

# Internally displaced women as knowledge producers and users in humanitarian action: the view from Colombia

**Kristin Bergtora Sandvik** Senior Researcher, Peace Research Institute Oslo, and Director, Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies, Norway, and **Julieta Lemaitre** Associate Professor, Universidad de los Andes Law School, Colombia

*The literature on evidence-based action in humanitarian crises commonly focuses on how inter- and non-governmental organisations can produce better knowledge and how this can be translated into improved programming. Yet, there is little recorded experience of, or concern about, how the beneficiaries of humanitarian relief can produce and use knowledge of their predicament. This paper is based on a case study of how the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas, an internally displaced women's organisation in northern Colombia, employs proactively research-generated data to advance its own agenda in its interactions with donor bodies and the government. The paper finds that beneficiaries of humanitarian aid can, and do, use participatory research to advance their own ends in the legal and political spaces created around humanitarian crisis. However, their agency is limited by poverty, violence, and local balances of power. The paper concludes that beneficiaries' priorities in the production of data about humanitarian crises warrant further study.*

**Keywords:** collaborative research, Colombia, displacement, food security, humanitarian, participation

## Introduction

Who gathers the evidence on humanitarian crises? What counts as evidence? How is evidence used? What are the consequences for humanitarian action? Discourse on evidence-based action in humanitarian crises commonly focuses on how humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can produce sound and relevant knowledge and how this can be translated into improved programming. Discussions about participatory research methods usually centre on knowledge production and assume that the humanitarian agency or NGO is the end user. This paper explores evidence-based action in a humanitarian crisis by concentrating on a different issue: how beneficiaries of humanitarian relief produce and use knowledge of their predicament to demand the implementation of governmental humanitarian policies and legal regulations. Through an example from fieldwork in Colombia, it addresses the gap in knowledge concerning the ways in which beneficiaries of humanitarian aid employ knowledge of their predicament.

The forcible displacement of some 5.2 million people within Colombia's borders has created a protracted humanitarian crisis and led to impoverishment and rights

deprivation (IDMC, 2011b). This paper examines the production of knowledge and its role in the strategies of the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas, a grassroots organisation for internally displaced women, to secure the rights granted under Colombia's sophisticated framework for the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The study on which this paper is based, entitled *The Significance of Political Organization and International Law for Internally Displaced Women in Colombia: A Socio-Legal Study of Liga de Mujeres*, is a joint undertaking of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), in Norway, and the Centro de Investigaciones Socio-Jurídicas (CIJUS), in Colombia.

We hypothesised that the best way for displaced women to demand implementation of their legal rights and national and local humanitarian policies was through civic and political organisations capable of making local politicians accountable for failing (i) to respond to humanitarian emergencies and (ii) to provide the services required by law. The intent of the research design was to facilitate the development and deployment of feminist collaborative methods that would engage internally displaced women as agents throughout the research process. The participatory aspect was intended to incorporate displaced women not only as objects of study, but also as agents of reflection on their past experience; the assumption was that the women were capable not only of being informants but also of assisting in knowledge production.<sup>1</sup>

Collaboration with the Liga occurred between May 2010 and June 2011. By June 2011, the collected data on the Liga included: in-depth interviews with 14 Liga leaders; a collaboratively developed census of 126 member households; extensive field notes from participant observation of legal proceedings and meetings; and interviews, audio clips, and statements obtained from the Liga's three successive websites.

Beginning in late 2010, however, before the census results had been fully analysed, the Liga began to make active use of the census in a way that was neither planned for nor foreseen in the research design.<sup>2</sup> It used the data in at least four different negotiations with national and international power holders: to request food aid from various international agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP); to ask for food aid to be included in security measures granted by the Government of Colombia; as part of a report on the status of IDP women presented to the Constitutional Court of Colombia; and as part of an effort to follow up on the steps taken by a municipal administration to implement programmes for IDPs. Although initially we were surprised by this active employment of data, we learned that such actions were part of the Liga's practice. This paper analyses the Liga's use of the quantitative data produced in the PRIO–CIJUS study and reflects on the importance of better understanding the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid as political agents capable of both producing and using knowledge.

