

# Internal displacement in Colombia: humanitarian, economic and social consequences in urban settings and current challenges

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## **Abstract**

*This article provides an overview of internal displacement and the internally displaced person (IDP) assistance system in Colombia. It analyses the humanitarian consequences faced by IDPs when they move to an urban environment, and examines the impact of the influx of IDPs into cities on the different actors involved, such as the government, national and international organizations and host communities.*



The internal conflict in Colombia has led to the displacement of between 2,650,000 and 4,360,000 people, making it the country with the largest IDP population after Sudan.<sup>1</sup> This is the result of a situation where various illegal groups are fighting for territorial control, and the civilian population is subjected to direct

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attacks, forcible recruitment, threats, disappearances, deaths and selective executions:

‘... armed groups stage deliberate attacks on civilians to depopulate the area and thereby extend their control, reduce the combat power of the enemy and extract money from the area [...] the expulsion of the population is also a war strategy to prevent collective action, destroy social networks and intimidate people, as a means of controlling the civilian population.’<sup>2</sup>

IDPs flee in fear for their lives, abandoning their assets and their social and family network. The majority of IDPs move from a rural area to an urban environment, a change that has profound humanitarian, economic and social consequences.

At the individual, family and social level, the emotional impact of their experience affects the ability of IDPs to learn, become self-reliant and build a new life. Within the family, displacement often leads to domestic violence, abuse and separations. Displacement also has a particularly severe impact on certain groups, such as indigenous people and people of African descent, who are cut off from their customs and community organization.

Economically, displacement results in the loss of assets, capital and labour. This and the generally low level of education of IDPs means that their chances of earning a living and achieving a degree of stability are slim. The influx of IDPs into a city contributes to spreading the poverty belt. They have to build their homes from waste materials (cardboard, plastic, boards) in areas where the precarious conditions put their lives at risk. Many families find themselves without the economic resources to meet even their most basic needs. Before displacement, they obtained food directly from the plots that they farmed and the livestock that they kept, or they purchased food at a relatively low cost, but in urban settings they have to rely on help from family and friends and humanitarian aid. In many cases, they have to resort to begging on the street. Poor people in the host communities end up ‘competing’ with IDPs for the social programmes available. The government has to meet an increasing demand for assistance with limited resources and infrastructure.

This complex scenario poses challenges for IDPs as active agents in rebuilding their lives and for the host communities, the government and national and international organizations operating in the country, which have to adapt their programmes and provide a rapid response in a constantly changing environment.

1 As at 2008. See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2008*, IDMC, 2009, p.12.

2 Cited in Ana María Ibáñez, Andrés Moya, Andrea Velásquez, *Hacia una política proactiva para la población desplazada* (Towards a Proactive Policy for the Displaced), Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, May 2006.

## Internal displacement in Colombia

According to government figures, on 31 March 2009 there were 2,977,209 people<sup>3</sup> (672,604 households) registered in the Registro Único de Población Desplazada (RUPD – unified IDP register). The actual number of IDPs could be as high as 3,870,371, taking into account an estimated under-registration rate of around 30%.<sup>4</sup> According to the latter figure, IDPs may therefore account for up to 8.6% of Colombia's total population<sup>5</sup> and 11.6% of the urban population. It is not known exactly how many IDPs there are in the country because many of them do not report their status to the Ministry of Public Affairs, either through fear or ignorance.

Two types of forced displacement are defined: massive displacement and individual displacement.<sup>6</sup> Almost 80% of those included in the IDP register were displaced individually.

Internal displacement is caused by the direct or indirect action of illegal armed groups or clashes between such groups.<sup>7</sup> Faced by this threat, people either remain in their homes at the risk of losing their lives, live in fear or move to another part of the country.

When people flee their homes, they tend to go to the nearest urban centre first. They then move on – although not always – to a larger town or city. Families move to the nearest urban centre first because of its geographical proximity, cultural empathy or because they know the place or have family or friends there. However, the very fact that it is near the place that they are fleeing from means that they still feel threatened by the situation of insecurity, and families generally move on to larger towns or cities, where it is generally thought that opportunities for employment, income generation and education are better in larger centres;

3 Between 1995 and 1998, the Ministry of the Interior and Justice was responsible for collecting information on IDPs in Colombia. In 1999, the *Red de Solidaridad Social* (Social Solidarity Network – RSS) was set up to co-ordinate the *Sistema Nacional de Atención Integral a la Población Desplazada* (National System for Integrated IDP Assistance – SNAIPD), and the formal declaration and registration process, including the unified registration system, was put into operation in 2001. From 2005 to the present day, the *Agencia Presidencial para la Acción Social y la Cooperación Internacional* (Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Co-operation, known as *Acción Social* – the former RSS) is responsible for IDP registration and the compilation of statistics. The figures on IDPs in Colombia provided here refer to the period from 1995 to March 2009.

4 *Comisión de seguimiento a la política pública sobre el desplazamiento forzado* (Commission to monitor public policy on internal displacement), National process to verify the rights of the displaced, Fourth Report to the Constitutional Court, April 2008, p. 58.

5 According to population projections by the *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística* (National Administrative Department of Statistics – DANE), Colombia has a population of 44,957,758 (2009).

6 Massive displacement is defined as the displacement of ten or more households together, while individual displacement is the displacement of a person or family on its own.

