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Case report

Youth perspectives in rapidly changing landscapes: Lessons from Peru

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1. Introduction

The loss of young people due to out-migration is considered a challenge to rural communities and the continuation of land-based livelihoods and activities (Cazzuffi & Fernández, 2018; FAO, 2017). Such migration may be undertaken to diversify household income, escape unemployment, or access education, among other reasons (Cazzuffi & Fernández, 2018; Crivello, 2011).

In the case of the Peruvian Amazon, little information exists about youth migration patterns and drivers. In this case report, we describe the pattern of rural to urban migration of youth who grew up in forest communities in the Madre de Dios region, but have since moved (temporarily or permanently) to the urban centre of Puerto Maldonado. Drawing on insights from a three-day 'visioning' workshop, as well as our own professional experiences working with local forest communities,¹ we explore the motivations for youth to migrate, their engagement with forests, and the implications for traditional forest cultures (for an overview of the methodology see Robson et al., this issue). As young people are increasingly choosing to leave their communities of origin for nearby urban centers, there is the assumption that they will lose their connections to home – posing a threat to long-standing customs, practices, and livelihoods, including those related to forests. We provide an empirically-informed and nuanced response to this assumption, showing that youth-community ties can and do remain strong.

2. Context

In Peru, migration into, within, and out of Amazonia has long existed, although the drivers of such migration do vary and can change subject to socio-cultural and political processes (Hecht, Yang, Basnett, Padoch, & Peluso, 2015). Indigenous and non-indigenous people in the

region have moved in search of food, land, other sources of livelihood, while some groups have been forced to leave their territories (García Hierro & Surrallés, 2009; Padoch et al., 2008). In recent years, migration rates towards the Peruvian Amazon regions have increased as a result of improved infrastructure (especially roads) and rising demands for natural resources (e.g. timber, gold, oil palm) (Dourojeanni, Alberto, & Dourojeanni, 2008; Perz et al., 2012).

Madre de Dios is one of the most isolated and least populated parts of the country – 141,000 inhabitants are spread out across 85 million hectares – yet has one of Peru's highest immigration rates. The population grew by almost 30% during the period 2007–2017 (INEI, 2018), as gold mining expansion drew workers from other parts of the country. Besides gold, resources such as timber, agricultural crops and livestock, Brazil nut (*Bertholletia excelsa*) (a highly valued non-timber forest product) and, on a smaller-scale, palm fruits (e.g. *Mauritia flexuosa*, *Euterpe precatoria*), are or have become important sources of income. Over the past decade, cacao cultivation has also increased, mirroring growth in other parts of Peru.

Influxes of migrants, as well as extractive industries, have had a significant impact on local communities and their forests. While the region is changing rapidly because of new jobs and improved infrastructure and basic services, there has been marked forest loss and degradation. Increases in herbicide and pesticide use (for agriculture) contaminate water sources and the large number of small-scale gold mining activities have vast social and ecological impacts, with worrying levels of organic mercury now present in the food chain, especially fish (Diringer et al., 2015).

It is within this context that young people in Madre de Dios remain in or leave their forest homes.

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3. Methods

We recruited young people who grew up in rural communities in Madre de Dios but who currently live in the region's capital, Puerto Maldonado. Here, the term 'rural communities' refers to both Indigenous territories and small peasant (non-Indigenous) localities. Using social media, we launched a call for expressions of interest. Through contacts working with youth, we reached people without internet access. We encouraged indigenous youth and young people from the Brazil nut sector to participate, as they constitute a livelihood with strong forest ties, and outmigration has been considered a challenge to their communities. The response to our call was higher than expected, with 67 young people asking to participate. The interactive nature of the FoFW workshop methodology (see Robson et al., this issue) works best with a small number (10–20) of participants. From the 67 applicants, we therefore selected fifteen to participate in the workshop, based on their rural background (they came from a forest community with history of land-based livelihoods), age and gender. Of these fifteen participants, 43% were female and 57% male, and they ranged from 15 to 34 years of age. Most fell into one of three groups: (i) students from a high school in Puerto Maldonado, COAR (*Colegio de Alto Rendimiento*) (n = 4); (ii) children of Brazil nut concession holders and (youth) members of the producer organization, RONAP (*Recolectores Orgánicos de la Nuez Amazónica de Perú*) (n = 4); and, (iii) Indigenous youth who belong to a student organization, OJEMAD (*Organización de Jóvenes Estudiantes Indígenas de Madre de Dios*) (n = 4). The participants were grouped liked this because the organizations they belong to supported us with the recruitment of youth. Three workshop participants did not belong to any of these three groups and were selected based on their background, motivation and ability to participate. They shared the same characteristics as the other youth. Twelve of the fifteen participants were university, college, or high school students. Three were working.

