

THE WRETCHED LIVES OF YOUNG LIMONNENSES: WHO CARES?
INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Limón, March 2, 1994.

Dear Peter,

Did you know what some unemployed young people in Puerto Limón do for a living? Only those (blessed) with strong teeth and jaws appear to make it out. How is that? Well, I invite you to listen to some rare stories of survival strategies.

A young Limonnense in his early twenties came and stood in-front of the coffee shop located opposite the south-side of the central market (mercado central). He bent to put down on the ground a cartoon box he was carrying and pulled out of it a rounded cloth black bag which was tied with rope at one end. He slowly untied the bag, put his right hand in it and took something out—a dry coconut.

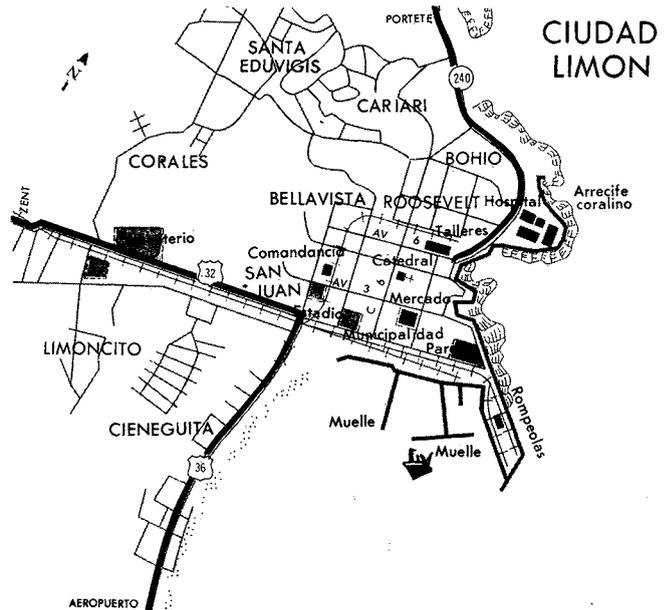
He stood up and called (in Limón English) the attention of the people who were seated in the coffee shop, many of them sailors and a few tourists. I was seated at the front close to where the young Limonnense was.

"Oke you know dis days der is lot unemployment in limon and I do dis ting I goin show you now for a living. I ope you like de show."

He took off his shirt exposing bare his chest and abdomen. Then he began massaging his neck muscles with some oil which he carried (in a small dark bottle) and moved his head in circular, side-to-side, back and forth movements.

"Oke me friends, now I begin me show and I ope dat you will appreciate it", he said again. He was going to peel the dry coconut with his bare teeth down to the seed!

He lifted the dry coconut from the ground and held it in both his hands. He paused a little bit and took one deep breath. He moved up the dry coconut close to his mouth and then bit it so hard— a real one strong bite that his neck muscles bulged out and his head shook, until the veins on the sides of his head showed and his eyes shut. With his teeth now firmly fixed to the coconut he pulled with his head and pushed outwards with his hands. And then, I heard a sharp sound; tret-tret-treeeeeeeet-sound of just a small dry coconut skin that was tearing off. It's

