

**Public Housing, Public Aid, and Collective Reparations:
Neighborhood Formation in Makatoa and Sabana**

**Maria Atuesta
Graduate School of Design
Harvard University**

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Abstract

How are neighborhood communities created when the government provides free housing to a specific population? The paper examines the formation processes of displaced neighborhood communities and their collective efficacies in two free housing projects established after a public initiative to provide free housing to Colombia's more than 8 million internally displaced persons. Situated in Granada, a city of around 80,000 inhabitants located in Colombia's eastern plainlands that has absorbed tens of thousands of internally displaced persons, the paper finds that although public housing has granted displaced individuals with a new place to own and stay in the city and a right to make claims as legal owners of property, such public provisions also amplify conditions of social exclusion limiting residents' capacities to effectively make claims as a collective and access basic residential infrastructure—besides housing—to inhabit the city.

This paper draws on a chapter in my doctoral dissertation that was written after one year of fieldwork in Granada, between 2018 and 2019, where I conducted interviews, participant observation and systematic review of city council minutes with a focus on neighborhood formation processes in three different types of forced resettlement environments: government-sponsored public housing projects, illegal land occupations, and illegal subdivision and development of private, or public, land. Having received displaced persons representing about one third of its urban population over the last three decades and having seen a wide variety of new neighborhoods emerge—largely inhabited and built by displaced persons—Granada is an ideal place to study and compare the impact of different types of resettlement processes on the creation of neighborhood communities with more, or less, capacities to transform, effectively, the conditions in which they live.

Free housing for the poor and displaced

In 2012 the government of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2014; 2014-2018) launched a program to provide 100,000 completely free housing units to Colombia's "poorest of the poor." The program was unprecedented because never before had the national government been directly involved in the financing of 100 percent of the construction costs of housing units for the poor in a variety of cities across the country, and its implementation was justified as a means to provide housing to poor families, poor families displaced by the harsh winter season of 2011, and, fundamentally, displaced persons of the Colombian civil conflict who had been historically excluded from the subsidized housing market.

With the Free Housing program 110,545 housing units were built in more than 200 cities between 2012 and 2016. Located for the most part in city peripheries, the free housing complexes have been occupied by low-income families, and among them, by a large proportion of displaced persons. In the smaller cities where housing units have been built, like Granada, the building typology has been mostly characterized by the construction of one-story single-family housing complexes, with side-by-side units, sharing a common wall and a common look for the entire housing complex. The size of the housing projects tends to be smaller in smaller cities, but because in these cases housing units represent a larger proportion of the housing stock, projects tend to be incorporated to the city as entirely new neighborhoods with the capacity to constitute their own local community boards. These boards are elected every four years (Law 743 of 2002) and can propose local development projects to city authorities, and request resources to municipal and regional public entities to invest in the local infrastructure (e.g., build a park or pave a street). This is the case of Makatoa and Sabana, two free housing projects built by the government in 2014 and 2015 in Granada, with a total of 180 and 196 units, respectively,

providing housing to 95 and 161 families victims of conflict. These two housing projects became two completely new neighborhoods of Granada.

Makatoa and Sabana are the first neighborhoods of completely subsidized housing units ever built in Granada, and this paper is concerned with their formation processes and related outcomes over the internally displaced persons who live there: What happens when internally displaced families occupy a common residential space under state sponsorship? What social and claims-making practices become institutionalized and how do these practices impact the capacities of residents to transform the conditions in which they live?

The challenges of public housing provision

There is a popular saying in Colombia that translates: ‘everyone in bed, or everyone on the floor’ (*o todos en la cama, o todos en el suelo*). It reflects a sense of shared responsibility where “the welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all,” but the proverb is not used in Colombia to evoke a general lesson of what society as a whole ought to achieve. It is rather used in specific circumstances. It is used in dire times where a given group or community agrees to carry the heavy burdens of life together: if some must suffer, the community agrees that everyone will suffer together. Unfortunately, under specific circumstances, this sense of community spirit can lead to less than desirable social outcomes.

Penelope, a displaced resident of Granada, told me an interesting story that is not directly related to housing but is a very useful way to illustrate how an initiative of aid provision may awaken an ‘everyone in bed, or everyone on the floor’ dilemma, with undesirable social outcomes. She had been living in Granada for many years already when she learned that her name had been listed to receive a basic mix of food supplies that people call *la remesa*. The news came as a surprise to her, because, as she put it: “I have never received anything from the

government” (interview by author, June 2019).¹ To receive *la remesa* she had to go to the House of Culture, a public venue where the government organizes all sorts of events. She arrived there to realize that *la remesa* was, unexpectedly, rather good and included, among other items, a large sack of potatoes, beans, oil, and rice. There was nevertheless a problem. Many of the displaced persons who had not been selected as beneficiaries were there too, to complain. Things got out of hand. She remembers hearing people screaming at different tempos: “either everyone gets something, or no one gets anything” (*o le dan a todos o a nadie*), and then, the storm of popular discontent was unleashed. She saw how one woman tore the sack of food of another, and beans began to rain onto the tile floor. She panicked. She asked a resident of a house nearby to let her keep her stuff while things settled down. In the meantime, she found another resident of her neighborhood and they agreed to share a taxi ride back home. They both jumped into the cab with their food packs and left the disturbance behind.

Although anecdotal and not directly related to housing, Penelope’s story reveals an interesting insight about a situation in which government aid, intended to help the poor, can create tensions and fissures within a community which in this case involves a group of displaced persons who proclaimed: “either everyone gets something, or no one gets anything.” The question, in this case, is whether it is the same with public housing, how, and why.

