

**Five**  
**Vaccines**  
**Against**  
**Despair**

Roberto Bissio

# *Five Vaccines Against Despair*

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**I**n the North-South Institute's invitation to write this piece for its 2001 *Canadian Development Report*, Institute President Roy Culpeper said that "much of what is written on development emerges from situations of crisis or desperation" and the message therefore "often conveys anger, frustration, gloom, deep concerns and even a sense of hopelessness about the future. Indeed, there is much to be pessimistic about".

"Pessimism" comes from the Latin word *pessimus*, worst, in turn rooted in *ped*, *pes*, "foot". Quite an appropriate etymology when talking about development, which happens "down there".

The opposite of pessimism is optimism and while that word wasn't used in the request to write for this report, the idea seems obvious that the reader should find grounds for optimism by learning about five "opportunities or sources of hope" that "will make the world a better place over the next generation."

"Optimism" does not derive from "head", but from the Latin root *ops*, which means power. The same root as in *opus* (work) and opulence. Which is exactly what this essay is all about: power and money, the latter being at the end just a symbolic expression of the former and the way they are unfairly distributed.

The collapse of the "evil empire" ended the bipolar world of half a century of Cold War and initiated an era of global dominance with military power concentrated in a single command as never before in history

and economic power in the hands of a small number of global corporations. Disparities between and within nations are growing, poverty is not being reduced and the tide of globalization that was supposed to "lift all boats" is being perceived as a *tsunami* of devastating consequences by the vulnerable everywhere.

Such a process is not uncontested. In previous years, when the meetings of the G-7 were not confronted by hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) used to organize a parallel gathering of the poorest countries of the world, called "TOES" (The Other Economic Summit). Protesters against undemocratic global decision-making processes now number in the hundreds of thousands.

If optimism is about power and if readers agree with me that the power of law and democracy will work for the common good better than the power of arms and money, my five preferred examples of current opportunities are:

1. The process toward the creation of an International Criminal Court to judge the authors of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.
2. The combination of microchip technologies, "open source" software and non-exclusive communication protocols (the internet) that places in the hands of any person the capacity to process data, access information and communicate that was previously only possible for large state or corporate entities.

3. The crisis in the governance of globalization that started in 1999 when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) dropped the idea of adopting a Multilateral Agreement on Investment and which became obvious the following year in Seattle when the World Trade Organization (WTO) could not agree to start a new “round” of trade negotiations due to the unprecedented resistance of the poorest and weakest countries.
4. The fact that such a crisis was largely due to the emergence of new networks and coalitions of civil society organizations (CSOs) from around the world criticizing, analyzing, protesting, demonstrating and proposing alternatives, effectively ending the ideological monopoly expressed by the World Economic Forum of Davos. In 2001, these efforts effectively created a “social” balancing forum in Porto Alegre.
5. The adoption at the highest global political levels of the UN General Assembly’s Millennium Declaration of September 2000 which sets out concrete targets toward poverty eradication, gender equity and environmental sustainability. This is the measure against which the workings of the economy and the effectiveness of political decisions will be judged and held accountable in the years to come.

All of these are processes in the making, their achievements partial and ongoing—they can be deviated, co-opted or frustrated. Taken together, they demonstrate a trend to counter the power of arms and money, one which is credible enough not to feel entirely pessimistic about the future.

On the other hand, maybe we shouldn’t need to be optimistic in order to act. From an ethical point of view, the right course of action should be taken because it is the right thing to do, even if it doesn’t make us winners. Spartacus, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara and Rosa Luxemburg were “losers”, as well as many other iconic figures who continue to inspire people to take action for justice or the common good.

Personally, when asked to think about “sources of hope”, I think of my daughters. I do this, not just

because like any parent it is my wish that they live in a better world, but because the world is a better place with them in it. Each and every child recreates that miracle of making the world better. And so do some adults. I have the privilege of knowing many such people scattered around the globe. The analysis of numbers and trends, the discussion of benchmarks and the assessing of targets is what I regularly do, but my vaccines against despair lie not in statistics but in actual people who just do what has to be done in their lives and circumstances.

