

## **Toda Tierra es Tu Tierra (All Land is Your Land)**

**Summary:** *A street play bringing together young refugees and young Costa Ricans, conceived as an awareness raising project*

**Actor(s):** *UNHCR, ACAI (NGO for refugee protection), the Ministry of Culture and Youth, and teachers and students of the “Conservatorio Castella” - a state-run school renowned for its excellence in arts*

**Location:** *Costa Rica*

**Start/end date:** *First performance – World Refugee Day 2007*

*Last performance – December 2008*

**Keyword(s):** *Adolescents/youth, Community-based approach, AGDM*

**Description (describes the practice, the context in which it took place, and any other relevant factors)**

As part of UNHCR Costa Rica’s community-based strategy, different age and gender groups have been supported to empower refugees. One of the most consolidated groups is the *Parceros*, a youth group (from 10 to 18 years of age) of approximately 55 refugees who meet once a month and attend a yearly summer camp.

In 2007, several *Parceros* attended a summer theatre workshop which raised their interest for this form of art. At the same time they expressed their wish during the participatory assessment to include other youngsters, both Colombian and Costa Rican, through sports and artistic activities.

Taking into account these wishes, a project was initiated bringing together UNHCR, ACAI (an NGO and UNHCR’s partner for refugee protection), the Ministry of Culture and Youth and teachers and students of the “Conservatorio Castella” a state-run school renowned for its excellence in arts. This joint effort resulted in the creation of a street play, called *Toda Tierra es Tu Tierra* (‘All Land is Your Land’) exploring the theme of exile and uprootedness.

Forty-five refugees, migrant and national adolescents participated in the project under the direction of Maria Steiner, a professor of the “Conservatorio Castella”. *Toda Tierra es Tu Tierra*, a combination of dance, poetry, music and theatre, was also conceived as an awareness raising project.

Based on their own experiences, the play portrays the different issues that refugees face, ranging from their reasons to flee, to the discrimination and xenophobia encountered once in the country of asylum. But the play shows as well the resilience, the strengths and the capacities refugees bring with them into their new country. The play is divided into three acts, which in less than an hour portray the shared ordeal faced by many refugees.

The first part shows the violence that forces refugees to flee, while the second focuses on the themes of uprooting and xenophobia. For young refugees, the experience of xenophobia, based solely on nationality and lack of understanding of the sufferings they have gone through, is often the hardest part to bear.

The play ends with a message of peace and hope, conveyed through a choreographed piece of music during which all the children and youngsters dance together. Months of intense rehearsals resulted in the premier at the National Centre for Culture (CENAC) on World Refugee Day 2007, with several hundred people in attendance. The play was a success and obtained public acclaim. Therefore a decision was taken to extend the theatre play’s lifespan, taking it to places such as the southern border area, the University of

Costa Rica, the National Theatre Arts Festival in San Ramon, local primary and secondary schools, and even a regional meeting of ombudspersons, almost all of these at the request of the institutions hosting the events where the play took place.

During 2007 and the first months of 2008 the play was presented more than 40 times. In 2007 the play obtained a theatre prize for Best Group from the Ministry of Culture and Youth and in April 2008 the group participated at the International Arts Festival held in Costa Rica. The play's last showing was on World Refugee Day 2008.

The play exceeded expectations in attracting the attention and acclaim of a variety of audiences and the national media demonstrated great interest. Moreover, the play appeared in a moment when the refugee issue obtained a lot of media attention, some of which was rather negative as Colombian refugees in Costa Rica are often stigmatized and linked to violence.

**Impact** (*describes any positive and/or negative impact in the immediate, medium or longer-term*)

The play has served as an innovative and creative way to show the possibilities of **raising awareness** about the plight of refugees with the active participation of both refugee and host community youth. The months of intense rehearsal became a safe space to “vent” the anguish and the pain refugee children suffered in the past and in the present and to find comfort and support amongst each other. The play boosted the self-confidence of the participants making them agents of change by learning how to peacefully coexist and solve daily conflicts and how to fight xenophobia, mistrust and stereotyped ideas with a positive, collective message of peace and hope in a time when refugee and migrants received only negative press.

**Lessons learned** (*describes any lessons learned and/or give advice on ways to improve the practice*)

Bringing together different national actors and building on the creativity, energy and resilience of children, can result in a successful product that not only managed to raise awareness on the plight of refugees, but also provided the refugee adolescents with a safe space and a forum to express themselves.