To be clear, the Latin American literature studying public and affordable housing has already found several faults in the state’s involvement in housing provision (Jannoschka and Salinas-Arreortua 2017). Scholars studying housing provision under the current liberal policy model of housing subsidies—which leaves the construction of housing to the market-oriented

¹ All interviews in this paper were made by the author in person. See note on sources at the end of the paper.

interests of private developers—have criticized the proliferation of low-income housing complexes in the urban peripheries of cities (McTarnaghan et al 2016)—favored by developers due to lower land costs—typically lacking the infrastructure to satisfy the needs of residents and negatively impacting low-income households’ social networks (Libertun de Duren 2017). Scholars have further identified that in this context private construction firms’ efforts to reduce costs and make projects ‘pencil out’ have resulted in poor-quality housing, and some suggest that there is a positive relationship between the quality of physical residential spaces and the capacity of residents to live in peaceful coexistence (Rodríguez and Sugranyes 2004).

Makatoa and Sabana share the main problematic conditions identified by this literature and, like Rodríguez and Sugranyes (2004) have argued, in both neighborhoods poor-quality housing conditions have been denounced by residents as a source of social tensions between neighbors. The same goes for other free housing projects built in other cities around the nation. Public officials monitoring the more than 200 free housing projects built in Colombia² also identified that one of the major challenges they encountered were the many social tensions that emerged between people who became neighbors when they moved into the units. Residents fighting over the use of defective communal spaces, and the noise that travels through the neighbors’ thin walls were some of the most commonly cited examples of social tensions related to the physicality of housing projects and their immediate residential environments. Even though these are all good explanations of social tensions, there are important limitations to the power that the design of physical space can have over specific groups. As Foucault once said: “the architect has no power over me” (Foucault 2000, p. 357). There are variations in how the same

² Besides local housing officials, and the mayor in charge of implementing the projects of Makatoa and Sabana, I conducted a focus group with civil servants at the national Department of Social Prosperity, which is the agency charged with providing social and community support to all free housing projects in the country, including Sabana and Makatoa. The agency used to have a large network of civil servants monitoring 283 projects on a regular basis.

built environmental conditions can impact—negatively or positively—specific communities. For example, in stark contrast to the case here, there are numerous ethnographies on informal settlements that have shown how infrastructural deficiencies actually become the means by which residents of the same poor urban peripheries come together and join efforts to change their living conditions for the better (see for example Lloyd 1980, Perlman 1976). This contrast between the paradigmatic case of informal settlements and public housing projects indicates that the design of physical space and the difficulties brought by peripheral locations are only part of the explanation of the social tensions experienced in public housing projects. In other words, while poor-quality housing may be a challenge to low-income communities in general, we need to understand why it tends to become a means to refer to social tensions and a factor dividing a neighborhood community in public housing projects, instead of a means to bring residents together like in informal settlements.

In this paper, I examine the everyday challenges and social tensions experienced in free housing neighborhoods Makatoa and Sabana and how residents address these issues. In both neighborhoods, residents reported that they had a hard time learning to live together. As in Penelope's story about the delivery of food packages, I find that conditions imposed over the use of housing units, inequalities in material provisions, and local-national tensions in the definition of "deserved" humanitarian aid can undermine social solidarity. Public provision of housing is considered a blessing by most who have benefited from these programs and who have finally been able to own a place in the city after forced displacement. But it has also come with other obligations and expectations that can be a burden for families who inhabit the housing units.

Image 1

Free housing neighborhood Sabana (left) and Makatoa (right)



Source: Author – 2019

The neighborhood enabling process

Mandates and regulations

The enabling process by which free housing neighborhoods form is determined by the implementation of top-down national and local institutional mandates and regulations that set the stage for the construction of free housing projects that became new official neighborhoods in small cities. These mandates also impose conditions on the use of the built environment, and eventually frame interactions among residents.

In 2004 the Colombian Constitutional Court—the highest court for the protection of fundamental rights—issued Sentence T-025 demanding immediate action from all public authorities to protect the constitutional rights of displaced populations—including the right to housing (Sentencia T-025 de la Corte Constitucional de Colombia). Today there are more than 8 million reported cases of forced displacement as a result of a decades long civil conflict taking place since the 1960s between the government and different guerrilla armies. The 2004 constitutional mandate sought to respond to more than 100 cases brought by the displaced victims

of conflict before the court to address the lack of an effective response from public authorities to some of their basic needs. This mandate became a steppingstone for the development of new regulations and new programs targeting displaced persons above other vulnerable populations in Colombia. One of these programs was President Juan Manuel Santos' *100,000 Free Housing* program. In April 2012, President Santos launched the program declaring that the free housing units would be built for the "poorest of the poor," and would benefit, among others, vulnerable populations and families displaced by the armed conflict.

