Colombia: urban futures in conflict zones

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Executive summary

The 2014-15 peace negotiations in Havana between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla movement are expected to end the long conflict between these two armed actors. The accords reached thus far reiterate a commitment to human rights and development in neglected rural areas, but do not prioritise the dire situation faced by regional medium-sized cities in conflict zones. Millions of victims have sought refuge in these cities and are likely to remain there. This report argues that achieving urban integration, strengthening institutions and increasing productivity in urban settings are fundamental to peace.

All cities have suffered in multiple ways from the massive influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Medium-sized cities are growing faster than the largest cities, having received the highest percentage of conflict victims in relation to their pre-existing local populations. Today they are largely unable to integrate IDPs living in their jurisdictions either administratively or economically. New infrastructure, stronger institutions and extended public services are badly needed. Taking two Colombian cities as illustrations, the report examines efforts to improve the well-being of IDPs and other victims, focusing on the urban resources and regional development that will be needed in post-conflict Colombia.

Introduction

The 2014-15 peace negotiations in Havana between the Colombian government and representatives of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla movement are expected to reach an agreement on ending the long conflict between these two armed actors. Although armed conflict has persisted for decades, the massive displacements that are the focus of this report were brought about by confrontations at the end of the 1990s between and among: (1) armed insurgents of the FARC and, to a lesser extent, the National Liberation Army; (2) the paramilitary forces eventually consolidated into the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), first hired to protect landowners from the insurgents and later to directly confront the FARC; and (3) the country's armed forces. The rise of narco-trafficking and the separate but related "war" on drugs intensified forced displacement. The peace process thus far prioritises the rights of victims and offers them compensation for the suffering they have endured during the decades of armed conflict. The negotiators at the peace table are calling for what they term

a "territorial peace", one that decentralises the political and economic dominance of the Bogotá-centred political and economic structures, and empowers municipal and departmental leaders and rural communities. The accords reached to date pledge much-needed economic infrastructure, social services and good governance to rural parts of the country that the central government has long ignored: "Integral rural reform establishes the bases for structural transformation in the countryside, creates conditions for the well-being of the rural population and thus contributes to the stable and durable peace" (author's translation).

The measures under the heading "Towards a new Colombian countryside: integrated rural reform" detail the multiple deep structural and social changes needed to revive the agrarian sector and create prosperity for rural inhabitants. The accords reached thus far are dedicated to ending a history of inequalities, discrimination, and exploitation in favour of investment in rural development and reform.

The large majority of the six million internally displaced persons (IDPs) are of rural origin, and rural reforms are essential. However, there are few references in the agreements to policies intended to integrate the millions of IDPs who fled from the countryside and have now settled in nearby medium-sized urban municipalities. All important urban centres located throughout rural Colombia are today equally in need of investment, development and reform. The increasingly widely shared view among national, regional, and international actors is that combined rural development, urban planning and a regional focus should form the basis for a successful territorial peace.

Conflict, displacement and urban growth[1]

The elaboration of "territorial peace" in the accords is focused on broad goals of democratic development in favour of the dispossessed. The accords are intended to rectify the transformations due to conflict and economic modernisation measures that have adversely affected primarily the rural poor. The solution implicitly foresees a return to an economy based on small and medium-sized farms. Nevertheless, hopes for a revival of small-scale agriculture are countered by the realities that much of the best agricultural land is now concentrated in and owned by commercial agribusiness, while legal and illegal mining and the cultivation of illegal substances have become major sources of employment for both the urban and rural poor. Small and medium-sized farming was hardly prosperous in the past and is unlikely to be very attractive to Colombian youth in the future.

After more than a decade of displacement, millions among the victims and their families who should be the beneficiaries of peace are neither rural nor wish to be. The rural population driven from their homes and land is presently scattered, with more than half living in cities, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).[2] To attend to their needs, policies addressed to the urban places of refuge where the majority of victims have made their lives are as essential, or more so, as policies focused on agricultural development.

