

Participatory capacity building in action in Colombia

by Josep Zapater

The south-western Colombian department of Nariño has developed an innovative, demand-led and participatory initiative for the local integration of IDPs. The long-term sustainability of such partnerships between local administrations and grassroots communities hinges on ability to influence national and international financial flows.

As a result of protracted internal conflict, Colombia is home to one of the world's largest IDP populations, estimated by the Colombian government to be 1.9 million¹ and by the UN and NGOs to be more than three million.² Nariño, a department on the Pacific Ocean bordering Ecuador, is host to at least 59,000 IDPs displaced by conflict. Most IDPs live in urban centres and suffer unacceptable levels of overcrowding and malnourishment.

Realising that return is unlikely to be a realistic option for a long time, the departmental and national governments, with UNHCR support, decided to develop a strategy for local integration of IDPs. The resulting initiative – Plan Integral Unico de Restablecimiento (PIUR)³ – aimed to assess needs and develop a structure for project design, fundraising and implementation, focusing on housing and income generation. IDP participation was to underpin the initiative from the start.

In 2002 the departmental government organised a series of roundtables to undertake participatory needs analysis with IDPs in ten municipalities. UNHCR was then asked to hire and train a technical team to develop potential projects based on the needs identified by IDPs. By 2004 more than 100 projects had been designed, with significant financial pledges by municipal and departmental authorities. However, despite lobbying of national and international authorities and donors, no additional funds were secured. This led the departmental government and UNHCR to create a more ambitious framework with

concrete strategies for project and beneficiary selection, IDP participation – and fundraising.

In October 2004, more than 100 representatives of local government, NGOs, international agencies and IDPs gathered in Pasto, the departmental capital, to discuss key questions relating to the initiative. These focused on PIUR's underlying principles, financial implementation, partner and beneficiary selection criteria, project implementation and coordination, beneficiary participation, follow-up, evaluation and sustainability. IDP participation at all levels of discussion and planning was ensured by the Mesa Departamental de Poblacion Desplazada de Nariño⁴ and its more than 40 affiliated associations. The Mesa Departamental, an umbrella IDP organisation, was formed in 2003 with support from UNHCR and the Colombian NGO Corporación Opción Legal.⁵

The results of the workshop were presented to the national government and the international community in Bogota in June 2005.⁶ The Colombian government immediately pledged \$700,000.

By the end of 2006, PIUR had attracted \$4.2 million for housing and income generation, 77% from Colombian public funding, 19% from the international community and 4% from the beneficiaries (mostly in the form of work and soft credits). To date, 1,025 IDP and 353 vulnerable local families have benefited from the initiative. PIUR is now a nationally recognised durable solutions programme

built on consensus and beneficiary participation with a permanent technical team and a strong network of allied institutions. UNHCR finances the technical team and the departmental government provides office space and institutional backing.

With its strong local flavour, demand-based character and participatory decision-making structure, PIUR does not conform to the usual durable solutions strategies preferred by the Colombian government and such donors as USAID or the EU. These typically include either well-defined sector-based programmes, with little scope for integration or flexibility, or multi-purpose funds with centrally designed financial and coordination rules which grant little decision-making power to IDPs or local coordination structures. It is interesting to contrast the significant interest shown by the Colombian state in funding this demand-based initiative with the lukewarm support offered by the international community.

Participation and empowerment

The PIUR has a number of internal weaknesses. It needs more long-term projects and in-depth feasibility studies, less delay between project design and implementation and better evaluation mechanisms. It remains, however, one of the most principled and successful IDP programmes in Colombia. Above all, it successfully showcases effective capacity building, participation and use of local knowledge.

The PIUR process in Nariño clearly demonstrated the IDPs' preference for local settlement rather than return and has thereby shaped durable solutions policies in the department. PIUR's participatory approach has also served to legitimate and empower IDP associations. Through building participatory projects and

raising significant resources PIUR has shown IDP communities that the hard and sometimes thankless work of community organisation can pay off. At the same time, IDP organisations have played a no less important legitimising role. PIUR's most convincing argument to prospective donors has been the fact that it is grounded in consultation and beneficiary participation, from needs identification to strategic design.

