



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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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 October 2015

Received in revised form

26 January 2016

Accepted 30 January 2016

Keywords:

Housing

Land restitution

Reparations

Social policy

Urbanization

Colombia

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 reparations 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 reparations 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 qualitative 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 Duranton (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.

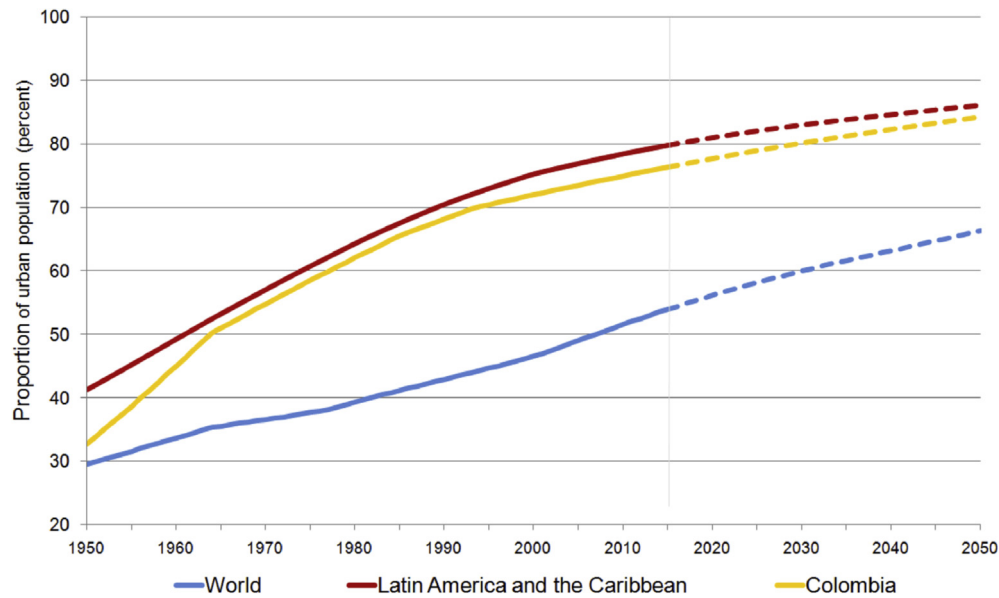


Fig. 1. Urbanization in Colombia, Latin America/the Caribbean, and the world, 1950 to 2050. Adopted from UN DESA (2014).

on the principles and experiences from Chile, although with some differences. In the Colombian program, housing units are handed over for free, a new departure in Latin America, where other countries require some form of contribution from the beneficiaries. Furthermore, the program mostly targets households that were displaced as a result of the armed conflict and, in some cases, due to natural disasters. These generous conditions reflect the Constitutional Court's order to provide housing subsidies for the displaced population.⁵

In general, there are three main policy strategies that governments can apply to compensate and assist IDPs: 1) facilitating return to the areas of origin, 2) providing new housing, whether temporary (shelters) or permanent (social housing), 3) improving existing housing (upgrading self-built dwellings and providing basic services). As explained later, countries with large numbers of IDPs usually implement more than one of those strategies. However, the academic literature does not compare different IDP programs within the same country. As noted by Carrillo (2009) and Crisp, Morris, and Refstie (2012), the literature on displacement has generally focused on the transitional stage after displacement, and on aspects such as humanitarian aid, refugee camps and initial migration to the city. There is a need to investigate the more permanent housing and restitution solutions designated for the IDP population, and how they impact the relations of the displaced families with their places of origin and their eventual decision of where to settle down. According to Crisp et al. (2012, p.24), "urban planners, demographers, and development specialists have not addressed significantly the relationship between displacement and urbanization."