Urban migration is a global trend that was well under way in Colombia prior to and independently of conflict-induced displacement. In the 1960s and 1970s the economics of export substitution won considerable support throughout Latin America and gave rise to manufacturing projects in several regional centres. The policy attracted farmers from the countryside who for a brief time formed a core of workers in small industrial hubs throughout the country. However, the import substitution model had been discarded by the late 1980s. Buildings in the nearly abandoned urban peripheries still stood, but without the productive infrastructure that once promised employment opportunities. Instead, former manufacturing areas served as essentially "bedroom communities" for the migrating rural poor. By the time IDPs populated these former manufacturing districts there were few if any economic opportunities for them either in the peripheral settlements[3] or in the city cores.

Forced migration has followed similar patterns since the 1990s. Victims of violence, threats and land seizures generally go first to nearby small municipalities but, unable to find the means of survival there, move on to larger cities, from where they may move to the major urban centres. Since the early 2000s IDPs have frequently gone directly to the large cities where they have established a family and community presence. The largest cities in Colombia – Bogotá, Medellin, Cartagena, Cali and Barranquilla – have received the greatest number of conflict-displaced people. Various sources estimate the number of IDPs in metropolitan Bogotá at close to 600,000, largely concentrated in the separate municipality of Soacha, which was formerly a manufacturing hub.[4] Medellin has received migrants of all kinds in recent years and grown rapidly. It is home to over 250,000 recognised victims (Pareia, 2013). These cities have been criticised for failing to provide adequate services or protect inhabitants and the environment, although Medellin has won praise for innovative financing arrangements to assist the smaller, poorer municipalities nearby that host large numbers of victims.[5] Municipal authorities everywhere lament growing criminal activity and drug trafficking in areas heavily inhabited by IDPs. Nevertheless, the IDP population constitutes a very small percentage of the total population of major cities and the IDP presence is all but invisible for the majority of inhabitants.

By the early part of the next decade virtually every department in the country had either expelled or received victims, most often both. Unlike the rural poor who had begun arriving earlier, forcibly displaced persons fled to urban areas involuntarily. The newcomers neither intended to migrate to cities nor planned their departures and arrivals. The rapid, sometimes sudden, appearance of thousands of people who were poor, desperate and traumatised invariably proved disruptive to long-standing city residents and the urban environment. The authorities were unprepared and unable to accommodate the influx adequately, even with the humanitarian assistance legislated for IDPs and present throughout the country. Nevertheless, over the years and with great difficulty a formerly rural population has largely learned the disciplines and demands of urban life, accessed humanitarian assistance, found new allies to

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1   Thanks to Edgar Forero Pardo of UNDP for enhancing my understanding of how urban dynamics relate to displacement.
2   UNHCR/Colombia (2014) notes that 51% of IDPs are living in the 25 principal cities in Colombia. The director of the National Planning Department (DNP) reports that 78% of IDPs in cities are in medium-sized and large cities, with 2 million in Bogotá alone (interview with Lina Garcia and Claudia Juliana Mello, DNP, February 11th 2015).
3   Refers to informal settlements constructed, largely without legal title, on the outskirts of municipal areas.
4   Interviews with Manuel Oveido, UNHCR, February 3rd 2015, and Edgar Cataño, UN Habitat, February 4th 2015.
5   Interview with Lina Garcia and Claudia Juliana Mello, DNP, February 12th 2015.

replace the broken safety nets it left behind, formed organisations and settled.

Urban conditions remain poor: substandard informal housing in marginal areas where inhabitants' land and dwellings are not, or not yet, legalised; low-quality public services; poor transportation; and few prospects for employment. The displaced in cities are living among criminal gangs, drug traffickers and deteriorating infrastructure. Cities have offered refuge from conflict and the displaced populations have poured in. But violence has followed the urban displaced, resulting in frequent intra-urban flight in numerous locations due to forced recruitment, gender-based violence and pursuit by former victimisers.

While levels of services and personal security may be inadequate, however, education and health care are present in all the larger and medium-sized cities (which is not the case for the smallest municipalities and rural communities), and there are greater possibilities to earn incomes. The displaced often cite the absence of health and educational services as major reasons for deciding against returning to rural areas. Likewise, in the towns and cities the displaced have been able to form organisations for mutual assistance and to advocate for their rights before municipal, departmental and national officials. IDP organisations are numerous throughout the country, and women in particular have been among their major leaders and beneficiaries. These organisations have not been very successful in exerting pressure for the changes their constituencies need, but their presence has been felt. The peace accords should enhance the authority of such entities.

