

# Agape: a reconciliation initiative by members of civil society and former child-soldiers

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*‘Agape’ is a reconciliation project among victims of the armed conflict in Colombia and child-soldiers who, legally, are also victims of the armed conflict. The project was realised fully by volunteers, who are kidnap victims, refugees, students and other members of the Colombian community in Montreal, Canada. The paper presents the results of this project: the contribution of the child-soldiers to the healing process of many of the direct victims of the war, as well as implications of the project for former child-soldiers, other victims of the war, and all other community members involved. The paper concludes by asserting the importance of the participation of the community in the search for solutions to armed conflict.*

**Keywords:** Canada, child-soldiers, Colombia, reconciliation

## Introduction

The armed struggle in Colombia comprises guerrilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), both inspired by communist ideology. In addition, there are extreme right paramilitary groups organised as regional bands without a cohesive line of command that run illegal and violent operations. Guerrilla and paramilitary groups are financed through narco-traffic, kidnappings and extortion.

Recruitment of minors by the illegal forces is common practice. Other factors that may

result in minors joining armed groups include the presence of illegal armed groups in a child’s area of residence, family abuse and neglect, promises of financial gain, lack of educational opportunities, and the desire to join friends and relatives who are already part of the group.

‘Agape’ is a project for former child-soldiers. Some of the child-soldiers who participated had been abandoned by the armed groups when they get ill or injured. Others were captured by, or released to, the government as part of peace agreements. A few of them had run away. Since 2002 Colombian law recognises these children as victims and accords them special protection.

*Agape* was initiated by a group of Colombians living in Canada. They decided to create and implement a reconciliation and training programme for former child-soldiers who visited Canada during the summer months of 2006, 2007 and 2008. Members of the Colombian community directly affected by the war and who had arrived in Canada as refugees were also invited to participate. The project was based on the belief that peace in Colombia is the responsibility of all its citizens, including those who have emigrated.<sup>1</sup>

The word *Agape* refers to the love that is universal and unconditional, regardless of the merits of the recipient. This love is not necessarily a feeling; it is an act of will, an intention and an action that looks for the

wellbeing of others. It is this attitude of acceptance that *Agape* aspires to encourage.

## **Objectives**

*Agape's* program had several objectives: to provide a space for reconciliation among different victims of the armed conflict in Colombia; to promote training opportunities for the child-soldiers in an area of their interest; to break the pattern of rejection that often accompanies these youngsters; and to offer the former child-soldiers an opportunity to experience life in a context of peace. In addition to providing training opportunities, the program was meant to provide a personal and family experience to former child-soldiers. Another important goal was to facilitate reconciliation amongst child-soldiers and members of the Colombian community. Many Colombians living in Canada as refugees continue to struggle through the painful consequences of the armed conflict, and it was thought that meeting former child-soldiers would have a positive effect in the healing process of both parties.

In order to attain the above mentioned objectives, a team of Colombian volunteers called Technical Team (TT), assumed the responsibilities of fundraising and organising the programme. The members of the team include victims of the war in Colombia, such as refugees and people who were kidnapped, Colombian university students studying in Canada and other members of the Colombian community. The TT selects possible Colombian host families who welcome the youngsters into their homes as family members and searches for training opportunities and other interesting activities for the youngsters. The TT also provides information workshops for the host families in order to help them get acquainted with

the realities of the former child-soldiers prior to their arrival.

Different organisations, institutions and enterprises have provided their facilities for the training of the former child-soldiers in areas of their interest. Companies owned by Colombians and Canadians have opened their doors to welcome them. To date the participants on the programme have had access to an organic farm, a tropical juice factory, a leather shop and different restaurants.<sup>2</sup>

The first two former child-soldiers arrived in the summer of 2006. The experience was repeated in 2007. In 2008, the program welcomed four former child-soldiers. At first, the Colombian community, viewed the former child-soldiers as potential threats and shunned the project as well the youngsters. By the third year the community had started to participate actively in the programme by getting involved in fundraising, providing training opportunities, attending meetings in the presence of the youngsters, participating in reconciliation workshops and ultimately opening up their homes to the former child-soldiers. The programme was interrupted in 2009, when Canadian Immigration refused visas to the five minors and to the Colombian government delegates who were to bring them, arguing that Canada does not allow minors who have used weapons in armed conflicts to enter the country. The refusal of entry visas to Canada is a good example of the series of difficulties that former child-soldiers have to face. Both lack of knowledge on their family histories and socio-economic background of child-soldiers, as well as ignorance about the dynamics of recruitment of minors, result in fear and prejudice. Former child-soldiers are often considered willful participants in the armed conflict rather than victims and for this reason they

are rejected by society. These factors create further obstacles to the already difficult process of social reinsertion. Now the future of the project in Canada is on hold.