Much academic research on housing and the built environment in Latin America and the Global South has focused on the emergence and consolidation of self-help informal and squatter urban

settlements (Bredenoord & Van Lindert, 2010; Davis, 2006; Fernandes, 2011; Hamdi, 1995; Hernández, Kellett & Allen, 2012; Robbins, 2008; Turner, 1976; Ward et al., 2015). The literature on centrally planned housing in Colombia emphasizes the qualitative and quantitative shortage of affordable social housing in urban areas (Ballén Zamora, 2009; Escallon, 2011; Farías Monroy, 2014; Insuasty Delgado, 2013; Pecha-Garzón, 2011).

Many scholars writing from a political science perspective have noted how the Latin American states are shifting away from the neo-liberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s, in an attempt to tackle the persistent issues of poverty and inequality, and to improve social welfare (Barrett, Chavez, & Garavito, 2008; Grugel & Ruggirozzi, 2012; Yates & Bakker, 2014). In recent years, the public sector in Latin America has played a more active role, especially in housing and labor markets—for example, by regularizing property and workers' rights, investing in public infrastructure projects, (Ward et al., 2015), and providing an increasing amount of affordable housing, which (at least in theory) targeted the urban poor (Gilbert, 2013).

1.2. Social housing and land restitution in other contexts

There have been several countries where housing policies designated for the urban poor and—intentionally or not—the IDPs have been implemented alongside property restitution programs.

When the civil war ended in Sri Lanka in 2009, close to 90% of the IDPs were resettled or returned to their places of origin (Saparamadu & Lall, 2014). In most cases, the return was voluntary, although the Sri Lankan government at the time had been very reluctant to launch return and restitution programs to support the IDPs, most of whom were from the Tamil minority (IDMC, 2015b). Prior to 2015, only a few externally-funded initiatives existed, such as reconstruction and repair of almost 43,000 dwellings, sponsored by the government of India (UN-Habitat, 2015). The situation started to change after the elections in 2015: the new government has taken a different approach and has begun developing comprehensive strategies to facilitate the return and resettlement of the remaining IDPs and provide dignified housing, primarily in the most heavily affected Northern and Eastern Tamil provinces (IDMC, 2015b). Due to the geographical concentration of the IDPs in

⁵ Since 2003, the Constitutional Court of Colombia made a number of sentences which ordered and maintained the necessity to provide housing subsidies for the displaced population. Among others was the sentence from 2007, which stated that the provision of dignified housing for the displaced is the responsibility of the state and ordered the Ministry of Housing, City and Territory (MinVivienda) and the National Savings Fund (Fonvivienda) to launch a system for assignation of subsidies for the affected population (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, 2007).

Sri Lanka, these initiatives are coordinated through one administrative body, the Ministry of Resettlement. The fact that a vast majority of Sri Lankan displaced had already returned to their places of origin before these new policies were implemented makes coordination of property restitution and housing programs theoretically easier than in Colombia, where few IDPs have returned and the rest are scattered in urban and rural areas around the country.

When the Bosnian war ended in 1995, there was little demand for new housing, because of the decrease in population, although a significant qualitative shortage caused by the destruction of housing stock was present, especially in Sarajevo and other major towns and cities. A massive, government-led reconstruction program was chosen as the prioritized post-conflict housing strategy (Hegedüs & Teller, 2008). It was hoped that the property restitution and return programs would complement efforts to reconstruct the damaged housing stock in a successful recovery process. However, due to the lack of financial resources, the informal character of ownership and construction, as well as the continuing ethnic tensions which discouraged many IDPs from returning to their places of origin, all of those programs proved inadequate for providing dignified living conditions. Many of those who did return sold their properties, preferring “not to live in ethnically mixed neighborhoods” (Harild, Christensen, & Zetter, 2015; note 36). There might be a growing need for new housing schemes for vulnerable and IDP groups, particularly those who do not want to return (Hegedüs & Teller, 2008).

