Women and Land

in_focus

CASE STUDY
COLOMBIA

Land holds promise of peace in Colombia

Research has become a driving force behind upcoming land restitution efforts in Colombia, where for decades peasants have lost land by violent means. The initiative is especially important for women, who have also built new networks in pursuit of a broad range of social goals.

With coloured pens and large sheets of white paper, a group of women in Colombia are bringing the past back to life. They map out the physical contours of the terrain they once called home and their experiences there. They draw their recollections of life before conflict. They draw the landmarks that were once part of their daily lives. They draw the events that forced them to leave.

This seemingly simple activity plays a potentially crucial role within Colombia's urgent quest to address one of its most pressing social problems. Unequal land distribution fed decades of bloody civil war and today continues to cast doubt on the viability of the country's uneasy peace.

Brought together by the Historical Memory Group of Colombia's National Commission of Reparations and Reconciliation, these women wield their coloured pens to achieve a number of specific goals.

First, they are creating tangible expressions of a history that might otherwise have been lost. In that sense, these drawings are monuments to a disquieting past that demand attention and a meaningful response from the society around them.

Second, the pictures these displaced women create provide a kind of personal therapy, allowing them to look on their own experiences from a distance — as pictures on a wall — and to move beyond the past.

Grupo de Memoria Histórica/CNRR

Women displaced by violence in Colombia map their old territory at workshops organized by the Historical Memory Group.

A visual record of loss

Third, and perhaps most important, is the more practical goal of this exercise. By using the drawings literally as maps — by piecing together individual renderings of small land plots and cross-referencing them with geographic surveys of the area — the commission aims to document where displaced farmers came from and how they lost their land. This way, the victims' experiences form a composite picture of the ways that violent actors — and opportunistic entrepreneurs — have seized control of land that peasants abandoned. These insights are crucial for the government's land restitution law, which aims to repair some of the damage done to former peasant landholders.

With funding from IDRC, the Historical Memory Group's work on violent land seizures has focused on the departments of Córdoba and Sucre, which includes the Montes de María region on Colombia's Caribbean coast. The striking imbalance in land distribution there has fed high rates of poverty and a history of violence. The current rates of rural poverty are 68% in Sucre and 66% in Córdoba, well above the national rural poverty rate of 46%.

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Campaign cut short by war

Landless peasants, struggling to survive, attempted to improve their situation in the 1970s through a non-violent campaign to seize lands and assume *de facto* ownership. Their rallying cry was "the land belongs to those who work it." But conflict over land didn't remain non-violent for long. The persecution that peasants initially faced turned into overt violence by the end of the 1980s. Then, paramilitary groups, sponsored by large landowners and drug cartels, began brutally suppressing the peasant resistance that had prompted the government to adopt a limited land reform. A decades-long cycle of bloodshed began. Faced with pressure from two politically opposed armed groups — the guerrillas and the paramilitary — the peasant movement verged on collapse.

Though all small farmers in the Caribbean coast region face problems when trying to gain access to land, the situation is especially problematic for women. Though women were legally granted the right to own land in the 1960s, "there is a very large gap between what the law says and what happens in practice," says assistant researcher Eliana Pinto from the Historical Memory Group. For example, widows who jointly worked small plots with their husbands have difficulty proving their ownership share, particularly if they were not formally married.

Peasant women's struggles are complicated by an enveloping climate of repression. In this area, a system of cronyism concentrates power in the hands of a few wealthy men, and little protection is afforded to poor women. For example, Eliana Pinto says the widespread tolerance of the sexual abuse of workers' daughters by wealthy landowners indicates how few rights women here possess.

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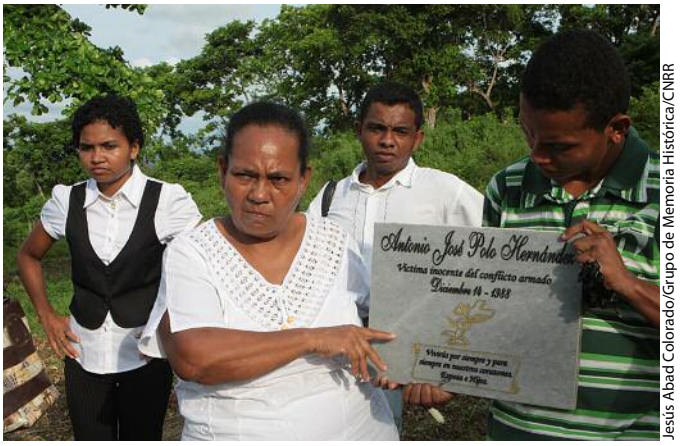
Activists at a meeting in the 1970s heyday of Colombia's peasant movement. (Photo first published in *Carta Campesina* magazine, November 1977.)



Jesús Abad Colorado/Grupo de Memoria Histórica/CNRR

By the late 1980s, paramilitary groups overtly targeted peasant groups involved in land reform. Community leader María Zabala's husband was assassinated in 1988.