7 In 45.6% of cases, there is no information available about who caused the displacement. 20.5% of IDPs report that they were displaced as a result of a guerrilla group and 12.7% as a result of other groups, 10.8% do not identify the group that led to their displacement, 9.6% blame counterinsurgent and paramilitary groups, 0.5% the armed forces and 0.4% more than one actor. Source: *Acción Social*, March 2009.

moreover, they have a greater institutional capacity to provide assistance and services (as opposed to small towns or villages, where the presence of the State and the availability of social services is limited). Mainly for these reasons, the majority of IDPs move to urban areas. Inflow and outflow patterns based on available figures substantiate this conclusion.

Although displacement caused by armed conflict is a widespread phenomenon in the country, the trend is stronger in some areas than others. This is confirmed by the fact that 16% of all IDPs in the country come from the ten municipalities with the highest expulsion figures. Half of the IDP population is concentrated in 23 municipalities, indicating a definite preference for some places over others (Table 1).

The city that has the largest displaced population in the country is Bogotá (Capital District), followed by Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla, the three other most important cities in Colombia in terms of population and economic development. Eighteen of these 23 municipalities are department capitals, that is, large or medium-sized urban centres.

The influx of IDPs into towns and cities puts a strain on social services and population dynamics (contributing to overpopulation). The pressure index (Table 1) shows the ratio of IDPs in the municipality to the total number of inhabitants. For example, in El Carmen de Bolívar, 42 out of every 100 inhabitants are IDPs. Graph 1 shows that IDPs arriving in towns and cities come from: (i) other departments, (ii) other municipalities in the same department<sup>8</sup> or (iii) other areas of the same municipality. In the latter case, they come from mainly rural areas.

In conclusion, it can be said that in Colombia, the tendency of displacement from rural areas to urban centres has implications in terms of land management (i.e. the efficient use of land, and overcrowding caused by the influx of IDPs into towns and cities); availability of government services and assistance; and integration of the displaced population into local economies with limited employment and income generation opportunities.

## Who are the IDPs in Colombia?

Almost 60% of Colombian IDPs come from rural areas.<sup>9</sup> In many cases, they have only ever visited the urban centres near where they live and have never been to a big city. They generally farm for a living. IDPs are predominantly

8 In the first two cases, there is no official information on whether IDPs come from rural or urban areas.

9 *Durable solutions for IDPs in protracted situations: three case studies*, Brookings Institution/University of Bern, October 2008, available at [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnid/Filename/RMOI-7LX2ZX-full\\_report.pdf/\\$File/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnid/Filename/RMOI-7LX2ZX-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf) (visited 30 September 2008). This figure roughly coincides with the one provided by the commission to monitor public policy on internal displacement, which reports that 54.5% of IDPs come from rural areas. Source: *Comisión de seguimiento a la política pública sobre el desplazamiento forzado*, National process to verify the rights of the displaced, First Report to the Constitutional Court, January 2008.

young, with an average age of 23. Displaced families have an average of five members.<sup>10</sup>

## Vulnerable groups

Half of IDPs are under eighteen years of age (Graph 2), a population group that requires special attention in terms of education (school-age children between 5 and 18) and health, particularly with regard to vaccination, monitoring of growth and development, etc.

Half of IDPs are women (Graph 3), and 49% of these women are of child-bearing age (between 15 and 49). The proportion of displaced women who are pregnant is 5%, a higher percentage than the national figure, which is 4.2% according to the nationwide demography and health survey.<sup>11</sup> This is a sizeable group that requires attention during pregnancy (prenatal care, micronutrient supplements) and after the birth during the nursing period.

Figures show that 8% of IDPs are of African descent and 2% belong to indigenous groups, although the information available is patchy (Graph 4). These two groups require assistance adapted to their cultural circumstances.

Almost 1% of IDPs have some kind of disability (Graph 5), although, here again, information is lacking and the figure could be higher. Programmes are needed to provide rehabilitation for them and direct support for their families, as they are economically dependent.

Sixty-one per cent of households are two-parent families, and 84% of them report that the head of household is a man. Single-headed families account for 39% of the total, and 91% of them are headed by women (Graph 6). Single-headed households are likely to be more vulnerable in an urban environment, because of the difficulties of earning income and not having a partner to help look after the children. Female heads of household may benefit from positive discrimination (privileges in food programmes, child care, etc.), while men heading a household on their own seem to be somewhat neglected. This is a subject that warrants further study.

## Educational level

The average number of years of education is around 5, although 11% of IDPs have not even attended school for one year. Figures on the level of education of IDPs

10 Official statistics on internal displacement in Colombia are compiled by *Acción Social* and only take into account people registered in the unified IDP register (RUPD). Various studies have been carried out in the country including both registered and unregistered IDPs. The data from some of these studies have been used here as supporting information to determine the characteristics of the IDP population.