In South Africa the abolition of apartheid and the introduction of a multi-racial democracy in 1994 led to a similar process, although not originating in civil war. The ruling African National Congress launched a series of policies targeting the poor and oppressed Black population. One of them was a comprehensive land reform and property restitution program for communities and individuals dispossessed of their properties as a result of “racially discriminatory laws or practice” (Sibanda, 2001, p.2). Restitution of land in rural areas usually involved group claims, whereas demands requests for restitution of plots in urban areas were submitted by individual households and generally involved cases of slum clearance and settlement evictions. As restitution of urban lands was usually impossible due to new development of these sites, most claimants received monetary compensation instead of property rights (ibid.).

Another initiative of the South African government that targeted disadvantaged and marginalized groups was the provision of the impressive number of 1,155,300 housing units for over 5.7 million people in only five years (RSA Department of Housing, 2001). These total subsidies were meant to alleviate poverty and promote home ownership among the lowest income-earners, mainly Black Africans who had suffered under the apartheid regime (Gilbert, 2004). Similarly to Colombia, new formal housing in this case has been distributed to most of the beneficiaries for free (Chiumia, 2014).⁶ Interestingly, the beneficiaries of the Land Restitution program have received special treatment and are eligible for housing subsidies, in contrast to owners of other residential properties (RSA Department of Human Settlements, 2009). Nevertheless, the housing units have been criticized for being small, while their location further deepened racial segregation in the country. Moreover, many residents found it difficult to afford to pay for public services and decided to move out of the projects (Gilbert, 2004). A lot of them returned to the informal settlements from which they had come.

Implementation of those policies had mixed results and was context-dependent, as the rural–urban character of displacements and the political situation differed in all the cases mentioned above. The proportion of IDPs willing to return also varied, although, as noted by Harild et al. (2015, p.6), refugees worldwide are “increasingly drawn to urban centers,” and prefer to “return to urban areas” if given a choice. The important point here is that institutional coordination between housing, restitution and return policies in the countries mentioned was definitely not uncommon, and in some countries was significantly stronger than in the Colombian case.

2. Colombia: the victims' law and the free housing program

In the initial phase of the Colombian conflict, there was little government intervention to provide temporary or permanent housing solutions for the IDPs. The passivity of the state was reflected in quiet acceptance of land invasions and indirect support for informal development. Squatting on public lands in urban peripheries became a common practice, as the risk of eviction was relatively low during this chaotic period of conflict (Naranjo, 2004). The responsibility for attending to the needs of recently arrived IDPs in urban areas was initially given to local governments. IDP households were eligible for three months' humanitarian aid, and assistance with education for children under 15 years of age (Ibáñez & Moya, 2010a). In some municipalities, the local authorities provided land, construction materials, or financial support for families willing to build. There were also several income-generating and training programs for the IDPs—although not sufficient for permanently alleviating poverty, according to Ibáñez and Moya (2010b).

The first attempt by the Colombian federal government to facilitate the return of IDPs to their lands was the Negotiated Restitution in the Law of Justice and Peace in 2003. Perpetrators were expected to voluntarily give back the land they had seized, or compensate the victims in exchange for legal and social benefits (García-Godos & Lid, 2010). However, hardly any cases were settled in by such voluntary means.

A more comprehensive approach to reparation and restitution were drafted in 2011 in *The Victims' Law*,⁷ which introduced regulations and policies intended to “reduce the injustice and social inequality through economic and moral reparation for the victims” (Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2011, p.9–10).

Besides establishing new restitution policies, this law recognized the importance of addressing the housing needs of the victims. It specified that the Ministry of Housing, City and Territory (MinVivienda) has the authority over urban housing-subsidy schemes for the displaced population and for restitution of properties in urban areas, whereas the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MinAgricultura) would coordinate housing programs and the implementation of Land Restitution in rural areas (Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2011).⁸ Since most instances of property dispossession took place in the countryside, with the displaced households fleeing to the cities, MinVivienda in practice assumed responsibility for social housing schemes for the urban

⁷ Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras y sus Decretos Reglamentarios, Law 1448 of 11. June 2011 [the Victims' Law].