On the basis of our observations, we make three arguments relevant to the dynamics of humanitarian action in Colombia:

- First, contrary to the claim that institutionalising the IDP issue as a humanitarian concern has 'depoliticised' it (Fadnes and Horst, 2009), the discourse and institutions of internal displacement have in fact created legal and political spaces for

activism, in which beneficiaries can act both within and at the margins of the humanitarian system to improve their conditions.

- Second, although the Liga's leadership (and, to a certain extent the rank and file) are particularly astute in their use of these spaces, they remain constrained by poverty, violence, and local processes of exclusion—which, in combination, undermine the possibilities for effective collective action.
- Third, further research is needed on the beneficiaries of humanitarian relief as agents in the production and management of knowledge of their predicament.

The paper has six parts. The first describes internal displacement and regulatory responses in Colombia in the midst of a protracted internal conflict that is complicated by the war on drugs. The second situates the Liga within this broader politico-social context—and, more specifically, in its site of reception, in northern Colombia. The third describes the research design and the process of collaborative knowledge production. The fourth presents the main findings. The fifth describes the Liga's use of data in its interactions with the international community and the government. The sixth briefly considers the promises and pitfalls of beneficiaries' use of evidence to influence humanitarian action in settings where humanitarian relief mechanisms are managed by bureaucratic national institutions.

## Internal displacement in Colombia

Colombia's massive internal displacement results from a protracted internal conflict between government forces, guerrilla groups, and paramilitaries, compounded by an extended war on drugs. The parties to the conflict require territorial control for the safe movement of relatively small armies; guerrillas and paramilitaries financed by the growth and processing of coca and poppy crops are also particularly dependent on the loyalty of local rural populations (IDMC, 2009). In contrast to the large-scale displacement seen in Sudan and in the Great Lakes region of Africa, most displacement in Colombia involves individuals and small family groups who flee to small and mid-sized cities in the same region, or to the large cities of Bogotá, Cali, or Medellín (Ibañez, 2008).

Displacement has continued unabated under the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos, who succeeded President Álvaro Uribe in 2010 (IDMC, 2011b). While Santos generally is seen as having a more sympathetic view of the IDP issue, he has also grouped IDPs with other victims of the ongoing internal conflict in Colombia and has created an enormous transitional justice apparatus to respond to all victims. Nevertheless, IDPs are the largest group, both numerically and in terms of political importance.

The displacement of a large segment of the rural population and the accompanying loss of land has resulted in incalculable harm. Displacement dramatically increases impoverishment (Ibañez, 2008). Indigenous peoples and rural Afro-Colombians are disproportionately represented within the IDP population. In cities, indigenous and

Afro-Colombian IDPs often encounter discrimination in the labour and the housing markets because of their ethnic origins. IDPs in general also suffer discrimination in access to government services such as education and healthcare. One reason is their suspected political affiliations: they are imagined to be guerrilla collaborators, informants for the paramilitaries, or participants in the drug trade. Moreover, few IDPs belong to any type of organisation, and levels of legal literacy about the constitutionally granted rights they possess as citizens are low (Comisión de Seguimiento, 2008b). For women IDPs, who constitute 52.4 per cent of the IDP population, these crosscutting forms of marginalisation are compounded by gender-specific vulnerabilities, such as the risk of sexual violence and of poor maternal health (ECOSOC, 2005; OAS IACHR, 2006), as well as increased risk of loss of property without compensation (Comisión de Memoria Histórica, 2010, 2011).

Large-scale humanitarian crises along the lines of the internal displacement of Colombians usually involve weakened or fragile states that rely on the humanitarian apparatus of the United Nations (UN) and on international NGOs to assess and address the crisis. This paper assumes that, in a relatively sophisticated state bureaucracy such as that of Colombia, humanitarian policies will not be based on the codes of conduct, guidelines, handbooks, and monitoring and evaluation tools that form the key components of the humanitarian toolkit, but rather on administrative structures, regulations, and social programmes that are justiciable (Zapater, 2007).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, unlike refugees who have crossed an international border, IDPs have at least nominally retained their citizenship rights.