According to vice-minister of housing Guillermo Herrera (2013-2016), with the best intentions to achieve greater transparency in the distribution of the 100,000 free housing units, the government used information technology to systematically allocate those units. To create a list of potential beneficiaries, the government merged several national datasets on poverty and displacement.³ This list was delivered to each of the municipal administrations where free housing projects would be built. It was up to the mayors and other local and national authorities to inform all potential beneficiaries of the program and help them file the required paperwork to manifest their interest in obtaining a free housing unit. This paperwork was then sent back to the national government, which used a ranking scheme to further refine the list of potential beneficiaries. The ranking scheme was meant to prioritize groups of households based on several criteria, like: whether they had an assigned housing subsidy which they had not been able to cash before, or whether they were included in the lists of both the national information system of displaced persons (*Red Nacional de Información*) and the national strategy for the eradication of extreme poverty (*Red Unidos*)—in the refined list by the national government for all free housing units to be built

³ The main datasets used to create the list of potential beneficiaries were the National Registry of Displaced Populations, Infounidos (containing information of vulnerable families), SISBEN (containing information of vulnerable families), and municipal registries of victims of displacement of the rainy season.

between 2012-2014 74% of eligible households were internally displaced.⁴ This list was then sent back again to municipal authorities. If, as was often the case, the number of eligible households in the refined list exceeded the number of units to be built in the city, then local authorities conducted lotteries.⁵ Accordingly, hundreds of the eligible households attended the public lotteries in their respective municipalities (see Image 2).

Image 2

A lottery event of Free Housing units



Source: Ministerio de Transporte de Colombia, November 2013, in https://www.mintransporte.gov.co/publicaciones/3237/2858_familias_vulnerables_de_barranquilla_ganaron_en_sorteo_publico_una_casa_gratis/

* In representation of the Housing Minister Luis Felipe Henao, Minister of Transportation Cecilia Alvarez Correa conducted the lottery in the city of Barranquilla; The organization of lottery events was very similar in every city that was selected for the construction of free housing projects. In Granada, Housing Minister Luis Felipe Henao and Mayor of Granada Alexander Guzman ran the lottery events.

Through this highly technocratic selection scheme the national government sought to prevent local authorities from exploiting public funds to benefit family members, civil servants, and local political brokers. Additionally, to guarantee that public funds were used properly by beneficiaries, free housing units came with a series of obligations for those receiving the units.

⁴ For a more detailed description of the selection process see Departamento Nacional de Planeacion (2014).

⁵ In Granada, displaced persons who had been assigned a housing subsidy in previous years, but who had not been able to cash it, did not have to participate in the lotteries. Housing units were first assigned to this population. The remaining housing units were assigned through the lotteries.

With the keys to their new homes, beneficiaries received a list of obligations to comply with, which they constantly keep in mind because the government has the power to reclaim the house in the case of non-compliance. Even though residents receive property titles and become the sole owners of their units, they are obligated to inhabit the house for a period of ten years. If they leave the house abandoned or rent it to someone else before ten years, the government has the power to reclaim the house. The government can also reclaim the house if residents fail to make timely payments for public utilities and annual property taxes. Once the residents moved to their new neighborhoods, they also learned about other restrictions. In compliance with city regulation, residents cannot make any structural changes to their homes such as installing fencing or adding decks or front porches. They also cannot create any form of enclosure around open patios—as originally designed for both Makatoa and Sabana. Residents are also not allowed to run their own small businesses from home, which also means they cannot change the buildings in ways that would facilitate commercial activities. And they are not allowed to transform public sidewalks in front of their homes.

These rules and regulations on the use of the built environment make residents feel choked, even though they know that it is very rare to get penalized for non-compliance. Residents have learned that breaking the rules “is not a big deal,” and it will not get them, or others, in trouble. They know, for example, which housing units in their neighborhood are being rented out to third parties. So far, the government has not taken any action against the owners. Many have built decks and fences outside their units without being punished or penalized, and many have also transformed their front porches and living rooms into small grocery stores, hair salons, and paper and office supplies stores, among others. However, despite the apparent ease with which residents break the rules, they still fear and resent that authorities might feel compelled to penalize them and

ruin the investments they have made to their homes, if not worse (i.e., initiate an eviction process). Unlike residents who live in informal settlements in the city, they have more reasons to fear public retaliation against informal practices in the use and transformation of their homes, because they are immersed—at least in theory—in an environment of residential formality and control. With the free housing units, they have achieved a legitimate right to own a place in the city, but they have not gained a legitimate right to transform it.

Embedded in this environment of residential “formality” is also a system of aid provisions to Colombia’s displaced persons, where assistance is justified and constantly evaluated on the basis of providing it to the “poorest of the poor,” and those who “really need it.” It was through this system that residents became eligible and were able to access a free housing unit in the first place, and through it they have also become the subjects of systematic monitoring and evaluation practices.

The public aid system for displaced families

In Colombia, aid provision to displaced persons of the armed conflict is organized through a series of stages which the displaced household is meant to reach, as it becomes less and less dependent, or in less need, of public support. The first stage represents the period from the moment when the person, and his/her family, arrives at a new municipality and declares displacement to public authorities.⁶ This stage is meant to last around three months during which the family is entitled to receive *Emergency Aid* in the form of food, household supplies, shelter, and basic health services.⁷ Once the family is included in the national information system of displaced persons, it enters the

⁶ Declarations are generally made to local public authorities (i.e., the local ombudsman offices, and the local victims’ unit in the area).

⁷ The amount of Emergency Aid provided varies substantially across cities depending on the resources available at the municipal level and the types of organizations involved (e.g., the Red Cross, Pastoral Social) in aid provision.

person that only has a declaration of displacement) and range between 15 and 35 million pesos (ca. \$5,000 and \$7,000 US dollars).¹⁰ To make these adjustments, the government needs information at the household level, collected through a survey system called *Plan de Asistencia, Atención y Reparación Integral* (Comprehensive Care, Assistance, and Reparation Plan).