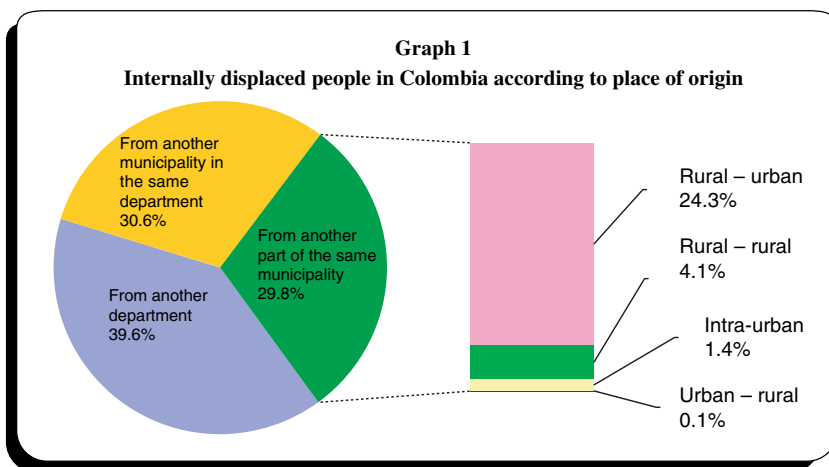
11 *Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud* (National Demographic and Health Survey – ENDS), Profamilia, Bogotá, 2005.

Table 1. The ten cities with the largest IDP populations (Source: *Acción Social*, March 2009)

No.	Department	Municipality	IDP population	IDPs in municipality as % age of total IDP population	Total population of municipality	Pressure index***
1	Bogotá	Bogotá**	244,184	8.20%	7,259,597	3.4%
2	Magdalena	Santa Marta*	141,520	4.75%	441,831	32.0%
3	Antiquioquia	Medellín*	135,391	4.55%	2,316,853	5.8%
4	Sucre	Sincelejo*	83,098	2.79%	252,554	32.9%
5	Valle del Cauca	Buenaventura	65,270	2.19%	355,736	18.3%
6	Valle del Cauca	Cali*	61,784	2.08%	2,219,633	2.8%
7	Meta	Villavicencio*	61,416	2.06%	421,041	14.6%
8	Cesar	Valledupar*	60,975	2.05%	393,294	15.5%
9	Bolivar	Cartagena*	58,601	1.97%	933,946	6.3%
10	Caquetá	Florencia*	57,168	1.92%	154,499	37.0%
11	Norte de Santander	Cúcuta*	48,812	1.64%	612,273	8.0%

12	Atlántico	Barranquilla*	47,802	1.61%	1,179,098	4.1%
13	Antioquia	Turbo	46,368	1.56%	135,967	34.1%
14	Cauca	Popayán*	45,045	1.51%	265,881	16.9%
15	Tolima	Ibagué*	42,477	1.43%	520,974	8.2%
16	Chocó	Quibdó*	40,262	1.35%	114,210	35.3%
17	Santander	Barrancabermeja	39,431	1.32%	191,334	20.6%
18	Santander	Bucaramanga*	37,191	1.25%	523,040	7.1%
19	Córdoba	Montería*	33,738	1.13%	403,280	8.4%
20	Huila	Neiva*	33,386	1.12%	327,618	10.2%
21	Antántico	Soledad	31,435	1.06%	520,323	6.0%
22	Nariño	Pasto*	31,157	1.05%	405,423	7.7%
23	Bolívar	El Carmen de Bolívar	29,327	0.99%	70,397	41.7%
	<b>Total</b>		<b>1,475,838</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>20,018,802</b>	<b>7.4%</b>

\* Department capitals; \*\* capital city of Colombia; \*\*\* ratio of IDPs in the municipality to the total number of inhabitants.



Source: *Acción Social*, March 2009

show that the largest group among over eighteens is formed by those who have not completed primary education (40%) (Graph 7).<sup>12</sup>

The proportion of households with at least one illiterate member is almost 17%. In 3–10% of households, the problem is even more serious, as none of the members is literate.<sup>13</sup>

## Poverty

Around 70% of the rural population in Colombia is living below the poverty line, while 99% of people displaced from rural areas to urban areas are living in poverty<sup>14</sup> and 85% in extreme poverty. Before displacement, many of these people farmed their plots and kept small livestock, guaranteeing their food security. They were also able to sell the small surplus that they produced to buy other items.

As these figures show, while conditions in rural areas are precarious, when people are displaced to urban settings, their situation becomes even worse.

## Assistance for IDPs

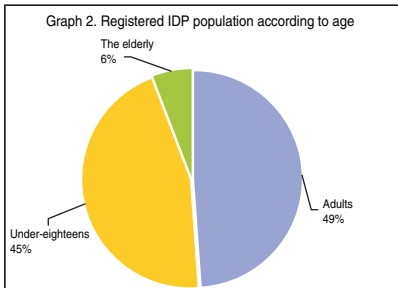
Law 387 of 1997 establishes the framework for IDP assistance in Colombia. The implementing regulations have been passed in various decrees.

12 *Survey on the socioeconomic conditions of internally displaced persons assisted by the ICRC in Bogotá, Cúcuta, Florencia and Medellín*, ICRC, Bogotá, May 2008.

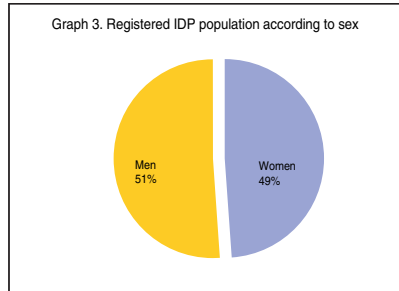
13 ICRC/World Food Programme (WFP), *Una mirada a la población desplazada en ocho ciudades de Colombia: respuesta institucional local, condiciones de vida y recomendaciones para su atención*, ICRC/WFP, Bogotá, November 2007, available at [http://www.icrc.org/web/spa/sitespa0.nsf/htmlall/colombia-interview-131207/\\$FILE/report-summary-131207.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/web/spa/sitespa0.nsf/htmlall/colombia-interview-131207/$FILE/report-summary-131207.pdf) (visited 21 December 2009).

