Accompany, Serve, Advocate in Soacha
An internship with the Jesuit Refugee Service

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1. Introduction

During my second semester at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, I received one of the best classes from a humanitarian worker of the Jesuit Refugee Service: Mr. Gonzalo Sánchez Terán. He had lived in refugee camps for 22 years and in during the three days at Deusto he tried to teach us as much as possible, especially trying to give us an idea of the daily struggles of a camp manager and the possible solutions. We encountered multiple dilemmas and we had many fruitful discussions accordingly.

What I especially noticed during the classes of Mr. Sanchez was his optimism, even after all the horrible things he had seen and had lived. Many humanitarians we have met during the program of NOHA have a huge heart and are extremely motivated to help others, however I found many of them sceptical and negative towards the world and its people in general. This man, however, kept his optimism, hope, and faith in the world and its people while recognizing that many things go wrong as well in the humanitarian sector as in the world which can be extremely frustrating and demotivating. I was touched by the way this man stayed positive and continued his work inside and outside refugee camps.

During the second semester in Bilbao, we also received classes from Mr. Octavio Romano, the director of ALBOAN which is the Bask version of the Jesuit Refugee Service. Again, I was intrigued by the realistic though positive vision of the organisation and its people.

After the experiences which I mentioned above, I felt that I wanted to do my internship with the Jesuit Refugee Service. Although I am not religious, I wanted to get to know the work of the organisation in Colombia, experience their work ethic, and help them with the work they do.

I received the contact of the coordinator of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Bogotá from Pablo Cortés Ferrández, another NOHA student that I met in Bilbao and of whom I knew that he had also done his internship with the organisation. After some e-mail contact I got a skype interview with the director of the office in Bogotá after which I was accepted for the internship.

After the e-mails and the interview with Mr. Moreno, I expected the internship to be very dynamic and I expected it to be a job which required to work very close with the actual people with whom the organisation works. Although reports had to be written, the main job was with the people in the municipality of Soacha; the biggest receiving municipality of displaced people in Colombia.

2. The Internship Organisation

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation, found in 50 countries, providing assistance to displaced people and refugees. The organisation’s main areas of work are in the field of education, emergency assistance, healthcare, livelihood activities and social services. The Spanish name of the Jesuit Refugee Service is ‘el Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados’. The JRS Colombia is part of the regional department ‘Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados – Latinoamérica y el Caribe’(SJR LAC).

The three most important verbs and main tasks of the organisation are to accompany, serve, and advocate. This means that the organisation exists to accompany refugees or persons in a situation of displacement in their battle to reduce their vulnerability
and recover their lives. Moreover, it serves and advocates for their rights and wants to make their situation visible to the rest of the world. The values of the organisation that guide the work they do are: creativity, attentive and respectful listening, hospitality, justice, responsibility, duty, solidarity, and respect for one’s dignity, differences, diversity, and autonomy.

In Colombia, the Jesuit Refugee Service is present in Valle del Cauca, Magdalena Medio, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Soacha. In every place, the team is divided in three distinct working areas and therefore consists of three sub-teams: humanitarian action, local integration, and prevention.

3. Tasks & Activities of the Internship

Within the area humanitarian action of the JRS of which I was part, various tasks and activities had to be executed by the team. Some of the tasks were shared with everyone whereas other tasks had to be done in pairs or individually. In this section, an extensive description of the tasks of the area humanitarian action will be given.

3.1. Receiving so-called ‘cases’ (displaced families/individuals) that ask for support.
The main tasks of the area is to help families and/or individuals who live in Soacha and come to our office to ask for support from the organisation. The moment they arrive at the office, two people of the team take on the so-called ‘case’ and sit and talk with the person for as long as they need. We let them talk about their problems and issues, and we listen to the doubts and questions they have. Moreover, we ask them for some for personal information like the exact date of displacement and the place they originally come from.

After this first conversation the whole team comes together and we talk about the story of the person. The aim of this talk is to discuss their situation and verify whether providing support for this person lays within the mandate of the organisation. If yes, which often is the case, the two persons that are responsible for the new arrived person formulate an individual strategy or a so-called ‘route’ which will be used as the guide to support the person with his or her specific issues. Generally, the people receive psychosocial and legal support, only in exceptional cases, we give the people clothes and food for a certain amount of time.

3.2. Providing psychosocial support to families and children
In order to provide psychosocial support, the two persons responsible for the specific ‘case’ schedule multiple moments in which the people come to the office to talk about the problems and issues they have got. While the people take the ‘route’ that we have proposed to them in order for them to claim their rights before several institutions, they can encounter many obstacles which can discourage them. As an organisation we believe that letting them tell their stories and share their doubts, and talking and motivating them during these conversations will help them to move forward with their lives and continue the difficult journey in claiming the rights they have and constructing their new lives.