With this set of rules, conditions, and monitoring practices, Colombian governmental authorities have sought to provide aid to Colombia's displaced families more efficiently, in a context where the policy to attend the needs and rights of the victims of the armed conflict (Law 1448 of 2011) has been critically underfunded (Sikkink et al 2014). At the same time, in order to receive support from the government, every displaced family implicitly agrees to become the subject of an intricate system of classification, requiring periodic controls and comprehensive regulation; a *biopolitics* (Foucault 1988) assessing "ideal" degrees of vulnerability and "deserved" social aid in every household.

To be clear, conditions of public aid provisions are not unique to the provision of free housing. Poor and displaced residents of other neighborhoods in the city are also recipients of low-income support and humanitarian aid. These conditions, nevertheless, play a key role in the constitution of new free housing neighborhoods because it was through this regulatory system that families applied for a free housing unit and became neighbors. As a result, unlike any other neighborhood in the city, all residents of the free housing neighborhoods are subjects within the national system of regulation of aid provisions, on top of the already mentioned regulations

¹⁰ Reparations can be up to 40 months of payments equal to the monthly minimum wage. Addressing a general state of underfunding, in 2017 the government announced that reparation payments would be prioritized among people who were older, had a disability, or were critically ill (Government Ruling 1049 of 2017).

limiting the use and transformation of the free housing units. These conditions of neighborhood enabling processes, have created fissures between neighbors in Makatoa and Sabana.

Vertical and horizontal relations of free housing residents

Tensions in local and national assessments in the distribution of social aid

Despite efforts from authorities to implement an objective selection criterion for the distribution of the free housing units, the complicated selection scheme was difficult to understand at the local level and generated discomfort and social unrest among many residents of cities that would be receiving free units.

Specifically, the publicly distributed lists of potential beneficiaries generated discomfort and discontent among citizens. For example, civil servants who played a role informing potential beneficiaries of the free housing projects to be constructed in Villavicencio—a mid-size city about two hours driving distance from Granada—complained that people reacted violently to the publication of this information. In an official statement sent by these civil servants to national authorities in the Department of Social Prosperity—the agency charged with providing social and community support to all free housing projects—they remark: “because the information was disclosed without further clarification and discussion with the community, too many people came to deliver their paperwork [to apply for housing], not just those who had been pre-approved by the government. This generated a complex situation of social unrest”¹¹ (Departamento Nacional de Planeacion, 2014).

Nicolás Marquez, a national official I interviewed in charge of facilitating the selection process of free housing beneficiaries and who interacted with local officials to coordinate the

¹¹ The statement was made by civil servants from ANSPE, Cofrem, and Cavis-UT, and was cited in the official evaluation of the *100,000 Free Housing* program by Departamento Nacional de Planeacion (2014).

implementation of the housing lotteries, corroborated this story by claiming that one of the biggest surprises during his time in office was the general pushback against the implementation of the nationally produced, highly technocratic list of eligible individuals. He identified this as a specific issue of small cities—like Granada. In such places, residents were more likely to know many who were included or excluded from the lists, which meant they had their own views of what they thought was the right selection criteria for their cities. For example, the lists of potential beneficiaries included residents from the rural areas of municipalities—even though housing was going to be provided only in urban centers—and residents who had left town. Seeing these people listed did not sit well with many residents who argued that those people would probably not move to occupy the free housing units, while there were many other residents in town who needed housing. Additionally, in the lists of potential beneficiaries, residents identified people who, according to them, had properties somewhere else or who were better off financially than other residents of the city. These shortcomings proved to their eyes that the selection criterion was biased and wrong. As a result, despite best intentions from national authorities, inflexibility of the technocratically produced lists left local mayors—who are particularly close to the citizenry in small cities and deal with all sorts of local complaints—with no room for maneuver to address some of these concerns. The result, in some cases, was public upheavals. In a few cities, according to Marquez, mayors were forced to postpone the lotteries because some people in the community threatened to disrupt the events. Here again, as it happened in Penelope's story about the distribution of food provisions, many people protested and resisted the implementation of what they considered to be an unjust selection process, even at the risk of losing the product that was being delivered. Marquez recalled that the burden of popular discontent fell all on the mayors'

shoulders, and some complained to him, arguing that the program was “the worst that had happened to their administration” (interview by author, November 2019).

Beyond an issue of party politics, in this case the problem with the distribution of housing lay in the institutional design and a mismatch between national and local knowledge. Bureaucrats and displaced persons need to deal with the inevitability of exclusion in the distribution of scarce resources. In this process there can be fundamental differences in how local and national public authorities, and regular citizens assess what and who is deserving of support. All believe support should be distributed on the basis of need, but they assess need in very different ways. These tensions are specific to small cities, where residents are familiar with those who are receiving support and they have an idea of which families need support and are not getting it. These different views can trigger social upheaval and can put a burden on those who are receiving the provisions in question because they become the visible beneficiaries of what some people see as an “illegitimate” distribution system. This challenge is clearly evidenced in the free housing neighborhoods of Granada.

When asked about the distribution of free housing units, the general stance today among many residents of Granada is that the government made many mistakes giving free housing to people who did not really need it or deserve it. Criticism of the way housing had been distributed not only came from people who were not able to participate in the free housing lotteries. It also came to a great extent from people who live today in a free unit. Some residents said that while the housing had been a blessing for them, after all they had lost, they still had issues with the program. Many disliked that the program had benefited some victims who already had means to make a living and had also received disproportionate support from the government over the years, leaving others who were in real need of support behind. Others thought that the selection process

should have given a higher priority to people who owned a home and lost it when they were displaced. In some instances, my interviewees even admitted that if it were up to them, they would not have given priority to displaced families but to vulnerable populations.