14 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

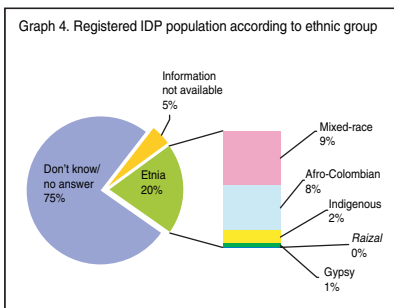




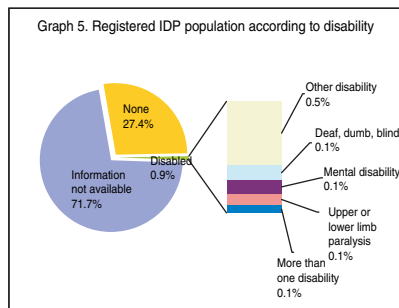
Source: *Acción Social*, March 2009



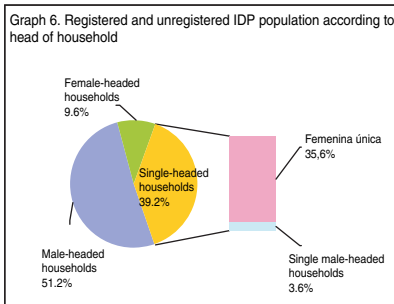
Source: *Acción Social*, March 2009



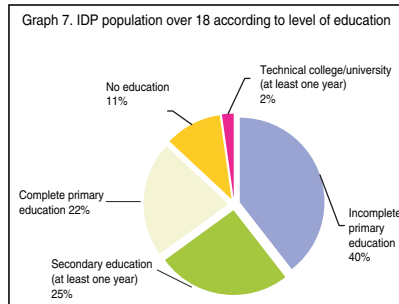
Source: *Acción Social*, March 2009



Source: *Acción Social*, March 2009



Source: *Comisión de seguimiento a la política pública sobre el desplazamiento forzado*, February 2008



Source: *ICRC*, 2008

After a group of IDPs filed a writ for the protection of their rights (*acción de tutela*), the Constitutional Court ruled that the government must provide comprehensive assistance to them immediately and report on the measures taken to this end.<sup>15</sup>

15 Constitutional Court of Colombia, Judgement T-025, 22 January 2004.

Since that time, the Constitutional Court has passed a series of writs (*autos*), in which it monitors the progress made in providing assistance to IDPs and provides guidelines on programme design and implementation for specific groups. Writs have been issued on special assistance for displaced women,<sup>16</sup> children,<sup>17</sup> indigenous people and Afro-Colombians.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, 2008 was declared the year for the promotion of IDP rights, and the private sector was encouraged to contribute to assisting victims.<sup>19</sup>

IDP assistance in Colombia involves a very complex scenario, including a variety of actors, different approaches and a strong State presence.

The national system for integrated IDP assistance (SNAIPD) brings together the various institutions responsible for providing assistance to IDPs and is co-ordinated by *Acción Social*, the presidential agency for social action and international co-operation.

Registered IDPs (with recognized IDP status and included in the official government register) receive aid during the emergency phase (food, hygiene items, psychosocial care, rent and essential household items) for a three-month period. After that, the family is entitled to assistance in the form of education, health, training and support to carry out income-generating projects with a view to achieving financial stability.

IDPs not included in the unified IDP register (RUPD), either because they were rejected (e.g. they made the pertinent declaration to the Ministry of Public Affairs, but were not granted IDP status) or because they did not make the declaration, are not entitled to such assistance, but can receive support from non-governmental organizations.

In addition to government assistance, there are also national and international organizations that provide assistance to both registered and unregistered IDPs during the emergency phase. International organizations include the ICRC, which provides assistance for three or four months, and the World Food Programme (WFP), which provides assistance for four, five or six months. Programmes and services aimed at helping IDPs to achieve stability in their new environment are insufficient and coverage is limited.

Unregistered IDPs are lumped together with the poor and receive the same treatment as this traditional sector of the population.

Although a regulatory framework does exist – the national plan and system for integrated IDP assistance – IDPs are unable to meet their basic needs and achieve long-term stability, because the sheer scale of the problem and limited resources, among other reasons, make it impossible to achieve full coverage.

16 Constitutional Court of Colombia, Writ 092, 14 April 2008.

17 Constitutional Court of Colombia, Writ 251, 10 October 2008.

18 Constitutional Court of Colombia, Writs 004 and 005, 26 January 2009.

19 Colombia, Law 1190, *Por medio de la cual el Congreso de la República de Colombia declara el 2008 como el año de la promoción de los derechos de las personas desplazadas por la violencia y se dictan otras disposiciones* (whereby the Congress of the Republic of Colombia declares 2008 the year of promotion of the rights of persons displaced by violence, and other regulations are announced), 30 April 2008.

Around 80% of IDPs do not want to return to their place of origin because the problem of insecurity persists. They prefer to remain in the place that they moved to when they were displaced,<sup>20</sup> which means that assistance must be provided in urban centres.

