

Resilience as a protection strategy in informal settlements

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The city as a refuge or as a prison. Pablo Cortés Ferrández carried out a study in Altos de la Florida, an informal settlement in the municipality of Soacha in Colombia. This vulnerable urban community is a reflection of a global phenomenon which must lead humanitarian workers to rethink their interventions, together with local actors and, of course, the populations.

Protracted urban internal displacement is the new norm¹. By the end of 2017, 40 million people had been displaced by armed conflict and violence within their own country. The largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in history². Today, displacement has two main characteristics; it is urban, between 60% and 80% of IDPs are in cities³ and, secondly, it is protracted, lasting on average 20 to 30 years⁴. Humanitarians must analyse displacement within the urbanisation process and the uncontrolled demographic growth concentrated in fragile and developing countries⁵. 80% of Latin Americans live in cities and, in Colombia, 77% of the population reside in urban areas⁶. Informal settlements are an exponent of urbanisation. In 2014, approximately 881 million people lived in these settings⁷. In Latin America, at least 24% of the urban population live in informal settlements (over 110 million)⁸. In Colombia, more than 24% of the built-up areas of all cities are informal and almost five million people live in them⁹.

Colombia: an archetype of a global phenomenon

Alongside Syria, Colombia is the country with the largest number of IDPs with more than 6,5 million¹⁰, 87% of which are in urban areas¹¹. Although the exact number is unknown, it is estimated that the large majority of urban IDPs found their last urban refuge alternative in informal settlements. The vulnerability of urban IDPs and local host communities has revealed

¹ ICRC, *Displaced in Cities. Experiencing and Responding to Urban Internal Displacement Outside Camps*, 2018, p.14.

² IDMC, *Global Report on Internal Displacement*, 2018.

³ IDMC, *Unsettled: Urban displacement in the 21st century*, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FrDZ9y>

⁴ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement*, 2015; GAUC, *Urban Crises: Recommendations*, 2015.

⁵ Lindsey Weber and Kevin Wyjad, "Potential Indicators of Urban Fragility", in *Human Security for an Urban Century*, January 2006, p.82-84, <http://www.humansecurity-cities.org>; Brown et al., *Urban Crises and Humanitarian Responses: A Literature Review*, The Barlett Development Planning Unit, 2015; John de Boer, Robert Muggah and Ronak Patel, "Conceptualizing City Fragility and Resilience", *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research*, October 2016.

⁶ World Bank, *DataBank*, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2EgreNP>

⁷ UN-HABITAT, *Explore data indicators*, 2015 <https://bit.ly/1HnGIdX>

⁸ Robert Muggah, "A Manifesto for the Fragile City", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol.68, n°2, 2015, p.19-36.

⁹ UN-HABITAT, *Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures*, World Cities Report 2016, p.14 and 57; Carlos Alberto Torres (comp.), *Ciudad informal colombiana. Barrios contruidos por la gente*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2009, p.48.

¹⁰ 6,509,000 IDPs in Colombia. IDMC, *Colombia. Country information*, IDMC, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2RkwrwB>; 7.7 million IDPs in Colombia. UNHCR, *Fact sheet Colombia September 2018*, 2018 <https://bit.ly/2M5Fzzx>

¹¹ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Una nación desplazada. Informe nacional del desplazamiento forzado en Colombia*, 2015, p.38-39.

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the need for a real humanitarian change in the field and a necessity to rethink aid to address the mortal synergy between urban fragility and violence¹².

Informal settlements: the last refuge

In many cases, informal settlements¹³ are the last alternative refuge for urban IDPs in the Colombian armed conflict. The city as a refuge (*ciudad-refugio*) is the last stage of displacement after rural eviction¹⁴. These settings are understood as Stateless urban territories¹⁵, where insecurity increases the risk of new (intra-urban or inter-urban) displacements. Furthermore, due to the informality, inhabitants suffer patterns of social and spatial segregation in poverty areas with low-quality housing and a lack of tenure security, services and infrastructures. In order to analyse the vulnerability and diagnose the effectiveness of humanitarian aid in these contexts, this research (*see the end of the article*) was conducted as a case study, between 2015 and 2018 in Altos de la Florida, an informal settlement in Soacha (Colombia). Soacha is the largest of the cities surrounding Bogotá, the country's capital. It has a population of approximately one million people, 67% of whom were living below the poverty line in 2010. According to official sources, the total number of IDPs in the city reached around 50,000 in July 2017. Moreover, according to the city's development plan, 48% of the 378 neighbourhoods are illegal (the term used by local authorities). The conclusions of the research in Altos de la Florida reflect frontline experience and research based on 75 in-depth interviews (with inhabitants, the humanitarian sector and local authorities), three social maps and a questionnaire to 211 households¹⁶.

Informality: the trigger for vulnerability

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identified Altos de la Florida as a “vulnerable community due to the informality of the neighbourhood”¹⁷. An urban community (1,011 families and 3,657 people) with two main characteristics: the number of urban IDPs (between 30% and 40% of the community) living in poor local families and the high number of young people and women (52,49% are aged twenty-five or younger and 48,81% are women). In addition, 72,9% of households are in conditions of structural poverty. Only 49% of one sector is legal.

The first consequence of informality is that households lack tenure security; they do not have any official document of home ownership. The neighbourhood faced an eviction attempt in 2009. The absence of daily services and infrastructures increases vulnerability. 97,1% of households do not have access to drinking water except via tankers, around 300 children need day care and there are no primary health centres in the area (Soacha's hospital only has 250 beds for one million people). In this context, urban violence is increasing. The position of these settlements, the absence of the local authorities and their informal nature makes them strategic points for non-state armed actors wanting to take control. This social and territorial

¹² IRC, *Humanitarian Action in a New Urban World*, 2015; OECD, *States of Fragility 2016: Understanding Violence*, 2016, p.13.

