only work to pay rent. We don't have any money left for other needs or for recreation.

We need emergency shelters for refugees, because it is really difficult to find a place when we arrive. We relied on members of the community to invite us to stay in their living rooms for a few days.

Priorities/solutions

1. Affordable housing
2. Wage Increase
3. Accompaniment, translation, support and advocacy
4. Emergency shelter for refugees and migrants
5. Affordable childcare
6. Labour rights
7. Access to Health Care
8. Access to Education for adults and children

9. Affordable Transportation
10. Recreation

Resolution

The participants of this community gathering, refugees and migrants from Buenaventura Colombia living in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland have decided to organize a committee of 7 members who will meet to work around the main priorities, solutions and demands.

1. Demanding affordable and dignified housing
2. Demanding wage increases
3. To create a solidarity system of accompaniment, translation, support and advocacy

Community Meeting on Saturday March 24, 2018

15 Latin American Migrants living in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland.

in this second consultation we met with 15 migrants from different Latin American countries.

The main question was:

How poverty affects refugees and migrants?

Answers:

- Food

Food is too expensive

- Employment

Because we have a baby we only survive with one salary, in order to survive we are working all time and we don't have the possibility to expend time with our families, it is a threat to the family unity.

Wages are very low in BC

I am a carpenter but my salary is too low

Taxes are too high

- Housing

More than 50% of the salary goes to renting a place to live

Rent is too high.

There is no housing for larger families, we are 7 members in the family and we can't find a place

As Latin Americans our destiny is to live in basements

Every time we want to rent, they ask for SIN or employment letter and other official ID

Feels like Kids don't have rights, Canadians get to angry when kids are playing

- Transportation

Is extremely expensive. 100 dollars for one zone fare

- Language

There are no places to learn English where you can have your children closer

- Food

It is difficult to access food programs.

Food is too expensive

In the last 3 month's food got too expensive

- childcare/babies

Diapers are expensive

Daycare not available for us or out of our financial possibilities, one of the parents have to stay home to take care of the children

- Education

Fee for education is too high

- Access to legal aid

It is very difficult to obtain legal aid to regularize immigration status.

- Access to Health Care

We can't go if we don't have Medical Card

We live in Surrey and there are not clinics for migrants and refugees

Main Priorities/ solutions

1. Create Affordable Housing
2. Access to Health Care
3. Affordable Childcare