## Consequences of displacement in the urban environment

Internal displacement has humanitarian consequences that take on specific dimensions in urban settings and affect actors such as the government and the host communities.

### Economic consequences

The immediate effect of displacement is asset depletion, as people are forced to abandon land,<sup>21</sup> property, livestock, crops, tools and machinery.

‘...around 55 per cent of displaced households had access to land before they were displaced. As a result of displacement, households lost an average of four hectares, amounting to a national total of 1.2 million hectares.’<sup>22</sup>

All aspects of their lives are affected by the loss of their assets. Their access to food is limited, they cannot afford decent housing and, above all, they have no peace of mind or hope for the future.

Registered IDPs are entitled to emergency humanitarian assistance from the government for a three-month period. Although in recent years this assistance has improved in terms of coverage, length and quality, it has also given rise to a worrying tendency, particularly in urban settings. In urban centres, IDPs often fall victim to common crime, and people in the host community sometimes try to cash in on the assistance received by IDPs. There have been cases, for example, of IDPs being robbed when they received aid in the form of cash. IDPs without the means to transport the essential household items from the office issuing them to the place where they are living are often forced to hand over part of the aid received (including vouchers and food), usually an extortionate amount, in payment for transportation of the supplies.

20 For example, a survey showed that, in the city of Cúcuta, only 0.5% of IDPs receiving ICRC assistance wished to return to their original place of residence; 14.8% had not yet taken a decision; 0.9% were considering moving to another country; 4.7% wished to relocate elsewhere in Colombia; and the majority (79.1%) intended to remain in their current place of residence. The figures are similar for Bogotá, Florencia and Medellín. See *Survey on the socioeconomic conditions of internally displaced persons assisted by the ICRC*, ICRC, Bogotá, May 2008.

21 ‘Aggregate figures for assets, properties and land abandoned, ransacked or lost amount to 1.7% of Colombia’s GDP in 2004. Farming income not earned after displacement amounts to 2.1% of agricultural GDP in 2004’. See Ibáñez *et al.*, above note 3.

22 *Ibid.*

Poor people sometimes try to pass themselves off as IDPs in order to receive IDP assistance, which has made it necessary to implement controls and mechanisms to verify IDP status. These cases of fraud cause inconvenience to the government and organizations that provide assistance.

Disputes sometimes arise between IDPs and members of the host community, the latter demanding that the State provide them with assistance too and accusing IDPs of monopolizing social benefits. There have been clashes between the two groups, with people accusing each other of lying about their IDP status.

After the emergency phase, IDPs receive support from the government to help them achieve socioeconomic stability, in the form of training, economic incentives and assistance to implement income-generating projects.

This is the most difficult part of the process. Access to training is very low, with just 12% of registered households benefiting; others are unable to benefit because they do not meet eligibility requirements, because of their lack of education, or because they cannot afford to pay the additional costs involved, such as transport. Additionally, not everyone is business-minded and it is difficult to promote income-generating projects; the projects that are undertaken tend to be related to the informal economy.

When people are displaced, they cannot compete effectively in the labour market, as their farming skills are not easily transferable to an urban environment, where the unemployment rate can be as high as 13%.<sup>23</sup> IDPs have to compete with the resident population for job opportunities, with the added disadvantage of being poorly educated and suffering the stigma of their IDP status.

Even when IDPs do find employment, it is not full-time (average of 15 days work a month). Monthly earnings vary between 233,000 and 316,000 Colombian pesos (COP).<sup>24</sup> This is less than the legal minimum wage currently in force in Colombia, which is COP 497,000.<sup>25</sup>

In urban centres, men usually work in the construction industry or in the personal services sector as *coteros* (loading and unloading goods at the city's markets and other places), street vendors, cleaning cars at traffic lights, etc. Women generally work in domestic service or street vending.

These are all unskilled activities carried out by people with a low level of education in the informal economy. Workers of this kind are not entitled to health or other social benefits, and their earnings depend on the work they do each day. The informal activities that they carry out sometimes involve an invasion of public spaces.

It is common to see women, children and elderly people begging for money on the street, at traffic lights and outside shopping centres with signs saying

23 DANE, *Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares* (National Household Survey), available at [www.dane.gov.co](http://www.dane.gov.co) (visited 30 September 2009).

24 These figures are for the cities of Florencia and Bogotá and are equivalent to USD121 and USD164 at the exchange rate of June 2007. These amounts are 53 and 72%, respectively, of the legal minimum wage in force at that time. See ICRC/WFP, above note 13, p. 6.

25 Equivalent to USD217.15 at the April 2009 exchange rate of USD1 to COP2,288.64.

that they are IDPs. This situation undermines their dignity and self-esteem, although, as they themselves say, it is better to beg than to steal.

In conclusion, IDPs are unable to become self-reliant and meet their basic needs in a sustainable manner, without permanent assistance from the government and humanitarian organizations.

