

## Exclusion and institutionalized criminalization: The case of forced displacement in Bogota, Colombia

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### Abstract

The Colombian government's program for reception and support of forcibly displaced migrants is the main body for ensuring that the rights of these persons are guaranteed through the provision of appropriate assistance. Through extensive ethnographic fieldwork, this study examines the bureaucratic practice of the government aid program in Bogota and the processes that lead to the exclusion of specific categories of migrants. The research found that the classificatory and statistical procedures used resulted in the systematic and coordinated exclusion of certain groups of migrants. As opposed to being failures of a bureaucratic system, this practice operates to sustain and reify the political narrative that forced displacement and violence have significantly subsided. At another level, the study found that the bureaucratic practice of service provision is a principle social space for the production and reproduction of a social imaginary of the displaced migrants as needy, suspicious and potentially threatening.

KEYWORDS: migration, forced displacement, exclusion, bureaucratic system

### Introduction

Forced displacement in Colombia has been driven by various armed conflicts and multiple forms of violence. During the period known as *La Violencia*, which pitted the conservative and liberal parties against each other, threats, assassinations, massacres, forced conscription, and armed confrontation characterized the struggle for power and control of land and territory. Neither the demobilization of paramilitaries, led by the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez between 2003 and 2006, nor the peace agreements initiated in 2012, between the Colombian government of Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolu-

tionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC), have stemmed conflict and population displacements. In fact, violence exercised by the successors of the traditional armed groups has intensified and diversified as a consequence of drug trafficking, criminal interests, and connections with the political elite. The impact on displacement is evident in Colombian government data, which shows that almost 8.4 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes between 1985 and December 2022, either as a direct or indirect consequence of armed conflict, and, according to the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES 2021), between January and November 2021, the Colombian government registered 167 mass displacements across the country, involving 82,846 persons—the largest number of displaced persons in the previous five years.

In Bogota, Distrito Capital (hereafter Bogota), which receives the most internal migrants, displaced persons are usually forced to relocate to irregular dwellings on the outskirts of the city, which have quickly developed to large scale shantytowns. The inhabitants of these neighborhoods live at the mercy of the armed groups—strategically referred to as criminal gangs by government institutions and in most political discourse and the media—that control these areas.

The aim of this article, and the research that underpins it, is to analyze the government’s administrative system for the reception and support of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Bogota. Specifically, the study examines the bureaucratic practice of service delivery and the construction of representations of the displaced population as problematic, flawed, and threatening, as well as the administrative practices that lead to the systematic exclusion of certain categories of IDPs.

As this article also shows, the places where political power is materialized, such as in adaptations and interpretations of legal mandates in everyday bureaucratic practice, are strategic locations for the observation and analysis of symbolic violence against migrants by the state (Bourdieu, 1994).

### ***The category of the forcibly displaced person***

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement outlines the rights and protections available to IDPs and defines them as:

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, viola-

tions of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (OCHA, 2004, 1).

The Colombian state formally recognized these Principles, elevating them to the status of constitutional law and therefore giving legal protection to IDPs and recognizing the Colombian State's obligation to respond to their needs. In turn, Colombian Law 387 of 1997 established the fundamental rights of IDPs and the duties of the State to care for this population and "to formulate policies and adopt measures for the prevention of forced displacement, and for assistance, protection, socioeconomic consolidation and stabilization of persons internally displaced by violence."<sup>1</sup>

As a consequence of this recognition in Colombian legislation, the Colombian government designed and implemented, mainly after Law 1448 of 2011, a set of public policies conceived as a system of reception and care for the displaced population. The first step within this care route of social support conceived by the Colombian state to attend to this population consisted of identifying the people who were to be recognized as victims of forced displacement by government institutions (Rivera, 2021). In order to qualify for this recognition and the assistance thus made possible, the first thing that people had to do was to make a statement of the facts that caused the displacement in front of an official in specially designated spaces. This first bureaucratic step in the care route is the specific tool of the bureaucratic system analyzed in this article. This first step, the declaration of applicants seeking official recognition as IDPs by the state and the emergency assistance—food vouchers and temporary shelter—provided (or not) at the time of the declaration, is, in fact, of vital importance and significance as it can either be the gateway to the rest of the assistance system for those whose declarations are considered valid as examples of forced displacement, or it can result in the denial of any assistance or recognition in relation to forced displacement by the state.

In this article, "forced" displacement refers to internal migrants who left their places of residence and settled in Bogota or its surrounding area as a consequence not only of the armed conflict between armed groups over disputed territory, which has been ongoing for more than 50 years in Colombia, but also as a result of political and economic violence, such as the wholesale dispossession of traditional peasant lands that the majority of these migrants had originally occupied (Sanford & Asale, 2006; Pérez, 2004; Cerri, 2011; Castillejo, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Colombia, The Congress of Colombia, The displaced and the responsibility of the State, Law 387 of 1997, Diario Oficial [Official Gazette] No. 43,091 of July 24, 1997. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a255b374.pdf>