### **Why in Canada?**

The journey to Canada provided the youngsters with a new experience. For the first time they were able to live in a society where there was no war and where they were not the targets of prejudiced views. It is a fact that Colombian society has developed a series of prejudices, negative images and fears towards these youngsters. The former child-soldiers might also present defensive behaviours for their own security. Understandably they are used to protecting their identity and avoid revelations about their life in the armed groups. They carefully control what they say to others and what they keep to themselves. During their stay with well prepared Colombian families in Canada all these preoccupations disappear. Meeting families, who arrived in Canada as refugees, offered these children the possibility of entering into a dialogue with other victims of the armed conflict. *Agape's* approach provides a safe space that facilitates reconciliation encounters.<sup>3</sup>

The encounters that *Agape* implemented in Canada would be difficult, but not impossible, to replicate in Colombia. The violence during the last 50 years and is rooted in profound structural inequalities that have not been resolved through the political and economic history of the country. As a consequence the majority of the population in Colombia was born and grew up in the midst of armed conflict. This conflict is present in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of life in Colombia. Furthermore, it has become a national identity trait with its own ideas, language and particular set of values that

are now part of the daily lives of many Colombians. They see society as made up of “*friends and enemies,*” “*good and bad,*” “*us and them.*” In other words, the armed conflict is seen as the product of the threats of a minority of bad people against and a majority of good people; not as the result of long existing adverse social conditions. This way of looking at the conflict also promotes distance and thus impedes the dialogue that is a prerequisite for a process of reconciliation. In Canada, the mere distance from the violence helps to look at the conflict in a more contemplative, less emotional way.

### **A volunteer initiative**

In countries such as Salvador, Chile, or South Africa that have known civil wars, military dictatorships or authoritarian regimes, reconciliation efforts have occupied an important place in government agendas. As a result of the implementation of public policy, the reconciliation efforts under these circumstances are highly institutionalised by the governments through commissions, bureaus, or tribunals run by specialised civil servants (Lefranc, 2002; Richters, Dekker & Jonge, 2005). Precisely one of the criticisms that emerge about this modality is that “*a government can effectively dominate the discourse on memory and reconciliation, there by politicizing and instrumentalizing it*” (Richters, et al., 2005: 210). Other scholars affirm that “*It is also an illusion to believe that reconciliation imposed from the top will automatically engender individual steps towards reconciliation (...)* Authorities cannot impose trust and empathy by decree. But they can create a climate that encourages private steps towards reconciliation” (Bloomfield, 2003: 28).

Contrary to these top-down policies, *Agape's* efforts are exclusively communitarian and based on an initiative of civilian volunteers.

In this sense, *Agape's* model is closer to the perspective of reconciliation developed in post-war societies like Nigeria or Mozambique. These countries did not create truth commissions nor war crimes tribunals, but people were encouraged to reconcile amongst themselves through their own local traditions and practices of justice. In both countries, the underlying premise was that justice and reconciliation "*can be done socially and that the practice of such healing takes place at the level of community*" (Richters, et al., 2005: 207).

According to *Agape*, the armed conflict in Colombia does not occur between two opposite factions but rather, violence is the expression of an acute crisis in which society in general has some degree of responsibility. Understood in this light, reconciliation is not an approach between victims and perpetrators, as has been the traditional approach in other countries and is a basis of their official policies of reconciliation. It is rather a process of understanding between the different social sectors. Therefore, *Agape's* task is to facilitate spaces where understanding of the reality of others can occur. Our contribution is to promote change through the understanding of the realities of former child-soldiers and of those directly affected by the war in order to transform the prejudices that both these groups generate.

### ***Agape's* approach to reconciliation**

Following Richters et al. (2005), *Agape's* approach considers reconciliation a part of a set of different issues like social and individual suffering, forgiveness, witnessing, reconstruction of the social fabric, healing and restitution of human rights.

