

Internal Displacement in Guatemala

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Introduction

Beginning in the late 1980s, the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War heralded a new dawn for many in the global community premised on the ostensible and peaceful transition to democratic rule coupled with material prosperity grounded on free trade. Yet, for an estimated 25 million people scattered across the regions of Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, one of the world's most acute and growing crisis was beginning to gain recognition as a global socio-political issue. Internal Displacement is now recognized as both a human tragedy and one of the most pressing challenges to beset the global community at the start of the 21st century.

Primarily because internal displacement did not become visible until the post-cold war period, it is often thought to be a post-cold war phenomenon. However, as Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng assert, internal displacement is not new and major cases of displacement took place either during the cold war or were significantly affected by cold war policies.¹

Unlike refugees who cross international borders, internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain within the territorial frontiers of their countries. Additionally, in contrast to refugees who are afforded some measure of legal protection and assistance in accordance with international conventions and regional declarations, IDPs fall outside this umbrella of rights with the exception of Article 40 of the Geneva Convention and Article 17 of Additional Protocol II. Despite this modicum of support and the belief that “rights have no borders,” IDPs are captives of the nation-state system that rests on principles of territorial sovereignty and non-intervention into the “internal” affairs of states because they are still in their home country.

In the early 1990s, while scholarly attention to the problem of internal displacement was in its infancy, several United Nations agencies and international organizations outside the UN framework have been instrumental in placing the crisis of internal displacement on the global political agenda. In 1992 a United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) asked UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to appoint a special representative to the newly created post of Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Internally Displaced Persons. Despite this voluntary position, Special Representative Deng does

not have a mandate to politically and economically assist this category of people. Instead, within the UN system, only the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has ever acted on behalf of IDPs in situations when they have been commingled with returning refugees. According to Deng, in situations where the UN does assist, the UNHCR remains reluctant to involve itself too deeply into the IDP issue for a variety of reasons, including, *inter alia*, its unwillingness to compromise its “core” work with refugees.² Scholarly attention to the crisis of internal displacement is a relatively recent force in academia. It was Cohen and Deng's prodigious 1998 study that proved to be the turning point in academic circles. The growing body of literature is an indication of our expanding interest and awareness of IDPs. Generally, the literature can be divided into a broad variety of categories. Among these categories are topics addressing complex emergencies or conflicts that produce IDPs; country-specific case studies; discussions over the nature and definition of who is an IDP; the impact of displacement on gender; response mechanisms that provide increased understanding of how individuals, families, and communities cope during the various phases of displacement; and, the work of humanitarian and development organizations that offer protection and assistance.

Despite the growing academic attention to the issue of IDPs, there is also a noticeable gap in the literature. What is lacking is any systematic analysis of the post return/resettlement phase of displacement. There remains little, if any, effort to identify, let alone quantify the number and types of IDPs whoever, and for whatever reasons, were not able to return and resettle. This understanding is important because it would allow us to develop a form of measurement of when an IDP ceases to be an IDP and to develop a typology of displacement when multiple reasons for this condition exist simultaneously.³

This observation begs the following question. Does one's status as an IDP depend solely on the recognition by international organizations based on the prevailing principles and standards of who is an IDP? Or is there an inherent psychological element to displacement based on self-identification? If self-identification plays a role, under what circumstances will an IDP self-identify as such or not? This last question is particularly important in circumstances where IDPs in the post return/resettlement phase face serious rep- rehension especially if they are believed to have played a

supposed role in fostering internal strife that led to conflict induced displacement.

This scenario is paramount in Guatemala because the conflict-induced IDPs were thought to be guerrilla sympathizers. In the post-civil war context, the safe return and resettlement of this group is extremely precarious.⁴ As we discovered, many of the conflict-driven displaced are still considered to be IDPs. However, they do not identify themselves as IDPs as a protection mechanism to explain the fact that they have not returned or resettled. An understanding of this is important when the IDP situation is continuous over an extended period of time and when IDPs locate in areas already inhabited by persons or groups who are uprooted for reasons other than conflict and civil war.

Internal Displacement in Guatemala

Guatemala's 36-year civil war officially ended on 29 December 1996 with the signing of the *Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace* between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). This agreement represented the final step in a series of previously negotiated accords between the government and the guerrillas that began in 1994 under the auspices of the United Nations. With the official ending of the civil war, previously agreed upon accords such as the 17 June 1994 *Agreement on the Resettlement of Population Groups Uprooted by the Armed Conflict* could officially enter into force. The provisions of the resettlement agreement called for the establishment of a Technical Commission (CTEAR) to implement a number of principles that would allow for the return and resettlement of Guatemala's estimated 100,000 refugees and 1 million internally displaced.