Women have found themselves facing violence as a response to their demands. In Córdoba, for example, several women who made claims to land have been murdered. Says Eliana Pinto: "Violence is everywhere, and we began to see that the cultural acceptance of violence against women in a way legitimizes this use of violence as a political tool."

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This deeper understanding of the social context of displaced women's travails was an unexpected consequence of a two-phased research approach. In the first phase, the Historical Memory Group interviewed 200 men and women about the events that had driven them from their land, and about the history of peasant organizations' attempts to stay on the land. Women, whose roles were of special interest to the researchers, then took part in special workshops that included the mapping exercises described earlier. As the discussions broadened, the researchers gained a more complete picture of the complex forces that had displaced poor landowners, of poor women's daily lives, and of the challenges that complicate their quest for equality.

Land seized or abandoned

Gaining a better sense of the circumstances that led to displacement has been particularly important. The Historical Memory Group has made recommendations to Colombia's Minister of Agriculture on the land restitution law, and has influenced the extensive debate of the law in Colombia's Congress. Based on its findings on how displacements have occurred, the group advised the minister that the eligibility for land claims should be broadened to include more than just direct victims of violence.

"What we've seen is that land seizures are a chain of actions and of actors," explains Donny Meertens, a social science professor at Colombia's National University and Universidad Javeriana. "It's not always that people are kicked off their lands by violent actors themselves. People may be forcibly displaced, but they may also abandon their lands because there have been massacres nearby or assassinations in their communities. This displacement is a form of prevention — people move because they want to protect their lives."

In such cases, peasants' claims to become part of the restitution process can be supported by cross-referencing their movements with events that occurred during the civil war. Says Meertens: "It's easy to prove because we have compiled statistics for this special region on the Caribbean coast that directly link the number of displaced people to the intensity of massacres and other forms of violence in the region."

The situation often gets murkier after the peasants have been driven from their land. Several possible sets of occurrences may make it appear that former landholders no longer have any claim on the land. Often, for example, large landowners have occupied the abandoned lands and incorporated them into plantations, sometimes with the connivance of corrupt local registry officials who assign title to the new occupants. Meertens reports that both the Historical Memory Group and the Ministry of Agriculture have documented numerous cases of officials being bribed to give title to the new occupants. In addition, because of the area's tradition of informal land tenure, many peasants who worked the land may not have had a deed. This works against their efforts to reclaim their property.

Debt and coercion

In other instances, peasants have been coerced into signing away their ownership by debt collectors. Many people who benefited from the land reform program in the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, fled their homes still owing money spent to buy equipment, agricultural inputs, and to pay for the land itself. They invariably faced poverty in their new surroundings and had

Scott Wallace/World Bank

As part of Colombia's land restitution efforts, the Historical Memory Group has documented where displaced farmers came from and how they lost their land.

minimal prospects of being able to return home. If their plots are in guerrilla-controlled territory, for instance, returning would brand them as guerrilla sympathizers and make them targets of security forces. Similarly, if their old homes are located in areas controlled by the criminal gangs formed from the remnants of paramilitary groups, it may be too dangerous to return.

And so, when debt collectors — some of them foreign firms that had bought blocks of outstanding debts from the land reform institute — approached the former farmers with offers to buy their land for a fraction of its value, many accepted. Widowed women with children to support felt a particularly strong pressure to sign away their land for debt relief or a little cash. Meanwhile, other women who had no way of proving their ownership of the land were simply assumed to have always been landless and ignored.

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What these tangled stories show, Meertens says, is that many of the current situations of displaced peasant families are traceable to earlier campaigns of violence and intimidation. That provides reason to consider their claims for compensation, since the initial injustice was never addressed. When debt collectors swooped in or new occupants seized their properties, "there was no question of thinking of redress or reparation or compensation for losses," she says.

Law only part of solution

But righting this now-entrenched wrong will not be easy. Meertens says that passing the historic land restitution bill is just the start of a demanding, perilous process. The government has already recognized that within the Caribbean coast's pervasive climate of violence, assigning land as compensation will require the deployment of national security forces to protect the recipients.

Beyond security issues, Meertens says, the national government also needs to tackle local corruption and ensure that farmers regaining their lands are given training, technical assistance, and other support. Monitoring of future land restitution will also be important, partly to ensure that women are not left out of the process.

Meanwhile, women's groups are making strides on their own. The Historical Memory Group has found that women have assumed leadership roles within new organizations that work to improve the lives of women. For example, the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas de Bolivar not only lobbies for compensation for displaced women, but also has violence prevention programs, has bought land, and even built a neighbourhood. Other women's organizations run shops and small manufacturing operations, and work on environmental protection initiatives.

"There is this idea that the peasant movement was beaten," Meertens says. "But the story we unravelled is that women have continued to work at the local level through their own networks and organizations. Women have much more autonomy today than they had when the peasant movement was in its heyday in the 1970s."

This case study was written by Stephen Dale.

The views expressed in this case study are those of IDRC-funded researchers and experts in the field.

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