The first group, those displaced as a consequence of the armed conflict, would consist of those displaced by the war, i.e. by the violence exercised by the guerrillas, mainly the FARC, as well as by paramilitary groups and the Colombian army after the 1960s, while the second group would consist mainly of those displaced in times or places of “peace,” but also of those expelled from their homes and lands prior to the consolidation of the aforementioned armed groups. It is not the aim of this article to produce a critique of the politics of labeling of the different groups and categories of internal migrants, but it is necessary to make this point since this distinction between categories of migrants is exercised by the bureaucratic apparatus of care analyzed here in its daily praxis. The only migrants who are likely to be recognized as IDPs by government institutions are, in fact, the former, those displaced by the armed conflict that is usually defined as a low-intensity (or *guerrilla*) war that began in the 1960s (Pizarro, 2002). The perspective assumed in this article is, however, that rural migrants who are located in the informal neighborhoods of Bogota's periphery continue a process of colonization<sup>2</sup> that began more than a century ago in the Colombian countryside and which, especially in recent decades, has moved to the cities. Initially, it was not the armed conflict but agricultural industrialization, pursued by large landowners supported by the state and local authorities, that forced peasants to move and “*tumbar monte*” (clear the hills) in order to obtain a piece of land to work for their subsistence. At the beginning of the 20th century, feudal land ownership practices were still dominant in most regions of the country. Law 61 of 1874 and Law 48 of 1882 stipulated that whoever cultivated vacant land would become its legal owner, which prompted many peasant settlers to occupy unproductive land which, in theory, they could not be dispossessed of, even though they did not yet possess title deeds. Conflicts between settlers and landowners intensified and the landowners, in collusion with local political authorities, and sometimes through the hiring of small groups of armed men, began a process of threats, harassment and systematic expulsion of settlers who refused to sign sharecropping or leasing contracts (Pérez, 2004; Mondragón, 2002). Gradually, from 1930 onwards, many of the *haciendas* (landowners' estates) were transformed into capitalist agricultural enterprises that transformed tenant farmers into wage laborers (Legrand, 1994). A “bimodal” structure was thus consolidated in relation to the agricultural exploitation of Colombian territory: corporate agriculture, which tried to compete in the international market with different plantations and large-scale crops such as bananas, coffee, cotton, soya, rice and, more recently, palm; and peasant agricul-

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<sup>2</sup>The term *colonize* is employed here in its etymological sense of cultivating new land in order to inhabit it. In the Colombian context, the notion designates processes of land occupation and utilization—frequently of state-owned vacant territories lacking effective state presence—driven both by subsistence imperatives and by the pursuit of land tenure on the part of dispossessed peasants as well as segments of the urban poor.

ture, developed at the family level on small or medium-sized plots, aimed at subsistence and sale in local markets, and in which the diversity of crops was greater. For landowners, in need of peasant labor to work on their increasingly export-oriented farms, the possibility of poor peasants gaining access to land posed a considerable risk. Landowners, whose interests clashed strongly with the colonization process of landless peasants, opted to secure the source of cheap labor by controlling the land (Rodríguez, 2013). Colonization processes usually ended with the expulsion of settlers and the concentration of land in the hands of landowners who, often supported by members of the conservative party, carried out persecutions and selective assassinations of social leaders and violent and systematic expulsions of settlers who aspired to the titling of the land they occupied (Rodríguez, 2013, p. 64). The final outbreak of violence was triggered by the assassination of the hugely popular Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948 in Bogota, which began the era known as "*La Violencia*" (The Violence) between supporters of the Liberal and Conservative parties. It could be considered an undeclared civil war in which ideological motivations were inseparably intertwined with conflicts over land ownership. It is estimated that between 1948 and 1960 more than 200,000 people were killed and more than two million were forced to migrate from their homes, mostly peasants faithful to the Liberal party (Molano, 1994; Molano, 2012).

From the point of view of liberal economists, peasant smallholdings were considered an obstacle to progress because they did not contribute to the development of the economic potential of rural areas. During the 1950s, a group of economists, including Lauchlin Currie and Edith Holt Whetham, defended the need to reduce the number of Colombian rural dwellers, to extend the new industrialized and "modern" system of organizing agricultural production to the whole of Colombia, and to promote the migration of peasants to the cities, even by repressive means (Pérez, 2004, p. 75). During the government of Eduardo Pastrana, a member of the Conservative party, in the early 1970s, the "Currie Plan" was implemented, which designed strategies for the emigration of peasants to the city in order to increase agricultural productivity.

Numerous studies have identified the still ongoing relationship between forced displacement due to land dispossession caused by the expansion of mining companies, oil palm monoculture plantations, and paramilitary activity in areas highly controlled by the State armed forces (CODHES, 2011; Osorio, 2015). However, forced migration associated with land conflicts in times of "peace" and in areas relatively free of armed confrontations is not recognized by the authorities or by government aid programs, and, for example, because political leaders accuse guerrillas of financing through illegal mining,

all artisanal miners displaced to the cities are under suspicion for collaboration with, or being members of, guerrilla groups. Frequently, this means that their applications for official recognition as displaced persons are rejected and they are denied access to government support (González-Enríquez, 2020).

The case of Luisa, a 37-year-old displaced woman from the department of Antioquia, is a good example of this.

I was displaced by the mining company, the dogs [men] hired by the mining company, because they wanted my land and they didn't want us to compete with them, but I was so stupid, I told the truth when I arrived at the UAO, and I was left without help.<sup>3</sup>

I have, in fact, interviewed several migrants whose applications for recognition as displaced persons had been rejected and others who had decided not to submit a statement, having been too discouraged by acquaintances' experiences with the administrative system.