¹³ See definition in United Nations (2015), Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, “Habitat III”, *Issue Paper n°22 on Informal Settlements*.

¹⁴ Lina María Sánchez, *La ciudad-refugio. Migración forzada y reconfiguración territorial urbana en Colombia*, Universidad del Norte, 2012.

¹⁵ Laura Tedesco, “El Estado en América Latina ¿fallido o en proceso de formación?”, *Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior*, vol.37, 2007.

¹⁶ Adapted from Concern Worldwide's Surveillance Questionnaire in the Indicator Development for the Surveillance of Urban Emergencies project (2014-2015).

¹⁷ UNHCR and UNDP, *Documentación proceso de integración local comunidad Altos de la Florida, Soacha*, 2017.

pressure triggers new urban displacements within cities.

Urban IDPs have to move from one informal settlement to another informal settlement with similar risks. This type of displacement causes a vicious cycle¹⁸. According to official sources, the homicide index in Soacha was 40,58 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, the highest in the Cundinamarca region. The profile of the victims follows a common pattern compared with other urban contexts in Latin America: men (91,5%) aged between 20 and 29 (44,3%). Interpersonal violence is also a significant challenge (2,898 cases): it is the fourth city behind Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla.

The limits of humanitarian aid in informal settlements

This research also aims to diagnose the limits of the humanitarian intervention in Altos de la Florida between 2001 and 2018¹⁹. The first limit observed is that a protracted and supply-driven emergency response generates dependency on external aid within the community. Emergency assistance is essential, mainly in the reception of displaced families. But protracted aid replaces community participation. In these complex urban contexts, the sector can clearly identify the gap between humanitarian aid and development and this is therefore an opportunity to bring both together in an innovative way. Secondly, due to the protracted nature of these situations, the humanitarian sector is working in contexts that lack social cohesion and where leaders depend on humanitarians. Thirdly, both the community and the humanitarian sector argue that the neighbourhood is divided by the influence of different actors. Duplicity and a lack of coordination decrease the effectiveness of the intervention. Finally, after the project, UNHCR and UNDP assessed that “it became evident that the existing problem in this area is on such a scale that international cooperation is insufficient and requires the integral intervention of the State”²⁰. Therefore, to achieve a sustainable solution to urban displacement through local integration, collaboration between the humanitarian sector and local authorities is necessary.

Building resilience

The final aim of this research is to show how building resilience is an effective protection strategy in informal settlements. The ICRC’s latest report highlighted that “Ensuring that people survive is essential. But humanitarian action is also committed to helping people live in dignity. This goes beyond physical survival and relates to people’s sense of autonomy, their ability to make choices, their feeling of being respected and valued by others”²¹. Based on the analysis of the intervention in Altos de la Florida, this research presents an approach to protection spaces that complements the UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas. “Resilience spaces” create safe areas within an informal settlement where humanitarian actors strengthen local capacities. The humanitarian mandate in informal settlements should be based on protecting and assisting urgent needs and on strategies for returning people’s independence with dignity, by strengthening local capacities understood as building resilience. In Altos de la Florida, this approach has been used in four physical spaces: a cultural centre, the headquarters of the *Asociación Codo a Codo*, the headquarters of *Fundación Proyecto de Vida* and the *Casa Pastoral*. “Resilience spaces” combine a top-down protection approach with a bottom-up approach to

¹⁸ CODHES, *Desplazamiento forzado intraurbano y soluciones duraderas*, 2013, p.18.

¹⁹ 2001-2006: World Vision’s response; 2006-2010: Entry of United Nations agencies and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS); 2010-2012: UN Human Security programme; and 2012-2018 UNHCR and UNDP local urban integration programme - Transitional Solution Initiative (TSI).

²⁰ Econometría Consultores, *Evaluación externa del programa “Construyendo Soluciones Sostenibles-TSI”*, 2016, p.19.

²¹ ICRC, *Displaced in cities...*, *op. cit.*, p.65.

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building capacities through three areas of intervention: generating educational, economic and labour opportunities; strengthening social cohesion; and supporting leadership skills. A resilience space framework is also supported through a social network approach and has three objectives. Firstly, increase State intervention. Evaluations of human security and Transitional Solution Initiative (TSI) projects concluded that risks in informal settlements exceed the programmes' capacity and that international humanitarian action is insufficient²². Consequently, a social network approach facilitates dialogue between communities and local authorities. The second objective of this approach is to support access to local and national protection routes. Through the networking of the humanitarian agencies, *Unidad para las Víctimas* and *Defensoría del Pueblo* created a focal point in different resilience spaces. Finally, a key protection tool was created in Altos de la Florida, the *Comité de Impulso*, a fortnightly meeting between leaders, the community, IDP associations and humanitarians. This social network assembly is designed to provide information about humanitarian and community projects so as to avoid duplication, improve coordination and increase the effectiveness of external aid. This intervention framework confirms the importance of making current humanitarian aid more local, not only by strengthening the local NGOs, but also by building resilience in grassroots organisations in order to guarantee the sustainability of international humanitarian interventions in urban contexts.

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²² Econometría Consultores, *Evaluación externa...*, *op. cit.*, p.19; María García, *Evaluación Externa. Por una Soacha Más Humana*, UNDP, 2012, p.56.