Out of many inspirations, I had to choose five. All of them would probably reject the notion of being models, and none of them would have chosen to speak about her or himself if they had not been forced to by the Uruguayan journalist Andrés Alsina, who interviewed them in Rome in November 2000 during the Social Watch assembly. The texts that follow have been edited and adapted by me from Alsina’s reporting with his authorization.<sup>1</sup> Context notes have been added, in some cases, excerpted from the Social Watch national reports. Here then, are five of my “sources of hope”.

### **1. Edward Oyugi: Untangling the web of corruption in Kenya**

Edward Oyugi does not talk about politics, but of how to control politicians. For many years his organization, Sodnet, together with many other forces in Kenya, has fought corruption, investigated responsibility for major fraud and raised an accusing finger to draw a clear line between right and wrong.

Yet these good intentions were hampered by the most basic stumbling block, the lack of information. What political science calls a lack of transparency often ends up being the best shield for corruption. The members of Sodnet sighed, impatient.

So they sat down and thought about the essence of the problem, because, as logic teaches, if the problem has no solution, the problem is badly formulated. How to stop public money ending up in private pockets without the citizens knowing? “At the root of this is the fact that corruption deals with badly allocated resources. So we asked ourselves if, instead of finding out how much money had been misappropriated, how much money had never reached its destination and

what methods were used to divert it, should we not examine the process itself of allocation of state funds. This process, the preparation of the budget, is important. It is the source of government resources and the first point of distribution; it is also the first point of control over its use."

The idea of civil society undertaking the monitoring of the budget in order to trace the root of corruption did not, however, come out of the blue.

In 1988, Daniel Arap Moi took office as president. His administration did not live up to expectations and did not lessen tribal conflicts; it only opened the doors to transnational capital and to the severe adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, thus deepening structural imbalances. Social unrest made the production of basic foodstuffs fall abruptly and this opportunity was seized by transnational companies to promote, through credit, the plantation of flowers, sugar cane, coffee and tea exclusively for export. Wheat and corn for food are now imported from the United States and South Africa.

"Kenya produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce", summarizes Oyugi. "The international division of labour bequeathed by the colonial political economy has not only remained intact, but has been reinforced by the emergent middle class in the post-colonial era". That situation has not improved, in spite of the emergence of a democratic opposition movement. Oyugi estimates that "imbalances are getting worse as infrastructure is handed over to transnational corporations".

In 1993, at the start of his fourth consecutive term as president, Arap Moi presented a plan for privatization and liberalization of foreign trade requested by the IMF. Yet, only in 1995 did the international organizations declare themselves satisfied with the plan, which, in addition to a more rigorous tax regime, contained formal measures against corruption. "The rhetoric is about decentralization. The reality is that policy-making is becoming more and more centralized in Washington DC. The 'home-grown' Poverty Reduction

Strategy Paper in Kenya is a mirror image of that of Bolivia, which in turn is a replica of that of the Philippines, in defiance of the 'local ownership' logic that is being peddled by the Bretton Woods Institutions to justify their imposition on the national economies".

This is the situation in which Edward Oyugi lives and manages to achieve results. "Our concern is to know what the resources are and how they are disposed of, in order that our demands can be part of the budgetary process itself".

It is true that they have not invented the wheel. To monitor the budget as an initial and fundamental way of monitoring the allocation of resources to the various projects which in turn may be followed up "is a process that we have seen in India and South Africa. We follow their example and to a lesser extent that of the United States, where this started many years ago. I do not know why it started in the United States, but in India and South Africa it was linked to the fact that resources were not used

properly".

Edward Oyugi chooses his words carefully. To monitor the vast amount of money in the budget, 300,000 million Kenyan shillings (at 80 shillings to the US dollar, equivalent to \$3,750 million in a country with 28 million inhabitants) implies specialized knowledge, it requires people with the necessary technical skills and clear work priorities. For the five years Oyugi has been doing this, it has become an exercise of patience in which information plays hide and seek. His initial academic training is not ideal for the task, "but the choice was a logical one." He taught psychology at the university, was arrested, and on being freed discovered that he was no longer allowed to give classes. "So I decided to do this", he says, as if it were his destiny. Perhaps it is. Until a short while ago, he says, he missed the classroom, "but now I don't, I've lost interest. This is more practical and it captivates you much more." Now he is a prisoner of his own vocation.