Such an answer could be interpreted, at first, as a lack of fellow-feeling among displaced persons. But the answer is not very different from that of those who worried about displaced families that had been overlooked by the government or who had lost property with displacement. I understood this better one Friday afternoon conversing with Dilma at her front door, in one of Granada's informal settlements. She pointed at nearby houses of neighbors who, unlike her, had received a free housing unit. Through the labyrinthine narrow alleys, she pointed at a house painted in pale yellow a couple of steps away and said: "Ana got a house in Makatoa." Pointing at the wooden house right in front of hers she mentioned: "This one belonged to a black woman from Choco [a department in the Pacific coast]. She got a house in Sabana." Lastly, she noted: "Another woman with two lots [not around her corner] also left for Sabana and is now renting one of the lots to a car repair business" (interview by author, April 2019).

I asked her whether she thought it was unfair that they all got free housing and she did not, since she had also been displaced, not only once, but twice—the first time in 1996 and the second in 2006—and her husband and one of her sons were killed because of the armed conflict. She shook her head. She thought her former neighbors were all displaced and in need of housing, and the problem lay instead among those who were "not really displaced." "Commuters," she called them, explaining that they were people who moved to areas controlled by the guerrilla or paramilitary forces because they could make money from the then-booming coca economy. For her, they were not really displaced, because they moved to these areas to make money. What she identified as "commuters" were also known as *raspadores*—day laborers who went to live and

work in the coca crops—or businessmen who traveled on a daily basis to sell goods and take advantage of the heated coca market. Dilma mentioned that she knew many of these commuters, because she used to live in a coca territory, and she knew that they returned home to Granada to declare displacement, with money in their pockets, and without being “really displaced.” She remarked that the commuters had no problem waiting in long lines to get humanitarian aid and other sorts of provisions, while people who were “really displaced” had not even had the chance to declare displacement. She concluded: “That is why many of us question the use of the category of displacement to define who gets housing” (interview by author, April 2019).

The displaced people who live in Granada, including those who live in the free housing neighborhoods, have a vague idea of who is and who is not getting a free housing unit because many have migrated from the same regions. As a result, they are familiar with the stories of displacement of others, and they see what the government does not. Because aid is limited but reachable, and desired, they use this information to evaluate and reevaluate where the line separating the deserving and undeserving beneficiaries of social aid should lie. To be clear, these social assessments are prevalent in the city, and they are also very much alive in the narratives of the residents of free housing neighborhoods. Still, only in the latter case does the narrative of the problems with distribution impact how residents relate to their neighborhood and their neighbors.

In my interviews, the many residents who embraced this narrative were compelled not only to assess whether their neighbors “deserved” a free housing unit but also whether they themselves “deserved” one as well. Fabian, for example, felt compelled to both criticize the way housing had been provided, and defend his rightful access to a free unit when I asked him to tell me the story of his neighborhood and how he became a resident of Makatoa. Fabian, who is now in his late sixties, used to live on a rural estate of his own and sell *merchandise* (coca leaf production) to both

paramilitaries and guerrillas in what Dilma identified as a coca territory. Because he was selling *merchandise* to both sides, the FARC guerrilla threatened to kill him. He left his estate and declared displacement in Granada, because it was “the place to go to” in a time when hordes of people from his home region were forced to leave their homes. Fabian had no intention of staying in Granada. He moved away immediately to work on a rural estate nearby. About seven years after displacement, he received an unexpected call from a public agent from Red Unidos—a national program providing comprehensive support to vulnerable families—who told him that he was eligible to participate in the lottery for a free housing unit.¹² Fabian was not able to explain to me why Red Unidos called him in the first place, because he never applied for housing and was not even living in Granada at the time. He just knew that: “I met with her [the agent from Red Unidos] and she gave me my winning number for the house. Because I asked God to give me some place to live to stop suffering, I believe that God granted this gift to me” (interview by author, November 2018).

When talking about the neighborhood, Fabian acknowledged that the government did not deliver housing in what he thought was the right way, because there were many people with other properties who had been given a free unit in his neighborhood. But, at the same time, he admitted that he still owned the rural estate where he used to live before displacement, and for this reason, others claimed that he was being dishonest. He made it clear that he was not, because he did not intend to return and, in fact, was willing to give away his former property at any moment, should the government require so. He felt old and tired, and he did not trust the guerrillas who were still present in the territory.

¹² Red Unidos is part of the selection process of the Free Housing program. Public agents had to find and inform all potential beneficiaries under the Red Unidos program.

Fabian's story is interesting because it combines many of the issues mentioned by other displaced persons in the neighborhoods, as a problem of the distribution of free housing units. He owned property elsewhere, and he was not living in Granada before getting a free unit. He only moved there to occupy his house. He could also be easily mistaken—to the eyes of others who did not know his story in detail—with what Dilma identified as “commuters” or “not really displaced” people who came back from the coca territories with money in their pockets. And yet, like many others, Fabian perceived that others, unlike him, had manipulated the system by not providing information about other properties they owned or by receiving housing that they did not really need because they had money. He claimed that this was not his case, because in some instances, like his own, having a property elsewhere did not necessarily mean that the owner was willing or able to “return.” Whatever others might say about him, he considered himself a “rightful” owner of a free housing unit; a person who has had a hard time in life and deserves reparation. Today, Fabian thinks there is “a lot of envy and competition” (interview by author, November 2018) in the neighborhood and feels judged and observed by some of his neighbors. Even though he is involved with the local community board of Makatoa and tries to collaborate as much as he can, he wants to sell his new house and leave the neighborhood.