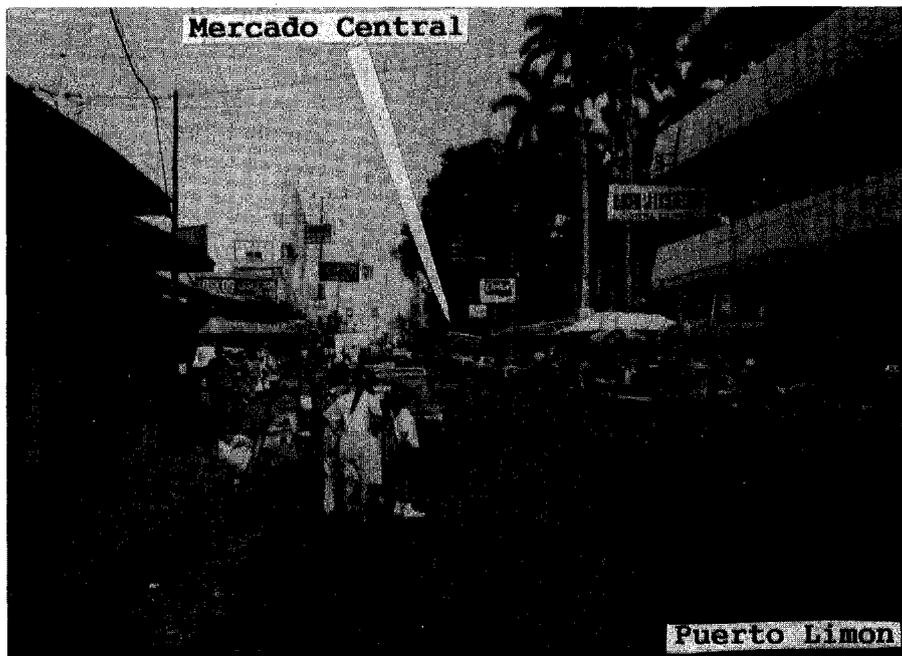


Bacete Bwogo is an ICWA fellow studying primary health care delivery in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State in India & the U.S.A.

heard inside the coffee shop and somebody said, "hey look at that, is he going to skin it all like that?" I was not sure either. It looked quite a tough thing to accomplish.

The young man went on with his work quietly and systemically, tearing off bits of dry coconut skin one bite after the other. But the peeling got tougher when he reached the half-way mark. And this was where the real demonstration began. It was either he peeled the coconut all the way to the finish successfully or face the humiliation for failing to do the job he did for a living.

Another bite. Another treeeeet. And another peel off. Another treeet but which stopped half-way. The young man steadied his teeth-grip on the coconut again, pulled and pushed harder, but still made no progress. Again he pulled and pushed, jumping up and down several times pulling and pushing, his neck muscles now bulging and his abdominals and chest muscles working very hard. Another tret-tret-treeeeeeet and the last coconut skin was finally torn off. Instant hand claps filled the coffee shop. The young man was breathing heavily and rapidly. Profuse sweat ran down his face and body. He looked a bit drowsy and exhausted. But he had crossed the finish line and was triumphant. He remained standing where he was, massaging his neck and shoulders for the final time to relax his muscles. Finally, he said, "I ope you enjoyed de show", continuing his massage. "Please I will appreciate your help very much. Just any help."



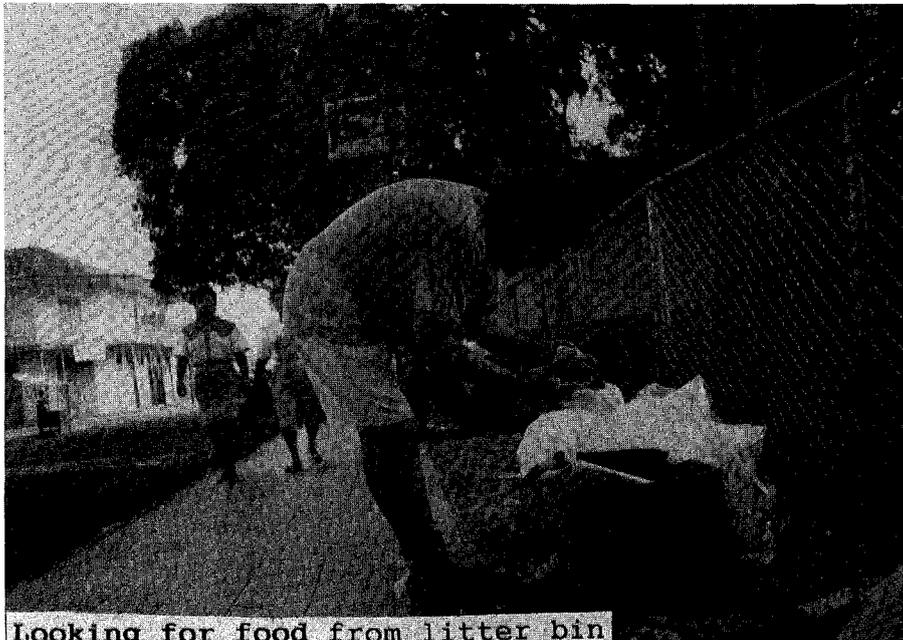
One tourist seated at the front offered the young Limonnense a cigarette and he lit it for him. "Muy amable senor, gracias", he said (this time in Spanish). He smoked a little and he was looking more relaxed now. Then he took out an old small black hat

from the cartoon box and said, "thank you all again for watching". He remained standing in his place with the black hat in his hand.

