



Reinventing communities: the resettlement of Guatemalan refugees

During the Guatemalan civil war, an estimated 150,000 people fled Guatemala to seek refuge in neighbouring countries (mainly Mexico) and one million became internally displaced.

by Julie de Rivero

The conflict also led to the death and disappearance of approximately 200,000 people between 1960 and 1996. It is estimated that 80% of these victims were of Mayan origin and that 440 Mayan villages were destroyed. The Guatemalan UN-sponsored truth commission concluded that the elimination of these populations constituted acts of genocide for which the state should be accountable. The militarisation of society was another grave consequence of the war. A total of 900,000 men and boys were forcibly enrolled in civil defence patrols (Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil), a paramilitary structure used by the army to control insurgency by permeating all spheres of communal, family and individual life. 'Model villages' and so-called development poles were created as a further form of control at the communal and local level, with military designated authorities. The Guatemalan civil war halted the development of civilian authority and institutionality, putting the armed

forces at the forefront of the state and society.

When formal negotiations for peace were initiated in 1990, the armed forces of Guatemala had practically won the military battle against the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, URNG). However, the end of the Cold War, the Central American peace process and the beginning of a process of democratisation in Guatemala prompted them to accede to the negotiation of a set of accords to put an end to armed confrontation. The accords provided for the demilitarisation of society (including the demobilisation of the URNG), the strengthening of civilian power and authority, democratisation and the development of a nation-state inclusive and respectful of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the accords provided for measures to redress social and economic inequity and promoted increased participation of the

population in the determination of development policies. The accords also sought the immediate cessation of fundamental human rights violations, the creation of a truth commission and the return and reintegration of uprooted populations.

The UN Verification Mission was set up to monitor the implementation of all the provisions of the accords. In fact, the Guatemalan experience is considered by many to be one of the most successful peace processes which the UN has monitored, as the actual armed conflict and massive violations of fundamental human rights were quickly put to an end when the peace process began. However, this should not overshadow the complexities of the transition to peace. It is within a very fragile process of democratisation, demilitarisation, economic and social reconstruction that most of the programmes of return and reintegration took place.

Resettlement and the power of the organisational experience

There were two distinct resettlement processes in Guatemala. The first wave of repatriations was sponsored by the Guatemalan government in 1986 and monitored by the army. Refugee families and individuals were offered amnesty in exchange for their return and were relocated to 'development poles', model villages and communities of origin. Known as repatriados (repatriates), these populations were influenced by military reintegration programmes and were forced to serve the paramilitary structures of the state in the framework of the military's counter-insurgency doctrine.

Dramatically different to the 1986 experience, the second wave of repatriations was the product of a negotiated settlement between the Guatemalan government and a representative body of the organised refugee populations in Mexico, known as the Permanent Commissions. It provided for the collective return of uprooted populations on the terms defined by the refugees and agreed upon with the government. These included their return in conditions of safety and the implementation of an integral reintegration programme, including access to land and credit. The first collective return took place in 1993, founding the Community of Victoria 20 de Enero in the

municipality of Ixcán-Quiché. The so-called retornados or returnee communities were accompanied by UNHCR, governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Furthermore, many spontaneous non-assisted individual or family repatriations occurred throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which are likely to be

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unaccounted for in official government or UN statistics. Likewise, thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) remained anonymous due to their fear of persecution; whether they returned to their places of origin remains unknown. However, one distinct group of IDPs, known as the Comunidades de Población en Resistencia (Communities of Populations in Resistance: CPRs), which organised themselves collectively while in hiding, also negotiated their collective resettlement.

While the Accord for the Resettlement of Uprooted Populations did not provide for all the rights negotiated under the Permanent Commissions' accord with the Guatemalan government, particularly with regards to land and credit facilities, it did

benefit from the verification of the UN Verification Mission and included all resettled populations as potential beneficiaries. The Guatemalan experience proved that those who organised themselves achieved better levels of assistance from the government, NGOs and international agencies than those who remained dispersed and/or unaware of the benefits of the accords.

A clear example is that of the internally displaced CPRs who obtained land for resettlement and productive educational and economic reintegration programmes, as well as assistance for the documentation of their population, in contrast to the thousands of IDPs around the country who did not receive any assistance, on account of their anonymity. This was also true of those who negotiated their collective return versus those who returned before this framework existed, at an individual or family level or who repatriated in 1986.

Furthermore, organised returnees and IDPs, who had developed high levels of political awareness through organisation, also sought to participate proactively in local and municipal politics. The fact that they benefited from documentation programmes, which included women, quickly converted them into large numbers of potential voters and hence a population to reckon with at the local level. In municipalities with large numbers of returnee and CPR communities, these groups were able to define the results of local elections. In fact, a prominent leader of one of the CPRs was elected mayor in the last general elections.