Neighborhood fissures

Not all residents of the free housing neighborhoods had a hard time justifying their access to a free unit like Fabian did, but, overall, the institutionalized narrative of who deserved free housing complicated relations with neighbors, encouraging residents to assess others' legitimate right to a free unit, and making them feel self-conscious; aware of being assessed by others who did not understand their particular situations well. In each case, it did not help that residents were internally differentiated by a wealth of different sorts of aid provisions that had been provided on

an unequal basis, further encouraging residents to assess each other's "rightful" access to specific benefits.

For example, because of the national visibility of the free housing projects, a multiplicity of social programs by public authorities, national NGOs, or international organizations focused their efforts on these neighborhoods. Unfortunately, each of these programs had their own budget and mission statement, and, accordingly, their own rules and restrictions on who could participate or how many people could enroll. As a result, not all residents benefited from each social program implemented in the neighborhoods. Some residents rationalized this situation as another example of the "unfairness" of aid distribution, further cementing the general narrative about the problems of free housing provision. This situation also tarnished the legitimacy of the neighborhoods' local community boards, because some residents claimed that the board's leaders—who are also residents of the neighborhood—were helping their friends access these programs.

Within neighborhoods, residents were also internally differentiated by the same national institutional system of humanitarian aid provision through which they accessed housing. Rosa, for example, is one of the few people in her neighborhood who has received the monetary reparation from the government. I asked her how she managed to get her reparation, since it had been so difficult for most people I had interviewed so far to even know where they were in the process of obtaining it. She replied: "I sued the government." Because her health insurance company was refusing to cover the cost of thyroid medicine that the doctor had prescribed her, she visited the local health department to request the medicine. There, she learned that she was able to sue the health insurance company at no cost through the municipal ombudsman's office to get her medicine. There, she also learned that she could sue the government to get her long-awaited reparation, which she did. Rosa has invested the money in her house: buying basic household

appliances, painting it, building a wall in her small backyard—without official permit—and putting tiles over the cement floor. Although her modest housing investments are already visible to her neighbors, she tries to keep the source of such transformations a secret. Whispering in her living room, she mentioned: “Only God, who is listening, you and my husband know that I sued the government.” I asked Rosa why she did not want people to know. She replied: “I do not like it because people start asking, ‘Hey you have money, can you lend me some money?’” (interview by author, September 2018). She also mentioned that her neighbors were “envious” and difficult to deal with, as she personally experienced when she was selected as one of the beneficiaries of a municipal program to install gas services to her home.

Even though the property titles that each family received from national authorities indicated that the housing units were supposed to have a direct connection to gas services, the private construction firm in charge of building the project built the units without those connections. To solve the issue, some residents used their savings to pay the approximately two million pesos (ca. \$600 US dollars) needed to install the lines. Others took out loans from the local public services company, which they paid back in monthly installment payments. Many others, who did not have the money or claimed that the government should be the one paying for the installation, decided to live without gas installation to their homes. Instead, they bought cooking gas cylinders and refilled them on a regular basis.¹³ By the time the municipality released the program of gas installations, 24 property owners in the neighborhood signed up to receive the subsidy, but only six were selected and one among them was Rosa. The goal of the program was not to address the issue of the gas installation that had been promised but never delivered with the free housing program. Rather, it was to increase the coverage of gas services in a city with very poor coverage.

¹³ A refill costs around 60 thousand pesos (ca. \$20 US dollars) and households run out every one or two months.

Nevertheless, residents, who already resented a government that had not fulfilled what was supposed to be delivered, did not take the news well. They were suspicious of the selection criteria, which according to public authorities was based on a random selection of city blocks. Although anger and resentment were primarily directed at public authorities—as had happened before with the distribution of food and housing—those receiving the gas connections were the ones who suffered the direct consequences, bearing the stigma of state corruption in their daily lives. Here again, leaders of the local community board were accused of interceding on the behalf of their friends and family members in the neighborhood. Rosa, who claimed that she had nothing to do with the local community board and she had just been lucky, had to endure criticism because of all this. Hence, she concluded that her neighbors were “envious” and “constantly watching” (interview by author, September 2018), and she resolved that it was better to keep information about the benefits she received private as much as possible.

Beyond political, familial, and friendship loyalties that may be shaping how local community boards operate, or how some individuals get access to specific benefits, what these different examples show is that the distribution of housing and other related sorts of *selective* provisions by different organizations and national and local public authorities is highly contested. This contested inequality in the distribution of insufficient resources reveals that there are tensions across the scales at which benefit programs are planned and executed. What is a legitimate way to target resources at the level of national and international entities, and even at the level of the city—as in the case of gas connections—may be in conflict with local assessments of worth and the context of what neighbors expect from public authorities. These tensions, introduced by free housing projects and their associated social programs—unfolding at different scales of operation (e.g., at the level of the nation, international organizations, the city, or the neighborhood)—are

impacting individuals' willingness and capacity to establish horizontal relations with their neighbors. Envy was a commonly used word by the residents of Makatoa and Sabana who often felt unjustly judged by "envious neighbors." Feelings of resentment were also common among residents who felt they were "unreasonably" excluded from the *selective* provisions.