A voice called him from inside the coffee shop. He went over to the table where a group of people were seated. They put something into his black hat. Another call from another table and more things were put into the black bag- the young Limonnense was making money. It was his lucky day. A lot of admirers.

After he finished collecting the gift offerings he came over to the front table where I was seated and he asked me, "please may you look after my hat (which had money in it) while I cleaned the coconut skins from the floor?" He surprised me but I said, "it's okay".

He finished cleaning and then he put on his shirt and loaded the cloth black bag back into the cartoon box. I gave him back his hat (together with its content, of course). He said thank you, took the money out of the hat and put them right into his pocket without counting them. He looked a very happy man as he said to all-Adios! Lucky man. He used well his strong teeth and jaws as a means for finding his food to be able to survive. Other less fortunate unemployed persons look for food from garbage bins. This was what I saw the next day.



Looking for food from litter bin

I found a shady place under a big tree at the mercado central. I sat down just watching people to while away some time. A young man in his late twenties dressed in shorts and T-shirt walked past me and stopped at a short distant away to my right. I saw him bend down over a litter bin. He put his hand in the bin and pulled out a coca cola can, shook it and emptied some of its liquid contents straight into his mouth. He picked up another

tin, smelled the inside of it, put his finger in the tin and scooped out some of the contents with his right finger into his mouth.

And another tin. This one contained a green jelly material. He smelled it but did not put anything into his mouth. Instead he took some of the green jelly out with finger and rubbed it on his hands, face and into his hair. He threw the rest of the jelly tin back into the litter bin. He straightened up his back and he quietly walked away.

As he walked away he was looking from side to side on the pavement as if searching for something he had lost. He was scratching himself every now and then, on the head and on the body. He asked nobody. He talked to nobody and bothered nobody. Nor did anybody ask or talk or bother him. He was a man left to his own world and everybody that walked past him appeared to be oblivious to his presence. This made his (what I thought as) abnormal behavior look like it was normal to Limonneses because nobody seemed to care about what the young man did at the garbage bin. Didn't he have family? What was he suffering from? Was he a lone sufferer?

To my surprise I found out that he was not the lone sufferer, there were many others just like him on the streets. You just had to wait more time watching the streets of Limon and it was possible to witness what you didn't expect to see- those people who walked on the streets aimlessly from morning till night. Those people with uncombed hair and dirt had turned their hair into some dreadlocks, but they were not Rastas. They did not appear to look after themselves and it looked like none had a bath for a very long time.

They wore rags patched up with different cloth material to seal torn parts. They carried empty cans or tins or bottles which they held and smelled from time to time, endlessly. (I didn't know why they kept on smelling empty containers.) They talked to nobody and nobody talked to them. They bothered nobody and nobody bothered them. Always walking from one corner of the street to another and back again, forward and backward, always retracing their foot path. It is as if something was telling them just to keep on walking without stopping.