⁸ According to Para.1, Art. 66, of The Victims' Law, “to guarantee effective and integral attention of the returned or relocated population, [the provision of] dignified housing is the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development [today the Ministry of Housing, City and Territory] in the case of urban housing, and the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in the case of rural housing” (Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2011, p. 42).

⁶ In addition to Colombia and South Africa, other countries which (with limited success) have been attempting to offer fully subsidized housing schemes are Venezuela, Chile, Brazil and Zimbabwe (Chiumia, 2014).

IDPs, whereas MinAgricultura focused on implementing land restitution policies. From that point, there was no further coordination between the two programs, and each ministry developed its own mechanisms for implementing these policies.

In order to facilitate involvement of the displaced households and local enforcement of the restitution program, MinAgricultura has established the Land Restitution Unit (URT), with regional branches across the country. In the first years, the URT is to work on resolving cases of lands located only in selected areas approved by the military as sufficiently secure. Once the legal procedures are complete and property rights have been restored, the URT will support the beneficiary household as regards return and re-establishment. The landowner is not allowed to sell the property during the first two years after restitution. Monetary compensation is provided only in special cases, when full restitution of the property is not possible (Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2011). Funding for operation of the program comes primarily from the Colombian government and donations from various international organizations and foreign governments.

The social housing schemes for the IDPs followed the recommendations given in the Victims' Law, but developed independently from Land Restitution. MinVivienda announced the inauguration of its 100,000 Free Housing Program (*100,000 Viviendas Gratis*) in 2012, and construction of the first projects started shortly after. The success of the first stage of the program led to its being expanded by an additional 300,000 units. The Free Housing projects are operated according to various financing schemes. Some are funded entirely from the federal and local governments; others are subsidized by the National Savings Fund or built in collaboration with private businesses and donors. Regardless of the arrangement, MinVivienda has set a limit for construction costs to 70 minimum salaries (around \$21,840 USD in 2012). per unit. This housing unusually involves two-bedroom units in apartment blocks or single-story row houses in neighborhoods built for 3000 to 15,000 people.

Most Free Housing projects are built in cities that received large numbers of IDPs. Program beneficiaries are usually drawn from waiting lists, administered locally by Family Compensation Funds (*Cajas de Compensación Familiar*). In many cases, the waiting lists of IDP households wishing to participate in the program were created at the local *Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas*—the unit for attention to and integral reparations for victims, one of the first entities where IDPs go after displacement. These lists are then supplemented with names of families classified as being in extreme poverty and/or victims of natural disasters. IDPs are estimated to constitute around 72.5% of all beneficiaries of the Free Housing Program (MinVivienda, 2014a).

Unlike the South African case, the Colombian government does not specify whether IDPs may apply for the housing subsidy and the property restitution program at the same time. The absence of such regulation may be interpreted as permission to participate in both. Our study shows that few IDPs apply for both programs, primarily because they have already decided which kind of lifestyle they wish in the future.

2.1. IDPs unwilling to return

Data from various sources make it clear that IDPs in Colombia want to stay in urban areas. A survey conducted of 43,587 IDP households in different parts of Colombia between 1997 and 2004 by the Catholic Church showed that not more than 11% of the respondents wanted to return to their place of origin (Arias, Ibáñez, & Querubin, 2014). According to another nationwide survey, conducted in 2008 by the Commission for the Monitoring of the Public Policy on Forced Displacement, only 2.9% of the 8100 households



Picture 1. Villas de San Pablo housing project.

