

Triggers of internal displacement in Guatemala

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More than 20 years since the end of the civil war, Guatemala is once again experiencing an upsurge in internal displacement. The causes are multiple, and demand attention.

The signing of peace agreements in 1996 ended 36 years of civil war between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit.¹ An estimated 200,000 people were killed during the war, while about one million people were internally displaced or fled the country. More than 20 years have passed since the end of the war but today this Central American country is again experiencing high levels of homicide and generalised violence, with significant levels of new displacement.²

At the time of negotiating and approving the Peace Accords, including the Agreement for the Resettlement of Uprooted Populations by Armed Conflict³, the government introduced economic structural adjustment measures. Although some progress has been made, there has been little impact on economic inequalities. For example, there has been no comprehensive fiscal reform, so the State has few resources to invest in education, health, social protection, housing and job creation. The indigenous population continues to be denied their rights

and access to the justice system. And in terms of compensation, lack of state resources means that few families who were victims of war have received comprehensive compensation.

All this, combined with the uneven implementation of the peace agreement's provisions, has led to a deepening of inequality and poverty in the country and to greater State fragility, providing fertile ground for armed groups, criminal gangs, organised crime and drug trafficking. Guatemala currently has high rates of crime, creating fear and uncertainty in the general population.

Research undertaken in 2016 identified a wide range of factors driving internal displacement in Guatemala: violence, extortion and threats; organised crime and narco trafficking; the expansion of large-scale business activities (such as the cultivation of sugarcane and oil palm, cattle raising, mining and hydroelectricity production); and natural and climate-related events. Added to these are other risk factors that trigger forced migration, such as the deterioration

and exacerbation of social inequality in access to health, education, housing, livelihoods and land (with the most affected being those living in rural and marginalised areas), and the predominance of the patriarchal system.

The expansion of large-scale business has reduced areas for food crops, which has led to the displacement of families and sometimes entire communities in the northwest of the country. This situation has in turn placed these people at risk of disease and malnutrition, with little or no access to livelihoods. Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by violence, intimidation and land grabbing by big business, and by the environmental damage done to the land, particularly to water sources by contamination, overuse and diversion of rivers.

Such businesses benefit from a weak State, from corruption and inefficiency, but also from the close ties that some companies have with mafias and State institutions. This situation has left communities unprotected. Some resist (such as those who protest against mining and hydroelectric projects), while others choose to sell up and look for somewhere else to live – often leaving for their own survival.

Guatemala's geography and location make it vulnerable to climatic and natural events (storms, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes) that have led to forced displacement. This situation is aggravated by the lack of land use planning, deforestation, poor oversight of housing, housing shortages and poor prevention and preparedness measures. The people most affected are those already living in poverty. When such events occur, affected populations receive emergency care but no longer-term assistance.

From indifference to investment?

In sum, there are many reasons that promote internal forced displacement in Guatemala, yet there is little State recognition of the underlying problems. Those displaced by violence live in constant fear of being found by the perpetrators of violence, and consequently mistrust other people and public officials. This scenario makes it extremely difficult to secure data about displacement, while the undercurrent of fear discourages people from lodging complaints, which in turn hinders

the investigation and punishment of criminal acts and fails to stop them being repeated.

The government needs to demonstrate its willingness to address the structural aspects that are currently causing displacement. It urgently needs to undertake a system-wide evaluation (with the participation of civil society) of public policies and of prevention and care programmes targeting displaced people; there needs to be greater investment in improving the living conditions of the poorest and most excluded populations – those located in rural areas and precarious urban settlements – with specific approaches for children and adolescents, women and indigenous peoples. A national development plan is needed, one that benefits the more vulnerable populations, seeking to eradicate poverty and malnutrition, ensure access to the school system and employment, and promote the sustainable management of the land. This does not require starting from scratch since there already exist initiatives that can be revisited.⁴

The State also needs to develop procedures to regulate expansionist and extractive business activities, and in doing so should focus on questions of legality, social conflict, environmental impacts, repercussions on food production, the role of public officials and their relationship with business, and the actions of local authorities that violate communities' right to be consulted. Above all, the government should analyse whether these business activities are appropriate for the country in social, environmental and economic terms, both in the short and the long term.

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1. Conciliation Resources (1997) *Negotiating rights: The Guatemala peace process* www.c-r.org/accord/guatemala

2. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reported 6,200 new cases of internal displacement in 2016: www.internal-displacement.org/countries/guatemala

3. www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Guatemala_ResettlementAgreement.pdf

4. For example, the Peace Agreements, the 'Plan para Activar y Adecuar la Política Nacional de Desarrollo Rural Integral' and 'Mejoremos Guate'.