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Resilience spaces: rethinking protection

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Collaborative approaches to building capacities of urban IDPs and host communities are emerging as a more effective way of confronting the root causes of protracted and secondary displacement in informal settlements in Colombia.

In Colombia, internal displacement caused by armed conflict or generalised violence is often followed by further displacement towards cities where families seek assistance, protection and economic opportunities. An estimated 87% of these internally displaced people (IDPs) come from rural areas, and they seek shelter in the only places that they can access – informal settlements.¹

“I was displaced by paramilitaries from Llanos Orientales to Chocó in 2005. Three years later we fled to the urban areas of Buenaventura and then again in 2012, due to the generalised violence, to Bogotá. In 2014 we started to build our house on this hill because of the cost of living in the city.” (Yomaira, who lives with her husband and three children in Altos de la Florida, Colombia)

Altos de la Florida is a neighbourhood in Soacha, a municipality of approximately one million people, the largest of the cities in the vicinity of Bogotá. Forty-eight per cent of the municipality is considered ‘illegal’ by the local authorities. By July 2018, Soacha was hosting around 50,000 IDPs. The number of displaced people has also been swelled by at least 12,300 Venezuelans who have fled the crisis in their home country. Altos de la Florida has a low quality of housing, services and infrastructure, with some 73% of households – 1,011 families, around 3,657 people – living in conditions of structural poverty.

Informality: a root cause of urban displacement

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and UNDP have identified Altos de la Florida as a vulnerable community due to the ‘informal’ nature of the neighbourhood. Households lack security of tenure, with no official proof of home ownership (and indeed the neighbourhood has faced eviction attempts). The lack of basic services and infrastructure



Altos de la Florida, September 2018.

in Altos de la Florida increases people’s vulnerability. Few have access to mains drinking water, around 300 children lack access to a kindergarten, and there are no primary health centres. The informal nature of these urban settings limits what can be done to reduce vulnerabilities, yet the city’s planners refuse to legalise the settlement by approving those homes that have already been built and by incorporating the neighbourhood into their urban planning.

Informality combined with the settlement’s physical location and the absence of local authority presence make it a target for non-state armed actors. Homicide rates are high, and violence is a significant challenge. The lack of political will, the

structural vulnerabilities of communities in these informal urban areas and high levels of insecurity lead to new urban displacements, both intra-urban and inter-urban. Urban IDPs are forced to flee the informal settlement due to urban violence only to arrive in another informal settlement with similar protection risks. Informal settlements are thus at the same time places from which people flee and places in which displaced people seek refuge. In socially and spatially segregated Altos de la Florida, IDPs represent 30–40% of the population.

International aid: undermining resilience

In recent years, humanitarian, development and peace actors have increased their interest in responding in urban contexts. However, their lack of experience in responding to challenges arising in urban settings continues to undermine humanitarian and development interventions, and this is what our research in Altos de la Florida investigated.²

In the settlement, a protracted emergency response since 2001 has caused over-dependency on external aid. Emergency assistance is essential, particularly for newly arrived families, but protracted provision of aid replaces community participation and increases the gap between humanitarian action and development. Social cohesion is undermined, and the limited consultation and lack of coordination involved reduce the effectiveness of any intervention. Previous project evaluations found that “international cooperation is insufficient and requires the integral intervention of the State”.³ Far greater collaboration between the humanitarian sector and local authorities is necessary if the causes of lack of integration and ensuing secondary displacement are to be addressed; this requires a strong political will, both locally and nationally.

Resilience spaces: a protection approach

In informal urban settlements, humanitarian, development and peace actors have to work within the limitations of a weakened and less cohesive social environment, exacerbated by violence. This promotes short-term responses and siloed approaches. Poorly integrated

responses have limited capacity to address complex urban crises. Interventions must be collaborative and integrated, and should aim to reduce the longer-term vulnerabilities of both IDPs and host communities.

Beyond survival, humanitarian aid should be committed to supporting people to live in dignity. ‘Resilience spaces’ were developed as a complementary approach to protection, combining assistance and recovery not only by addressing urgent needs but also by strengthening local capacities. The framework combines a top-down protection approach with a bottom-up capacity-building approach through three areas of intervention: creating education, economic and labour opportunities; strengthening social cohesion; and supporting leadership capacities. Such an approach has been introduced through various projects in Altos de la Florida, resulting in the creation of two grassroots ‘resilience spaces’ in the informal settlement: *Comité de Impulso*, a fortnightly meeting between community leaders, residents, IDP associations and humanitarian workers; and *Florida Juvenil*, a youth community organisation created by the neighbourhood’s breakdance, theatre and football groups.

The *Comité de Impulso* works to build synergies among organisations, the community, the authorities and the public sector in order to make humanitarian response more sustainable. With local leaders convening the committee and through the community being empowered to deal with neighbourhood issues, it is itself a resilience-building process. *Florida Juvenil* – whose approach is that protection comes through empowerment – emerged from a UNICEF initiative and continues to be supported by UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), *Kairós* and the Jesuit Refugee Service. *Florida Juvenil*’s leaders are young people from the neighbourhood who started as students with the breakdance group (called 180 Crew because of the number of young people involved).⁴

Resilience has emerged as one of the strongest responses to the humanitarian and development divide and the call for a ‘New Way of Working’ to bridge this

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www.fmreview.org/return

divide. In Altos de la Florida, the joint work of humanitarian and development actors, in collaboration with national and local counterparts, aims to reduce risk and vulnerability in the short to medium term (three to five years). The focus here is on three criteria which are increasingly recognised as essential in urban responses to displacement: complementarity, connectivity and sustainability.

In Altos de la Florida, international actors have been working to strengthen rather than replace local and national systems. They have sought to collaborate with local and national aid providers, and include local authorities and municipalities in planning and programming; they work to empower leaders of both local and national NGOs and community-based organisations by developing their leadership, management and coordination capacity, and by facilitating them to use social networking tools to advocate with local authorities. Sustainability and resilience depend on this ability to

collaborate and on the strengthening of local and national capacities. The approach taken in Altos de la Florida is based on the construction of resilience as an instrument of protection. This protection, in turn, represents a key factor in addressing the root causes of urban displacement.

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1. CNMH (2010) *Una nación desplazada. Informe nacional del desplazamiento forzado en Colombia*, p38 bit.ly/29uyNzv
2. This article is based on a research project implemented 2015–18 in Altos de la Florida, comprising 211 households surveys, 98 in-depth interviews, three social cartographies, and three focus group discussions. The project received funding from the EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 691060.
3. Econometría Consultores (2016) 'Evaluación externa del programa "Construyendo Soluciones Sostenibles-TSI"', Econometría SA, p19
4. www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI16jtL7v_U;
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