The relationship between PIUR and the IDP associations has not been without disagreements. PIUR's fiercest critics have been IDP leaders. Given that the programme does not have its own resources, frustratingly long delays sometimes occur between needs identification and project implementation. IDP leaders have on occasion complained that their role diminishes once beneficiaries have been identified and projects started. The PIUR team tried to overcome this in some municipalities by having projects assigned to particular IDP associations as beneficiaries. However, this introduced a prerequisite to be part of an association in order to benefit from a PIUR project. At the same time, IDPs started to desert those associations whose projects had poorer prospects of being financed and to join others seen as having better prospects. The approach was abandoned in favour of selecting beneficiaries on an individual or family basis and according to strict criteria of vulnerability, rights violated and ability to implement the project. New difficulties arose as some families saw the projects as more useful foci of social organisation than the existing IDP associations. At the same time, while PIUR has empowered IDPs in general, its impact on internal democratisation and participation in the IDP associations is very difficult to measure. All these matters are the object of lively discussion among the PIUR team and the IDP associations.

The numerous meetings at municipal and departmental level necessary to build consensus around PIUR programmes and methodologies, though occasionally seen as burdensome and bureaucratic, revitalised dormant coordination structures, helped build awareness among officials previously uninterested in IDP matters and enabled local institutions and NGOs to

start working together. The presence of a full-time team dedicated to raising national and international funds gave the local mayors and the departmental government the confidence to make important financial commitments – almost 20% of the total raised to date. Some mayors, who in previous years included a token \$8,000 for IDPs in their budgets, more than trebled their contributions. In Pasto, a generous land donation by the Catholic church and the financial commitment of the local government enabled a housing project for 203 vulnerable local and IDP families. The government of one of Colombia's poorest departments is now among the biggest contributors to IDP programmes.

Sustainability

Early hopes that the international community would finance 70% of PIUR's costs have been dashed. The most important financial partners have been the national urban and rural housing programmes, providing 38% of the funding. The most reliable partners – despite their limited financial resources – have been the local authorities who have unconditionally provided almost 20% of funds secured. The weakest responses have come from the international community – 18.5% – and from the leading national government institution for IDP issues and income generation (Acción Social) – 16.5%. This pattern indicates how highly centralised and sector-based policies may undermine demand-based and participatory efforts. Strengthening sectors should not be at the expense of more integrated programmes. International donors should be less wedded to inflexible regulations and financial cycles. PIUR clearly complies with international standards for durable solutions programmes, based on participation, rights-based programming, local leadership and financial commitment. International donors and central government need to be more responsive. Only a strong and flexible financial response may sustain IDP participation and motivate local authorities both to implement high-quality planning and programming and to accept IDP participation.

PIUR has not been integrated into the departmental multi-year

development plan and budgets. The PIUR team continues to be financed by UNHCR rather than being self-supporting. While the departmental government provides office space and logistics, none of the most relevant ministries – such as agriculture or planning – provides permanent staff resources. The October 2007 local elections may bring in a government with less commitment to provide institutional and financial support. Aside from UNHCR's ongoing involvement, hope now lies in the strong lobbying capacity of the IDP associations – underlining the linkage between beneficiary participation and sustainability of capacity-building initiatives – and in PIUR's high local and national visibility.

PIUR illustrates the tension between participatory, demand-driven and rights-based durable solutions and the inflexibility of current systems for policy design and financial disbursements. In relatively sophisticated state bureaucracies – such as Colombia – humanitarian policies will inevitably be based on established administrative structures and regulations. The success of initiatives geared towards building the planning capacity of local administrations and grassroots communities will depend greatly on their ability to tap into national and international funds. The relative success of PIUR demonstrates how local administrations with deep-rooted participatory traditions and grassroots associations can implement demand-based programmes when they strike an effective alliance. PIUR offers the donor community in Colombia food for thought about the best ways to maximise impact and promote sustainability of humanitarian policies.

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2. Colombia country report, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre www.internal-displacement.org
3. <http://despnar.idsn.gov.co/articulos-noticias/documento-piur.pdf>
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