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## 2. Meena Raman: Making the law work for the poor in Malaysia

One day, less than 20 years ago, Meena Raman discovered that her law studies really had a lot to do with the lives of people who did not even know that the law existed. Those people found out about the existence of lawyers when their livelihoods, based on the goods of nature, like their ancestors, were extinguished. Death to an entire way of life took the form of dams, deforestation, industrial waste poisoning the waters and of multinational corporations as ethereal as gods. That was when this young woman decided to become the voice of those who had no voice in the courts.

At that time, 1981, Meena Raman was a young law student living in the university city of Kuala Lumpur. She learned that the Consumers Association from Penang, (CAP), had approached her faculty to propose that the training of lawyers should not be restricted to the legal needs of corporations, but that the teaching should be opened to other subjects, to make students aware of issues of public interest like legislation relating to livelihoods and to the environment. Opening up windows to other subjects let in a breath of fresh air on the campus.

Broadening the scope of her studies to include other emphases changed Meena Raman's vision and that of many others, which in turn caused quite a few changes. "The first thing I began to understand was that what I knew was only one side of the picture. I liked what I learned very, very much. It was not only about economic growth". People stopped being abstract and their problems stopped being just theoretical and mere case studies.

She visited workplaces, and a sense of embarrassment keeps her from relating the enormous impact this had on her, although you feel it through the tone of her voice. "I saw industries rapidly developing and at the same time affecting, by industrial waste runoff, the economic life of fishermen to such an extent that they lost their livelihood." Not only were jobs being lost, but the very shape of their

lives was being distorted. People who had fished for generations found that poisoned water no longer allowed fish to breed. This was unthinkable four generations ago, and these fishing villages had been established a lot longer than that. Then she visited and got to know the situation of small farmers displaced by the construction of an airport. "This opened up my eyes", she says, and she opens them, shining, penetrating and human.

On finishing her studies in 1982, she had already decided to join CAP, and "we established the first legal firm dealing with consumers". She and her colleagues achieved a lot, according to the stories going around, but when she assesses what has been done, Meena Raman is cautious, weighing her words. "It is not easy to change things. What has evolved is a movement of awareness about the issues of health and environment at the grassroots level". The direct result was that there were more people fighting against the foreseeable effects of industrial malpractice.

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This is sorely needed. Malaysia is the main world exporter of tropical wood, a market with increasing demand from industrialized countries. Today, only half of its tropical forests remain—of the original 305,000 km, they are down to 157,000 km.

But Meena Raman recognizes that "something has been achieved. For example, we managed to prevent the Mitsubishi corporation from keeping a factory that had radioactive waste affecting 10,000 people. The gigantic battle included demonstrations, many of them illegal and, despite the support of the Malaysian government and state for the Mitsubishi project, including a Supreme Court ruling in favour of the international corporation, Mitsubishi decided to withdraw, in view of the enormous public pressure against it". Meena Raman says the pressure included "our international connections, mainly in Japan". This energetic woman, who spends her life taking action against the state and the government for one thing or another, in a country where

democratic regulations are not well established, is staking everything on the rule of law. If this is not so, she is betting on the need for it to be.

The lesson seems to be that things can be achieved if the opponent is not in the right, and this becomes public knowledge. In addition, mass movements have to be combined with legal action and the conditions have to be right to enable pressure to be put on the whole power pyramid up to and beyond the government itself, all the way to the den of globalization.

What is being faced “is no longer a situation in which you can work exclusively in your own country. Globalization demands, imposes the need for international work”. Part of that work to establish and broaden international links explains the time Raman devotes to writing reports, for example for Social Watch. Monitoring the social indices for improvement in Malaysia “is interesting, as we do not have the mass poverty of neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, but in spite of this, there is increasing inequality. Of course, through our work on consumer issues we concentrate our research and analysis on health and education. Thus the link with Social Watch arose naturally”.

What’s more, “if there are problems of poverty, it is important for CAP to know their origins and to be able to fight against their structural causes, particularly the non-traditional ones. For example, we export rubber, but there are poverty pockets precisely there”.

