

Urban displacement and migration in Colombia

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In order to improve urban policies and planning for IDPs, migrants and local communities, it is important to understand forced displacement to urban areas in Colombia in the context of rural-urban migration.

According to existing data, 93% of the displaced population in Colombia have been displaced to urban areas. At the same time, over the last decade the country has experienced an intense process of rural-urban migration.

Bogotá has a population of around seven million people, including both the largest immigrant and IDP populations in the country, hosting 270,000 internally displaced people. These two phenomena are different

rights as forcibly displaced and therefore do not seek registration.

The registration system, which is by law mandated to admit IDPs into the registry with only an oral account of the causes and circumstances of displacement, is hard pressed to differentiate those who truly are IDPs from those who are economic migrants. So, in practice, IDP registration ends up resembling the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process conducted for refugees.

However, it is evident that the IDP registration process lacks the procedural protections included in RSD and is not conceived as a process for screening, which in practice it is. It is allegedly conducted with a high level of subjectivity and arbitrariness, resulting in the exclusion of people deserving registration.

Another implication of the heavy mixed flow, which is present in most fast-growing cities

hosting IDPs in developing countries around the world, is the emergence of informal settlements and informal land markets around Bogotá. Some localities around the city have grown into full-blown settlements which have eventually annexed themselves to the city as a result of the gradual process of conurbation.

It is precisely in these settlements around Bogotá that IDPs settle. After staying with family or friends for a short period of time, IDPs look to meet their accommodation needs by acquiring or renting shelter. Access to the formal land and property market requires a significantly higher purchasing power than is

generally available to IDPs, and access to housing subsidies requires a financial and credit history which many IDPs do not have. As a result, most IDPs by necessity gravitate towards the informal settlements. Sometimes, these processes have resulted in mass evictions, while at other times the municipality has legalised the settlement and provided basic sewage and electricity.

Displacement to large urban centres such as Bogotá also means that it takes IDPs a very long time to access humanitarian aid due to them by right. A survey showed that in Bogotá, with long procedures and red tape being the norm, it can take up to two years between displacement and receipt of the first humanitarian aid in the city. This exhausts the patience of IDPs, many of whom therefore prefer informal channels of support.

Development and humanitarian policy

National-level data reveal that 98.6% of the displaced population live below the poverty line while 82.6% are officially classified as living in extreme poverty, rates that contrast sharply with the 29.1% and 8.7%, respectively for the non-IDP population. The income of IDPs in Bogotá is on average 27% lower than the income of the poor resident population.

Development support is indispensable in the long run in cities such as Bogotá, where the bulk of IDPs appear to have the same aspiration as migrants, that is, to remain in the city permanently. The fact that displacement to Bogotá happens on a steady and continuing basis makes it necessary simultaneously to furnish humanitarian assistance for new arrivals and long-term support for the majority who remain beyond the three-month humanitarian assistance phase. If settlement in the city of displacement is to be a durable solution, it requires realisation of the entire spectrum of rights of



Night view of Ciudad Bolívar, in southwestern Bogotá.

<http://ceis.unia20.com/2009/10/18/ciudad-bolivar/>

expressions of the same root cause: rural-urban migration which has historically been driven by unequal access to land and which has led to tension between land-owners and peasants and eventually to the armed conflict and violence that continue to cause forced displacement. To this day it is difficult to differentiate economic reasons for migration from those linked directly to conflict, violence and human rights violations. This complicates the IDP registration process and partly explains the fact that only about half the IDPs in Bogotá are registered. Because of the coexistence of migration and displacement, many IDPs are not aware that they have

IDPs, without discrimination, at least up to the level enjoyed by similarly situated non-displaced members of the population.¹

Internal displacement is understood by most city authorities in Colombia as a national-level phenomenon with local implications that must be taken care of by the national government.² As a result, municipalities do not systematically incorporate displacement into their local or municipal development plans (with some exceptions) and do not see it as their responsibility to appropriate resources to respond to the phenomenon, particularly when it comes to long-term development.

Recent legislative changes aimed at solving this problem have determined that responsibilities should be shared between national and local government. Nevertheless, the degree of shared responsibility is not clear and the proportion of costs that should be covered by the central government, particularly for long-term socio-economic support, is not set.

Bogotá has taken some steps to incorporate special programmes for IDP families leaving the three-month emergency support network. One such project includes a dedicated social protection programme for IDP families (called 'Bogotá, a positive city for a better life'³) within Bogotá's development plan. Nevertheless, such projects remain mostly ad hoc and their impact has not been evaluated. In any case, much more needs to be done to ensure that city planning and development policies encompass social protection for IDPs settling in the city, and to evaluate the impact of existing programmes.

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1. Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 'When Displacement Ends: A Framework for Durable Solutions', 2007, p11. <http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2007/09/displacementends.aspx>

2. See also Ferris article p39.

3. 'Bogotá positiva para vivir mejor'