However, when CTEAR concluded its work, its final report listed only 324,187 persons that had been resettled as part of the total uprooted population—a figure that includes both returning refugees and the internally displaced. For the purposes of implementing the resettlement accord, CTEAR identified five “zones of peace” in which return and resettlement would occur. These zones of peace consisted of the following five Guatemalan Departments: Quiché, Peten, Alta Verapaz, San Marcos, and Huehuetenango. Ironically, during the civil war, the government classified these same five departments as “zones of conflict.” Excluded from CTEAR's resettlement were the approximately 600,000 IDPs who left their original villages in the conflict zones and relocated in the environs of Guatemala City and the southern region of the country—departments not included in the zones of peace for the purpose of resettlement. Adding to the predicament concerning the return and resettlement of Guatemalan IDPs remains the often overlapping and differing data on the topic. Moreover, when the final peace accord was signed ending the civil war, several international organizations such as the U.S. Committee for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the UNHCR assumed that Guatemala no longer had an IDP problem. Many of these organizations based this assumption on the erroneous belief

that the resettlement agreement repatriated the refugees and returned or resettled all the IDPs who intended to return. However, the facts on the ground do not support this assumption. The reality is that most of Guatemala's IDPs, displaced as a result of the civil war, were simply not resettled. Furthermore, the IDP problem in Guatemala is not declining; instead, it is increasing. This increase, in part, exists because of the unresolved land issue and the growing number of government sponsored forced evictions of indigenous marginalized communities.⁵

Most of the victims of Guatemala's civil war were the indigenous Mayan. Even though they comprise the majority of the country's population, the Mayans remain politically, economically, and socially marginalized. They constitute the vast majority of Guatemala's poor, its land-less peasants, urban shanty dwellers, and IDPs who were not included in the resettlement agreement. Despite the end of the civil war, many of Guatemala's remaining IDPs cannot voluntarily return to their place of origin. In part, the government's scorched-earth counterinsurgency war in the zones of conflict between 1981–83 completely destroyed more than 440 Mayan villages along with the Mayan's ability to engage in subsistence agriculture. In other instances, squatter groups now occupy many villages and homes that escaped complete destruction in the conflict zones. In other circumstances, conflict-induced IDPs face serious human rights violations should they attempt to return because of the stigma of their alleged association as guerrilla sympathizers.⁶

During the civil war in Guatemala, indigenous leaders who asserted land rights were persecuted as communists and subversives. The government's violent dispossession of indigenous land deprived the Mayan of their means of survival and endangered their cultural traditions. Even after the civil war, indigenous rural groups have persistently called upon the state to uphold Article 67 of the Constitution that protects indigenous land, yet the judicial branch routinely recognizes individual landlord claims that are often absentee over the indigenous that renders their land subject to expropriation, sale, or break-up. This, in turn, only serves to fuel further displacement.

The IDP issue in Guatemala remains important because many of the indigenous and IDPs do not believe that the conflict is over. Many of the IDPs surveyed for this study believe that the civil war in Guatemala still rages at a psychological level. Moreover, the successful consolidation of the peace process will depend on the extent to which the government is able and willing to address the issue of the IDPs. At present, it is the government's view that IDPs are not a special group; instead, they are in the same general situation as the rest of the population facing extreme poverty.⁷

Conflict displacement has been central to the experience of the indigenous population afflicted by Guatemala's bloody civil war. Prior to 1980, internal displacement as a result of civil conflict was reserved more for individuals being targeted as subversives — a theoretical paradox be-

cause individuals were not afforded IDP status. Moreover, until the rise of the “Scorched Earth Campaign” displacement, both internal and external, was only a “collateral” effect of the violence engulfing the state. As a result of this campaign, displacement then became an actual counterinsurgency policy objective.

Beginning in 1983, military strategy shifted and was directed at resettling the Mayan communities under the control of the Army. The military attempted to institute this strategy by creating “model” villages and “re-education” programs in the regions that were the most conflictive; by relying on the civilian patrols (PAC) formed by the military; and through the military appointment of local leaders. Yet, many displaced did not return or resettle given the State’s “stigmatization” of the Mayan villagers as either guerrillas or guerrilla sympathizers who were responsible for the armed confrontation.