From this historical perspective, "violence ceases to appear as opposed to order to show its constituent character of order. It is not a pathological, abnormal state, but an element of strategic importance for the construction of peculiar social orders" (Rodríguez, 2013, 59).

Forced displacement, including the settlement of the informal peripheries of the city of Bogota, responds to a continuum of uncertainty in the form of land ownership, to the lack of protection by the state, both in rural and urban contexts, and to the various forms of violence exercised on the vulnerable population for more than a century in the Colombian context. This continuum of violence, which runs through both the routine violence of everyday life and the outbreaks of extraordinary forms of violence, occurs in times of peace as well as in times of war (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Everyday violence, according to Nancy Scheper-Hughes, can be understood as those small routines and violent actions practiced in a normative way on vulnerable bodies in bureaucratic and administrative establishments, among other contexts. But this definition, as Philippe Bourgois pointed out, overlaps greatly with forms of structural violence and its everyday effects (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Bourgois, 2001). The analysis presented in this article aims to shed light precisely on this overlap or juxtaposition by showing how the routine daily praxis of the bureaucratic apparatus and its "micro-violence" connect and

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<sup>3</sup> Reception and Support Offices [*Unidades de Atención y Orientación*], a government programme for the assistance of displaced migrants in Bogota.

intertwine with forms of exclusion, discrimination and criminalization exercised at the macro level by Colombian state institutions.

From a legal point of view, the migrant population in Colombia is a clearly defined group with homogeneous rights and administrative protections. However, from an anthropological perspective, it is not possible to speak of forcibly displaced persons in these terms, since their lives are defined by instability, mobility and transience. Forced displacement must be understood as a contextual, interactive, and processual phenomenon and, therefore, involving changing identity construction. Everyday, displaced persons must navigate between multiple classificatory systems (Bartolomé, 2008, p. 42; Vila, 1999, p. 81), attempting to have their status as forced migrants recognized in government institutions at the same time as concealing it in the informal neighborhoods where they reside. Displacement should therefore be understood as a process that incorporates the events and circumstances prior to migration, the journey and routes, the arrival at a new location, and the various strategies for reconstructing a life project in the new urban social environment (Meertens, 2001, p. 79).

On the other hand, the bureaucratic practice of state programs should not be understood as simply the implementation and materialization of the legislative corpus but should be analyzed as the way in which this legislative corpus is interpreted and applied in a system of changing political relations (Herzfeld, 1992, p. 115). Each application of the law constitutes an interpretation that translates the dominant nationalist discourse and ideology into the everyday practice of classifying people (and non-citizens) through exclusion and inclusion criteria that are not actually stated in the law itself. Thus, the bureaucratic system emerges as a distributive body for citizens' rights and associated government services that, in theory, is based on international, national and local legislation, but in practice is arbitrary (Holston, 2008, p. 331).

### **Methods, materials and context**

The research methods employed in this study combine document analysis and historical research with ethnographic fieldwork, including unstructured interviews, the collection of life histories, and observation. The document analysis included a review of legal texts, such as regulations, laws, decrees and rulings of the Constitutional Court of Colombia, among others. The fieldwork was carried out between September 2008 and February 2009 and between September 2011 and January 2012 in various locations, conforming to an approach that has been termed multi-situational or multi-local ethnography (Marcus, 2001, p. 116). The fieldwork was mainly carried out at two different times under the

conservative government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez and the more moderate government of Juan Manuel Santos Calderón. Between September and October 2019, some interviews were also conducted under the conservative government of Iván Duque Márquez.

This included visiting government-run Reception and Support Offices (Unidades de Atención y Orientación (UAO)) for IDPs, NGOs, informal settlements on the outskirts of Bogota, and two rural areas experiencing large scale displacement and expulsion: Chocó and Valle del Cauca, each about 400 km from Bogota. In terms of the UAOs, I conducted interviews with nine officials responsible for receiving migrants' declarations and delivering (or not) emergency aid to them, and 60 IDPs in two of the six offices in Bogota, located in Puente Aranda and Suba, which were chosen because of their location and representativeness.<sup>4</sup> In conjunction with Fundación Colombia Nuevos Horizontes, an NGO that provides temporary shelter to Colombian migrants recently arrived in the capital, I conducted 30 unstructured interviews and 10 life history interviews with internally displaced migrants. In collaboration with the children's toy library Corporación Humanitaria Tierra Viva, which operates in the informal neighborhoods of Altos de Cazucá in the municipality of Soacha, on the outskirts of Bogota, I carried out 25 interviews and life histories with IDPs who had migrated to the capital in the previous years, some many decades beforehand. Finally, in the rural areas of Chocó and Valle del Cauca, I interviewed 15 and five migrants, respectively, who had been displaced from other areas within those same regions.

My role as a researcher in the field evolved throughout the course of the fieldwork, depending both on the possibilities of access and the research interests. My work with UNHCR as a public policy consultant provided me with access to government officials, institutions, and decision-making spaces that I would not have been able to reach otherwise. At the same time, my volunteer work at the children's play center in the neighborhood of Altos de Cazucá—where I offered various workshops for local children while living with a local family—allowed me to get to know families both in public and in more intimate, private settings.