It is important that the people feel that they have a place where they can go to, a place where they feel supported and listened to whenever they feel the need. Besides the part of psychosocial support in which the people come to the office to talk, psychosocial support also includes that the two persons responsible make sure they call once every week
to check upon the individual or family to check whether they need any help and to just let them know that we think about them. Once a stable relation of trust has been established, we also try to make an appointment with the person to visit his or her house in order to get to know their situation even better and give them a real feeling that we care about them and that we are interested in their lives.

3.3. Providing legal support for families
For the officially registered displaced people in Colombia the state has developed a special law; law 1448. This law stipulates the rights of displaced people as official victims of the armed conflicts and the procedure with respect to the restitution of the land they have lost in the war. Law 1448 discusses the five rights the people are entitled to: the right to education, the right to health, the right to a job, the right to decent housing, and the right to alimentation.

After the first conversation with the person that came to the office, his or her needs are analysed and we establish a route which helps them to claim the rights for which the person has the most urgent need in his or her actual situation. The strategy or route, as mentioned before, especially focuses on claiming this rights and obtaining the help of the state that the person is entitled to. Within the team we know which steps to take in order to claim the rights of the persons and it is our task to inform the people we help. It is important to note that the JRS does not want to create dependency. It is therefore that we provide the information that we have with the persons in order for them to claim this right. We do whatever we can to accompany them in this process; we write official letters together with them, we schedule appointments with a lawyer that works for the organisation, and we provide the psychosocial support when needed.

3.4. Organizing workshops for individuals and families
Once every two weeks we organize workshops for the persons that we help. Their families are also invited to these workshops. The organisation of the workshops have three distinct goals:
- Informing the persons about various subjects: law 1448, nutrition, auto-recognition, self-esteem etcetera.
- Creating a space in which the parents can talk freely with other parents and displaced people about their problems, their doubts, and they can give each other advice and mental support. We create this space by always separating the children and adults when having a workshop.
- Creating a social network for the people in Soacha. Many times, the people feel very lonely and have the feeling that they do not have any friends. By meeting each other once every two weeks and talking about intimate feelings, people see that they are not alone and they discover that some of them even live close to each other.

3.5. Accompany the children that receive lunch at the school ‘Fe & Alegría, Soacha para vivir Mejor’ in Altos de la Florida.
Altos de la Florida is a specific neighbourhood of Soacha which is located high in the mountains. It is a neighbourhood in which many people live illegally, the living conditions are bad. There is a lack of drinking water in this neighbourhood, water is daily delivered by trucks. At one of the schools in this neighbourhood, “Fe & Alegría, Soacha para vivir Mejor”, 70 children daily receive lunch from a foundation because they do not have or receive
sufficient food at their home. It is our task to talk with the children, create a relationship with them and figure out their situation at home. Creating this relationship with the children gives us a point of access to their parents with whom we want to talk in order to verify whether they need help from the organisation.

3.6. English classes
Teaching English is an activity for which I was personally responsible. After I had been in the organisation for a while and people started to know me as well, they asked me whether I could teach them English. I gave classes to two women: one of them needed tutoring next to the English classes she already had, the other women actually needed classes because she had never had English classes before. Because of the fact that the women had little money and were oftentimes very busy, the classes were irregular and were held depending on the availability of the women.

3.7. Systemization and passing on information.
The semester in which I did my internship with the JRS Colombia, a process was started with the aim to systemize and digitalize all the information gathered during the work and activities of the organisation. This has not been done before, at least not so intensely and controlled. The JRS in Soacha consists of many interns and volunteers that rotate every 6 months or every 12 months. Therefore, many knowledge got lost in the past. To prevent the new information being lost and giving a good and steady introduction to the new ‘generation’ to come and work for the JRS, the whole team of the JRS had to write as many reports as possible about the activities done. On top of that, within our area of humanitarian action we decided to create a booklet for the next persons that would be working in our area.

Creating a booklet
Together with another person of my team, I was responsible for the creation of a booklet that we wanted to hand out to the our new colleagues that would start working with the organisation after the Christmas holidays. It would give an introduction to the organisation and to the work of the area humanitarian action. Moreover, it would give an explanation of the complex situation in Soacha and an explanation of the terms intra- and inter-urban displacement. The booklet also provided an explanation, and tips and tricks on how to accompany displaced people. Furthermore, in the booklet we told the success stories about some families we had helped, and provided an overview of important addresses and people.

