

In order to promote coexistence, tolerance and respect, displaced populations need to recognize, acknowledge and value commonalities with local populations (i.e. those who never left and those who were brought into their communities of origin). For instance, in many cases they will belong to the same minorities (i.e. indigenous populations, Afro-descendants), they might have the same professional or occupational background (i.e. peasants), the same language, culture, nationality or religious beliefs. In a way, all of them have been affected by forced displacement as a country, nationality or community.

In Guatemala, many of the land plots previously owned by refugees were given to new owners or were occupied by other destitute peasants, with or without the support of different actors. Land restitution became problematic, as later witnessed also in former Yugoslavia. So the question was, how to promote co-existence and reconciliation, taking into account that we are talking about the same destitute peasants of Mayan origin, for whom land ownership constitute an element of survival?

Long dialogues were promoted among those populations to identify common interest and similar characteristics and to get to know each other much better. Third parties were present in the dialogues, acting more as witnesses and facilitators, than as external negotiators. This is a key element, because third parties usually are only temporarily in the country and any lasting solution should not be dependent on their continued support or coaching.

Once those commonalities have been identified and underlined, efforts should also be undertaken within the community to recognize and value differences and their contribution to a multicultural society. As human beings, as part of our traditional way of thinking, we might be afraid of the “other”, usually perceived as different, as a foreigner or as an alien. In fact, differences should be seen as complementary assets to benefit the community.

As previously mentioned, many refugees have learnt a new language, new vocational and professional skills, and have benefited from living in multicultural societies. The experience of living abroad, even during exile, has expanded their way of thinking and the way they react to what is perceived as “different”.

Refugees are survivors of persecution, human rights violations and violence,