The workshop took place in a lodge outside of Puerto Maldonado, bordering the Tambopata National Reserve. Over three days, we engaged the participants in conversations about their lives, their relationship with forests, and visions for the future. Our aim was to better understand if forest-based work could be a viable option for them in a rapidly changing landscape. Each participant also completed a short questionnaire. In addition, we held semi-structured interviews with eight of the fifteen participants,² allowing us to delve deeper into their motivations to migrate, their experiences living outside of their communities, including adaptations to urban life, and their future plans. The interviews were useful, as neither the workshop activities nor the questionnaire collected data on migration experiences.

4. Results

4.1. Migration drivers

In Peru, education is increasingly viewed as a basis for future well-being, and education migration has become an important response to poverty (Crivello, 2011). Our participants noted that access to education was their major reason for having migrated to Puerto Maldonado, as no more than primary-level schooling is available in the small, rural communities that most came from. Even for those who came from larger communities, it was difficult for them to find post-secondary education locally. The quality of education in the Madre de Dios region is among the worst in Peru (i.e. infrastructure and materials, qualified teachers, recognition of cultural and linguistic differences, among other indicators). Schoolchildren there scored one of the lowest in reading comprehension and mathematical reasoning in a recent national census

² This was additional to the FoFW methodology. Due to time and budget constraints we conducted only eight interviews.

(Defensoría del Pueblo, 2016; INEI, 2017). This reality further encourages rural youth to move to large urban centres to receive better quality secondary schooling or continue their post-secondary studies. This was also the case of our participants (n = 15).

Distances have changed facilitating urbanward migration. Ten years ago, young people from the region would often head to Cusco, Arequipa or Lima (the nearest large cities, 500 to 1500 km away from Puerto Maldonado) to continue their studies. However, over the past decade, access to higher education has improved in Puerto Maldonado, which is now home to two public universities, one private university, a technical institute, with the number of professional degree programs on the increase. In addition, policy programs that promote further education and provide scholarships for Indigenous and rural youth have also stimulated interest (e.g. Pronabec or university indigenous admission policy), making it more feasible for youth to consider leaving their communities for school.

Not all rural youth are economically in a position to make this move to the city to receive a better education. Most participants remained dependent on their families (except for the three who were working) but because that financial support was still limited, a number still held part-time jobs (e.g. taxi drivers, Brazil nut gathering, farming, tourist guide) to see them by. In terms of housing, the indigenous participants stayed with family members during their studies, as did the Brazil nut producers' youth. COAR, on the other hand, is a public boarding school, so the four youth studying there would live at the school during the week and go to their family homes during weekends and holidays. While data was not collected to confirm this trend, our experiences in the field and from working with some of the communities that these youths come from, suggest that such strategies hold true for youth broadly from the region.

During an interactive push-and-pull-factor dynamic, more aspects were mentioned why youth would move to the city. Factors such as the growing rural-urban interactions that bring rural communities into contact with urban centres, introducing new lifestyles to such places have influenced and reinforced their desire to migrate. While not a new phenomenon – there has always been communication between (even isolated) rural populations and “outsiders” – these interactions and flows of information have increased substantially over recent years. As Puerto Maldonado has grown, a greater desire or curiosity among rural dwellers to experience urban culture, or enjoy improved access to communication technologies and a greater diversity of goods, was noted by both male and female participants. Better healthcare, business opportunities, and news media being available in the city were all cited.

A final migration driver was family pressure. Several youths explained how their parents wanted them to become professionals and to move away from the kind of land-based livelihoods (forestry, farming) that are often associated with impoverishment. This was less the case for youth from the Brazil nut gathering communities, whose parents were keen for them to remain involved and inherit concession rights to Brazil nut areas.

4.2. Relationship with the forest

Our participants come from communities and families associated with forest-based livelihoods; these are young people whose parents or caretakers are involved in Brazil nut gathering, or logging, or farming, through holding communal or individual land rights. Several workshop activities and discussions provided youth with an opportunity to share knowledge about the forests that they grew up in and with (see Robson et al., this issue). Collectively, they identified a long list of goods and services, and a range of economic, biological, cultural, and spiritual values, that they associate with forests, and which underline forests' importance to them. During a forest walk, participants identified “landmarks”; specific places or things that held meaning for them. For example, one boy chose the Lupuna tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) as it has: “... an economic value because plywood panels are made of the timber, however,

this tree is considered the mother tree carrying the spirit of the forest. Cutting it down means bad luck for you". Another emblematic species was the Brazil nut tree, chosen by the daughter of a Brazil nut concession holder because: "... it is one of the largest trees of the forest and the fruit gathering and commercialization form an important income for many families in the region".