Systemizing and digitalizing
The whole team was responsible for writing down everything we had done as a team. Summaries of our meetings, summaries of our conversation with the people we help, explanation of the workshops beforehand and a reflexion of the workshops afterwards, the English classes; everything had to be written down and put in a special system with the aim to keep the information that we had gathered.
4. Supervision of the internship

The internship supervision was done by Mr. Moreno who is also the coordinator of JRS Colombia – Soacha. Especially in the beginning of my internship with the organisation, he regularly asked me to come to his office and talk about how I felt about the internship and whether I felt comfortable in the team. Moreover he told me that he was open for any feedback from my side. After the initial period had passed, I received the supervision that anyone of the team used to receive. Every week we had a meeting with the area humanitarian action and once a month we had a meeting with everyone from the office and the coordinator.

The atmosphere at the office of the JRS was very pleasant and informal, therefore there were not many official moments for supervision. Informal supervision actually took place every day, by my co-workers, the coordinator of the area humanitarian action and by the coordinator of the JRS Colombia – Soacha.

I have not encountered any problems or issues with regards to my supervision. Whenever I had doubts I could ask anyone around me for help and information. In case of specific questions about my internship or the work I had to do for my research, I could walk into the office of Mr. Moreno and ask him. He took all my questions and issues very serious and helped me as much and as fast as he could.

4. Living Conditions

During my stay in Colombia, I lived in the neighbourhood Chapinero which is a pleasant neighbourhood of Bogotá. It is a very dynamic neighbourhood, which I liked a lot. It therefore also felt safe when I walked through the neighbourhood as there were always people around me. The house I lived in was a regular student house which was sufficient for the 5,5 months I stayed in Bogotá. I paid the average price of a student house in Bogotá: 600.000 pesos per month which is equal to 185 euros a month. The Colombian peso is cheaper than the euro, therefore food and products were always cheaper than in The Netherlands.

5. Tips and Advice

I would definitely recommend anyone to do his or her internship with the JRS in Colombia. Besides the very pleasant atmosphere at the office in Soacha, I liked the internship a lot because one has almost every day some personal contact with the people of Soacha that received help from the organisation. Sometimes you actually become friends with them and have daily talks about whatever subject.

There are two points that are important to realise before starting an internship at this organisation in Colombia. The first one is the Spanish language. You cannot do this internship if you do not speak at least a basic level of Spanish. When I entered I spoke a basic level of Spanish which is fine. Your Spanish level increases very fast as you practically hear and talk Spanish every day, all day long. The second point to make is that you have to take into account that you are in a different country with a different culture. The work I did at the organisation felt sometimes very inefficient and even useless. I, as a Dutch person, felt that
many time at the office is being used to socialize and have lunch. In the beginning this frustrated me a lot, but once you accept that this is the way you work, you simply adapt and make sure that you at least finish your tasks and help others with theirs. Although I expected the culture to be like this beforehand, it was a big frustration point in my first month working for the organisation.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Intrinsic and personal learning effects
During my internship with the JRS I have learned many things of which some are context-specific and other learning points are more general and even personal.

During my internship I have learned a lot about the Colombian legal procedures that victims of the armed conflict should follow. Moreover, I have gained more knowledge about the rights that these displaced people have and how they can claim those rights. Although I do not expect to use this knowledge in another context, I am grateful for the fact that I have learned more about Colombia and its legal system.

Furthermore, I have got to know the real significance of intra-urban displacement and inter-urban displacement. Although we have talked about it during our studies and beside the fact that many texts have been written about this concepts, the experience is always different if one talks personally with a person who has lived or is still living these specific forms of displacement. I think that it has been important for me to experience this emerging form of displacement, as it is an increasing phenomenon present-day.

Another important lesson that I have learned, of which I still do not know whether this is a cultural lessons or a more general lesson, is that sometimes a process is more important than the actual results in this work. As an example I use the first workshops that we prepared for the people we accompany. The subject of the workshop was the peace process and the peace agreements of the Colombian government with the FARC. As Dutch person this meant to me that we were supposed to talk about this peace agreement as much as possible and provide the people with new knowledge. However, in the end we only talked about the peace agreement for 15 minutes and we talked more than an hour about the problems, issues and doubts of all the women present. During this workshop the women discovered that some of them experienced the same problems and they gave each other advice. Moreover, they discovered that they lived in the same neighbourhood and were planning to meet each other once in a while. I noticed that right after the end of the workshop I was disappointed because I felt that we had failed in our work to provide the people with information about the peace process and have fruitful discussions. Afterwards, though, I realised that this knowledge was not the most important aspect of the workshops. It was the new connections made and the new created relationships established between the people that we accompany that was the most important aspect of the workshop. After all, it should not be us providing knowledge and creating a dependency by teaching people and leave them afterwards. It is the people that have to help themselves and each other. This process starts exactly at the moment that people do not feel alone anymore and feel that they have a friend or companion. For me this was a real eye-opener.

Another lesson learned for me is that listening to people is a very important though relatively easy task. As listening was a big part of our job with the JRS, I noticed that I had the tendency to start talking a lot in order to give advice to people. However, this was not
necessary because many people continued talking themselves, exposing everything they had in their hearts and minds. During this same conversation they also discovered new feelings, new aspects about themselves and they provided themselves with advice. I think that this experience and lesson learned is very valuable for my future as a humanitarian worker.