During the study period, the Sistema Nacional de Atención Integral a la Población Desplazada (SNAIPD)—the main institutional framework for IDP protection—served as the focal point for national and municipal authorities delivering services originating with a variety of public and private organisations. The main agency coordinating the SNAIPD system, and therefore the government's response to the humanitarian needs of the IDP population, was Acción Social, which also handled ordinary poverty relief programmes. Under Law 387, passed in 1997, IDPs have the right to emergency humanitarian aid for a maximum of three months; at the end of that period, a single, second renewal, for the same length of time, is permitted. The aid is designed for the rescue, care, and support of IDPs; under Articles 20–24 of the law, such support includes the provision of food, emergency transport, housing, and physical and mental healthcare, as well as inclusion in general poverty relief programmes such as subsidised health insurance. However, humanitarian aid has not reached IDPs consistently—and the response to their needs through ordinary poverty relief programmes has been insufficient, and a far cry from the rights enshrined in Law 387.

Article 2 of Law 387 established a number of displacement-specific human rights, including the right not to be displaced. The 1991 Constitution of Colombia created a petition procedure, the *tutela*, which enables Colombian citizens to object to violations of their basic rights and to receive a decision within 10 days; *tutela* cases are then reviewed by the Constitutional Court. Since the early 2000s, the IDP population

and IDP organisations have made increasing use of *tutelas* to seek enforcement of the rights enshrined in Law 387; during the same period, the importance of the Constitutional Court in monitoring governmental responses to internal displacement increased as well (Rodríguez and Rodríguez, 2009).

With respect to the inadequate implementation of existing programmes and legal norms, two juridical milestones are central to understanding humanitarian governance of the IDP issue. Tutela T-025, of 2004, and a series of follow-up awards (made because the Constitutional Court retained the authority to oversee compliance with T-025), have, in combination, judicialised IDP policies and delivered a unique, gender-sensitive remedy. According to T-025, the structural deficiencies of the state with respect to the protection of IDPs' fundamental rights created an unconstitutional circumstance that required the government to take effective action. This *tutela* restores the exercise of citizenship as an active relationship between the state and IDPs (Santa and Soto, 2009; Arango Olaya, 2010).

Award 092, of 2008, one of the follow-up decisions based on T-025, is particularly relevant to the status of IDP women. In it, the Constitutional Court found that the government's failure to establish public policies to address the disparate impact of displacement on women violated both the Constitution and Colombia's international human rights obligations. To provide a comprehensive structural remedy, the Court ordered the creation of 13 specific programmes for displaced women and granted individual orders of protection to 600 women across the country, giving them the right to be included in some of the 13 programmes, as well as to receive emergency humanitarian aid (Arango Olaya, 2010). Despite the progress represented by T-025, recent studies and reports on the implementation of the decision have recorded mixed results: although certain indicators have improved, others remain dismal, especially access to food, housing, and work (ACNUR, 2007; Comisión de Seguimiento, 2008a, 2008b; Ibañez, 2008; Rodríguez and Rodríguez, 2009).

The response to humanitarian emergencies and IDP relief more generally has transitioned to a new system of institutions in the wake of the 2011 Victim's Law (Law 1448 of 2011). The activities previously carried out by *Acción Social* are now the responsibility of a Victim's Unit, which is also in charge of reparations. Two additional units, the Protection Unit and the Unit for the Restitution and Protection of Land, also have major responsibilities.

As well as dealing with a complex legal and institutional structure, IDPs and their organisations have had to negotiate direct threats, as well as general insecurity, in the local context.<sup>4</sup> And although the central government has relegated significant resources to local municipalities—both to implement humanitarian aid programmes and to privilege IDPs in regular poverty relief programmes—IDPs who attempt to claim such benefits often confront hostility, including from elected officials and public servants; this is particularly the case in small and mid-size towns, where local power structures frequently include druglords and paramilitaries (Duncan, 2006; Camacho et al., 2009; López et al., 2010).

