Beyond our own Borders - Más allá de nuestras fronteras

Background statement and organizations involved

This project proposes to work on the mountainous border between Ecuador and Colombia, specifically in the cities of Tulcán and Ipiales. Tulcán, located in Ecuador, is the capital of the Carchi province, and Ipiales belongs to the department of Nariño in Colombia. Both cities are connected by the same ancestry marked by the indigenous society of “Los Pastos.” Thus, the cultural essence of both cities oversteps national borders provoking similar ways of seeing life and, simultaneously, identical structural problems. Poverty, discrimination, lack of educational opportunities, and domestic violence are challenging issues these populations face. In 2022, the number of violent deaths in Ecuador reached its highest rate in the last ten years. Simultaneously, Colombia has been constantly hit by violence due to the internal armed conflict that has lasted 60 years. On top of this, Colombia is one of the leading producers of cocaine in the region, and Ecuador is classified as an important transit route for illegal drogues. In this context, these two cities are marked by their unique condition as national borders implying the circulation of large quantities of illicit drugs and the constant struggle of criminal gangs for dominance.

Consequently, the youth in these communities has been exposed to the normalization of violence as a defense and survival mechanism which carries serious mental health issues. This reality of desolation causes Tulcán to be one of the cities with the highest suicidal rates in Ecuador. In the case of Ipiales, it is part of one of the most violent areas in Colombia, greatly affected by the armed conflict. This violence dramatically affects teenagers who, without educational opportunities or economic resources, become trapped in substance abuse, lack of motivation, and delinquency.

Two organizations have been working to break these cycles of violence. Bienestar, a center for psychological support, has been working for affordable access to mental health in Tulcán for more than ten years. Bienestar innovates in providing mental health using art and occupational therapy to support people dealing with mental issues, especially vulnerable youth. In this challenging task, they have received the help of many social organizations, such as Puentes Invisibles, which in 2022 turned ten years of artistic trajectory. Puentes Invisibles is an artistic organization focused on theater and directed by two accomplished actors, one from Argentina and another from Colombia. They specialize in the theater of the oppressed that empowers individuals to work for the resolution of conflicts. Furthermore, they work with artists from multiple countries to encourage the use of art to express social issues.

These organizations have worked together to spread the use of art and empower the population. But their work has been limited by financial restraints resulting in a few free theater workshops over weekends in which groups of young people from Ecuador and Colombia have already participated. These workshops significantly impact young lives but don’t have continuity due to financial restrictions. Therefore, we are proposing a project that uses theater to sensitize and transform the social context of the youth in Tulcán and Ipiales, promoting a culture of peace and fellowship between communities divided by a border but connected by similar challenges.

Proposal and Objectives

This project proposes working with teenagers from Tulcán and Ipiales to denormalize violence by creating a theater play focusing on peacebuilding. We aim to give 30 teenagers, 15 from Ecuador and 15 from Colombia, an artistic residence for five weeks in which, with the support of mental health professionals and artists, they will work on processing their experiences with violence. The theater play created and performed by these teenagers will reflect those experiences and be performed in both cities.

Beyond our own borders has the following aims:

- Promote a culture of peace, non-violent communication, empathy, solidarity, binational integration, and respectful exchange of different perspectives.
- Develop the creation of a theatrical play to perform and circulate art around Ecuador and Colombia.
- Foster the formation of a space for group healing filled with self-awareness, auto exploration, and pacific interaction.
- Encourage the decentralization of art, the democratization of culture, and the support of cultural spaces in areas vulnerable to violence.
Support art therapy as a way to promote mental health and express emotions in complex healing processes.
Expand the artistic opportunities of thirty teenagers and give them insight into theater as a tool for social change.

Project Timeline

- **Phase one – Socialization and Selection:** This project will be socialized with the community for two weeks through the local press. Simultaneously, we will initiate a selection process simplified by the fact that there are around 45 participants from previous workshops. New participants will also be welcome. All the participants will be selected according to their interest in theater, vulnerability condition, and willingness to participate in the project.

- **Phase two - Artistic Camp:** this phase of the project will be a four-day camp with 30 selected participants, two theater professors, two psychologists, and two people in charge of the camp logistics. Furthermore, this camp will serve as the first connection between participants. Therefore, the camp will be necessary for creating a safe and trusting community. The four-day camp will include theater workshops focusing on the theater of the oppressed. These workshops will be implemented with the assistance of two psychologists that will contribute with their professional perspective to use art to express emotions and internalized trauma. In addition, this camp aims for the participants to write their theater play about their interpretation of peacebuilding.

- **Phase three Theater - Play building and rehearsals:** for the following two weeks, the participants will have guided rehearsals in the facilities of the Center Bienestar to settle their theater play and finalize their performances.

- **Phase four - Shows around both cities:** subsequently, the participants will showcase their artistic creations in the following two weeks with a tour around six marginalized neighborhoods in Ipiales and Tulcán. These shows will democratize culture and be followed by public discussions as a space for the participants and the audience to reflect on the theatre play.

The project will comprise five weeks of direct work with the participants, two weeks of preparation and selection, and one week of project evaluation, totaling eight weeks.

Intended outcomes and long-term impacts

- This project will give 30 participants tools to recognize the effects of violence in their lives.
- Through theater and with the support of mental health professionals, the participants will also learn to process emotions and experiences that were previously minimized.
- The 30 teenagers will materialize peacebuilding through a theater play that can be replicated in other communities.
- The project will construct connections between young people of Ecuador and Colombia, enabling future artistic collaborations and diffusing divisions between the two communities.
- Theater and mental health will be democratized in a context where they are a privilege, impacting the vulnerable youth and six marginalized neighborhoods and helping them denormalize violence.