

Title: *Displaced Art*

School: *Claremont McKenna College*

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I. Summary:

“Displaced Art” was born from the necessity of defining the dimensions of the social indifference towards Afro-Colombians internally displaced, taking into consideration their historic exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination in the nation. What began as an effort to investigate and identify Afro-Colombian cultural life and ethnic history culminated in the creation of a micro-enterprise dedicated to the production, commercialization, and distribution of Afro handicrafts. “Displaced Art” proved to be a sustainable project, improving the life standards of the displaced, by relying on Afro production and Afro consumption, while simultaneously raising awareness of ethnic segregation in Colombia.

“Displaced Art” created not only a strategically located commercial outlet for products designed by displaced Afro-Colombians, but established a merchandising network for products made in workshops across the country. Although the network was centered in Bogota, it increased both the quantity and quality of the production of handicrafts in Cartagena, Quibdo, Buenaventura, and Bogota itself. We worked to promote Colombian communal values by exploiting the cultural richness and potential of Afro artisan design. By encouraging the financial development of those displaced, we will contribute to the strengthening of Afro values, in particular, the value of a distinct ethnic identity within a larger culture. For those whose history and traditions were in many ways lost in the uprooting from ancestral lands, “Displaced Art” offers the hope of preserving customs which are now part of Colombian history.

Since mid-June, and throughout July and August, the participation of AFRODES (Asociacion de Afro-Colombianos Dezplazados) increased the project’s scope and effectiveness thanks to expertise on labor opportunities, potential markets, legalization of commercial activities, and knowledge of forced displacement in the country. Our target market, which consisted of Afro-Colombians, Bogotans, and foreigners, was identified to help induce the growth of the enterprise to a profitable level. With these goals in mind, we are currently employing, both directly and indirectly, eighteen families.

II. Project Results:

Our major success in “Displaced Art” has been consolidating a theoretical and practical groundwork from which to tackle the injustices of displacement. The flexibility with which we approached our work and the unwavering pursuit of our goals has given us a realistic chance for sustainability. We have created a path for progress that will create permanent change by empowering the people for them to secure an honest existence.

The initial impediment to the project was the lack of an overall understanding of Afro displacement within Colombia, which may have hindered the practical and enduring benefits of the project. Lesser nuisances included the difficulty of identifying a market for the goods, of identifying a strategic physical location for the micro-enterprise, and determining the logistics for a distribution network linking up four crucial regions

of Colombia. The solutions to these difficulties, however, once we managed to identify them, helped form the foundations for an enduring project.

Each problem tested our limited resources. Relying on the minimal government information at our disposal, we discovered there was a logistical challenge in identifying the social circles for Afro-Colombians, including their places of work, residence, and leisure in Bogota. We conducted a market study, and discovered that our best potential market laid in the lower socioeconomic classes, with low purchasing power. Despite their economic disadvantages, however, they proved to be our best customers, and we tailored our products accordingly. With a co-sponsored market survey made possible by AFRODES, we confirmed that health and beauty products had to be commercialized alongside the handicrafts for the enterprise to record optimal profits.

Our most complex challenge today is legalizing the entire enterprise with the respective authorities. The approval of commercial activities in Colombia takes time. We are in the process of registering the enterprise, submitting paperwork, and proving our “just commerce” cause.

III. Implications:

The “Displaced Art” project produced an informative critique of the social indifference toward the Afro-Colombian population, as well as the dire conditions under which they live. By providing a physical space for the exhibition of Afro-Colombian culture, we will help encourage initiatives which work for negotiated solutions to the problems of forced displacement. We believe that the uniqueness of our undertaking will help local governments become more aware of the structural exclusion of Afro citizenry within Colombia’s public and private sectors. We strive to promote the visibility of Afro culture to help prompt more societal inclusion.

We expect our commercialization network to grow linking up to multiple other displaced Afro-producing communities with the goal of exporting artisan products in the near future. We expect our distribution network will professionalize both to lower its costs and increase profit margins. We are certain that production, distribution, and commercialization of the products will inevitably involve additional families working to improve their life standards. Hence, a healthy, self-nurturing cycle of empowerment of the Afro population will begin, enabling them to defend their rights and their cultural identity by assuming more dignifying and sustainable life alternatives.

Certainly, “Displaced Art” will become a pilot of sorts, strengthening the Afro-social movement, speeding the processes of healing and unity, creating an avenue toward understanding and peace. The enterprise may provide a model for the protection and defense of ethnic rights, and a possible catalyst to help solve problems of internal displacement. Our production, commercialization, and distribution networks may be thought of as an integral platform upon which we may build an equal opportunity society for ethnic populations in Colombia.

On a personal note, I have learned about the problematic situation of internally displaced people within my country, and the implications of a humanitarian tragedy: the disputes of territorial rights, for example, as well as social exclusion, and lives wasted by war’s wide wake. I learned above all that we must understand the structural phenomena of internal displacement; its causes and consequences, before implementing a solution. Thanks to the KWD Projects for Peace, I have learned that in my Colombia there is important work to be done, and valiant– hard-working people ready to do it.

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