surveyed said they would like to return; up to 78.7% would prefer to stay in the receiving city, while 12.2% considered moving elsewhere (CSPPDF, 2008).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from our RDS survey conducted in 2014 in Bogotá and Barranquilla of 499 IDP households who own land in municipalities currently eligible for land restitution. Although nearly 62.5% of the surveyed households are in the process of applying for the Land Restitution Program or expressed their intention to apply, only 28.1% plan to return to their land if restitution is granted. Around 22.6% would prefer to sell or lease the plot to someone else (Wiig, 2015). This lack of interest in returning and farming may seem surprising when we consider that the average monthly income of the surveyed IDP households was almost halved, from around \$485 USD before displacement to \$260 USD in 2013. However, the current economic situation of the household does not seem to have an impact, as families that maintained or improved their incomes from before displacement were as likely to consider returning as those with significantly lower incomes.⁹

We conducted in-depth interviews with ten IDP households, of which four live in the apartment block housing project Villas de San Pablo (Picture 1)¹⁰ in Barranquilla, four in the single-story housing project Nueva Esperanza (Picture 2)¹¹ in the neighboring city of Soledad, and two who are still on the waiting list. They confirm that return to the place of origin is not the preferred alternative. All of the beneficiaries expressed their satisfaction at having obtained a house or apartment free of charge, and declared their willingness to settle there permanently. Only two of the interviewed households are in the process of Land Restitution, but they have no intention of returning and say they will sell the restituted property as soon as possible. In other cases, the interviewed IDPs are either not entitled to restitution, because their areas of origin are not yet eligible for restitution, or they have not bothered to apply as they do not believe the process works in a truly transparent and timely, efficient manner. Still, all interviewees indicated that they missed some aspects of living in rural areas, such as being able to grow or

⁹ In our RDS survey, respondent households were asked to estimate their monthly incomes before displacement and in the year previous to the survey (i.e. 2013). From these data we could calculate average values and compare the results between the different sub-groups of respondents.

¹⁰ Villas de San Pablo is a Free Housing project located about 5 km outside the built-up area of Barranquilla. The project was built and is still operated by the landowner, the Mario Santo Domingo Foundation. It consists of 832 units in apartment blocks that are part of the 100,000 Free Housing Project; and close to 2000 single-family houses built as part of other subsidy programs. Planned capacity of the entire project after expansion in the next years is up to 20,000 dwellings.

¹¹ Nueva Esperanza is located on the southwestern periphery of Soledad, next to a settlement established primarily by IDPs. The project consists of 1561 single-family, two-bedroom attached houses, each with patio and small garden.



Picture 2. Nueva Esperanza housing project.



Picture 3. Vacant farm in El Carmen de Bolívar. It was restituted to the original owner, but he did not want to return there and take up farming again.

produce their own food. For this reason, two respondents said they would consider moving to the countryside—not to the same area where they came from, but somewhere else.

All ten households report that at least one member receives regular income through employment or pension. Those who were employed had usually kept the same occupation they had before moving into the Free Housing project. Most were self-employed in formal or informal businesses, such as food vending and workshops. They operated either from their previous dwellings in the city, or (illegally) from the new houses or apartments in their Free Housing projects.

Interviewees agreed that there were far better opportunities for employment and education for them and their children in urban areas than in the countryside, and this may be the main reason why they want to stay close to the city. We encountered several IDPs, particularly woman, who, on their own initiative, had signed up for vocational training programs and academic courses. Most households sent their children to local schools or even colleges or universities, and said they had no intention of passing their farming skills and traditions on to their descendants.

Other common reasons for not returning included the perceived insecurity of the place of origin, and unpleasant memories of violence and displacement. The Free Housing projects are seen as relatively secure places which offer “quiet” and “dignified” living conditions. One interviewee said that the neighborhood in Barranquilla where had she settled after the displacement had been “too dangerous,” and the Free Housing program offered her a way out. However, there are also cases when the newly arrived residents find the victimizers or their families (usually ex-guerrillas) living in the same housing projects.