### *Housing*

IDPs usually stay with family or friends when they first arrive in the city, a situation that also affects the economy of the host community. Eventually, they have to find their own place to live. Because they lack resources, they often have to build shacks with waste materials (cardboard, wood and plastic) in 'invaded areas',<sup>26</sup> where unhealthy living conditions (lack of sewers, drinking water, waste disposal, etc.) and hazards such as landslides, mudslides and floods put their lives at risk.<sup>27</sup>

An example of the risky living conditions suffered by IDPs is the fire that swept through the Moravia neighbourhood in Medellín in January 2007, in which a five-year-old child died, 200 houses were totally destroyed and hundreds of families lost all their belongings. This shanty town, inhabited mainly by IDPs, is built on a former waste disposal site, and the fire was most probably caused by gases seeping from the ground.

As families invade private and public land to build their homes, they are sometimes evicted by the police, who destroy the shacks as a means of clearing the area. This has been the cause of clashes between IDPs and the authorities.

The government has developed a strategy involving processes to relocate and legalize shanty towns. It also grants housing subsidies,<sup>28</sup> although few families receive them because they do not meet eligibility requirements. IDPs argue that the subsidy is not enough to buy a home, which means that families have to pay the rest from their own resources or take out a loan. Cities such as Bogotá and Medellín have therefore approved a supplementary subsidy to match the amount granted by the central government.

Apart from these measures and their implementation, there is another difficulty: there is very little land available on which to build social housing in cities, and the plots that are available are very highly priced. Cities like Medellín and Bogotá are beginning to look at the possibility of relocating IDPs to nearby municipalities.

26 Invaded areas are defined as privately or publicly owned land or waste ground where IDPs build their homes.

27 ICRC/WFP, above note 13, p. 4.

28 Decree 951 of 2001 establishes an amount of up to 25 times the minimum monthly legal wage for the purchase of social or second-hand housing or for home improvements.

## Food

Food becomes a critical issue once the emergency humanitarian assistance phase comes to an end. For example, in Bogotá, Sincelejo, Medellín and Villavicencio, almost half of IDP households eat fewer than three meals a day,<sup>29</sup> and in the majority of the country's cities, IDPs report that they cannot afford enough food to feed their families properly. Although there are food aid programmes, their coverage is limited and they generally target specific groups, such as children (food at school), pregnant women and nursing mothers.

Whereas families obtained food from the plots they farmed before they were displaced, once in the city they have to beg on the street or scavenge for unsold, damaged or discarded food at marketplaces.

In economic terms, the consequences for the central government and local authorities are enormous. The continuous influx of IDPs into municipalities results in a growing demand not only for specific assistance for this group, but also for social programmes for the poor in general.

Local authorities have three main sources of income: transfers from central government, their own revenues and borrowing. Central government transfers are mainly for education and health<sup>30</sup> and are distributed annually among all the municipalities around the country in accordance with their category.<sup>31</sup>

Municipalities are categorized according to the size of their population, and as this information is not permanently updated,<sup>32</sup> there can be a gap between a municipality's official population and its real population, swollen by the IDPs arriving day after day. This means that the same revenue has to be stretched to assist more people.

## Social consequences

Some of the consequences of internal displacement are not readily visible. It has emotional, family and social effects that take their toll not only on the displaced, but also on the country as a whole.

Displacement has an emotional impact on people, whether it is because they have lost a loved one or because they have had to abandon their way of life, assets, customs and culture. At an individual level, it is manifested as sadness, crying, depression, nostalgia, nervous tension, fear, despair, regression to childhood, aggressive behaviour or an apparently calm demeanour and acceptance of the new situation in people who are not even aware that they have a problem.

29 ICRC/WFP, above note 13, p. 5.

30 Law 715 of 2001 on the general participation system.

31 Law 617 of 2000 establishes six categories of municipalities and a seventh 'special' category. The country's 1120 municipalities belong to one of these categories depending on the size of their population and unearmarked current income.

32 Colombia's last general census was carried out in 2005, and the one before that in 1993. Since 2005, official population figures are based on projections made by DANE.

According to the ICRC-WFP survey conducted in eight Colombian cities, approximately 67% of displaced households report experiencing psychosocial problems. Of these, 24% sought help, although only 15% actually received any care. Therefore, only 2% of those who reported having psychosocial problems received help. There are very few psychosocial services available, and there are no standard assistance protocols in place.

This problem affects all aspects of human behaviour, impairing the capacity to learn (in the case of children and adults who wish to receive education and training), become self-reliant and build a new life.

Displacement can also lead to problems such as domestic violence, abuse, divorce or desertion by one of the partners. Financial difficulties and the change in traditional gender roles and mentalities that displacement entails often cause domestic discord.<sup>33</sup>

Social problems also extend outside the home – IDPs normally live in the city's outlying districts, where they are exposed to the risks of common crime, gangs, and other problems, such as drug abuse, etc.

Displacement also cuts people off from their social networks and groups (friends), milieu and community organizations. 'Displacement obstructs the formation of community organizations and contributes to the destruction of social networks and social capital, which are essential to social development and the construction of a new life'.<sup>34</sup>

Certain groups are more prone to specific problems:

### *Adult IDPs*

Their low level of education makes it difficult for them to cope with everyday activities, such as taking public transport, looking up job offers in the press and understanding the leaflets that they are given at different institutions with information on the procedures to be followed to receive assistance. These constraints are of particular consequence when it comes to finding a job.

### *School-age IDPs (5- to 18-year-olds)*

Although they have access to the education system, they often fail to attend school for various reasons. These include discrimination for not wearing a uniform (because the family cannot afford to buy one), the stigma of IDP status (in some cases, displaced children are refused a place by school authorities or are singled out in the classroom); or difficulties arising from differences in the syllabus and the quality of education between rural and urban areas. Over-age students, very common in rural areas, have difficulties adapting.