In terms of the fieldwork in Altos de Cazucá, some background may be useful to orient the research results. Many of the displaced persons arriving to Bogota settle in informal neighborhoods such as Altos de Cazucá, part of the town of Soacha, a very low-income area located to the south-west of Bogota. Even though from an administrative perspective Soacha is a different municipality, it is part of the Bogota conurbation and depends on it economically. Known as *La Loma* (The Hill) by its inhabitants, it is largely made up

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<sup>4</sup>There were 6 at the time of the fieldwork.

of informal settlements—residents tend not to hold land property titles. The area has grown quickly in the last twenty to thirty years because of the continual arrival of displaced families from the Colombian provinces. The area lacks public utilities and infrastructure such as proper roads, potable water, sewage systems, and electricity and most social services are provided by international aid agencies. The dire living conditions are exacerbated by street crime and violence by armed groups, who continue to exercise strong control over the area, which used to have enormous strategic importance to the guerrillas as an entry-point from Sumapaz into Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá. As the successors of the paramilitaries that set up the *Bloque Capital* in the mid-2000s, the presence of these groups is now much less politicized and the control they exercise is more social than political.<sup>5</sup> Intra-urban displacement is also extremely frequent in Altos de Cazucá, with many people suffering second and even third displacements following their arrival to these neighborhoods.

The daily lives of the inhabitants of these urban margins are plagued by various forms of violence, from acts of street crime, multiple forms of sexual violence, threats and displacement, to various forms of stigmatization and rejection due to living in a neighborhood with a reputation in the capital for practically being a battlefield. The focus of this article is not, however, to delve into the analysis of these forms of everyday violence, but rather to shed light on the forms of victimization and exclusion exercised precisely by the same state institutions designed to offer social support to these communities. The tendency of ethnographic research to often focus on the everyday violence that permeates life in marginalized communities on the urban periphery, as is the case in Altos de Cazucá, can contribute to the production, spread and reinforcement of negative stereotypes about these same communities (Auyero, Bourgois & Scheper-Hughes, 2015). I intend with this analysis to enrich the debate on the factors that contribute, on the contrary, precisely to producing the urban margins and the violence that permeates them. The state response to forced displacement represented by the bureaucratic system of social support designed to provide assistance to the victims of the armed conflict is, as this article suggests, one of these factors.

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<sup>5</sup> The *Bloque Capital* was one of the units of the right-wing paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia-AUC (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) that actively participated in the armed conflict in Colombia until its formal demobilisation in 2006. The *Bloque Capital* operated in Bogotá and its outlying areas.

## **Systematic exclusion as a form of criminalization**

### ***Discourse and practice***

When a person wants to make an application to have their status as forcibly displaced recognized by the government, their first step is to go to the UAO to make a statement. After making the statement, if the person does not hold a national identity card, they will be sent off without any possibility of receiving emergency aid—temporary accommodation and food vouchers designed to meet the immediate needs of the person. They are told to return about three weeks later to verify whether or not their “displaced status” has been recognized. During the months of fieldwork carried out in the UAOs, no applicant was given emergency assistance if they did not have an identity card. Moreover, the procedures that the officials responsible for delivering this aid claimed to carry out in order to decide which applicants should receive the food vouchers required a national identity card, as they involved the consultation of education and health records.

It should be noted that, for various reasons, a large proportion of forcibly displaced migrants arrive in the city without identity documents. Many of them had to leave their homes in a rush as their lives are in danger. In other cases, documents were confiscated by armed groups and many from remote rural areas may never have been documented in the first place. Additionally, as well as being an essential step in achieving legal recognition and accessing full legal rights, the legal and regulatory framework recognizes that providing support for the acquisition of documentation can be a mechanism for the prevention of forced displacement (UNHCR, 2016, p. 31).

There is nothing in the relevant legislation that justifies preventing undocumented IDPs from accessing the very aid that is intended to alleviate the emergency situation and heightened vulnerability that they find themselves in. In fact, the right of displaced persons to identity and to emergency aid is recognized in Law 387 of 1997 while Decree 290 of 17 February 1999 enables civil registration from anywhere in the country and Law 1163 of 2007 subsequently regulates these procedures for the displaced population. Furthermore, applicants cannot access the documentation process designed for IDPs until they are officially recognized as victims of forcible displacement. Therefore, while the law “guarantees” a right to documentation and emergency assistance, the bureaucratic practice of the law condemns them to undocumented status, non-citizenship, and institutional neglect in the hugely vulnerable moment of arrival in the capital after the displacement. The lack of assistance with shelter or food forces families to remain in or relocate to the most deprived areas of informal neighborhoods, to rely more heavily on the solidarity of neighbors or acquaintances, putting stress on their immediate social rela-

tions, and to leave young children alone for long hours of the day while they try to earn *el diario* (the daily bread).

In this respect, bureaucratic practice is only evident in the everyday actions of the officials in charge of allocating support and protection measures. When interviewed, the officials categorically denied the existence of protocols or formal documents governing the exercise of their functions. In other words, no official admitted excluding undocumented migrants from emergency assistance because they were not in possession of a national identity card, as this would violate the legal provisions and the migrants' rights. Nevertheless, all the officials I interviewed and observed in their daily practice excluded undocumented IDPs on this basis. At the same time, it makes little sense to blame this "failure" in the application of the law on a lack of organization. Despite the supposed absence of any protocol or guidelines, the procedures for attending to migrants seemed to be highly coordinated and efficient in all the UAOs visited, the work of the officials interviewed or the different times-months, years and governmental periods in office-in which fieldwork was conducted. In addition, only half of the families interviewed who met the criteria for emergency assistance actually received it, despite the evaluation criteria being common to all UAOs.<sup>6</sup>