## The Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas

The Liga, founded in 2001, is an explicitly political and feminist grassroots organisation. It had a membership base of approximately 160 as of 2010. The Liga was set up by a well-known Colombian feminist lawyer. Since the mid-2000s, however, grassroots leaders have taken over more and more leadership functions. The Liga membership base resides in impoverished urban and peri-urban *barrios* located in and around Cartagena, a mid-sized city in the department of Bolívar, in northern Colombia. The *barrios* have a significant paramilitary presence, and everyday life is marked by violence, discrimination, and deprivation.

Although the initial focus of the Liga was feminist consciousness-raising, the members have engaged in a wide variety of activities to overcome their poverty, including: a microcredit scheme (which failed); the establishment of government-sponsored day-care centres (which still function); and applications for government assistance, including subsidised healthcare, free education, and a small stipend for families with dependent children known as Familias en Acción (Families in Action.) In its most successful effort, the Liga obtained government subsidies and substantial international aid to develop and build a housing project called Ciudad de Mujeres (City of Women), which features 98 member-owned brick houses, in the town of Turbaco, 30 minutes by car from Cartagena (Guerrero, 2006; Santa and Soto, 2009; Lemaitre et al., 2012). Given that most were displaced a number of years ago, Liga members have felt for some time that they are beyond the stage of requiring emergency humanitarian relief. Although members still hope for compensation for lost land and goods, they express no wish to return to their towns or regions of origin.

Liga members also have hosted and attended numerous meetings, workshops, and training sessions. One of the organisation's key strategies has been the active use of national and international human rights courts: it petitioned the Constitutional Court in the process that led to Award 092 and is among its beneficiaries;<sup>5</sup> it pursued 126 cases for the crime of displacement (LMD, 2009); and, more recently, it obtained protective measures from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission by successfully arguing that Liga members were subject to frequent and credible death threats. In the Colombian setting, the Liga stands out both for its sophisticated and strategic self-promotion and for its use of legal and political spaces for negotiation. The organisation also has received a number of prizes, as well as national and international recognition from the human rights community.<sup>6</sup>

The Liga demands recognition, respect, and services from local and national authorities. Through consciousness-raising activities, members have been trained to 'speak up' and to use a human-rights and gender-conscious discourse. In recent years, the Liga's activism has focused progressively more on two areas: (i) the implementation of the national legal and administrative framework, including the inclusion of IDPs in new social programmes; and (ii) increasing security. Despite some successes in other areas, our 2010 household census revealed high levels of food insecurity, arising from unemployment and a general absence of income-generating activities. The data showing continued food insecurity led the Liga members to question fundamentally their previous strategy of framing needs as rights.

## Research design and execution

Our decision to carry out a case study of the Liga was inspired by its visibility as a successful organisation of IDP women, a rare occurrence in the Colombian IDP landscape. The goal of the wider study was to examine the intersection of organising and rights enjoyment amid persistent armed conflict. The case-study design combined traditional methods of legal analysis, ethnographic observation, and participation with a collaborative approach, grounded in feminist theory, involving activists from the Liga. We thought that the qualitative aspect (interviews, field research, and practitioners' reflections) would provide unique insight into the everyday dynamics of both organising and rights claiming, and of the role of gender in these activities. The heart of the study was intended to be the design, conduct, and analysis of a survey that would (i) establish Liga members' level of rights enjoyment and (ii) compare it to that of the general IDP population, as represented by the results of general surveys. We believed that these qualitative and quantitative methods, separately and in combination, had the potential to offer something new on organising and rights enjoyment among IDPs—and, in particular, about the role played by women.