Reconciliation for *Agape* involves parties that, while being at the opposite end of the

armed conflict, share common grounds, as both the refugee families and child-soldiers are legally considered victims. There is, however, ongoing debate about the child-soldiers as victims, especially when discussing their share of responsibility in the horrible crimes perpetrated during their militancy in the illegal armed groups. *Agape's* approach to this debate is that the youngsters, as minors, are considered victims for three main reasons. First of all, recruitment of minors is a crime against humanity condemned by national international laws. Secondly, during the time of recruitment these youth were deprived of their rights as children. Both the state and the society are obliged to protect the rights of children. Thirdly, these children are victims because in most cases they have not had the family, social, educational nor economic conditions that would guarantee their normal development. These conditions should be promoted and guarded by the state, its institutions and each of the society members. Inability to ensure proper conditions constitutes a violation of their fundamental rights. Moreover, the acts perpetrated by the child-soldiers are clearly the responsibility of the adults that recruited them—although many child-soldiers feel personally responsible for their actions.

Reconciliation as proposed by *Agape* searches common grounds where refugees of war and former child-soldiers can meet to share their experiences. Indirectly the families as well as the child-soldiers are also victims of the state that failed to protect them. On the other hand the under-aged soldiers are also victims of the conflict but from a different viewpoint. The reconciliation process takes place by facilitating the understanding of the emotional realities and circumstances of the former child-soldiers as well as those of the other victims

of the war. All the participants in *Agape* are then in a position to develop a compassionate understanding of the painful repercussions that the violent acts have had on all the victims of the armed conflict and this understanding is the basis on which the reconciliation process takes place.

### **Former child-soldiers as agents in the reconciliation of others**

*Agape's* idea of reconciliation as an inclusive process has radically transformed the role of the former child-soldiers in the programme. In fact, they are not only considered beneficiaries but also active agents and promoters of reconciliation. Their life stories and their experiences give invaluable testimony of the complexities and damages caused by the armed conflict. Their input is crucial in the exchange dynamics that is established between the former child-soldiers, the refugees and the community.

Contact between the former child-soldiers, the families, and members of the community occurs in a supportive atmosphere that invites a dialogue capable of changing perceptions and mutual stereotypes. The participants are able to change the way they think of themselves as they introduce in the notion of themselves parts of the "other" that they did not know, such as their values and their experiences. *Agape* is convinced that empathy generates the development of a gradual sense of moral responsibility towards the well being of the "other." This process paves the way towards reconciliation.

The former child-soldiers also contribute to the increased awareness of the Colombian community and others with regards to the realities of child recruitment in Colombia. The involvement of refugee families is also significant as they carry painful experiences related to the political realities of the

country. Through the realities presented by the youngsters they are able to get a more realistic view of the conflict and its agents than the one presented by the media. Through their contribution, the former child-soldiers are no longer passive subjects of institutional attention: they contribute to the building of the Colombian community and help the other participants to reflect together about the impact of the war on people's lives and about individual and collective responsibilities.

In this way, the Colombian community resident in Canada gains awareness over the issue of child recruitment while at the same time the child-soldiers have an opportunity to become acquainted with the personal and family drama created by the war where people, like themselves, carry physical and emotional wounds, perhaps for life. The impact of the programme is reflected in the following e-mail received by the TT from a 17 year-old former child-soldier and participant in *Agape*. It was written the day before she returned to Colombia and was written in the colors of the national flag:

*To the TT and the host families: The truth is that before I leave I want you to know that I am grateful for the opportunity that you give us. I am happy to see that people like you are working towards a new Colombia, and yes, the path you chose is the right one. The topic of reconciliation starts in this way and others should be able to follow our steps. I am particularly thankful with Rosa y Beatriz because they have had the courage to say "I want to help" even if it could have been us that made them loose their homes, their lands and ultimately their country. I believe that this is the real meaning of forgiveness. I also want to ask for forgiveness; forgiveness for not realising that taking part in the armed group I hurt so many*

*wonderful people who left and who at this time could be in Colombia serving our country. Probably I took the easiest path and to avoid other circumstances I finished making decisions that hurt my own family. Now I am trying to make up for all the losses and it is not easy. Everything takes its time. The first thing that I am going to do is heal myself and I think I have taken the first step. I ask for God's blessings for you and I pray that He guides you in the right path so that you continue to provide the support that Colombia needs. The time to say goodbye has arrived. The truth is that I am not so good at farewells and I send you hugs. I hope I did things right during my stay. If this is not the case, please forgive me. Goodbye. I almost forgot I have made the promise that my first heifer will be called Agape in your honor. I am going to miss you very much.*

Juana.