Indigenous villages in Quiche, San Marcos, Chimaltenango, Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, and Huehuetenango were targeted specifically because of their alleged entanglement with guerrillas. It was the belief of General Efraín Ríos Montt’s government (1981–83) that if the bases for popular guerrilla support among the indigenous were destroyed, then the guerrillas would be broken. This belief translated into a policy that left the Guatemalan people with few choices other than flight. The *Recovery of Historical Memory Project*, REHMI, basically identified similar patterns of displacement during the civil war as did the *Guatemala Memory of Silence: Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification Conclusions and Recommendations*. REHMI, however, did identify two distinct forms of displacement: individual and community. Individual displacement took place mainly in the urban areas during the 1960s and 1970s. This type of displacement was the result of particular persons being targeted exclusively as subversives. Moreover, individual flight occurred only if the targeted individual’s family that remained behind had an adequate social and safety network. However, what generally happened was that family members of the individual who was displaced would often follow in an effort at family reunification thereby contributing to the displacement problem.

According to REHMI, displacement in rural areas typically took place in groups and thus involved entire communities. Direct violence committed against the community was most often the catalyst for flight. Also, flight as a result of the fear of violence was not uncommon. In some cases the indigenous were forced to flee as a result of the destruction of land, a military objective that effectively left the indigenous population with very little means of subsistence. Because most communities were forced to flee in the face of violent massacres they were not able to escape with much more than very basic essentials. Most families lost all of their property as a result of the violence. Given the abrupt and hurried nature of flight most families were not able to take any food or other essentials with them. As a result they were forced to scavenge for food in the wilderness where

the terrain was most inhospitable and unfavorable. Survival in the wilderness ranged from short periods of time consisting of a week or less, to months or years while in transit to more hospitable locations. Displacement and survival in the wilderness led to the break up of family units, questions about whether or not any family still existed, the status of fellow community members, and whether or not return would ever be possible.⁸

The IDP situation is particularly acute in Guatemala City where a number of different types of IDPs are interspersed in marginalized communities. Compounding their predicament is the lack of cohesion among these disparate IDPs whose only basis of unity is the land issue. Also, many of the grassroots organizations that address the IDP issue often work at cross purposes making it difficult for IDPs to present a unified front before government. The IDPs in Guatemala City remain invisible and there is a general lack of opportunities for them to return to their place of origin since the signing of the 1996 peace agreement. Moreover, the data on the number of IDPs is unreliable and the figures on displacement are only estimates given the lack of systemized data collection efforts.

Although Guatemala has always experienced episodes of internal migration owing to changing socio-economic dynamics that revolved around agriculture and industrial development, these patterns changed with the escalation of the civil war in the 1980s. To date, only two studies have attempted to categorize Guatemala’s IDPs—Santiago Bastos and Manuel Camus’s 1994 study, *Los desplazados por la violencia en la Ciudad de Guatemala* and the 1997 study sponsored by The Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences in Guatemala (AVANSCO). The latter study identified two types of IDPs. The first category identifies those who fled between 1980 and 1982 and were displaced in the mountains near their place of origin. The bulk of these IDPs formed what became known as the communities of popular resistance (CPRs). The second categories, the dispersed-displaced, are those conflict IDPs who fled to two areas in particular—Guatemala City and the southern coast. The AVANSCO study concluded that the *dispersed-displaced* are more difficult to analyze because they are scattered, hidden, and remain anonymous among both the urban and rural poor. Furthermore, the *dispersed-displaced* are inadequately represented within the social sciences and by the international community, non-governmental organizations, and governmental agencies that could offer them protection and assistance. Their inadequate representation is attributed to their lack of identification as a collective group of IDPs whose needs are based on their forced relocation.⁹

The Bastos and Camus study explored the condition of Guatemala City’s IDPs from the standpoint of their lack of adaptation to urban life and their limited ability to communicate because they only spoke indigenous languages. Moreover, Bastos and Camus noted that the violence and forced flight to safety left many enduring scars on this particular population, which may account for their reluctance to as-

sert their claims. While these studies are important because both of them draw similar conclusions and deepen our understanding of the particular features of their situation, they are not representative of Guatemala's IDP population for several reasons. First, both studies are in Spanish and their circulation is limited. Secondly, the Bastos and Camus study predates the end of the civil war and the subsequent, *albeit*, ostensible resolution of the IDP situation.

There is no international instrument that addresses when an IDP ceases to be classified as such. The end of the civil war in Guatemala did not terminate the fact that there is a substantial IDP population; hence, the importance of developing a typology of the number and type of IDPs. On a more theoretical note, the development of a typology of IDPs would be universally applicable across a range of IDP cases. As such, this would permit the development of theoretical frameworks beyond the more broadly defined humanitarian constructs that underscore studies in this area. Specifically, a typology of IDPs could lead to concept and theory building along dimensions of areas such as civil society and democratization studies. Additionally, such a typology could be used for comparative studies that examine similarly situated IDPs in cross-cultural and diverse political settings. Studies such as this could enhance our understanding of the phases of displacement and how the international community might best address the issue of displacement.