When it comes to cities, size and overall wealth matter. Large cities are wealthier than medium-sized or poor ones. However strapped for resources they are, they have the ability to tax: land ownership is more clearly defined, enabling both property and personal taxation. The major cities receive funds from the central government and have established systems of health care, education and sanitation that can be expanded to accommodate larger numbers as populations rise, if there is the will to do so. The Colombian system is designed so that wealthier municipalities receive the largest share of federal funds as payment for use of their resources (*regalias*), and poorer municipalities less. Small, poor, rural municipalities historically have received very little – hence the priority accorded to improving conditions in such communities.

Victims and their future

Rural civilians were forcibly drawn into the conflict as their land and properties were seized and children forcibly recruited; many died and millions fled. Flight was augmented due to the fumigation of the major cash crop, coca. The AUC was formally demobilised by 2006. The FARC sits presently at the peace table in anticipation of demobilisation and a transition to a political rather than military agenda. Nevertheless, displacement caused by armed threats and violence persists, now attributed to "criminal bands" that combine former militia, drug-related gangs and others.

The underlying legal framework for addressing the rights and needs of victims has been put in place in the combined Victims and Land Restitution Law no. 1448 of June 10th 2011. The law creates mechanisms to protect and assist victims, restore land forcibly lost or stolen, and/or to compensate the rightful owners for their losses. Law 1448 provides benefits for victims and is flexible in allowing those determined to be eligible to receive benefits in locations other than their places of origin, including cities close to or far from their original rural homes. Victim and land restitution rights allow compensation for losses suffered.

This flexibility is fundamental because, as important as the rights to return and restitution are to the peace process, the successful implementation of the laws presently and in the post-conflict transition period will continue to be limited by administrative shortcomings, lack of political will and criminally driven insecurity. The legislation in place has not protected would-be returnees from violence and threats even when claimants are able to document the legitimacy of their claims (Amnesty International, 2014).[6] The indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in particular have encountered violent resistance to their efforts to return. To be classified as a "victim" for the purposes of receiving benefits and assistance for returns and resettlement under the law requires recognition and registration in the RUPD (the registry of those recognised as victims of displacement) of the National System for Attention and Reparations for Victims. It is at times far from easy to meet criteria for recognition, and even more difficult to sort out and document conflicting claims to land or ascertain compensation due.

While the government and aid agencies have encouraged and materially supported IDP return under the Land Restitution Law, the new legal order has produced a relatively small number of documented successful, durable returns.[7] Although greater security, more public services and improved rural infrastructure would increase both the numbers seeking return and restitution – and the likelihood that returns would be durable – these are long-term goals. Meanwhile, the more time families are settled in

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6 Amnesty International investigated land restitution and found serious problems both with regard to identifying victims who were eligible for restitution and implementing the programme. Its report (Amnesty International, 2014) covers frequent violence, multiple abuses and systemic obstacles preventing persons dispossessed of their land from recovering it.
7 UNHCR cited some 37,000 requests to register land seized in conflict with the Land Restitution Unit – which not only is a small number, but does not always mean the owner intends to return. It is likely that the people who fled from conflict but whose land was not seized constitute the largest number of returnees. But they are not registered with the Land Restitution Unit, and probably returned some time ago.

other places, the less likely they will be to return to their original homes (Meertens, 2004).[8] Nobody expects a massive return to places of origin after the peace accords are signed or for the foreseeable future.

The most recent polls indicate that at least 70% of the now largely urbanised internally displaced population does not intend to return to its places of origin.[9] On the one hand, attempts to regain land have been met with violence in addition to legal and financial insecurity while, on the other hand, the displaced and other victims have found previously unavailable advantages in their host cities and they can contemplate a better future for their children.

The results of a 2014 survey published by the Administrative Department of National Statistics (DANE) and released by the Unit for Attention and Integrated Reparations for Victims (Victims Unit) validated the notion that IDPs were becoming settled in the various municipalities where they currently reside. The DANE survey report, entitled *Effective Enjoyment of Rights 2013-2014,* indicated growing stability and slow improvements in quality of life (DANE, 2015). The results were mixed but somewhat encouraging. In addition to greater stability among families, poverty levels showed improvement, although were still unacceptably high; more homes had been regularised and documented; and food insecurity was less a problem. The least well off were municipalities along the Pacific coast where – not coincidentally – the largest numbers of Afro-Colombian and indigenous displaced persons are concentrated. While hardly painting a positive picture, the results could be seen as indicating continuing improvements in quality of life, i.e. "effective enjoyment" for IDPs in the host municipalities surveyed, and a justification for a path away from dependence on assistance.