Moreover, the new social networks that have developed after displacement are stronger than the pre-conflict networks in rural areas. Several of our respondents believe that the old communities in the villages where they come from no longer exist, and returning would mean having to start all over from scratch—a view that becomes stronger as time passes. The relatively slow progress of Land Restitution and the impossibility of initiating claim processing in many of the affected areas not yet selected may further discourage the IDP population from returning.

Key informant and household interviews conducted in the primarily rural municipality of El Carmen de Bolívar, which was severely affected by the conflict, indicate that in the rather small group of IDPs who decided to return, most individuals were already old, and returned regardless of the Land Restitution initiative. They might have bought another plot in the area, or have managed to recover their old property if it was still left abandoned. Returnee households we spoke with were families who had settled in the local town rather than on their original farms. In a few cases, these returnees were now engaged in typical urban occupations, and

used their farms as weekend retreats; any cultivation or animal husbandry was small-scale, more a leisure-time activity.

From our interviews we conclude that the Free Housing Program has been more popular than the Land Restitution Program, as it allows IDPs to continue the means of livelihood and social networks they developed in the towns and cities where they settled after displacement. Land Restitution has failed to preserve or improve the current livelihood situation for IDPs, as return to the often depopulated rural areas and re-establishing agricultural production is generally not seen as an attractive or economically viable alternative (see [Picture 3](#)).

The advantages in the offer of Free Housing are reflected in the number of IDPs who have signed up for the program. It is estimated that up to 900,000 households are on the waiting lists for Free Housing across the country ([MlinVivienda, 2014b](#)), compared with only around 73,000 claims for Land Restitution filed by June 2015 ([Valencia, 2015](#)). To date, some 100,000 households have benefited from the housing program, whereas only 1368 restitution rulings have been passed for around 4000 households ([Valencia, 2015](#))—well below expectations and original estimates of the URT, as the plan was to settle 360,000 cases by 2021 ([Sabogal Urrego, 2013; Semana, 2015a](#)).¹² Our interviews and observations indicate that the number of beneficiaries of Land Restitution who have returned and now live on their land is relatively low, although the exact figures are not known.

3. Discussion

The data presented above leave no doubt that most IDPs do not want to return to their places of origin, but prefer to stay in the cities where they have now settled. This applies not only to those who received housing for free from the government, but to the entire victimized group in general. Therefore, it can be argued that those IDP households would have remained in the cities anyway, regardless of whether or not they benefit from the Free Housing program.¹³

¹² According to our informants in El Carmen de Bolívar, the local URT office is under pressure to “prove results”; in order to meet the quota set by the head office in Bogotá, they often contact people who used to own land in the area to encourage them to apply for Land Restitution, even if there was no proven dispossession of the property.

¹³ However, this may not be the case for the entire country, as there are also many rural areas and small towns that are considered safe and free of conflict, and at the same time, there are larger urban areas, such as Buenaventura, where the presence of criminal groups is very high.

That gives rise to another question: would the Land Restitution program tempt IDPs from the Free Housing projects to return, if they did not benefit from this initiative? Our interview and survey data indicate that Land Restitution would probably not have caused a massive return to the countryside, as the IDPs prefer the employment and educational opportunities in the city. The free house or apartment can be seen as simply an improvement in housing conditions, particularly for those who lived in ramshackle dwellings in under-serviced informal settlements (see [Picture 4](#)).

For many IDPs, the new housing provided by the government may be the first formally owned property that could be revoked if the family does not move into the housing unit within a specific period of time. Coping with this new formal housing arrangement may require financial stability easier to achieve by remaining in the city and preserving the current source of income.

The 10-year restriction on selling and renting out the new housing unit may further reduce the mobility of beneficiary IDP households, which would also discourage return. At the same time, the two-year period that the landowner must wait before being allowed to sell or rent out the restituted rural property, combined with the common practice of not returning to these lands, leaves those who benefit from both programs without a choice. For them, staying at the subsidized housing and waiting to sell, rent out, or just keeping the restituted property vacant is the only feasible option. Therefore, it can be argued that although the Free Housing program does not make a significant change in the number of IDPs who do not return, it ‘cements’ their decision to stay in the city, making a future return to the countryside much less likely and more complicated.