To develop the survey, the CIJUS research team prepared a set of questions that would permit an analysis of the level of rights enjoyment. The team then compared these questions with those on the 2008 Second National Survey of Verification of IDP Rights Enjoyment, undertaken by the Commission for the Monitoring of Public Policy Related to Forced Displacement and the CID Development Research Center of the National University (Comisión de Seguimiento, 2008c). The 2008 survey and other documents from the Commission for the Monitoring of Public Policy Related to Forced Displacement helped us to define the scope and the wording of the questions and to fine-tune the focus of the survey.

In June and July 2010, the CIJUS team conducted fieldwork in Turbaco, a settlement outside Cartagena, and in El Pozón, a slum area in Cartagena. In recognition of the need to address the issue of power in participatory research, the research design was intended not only to produce knowledge *about* the Liga members, but also to co-produce knowledge *with* the Liga members. Survey participants were recruited from among Liga members, and the format was changed from a survey to a complete census of the homes of all displaced women active in the Liga. The CIJUS team met several times with a research committee set up by the Liga, to review proposed survey questions and to learn what rights enjoyment meant to the Liga members. The members suggested a number of changes, including: (i) modifications of wording and possible answers; (ii) a shift in the modules that were considered relevant; and (iii) the creation of a new section that included both more questions on reproductive concerns and questions about participation in the Liga.

The trial runs that the census takers carried out among themselves made it clear that the census had to be edited, given the limited time of the respondents. The final version had 17 sections and 162 questions, 65 of which covered all members of the household. All respondents had been displaced from 1998 onwards. The final version of the census was implemented by 14 Liga women who were trained for this purpose during August 2010. From September–November 2010, the CIJUS team prepared an

initial report, which was presented at a workshop with Liga members in December 2010. During part of this time, the Liga's founder was an activist-in-residence at CIJUS and helped with interpretation of the data.

## Survey outcomes

The census was conducted at the homes of 126 Liga members, yielding information on some 695 people.<sup>7</sup> The results, which generally could have been predicted on the basis of previous conversations and interviews, showed that the Liga's most successful achievement was the housing project, benefitting 42 per cent of all members, and that, on average, women with stakes in the housing project enjoyed a higher standard of living than other members. The census also revealed that 98 per cent of respondents had participated in some of the organisation's activities; that 95.8 per cent of families participating in the census had health insurance; and that the children of most participants attended school, although only 82 per cent of the children in elementary school were in grades appropriate for their age.

However, the census also revealed widespread poverty, high unemployment, and the general absence of income-generating activities. Among the most striking findings was the widespread persistence of food insecurity.<sup>8</sup> In response to the question 'In the last week, have you or any member of the household eaten less than you wished due to food shortage or lack of money to buy food?', 71 per cent of respondents answered 'yes'. In response to the question 'In the last week, have you or any member of the household gone hungry due to food shortage or lack of money to buy food?', 70 per cent of the respondents answered 'yes'. Finally, in response to the question 'In the last week, have you or any member of the household abstained from breakfast, lunch or dinner due to food shortage or lack of money to buy food?', 73 per cent of respondents answered 'yes'. In sum, in 75 per cent of the surveyed households, one or more of the food-related standards set by the Constitutional Court in T-025 were not being met.

The lack of food corresponded to other findings. For example, 32 (8 per cent) of respondents' children had been diagnosed as being under the normal height and weight for their age, and 81.2 per cent of the households received at least one of the governmental subsidies for families in extreme poverty. The subsidies range from USD 60 to USD 70 per month, and 22 per cent of the Liga households live on that amount. Only 8.4 per cent of responding households earn one full minimum wage or more (the minimum monthly wage in 2010 was approximately USD 300 per month). Furthermore, respondent households include more people than the average household in Colombia, and their level of dependency (3.9 dependents per person generating some income) is higher than both that of the general population of Colombia and that of IDPs in the 2010 Third National Survey of Displaced People (Tercera Encuesta Nacional de Verificación de los Derechos de la Población Desplazada, or ENV). As of 2005, the dependency level for the general population was 1.3; as of 2010, it was 3.5 for IDPs in general (Comisión de Seguimiento, 2010).