On personal level I have also learned a lot during the time of my internship. Not only have I improved my level of Spanish, I have also learned to adapt to another culture. Although I have lived in other countries outside of Europe before, my stay in Colombia felt as the first time that I really lived in another country like the people of the country themselves. As a consequence, I also encountered many new issues and I learned how to deal with them and to fully accept the different customs of another country and another culture. This process came with some frustration but the result has been satisfying.

Two other aspects that I have learned about myself while doing my internship in Soacha is that I value my life and the things I have much more than before. Moreover, I now know deep in my heart that humanitarian action is the work that I want to do and that applying for this master has been one of the best decisions every made until now.

6.2. Internship Expectations
In this section I will give an answer to the question to what extent my expectations beforehand have been fulfilled, after which I will critically assess the difficulties and problems that I encountered during the internship.

The expectations I had of my internship have been largely completed. To be really honest, I did not have many expectations because it was actually one during the internship that I found out what it was that our team had to do and what my role would be in this activities. I did expected, though, to have many contact with the actual people who live in Soacha and who the organisation was helping. This expectation was definitely fulfilled; I did have personal contact with many people, however not as much as I expected. This was not due to the organisation and its activities, but more because of the fact that I was a foreigner and I was not fluent in Spanish. As mentioned before, the work that we do in the organisation is very personal and involves a lot of talking and listening. I therefore let the other people of my team do the talks because I was afraid to say something wrong and re-victimise the persons, or simply don’t understand them after they had told me so many personal stories.

The biggest difficulty that I have encountered during my internship is without doubt the Spanish language. The fact that I was not fluent in the language had an effect on me and my work in two ways. Primarily, it affected me personally in the sense that I took me way longer to feel familiar and completely comfortable with the people and the new working space. As it is more difficult to express oneself, it is also more difficult to make friends, make jokes, and be yourself completely. It was only in the last month that I felt that I felt completely comfortable and the person that I knew. Secondly, the lack of Spanish resulted in fewer personal responsibilities within the team. Whereas normally I am a person that wants to be involved and that takes on many responsibilities, I sometimes felt useless because I did not get any specific responsibilities within the team. It was also in the last month that I was in charge of several projects.

Problems that I encountered during my internship were definitely the fact that the work being done was way less organized and less effective than I am used to from the work in The Netherlands. In the first month of the internship this created a lot of frustration from
my part, it was a real challenge to accept this culture difference and to fit my pace of working to those of my colleagues.

6.3. SWOT Analysis

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<td>- Direct and personal contact with beneficiaries; open atmosphere;</td>
<td>- Loss of valuable knowledge</td>
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<td>- A learning environment: no mistakes can be made, everything we do wrong can be something we can learn from;</td>
<td>- Need for more structure and organisation</td>
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<td>- Clear mandate with which they work hard to stick to it (a mandate that is close to my heart)</td>
<td>- Inefficient transfer period between semesters and new interns</td>
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<th>Opportunities</th>
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<td>- Ability to grow as an important organisation in the area.</td>
<td>- Replicate the mistakes that have been made by other teams of the JRS Colombia because of a lack of knowledge transfer.</td>
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<td>- Use information from other teams of the JRS, other organisations, and the academic world to construct new activities.</td>
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6.4. Function of Internship as part of NOHA

Firstly I want to comment that I feel that as in any conflict the situation is often so complex and context-specific, there are always gaps and overlaps between what the theory of NOHA teaches us and that what happens in real life.

I think that after the many experiences here in Colombia, it would have been very interesting to at least discuss the rights of displaced people. Although displaced people do not have many rights into the framework of international law, it would be interesting to at least discuss about it or try to find holes in the framework that could be used for the rights of displaced people. It is a phenomenon that is being seen more and more nowadays, so it would be very interesting to at least touch upon the subject.

During the psychology course we learned a lot about psychology in general and about post-traumatic stress disorder. It would be very interesting if a component could be implemented that treats small tips and tricks that one can use when having to give psychological support with little knowledge. We could talk about body language, about small tools that one can use when being in an emergency situation in which psychological supports needs to be given although one is no psychologist.

Tools that we have learned in the management course definitely came back in the writing of reports before and after the activities and workshops done during the internship.

6.5. Positioning on the Job Market

I believe and hope that the fact that I have done my internship with such a well-known international organisation will help me with my positioning on the job market. As more and more conflicts create an internally displaced population that seeks refuge in an urban setting, I also hope that this helps me with my position on the job market. However, it can also be especially this part that makes my position less valuable because still many organisations seek for experience that one acquires in the ‘traditional’ refugee camps.