### **Shared experience between youngsters and refugee families**

The former child-soldiers became contributors to the process in the reconciliation with other victims and it became evident that they shared common experiences with the refugee families with regards to the consequences of the armed conflict.

The *losses* of family, friends or goods are the subject of grief and mourning for all. The youngsters often mention the grief that they have experienced through the absence of their families during recruitment, particularly taking into account their young ages, some of them barely 10 years old. The refugee families grieve the absence of their relatives, their friends, their life style and of all that is known to them.

*Displacement* has also been a common experience. The families had to abandon their homes, leave everything behind and in many

cases, they are unable to return to their country and therefore live in exile. Similarly the minors left it all in order to join the illegal groups. Upon entering the reinsertion programme, and for security reasons, they live in urban centers away from their previous rural areas of residence and away from their families.

*Discrimination and rejection* is also a common experience firstly for the refugee families who, before exile, arrived at major urban centres and had to depend on public assistance after having lived an autonomous life and secondly for the youngsters who had to change their life stories for their own protection. In many cases, both groups became the subject of suspicion and mistrust in a society that tends to blame the victim.

*The wish to be reunited with their relatives and friends* is a permanent desire and a painful longing for all.

*The emotional charge of memories* is a constant and painful reminder of a difficult past marked with violent and atrocious actions that left indelible traces in their life histories. *Hope for peace* became a vivid experience through *Agape* in the exchanges among victims that extended their hand as a sign of peace in search of forgiveness and the will for reparation. The extended hand was considered as the fruit of an inner struggle experience during a healing process filled with the pain of wounds caused by the armed conflict in both groups. *Agape* witnessed the extended hand of those who, at least for a moment, were able to put aside their feelings of hatred and anger against their aggressors and who, through a new vision of the conflict, were able to overcome their own pain and shook hands with the youthful hand in search of vindication.

*Forgiveness* has also been part of the experience in *Agape*. Forgiveness expressed in the following terms: *"forgiveness does not forget,*

*forgiveness remembers with through the eyes of compassion. Forgiveness liberates. Forgiveness recognises the full extent of the wound but is able overcome it, if sometimes only momentarily, in order to meet the other.”*

## **Back in Colombia**

The former child-soldiers were delighted to be in Canada, but they showed little autonomy due to the language barrier. Through the experiences shared by refugees and immigrants they realised the difficulties they would face integrating into society in Canada. For the most part they refused to go out by themselves. One of them went out on his own for a walk explaining that he only went on a straight line, afraid to lose his bearings and to be unable to communicate. A few weeks into the programme the participants were homesick. They felt *‘far away’* and missed their food. They needed to be in touch with their people. *Agape* provided long distance telephone cards and Internet access at all times. None of them expressed the desire to stay in Canada, but a few expressed a desire to be able to return one day.

Upon their return from Canada, the former child-soldiers were taken by staff members of the insertion program to different institutions in order to meet with their peers and share their experience and lessons learned while in Canada. Later, each participant returned to his place of residence, either a group home or a foster family in different Colombian cities, given that none of them had been able to return home to their parents for security reasons. They continued taking a variety of courses. Most of them have recently graduated from high school or taken trade level courses in office administration, computer systems, esthetics, etc.<sup>4</sup>

*Agape* has provided ongoing, personal and regular follow-up to its participants directly

or through the different institutions. Four years into the programme *Agape* continues to be in touch with all of them without exception. The former child-soldiers have access to Internet and telephone. They are on Facebook and other social networks, sometimes with assumed names. They are in regular contact with members of the *Agape* team or with the families where they resided. *Agape* has sponsored courses and activities that are not included in the government programme, such as support for graduation expenses, computers, drivers license courses, permit fees and others. It is not uncommon to receive telephone calls in Canada from the youngsters wanting to share their news.

## **Plans for the future**

The program in Canada originated due to the lack of social opportunities available for the former child-soldiers in Colombia. They were, and continue to be, highly stigmatised. The former child-soldiers reported that very few people knew of their history in the illegal armed groups until they came to Canada.