Rubber is a non-traditional product in Malaysia and its short history links the habits of globalization with those of colonialism. At the end of the 19th century, the British smuggled some rubber plant seeds out of Brazil and took them to Malaysia to start plantations. In this way, they ended the “rubber era” in the Amazon region and promoted a strong migratory current of Tamils from the south of India to Malaysia to work on the new plantations. Thus, from a territory they ruled, the British were able to take part in the trade opened up by the incipient automobile industry.

Small communities and individuals have launched disputes over dangerous drugs, “and, by lobbying and doing research, we managed to prevent them from being put on the market”. Here there would seem to be something else to be learned: to fight, yes, but not to break off relations.

However, Meena Raman is not concerned by the old stories as much as by those of today. There are no minor battles. Small communities and individuals have launched disputes over dangerous drugs, “and, by lobbying and doing research, we managed to prevent them from being put on the market”. Here there would seem to be something else to be learned: to fight, yes, but not to break off relations.

To achieve all this, Meena Raman recognizes there are no set working hours, but she justifies this immediately. “You have to respond to people’s needs. It is true that sometimes we do not even have Sundays off. The life of an activist is full of challenges. But it is very gratifying to see that our ideals are appreciated by the people. It is very encouraging for me to know that a fisherman is thankful for having heard our voice together with his own”.

### 3. *Izzat Abdul Hadi: Finding strength in weakness on the West Bank*

He is a statesman without a state, and lately this is what has been concerning him most. To take a plane to Rome, he had to request a visa four times and three times it was refused. Finally, he was lucky that the plane left on time, as these visas expire in four hours. So he is here, Izzat Abdul Hadi, born in Nablus in 1957, but now living in Ramallah, sitting in an armchair in a Roman convent, in front of a tape recorder, at the November Assembly of Social Watch, a network of NGOs monitoring governments’ fulfillment of their UN commitments on social policies.

Izzat’s mother lives 45 minutes away by road, if the road is not blocked. He could have said goodbye to his mother, but only if he had taken lanes that the Israeli army has decided not to block, but he chose not to drive seven hours to get there and back, risking being shot at from the Israeli settlements through which the lane inevitably passes.

The personal inconveniences of Izzat since the resurgence of violence and the renewal of the *intifada* in Gaza and the West Bank are a minor problem. The closing of frontiers by the Israelis left the 120,000 Palestinians who work every day in Israel, and who formed a fifth of the total labour force of 600,000, unemployed. Additionally, there are a further 250,000 who are unemployed owing to the lack of capacity of Palestinian industry to export and transport goods to Israel, the Arab countries and Europe, a direct effect of the war. Those who do not go to work in Israel lose a daily income of US\$3,400.000.

The worst has yet to come: because fuel is beginning to become scarce, other industries will join the ranks of those that have closed down. Other products are also scarce because Israel will only let them be imported from Israel, at Israeli prices. Annual per capita income in Israel is \$18,000 and in Palestine \$1,440, so not much can be purchased anyhow.

According to Izzat Abdul Hadi: "This economic strangulation is one of the most important Israeli policies to force the Palestinians back to peace negotiations, this time with more conditions. They have an overall concept of war that includes not only confrontation, but also economics".

And isolation is part of this. "There are Israeli settlements scattered between all the Palestinian cities, that is the problem. It is really a system of apartheid, and from this standpoint it is ideal, since it segregates all the little villages. Outside the village there is a settlement and the roads can easily be blocked, as they are at present".

Instead of requesting visas four times to use the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Izzat could have taken a plane from another airport, in Gaza. But the Gaza Strip is totally isolated since the Israelis blocked the frontier crossing with Egypt and placed a military blockade to the north of the city, hindering internal movement in the zone. In any case, he could not have reached Gaza, because the roads between north and south go through Jerusalem, claimed by the Israelis not only as their capital, but

also as Israeli territory. So one has to have a visa to go through it. It has been five years since Izzat visited the sacred city, which he calls Al Quds. It was the only time during the interview that his voice showed that he can still be amazed, or even incredulous, over Israeli measures. Everything else was recounted in the neutral tone of something to be expected.

