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How can the international civil society support the life conditions of Afro descendant and Indigenous internally displaced women in Colombia

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Abstract: Colombia faces an internal armed conflict fueled by the struggle over land tenure for economic and political reasons. As a consequence, millions of people have been forced to flee from the rural zones towards the urban centers of the country and have been defined as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Based on the data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Colombia has the highest number of IDPs due to conflict in the world with 8.3 million people. In this context, the international civil society can act as an intermediary actor between the government and the local civil society by creating initiatives that strengthen the work of associations and organizations working for IDPs. This support can improve the life conditions of internally displaced women and tackle the situation of protracted displacement in Colombia.

Colombia faces an internal armed conflict fueled by the struggle over land tenure for economic and political reasons that has been going on for decades. Despite the 2016 peace agreement signed between the government and the largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP), the conflict still prevails due to the existence of other illegal armed actors. As a consequence, millions of people have been forced to flee from the rural zones towards the urban centers of the country and have been defined as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2021), there are currently 48 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) worldwide. Their situation is especially complicated because unlike Refugees, IDPs flee within the national borders, therefore staying under the jurisdiction of national governments. IDPs suffer the disruption of their social networks and usually lack predictable structures of support which compromises their capacity to build and sustain a good quality of life in the host societies (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2017). Based on the UNHCR (2020), Colombia has the highest number of IDPs due to conflict in the world with 8.3 million, followed by Syria with 6.7 million, and the Democratic Republic of Congo with 5.2 million.

In Colombia the Victims and Land Restitution Law 1448 of 2011, frames the governmental assistance for all the victims of the conflict. Unfortunately, problems concerning its implementation results in many IDPs being unable to cover their basic needs¹ and experiencing what is known as a situation of protracted displacement. The latter refers to a situation that lasts for years, moving "...beyond the initial emergency phase..." and entrapping people in a 'permanent' situation of displacement (Loescher & Milner, 2009).

In Colombia, internally displaced women are particularly affected by the death or disappearance of their loved ones, the loss of their roots, territory, and their culture (Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, 2013). Afro descendant and Indigenous women are considered one of the most vulnerable groups because they experience multiple types of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and their status as displaced which makes it difficult to find job opportunities and exposes them to risks such as sexual violence (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos [cidh], 2006). Additionally, the disconnection with their territories - which has a special significance for their cosmovision and cultures - hinders their possibility to pass on their beliefs, traditions, and norms to future generations threatening the subsistence of their culture (Rodriguez P., 2008); (cidh, 2006).

According to Ahedo (2020) interventions created by the international civil society should be directed towards the strengthening of the local civil society in a combined effort with the governments as a way to provide more inclusive solutions for IDPs in Colombia. In the case of women, they have turned to the creation of associations as a way to gain more knowledge regarding their rights, feel protected and become more empowered. According to the organization Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, organizations are a space for mutual help that provide accompaniment in grief processing, dealing their suffering result of their experience of displacement - which may involve physical, psychological, and sexual violence-, and reconstructing their economic and material life (2013).

The local civil society is filled with hundreds of organizations working for IDPs in the country. They have managed to provide solutions for this population through initiatives that focus on the coverage of their basic needs. A clear example of these initiatives concerns the creation of a neighborhood called La Ciudad de las Mujeres [the city of women] promoted by the feminist grassroots organization La Liga de Las Mujeres Desplazadas (LMD) and supported by the international civil society. The LMD whose members account for approximately 300 women from different ages and ethnical backgrounds has also implemented projects concerning human rights, gender justice, childhood, youth, leadership, governability, sexual and reproductive health, and housing among others (Bergtora Sandvik & Lemaitre, 2013).

1 For instance, they suffer from poor health care access, nutritional problems, lack of housing and job opportunities.

This example illustrates how women who have been internally displaced due to conflict in Colombia, can be empowered by the work of local associations and organizations which offer spaces to develop their abilities, heal, and expand their networks. In the case of minority groups, the need to protect them as different peoples, integrating their knowledge and cultural practices as part of the solutions can be provided by these entities as they constitute an important place to gain a voice, become more visible, and be able to fight for their particular cultural rights (Bula Escobar, 2016). In this context, the international civil society can act as an intermediary actor between the government and the local civil society by creating initiatives that strengthen the work of associations and organizations working for IDPs, which can benefit from their experience in other countries and more financial resources. This support can improve the life conditions of internally displaced women and tackle the situation of protracted displacement in Colombia.

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