In December 2010, at a workshop held at the community house in Ciudad de Mujeres, Turbaco, the research team presented the survey findings to the Liga members. The Liga leadership appeared to have been caught off-guard by the extent of food insecurity. Similarly, for the rank-and-file members, some of whom were accompanied by what appeared to the research team to be malnourished children, the fact that so many other Liga members shared the everyday hardship of food shortage seemed to be a revelation.

Although we were aware that hunger was a shameful subject, the surprise that the findings created—among both the leaders and the members at large—yielded valuable insight into the ways in which humanitarian needs may be viewed and expressed, or muted, within a grassroots organisation. Factors that may explain the leaders' and members' surprise include (i) a division between the leadership and other members, and (ii) the diverse geographical locations of the Liga, which may have prevented members from knowing what other members were experiencing. These and other potential explanations need to be explored further.

Additional comparisons between our data and the results of the ENV established that the conditions for comparable households in the region were even direr, confirming our initial assumption that membership of the Liga did indeed benefit displaced women.<sup>9</sup> This comparative advantage did not, however, lessen the validity of the Liga members' assessments of their level of food insecurity, nor their willingness to use the data to access food programmes.

## Using the data to claim humanitarian action

In early 2011, using the data obtained through the census, the Liga embarked on a campaign of trying to obtain food aid. The organisation asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the WFP for food assistance; it succeeded in obtaining assistance from the latter. The data were also used in a suit against the Mayor of Turbaco, the municipality in which Ciudad de Mujeres was located, for having failed to implement a municipal plan to assist IDPs. Finally, the Liga used the census data in two national-level legal processes:

- First, the Liga included the data in its periodic report to the Constitutional Court (as noted earlier, the Court had been monitoring the IDP issue, in the wake of T-025). In previous years, the Liga had had some success in influencing the Court's decision-making by submitting such reports. The Liga had also used quantitative data before: specifically, data on sexual violence that the organisation had produced for its landmark litigation on crimes of displacement (LMD, 2009). The census data was also included in the reports submitted to the Constitutional Court in December 2010 by two networks: the Mesa de Mujer y Conflicto Armado (Monitoring Group for Women and Armed Conflict) and the Mesa de Seguimiento del Auto 092 (Monitoring Group for Award 092).

- Second, the Liga included the data in its report to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on implementation by the Government of Colombia of its protection obligations, and in its July 2011 negotiations with the government on security measures.

By March 2011, all Liga members had been covered under the precautionary measures of the IACHR, whereby the Commission requests that member states adopt specific measures to avoid serious and irreparable harm to human rights in urgent cases (OAS, 2011). Responding to reports about the continued insecurity of women human rights defenders, the Office of the Rapporteur on the Rights of Women of the IACHR visited Colombia in May 2011, to promote compliance with the precautionary measures. In a subsequent meeting with the government, in July 2011, the Liga attempted to frame legal claims for protection against food insecurity as a way for the government to meet its obligation to comply with the Commission's precautionary measures. As part of this effort, the Liga asked the Constitutional Court to view food aid as a component of 'security measures'—and, on this basis, requested an order from the Court for the extension of humanitarian aid.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the negotiations produced few results: the government refused to accept the idea that provision of food aid constituted a security measure, but it did continue to provide bodyguards and a vehicle when the Liga leaders visited sites that they deemed risky.

The meeting with the government in mid-2011 marked the formal end of our research collaboration with the Liga. In an unexpected turn of events, the organisation experienced a significant internal rupture just before the meeting. While the Liga's founder and some other Liga members participated in a workshop at the Ciudad de Mujeres community house, another group of Liga members, led by one of the other key original members, was secretly meeting with lawyers from a competing NGO, Casa de la Mujer (House of Women), at the Liga's El Pozón site. This act of dissent brought simmering tensions within the Liga to the surface: although most of the rank-and-file members eventually sided with the Liga's founder, and expelled the organisers of the parallel meeting, the expelled faction took physical control of the community centre that was receiving the food from the WFP (Vargas, 2011). This unexpected internal conflict shows that local differences in priorities and agency concerning humanitarian need—and therewith local politics—require further study.