Preliminary Survey Findings

In several preliminary exchanges with IDPs in three marginalized communities within the environs of Guatemala City (El Tuerto, Los Canolitos, and Via Canales) the majority of individuals and families identified economics as the primary reason for them taking up residence in their particular community. Our survey instrument included both open-ended and a closed-ended questionnaire. Our closed-ended questionnaire gathered demographic data as well as information specific to the flight phase of displacement, such as whether they were forced to flee, with whom did they leave, and the locations and duration of their temporary settlement. Our open-ended questions asked respondents to recant their ordeal in anecdotal terms.

In El Tuerto, our interviews with 28 families and numerous individuals revealed that most of them had left their place of origin prior to the period they identified as "the violence" and that all of them resided in two to three other locations before settling in El Tuerto. The central concern that these residents expressed was title to land. When asked if they knew of persons residing in this community who were internally displaced because of the violence, the residents replied in the affirmative. Although they were reluctant to explicitly say so, their response to this question suggested that the conflict-induced displaced residents of El Tuerto constituted a distinct category. When further queried about the conflict-induced displaced, the economic displaced residents of El Tuerto indicated that they had little contact with that group.

In Los Canolitos, 18 displaced families originally from Quiche whose displacement could be categorized as conflict-induced because of their reasons given for displacement and the specific time frame in which their displacement occurred. However, nearly all of these families were hesitant to self-identify as conflict-induced displaced. One family described themselves as "not displaced, but in a place not of their origin." When asked if they would like to return to their homes in Quiche, one family responded that fear keeps them from returning while another family noted that they have nothing to return to in that Department. Among this group only one of the families admitted that they had extensive awareness of CONDEG—the Council of Displaced Persons of Guatemala formed to obtain land and housing for IDPs and their right to return to their communities from where they originally fled. Despite this awareness, this family believed that CONDEG no longer represented popular issues but has grown more NGO-like.

In Via Canales, five of seven families, who were originally from Quiche all cited the violence as the reason for their leaving in the early 1980s; however, once again, they are reluctant to self-identify as conflict-induced displaced. Their hesitancy, in part, could be attributed to the fear that most of them expressed as reason for their unwillingness to return to their place of origin. Among the residents of this community, the land issue and their dire conditions of poverty are paramount among their immediate concerns.

While the 57 families and individuals surveyed represent only a small number of IDPs in and around Guatemala City, their circumstances do seem to indicate that the formal peace of 1996 and the *Accord on the Uprooted Population* did not cast a wide net over Guatemalan society. One observation can be noted—despite the differences in reasons cited for displacement across the three communities, the land issue remains a pervasive theme among the IDPs surveyed. Additionally, while some cohesiveness was evident among the residents within each of the three communities, these IDPs appeared to self-select on the basis of their self-identification as the root cause of their displacement. More research is needed that includes future visits to marginalized and displaced communities with residents who self-identify as conflict-induced displaced so that they can be compared to this preliminary group.

Conclusion

These preliminary findings lead us back to our original questions regarding IDPs and self-identification—when does an IDP cease to be an IDP? If these individuals are unwilling to self-identify as conflict induced internally displaced and, if they consider themselves to be at home despite the fact they are not in their original place of origin, do we as researchers have the right to still call them internally displaced? If an IDP does in fact identify as being displaced, but for reasons other than conflict how then do we classify them? For example, what if a community predominately expresses the sentiment that they are internally displaced

due to lack of economic choices in their places of origin? Even if it is easy to surmise that the economic degradation of society is a direct result of the violence inflicted on the population are we able to call these people conflict displaced? Even still, if we do find those who are conflict-induced displaced and are willing to self-identify as such, but are unwilling to return, are they no longer an IDP? If one considers oneself to be resettled for whatever reason, then have they ceased to be displaced? These are some of the questions we as researchers are trying to discern.

Clearly, in the case of Guatemala, if the fear factor precludes both the self-identification of, and the return of conflict-induced IDPs, then we in the academic community are left with a gross misunderstanding of what the Peace Accords intended to accomplish. Additionally, if economics is the reason cited most often for past and present internal displacement regardless of the actual cause, then surely the rehabilitation of Guatemalan society after 36 years of civil war is compromised when over half its population remains outside the umbrella of civic inclusion. Surely, one would not anticipate that this rehabilitation would occur instantaneously; however, the international community has for the most part done just that. As an academic community and as privileged outside observers it is imperative that we recognize Guatemala's internal displacement problem as being unresolved by the 1994 Accord on Resettlement, and the subsequent 1996 peace agreement. Until the issue of internal displacement is settled for all of Guatemala's citizens how will peace ever be *firm* or *lasting*?

Endnotes

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