

## BOOK REVIEW

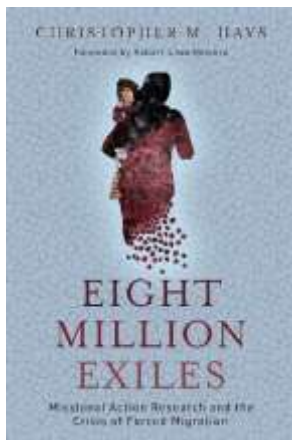
---

# Eight Million Exiles: Missional Action Research and the Crisis of Forced Migration

By Christopher M. Hays

Reviewed by Amanda Romero-Medina

---



Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2024. \$24.99.

Christopher Hays' *Eight Million Exiles* is a book about the construction of a new missional methodology called missional action research (MAR), undertaken under the auspices of the Biblical Seminary of Colombia (FUSBC) and its "Faith and Displacement" project that ran from 2014-2022. This project, and the MAR methodology that underpinned it, was geared to equip and encourage local Protestant churches to respond to the needs of the more than eight million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia in overcoming poverty, discrimination, deep trauma, and lack of assistance caused by the longstanding armed conflicts in that country. These IDPs were people from rural-urban communities with different ecclesial affiliations, geographies, and ethnicities (Indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombian and Mestizo persons).

Deeply rooted in the combination of the tenets of participatory action research (PAR) and integral mission/missiology (IM), elaborated by Colombian sociologist Fals Borda and Ecuadorian theologian René Padilla respectively, this MAR approach was the product of an interdisciplinary effort between theologians and social scientists. Six interdisciplinary research teams focused on topics of economics,

sociology, psychology, pedagogy, public sector interaction, and missiology "in order to give attention to the multidimensional nature of internally displaced person (IDP) suffering" (46). They promptly embarked on planning for the six phases of the MAR "cycle:" initial research, construction of an ecclesial-based intervention, execution of the intervention, impact analysis, revision of the diagnosis or intervention, and re-implementation.

The initial research phase of the project was launched in 2016 in six "pilot" IDP communities that were diverse in terms of geography (urban, semi-urban, and rural), ethnicity (Mestizo, Afro-Colombian, and Indigenous), and presence of ministries from different denominations. True to the tenets of participatory action research, two "co-researchers" from each of the communities were brought on board (both of whom ended up being crucial to the success of the project as a whole), and representatives of the six teams carried out their research in the IDP communities through interviews, focus groups, and Bible studies, making sure that a psychologist was always present in order to provide emotional care if trauma should manifest itself, whether among the IDPs or the researchers themselves. Interviews and surveys were also conducted with leaders of congregations ministering to IDPs, professional persons within those congregations, experienced teachers of IDPs, leaders of adult discipleship programs in the local churches, and Christian businesspeople and entrepreneurs.

Based on the results of this research, the Faith and Displacement project decided to "*create an educational intervention to mobilize the human capital of local churches, along with that of the IDPs themselves, for the purpose of fostering holistic IDP flourishing within the scope of the integral mission of the church*" (121, italics in the original). This three-step "intervention" consisted of convincing local pastors of the call to work with IDPs using the skills of the professionals in their congregations, mobilizing those Christian professionals, and using them to build the capacities of IDPs through curricula they would facilitate. Each team designed its

own curricula based on their topic, guided by six principles geared towards ensuring that the curricula were contextualized to the situation of the IDPs themselves and that there was full integration of social sciences and theology into each of them. A total of 19 curricula were created, all of which are available in Spanish at <https://www.fevdesplazamiento.org/>. Finally, an impact evaluation was carried out after the implementation of the intervention, yielding feedback and insights that were incorporated into a significant revision of the curricula and the scaling up of the project to nine geographic hubs based on a more formalized “*diplomado*” course.

This book provides an honest assessment of the successes and weaknesses of the project. A key aspect of the success was the wise steps and impact evaluation designed in the project, starting with an initial assessment to identify the main problems and factors involved in the IDP situation that included field work and extensive bibliographical research. A second crucial feature was that the project invited theologians, like the author, and other researchers from regions outside of Latin America to join those who were local. These allowed the project to succeed in putting together dialogues between IDPs, social scientists, and theologians from a variety of perspectives in such a way that not only was their combined input transformative, but they themselves learned from IDP testimonies, including new understanding and insights into the Scriptures as detailed in the book. At the same time, there were challenges that had to be overcome. One such challenge occurred when the creative didactic materials and instructions to use them ran into difficulties, because the authors had not considered that the participants in the project were not used to reading and following instructions.

Nevertheless, the Faith and Displacement project exceeded expectations, enabling local churches to become involved in outreach to IDPs and helping the latter in a number of ways, including starting new microbusinesses and receiving psychosocial support, such as counselling for victims of sexual abuse and disenfranchisement. These successes were enhanced in the scaling up of the project and the revision of the educational materials based on the impact evaluation that highlighted the “cyclical” interactions happening in the uncertain nature of social life and the alternatives the project enabled. This reminds us that every assessment requires contextual analysis of contingent facts, especially in a conflictive country like Colombia, where new expressions of armed actors pose serious risks to important sectors of the population living in poverty both in cities and in rural areas.