The procedures used by officials to assess eligibility for assistance generally consist of reviewing specific government webpages, servers and public records to attempt to establish an administrative link between the applicant and the capital or the relevant municipality. If the officials find that the applicant had been registered to vote, been on a national health insurance scheme, or made a previous application for support as an IDP in Bogota their application was automatically rejected. When I asked the District Secretariat official at the UAO, who was responsible for making decisions on emergency food vouchers, why they consulted webpages and official records, he replied that they do so to "rule out those who are going to be rejected as 'displaced' anyway." The official subsequently went on to state that the criteria they used to assess applications for emergency food vouchers were the same as those used by the agency responsible for assessing applications for displaced status. He explained that from an administrative perspective it would make no sense for vouchers to be given to people who were later not recognized as displaced. Thus, the system, logically, tries to minimize such inconsistencies. To do otherwise would mean accepting, from an institutional point of view, that aid intended for the displaced was given to someone who managed to "cheat" the system. If the total amount of assistance given to persons subsequently rejected as IDPs was very

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<sup>6</sup> Undocumented migrants are, *de facto*, not allowed to request it.

high, an external observer might conclude that the support system was failing to serve the displaced population. So, although this procedure appears logical and somewhat benign, it is enormously relevant because it belies one of the most common criticisms of the support system when explaining systemic or systematic errors or failures: that it is inefficient and disorganized (Viana, 2009, p. 147).<sup>7</sup> The fieldwork shows that the support and reception system is both coordinated and effective in the exclusion of IDPs whose displaced status is subsequently rejected. These migrants are therefore systematically excluded from receiving food assistance and displaced status. Mostly, these migrants are victims of different forms of intra-urban displacement—persons who were residing in Bogota at the time of displacement as well as those displaced by armed groups after the government-led paramilitary demobilization between 2003 and 2006.

Oscar's story provides a good testimony of what it is like to arrive and live in informal neighborhoods and subsequently experience intra-urban displacement.<sup>8</sup> When I interviewed him, Oscar was a member of the National Association of Displaced Afrocolombians (*Asociación Nacional de Afrocolombianos Desplazados* (AFRODES)), which has a strong presence in El Oasis neighborhood of Altos de Cazucá. Originally from Chocó, he lived most of his life in Medellín, where he worked as a policeman. Recalling his arrival in the neighborhood in 1998, he remembers it as a "pigsty" where "you could buy a plot for almost nothing and occupy it." He worked as a school teacher for a while and then, after living in El Oasis for about 10 years, he decided to move with his sister and two of his children to Usme, a neighborhood in south Bogota, where he worked in his sister's restaurant. His children were one of his reasons for moving, he wanted them to grow up in a quieter place: "you can't become anymore contaminated (by life), but they can .... Usme is a quieter neighborhood; it has everything you need." His main reason, however, was to safeguard his own life. When the paramilitaries were recruiting young men in the neighborhood before the "false-positives" scandal broke, Oscar advised several of the boys in his community not to believe their promises and not to leave with them under any circumstances.<sup>9</sup> The paramilitaries then went looking for him and made several threats against him. One night he was assaulted and pistol-whipped and then, following

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<sup>7</sup> The institution that provides emergency assistance is municipal while the one that evaluates the declarations to recognize or not the condition of displaced is national and both are present in the UAOs.

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all study participants to protect their identities.

<sup>9</sup> In 2008, due to the allegations and mobilization of the group known as Mothers of Soacha, the murder of young people from Soacha at the hands of the State Security Forces became public. Soldiers had falsely reported these young civilians as members of insurgent groups killed in combat. These extrajudicial executions are explained by the incentives received by the military who killed a greater number of guerrilla members ("positives") in the democratic security policy promoted by ex-President Álvaro Uribe Vélez.

the murder of one of his friends, he decided it was time to leave. Oscar, in explanation for why he had not declared this last displacement to the governmental institutions, claimed to know that if you were displaced while you were already in the proximity of the capital city, your displacement would never be recognized. He was, in fact, right.

That these internal administrative classification mechanisms are hidden is unsurprising. As the fundamental goal of all organisms of power is to ensure its own survival and reproduction (Herzfeld, 1992), any recognition or public disclosure of the procedures for assessing applicants would call the very legitimacy and justification of the administrative apparatus into question. In other words, that it is failing in its basic function as a public body that applies the law: to bring legal provisions closer to the target recipients of aid and to transform legal rights into redistributed state goods and services.

If these resource allocation mechanisms were visible, it would be apparent that they do not correspond to the criteria established in the law. However, perhaps even more importantly, it would be impossible to describe the so called “failures” of the system as quasi-random errors due to work overload, the speed with which policies must be implemented, or poor work practices of individual civil servants. It would become evident that the exclusion of certain categories cannot be explained by the lack of implementation of institutionalized criteria in everyday bureaucratic practice. As the ethnographic analysis shows, “failures” in the distribution and allocation of government aid to certain groups of IDPs do not occur because of the absence of agency, lack of organization, or institutional decision-making. The denial of emergency assistance to applicants who do meet the legal criteria for receiving it does not occur because of the absence of the State, but because of the deliberate, consistent, and institutionalized action of the State itself. Like other studies (Sanford 2004, 261), this calls into question the notion that the Colombian state is a failed state, incapable of fulfilling its duties to provide protection and assistance (Callejas, 2014, p. 96).

