

## Concentration of Rural Property in Colombia

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In Colombia, the relationship between armed conflict and land disputes has a long history. Disputes over land were already intense during the 1930s, but were often mediated by formal institutional arrangements. By the end of the 1930s, however, when the scarcity of land within the agricultural frontiers imposed heavy constraints on those wanting to take advantage of the boom in export commodities, disputes over land escalated to violence. During *La Violencia*, in the 1950s, disputes between big landowners, colonizers of wasteland and indigenous groups escalated to unprecedented levels. Smallholders were often forced to leave their lands, and it has been estimated that around 395,000 plots were taken over.

In the current armed conflict in Colombia, strategies commonly deployed by armed actors include territorial occupation, displacement of rural populations and land seizure. Civilians are often forced to leave their property so that armed territorial control can be expanded, civil resistance movements prevented and valuable assets seized. In the process, plots are looted or used to pay combatants or to finance the war, while areas with valuable natural resources or illegal crops are often occupied and exploited in similar fashion. In this way, armed actors have caused large migration flows of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the Colombian countryside to urban centres.

### Some statistical findings

- Armed attacks and forced displacement are more common in municipalities with high levels of informal administrative structures and high concentration of land. Land tenants are frequently and deliberately targeted and forcibly displaced. Within Colombia's IDP population,

55% of all households have had land, with plot sizes averaging 13.3 hectares.

- On the other hand, only 31.3% of all land tenants have legal title to their land, which makes it extremely difficult for the state to protect and secure land tenancy.
- Only 12.8% of all IDPs presently exercise a degree of control over their land, most often through the support of family members or friends who stayed behind.
- The total amount of land that has been abandoned or forcibly taken between 2000 and 2009 is 1.7 million hectares, which represents 2.8 times the amount of all land reallocated during the land reform of 1993–2000.
- In terms of the evolution of land concentration, the land Gini coefficient increased 2.5% nationwide – from 0.86 to 0.875 – between 2000 and 2009. This is the highest national concentration in Latin America, though individual figures vary significantly across municipalities: the land Gini ranges from 0.42 in the municipality with the lowest figure to 0.94 in that with the highest.
- The concentration of rural property increased by 56% in all national municipalities. This concentration took place across all areas of the national territory, not just in peripheral and isolated regions of the country

### Consequences of internal displacement and land seizures

An important consequence of the land seizures in Colombia has been a decrease in national agricultural production. The present net value of lost profits per household is about US\$16,000, and the

average loss of cattle is 29 units per household. When lost profits are aggregated, the decrease in Colombia's agricultural GDP amounts to 3.5% per year since 2000.

Aside from losses in material assets, IDPs face difficulties in accessing credit, as well as depreciation of their human and social capital. Skills that were useful and profitable in the countryside are often useless in the city, and it tends to be very difficult for people to acquire new skills at a sufficiently fast pace. As a consequence, IDPs are generally unable to recover their assets and earlier economic position as long as they remain in a state of displacement. In fact, only 25% of displaced households are able to recover lost assets. While average labour income does improve with time, it does not reach pre-displacement levels: after one year of displacement, average income stands at less than half the pre-displacement level. Not only does the overall condition of IDPs *not* improve with time while they are in displacement, but the effect of displacement may also spill over for one or two generations.

In the long run, such inability to generate new income may have devastating effects on displaced populations. Only 5% of IDP households in Colombia are currently above the poverty line, while 75% are below the destitution line.

Displaced households are left with an asset base that appears insufficient for them to escape poverty. The results of our research clearly indicate that displaced households do not catch up even after consolidating their new settlement. If positive interventions are not undertaken, displaced households may become locked into a poverty trap; once that happens, moving out of poverty becomes highly unlikely. Forced displacement has already clearly generated a poverty trap for segments of the Colombian population. Targeted assistance, such as asset transfers and protection against shocks, is needed to stimulate income growth for the displaced population.

### **Selected Briefs from the Seminar Land Reform and Distributive Justice in the Settlement of Armed Conflicts Bogotá, 5–6 June 2009**

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Ana María Ibáñez is Professor of Economics at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá. The seminar *Land Reform and Distributive Justice in the Settlement of Armed Conflicts* took place in Bogotá on 5–6 June 2009, and was organized by PRIO and the Program for Global Justice and Human Rights of the University of Los Andes (Bogotá), in the seminar series of the Forum for International Criminal and Humanitarian Law (for more information, see <http://www.prio.no/FICJ/C/>). The full text of this paper will be published in the FICHL Publication Series. Further information about the seminar is available at the Forum web site.

ISBN: 978-82-7288-319-4



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