Law 1448 created a Victims Unit charged with coordinating and evaluating public policies for the victims of armed conflict in coordination with all other government and non-government agencies. The unit has offices in every department and has taken on the functions exercised previously under the comprehensive legal framework that had defined the responsibilities of the state toward those displaced by conflict.[10] But definitions and policies have changed with the new legislation: IDPs are now part of a wider category of victims who are entitled to receive progressive levels and kinds of assistance, e.g. immediate humanitarian assistance upon flight, emergency attention and transition assistance for which registration in the system is required. The transition assistance subsidises basic needs – e.g. health, education, documentation and income generation assistance – and is intended to achieve

stabilisation, defined in turn as "effective enjoyment of life". The previously indefinite status of IDPs is to end. Upon achieving stabilisation or "effective enjoyment of life" the victim receives a once-off indemnity for losses[11] and thereafter is treated as other Colombian citizens. Decree 2569 of December 12th 2014 redefined benefits for IDPs under the Victims Law and laid down a path for ending the formally recognised status of displacement (CONPES, 2011; Unidad de Víctimas, 2014). This change of focus is highly controversial. The Constitutional Court has strongly defended the status of IDPs since 2004[12] and rights advocates oppose the changes.

If the government is eventually to relinquish a policy of supporting IDPs as a separate category in favour of one that integrates them into the communities where they settle, it is obvious that achieving this daunting task requires local institutions and municipal and departmental authorities to collaborate with each other, as well as with communities and national institutions. With return levels low and likely to remain so, the Victims Unit continues to play an important role. Since 2012 it has revised the previous assumption that its work would consist primarily of assisting people to return to rural areas. Currently its resources and regional offices are far more often engaged either in helping people who are insecurely settled in a host city to change locations within the same city or assisting them in relocating to a different city.[13] Victims may receive benefits, accompaniment and assistance when moving from one city to another, providing they can establish that they are doing so according to three basic principles: voluntary choice, security and dignity of living conditions. They are required to draw up a plan and establish that they will be relocating to a municipality that is secure and offers them the potential of effective enjoyment of life.

Medium-sized cities and the peace process

Outside of the major urban hubs are medium-sized cities that serve as departmental capitals and important regional trading centres. Their size and resources place them somewhere between rich and poor municipalities, and their potential importance for Colombia's future is too often under-valued. These cities are the administrative centres of every region, bridging rural and urban, national and departmental, and departmental and municipal realms. Medium-sized cities in the former conflict zones received people escaping violence throughout the late 1990s and in the first decade of the 2000s. Numbers continue to grow as violence abates, but economic displacement and poverty drive more people from the rural areas. Medium-sized

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8   Surveys have shown women to be more likely than men to prefer urban life to a return to rural areas. Their family and community status is greater, as is their ability to earn incomes. Young people overwhelmingly prefer urban to rural living.
9   See *El Tiempo* (2014). In the 2014 DANE survey 78% reported that they considered themselves to be already returned or relocated in the place where they currently resided (Segura Álvarez, 2015).
10 Law 387 of 1997.
11 The indemnity is the equivalent of 17 to 27 salaries (interview with Victims Unit personnel, February 12th 2015).
12 In 2004 the court issued Sentencia T-025 on behalf of respect for IDPs and has intervened some 200 times since then in its defence.
13 Interview with Iris Marin and Claudia Santamaria, Victims Unit, February 11th 2015.

cities are growing faster than the largest cities. While they have not received the largest number of conflict victims, they have received the highest percentage in relation to their pre-existing local populations. For example, the city of Florencia, located in the highly conflictive department of Caquetá, has a present population of close to 70% IDPs.[14] Among these heavily impacted cities are Sincelejo and Villavicencio, described below. Conflict-driven migrants have built temporary shelters on private, government-owned and ecologically fragile land. Their presence has brought confrontations with security forces or other armed parties, while weak municipal institutions are able to offer neither adequate protection nor viable options. Churches, non-governmental agencies and international organisations with donor funding are able to fulfil a small portion of the needs.

