

The journey towards social exclusion in Colombia

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In their new urban situation, the reality for displaced Colombians is of day-to-day problem solving.

There has been continuing forced displacement over many years in the south of the Department of Valle del Cauca in Colombia. Families fleeing conflict and violence between insurgents and government forces have moved into the municipality of Florida which has a population of approximately 55,000. Having lost the economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital accumulated in their home areas, they struggle to compensate for these losses and to preserve or improve on their well-being and living conditions.

Initial assistance is provided principally by friends or relatives at the reception sites. The new arrivals are offered housing and food and provided with information on work opportunities and forms of support offered by the state.

The displaced population forms a cohesive group on the basis of a shared ethnic and cultural profile. The ways of life of displaced people today are determined by specific conditions of solidarity and by their identity as displaced people, elements that can be even stronger than the factor of their geographical region of origin. Through their need and desire to belong to a supportive association, they become a defined group – and it is this that enables them to approach, obtain and channel the state aid to which they are entitled by law. This constitutes a fundamental aid strategy and, as an officially designated ‘vulnerable group’ eligible for state benefits, the new urban inhabitants are thus potentially in a situation of relative advantage over the structural poor of the municipality.

Families from rural areas cannot continue their traditional agricultural activities in the urban area; their economic capital diminishes and, unable to enter the labour market in the municipal

capital, they become marginalised. They turn to informal labour activities known as *‘rebusque’* – street selling of goods and services, construction work, portering, domestic service and, for female heads of household, cleaning and food preparation. These activities form the mainstay of survival and provide minimal levels of economic and cultural capital.

Some displaced male heads of households who live in the outlying areas of Florida earn a living by cutting and processing sugar cane. However, ironically, this work has been rendered more precarious and exploitative under Colombian labour legislation. While it would be reasonable to suppose that formal labour activities would offer the best benefits, in fact the opposite is often true. Tales told by sugarcane cutters suggest that modern forms of flexible labour, regulation and improved working conditions affect them negatively. They believe these elements increase conflict and insecurity, and lengthen the working day, leading to the weakening of family links, to health problems and to reductions in the quality of life of the whole family. They join the ranks of the needy in the municipality and their situation is frequently even worse than that of those who are unemployed or working in the informal sector.

The discrimination suffered by displaced people in urban settings is also reflected in the fact that it is often impossible for them to access the goods and services to which they are legally entitled. In many cases the authorities refuse to consider them as displaced persons, and their different social codes and loss of capital make their impoverishment plain to see, an impoverishment that signifies both the loss of a past considered by them to have been much better and an uncertain future.



Colombian IDPs arriving in the city.

The municipality is short of resources to meet priority needs such as health, employment, housing and education, and the security of the whole settlement has been jeopardised to the point of unsustainability. Criminal gangs have begun to appear and the security forces claim that most of the gang members are displaced people.

Displaced people have many reasons to resist recognising the reality of their current poverty in the city. On the one hand, they have access to certain resources such as information on state assistance, social relationships and personal contacts that provide access to the labour market; on the other hand, they are nostalgic for their former lives when they had significant economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital.

It is essential that programmes be put in place to meet existing needs and, specifically, to provide employment. Only then will these displaced people be able to access the economic resources they need to acquire goods and services and to activate the economy of the region.

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