He was quick to say that the situation in the scattered villages is even worse. Young people are unable to get to schools or to university. There are five Palestinian universities, he reports proudly. The result is one of the highest rates of higher education in the region. "We Palestinians are a cultured people; education has been our only tool for survival. Given our cultural level, we have been one of the builders of the Arab world. In fact, we have very, very powerful businessmen who do not live in the West Bank, but who do business throughout the Arab world".

They provide help, together with the Arab states and Europe, but in this new situation it is not enough. Palestinians are now living in what they call "a resistance economy", trying to save on everything. They say that they will have to bear this intolerable situation, which they expect the Israelis will make even worse as time goes on "and it will not be for a mere two or three months. Even if we return to negotiations, which is possible, it will be in the long-term because the issues are very complicated and the Israelis do not want to compromise on anything. The consequence of this lack of agreement is the *intifada*".

In his vision of events, in the 1993 Oslo agreement the Palestinians accepted Israel's occupation of 78 per cent of their territory and being left with only 22 per cent. "Now they take away Jerusalem and even more territory. We will not accept it. It may seem romantic to say that we are willing to eat grass, but this is the case. The slogan at demonstrations is: this is the last time, *Hadi al Mara Arher Mara*".

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Working for the Bisan Centre for Research and Development, Izzat helps prepare a long-term plan to organize the community, involving all segments of Palestinian society—women, senior citizens, business people, professionals and unions. The Centre also provides education, health and care services, economic advice and develops plans for resistance in daily life. They launch debates with the underprivileged to promote participation, but also to understand people's hopes. "Thus we will be able to apply a real plan to boycott Israeli products from the settlements, which is what we are suggesting now".

They also want Europe to boycott Israeli products. In the discussion on this matter, the Centre insists on differentiating between a boycott and anti-Semitic attitudes and they demand that the terms of the trade agreement between Europe and Israel relating to human rights be fulfilled, "something Israel is not doing". The example of South Africa under apartheid and the devastating effect a similar boycott had on its economy acts as a beacon.

Continuation of the *intifada* "does not necessarily have to be through actions of violence; we see them as being non-violent. Like what? Like peaceful demonstrations, aid to projects which support households and self-employment projects, small enterprises adapted to the situation and projects supporting families and children, whereby rich or middle class families cooperate with families with few resources, enabling processes for the adoption of a family by another in an Arab state or in Europe".

Izzat's NGO is a member of a network of Palestinian NGOs and it is through this network and its leadership role that he aims to change the situation. Although political theory frequently opposes state and civil society, the Palestinian NGOs want to build a state without this implying their becoming part of the government.

"We have to approve a constitution, to set up our institutions, to design a transparent process for the establishment and action of government, and to prepare and apply policies in different areas. We need,

for example, to have our own educational curricula, reflecting our history and our independence. Today this is forbidden by the Israelis and we have to use the Jordanian program which talks about Jordan. Today we cannot teach or talk about Palestine, our flag or our national anthem".

The idea was to raise awareness and understanding of the seriousness of violations of women's human rights in this society, with a view to achieving full enjoyment of those rights by educating and training women's groups, the press, police and lawyers on the issue.

"The problem now is not the declaration of existence of a state, but making it a reality. We have to organize our society from the bottom up, establishing links and a feeling of unity, providing services to people and addressing our own problems as a people. And we can have daily demonstrations with thousands of people, although it is tiring and exhausting. Even if we risk being killed at these demonstrations. But we have no other option. Armed conflict is not our choice at present, as we cannot match the firepower and sophisticated weapons of the Israelis. Our strength is built on our own weaknesses", he says laughing.

#### 4. *Genoveva Tisheva*: Stirring controversy in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has no laws against domestic violence, but as important as passing legislation is the challenge of achieving a change of attitude within Bulgarian society. Just under two years ago, a public awareness campaign was carried out to promote the idea that in domestic violence cases, women should have access to free legal representation. The idea was to raise awareness and understanding of the seriousness of violations of women's human rights in this society, with a view to achieving full enjoyment of those rights by educating and training women's groups, the press, police and lawyers on the issue.

The project not only produces campaign materials, but also, it is hoped, some changes in people's attitudes toward these problems. It also created the momentum to launch, the following year, a second project of "advanced strategies to combat violence against women", consisting of a pilot program to provide legal aid and medical treatment for abused women. Currently, NGOs are undertaking another

“really exciting” project to educate adolescent and adult males to make them more sensitive to the issue, as well as a pilot program to treat violent men.

