

FROM THE SHADOWS TO THE LIGHT:

The motivations of a young researcher

To pursue knowledge, understand realities, broaden one's outlook and help others with their skills is what motivates the daily work of Nicolás González Tamayo, a lawyer and expert on international affairs who is devoted to research.

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A cave. Men who are tied from head to foot look towards a wall. There is a burning fire and some shadows which are projected, as if they were the only truth. Later, they are freed, see a light in front of them, are temporarily blinded and then get a glimpse of a broader piece of knowledge which deserves to be shared with others.

For Nicolás González Tamayo, these aspects of the famous allegory—or myth—of the cave which Plato used to think about the concepts of truth and reality symbolize the greatest aspiration of his life.

He became interested in philosophy at a very early age and made knowledge one of his biggest objectives: “Knowledge as



“You turn into the disseminator of your own work and can spread the word to others. You can transfer what you initially think and materialize on a theoretical-academic plane into an everyday reality in a conversation at a moment when you are sharing your ideas with other people. It is another way of disseminating knowledge,” Nicolás González stresses.



His mission there involves field work with institutions and groups of migrants in Santa Marta, Pereira, Cúcuta and Bogotá, which has provided him with the information needed for his research but has also enabled him to get closer to these women and “learn about their experiences, outlooks and illusions” in a manner which would make anyone leave his or her cave and stop seeing only their shadows in order to get a look at, if not the light, then the shadows of something else at least.

Helping others is the source of one of his strongest motivations. He comes from a family of doctors, thus his willingness to serve others is more than latent and that is why he regards his profession as an opportunity to contribute to society “beyond the strictly academic plane”, thinking of “the impact it may have on people”, he says, even though that impact is not so clear when the result of his work are academic publications. He knows it and is very aware of that recurrent dilemma researchers face when they decide whether to maintain their academic language or make it more accessible to the general public, but he trusts that his research projects will have a sort of cascade effect.

Hence, with a study which evaluated the treatment of sexual crimes in international courts, for example, he sought to have a positive impact on the development of the cases brought before Colombian tribunals, in order to benefit the victims of sexual violence in the

González, being a researcher is not limited to doing your job as an academic, but a condition which becomes part of your whole life. Whatever you do or whatever the role you play, you begin to see reality in a different way, which allows you to fight against stereotypes, deconstruct dogmas and analyze situations from different standpoints.

context of the country’s armed conflict. “Perhaps those women will never read it, but when this information reaches the hands of a judge, he may be able to give life to this lifeless information and use it in favor of the victims.”

That is why research is important, because it provides people with tools to understand and describe realities but also to help to change or improve them. And not necessarily for the segments of the population which are studied, but even for the researchers themselves as well.

In that regard, Nicolás also recalls a study about the forced employment of minors in the informal sector of the economy, where he found that the premises which are regarded as unavoidable in one sector of the country are in some way inconceivable in others. Thus, while public policies and the bulk of the urban population are dogmatic about preventing minors from working, many rural, small-farmer, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities believe that using children for farm work is part of their tradition and that ending those cus-



toms would even lead to the end of their communities. It is a thorny question about which he was only able to reach a conclusion for his individual life.

His close acquaintance with the clash between ancestral and traditional ways of life and the logic of a Western kind which tries to impose itself through the law made him understand that the urban life of those who are probably reading this article now – a sector he belongs to himself – is like a shadow which the men who are tied up see on a wall in the cave. In that case, he, as a researcher, can depict himself as one of the men who were liberated and able to see that there was something else beyond the cave. And that “something else”, which is also his country, deserves to be shared with those who continue to only see the shadows. That is his aim.

The same thing happened with a study he did in the context of the “Security, Peace and Conflict” project of the *Political and International Studies Research Group* (CEPI, in its Spanish initials) of the Faculty of Political Science, Government and International Relations at the Universidad del Rosario. The project was devoted to a study of the strategic development of the FARC guerrilla group during the peace negotiations with the Colombian government in Havana. His job was to keep up with what was happening there. “It was a living research project, which took on new nuances every day, changed and was nourished by new events. It implied studying the quotidian reality,” he enthusiastically recalls.

He is also aware of the importance of living a balanced life which includes not only his work, but his family and friends, and love and leisure, so during that period when he was strenuously following the trail of the negotiators and their decisions, he also found time to sit down and converse with his friends. And since the atmosphere of the country was so polarized and the information in the mass media turned out to be insuffi-

A passion for research

Long before he formally became a part of a research group, Nicolás González formed a group with his undergraduate friends to undertake critical studies of the law: While it was not an institutional one, it was very rigorous. They called themselves the “*Escride*” group and it was his first project of an academic kind. During a period of a year and a half, those students held weekly meetings in which they presented their working documents. They were eventually joined by a professor who threw light on the subjects they were concerned with, a role similar to the one Nicolás now plays in an official capacity as an advisor to the research incubators of the *Human Right Research Group*. His role is to guide the training of the younger members, provide feedback for them and show them the right path for the continuance of their research projects.

cient, at least for him, Nicolás was able to share the ideas which he was formulating on the basis of his profound knowledge of the situation at that particular time and thus challenge prejudices about disarmament, the juridical status of the agreements, the political ambitions of the FARC and what might happen when the peace agreement began to be implemented. “Making use of what I had built up in my study, I had criteria of judgment that allowed me to speak of other realities,” he remarks, with satisfaction.

That is another version of the cascade effect which he refers to when he speaks of linking his work as a researcher with society as a whole, and it is also another example of how “standing outside of the cave” can help others to stop only seeing shadows. “You turn into the disseminator of your own work and can spread the word to others. You can transfer what you initially think and materialize on a theoretical-academic plane into an everyday reality in a conversation at a moment when you are sharing your ideas with other people. It is another way of disseminating knowledge,” because in the end, he believes, “being a researcher as such is not limited to doing your job as an academic, but a condition which becomes part of your whole life. Whatever you do or whatever the role you play, you begin to see reality in a different way, which allows you to fight against stereotypes, deconstruct dogmas and analyze situations from different standpoints.” ■