Today, these medium-sized urban cities are largely unable to productively integrate displaced persons living in their jurisdictions. New infrastructure and extended public services are badly needed. To a far greater extent than the large cities, they depend on the central government to fund all or part of the basic services needed, including education, sanitation, health care and sometimes housing. The challenge for post-conflict Colombia and the country's territorial peace will be to improve the financial base and employment-producing productivity in all cities and to legalise land and housing where former victims can live, thus opening the way to their durable integration. In some cases municipal authorities are themselves implicated in violence and criminality and are unreceptive of measures to improve conditions for IDPs or other poor sectors. In other instances municipal and/or department officials have been petitioning for years for expanded funding from the central government in order to cover public services.[15] The Colombian government, the representatives of UN agencies, donor governments, financial organisations and non-governmental advocacy groups acknowledge that improving regional governance, strengthening institutions and increasing urban resources are the *sine qua non* for meaningful change in post-conflict Colombia.

Two examples of urban realities: Villavicencio and Sincelejo

This section discusses progress in two different settings: in Villavicencio local government planning and capacity-building are improving with assistance from joint UN agency projects, while in Sincelejo there is little or no planning and minimal international engagement.

Villavicencio

Villavicencio is the largest city and the capital of the department of Meta, located only 74 km from Bogotá. It was a quiet village located at the intersection of two rivers until the construction of a road in the 1950s turned the town into a hub of trade and transit and a place of refuge. The areas surrounding the city before the conflict were characterised by open savannas, cattle raising and historically poor subsistence farms. The road opened the town to new markets, but also enabled the coca economy to thrive in the sparsely populated rural region. Coca cultivation along with drug trafficking sustained the local economy and peasants from other regions migrated there.

The FARC dominated the region until the 1990s, when it was partially driven out by paramilitary forces. Conflict involving the FARC, paramilitary forces and the Colombian armed forces produced thousands of victims. Two of the major massacres in the conflict, both attributed to the AUC/paramilitaries, occurred during the 1990s.[16] In the following years thousands of civilians were caught in armed battles between factions of the AUC and the FARC. The latter retained control in parts of Meta and surrounding departments.[17] The combined effect was to fuel a continuing flight from the countryside and its small towns to the cities, especially Villavicencio.

Coca cultivation helped to finance all sides in the continuing conflict and the combined forces of the Colombian government and the U.S. sought its elimination, primarily through fumigation. In two pilot projects during the first decade of the current century in the framework of Plan Colombia in La Macarena and Montes de Maria, Plan Colombia sought to turn these conflict regions into models of good governance and economic opportunity that were no longer dependent on coca cultivation. The effort produced the desired result in eliminating a great deal of coca and partly defeating the insurgents; nevertheless, in areas near Villavicencio the rural population was generally left impoverished by the loss of coca income and was still victimised, resulting in more people leaving (Isacson & Poe, 2009).

Flight continued throughout the region. Since the 2005 census the population in Villavicencio has grown from some 360,000 to about 500,000, with this growth consisting almost entirely of conflict-related migrants.[18] The author was repeatedly told that more people were arriving, often from a long distance away, and were expected to stay. At present the registry of the Victims Unit in Meta department lists 130,000 IDPs, the large majority located in Villavicencio.[19]

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14 Interview with UNHCR personnel, February 3rd 2015. Cities in this medium-sized category are Bucaramanga, Buenaventura, Barranca Bermeja, Cúcuta, Florencia, Ibagué, Monteria, Neiva, Santa Marta, Sincelejo, Tumaco, Valledupar and Villavicencio.
15 Very different local responses are examined in Vidal López (2011).
16 Mapiripan and Puerto Alvira.
17 In 1998, during the Pastrana presidency, the FARC established its area of ¨*distención*¨ in San Vicente de Caguan in the western part of the area. Hopes that this would enhance prospects for peace were sharply defeated.
18 Interviews with Laura Urrea, secretary of urban development, Villavicencio, and Leticia Camacho, director of the Office of International Cooperation, Meta, February 9th 2015.
19 Interview with Javier Velasquez and Susana Medina, Victims Unit, Villavicencio, February 11th 2015.