## **Implications for the dynamics of humanitarian action**

Drawing on the above empirical account, this section considers the promises and pitfalls of beneficiaries' use of evidence to influence humanitarian action in settings where humanitarian relief mechanisms have been regularised. We offer three key arguments about the implications of beneficiaries as producers and users of knowledge for the dynamics of humanitarian action in Colombia. First, beneficiaries of humanitarian aid, especially organisations, are capable of using research on their predicament to advance their own ends in the legal and political spaces created around

humanitarian crises. Unlike Fadnes and Horst (2008), we do not believe (i) that the transformation of displacement in Colombia into a humanitarian issue has caused displacement to become a technical rather than a political problem, or (ii) that the creation of a government bureaucracy depoliticises displacement. Instead, we understand active management of the internally displaced population by the Colombian state as a necessary step in acknowledging, making visible, and managing the human costs of internal displacement, as well as in supplying a space for grassroots advocacy and action.

The Liga's efforts to make use of participatory research compel us to rethink evidence—in particular, quantitative data, with its scientific allure—in terms of its possible utility for IDP organisations. We are aware of the risk that authorities will appropriate knowledge of IDPs and make problematic use of it (for example, to deny further benefits), yet our view is that knowledge—in this case, quantitative data—serves as a resource for groups such as the Liga, by providing a type of cultural capital that is necessary to negotiate an institutionalised and bureaucratised humanitarian system. This conclusion was further confirmed in 2012 when we were approached by a separate organisation, the Mesa de Víctimas de Mocoa, a network of IDP organisations in the southern town of Colombia, that was seeking support in producing their own survey and handling their own quantitative data on the IDP situation in Mocoa. Thus, we have come to believe in the relatively straightforward claim made by many practitioners: that knowledge is, in fact, power; and that grassroots IDP organisations are better able to appropriate and use academic knowledge than is usually assumed in quantitative and qualitative research on IDPs.

Second, even when beneficiaries of humanitarian aid do advance claims in the legal and political spaces provided by humanitarian governance, their agency is constrained by poverty, violence, and local power imbalances. Most of the Liga's actions failed to alleviate significantly the food shortage. This can be explained, in part, by inadequacies in the implementation of government policies; the principal reason, however, is that humanitarian relief programmes are not designed to deal with the long-term stabilisation of IDPs in urban conditions of violence and deprivation. As the example of the Liga shows, although context-specific knowledge opens up the possibility of reframing claims to benefits and resources, knowledge of a situation does not necessarily lead to the power to change it—particularly when the concern (in this case, income) is related to a highly contentious issue such as the redistributive role of the state with respect to IDPs.

Third, beneficiaries' priorities and agency in the production of data on humanitarian crises are in need of further study. Extensive literature addresses the strategic claiming of victim identities as a means of gaining access to resources, and what such claims reveal about humanitarian action (see, for instance, Sandvik, 2008). Our research shows IDP women as strategic actors in other contexts: as citizens who claim rights and attempt to use them as a means of escaping poverty and deprivation. Although the Liga's success in using our research for strategic political purposes was limited, as a whole the Liga has succeeded in providing most of its members with

access to marginally better circumstances than those of other IDPs in the same region. The vigour with which the Liga members were willing to take ownership of information indicates a need for this type of data. The humanitarian community also needs to understand better these types of strategies and to engage in further reflection on whether and how international agencies and NGOs should be responsive to beneficiaries' priorities and agency, with regard to data production and use.