The experience in *Agape* demonstrated that the security provided by a neutral space that is receptive and free of prejudice, together with the presence of other victims, facilitated the process of reconciliation and actualised the experience of peaceful coexistence. *Agape’s* experience allowed all participants to expand their vision of the armed conflict and brought to light a vision of the experiences of refugees and their struggles towards healing in a foreign country. The many losses that illegal recruitment represents for the former child-soldiers have common denominators with the losses of refugee families. Bringing together these groups has helped the child-soldiers develop a different view of their own actions within

the illegal armed forces. Other participants in the programme such as the foster families or the students have also become acquainted with the enormous repercussions of the armed conflict. Through their experience with *Agape* they have also been able to transform the prejudice they held towards these youngsters.

It is important for the community to assume an ethical and moral responsibility towards the search for solutions to the conflict. The change in mutual representations observed through the experience in *Agape* is a step forward in this direction. Unfortunately Canada has closed its doors to former child-soldiers. However, the experience gained through the years leads us to believe that an exercise of this nature should be repeated in Colombia, making some significant changes, respecting the restrictions that the continued presence of the war imposes.

Of course, the resources for this programme could have been utilised for reconciliation efforts in Colombia. However, although there are many reconciliation programmes for adults formerly attached to armed groups, no reconciliation programs with child-soldiers are currently in existence. So far none of the community groups approached had the motivation, human resources and infrastructure needed for such a programme.

Briefly, the proposal for a programme in Colombia would include the former participants in *Agape* Canada and new participants who would benefit from the previous experience. The program would take the form of workshops in which the former child-soldiers (now adults) who participated in *Agape* Canada would meet former-child-soldiers that are part of the reinsertion programme in Colombia at this time. They would share their reconciliation

experiences and the impact of this experience in their lives. Moreover, refugees that participated in *Agape* are willing to return from Canada to Colombia in order to share their experience of meeting former child-soldiers with internally displaced families. There would also be members of civil society be present to bear witness to these encounters. Additionally, when these different groups are prepared to meet there would be a general gathering of sharing and reconciliation amongst all the parties. However, many safety measures would have to be put in place in order to guarantee the success of this programme.

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<sup>1</sup> With the support of the International Migration Organization, (IMO), and the Colombian Institute of Family Wellness (ICBF), the equivalent of Youth Protection, a program was organised in Canada for Colombian former child-soldiers that are part of the reinsertion program of the ICBF in that country.

<sup>2</sup> The Colombian Embassy in Ottawa has provided support and facilitated administrative procedures in preparation for the arrival of the youngsters. Furthermore the Embassy has repeatedly welcomed the children in Ottawa and has presented the reinsertion programme to the international community. The former child-soldiers who have come to Canada are minors under Youth Protection and they have been escorted by professionals working on the reinsertion programme in Colombia. These professionals have provided valuable guidance to *Agape* and to the TT. *Agape* has also found a great deal of support within Latin American university student organisations. Students at McGill, Concordia and Carleton University have all contributed through their organisations, not only with activities for the youngsters, but also with funding for the programme.

<sup>3</sup> The reinsertion program for former child-soldiers in Colombia promotes family reunification and restitution of the children's human rights, which are of primary importance, but more efforts have to be made towards reconciliation between ex-combatants and community members through government policies of demobilisation and reinsertion (Moor, 2007; Anaya, 2007). Some

efforts are being made in this regard as in the case of the Association of Indigenous Governments in North Cauca (Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca). There, the communities themselves implemented their own reinsertion programme based on their own value system, beliefs and cultural traditions. In contrast with the government program, the indigenous authorities were able to involve their former child-soldiers with the community from the moment they came back to their families and the community created and implemented its own insertion programme. Reconciliation with the communities is done through symbolic collective reconciliation gatherings. There is also an element of symbolic reparation, whereby the participants are obliged to do work for the community, such as preventive information meetings at primary schools (Moor, 2007: 201).

<sup>4</sup> Besides the courses they must attend workshops related to their reinsertion process and they receive a monthly allowance from the government that helps cover basic expenses. At the age of 18, or when they have attained some of their goals, they are referred to the programme for demilitarised adults where the follow-up is less rigorous.

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