People continue to arrive in Villavicencio at least in part because the city authorities are attempting to absorb the new population through long-term planning and investment in solutions. The first challenge facing Villavicencio's local officials and city planners was the rapid occupation of government land in the 1990s by desperate IDPs. The land was uninhabited, but ecologically fragile and therefore largely unsuited for settlement. Under regulations for the protection of IDPs the city could not simply expel the trespassers. To address this issue in a durable and comprehensive way required finding other options; this remains the challenge today. Moving the conflict-driven trespassers humanely means identifying other available land, building viable communities where the violence they had escaped would not reoccur, bringing in public services and, for all these purposes, mobilising a large quantity of resources. At the same time the city faces a growing shortage of water and shrinking sources of income and employment as oil prices and supplies decline and productivity is stagnant.

The second challenge, related to the first, is to legalise the settlements where people have been living, if they are otherwise viable for habitation. This requires the settlers to petition for legalisation – which is bureaucratically complicated and involves both the departmental and municipal governments – and to negotiate with owners. Legalised settlements are then eligible for public services and new infrastructure as appropriate. Community organisations in legalised settlements have standing in the municipality; those without legal status do not. The process is ongoing and progress is not only slow, but costly. The mayor has indicated willingness to spend more on improvements, but taxation in Villavicencio is a limited option. Meta department earns funds from the federal government for its oil extraction, but these funds are not expected to last as oil prices fall and extraction declines.

Assisting these efforts, the UN agencies working in Meta undertook cooperative efforts with each other and with local authorities in order to find viable solutions and funding. UNHCR and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) are leading multi-agency efforts to integrate the IDP population into the urban fabric by improving institutional capacities and encouraging community organisations among IDPs. The UN alliance is a local manifestation of the Transitional Solutions Programme (TSI), a UNDP-UNHCR collaboration implemented in 17 communities, including Villavicencio, where conditions were determined to be conducive to efforts that facilitate self-reliance and development (UNHCR, 2013). Local integration is a major priority.[20]

The projects are wide-reaching, including labour initiatives, credit innovations, food security and income generation. The most ambitious project is the "13th of May" settlement. It combines municipal outreach, UN service and resources,

and a share of free housing that has been offered by the Presidency, largely intended for the internally displaced. The settlement, built on land owned by the municipality, has been legalised; housing titles are being issued; community organisations participate in governance; and, for the time being at least, many residents are employed in construction. This community of resettled IDPs and others like it are on the way to becoming an integral part of Villavicencio.

Continuing growth is inevitable, but Villavicencio's capacity to continue to absorb the growth is questionable for the reasons elaborated in this section. The urban planning in the city is not yet matched by similar planning outside it in the agrarian sector. Coca, once cultivated by small growers, has been replaced by large plantations of African palm owned by many of the same AUC militants who expropriated peasant land. Present cultivation levels of rice, cotton, etc. grown on small plots are stubbornly low, suggesting continuing migration from the countryside. Another worry shared by many is that demobilised former FARC insurgents will settle in large numbers in the city and not, as anticipated, in rural areas. If so, they too will need to be integrated; it is hoped they will become part of what is now a peaceful process.

Sincelejo

If there are valid causes for concern in Villavicencio, there are serious causes for pessimism over prospects that territorial peace plans will lead to successful integration in Sincelejo, the capital of Sucre department. Like Villavicencio, Sincelejo was a traditional rural town, dominated by land owners and cattle ranchers. It is somewhat smaller than Villavicencio, estimated by DANE in 2009 as having 230,000 inhabitants, up from its pre-conflict level of about 150,000. Both cities grew rapidly when they received thousands of victims in a short period of time from zones of brutally violent conflict. Like Villavicencio, Sincelejo is close to a major city – 125 km from Cartagena, but historically and culturally in a different world.

A U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-sponsored report on medium-sized cities written prior to the implementation of the Victims Law (Forero Pardo, 2011) found that IDPs faced a dire situation: while some 18,000 households had registered as internally displaced and sought benefits due to them, the municipality had attended to a mere 2%. No land had been made available for housing and the agencies charged to deal with housing had not met since 2007. The mayor had failed to comply with most of the requirements mandated by Colombian law and courts on behalf of IDPs. It could not be assumed that dramatically positive changes would follow the implementation of the Victims Law because the basic structures were not in place in the city.

