

Networks and ‘the right to the city’ in Medellín, Colombia

Jonathan Alejandro Murcia and James Gilberto Granada Vahos

Collective action by displaced people in Medellín has been both diverse and strategic.

In the past ten years, the city of Medellín in Colombia has received more than 300,000 people displaced by violence. When other options other than leaving fail, the process of settling elsewhere is itself primarily a process of collective action in the city. The presence of many houses and families creates community but requires effort to acquire basic collective services and facilities. This has led in Medellín to social and communal forms of collective action.

These activities are an expression of ‘the right to the city’¹ in the places where people have ended up. Collective settlements turn into districts within neighbourhoods that already exist and that are already recognised as administrative entities in the municipality. Some of these new sectors go on to be accepted into the official list of districts, while others face opposition and are eventually eradicated. The struggle for official recognition becomes part of the collective memory of the displaced people and the name they gave to the settlement becomes the name of the official district – sometimes the name of their place of origin, sometimes a new name, reflecting a new start for the community.

In the process of taking on Medellín as their new home, the displaced population has found ways of forming organisational structures or participating in existing communal organisations. Meeting their needs provides a common purpose, including in their dealings with the state, as they set up organisations that focus on claiming, protecting or demanding guarantees of their rights in displacement.

Their collective action has also led to their participation in political life and an impact on aspects of the administration of the city. There may be opportunities to do this in a variety of circumstances: while resisting eviction orders; while making demands by occupying churches or public buildings, or making formal petitions, and so on; while

holding marches or vigils in protest or commemoration; and making connections with other non-governmental organisations, trade unions or farmers’ associations. In 2005 an Alliance was formed among governmental and non-governmental organisations – including those formed by displaced people – that eventually led to the setting up of a roundtable, a committee and a technical unit to deal with displaced ‘victims’ in Medellín.

By all these means the displaced population developed relationships with a large number of social and institutional actors. Among these were ties to the University of Antioquia which gave them access to medical and psychological assistance, and political and legal advice. Students and teachers from various undergraduate colleges conducted work accompanying vulnerable communities and victims. The Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health, for example, worked with the communities to undertake nutritional studies of the population, while community interactions with the students and teachers of Political Science and Law led to the filing of a class legal action requiring the state to provide potable water to the community of Vereda Granizal in Bello Municipality and to the construction and management of a Community Development Plan for the people there, most of whom are displaced.

Jonathan Alejandro Murcia

Jonathan.murcia@udea.edu.co

Researcher, Institute of Political Studies,
University of Antioquia

James Gilberto Granada Vahos

James.granada@udea.edu.co

Lecturer and researcher, Institute of Political
Studies, University of Antioquia

www.udea.edu.co/

1. A term coined by Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la ville*.