“But it’s difficult, very difficult”, says Genoveva Tisheva, shaking her head, as if she were ready to give up. But she is unable to do that. She is a lawyer, undoubtedly a fearsome opponent in court. She speaks quickly, softly and precisely; she focuses on her objective and it is clear that she is not easily distracted. It is a well-known fact that she asks a lot of herself, but evidently she also achieves a lot.

She helped found the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF) three years ago. In the beginning, there were only three lawyers and now there are seven, so BGRF has more than doubled its forces. Its main objective is to promote the goal of gender equality in Bulgarian society, based on equal representation of men and women. It hopes to achieve a change in attitudes by providing information and raising awareness about the specific nature of the situation of women in Bulgaria and, through lobbying, to bring the country in line with European and United Nations standards and with universally recognized social and economic rights. In practice, this goal is proving to be an uphill struggle that requires total dedication from Genoveva Tisheva and her colleagues.

BGRF was the only organization from Central and Eastern Europe to attend the Social Watch assembly in Rome, but their country’s communist past is not a burden and they had no problems in forming the NGO, Tisheva explains. What does seem to weigh heavily are the prejudices and conservatism that float like a dense fog in the country’s streets and homes. The issues they are tackling “are still very new in Bulgaria. They are difficult to work on and are regarded as controversial in our society.”

When they decided to join forces in June 1998, they were all women with experience in the fields of law, education, human rights monitoring, lobbying for legislative reforms, publishing and networking. But as they discussed their setbacks and

moments of despair, they discovered that they also needed to study and research because the issues were all new and they were, in fact, starting from scratch. Now that they have a few years’ experience, they are the experts and a permanent source of advice to others. In addition, they are now a national organization and proud of it. They also know how to work collaboratively, using individual contributions, and have become part of the international scene through their participation in several networks.

In spite of three consecutive years of economic growth, Bulgaria lags far behind European Union (EU) countries; its per capita income is less than half of the average of the former communist countries of Europe. “The privatization process commended by the international financial institutions (IFIs) was notoriously corrupt and non-transparent”, explains Tisheva. “Globalization and pervasive poverty have resulted in the appearance of child labour and school dropouts. Poverty, unemployment and weak safety nets affect women disproportionately and social rights such as maternity and childcare leaves are being eroded. Women workers are more affected than men by increases in retirement age and a reformed pension system that penalizes more heavily for periods of unemployment early in a career. But the government and the IFIs do not take seriously the deterioration of conditions for women.”

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In addition, there are concrete problems and many are centred on the country’s southern border with Greece. That is the route for trafficking of women as cheap labour or through the prostitution networks; after passing through Greece, they end up scattered to unknown destinations.

The members of BGRF are confronting these problems without legislation to back them up, because there simply are no laws regarding these issues—yet another battle. Genoveva Tisheva says that “of course it is worth the effort; it has to be done.”

## 5. *Alberto Yepes: Resisting violence in Colombia*

Alberto Yepes expects to die at the hands of paramilitary groups. This small, moustached lawyer from Medellín is already 37 years old, so it could be any time. This is hard to accept and must be even harder to live with. He enjoys life and has a warm sense of humour that must make easier his work of training leaders in social organizations (a way of increasing the numbers of people who will replace him and others like him). But he is always serious, endeavouring to gain time for the work to which he is literally giving his life.

At the Social Watch assembly and at every other possible opportunity, Yepes was doing everything he could with his poor English, his good intentions and his enormous tenacity to warn the international community that the Colombia Plan, sponsored by the United States, had no chance of putting an end either to the plantations or to the manufacturing of cocaine.

However, the plan may achieve something which seemed impossible: an increase in violence against the civil population in Colombia and its damaged civil organizations, an increase in the level of horror, displaced people and in the loss of sovereignty of an already degraded state. And, he predicts, in exchange, the influence of the United States will increase in a state that is already tottering. Still greater obstacles will hinder the social reforms that would enable peasant participation in power, the backdrop to 40 years of guerrilla warfare.