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## Correspondence

Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, Senior Researcher, PRIO, PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway. Telephone: +(47) 22 54 77 00; fax: +(47) 22 54 77 01. E-mail: [bergtora@prio.no](mailto:bergtora@prio.no)

Julieta Lemaitre, Associate Professor, Facultad de Derecho, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia. E-mail: [jlemaitr@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:jlemaitr@uniandes.edu.co)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Participatory action research (PAR) is based partly on the work of Freire (2000)—and, in the Colombian context, Fals Borda (1985). In the 1990s, having lost most of their Marxist tenor, the concepts of participation and participatory research were brought into the mainstream in the fields of development and development studies by researchers and practitioners, with the specific purpose of furthering the realisation of liberal rights. In the late 1990s, PAR migrated into the humanitarian field, as a means of addressing the legitimacy crisis of the humanitarian enterprise: a focus on participatory methodologies was among the answers to the quest for accountability. Kaiser (2000, p. 11) notes, for example, that 'agencies are keen to improve their practice' and were 'interested in a rights-based approach, social learning and development of methods for greater beneficiary involvement in evaluation and other stages of humanitarian assistance programmes'. In their study of refugees' perceptions of the quality of healthcare, Rutta et al. (2005) argue that participation is a way to bridge the gap in 'qualitative information' in the evaluation of humanitarian assistance, making such assessments less top-down. Similarly, leading norm entrepreneurs, such as Cohen (2008, p. 1), thought that IDPs were 'the best placed to articulate their needs and evaluate the national, regional and international responses to those needs'. Nevertheless, concerns were

raised that (i) PAR failed to engage with issues of power and politics, (ii) it risked becoming ‘the new tyranny’ (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, p. 2), and (iii) it amounted to ‘advocacy research’—and therefore lacked academic rigor (Goodhand, 2000; Jacobsen and Landau, 2003, p. 187). Important recent publications, however, have moved beyond these criticisms, and concentrate on power differences between researchers and populations in crisis, research design, reflexivity, and the ethics of engaging in research with displaced populations (Doná, 2007; Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Hugman, 2010; Block et al., 2012; Refstie and Brun, 2012). Yet, further empirical research is necessary: as Taylor (2011) points out, although PAR is common in refugee studies, little analytical attention has been paid to collective action, organising, or leadership. Focusing on the Liga’s collective efforts as an example of best practice highlights the possibilities and constraints of IDP organising and leadership, and the ways in which collective action engages with the politics and power structures engendered by domestic law, human rights, and the emerging legalisation of humanitarianism.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete analysis of the census data, see Lemaitre et al. (2012).

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting discussion of state capacity for humanitarian governance, see Lautze, Raven-Roberts, and Erkinch (2009). For a detailed mapping of the Colombian humanitarian apparatus, see Wong (2008). For an excellent description of the situation of displaced women in Colombia, see Meertens (2010).

<sup>4</sup> The threat to IDP leaders is very real, and a high number are attacked, killed, or ‘disappear’. See ABColombia, Oidhaco, and U.S. Office on Colombia (2011) and IDMC (2011a).

<sup>5</sup> According to AJG (2008), 155 members of the Liga were covered by T-025, rendered in 2004, and 150 members by award 092, rendered in 2008.

<sup>6</sup> As part of our project, we wanted to learn about the agendas, leadership, and strategies of Colombian IDP NGOs for women; to this end, we conducted interviews with 66 such NGOs across the country (PRIO and CIJUS, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The survey was deployed in the five areas where the Liga was active: Turbaco (42 per cent of respondents; 53 homes); El Pozón (28 per cent of respondents; 35 homes); Carmen de Bolívar (13 per cent of respondents; 17 homes); San Jacinto (9 per cent of respondents; 11 homes); and San José de Chiquito (8 per cent of respondents; 10 homes).

<sup>8</sup> The indicators are as follows: (i) number of households where none of the members abstain from meals due to shortage of food or money; (ii) number of households where no members are hungry due to shortage of food; (iii) number of households where no person eats less than he or she desires due to shortage of food or money.

<sup>9</sup> Of the IDPs surveyed in the ENV, 89 per cent answered at least one of the hunger questions in the affirmative, versus 75 per cent of the Liga members.

<sup>10</sup> In 2007, the Constitutional Court found that the 90-day limit was unconstitutional and declared that (i) no limits could be set on humanitarian aid and (ii) individuals and groups in particularly dire circumstances could ask for indefinite extensions.

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