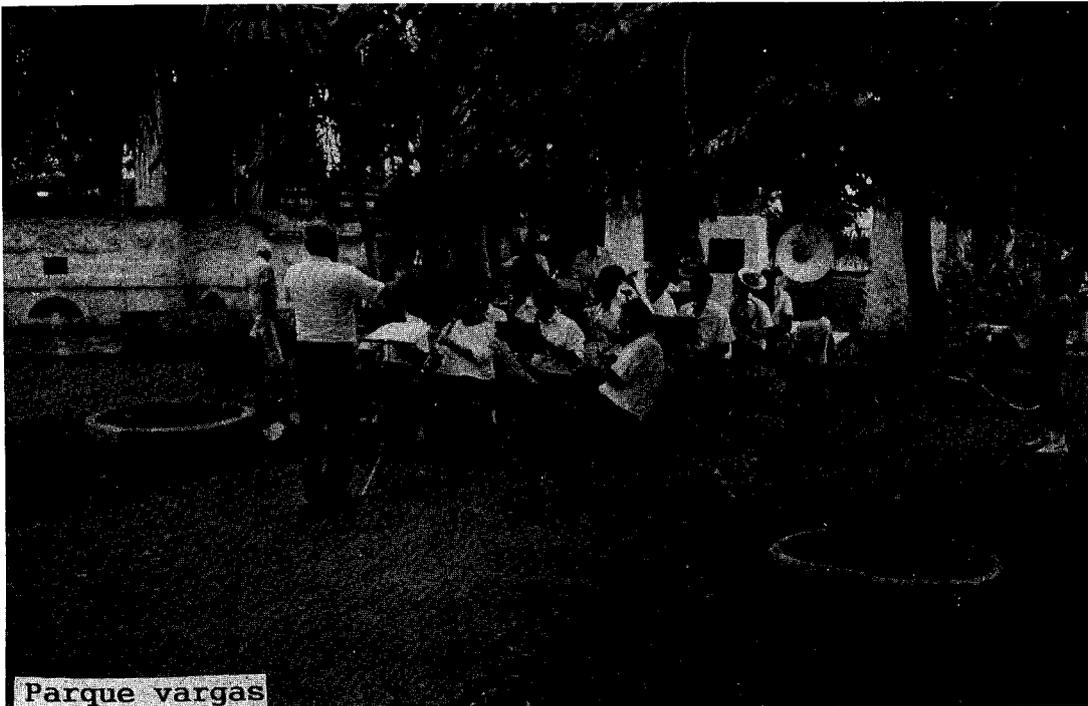
What was wrong with these people? Who were they? What were they suffering from? What was on their minds? Didn't anybody care about them?

And the old woman who always sat on the same bench at Parque Vargas (Vargas park) on the sea front. Always silent, she didn't talk to anybody and nobody talked to her. When she got up from her seat she would walk around and round the park and then went to the mercado central and back again to the Parque Vargas and sat on the same bench. Occasionally, she talked to herself while walking. This went on and on. What was wrong with this poor old woman? What was she suffering from? Sometimes she looked hungry and sad. Where did she eat? Where did she sleep? Didn't she have family?

But who were all those people?
Some Limonneses said, "ellos son locos (they are mad)", but many

people would say, "ellos son las victimas de la piedra (they are the victims of 'la piedra'- a Costa Rican euphemism for the narcotic 'crack')". The later opinion may be right. For the victims of la piedra were already reaching hospitals. This was what I saw at the emergencias unit at Tony Facio hospital in Limon: a young woman was brought in a coma, the doctor diagnosed her condition as hysterical coma and that she would recover well. Why did she go into coma? What was the problem?

"My husband has been unfaithful to me", she said to the doctor after she recovered from coma. But as she spoke the smell of alcohol came out from her breath which suggested that she had been drinking before she got into coma. She also admitted taking some drugs. Her husband came to the clinic much later. He looked sorry and apologetic and said he to the doctor, "I didn't mean anything. I had been drinking and didn't know how much I had so misbehaved".