The advantages of the Free Housing programs over Land Restitution and return incentives are clear. Not only is the housing program the preferred choice of the IDPs, it also is in line with the general migration trend in Latin America from rural to urban areas and the preference for city living. Furthermore, estimated government spending per beneficiary in the Free Housing program is just one third of that under the Land Restitution program ([Sliwa, 2015](#)).

However, while the Colombian government takes credit for the intermediate success of the Free Housing program, there are no guarantees that these housing projects will make a lasting change in the quality of life of the IDP population. Some scholars have questioned the basic idea of providing dwellings for free, even when meant as a compensation measure. They suggest that this kind of welfare leads to lack of sense of ownership of the dwellings, which may lead to poor maintenance and deterioration in the future, as was the case in many similar public housing projects in the past ([Correra, Cuevas, Silva, & Baena, 2014](#); [Gilbert, 2013](#); [Hamdi, 2010](#)). The interviewed new residents themselves, although very pleased to have received free housing from the government, report some shortcomings, including the small size of the units, and the absence of trees and green spaces (see [Picture 5](#)).

Moreover, for many of the residents, this is the first time they need to pay bills for public services. Similar to the case of South Africa, some respondents living in the Free Housing projects report that they are afraid of not being able to afford the bills and maintenance. A few of them have been forbidden to use parts of their new dwellings for business activities—which, they report, limits their livelihood and income-generation opportunities.

Serious complaints relate to the poor location (often outside of the built area of the city), overcrowding, use of cheap and pre-fabricated materials, lack of quality public spaces and commercial uses, as well as inadequate provision of health centers and police stations ([Correra et al., 2014](#)).

Insecurity might become a growing problem in the new Free Housing projects in the future, as an increasing number of crime, activity of local street gangs, acts of vandalism, stealing and



Picture 4. Siete de Abril is one of many informal settlements in Barranquilla inhabited largely by IDPs.

consumption of drugs in common spaces are reported ([El Heraldo, 2015](#)). Lack of ownership and insufficient funds for housing improvement lead to a rapid deterioration of private and common areas, highly evident during our field visits. The local media have also reported how many of the projects might quickly be turning into ghettos and isolated pockets of poverty ([Correra et al., 2014](#); [El Heraldo, 2015](#); [Semana, 2015b](#)).

Some of those issues can be mitigated through various types of interventions. First of all, the new housing projects should be better integrated with the city. This can be achieved by creating socially mixed and inclusive communities in better locations close to employment centers, and by improving access to public transportation. Introducing flexible, mixed land-use development and providing affordable spaces for commercial and small-scale industrial activities within the social housing projects that may be rented out to residents could help to expand the livelihood opportunities of the IDP population and contribute to their reintegration in society.

3.1. Is the free housing program necessary?

From the three potential types of interventions for the IDPs—facilitating return, providing new housing, and improving existing housing—only the two former are tried in Colombia, with little success. While the Land Restitution program has failed to bring masses of IDPs back to rural areas, the Free Housing program has resulted in the relocation of thousands of the displaced families within the same city and placing them in new housing projects,



Picture 5. Las Gardenias Free Housing project in Barranquilla.

some of which may become slums.

This raises an important question: if so many IDPs choose the Free Housing program over return to rural areas, because they prefer to stay close the city, then why does the government not help them improve their current housing situation? Perhaps, as indicated by Gilbert (2013), the political payoffs and the popularity of the idea of building new housing for the victims and providing them free of charge was among the reasons why the Colombian government decided to choose this strategy, as opposed to, for example, a gradual improvement and regularization of the informal neighborhoods in which many of the IDPs live. If large-scale return is not the alternative desired by the IDPs, then perhaps the answer lies in the opposite—a solution that minimizes any relocation, even within the same city.