In this respect, the systemic and systematic “failures” of the administrative system for the support and protection of IDPs analyzed before can be understood as a condition of the State’s need to legitimize and reify a particular narrative of forced displacement in Colombia, which has been naturalized in the political discourse of recent decades. This narrative has consisted in the systematic denial of the presence and activity of armed groups in the country’s major cities—most notably Bogota—while situating the armed conflict in isolated rural regions far from the country’s capital.

Thus, one of the fundamental functions of the administrative system is to operate as the “empirical”, statistical support for political discourses on the armed conflict and forced

displacement, validating these political discourses through collaboration and convergence with the media (Albano da Costa, 2012, p. 13).

Official statistics on the number of displaced persons and the causes of displacement are based almost exclusively on migrants whose applications for displaced status are approved. From an official perspective, these migrants' stories become the truth of displacement, defining the government narrative of who is displaced and where and why displacement occurs. This information, in turn, gives a particular account of political events in Colombia, of the armed actors operating in Colombian territory, and of the advance or retreat of the armed conflict. Data on the displaced population can be consulted publicly, for the most part, which means that it can support or, on the contrary, contradict the prevailing political discourse and legitimize or question the government's political and military actions.

When it comes to Soacha, a municipality so close to the capital, the political authorities attribute responsibility for violence, and therefore displacement, to acts of common crime and not to the presence of armed groups (RCN, 2018). To admit intra-urban displacement in and around the capital would be to acknowledge that Bogota and Soacha are not only areas that receive IDPs fleeing the war in remote, rural regions of the Colombian territory, but that they continue to be the scenes of armed conflict.

### ***Representations of displaced persons***

The implications of everyday bureaucratic practice in the classification and exclusion of IDPs goes beyond the legitimization of particular political discourse. This social space is also the principal point of production and reproduction of the symbolic social construction of forced displacement in Colombia. As Bourdieu reminds us, "the state, which possesses the means of imposition and inculcation of the durable principles of vision and division that conform to its own structure, is the site par excellence of the concentration and exercise of symbolic power" (Bourdieu et al., 1994, p. 9). On the one hand, the State effects a "theoretical unification", through the concentration, treatment and redistribution of information as capital. Also through statistics and census-taking relative to society, which is treated as a whole, effecting "operations of totalization" (Bourdieu et al., 1994, p. 7). On the other hand, bureaucratic practice converts this previously totalized information into categories of perception and classification, through which social agents construct the world—assuming it as their own, as the only legitimate, codified, objectified, classificatory system (Bourdieu et al., 1994). The administrative system for the support and orientation of IDPs thus emerges as a legitimizing system, at an informational

and symbolic level, of the dominant political narratives, and not only as a by-product of them (González-Enríquez, 2020).

Additionally, this administrative system is more than a space of symbolic production; it is also a symbolically charged social phenomenon as the concrete encounters between state bureaucracies and the urban poor are themselves cultural processes where the state creates particular cultural representations and identities through its daily rituals, routines and office procedures (Auyero, 2012).

When migrants arrive at a UAO office for the first time, they are confronted with a whole network of institutions, officials, procedures, requirements and deadlines with which they will become familiar over the years. The interviewees recount how their innumerable visits to these offices even continue once they have been granted displaced status, making endless applications for humanitarian assistance and subsequent extensions of that assistance, such as housing subsidies, places for children at school, business start-up grants, and health insurance, among others. In addition, they must notify the authorities of any changes to the composition of the family unit and many have to make repeated visits to rectify errors in applications or to seek reasons for unjustified delays or non-compliances.

The first time I visited one of the offices where the displaced persons gave their statements and where they could apply for the social benefits they were entitled to, I had great difficulty in finding it. It was practically hidden among abandoned-looking streets, very close to an abandoned train lined by the *cambuches* (shacks) of homeless people who, in many cases, seemed to be consumed by *bazuco* (crack cocaine). When I finally found the office I was looking for, the line of people at the office door seemed to be a mere continuation of the lines of homeless people populating the sides of the railway tracks.

Any resident of Bogota is well aware—as had been frequently pointed out to me—that neighborhoods such as this one, and particularly areas like the one where the office for assisting displaced persons was located, are commonly perceived as dangerous spaces, marked by the presence of various threats. By situating the offices in such locations, the municipal administration not only placed displaced individuals in potentially precarious and unsafe conditions, but also contributed to their symbolic association—in the eyes of the local population—with the very forms of danger and social disorder that these areas are thought to embody.

When I met him, Manuel was the legal representative of the Fundación Colombia Nuevos Horizontes, a private organization based in Bogota that offered housing, food and orientation to newly arrived displaced people. Manuel himself is a displaced person who used to work as an administrative assistant to the Secretary of Education in the department of Caquetá and who was threatened by the guerrillas for supporting the campaign of a particular political candidate. His case can be considered a success as he was finally able to achieve some degree of economic stability: a UAO official helped him find a job managing a shelter run by Franciscan monks and he then managed to set up his own shelter. However, it took him years and countless visits to care offices for him to escape a state of intermittent homelessness and poverty.

I was completely broke and I didn't even have shoes to wear.... The time came when I had no choice but to live on the street. I wrote letters, collected papers and visited the offices many times, but the aid never came. I looked like a dead man.