According to the literature, envious feelings among neighbors can be explained by an environment of precarity where the good fortune of some might be read as a challenge to "others like them" (Smith and Kim 2007). In the case of the free housing neighborhoods of Granada, the "good fortune" of residents is very much related to how aid is distributed and socially framed. In this institutional and social context, evaluation of who is, and who is not, deserving of free housing and other benefits has become a source of internal social division. Accordingly, even though most residents share a common experience of displacement, a narrative of difference and differentiated "deserved" social aid has taken precedence among them when speaking about their new neighborhood.

Social fissures are further exacerbated in an environment of state practices of surveillance and control where material improvements to individual units and communal spaces are "penalized" but where it is also relatively easy to trick the system to avoid "penalization." These conditions are negatively impacting horizontal relations and the neighbors' capacities to organize and address local tensions and needs.

For example, the Sabana housing project design is characterized by its compact rows of housing units. Each row is separated by narrow sidewalks and a drainage channel, and public streets surround the entire complex of free housing units. On the streets surrounding the housing complex plenty of space has been demarcated for parking purposes. The parking spaces, however, have remained empty, because few people own cars, and those who own motorcycles prefer to

park them on the sidewalks, right in front of their units. This practice has become the source of heated conflict between neighbors because parents fear for their children when they see motorcycles speeding on the sidewalks in front of their homes. Others also simply dislike that what was supposed to be a pedestrian thoroughway became a parking area for motorbikes. To prevent drivers from speeding on the sidewalks, some residents have strategically placed large stones in front of their units, which has in turn infuriated the drivers who must step down from their vehicles to avoid the dangerous obstacles.

This is an example of how design features can exacerbate local tensions. But beyond the issues with design and the quality of material infrastructures—which are common in different types of low-income neighborhoods—there is an additional limitation in free housing neighborhoods evidenced in how residents address these problems. Instead of setting up a meeting with neighbors and getting the local community board involved, residents of Sabana have raised the issue with public officials every time they come to visit the neighborhood. While motorcyclists claim that laying stones on the public sidewalks is against the regulations, their opponents claim that driving on the sidewalks is illegal. Authorities in turn validate both claims, acknowledging that both driving and laying stones on the sidewalks are against the rules, but they do not provide a real solution to the problem. Authorities ask residents to learn to live together and build their own agency as a neighborhood capable of solving their own problems. However, they also demand that residents behave within the rules of a highly regulated environment. So, residents are left to make decisions in a normative limbo where opposing parties are both right and wrong, where there is no enforcement, and where residents demand that others follow the rules in a social context where “nobody really follows the nonsensical regulations” over the use and transformation of their housing. Regulations are thus not serving their ideal purpose, which is to help a community

mediate social tensions through an agreed-upon social contract. Regulations are instead heightening these tensions by producing expectations of vertical authority before horizontal agreements to solve local problems. As of today, residents continue to suffer and fight over this issue.

Image 3

Stones laid out by residents on a sidewalk in Sabana



Source: Author – 2019

The issue with parking and motorcycles is certainly a problem that is dividing the community, making it harder for residents to act together. However, challenges to community organizing persist even when residents face common needs that should encourage residents to act together. For example, in Makatoa, housing development does not include a space to have community meetings—even though the free housing program’s guidelines stated that projects should include such areas. The president of Makatoa’s community board, and his team, tried to organize the residents to—like residents of informal settlements in Granada had done before—illegally occupy

an empty lot owned by the city and build a community center on the site. However, few individuals joined the effort, in part because many residents no longer trusted the local community board, which as previously noted had been the subject of controversies involving the unequal distribution of aid in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, the board went forward and even started work on the proposed center's foundation. But the work stopped after board's opponents contacted public authorities, who quickly dismantled the work that had been done.

This example is not evidencing that effective community organization is impossible in public housing neighborhoods, but it shows that there are unique challenges to such efforts. For one, unlike residents of informal settlements, an environment of residential "formality" and control will inevitably make it harder for residents to take matters into their own hands—through horizontal relations—to build solutions that ignore official regulations in the use and transformation of space. Additionally, although formal mechanisms of neighborhood participation, like the local community boards, can provide residents with new political agency to represent community interests to the city, these official entities face important challenges fostering collective support in a neighborhood context where residents tend to prioritize vertical over horizontal relations when solving problems.

In addition to state practices of surveillance and control over material improvements, residents experience regular monitoring of their own economic improvements. Because humanitarian aid is designed to target the most vulnerable households, the government implements regular surveys and control visits by public officials to evaluate each household's economic improvements and restructure aid accordingly—on an individual basis. These forms of control and surveillance are also impacting on displaced residents' capacities to organize and make collective claims of reparation.

Humanitarian aid and post-conflict reparations

As shown above, the national government regularly assesses “ideal” degrees of vulnerability and “deserved” social aid in every household that receives any form of humanitarian aid from public entities. Notably, in the *Comprehensive Care, Assistance, and Reparation Plan* process, the national entities that provide humanitarian cash transfers¹⁴ use phone surveys and visits to family homes to assess each household’s level of vulnerability. The surveys analyze households based on several unfulfilled goals in the areas of housing, nutrition, health, and education, and aid is then assigned based on the different degrees of vulnerability identified in each area.¹⁵

Even though it is necessary for a system that operates with scarce resources to assess levels of vulnerability and provide aid accordingly, this practice frequently has a negative impact on assessed individuals. Many residents thought that they were being evaluated based on pointless criteria that required them to stay poor or at least embrace the appearance of poverty. Manifesting her discontent with public authorities, one resident exclaimed: “They come here classifying everything; whether I have tile floor, whether I have silverware, whether I have mattresses, but instead of asking what I did do to be able to get all these things they just conclude, ‘Ahhhh, you do not need,’ or ‘Ahhhh, you are a victim and you have all this?’” (interview by author, May 2019).

