

The role of municipal authorities

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Municipal authorities present the most immediate interface between a government and its citizens. If the rights of IDPs are to be upheld and their needs addressed, more attention needs to be paid to the municipal level of government.

Colombia's national legislation on internally displaced persons (IDPs) is impressive. The country has a strong judicial system, a Constitutional Court that has consistently upheld the rights of IDPs and a committed network of civil society organisations, including hundreds of IDP associations. In his 2006 visit, however, the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons was "perturbed by the clear gap between the policies decided in the capital, Bogotá, and what is effectively implemented at the departmental and municipal level."¹

To examine the role of municipal authorities in addressing IDP issues in Colombia, the Brookings-Bern Project commissioned Ana María Ibáñez and Andrea Velásquez of the Universidad de los Andes to analyse the responses of four local and departmental governments, including the municipalities of Bogotá, Medellín and Santa Marta and the department of Antioquia. This study then served as the basis for a seminar held in Bogotá in November 2008 which brought together representatives from municipal governments, national governmental agencies and international organisations working with the displaced to consider the problems faced at the municipal level and to suggest ways of overcoming these obstacles.²

Mayors and municipal authorities are responsible for providing and managing the budgets for services such as public security, education,

health and recreation. When large numbers of IDPs arrive in a municipality, municipal authorities come under increased pressure to provide schools, health care, security, housing and other services. At the national level, the Colombian government has established a range of institutions to promote the rights of the displaced. In particular, Unified Comprehensive Plans (PIUs)³ provide a coordinating mechanism between national, provincial and local institutions, with territorial committees tasked with developing their own plans for assisting IDPs in accord with national legislation. But municipalities have been slow to develop their plans. Only 24% of municipalities with IDPs have formulated their PIUs and even where plans do exist, there are weaknesses in implementation.

At the seminar, participants heard from mayors and municipal officials about the difficulties they faced in complying with their obligations to assist IDPs. In particular, they noted the lack of data on the displaced, the lack of clarity about relationships between the central and municipal levels, the scarcity of financial resources at the municipal level and the lack of capacity of municipal authorities. They expressed particular concern about housing and socio-economic stabilisation. Housing for IDPs in municipalities is scarce and where municipalities are able to provide land for housing projects for IDPs, they are unable to cover the costs of public services. Integration into the economic life of the community can

be extremely difficult for IDPs. Low literacy levels among the displaced, for example, make it difficult for them to compete for jobs in urban areas.

Despite nationally mandated actions in support of IDPs, participants expressed frustration that they were not given the necessary resources to comply with them. Moreover, municipal authorities were concerned that by giving preferential treatment to the displaced, other needy groups – such as the historically poor – would be disadvantaged. "We have many mandates," one participant observed, "and not enough resources to meet all of these needs. How do we balance the needs of IDPs with those of people with disabilities, for example?" Municipal authorities also pleaded for more flexibility to ensure that the particular contexts of each region be taken into consideration and expressed serious concern about the lack of clarity in the relationship between the different levels of government and the lack of functioning coordination mechanisms.

Jader García Marín, from San Carlos, reported that his municipality is facing an emergency in trying to deal with returning IDPs. The return of 5,000 persons in 2006-07 put serious strains on the municipal budget, with hundreds of requests to build or repair housing for the returnees. He noted that "it has been much more expensive to assist those who are returning than to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced." Paola Carvajal, from Bucaramanga, noted that by working in partnership with the government and the Colombian Red Cross, they had been able to mobilise additional resources to meet demands.

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1. http://www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/RSG-Press-Releases/200606_rsg_colombia.aspx

2. Convened by Acción Social, UNHCR, the Universidad de los Andes and the Brookings-Bern Project. Report at: http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/07_colombia.aspx

3. PIUs, Planes Integrales Únicos



Los Altos de Cazuca, Ciudad Bolívar shantytown, Bogotá. At night-time, armed groups roam the streets.