The bureaucratic apparatus turns a migrant fleeing violence into an applicant for aid, a person constantly at the behest of bureaucratic procedure, perpetually justifying their situation of need, while in the eyes of an outside observer they are but a beggar queuing at the door of a government welfare office. In this manner, the image of the displaced population is that of persons who are always in need of something or lacking something. In the words of Donny Meertens:

In the social imaginary, being displaced is frequently associated with belonging to an armed group or, more generally, with the logic that being “uprooted” equates to “decultured” and “immoral”, someone not deserving of trust, devoid of the rights and duties of citizenship (Meertens 2011, p. 45, author’s translation).

Characterized by what they lack, they are socially constructed as an essentially different and segregated “other” and, therefore, people that are potentially responsible for their own situation of vulnerability (Delgado, 2004, p. 102). In fact, in their relationship with the administrative system and in their new social milieu, the displaced must continually confront mistrust and the suspicion that they are at least partly responsible for their own displacement.

In their everyday lives many displaced people hide the fact that they have been displaced because they feel that the reasons behind their forced migration, if known, could hinder their settlement process in the new urban context. An extract from an interview

with Blanca, a 27-year-old woman who had been displaced by the guerrillas from the Chocó region, helps to illustrate these processes:

You really suffer here because you don't know anybody; everybody thinks that you are a thief. Here, they think that you're displaced because they caught you in something and that you aren't a victim.... They don't think: "they wanted to take your land, they were going to kill you".... That's why it's better to say that we aren't displaced—not to say anything. For example, in the houses where I go to work, they don't know that I'm displaced because they probably wouldn't give me a job. So it's better to say that you just came from a farm and nothing else.

Several of the officials responsible for granting emergency aid argued that if an identity document were not required, the same applicant could cheat the system and receive the same assistance several times. This idea of a state threatened by an avalanche of displaced people trying to cheat in order to double or even triple the aid they receive is very common among the officials carrying out other procedures as well. This is how the civil servants interviewed usually justified the obstacles faced by displaced persons trying to register the separation of their domestic units into two households after the breakup of the couple, since some assistance is granted not on an individual basis but to the household as a whole.

In the analysis of the interviewees' narratives, the administrative system of support emerges as a social space where a representation of the displaced migrant as deficient and threatening is produced and reproduced. It also functions to legitimize an informational and symbolic system that methodically excludes certain categories of migrants from IDP status and it is precisely this exclusion that leads to the criminalization of these subjects. If the displaced are objects of mistrust and suspicion because of the events that triggered their migration from their home territories, those whose displacement is subsequently not recognized are most certainly marked as potential criminals.

Ticktin (2015) argues that within the current framework of humanitarianism "innocence" is a key condition to qualify for humanitarian compassion. Being represented as guilty, due to suspicions of contact with armed groups and victims, means the displaced may be categorized as "undeserving" of assistance—criminals, not victims. In the same way that the distinction between the categories of "refugees" and "illegal economic migrants" is used to distinguish the innocent from the guilty at European borders (Ticktin, 2015), the recognition or denial of the status of forcibly displaced serves to separate victims from collaborators, or even perpetrators, of violence in Colombia. If someone who claims to have been displaced and thus to have been a victim of violence is denied their

status as a victim, they are being denied, as Blanca pointed out, any possibility of being considered innocent because their proximity to violent and illegal acts is inseparable from their very request to be recognized as a displaced person.

This dualism between victims and criminals, like the distinction between refugees and illegal economic migrants, while perhaps useful from a legal point of view, does not respond to the complex range of factors, relations, and motivations that trigger migration.

*El Abuelo* (Grandpa), an elderly displaced man who resided in a temporary shelter for displaced persons in the capital, is a clear example of this false dichotomy. During my interview with him, *El Abuelo* told me about growing up in Valle del Cauca during *La Violencia*. His family was dispossessed of their land and displaced to the bush where they survived in hiding for years. As an adult, he traveled on foot to the Colombian department of Meta, an area controlled by guerrillas. There, he was allowed to cultivate a piece of land and raise cattle in exchange for part of his harvest and livestock. He lived like that for 15 to 20 years, during which time he got married and had a son. One day, a group of Colombian Army soldiers asked for one or two heads of cattle, because they were “hungry for meat” and *El Abuelo* could not refuse:

I said yes out of fear because as soon as you are of no use to them they could make you out to be a guerrilla and kill you, you become a military target and they’ll kill you.

The guerrillas then accused him of collaborating with the army and pushed him and his family off the land and then detained him, but he managed to escape and got to the capital alone, albeit without his family or news of their whereabouts or fate. *El Abuelo* had not given a formal statement to be officially recognized as an internally displaced person because he was acutely aware that his narrative rendered him—in the eyes of both the state institutions responsible for assisting the displaced and his own neighbors—as a threatening, ambiguous, and potentially dangerous figure. At the very least, he would have been judged as “not innocent.” Yet this suspicion—embodied in the figure of the officials who receive and process the requests of those who come to the assistance offices—extends even to those who have been officially recognized as displaced persons.

