

Collaboration with criminal organisations in Colombia: an obstacle to economic recovery

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Those seeking to support economic development for internally displaced people in Colombia need to understand how and why many IDPs collaborate with armed groups and criminal organisations.

To date, the Colombian government has registered over 7,300,000 victims of forced displacement as a result of the nation's many years of conflict.¹ Given that forced displacement is known to result in high levels of extreme poverty (affecting 85% of those displaced from rural to urban environments²), economic development is a priority. Among the many factors which create challenges for the economic recovery of victims of the Colombian conflict, one that is often not sufficiently taken into consideration is the incidence of collaboration by internally displaced persons (IDPs) with armed groups and criminal organisations.

These armed groups – guerrilla organisations, paramilitary groups, drug cartels, and local mafia and gangs – have a dramatic impact on the local economy of displaced communities. Furthermore, collaboration with armed groups can significantly undermine third-party efforts to foster economic development through the creation of new income-generating activities and the pursuit of formal employment. It is therefore vital that those involved in economic development with Colombian IDPs appreciate how and especially why IDPs collaborate with armed groups and criminal organisations.

Numerous obstacles impede the study of this phenomenon, in particular the risk of reprisals facing both the researcher and the research population. Additionally, displaced people settle in highly diverse and sometimes remote locations, and so research must be similarly wide-ranging. In undertaking this research, the author interviewed 15 community leaders and NGO workers in three major cities (Medellín, Bogotá and Cartagena), two municipalities (Tierralta and Puerto Libertador, in

Córdoba) and two small rural communities (in the regions of Córdoba and Cauca).

Forms of collaboration

Given their isolation and economic vulnerability, and the lack of government and police presence, IDP settlements are seen as conducive to organised crime. IDPs are known to collaborate with criminal groups both directly and indirectly; some will engage directly in the illegal activities of the criminal groups, most prominently drug trafficking and the extortion of protection money (called *vacunas*, 'vaccinations'), while others will provide the groups with support, for example, providing supplies or transporting gasoline to those cultivating illicit crops.

Additionally, armed groups in certain communities will control the supply of water and the sale of basic foodstuffs such as eggs and *arepas* (a Colombian staple, made from maize dough). They also control transportation in and out of the community. Under such conditions, local vendors, drivers and anyone who needs water are all drawn into various degrees of complicity with or submission to the criminal groups.

Reasons for collaboration

It is essential to understand **why** IDPs collaborate. Without such understanding, economic development efforts can founder, and agencies may put themselves and those they seek to help in danger, should their activities be perceived to threaten illegal actors. The reasons that IDPs are complicit with or directly participate in the activities of armed groups are far more complex than many appreciate.

One reason given is the perceived lack of economic opportunities. Interviewees



UNHCR/Rubén Salgado Escudero

Displaced community in Colombia.

report that, at least for some IDPs, having an alternative way to support one's family would dissuade them from engaging in criminal productive activities. Interviewees also highlight the inducement of 'easy money'. María Esperanza³ (a social worker with a community development faith-based organisation in Bogotá) summarises the dynamics as follows:

"Marginalised, excluded, segregated communities are an excellent environment for hiding organised crime. The trafficking and the fact that these communities have such needs, especially economic ones, and the culture of easy money make it very likely that they [the IDPs] will resort to illicit businesses."

The culture of 'easy money' is no doubt the result of a combination of factors, chief among which are probably the influence of drug cartels and the dependency dynamics created by government and non-governmental aid.⁴ But when one combines that culture with the realities of low wages or the low profit margins of much agricultural production, one begins to see why collusion with a criminal organisation becomes attractive. As Jorge Miguel (a pastor and

the leader of a community development organisation which works with IDPs) puts it:

"The justification is that ... [since] 2 kg of coca is worth around 4,600,000 pesos, then I am going to dedicate myself to cultivating coca and not corn. They justify it because the price of corn often goes through the floor, and the farmers ... almost always lose."

IDPs whose involvement is limited to supporting roles, such as transportation, may find it easier to justify their collaboration since they are not producing or selling narcotics directly.

Fear is unsurprisingly one of the most frequently cited reasons why IDPs go along with or support the work of criminal organisations in their communities. This fear is rooted not only in the danger that the armed groups represent but also in a feeling that IDPs have been abandoned by the government and the police. In the words of Susanna, a social worker leading a development project with IDPs outside of Medellín:

"Many are afraid... They feel like ... the best thing that they can do is keep quiet. But there are others to whom this seems like the easiest life, especially

given the abandonment by the State... they don't have anyone to protect them, they don't have anyone to hear them, or if someone hears them, they will be denounced [to the criminal groups]."

The perception of having been abandoned by the State is compounded by the fact that the local neighbourhood assemblies often push people to comply with extortion requests by the criminal groups, even sometimes directly collecting for them.

But fear and poverty are not the only factors. To a certain degree, criminal groups maintain order in many of these marginalised communities, functioning – in the absence of police and government representatives – as local government and meting out punishment for violations of community norms. Susanna explains:

"People have grown accustomed to [the criminal group's] presence there and have legitimated it in a certain way, because, when something happens to them, they go and seek out [the group members], so that they can solve things, so they can play the role of the judges."

Because local mafia and criminal groups fill the governance void, cooperation with them can be seen by IDPs as more legitimate than an outsider might appreciate.

Finally, IDPs may choose to collaborate with or even join an opposing criminal group as a reaction against the violence they suffered at the hands of a different armed group. In this way, they feel a greater sense of security and are able to extract a sort of vengeance. Angélica Pinilla Mususú elaborates:

"If the paramilitaries expelled me, I become an enemy of the paramilitaries and close to the guerrillas. [Or] if the guerrillas were the ones who expelled me, and I am a displaced person and a victim, I end up being part of the paramilitary groups, in pursuit of a justice that the State has not been able to give, in pursuit of a reparation that the State has not been able to provide."

Implications for development work

All of this underscores the reality that agencies focusing on the economic development of IDPs in Colombia need to adopt an alliance mentality, coordinating their efforts with complementary organisations. As

economic motivations are only a small part of why IDPs end up working with criminal entities, efforts to direct IDPs away from criminal groups need to take account of other factors; this is likely to be beyond the scope of a typical economic development organisation and therefore will require cooperation with government agencies, non-governmental organisations and faith-based organisations.

Since some of the factors discussed relate to the absence of the State and the weakness of local community leadership, attention to economic development should also go hand-in-hand with a more robust governmental and police presence in the communities, along with initiatives to help raise the communities' civic and political self-awareness. Similarly, insofar as some factors relate to ethical and psychological issues, they can be best addressed in cooperation with local religious communities and faith-based organisations, as well as with NGOs that provide psychological care.

While such cooperation would undoubtedly be complex, an appreciation of the non-economic factors that stimulate cooperation with criminal groups and impede legitimate economic development is vital when working to foster the economic recovery of IDPs.

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1. Registro Único de Víctimas (2018) Informe General <http://bit.ly/ColombiaRUV>

2. Carrillo A C (2009) 'Internal displacement in Colombia: humanitarian, economic and social consequences in urban settings and current challenges,' *International Review of the Red Cross* 91, no 875 www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-875-carrillo.pdf

3. All names have been changed.

4. See Thoumi F E (1999) 'Relación entre corrupción y narcotráfico: un análisis general y algunas referencias a Colombia', *Revista de economía de la Universidad del Rosario* 2, no 1: 24, 28 <http://bit.ly/Thoumi-corrupcion-narcotrafico-1999>

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