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20 Excerpted from material received on Meta in relation to TSI, "Update for Colombia", July 2014, and from discussions in Villavicencio with officials engaged in urban integration, February 11th-12th 2015.

Sincelejo is adjacent to Montes de Maria, a mountainous area where extreme violence emptied communities and transformed local economies. As in Villavicencio in the 1970s and 1980s, leftist insurgents, mainly FARC, claimed to defend the rights of poor peasants against the cattle ranchers and were resisted by landowner militias. By the 1990s the newly organised AUC was aiming its fire primarily against the poor peasants whom the FARC were defending. Thousands died in massacres in Montes de Maria between 1999 and 2000. The survivors fled. Violence grew further until the Colombian military was sent to the area and violence abated by 2002. However, the long-present narco-traffickers who found the region ideal for their purposes joined with the still-present paramilitary forces to seize land or force peasants to sell it. The survivors of massacres and outright conflict, joined by the now-landless peasants, fled to cities, and Sincelejo was one of the major destinations.[21] A UN expert estimated that 98,000 victims have fled to Sincelejo since the 1990s.[22]

Desperate people in flight occupied vacant land, constructed informal houses and remained. The owners of the urban properties suffered losses that were not compensated. The authorities did not address the situation seriously and residents of this once-quiet city became poorer and embittered by events. Local politicians are believed to have remained closely tied to both the drug traffickers and the former paramilitary cadres. The latter are demobilised and many have settled in Sincelejo, reportedly increasing crime rates. Today, even in a country where everybody identifies corruption as a major national problem, Sincelejo is especially well known for widespread corruption at every level. The city and department of Sucre have access to funding from the central government thanks to the payments from mineral extraction. But the income from minerals reportedly remains largely in the hands of foreign owners and is not, as is now legally mandated, distributed to meet common needs.

In the absence of government services or protection, the Catholic church, through Pastoral Social, has come to play a major and essential role in attending to victims' needs. It channels donor funding for the community (characterised as too-often short term and of limited scope), devotes efforts to organising collective self-help, and defuses conflicts that arise among the poor, involving the IDP victims and the "historic poor" of longer standing in the town. Support for community organisations extends beyond the city to smaller towns in the area, e.g. there are over 40 organised groups in the town of San Onofre, a nearby county seat.[23] The Pastoral Social has helped IDP communities to organise and represent their needs to authorities, but local institutions are ill prepared to respond. Among

the major demands are improvements in education – once fairly strong – and the now-broken health-care system. Equally or more urgent is to legalise land and housing in a similar way to the processes under way in Villavicencio. Prospects are not encouraging. The UN expert cited above who had worked for several years in the city concluded that planning for peace is not on the present political agenda. Officials in the National Planning Department characterised the situation in Sincelejo as "disturbing".[24]

Concluding observations and recommendations

In the preparation of this report the author has been greatly encouraged by the degree of support for her basic premise that Colombia's cities, and especially medium-sized cities in the former conflict zones, need more attention. While the measures in the peace accords reiterate a commitment to rural reform, human rights and development, none of these is possible unless reform, human rights and development policies are applied to regional cities as well. Millions sought refuge in these cities and by all accounts the majority will remain there, still in need of durable integration. A goal of territorial peace should be to permit people to establish lives with both urban and agricultural elements. The cities in question have suffered in multiple ways from the massive influx of displaced persons. The development of healthy and viable cities in or near former conflict areas can potentially restore the well-being of the now-larger populations living there. The victims who are able to re-establish their lives in regional urban centres with culturally familiar environments are more likely to become active participants in regional development than are those who resettle in distant, culturally distinct megacities.

At the same time a comprehensive regional development plan would buttress rural economies by absorbing and employing present and future population growth.[25] The absence of protection and security in rural areas led to massive flight to cities. Access to these rights is also at risk in the urban spaces where they have sought refuge. Positive forms of urban development must be planned and nurtured.

As has been shown, authorities in national institutions with responsibilities in support of the 2011 Victims Law are taking positive steps that recognise demographic realities and outstanding needs. But centralisation is a difficult habit to break, especially when municipal institutions remain as weak and (often) corrupt as they are. The obvious consequence is that local governments are not providing services adequately to people who need them.