33 Living in a city changes the mentality of IDPs; it can empower women, as they become integrated into a more egalitarian society offering greater opportunities for their sex. Roberto Vidal, *Desplazamiento interno y construcción de paz en Colombia* (Internal displacement and building peace in Colombia), 2008.

34 Ibáñez, Moya, Velásquez, *op. cit.*

## Adolescents

Adolescents often decide to drop out of school in order to work and earn some money,<sup>35</sup> driven by the need to be socially accepted and acquire items, such as clothes, which they need in their new urban environment. While the primary education enrolment rate among the displaced population is close to 90% in some cities, the rate for secondary education is about 15–20% lower.<sup>36</sup>

## Under-fives

Although there are nurseries run by city councils and the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (Colombian family welfare institute – ICBF), coverage is limited. When parents have to go out to work, children are often left in the care of other adults, or children are left on their own at home, exposed to the risk of domestic accidents or other dangers.

## The elderly

Because of their age, elderly people are unable to carry out economic activities in urban settings and sometimes have to resort to begging, which undermines their dignity. Although there is a specific programme for the elderly (monthly cash benefit), the number of beneficiaries is limited, because they are admitted to the scheme for life. This means that new beneficiaries are only admitted when someone withdraws from the programme or dies.

## Men

While men are usually the breadwinners in rural settings, in the city it is often easier for women to find work in domestic service. In such cases, the woman goes out to work and the man stays at home to do the housework and look after the children. Many men find it difficult to accept this change in roles and decide to leave their families.

## Indigenous people and minority ethnic groups

The break with community organization is all the more critical in the case of minority and indigenous ethnic groups.

35 'Low school attendance and drop-out rates can also be explained by the pressure on all the members of the household to engage in income-generating activities', *La población desplazada en Colombia: examen de sus condiciones socioeconómicas y análisis de las políticas actuales. Misión para el diseño de una estrategia para la reducción de la pobreza y la desigualdad* (The displaced population in Colombia: study on socioeconomic conditions and analysis of current policy), Departamento Nacional de la Planeación, Bogotá, 2006.

36 ICRC/WFP, above note 13, p. 6.



According to the 2005 census, there are 1,378,884 indigenous people in Colombia (3.4% of the total population), belonging to one of the country's 80 indigenous ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Wayuu, Nasa, Zenu and Embera.

When indigenous people are displaced, they lose their language, customs (such as traditional medicine), organization (own laws and rules and own system of judging those who break them) and, above all, their culture. It is common to find indigenous people in urban centres wearing Western-style clothes. They are also often to be found on the street and outside shopping centres begging for money.

The census also shows that there are 4,261,996 Afro-Colombians, accounting for 9.4% of the country's total population – 5.3% of them are IDPs. The Afro-Colombian population, like indigenous people, have their own particular customs. When they move to the city, however, they stop resolving their problems and needs within the community and begin to act individually in their own interests to ensure their survival.

When they have been in the new urban environment for some time, young people eventually lose interest in their customs and their land. This tendency raises long-term questions about whether there will be enough labour to sow and harvest crops and about how cities can cope with this continuous influx of people.

## **Challenges posed by internal displacement to urban centres**

The situation described above poses a series of challenges for different actors, which need to be addressed in order to ensure not only more and better assistance for IDPs, but also the sustainability of cities in the long term in terms of habitability, overpopulation, mobility and job opportunities.

### **Government**

One of the biggest challenges facing central government and local authorities is that of striking the right balance between assistance for IDPs and assistance for the 'poor', who are beginning to raise their voices in protest against positive discrimination in favour of IDPs.

The most critical issue is helping IDPs to achieve socioeconomic stability in the complex scenario in Colombia, with the Constitutional Court, civil society and IDP organizations demanding concrete results. The problem is exacerbated by the limited resources available, the already high and growing short-term demand and the lack of a favourable macroeconomic environment conducive to job creation.

The strategy of strengthening the institutional capacity of small towns (municipal seats) could be effective in preventing IDPs from moving on to bigger cities, which are already very densely populated. This measure should be accompanied by greater efforts to prevent internal displacement. Better

co-ordination between central government and local authorities, as well as the allocation of earmarked resources for IDPs, are also required in the short term.

Another measure that could contribute to increasing socioeconomic stability and solving the problem of overpopulation in big cities is the granting of rural land to displaced families, so that they can resettle in rural areas and carry out sustainable productive activities.

The biggest challenge in terms of IDP assistance is putting the legal framework that already exists into operation. It is a complex system in which effective co-ordination among the different actors is essential in order to achieve greater coverage, avoid the duplication of efforts and promote the active participation of IDPs in rebuilding their lives.

## Humanitarian organizations

A variety of humanitarian actors are involved in providing assistance to the IDP population in Colombia, including – to name but a few – agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM); international NGOs such as the Norwegian Refugee Council and Médecins sans Frontières; and local NGOs. The following section will focus on the humanitarian assistance programme of the ICRC, as well as addressing general issues of co-ordination.

### *The ICRC in Colombia*

The ICRC has been carrying out its humanitarian assistance programme in Colombia for the past 11 years. During this time, it has assisted around 1,100,000 people directly in the field (mass displacement) and through its offices around the country (individual displacement).