The 800,000 coca planters, who have taken up this occupation because they have been displaced, are the targets of this plantation burning. Yepes believes that what will happen is that they will take refuge in the Amazon forest, deforesting more land than they had previously in order to cover their losses, and will start planting all over again. There are 650 million hectares of virgin tropical forest, so there is much to be deforested. This will not be good for the ecology, but the peasants, if they want to survive, have no other alternative.

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In the past 15 years, two million people have been displaced from their land, surviving where and how they can, and if they can. No fewer than a quarter of these two million, out of a total population of 40 million, have been expelled from their homes over the past two years and are rootless.

“It is true that there is a relationship between guerrilla warfare and drugs; however, it is partial and unavoidable. Eradication has been shown not to be the solution. In 1995, 30,000 hectares of coca were sprayed. Now, in the year 2000, the hectares planted total 130,000. The FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) collects what it calls a ‘tax’ of 10 per cent from the coca growers, and the paras (paramilitary groups) have processing laboratories”. And now civilians are not only frightened of paramilitary groups; FARC has started harassing civil organizations, in the course of extending a war that does not allow for the existence of neutral groups.

However, for the negotiations to be viable, the participation of civil society is essential, says Yepes. “Guerrillas are not willing to turn themselves in just because of promises for the social reinsertion of their forces. Even if we don’t agree with their methods and their way of treating the population, we must recognize the need to deal with the social roots of the problem”.

The organization Yepes belongs to, Corporación Región, expends much effort to prepare reports on the situation and tries to disseminate information outside the country “because the internal conflict in Colombia will not be resolved by discussing only the internal issues. It is also a conflict geared to imposing globalization, which, when met by resistance, is imposed by violence.” Corporación Región is also a member of the Colombian Platform for Human Rights, Democracy and Development.

The friends whom Yepes meets abroad are always happy to see him again, because it means he has survived since the last time. They do not say this to him, though. As the Colombian saying goes, Yepes is “marked as a skeleton.” What worries him is that his daughter might not even remember him. She is already three years old, so in this race against time, she is now on the threshold of memory.

Meanwhile, in his house in Medellín, Yepes and his wife sleep behind a locked door and five sets of bars, with a cell phone each next to the bed—“because the first thing the paramilitary groups do is to cut off the phone”. What defence does the telephone offer? “To be able to let someone know that they’ve taken you. At least it will be known”. Not like Juan Carlos and Catalina, two directors of the Association of Families of Detained and Disappeared People, of which he is also a member. They were murdered this year and it only became known weeks later. This approach is consistent with his commitment to the only kind of life he wants to live. Yepes is less concerned about becoming a victim than with his determination to record everything, even in his own case.

Sometimes, coming back from a funeral and entering his home under six locks and keys, when opening the seventh, the one which unlocks his feelings, he cries. “How do I explain to my wife that the next one will be me? How can I look at my daughter, who perhaps will never remember me?”

He talks about himself only because people insist, and he is convinced that he can contribute to the description of the daily horror. Yepes considers that horror can be measured. A week before this conversation, paramilitary groups “arrived at the municipality of Soledad on the Atlantic, took four peasant leaders and cut them into pieces with a chainsaw while they were still alive. This is a dreadful measure of horror.”

A week before that, he had been with a grandmother and her nine grandchildren, the eldest 17, at a settlement for displaced people. They are there because, in 1998, a paramilitary group arrived at their home, a cocoa plantation in the area of Urabá. “They took the mother and the father outside and hung them by the feet, by one foot each. And the children had to watch how their parents were cut up until only the rope was left. This is a great horror and there is no possible compensation. Who can compensate for this? Who? This makes reconciliation very hard. The 17-year-old has been dumb since then and the other children want to live in order to kill the murderers. And to me, in spite of being on the side of life, it sounds perfectly understandable that they should want to do this.”

Why such sadism? “This is a message to others, so that they understand what may happen to them if they take part in the conflict on the wrong side. But in spite of this, submitting to violence cannot, cannot be accepted.”

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## Notes

- 1 Andrés Alsina, Interviews conducted at the Social Watch Assembly, Rome, November 2000. Published by Social Watch, Montevideo, Uruguay [www.socialwatch.org](http://www.socialwatch.org)