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21 Much of the information regarding Sincelejo has been drawn from interviews in the Pastoral Social of the Catholic Curia.
22 Interview with Freddy Garcia, UNDP, February 7th 2015.
23 Interviews with Norly Herrera, a resident of San Onofre, and Tatiana Palmeth of the Pastoral Social, February 6th 2015.
24 Interview with DNP officials, February 12th 2015.
25 One example of this kind of policy, although not covered here, is Florencia, located in the highly conflictive department of Caquetá. Reportedly the establishment of rural linkages between Florencia and the surrounding countryside has yielded positive results in both areas. In Antioquia USAID-supported projects for collective rural efforts could be helpful for establishing stronger rural-urban links.

These services are the joint responsibility of the national and municipal governments and need to be better coordinated than is now the case. The central government, helpfully, has made available funding for 100,000 homes for the poor, most of which are to be given to formerly displaced persons. Decisions on beneficiaries are made locally.

The current financial arrangements that reward wealthy municipals and sacrifice the poorer ones need revision. Funding made available from national, local and international sources should be equitably channeled so that victims receive benefits. Local authority can be strengthened and officials can be better trained to improve practices for attending to the needs of victims and other vulnerable sectors, and encouraging organised citizen participation. Today's "victims" encompass not only existing recognised categories, but those emerging as a consequence of criminal activities.

The ongoing collaboration and cooperation between UNHCR and UNDP in TSI, observed in Villavicencio, has a significant record of achievements. It was designed as a response to the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011 in 17 communities where efforts that facilitate self-reliance and development are judged to be viable. TSI has channeled funding for land and housing initiatives, governance and institutional strengthening, community strengthening, local economic development, and support for victims' organisations.[26] Working in small local contexts outside the realm of humanitarian assistance is a new learning experience for the organisations involved. UNDP has lunched an inter-agency project that proposes to bring about improvements in 150 municipalities, largely the smaller ones singled out by the peace agreement as most in need, but also including several medium-sized cities.[27] The project's stated objective is to strengthen local institutions to respond to victims in all conflict-affected regions. Such a strategy, it is obvious, requires generous international funding. Preliminary explorations of donor intentions do not yield optimism, however. Previous international humanitarian and development support for Colombia may diminish on the false premise that a peace agreement alone constitutes the desired end to the peace process.

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26   Funding from Canada, Spain, Sweden and the U.S., as well as the Colombian government ("TSI progress update", July 2014).
27   The proposal defines its purpose: "Construyendo Confianza en la Paz, Una propuesta de marco estratégico para possibles contributions de las Naciones Unidas y la comunicad internacional, a la implementation terrane del Acuerdo de Paz".

List of interviews in Bogotá, Villavicencio and Sincelejo,* February 2015

Letícia Camacho	Meta department
Edgar Cataño Sánchez	UN Habitat
David Duran	Department of National Planning
Amelia Fernández Juan	Universidad Javeriana
Edgar Forero Pardo	UNDP
Jenny Galvis Rey	UNDP (Villavicencio)
Freddy Garcia	UNDP (Sincelejo)
Lina Garcia	Department of National Planning
Carlos Gómez	Office of the Mayor (Villavicencio)
Norly Herrera	Mesa de Victimas, San Onofre
Ana Maria Ibañez	Universidad de los Andes
Stephan Jaquemet	UNHCR
Carlos Lesser Sonabria	UNDP (Villavicencio)
Iris Marin Ortiz	Victims Unit
Claudia Juliana Mello	Department of National Planning
Susana Medina	Victims Unit (Meta)
Fernando Gabriel Mesa Luna	Pastoral Social
Maria Morales	Pastoral Social (Sincelejo)
Pontus Ohrstedt	UNDP
Manuel Oveido Herrera	UNHCR
Tatiana Palmets	Pastoral Social (Sincelejo)
Pedro Pratoba	UNHCR (Villavicencio)
Jose Luis Rodríquez	Defensoria del Pueblo, Sincelejo
Juan Pablo Reston	Student (Sincelejo)
Fernando Rojas	Economist, World Bank
Hector Orlando Solano	COFREM (Villavicencio)
Yamile Salinas Abdala	INDEPAZ
Claudia Santamaría	Victims Unit
Christian Voelkel	International Crisis Group
Pär Westling	UNHCR (Villavicencio)**

* Interviews conducted in Bogotá unless otherwise indicated.
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