The participants valued forests for the biodiversity they are home to and as an important source of oxygen. Female youth tended to specify the foods and medicinal plants that forests provide, for both humans and animals. Male youth spoke more to the hedonic values (recreation, peace and quietness) that they associated with forests. There were differences in viewpoint between the Indigenous youth, the Brazil nut collectors' youngsters, and the high school youth, with the former possessing particular knowledge about forest plants, animals and forest-based customs, which they were keen to share with others. Non-indigenous participants needed more encouraging to open up about such things, and enjoyed learning and gaining knowledge about the forest from their Indigenous counterparts.

Something that connected participants were environmental interests and concerns. Asked what they wanted to "keep" in their communities (and territories), participants from all sub-groups mentioned trees, flora and fauna, clean water sources, and local traditions. Asked what they would "toss" from their communities, almost all participants listed environmental problems, such as garbage in the streets, contamination from mining, forest loss, and forest fires. Maintaining this theme, when asked what they wanted to see "created" in their communities, youth listed more protected areas, tourism, biodiversity, recognized land rights, environmental education, and local gastronomy. Most participants envisioned their local forests as spaces for conservation and sustainable forest work. Only one participant saw their local forest as primarily a resource for economic purposes only.

4.3. Visioning the future

When asked about desired future jobs, 66% of the jobs listed were forest-related or land-based, such as entrepreneur in eco-tourism, exporting of Brazil nuts, or selling Indigenous art and crafts. Other occupations stated included: forest restoration, tourist guide, and starting a medicinal plant nursery. Two things stand out from these findings. First, that in contrast to the land-based livelihoods that have traditionally underpinned their families' histories, few of the jobs that youth mentioned involve direct resource extraction. Second, the focus of youth participants on the forest as a site for future work suggests that many intend to maintain strong ties to rural areas once they have completed their schooling, since few such jobs are found within urban centres.

The survey data reinforced this notion, with nearly half of respondents (n = 7) hoping to be living in a forest community when they are 30 years old. Other participants want to be living in Lima or Arequipa (n = 3), or in another country (n = 4). Several participants mentioned how they wanted to "help" their community, which they felt needed improving in terms of health, education, sanitation, and security. Most youth spoke of their strong ties to the community of origin. Most of their families still live in the home village and youth said that they often go back to help with Brazil nut gathering, logging, or working in the fields. Survey data showed that a majority of participants visit their community on a weekly (n = 7), or monthly (n = 2) basis. Those that visit their communities only a few times a year (or less) tend to be from Indigenous communities located a day or more's travel away, or whose family no longer lived in the home village (n = 5).

5. Discussion and final reflections

Our participants were a cross-section of youth from the Peruvian Amazonian region of Madre de Dios, who had left their forest

communities to pursue secondary or post-secondary education in the city of Puerto Maldonado. They form part of a now established rural-urban migration stream; the result of a change in the educational aspirations of young people, as well as enhanced rural-urban linkages and improved facilities in the region's capital.

While urban areas are developing rapidly, most rural areas remain marginalized, with higher poverty rates compared to urban areas (60% versus 21% in urban areas (INEI, 2009)), minimal basic services (e.g. housing types, water facilities, electricity, health services, and education), and limited economic opportunities. These realities constrain the ability of young people to act on a commitment to help build sustainable, forest-based economies in their home communities. However, while youth may or may not return to their communities to re-establish themselves, our work leads us to believe that youth-village ties will not be easily broken. The same improvements in roads and communication technologies that serve to facilitate rural out-migration are also helping the rural youth living in the city to make regular visits home and maintain those connections. This is especially so for the many Madre de Dios youth for whom migration has been internal (within the region's borders), with some holding the additional incentive of having actual or potential access to land rights or forest concessions through family links and inheritance. And it is those in this latter position that maybe best placed, and most likely, to build on their education to meet career aspirations through productive, innovative activities in rural areas, connecting urban with rural areas (see also Padoch et al., 2008).

Thus, rural-urban migration in the Madre de Dios region does not drive a wedge between youth and the forests and forest cultures that they come from. While continued adherence to traditional customs and practices is a challenge for youth now living in urban centres, their demonstrated interest in forest-related jobs suggests that community and territorial ties can and do persist. Yet while improvements in transportation and communication have helped to connect youth in cities with their rural homes and cultures, greater public investment in rural areas is still needed in order to enable the kind of land-based, entrepreneurial activities that go beyond sole extractivism and which youth are showing an interest in. And while the number of professional degree programs in the region is growing, few are currently oriented towards the necessary skills that youth would need to meet current challenges and help them to realize their professional and personal aspirations.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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