Tomás was the official responsible for managing healthcare services at the UAO of Soacha during the period of my fieldwork. Based on what I observed over several months of participant observation, as well as on the testimonies of those who were assisted by him, Tomás appeared to be a deeply committed public servant—one of the most dedicated to the task of providing assistance to displaced persons and ensuring

that aid reached them effectively. Nevertheless, in Tomás' own account, those already officially recognized as displaced were often described as *muy vivos*—that is, clever and resourceful, yet morally ambiguous; individuals perceived as capable of exploiting circumstances for their own benefit:

It's true that when displaced persons start working and get automatically registered with a contributory EPS (health insurance provider), they can no longer receive aid—no matter how much they earn or what their needs are... That's a disincentive to work. We've had strong young people come in asking for assistance, and when you ask them why they don't work, they say it's because they're already getting quarterly payments. Aid should be something that complements work. There are displaced people who, say, after a landslide, get relocated to a new place, then rent out that new house and move back to where they used to live. Then there's the issue of splitting up the family unit—that's something they often do as a strategy... for business, really.

Even while acknowledging the shortcomings of the assistance system—the scarcity of resources and the frequent delays in delivering aid, which was often insufficient to meet the needs of those most deserving—Tomás' narrative consistently tended to justify the idea that both the system itself and its officials needed to protect themselves from opportunistic individuals, who were to be regarded with suspicion. Innocent at the moment of displacement, perhaps—but not necessarily so once they had entered the new urban context.

## **Conclusions**

This article analyzes some of the forms of exclusion that bureaucratic practice in its day-to-day form performs on the displaced from two different, but interrelated, dimensions. On the one hand, it analyzes the structural implications of the denial of the recognition of displaced status, and of emergency aid, to certain categories of migrants. On the other, it shows how state institutions in their concrete encounters with the displaced contribute to the production, spread and reinforcement of an image of them as dispossessed beings to be mistrusted.

In the case analyzed, forcible displacement takes place at an intra-urban level in the areas around the outskirts of Bogotá and its victims are systematically excluded from government aid programs for IDPs.

The exclusion of IDPs is produced in the interpretation that public officials make of legal mandates, which is only notionally subjective and individualized. This occurs between what Fassin calls stated “principles of justice” and observed “practices of judgment” (Fassin, 2003, p. 67). In other words, the gap between the formal principles of the law and the informal implementation of those principles. In the case of the government program for the support of the displaced population in Bogota, however, these variations do not respond to the subjective and individual actions of officials. The ethnographic fieldwork found that assessment practices were homogeneous, coordinated and effective, regardless of the office or the particular official who carried them out. The everyday practice of the bureaucratic apparatus is an example, as such, of how informal practices in the implementation of public policies are institutionalized and serve to maintain the formal order. Through lack of recognition, this practice excludes specific categories of migrants because to do otherwise would be to contravene the official discourse on the armed conflict in the country and the dominant classificatory system that derives from this discourse (Bourdieu et al., 1994). It is precisely this classificatory system, exemplified in the daily practice of the bureaucratic system of care for the displaced population in Bogota, which constructs the image of the displaced as culturally deficient and potentially threatening.

By not recognizing migrants’ status as displaced by violence, the state administrative system not only denies these migrants the right of access to state resources and aid programs, but also criminalizes them as potential collaborators of the very violence from which they claim to be fleeing. Therefore, the bureaucratic apparatus emerges as one of the fundamental places for the production, dissemination and objectification of social imaginaries of forced displacement. It is a social space where IDPs are persons who should be mistrusted or, in the best of cases, constructed as needy and incapable of actively and responsibly exercising their legal rights. The bureaucratic everyday practice converts the displaced into “spongers” living off the State—the needy poor who must stand for hours in long queues in the street waiting for their rations, visiting government offices time and time again to apply for aid that rarely comes on time or to complete paperwork that never ends. Aesthetically and symbolically, this turns them into a faceless, destitute mass, who are forced to stay or settle in the only places in the city where there is still land that can be occupied, the informal neighborhoods of the urban periphery.

The analysis of the role that the bureaucratic system plays in the production of these same informal peripheries is probably one of the most interesting lines of research that

this work has revealed. On the other hand, a possible and undoubtedly necessary continuation or deepening of the topic of study would require delving into the analysis of the interrelation between the forms of exclusion described in this article and forms of discrimination experienced as a consequence of racism and stigmatization that certain groups of displaced migrants face in their encounter with state institutions.

### **AI disclaimer**

Artificial Intelligence was used solely to review and improve the language, including translation accuracy and grammatical correctness. All content and analyses are the sole responsibility of the author.

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## **Povzetek**

Kolumbijski vladni program za sprejem in podporo prisilno razseljenim migrantom je glavni organ, ki zagotavlja uresničevanje pravic teh oseb z zagotavljanjem ustrezne pomoči. Študija na podlagi obsežnega etnografskega terenskega raziskovanja preučuje birokratsko prakso vladnega programa pomoči v Bogoti ter procese, ki vodijo v izključevanje določenih kategorij migrantov. Raziskava ugotavlja, da uporabljeni klasifikacijski in statistični postopki povzročajo sistematično in usklajeno izključevanje nekaterih skupin migrantov. V nasprotju z neuspehi birokratskega sistema ta praksa deluje tako, da ohranja in utrjuje politično pripoved o znatnem zmanjšanju prisilne razselitve in nasilja. Študija prav tako pokaže, da je birokratska praksa zagotavljanja storitev ključen družbeni prostor za proizvodnjo in reproduciranje družbene imaginacije razseljenih migrantov kot sumljivih in potencialno nevarnih subjektov.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** migracije, prisilna razselitev, izključevanje, birokratski sistem

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