In addition to the methodological insights and examples this book provides, it also addresses a number of other issues relevant to evangelical relief,

development, and advocacy in general and Latin America in particular. The first has to do with how to integrate social-science-led research into a seminary context that was focused on the training of pastors and was cautious not to stray from that mission. The book details the struggles as the project sought to give attention to a humanitarian crisis affecting IDPs based on the integration of academic research and a faith-based approach. The second issue involves how Colombian Protestants rely primarily on the Bible for their theological integration, whereas Catholics include insights from church doctrine that is more systematic in its analytical approach. The Protestant approach, rooted in the integral missiology of the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL), helped build common ground based on the local theologians’ experience and methodology that emphasized “The role of the *Bible* in doing theology; the *social realities* in Latin American contexts, and lay participation in the work of the church” (42, italics in the original). Project materials were thus connected “always to Scriptural texts” (43) rather than to systematic theological categories.

Third, the book acknowledges the key role played as an interlocutor to integral missiology by Latin America’s Liberation Theology movement, which reconciles spiritual and material needs. As explained, Protestant Latin American theologian René Padilla developed his understanding of integral mission (or missiology) parallel to the Catholic Ecclesial-based Communities in this region. His affirmation that “[a]ttention to justice and development needed to be central components of Christian mission” (41) is the idea that inspires the text by giving moving examples of the commitment of pastors, social scientists, and co-researchers who were members of Colombian Evangelical congregations. The book thus underlines how “humble service and solidarity with the poor” (43) are key values of integral missiology as its guiding theological framework.

There are two main critiques I make of the book. First, one weakness of the MAR approach has to do with its use of the term “intervention” for one of its phases. Although Hays criticizes “extractive” research, the label “intervention” has been questioned in Latin America for its meaning of someone going to a community and imposing certain views. The “politically correct” term adopted in this region to describe engagement has been “interaction,” because it reflects the horizontal, democratic, and respectful exchange between the people in local communities and the researchers.

Second, the book misses important references to the history of massive slaughter and forced dispossession of lands that increased the number of people living in the countryside and founding slums in Colombian cities, both of which spawned liberal and

communist guerrillas in the middle of the 20th century. By not including a description of the root causes of this conflict, the book presents the guerrillas as the single, original cause of internal displacement, while official data indicate that right-wing paramilitaries (“autodefensas”) were, at that time, the main authors of this human rights tragedy, in collusion with the official armed forces, as in the case of Tierralta. This first wave of displacement between 1982 and 1993 that saw forty massacres affecting 267 victims, has been well documented (Pabón Soto 2021). Saying the opposite is true only for certain conservative sectors of the country that believe, as the book echoes, that “[a]t one point in Colombian history, it was possible to view the *autodefensas* as part of a solution to the guerrilla problem” (5). It is worth mentioning, in this context, that in towns on the Caribbean coast, like in Sucre, paramilitary groups wiped out Catholic Ecclesial-based communities, accusing them of being “communist” but allowed some Evangelical churches whose pastors were politically sympathetic with conservative governments, to operate (Lozano Garzón 2009).<sup>1</sup>

In sum, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in integrating faith and participatory approaches to relief, development, and advocacy, and who are particularly interested in engaging local churches in that task. It provides an outstanding case study for how to do so, replete with a detailed discussion of practical, theoretical, and theological challenges. Moreover, it intersperses moving and often difficult-to-read vignettes of individual stories of displacement (many of them of the co-researchers for the project) to keep the focus where it should be, which is on the internally displaced persons themselves.

## References

- Dimitriadis, Vasilios. 2019. “Gustavo Gutiérrez: Liberation Theology for a World of Social Justice and Just Peace.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 4 (3), 431–441.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2019.0033>
- Lozano Garzón, Liz Carolina. 2009. “Spiritual Evangelical War or Indigenous Witchcraft? Magic-religious Practices of Former Combatant Paramilitary Members in War Contexts in Córdoba (Colombia).” *Universitas Humanistica* 68 (July/December).  
[http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci\\_artext&pid=S0120-48072009000200006](http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_artext&pid=S0120-48072009000200006)
- Pabón Soto, Gabriela. 2021. “¿Para qué Nos Quitan la Tierra? El Ciclo de una Ruina Eterna. Estudio de Caso: Análisis del Desplazamiento Forzado y Despojo de Tierras en Tierralta (1997-2003).” Grade Thesis. Universidad Javeriana.

---

**Amanda Romero-Medina** is an independent human rights researcher, lecturer, and activist. She holds a PhD in Education from the Pedagogical University of Colombia (UPN) and a master’s degree in Social and Educational Development from CINDE-UPN. Her main areas of study include ethnicity, peacebuilding, environment, gender and business, and human rights.

Author email: [Amanda.Romero@esap.edu.co](mailto:Amanda.Romero@esap.edu.co)

---

---

<sup>1</sup> It is not exact to say, as this book does, that the Liberation Theology’s thesis was “that the poor would be saved through communism” (41). As the noted Brazilian Catholic bishop Dom Hélder Câmara said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.” This “why” turned him overnight from a “saint” to a “communist” (see Dimitriadis 2019, 431).