



Should I stay or should I go: The role of Colombian free urban housing projects in IDP return to the countryside



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ABSTRACT

Over six million people have been displaced in Colombia's ongoing armed conflict, mainly from rural to urban areas. In 2012, the Colombian government launched a large-scale social housing program to alleviate the housing deficit caused by conflict and furthermore compensate the IDPs for their losses. The principles of this initiative are in line with the wishes of most victim families, who prefer to stay in the cities to which they moved due to the conflict. The new apartments and houses are provided free of charge and are in high demand. That may help to explain the lack of success of another large-scale reparation program, land restitution, which promotes the return of displaced households to the countryside.

Building on empirical qualitative field data, this article shows how the free housing program 'cements' the choice of displaced families to continue living in cities and further develop their post-conflict urban livelihoods and social networks, as opposed to returning to the depopulated rural areas and re-establishing agricultural activities. It is argued that those housing projects are not the ideal solution to the problems of housing shortage and poverty among the displaced population.

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1. Introduction

The ongoing armed conflict in Colombia¹ has resulted in the forced displacement of up to six million people (IDMC, 2015a). As much as 93% of them fled the countryside to urban areas (Albuja & Caballos, 2010), contributing to the rising poverty rate and the uncontrolled growth of informal and squatter settlements in Colombian cities. Although a lasting peace agreement has still not been reached, forced displacements are considerably reduced compared to the peak of the conflict between 1999 and 2002 (Unidad de Víctimas, 2013). There are now several reparation and return programs for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Colombia

is perhaps the only country in the world where such measures are being implemented before an official end of the conflict.

This study examines the relationship between the two main programs currently being implemented for IDPs in Colombia. Free Housing provides new homes for the displaced in the cities where they settled after displacement; Land Restitution enables IDPs to regain their rights to properties that were lost or abandoned in the conflict, and facilitates their return to rural areas. These two initiatives represent very different ways of thinking about migration processes. The first one accepts that once people move from a rural to urban area, whether forcibly or voluntarily, they are likely to adapt and stay permanently. The second is perhaps a more "romantic" idea of returning to the depopulated countryside and engaging in rural livelihoods as before the conflict. Although providing such distinct alternatives for the same target group of IDP households should be considered a great achievement of the Colombian government, the two programs—both part of the same political agenda of Colombian President Juan Miguel Santos—might actually undermine the success of each other.

A central issue is whether the offer of free urban housing affects the willingness of the IDP population to return to the rural area. Our

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¹ The ongoing armed conflict in Colombia began around 1964. The three sides of the conflict are the Colombian state forces, the left-wing guerrillas (including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC]), and right-wing paramilitary groups. The rebel groups were originally motivated by ideological reasons, but eventually the conflict became a war on drugs and for control of land for narcotics production and trafficking (Serres, 2000).

study finds that, to some extent, the Free Housing Program further decreases the already small likelihood of IDP households returning to the countryside. By offering free housing and other incentives to stay in urban areas, the Colombian government reduces IDP willingness to claim land restitution and return to their places of origin in rural areas.

If that is so, why does the government continue investing in both programs and offering them to the IDPs? The answer to this question is complex. First of all, coordination between the two programs has always been almost non-existent, as they are implemented by different state entities and financed from different sources.² Additionally, both initiatives can be characterized as being populist, as they propose radical interventions based on intentions and principles which seem hard to disagree with, but are not necessary feasible to implement in practice (Cuervo, 2012; El Colombiano, 2014; El Espectador, 2012; Gilbert, 2013). The low numbers of finalized land restitution cases may indicate that the program is meant to demonstrate willingness to help IDPs but not necessarily to be put in practice—that being said, however, it does entail high monetary and political costs.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in the Caribbean coast of Colombia in the summer of 2014 in connection with the master's thesis of one of the co-authors (Sliwa, 2015).³ The empirical data were collected using qualitative and quantitative methods, including ethnographic interviews with involved IDP households, semi-structured interviews with informants and stakeholders, as well as direct observations. Furthermore, Respondent Driven Sample (RDS) survey data described in Wiig (2015) are applied and secondary data from relevant literature and media.

1.1. Housing and IDP debates in Latin America

From about 1940, high population growth in Latin America brought a heavy influx of migrants to urban areas. An estimated 70 percent of all new houses in cities have been developed informally through land invasions and self-help construction in squatter and irregular settlements (Ward et al., 2015). Such processes are normally the reverse of conventional housing development, which starts with planning, followed by provision of services and infrastructure, construction of proper housing, and ends with occupancy. In informal settlements, the occupants move in first, then build a permanent structure, expanding it as needed. Once established, they may start lobbying the local government to provide infrastructure and services (Baross, 1990; Hamdi, 2010).