At the same time, there are also doubts about who can really benefit from the Free Housing program and who deserves them most. As one of our interviewees indicated, one has to be “very powerful and well-known” in order to receive support from the government. As explained by Gilbert (2013), the agencies that manage waiting lists for Free Housing allocation only check the eligibility of the applicant, not the spouse or other members of the family. Our data confirm that, given the amount of time that had passed since displacement, when they actually did get free housing, the households were in a different socio-economic situation. Some of them had higher incomes and better social networks than others. They might also have owned another house in similar location or with comparable living standards. The selection policy does not recognize those differences, so that the Free Housing program may not always allocate dwellings to those who need them most. As a result, many IDPs may be skeptical to the Free Housing idea, and may opt to play it safe, and stay where they are now.

Taking the funding from the Free Housing program and using it for house improvement grants and subsidies for water bills, public transportation, education and health services for the poor or even food and paychecks of the low-income earners, as suggested by Gilbert (2013) seems especially valid in this context. Formalization and further investment in public infrastructure in informal and squatter settlements according to the principles described by Turner (1976) and Hamdi (1995) might be a less expensive and indeed a more desirable alternative, since it would allow the displaced households to maintain their current livelihood situations without having to relocate. Such a strategy would not only allow the IDPs to remain in their (relatively) better location, but also to maintain the social network structures of neighbors, relatives and friends living nearby—crucial in IDP livelihood strategies.

4. Conclusions

The case study presented here confirms the significance of urbanization as a process that irreversibly changes how people live. We find that the success of large-scale land reforms and housing programs depends on whether the principles of these schemes work with or against the general rural–urban migration trends and livelihood choices of the target population. The dynamics of the Colombian situation are slightly different from other countries in similar situations (Sri Lanka, Bosnia and South Africa), which means that good post-conflict housing and return policies need to consider the local context and (as much as possible) the individual preferences and needs of the IDP households.

Urban IDPs in Colombia are generally unwilling to return to rural areas despite the difficulties of getting integrated into urban labor markets. It is evident that the displaced prefer to take advantage of housing subsidies that allow them to stay in the receiving city, as opposed to applying for initiatives that facilitate land restitution and return to their old properties in the countryside. Although the

displaced populations cannot be classified as economic migrants, their desire to stay in the city is primarily motivated by their economic situation and aspirations for a better future. Our study shows that the livelihoods of Colombia's IDPs depend on access to centers of employment and on income they can produce from home. However, these needs have been poorly addressed by planners and policymakers responsible for the new housing projects. It is urgent that these concerns be addressed, in order to develop successful initiatives that can truly reintegrate the IDPs with the rest of society. Further, better coordination is needed between the reparation programs, to ensure that benefits are delivered fairly, in an efficient and organized way.

The changes we propose will require improving or reconsidering Colombia's massive, 100% subsidized housing program as a solution to the challenges of urban IDPs. These social housing projects will have to be better incorporated with the social and physical fabric of the city in order to combat the process of socio-spatial segregation and ghettoization now emerging in the Free Housing projects. Alternatively, the Colombian government should support the consolidation and physical upgrading of the peripheral informal settlements in which the most of the IDP population actually live.

The ambitious promises of reparation initiatives for millions of IDPs are being realized at a high cost for the Colombian government and society. However, to date, the credibility and efficiency of the implementing agencies have not been monitored or evaluated by any major national or international instances. Perhaps the time has now come to rethink the strategy from its very core, and develop new mechanisms that can support efficient economic and social recovery in Colombia after so many decades of armed conflict.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Peace and Reconciliation Department of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for financial support, the Urban Design and Planning department at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) for academic supervision, members of the Land Observatory research project at the Universidad del Norte and the administration at the Mario Santo Domingo Foundation in Barranquilla, Colombia, for logistic support during our fieldwork, and finally Susan Hoivik, our language editor.

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