In the Colombian cities in which it runs its assistance programme, in addition to the emergency humanitarian assistance that it provides for IDPs, the ICRC also implements programmes that provide support to strengthen the *unidades de atención y orientación* (assistance and guidance units for IDPs – UAOs), in conjunction with *Acción Social*, IOM and UNHCR. It carries out activities to change and improve public policy on IDPs, which also extend to areas where it does not provide humanitarian assistance.

Under its humanitarian assistance programme carried out in towns and cities, the ICRC provides relief aid to people who have been displaced individually during the emergency phase for three or four months. It consists of food, hygiene items and essential household items. Food aid is provided in the form of vouchers that can be exchanged in shops and supermarkets near where the beneficiaries live, a system that allows them to retain their dignity and become more integrated. The families receive guidance from the ICRC on how to exchange the vouchers and use the other food items supplied and on the formal process for declaring IDP status, being included in the IDP register and receiving benefits.

Aware of the specific needs of IDPs in urban areas, the ICRC also distributes fortified flour for infants under one year of age and elderly people, and shirts for school. It also provides a transport allowance (voucher or cash to pay a taxi), so that beneficiaries can transport the supplies given to them from the ICRC office back to their homes.

In view of the complex situation in urban centres, in order to ensure that those who really need assistance receive it, the ICRC implements a series of mechanisms to verify the status of the applicant (initial interview, home visits, monitoring), which guarantee personalized attention, detailed information about the beneficiaries and effective referral to the State system.

The ICRC is committed to the ongoing improvement of assistance and services and, to this end, consults beneficiaries on a yearly basis (through focus groups, for example) at the various offices it has around the country. It also conducts a monitoring project based on a survey of the socioeconomic conditions of the beneficiaries before, during and after receiving ICRC assistance. Based on the results of this work, it adjusts the assistance it provides to the needs of the IDP population and their particular requirements in the new urban environment.

The ICRC faces a number challenges in providing IDP assistance through its humanitarian assistance programme in the cities in which it operates. Firstly, the high level of poverty in big cities has led to an increase in the number of cases of attempted fraud. People discover what eligibility criteria are required, what they should say and what 'stories' they should tell. It is increasingly difficult to tell which people have been displaced and which have not. The professionalization of office staff and stricter verification criteria and controls are essential to avoid granting assistance to people who have not been displaced as a result of armed conflict. The biggest challenge, however, is to provide useful advice on State programmes that can help them. At the internal level, measures are also required to ensure the psychosocial self-care of staff who have to deal, on a daily basis, with the emotional distress of IDPs affected by the armed conflict, who come into ICRC offices for help. Ensuring that co-ordination with the government and other humanitarian actors operating in the country is effective and results in complementary aid for IDPs is another important challenge that must be met in order to achieve sustained assistance to help IDPs establish a new livelihood. At the same time, ensuring the ICRC's independence and neutrality in such a context is a major challenge and goal.

### *The need for co-ordination*

The current challenge for national and international organizations operating in the country is to improve co-ordination and join forces to avoid duplicating activities and together contribute to improving IDP assistance. Although all sectors want to contribute to building and achieving peace, they have so far failed to join forces and rally around this common goal, as Colombia is such a polarized country. International organizations, as neutral actors, therefore face the challenge of motivating and helping national actors to work together.

It is also necessary to progress from emergency programmes to development-focused programmes which promote the socioeconomic stability of IDPs. Such programmes should be aimed not only at IDPs, but also at the poor in general, with a view to eliminating the gap between the emergency phase and the stability phase and ensuring a seamless transition. The limitations of the government make it essential for international organizations to provide support in the form of financial aid and technical assistance.

At grassroots level, everyone has a role to play in addressing the challenges faced by IDPs. The attitude of society at large needs to change, as people have become used to displacement and a climate of indifference prevails. It is necessary for everyone to join forces in solidarity. The private sector can make a significant contribution in creating temporary and permanent jobs and supporting micro-initiatives.

As for IDPs themselves, it is important for them to know about and understand how to obtain assistance and the rights they have as IDPs, so that they can access available benefits and services and become fully integrated in their new urban environment.

The major challenge for them is to play an active role in the process of rebuilding their lives and to avoid falling into the trap of dependence on assistance.

## Conclusions

In addition to the humanitarian consequences of displacement, IDPs who flee to a big city also have to adjust to a new urban environment, of which they have no experience. Their low level of education, their rural livelihood skills, discrimination and local economic problems, such as high unemployment, make it difficult for them to earn money in urban settings, in spite of the fact that there are programmes in place to help them. As a result, IDPs become part of the cities' poverty belts, which has an adverse impact not only on their living conditions, but also in terms of land use management and the growing demand for services that overstretches the resources of the authorities.

The fall-out extends to national and international organizations operating in Colombia's cities, who are required to adapt their programmes, their criteria and the aid that they provide to the specific needs of people displaced to urban centres. This situation gives rise to a series of short- and medium-term challenges for actors involved in the complex IDP assistance system in Colombia. Meeting these challenges or making at least some progress towards overcoming them would contribute to assisting IDPs more effectively.

The big question, however, is how to rebuild social capital, how to reconstruct the country, when it is still mired in an armed conflict that drives hundreds of people from their homes day after day.