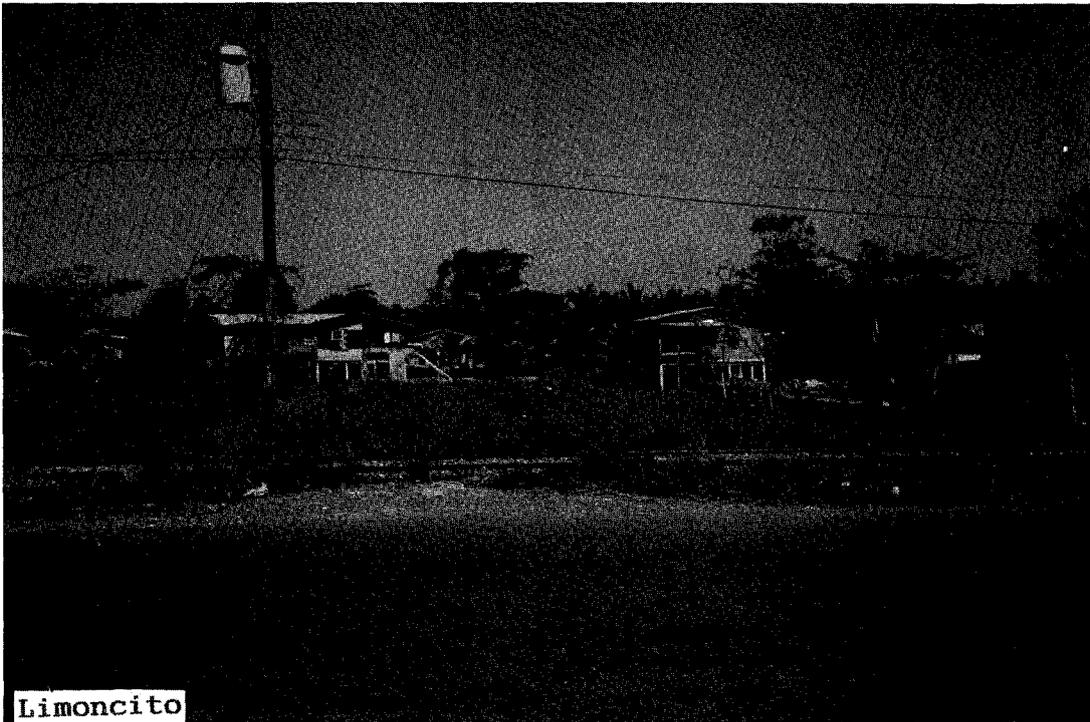
The young woman's case may be one among many such presentations to hospital clinics and it might just be the tip of the iceberg of alcohol and drug use in Limon.

Hospital doctors may succeed in treating such emergency medical conditions, but how could they prevent future relapses if patients were discharged without further counselling or following up of their illness conditions after they had been discharged from hospital emergency units?

Increasing alcohol and drug use by people in communities may be a serious sign of social breakdown. What do you think if you went to watch a football match in Limon Stadium and realized that some expectators smoked marijuana, not to mention the obscenities you might hear and the law enforcement officers stood idle?

What could save the lives of those young Limonnenses now caught up in this un-holy triangle of unemployment, drug use and alcoholism (all three a recipe for crime), in a city where bars were more than restaurants? Some young people managed just to survive. How? From hand to mouth.

I met Alfredo Gomez at a cafeteria in the mercado central, he lived in Limoncito. He said that he had just finished building one-half of his one-room house and, all that he was left with was fifty U.S. dollars. He needed additional money to be able to complete building the other one-half of his house. He said he had a brother working in the U.S.A. who had promised to help him with money to complete building his house. For now, he could not risk spending the little money he was left with on building because he must eat. He showed me a lone fifty-dollar note that he had.



Limoncito

Alfredo worked as a watchman-and-cleaner sweeping floors at the offices of a national university regional branch at Limon. He was paid a monthly wage of 8000 colones (about 1.7 US dollars per day). He said that sometimes he would be asked to work for more hours than the official eight-hours-per-day work schedule and without overtime pay. He had complained about that and had asked his employers for overtime pay but was denied. It was either he stopped asking for overtime pay or he would be invited to leave his job. The threat was tough and he kept working on his job as there were no immediate employment opportunities available to him. He had no choice.

After we had parted from the cafeteria, I was just thinking about what Alfredo could do if he lost his job. Would the

pressures of life push him into the zombie-world I had seen around the mercado central, Parque Vargus and the streets? Who would save young Limonnenses from their wretched lives?

Visit "el barrio Cieneguita" and take a good look at people. Even if you did not ask questions the look in their eyes will tell you their story- a story of hopelessness. But who cares? The law and drugs control authorities were oblivious to what was hapenning to people's lives. Limonnenses had been left to their own devices.

Como siempre, muchas gracias.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bacete O. Bwogo".

Bacete O. Bwogo