Many of those living in such settlements are economic migrants from the countryside and IDPs fleeing conflict zones. It is difficult to assess whether a hypothetical situation of no conflict would have

had a significant impact on the rural–urban migration process in Colombia, but comparison with other Latin American countries indicates that rapid urbanization has long been underway in all states of the region, regardless of their political and economic situation (UN DESA, 2014). Massive rural migration to the cities has continued despite various agrarian reforms aimed at improving the distribution of land in the countryside, slowing down only during the economic recession in urban areas in the 1980s (Gilbert, 1994). As shown in Fig. 1, urbanization in Colombia over the past 60 years has followed the same trend as the rest of Latin America and the world. Today close to 80% of all Colombians live in cities. Urbanization in Colombia, as in the rest of the world, is predicted to continue for at least some decades to come (UN DESA, 2014).

It is not always easy to distinguish clearly between displaced populations and those who have migrated voluntarily to the cities, for example to seek employment or educational opportunities. Typically, IDPs bring no savings which could enable them to start a new livelihood, and they lack skills needed for urban jobs; by contrast, economic migrants usually come better prepared, with some cash that facilitates their survival, at least in the first few weeks or months. It may be argued that economic migrants also have flexibility to choose places where they can have a comparative advantage as regards finding work compatible with their skills and experience, although Durantón (2015, p.29) notes that IDP populations may also choose “more prosperous local labor markets.” According to Aysa-Lastra (2011), members of IDP households in the Bogotá region tend to have less formal education than economic migrants and are more likely to work in the informal sector or remain unemployed for longer periods. As a result, IDPs are far more likely to experience extreme poverty than are voluntary migrants.

As regards formal housing, private-sector developers usually target upper- and middle-class households. Government-provided social and affordable housing schemes, targeting low-income and vulnerable population in Latin America, have been developed in two ways. The first—a centralized approach where the public sector designs, constructs and delivers housing with or without private companies as sub-contractors—was most common between the 1940s and 1970s, when many new public housing projects were built in connection with urban renewal and slum clearance policies.⁴ Many of those projects were later criticized for failing to improve the economic situation of the residents and for exacerbating socio-spatial segregation in urban areas (Dwyer, 1975; Gilbert, 2001; Hamdi, 1995; Turner, 1976; UN-Habitat, 2001; World Bank, 1993).

The second approach involves a more decentralized, corporate-friendly model, where government subsidies enable the poor to buy units in privately designed and constructed housing projects. This was first tried in Chile in 1977, and was later supported and promoted by such organizations as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank (Gilbert, 2004). At the same time, many governments initiated various initiatives and policies to regularize, formalize and upgrade informal settlements, in line with ideas put forth by Turner (1976) and later De Soto (2000). The general principle of all those housing policies applied in Latin America in recent decades has been to promote home ownership, whereas issues of rental housing have been largely ignored (Gilbert, 2013).

The Free Housing initiative adopted in Colombia was also based

² The federal government has allocated USD 29 million for operation of the Land Restitution Program for the period 2011–2021. In addition, the Land Restitution Unit (URT) has received donations from various international organizations and foreign governments, whose contribution may be up to USD 200 million (El Nuevo Siglo, 2012; Unidad de Víctimas, 2014). Estimated total federal spending for the Free Housing Program is around USD 9.4 million (Sliwa, 2015). Land for construction of housing projects is usually provided by municipal and departmental governments (El Colombiano, 2014). Additional funding is provided as a subsidy from the National Savings Fund (Fonvivienda). The remainder comes from local donors and private enterprises involved in the construction of Free Housing projects.

³ Master thesis for the Urban Ecological Planning Master's Program at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. The study was conducted in collaboration with the Colombia Land and Gender Project at the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research and the Land Observatory project at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia, both of which provided financial support for the research. Fieldwork focused on two selected locations: the metropolitan region of Barranquilla and Soledad in Atlántico department, and the municipality of El Carmen de Bolívar in Bolívar department.

⁴ *Conjunto Urbano Nonoalco Tlatelolco*, built in 1960s in the center of Mexico City, is perhaps the best-known example of such a large-scale public housing renewal project in Latin America. It was built according to modernist design principles and today houses close to 55,000 people.

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