Returnee and CPR communities also engaged in promoting the implementation of the peace accords by becoming active participants in educational, health and productive integration programmes, thanks to the experience they had acquired through exile. Their proactive approach towards the accords has been a key to their development and to the effective enjoyment of their rights.

Guatemalan returnees at Santa María Tzejá, near Cantabell



The empowerment of women through their organisation in exile also affected the role of women and their place in society once resettled. In many communities, however, there has been resistance to the new role that women would like to play. It would seem that women's organisations were accepted only while they served the common objective of return. Once resettled, women's organisations began to transform themselves, looking to strengthen the role of women in the community as well as to promote women's participation in decision making and in economic activities outside the home. In several extreme cases, the communal authorities opted to dissolve the organisations in which women participated because they did not belong to the organisational structure of the community and were not subject to communal (male) authority. In many cases, women have been forced to stand down from their activities and the problem of redefining their role in many returnee communities remains unresolved.

Reconciling differences

While organisation has been an important source of development for resettled populations, it also generated levels of assistance which accentuated already existing differences between groups.

In most cases, the areas resettled by the returnee communities had previously undergone a process of militarisation, aimed at destroying popular organisation and initiative. Militarisation had permeated culture and customs, putting military authority at the centre stage. Polarisation around returnee communities thus occurred because of an inherent mistrust felt towards them, accentuated when returnees received assistance, loans and reintegration programmes while the other communities did not.

Polarisation even created internal divisions in returnee communities. Those

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with large numbers of demobilised guerrilla members were increasingly affected by these tensions, particularly when other members of the community began to seek or accept the support of the military authority in the area. In many cases, the logic of confrontation inherited from the war was used to redefine power relations in times of peace. The conversion of the former guerrilla into a political party was perceived by many forces as a threat to stability and control in the area.

Many returnees feared that, by acquiring political power, URNG members would again expose them to military threat.

Rumours of probable *coups d'état* and of the existence of new armed insurgencies further strengthened these fears.

Individuals' own expectations and interpretations of the past also played a role in these dynamics. Many related their exile to military aggression while others blamed the guerrilla for exposing them and then abandoning them when military forces retaliated. Many returnees also began to withdraw their support for those leaders who had negotiated their return, when their expectations of what life would be like in Guatemala were not met.

Returnees in Guatemala were faced with the task of reinventing their communities in a context of polarisation. This task often involved a reinterpretation of communal, family or personal history and often put the organisational structure created to achieve their return under scrutiny. The natural process of readjustment of these communities was further influenced by outside perceptions and interests. However, returnees remained committed to their communities and in some cases more moderate leaderships progressively emerged.

Challenges for the future

Perhaps one of the biggest difficulties that resettled people have confronted on their return is their economic and productive reintegration into society. Most communities are still dependent on subsistence farming and outside aid to survive. Their progress has been limited by the scarcity of alternative sources of employment in the regions of resettlement. These regions tend to be characterised by their inaccessibility and isolation, in geographic, commercial and political terms. Most communities lack access to commercial routes and centres, basic infrastructure and adequate state services (justice, security, health and education).

Resettled communities today face the structural inequities which have characterised Guatemala historically and which the Peace Accords seek to redress. There is hope that their proactive nature and involvement in local politics and decision-making mechanisms will further their quest for development at least at the



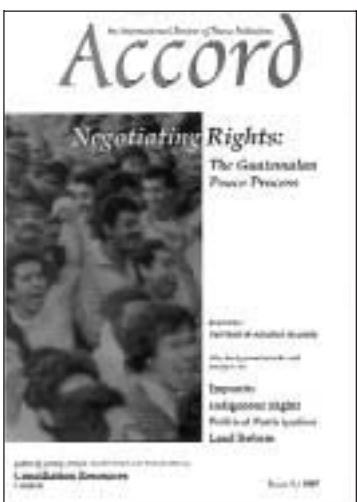
regional level. However, the burden of development lies on the state, which needs to recognise that population growth and the growing scarcity of productive agricultural land and alternative income-generating activities will continue to diminish this population's ability to survive and will increase the possibility of social conflict. The state must also officially recognise and repair the moral and material damage caused to the population during the war.

The resettled communities of Guatemala have already gone a long way in the process of reintegration, beginning to confront and reconcile their differences while constructing the basis for future social and economic development. Beyond these achievements, their effective integration as citizens of an inclusive nation-state is still to be achieved. This is part of a wider process of transformation which the country as a whole should undergo if it is to heal the social, economic, ethnic and cultural divide which was at the heart of the conflict.

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The opinions expressed here are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the UN.

The complete report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (as it is officially known) can be found at: <http://hrdata.aas.org/ceh>. There is also a summarised version which includes the conclusions and recommendations of the Commission.



See page 46 for details of this and other Accord reports.