The implementation of these different sorts of inspections is not restricted to free housing neighborhoods but to all households receiving humanitarian aid from the national government. Still, their impact is more clearly evidenced in these neighborhoods where most residents are subjects within this system, and they speak about it on a regular basis. The regular inspections

¹⁴ The Victims Assistance Unit (*Unidad de Víctimas*) and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare.

¹⁵ Information on Comprehensive Care, Assistance, and Reparation Plan can be found at the *Unidad de Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas*’s website: <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/pi%C3%A9rdale-el-miedo-al-paari/13932>.

govern the daily lives of residents of free housing who become self-conscious of what they eat and do not eat, or what they have or do not have. Because the inspections are generally discredited by residents, many think it is fine to trick the system to continue receiving monetary support and different sorts of aid from the government, while they adopt similar criteria to make sense of what makes them eligible and deserving of support *vis-à-vis* others.

Lucia, for example, who declared displacement five years ago, is a resident of Makatoa, and is a single mother of three children—two of which have a cognitive disability—expressed her discontent with the government’s survey system. She said: “You are supposed tell lies. But, I say, I can deceive people, but I cannot deceive God (...) so I have to respond [to the survey] ‘It is not that we eat good meat, no, if we have plantains we fried them, broth, lentils,’ I do not know, but there is always something to eat, if we have eggs, we eat one egg each, so, how am I supposed to say, when they ask me if we eat five times a week: ‘No mam, only twice’” (interview by author, November 2018). As a result of the survey, Lucia stopped receiving *Humanitarian Emergency Aid*, but she still receives *Humanitarian Transition Aid* from the government in the form of an annual cash transfer of 380,000 pesos (ca. \$125 US dollars). She says it is not enough for her to sustain her children and resents the outcome of what she thinks is a “ridiculous survey.” She knows couples “in less need” and with “well-paying jobs” who receive better forms of support, she believes they lied, and she wonders whether she should have lied too.

The institutional requirements of program delivery are having a direct impact on the ways in which residents classify themselves as “deserving victims” against some of their neighbors, in a context where aid is provided unequally and without a clear logic to residents who know that the system can be easily tricked. These regular surveys and what the residents perceive as *inconsistencies* in the way aid is being distributed among neighbors—with some families

apparently in better economic situations receiving more support than others—are encouraging residents to embrace the appearance of poverty relative to other neighbors, instead of identifying commonalities in the deserved rights of reparation, affecting in turn their capacities to make claims as a neighborhood community of displaced persons. As one resident argued, she did not like the institutionalized term victims—or what I identify above as the emerging notion of “deserving victims”—because it made people depend on the authorities and act independently to receive some form of economic or material benefit, instead of working together to achieve long term benefits for all. The extent to which the institutional design of humanitarian aid provisions is affecting the capacities of displaced individuals to make collective claims of reparation needs further examination. At the neighborhood level, it is impacting on how residents assess their economic situations *vis-à-vis* others, which is creating new obstacles to the organization of the neighborhood community towards the attainment of collective benefits and basic rights to improve their material and economic living conditions.

Conclusion: The challenges and opportunities of public housing

Disputes around food and housing are certainly exceptional instances of the everyday of displaced persons in Colombia. These events however offer a glimpse into the mundane: a years-long relationship with a system of social provisions that was put in place with the well-intended purpose of helping the millions of people displaced by armed conflict in Colombia. Despite the good intentions, the institutional design and delivery of aid has produced some problems. Protesting by tearing someone else’s bag of beans is nonsensical and might be read as clear evidence of anti-social behavior. However, such incidents show how distribution systems that are considered unfair and are difficult to understand can result in such behavior, even in communities that share similar interests and include people who are concerned about the wellbeing of others. In the context of

free housing neighborhoods in small cities, there is a material and social legacy of a system of institutional support targeted towards displaced persons but reaching individuals on a very unequal basis. This system is shaping horizontal and vertical relations among the displaced residents of free housing.

I found that tensions between national public officials and local residents—in how the distribution of housing is justified—are impacting the adoption of a narrative of “worth” among free housing residents, shaping how they relate to their neighborhoods. Residents who frame their relation to their neighborhood through this narrative are compelled to find differences between themselves and their neighbors, and feel often unjustly judged by others, all of which does not bode well for local solidarity and does not facilitate processes of collective claim-making under the common experience of displacement and the common right of reparation.

Adding to the tensions across scales, there are several inequalities in the distribution of aid provisions that residents need to grapple with—even though they all have received a free housing unit. The unequal distribution of gas connections in Makatoa is just one example of this challenge. Inequality in the distribution of resources can be the result of corruption and ill-intended private interests, or an outcome of local bureaucracies’ limited time and resources, especially in small cities. Moreover, these bureaucratic challenges are especially salient in moments of crisis (i.e., when there is a large influx of displaced people coming into a given city). In those moments, public officials must quickly make decisions that affect individuals in their own processes of moving on after being displaced. In any case, whether ill-intended or not, inequalities of provision, uneven access to information, and lack of transparency about who gets what and why are likely to become a burden for those who visibly receive support. These factors can also tarnish the legitimacy of

institutional modes of local organization like the local community boards run by neighborhood residents.

Lastly, a condition of apparent formality—imposed on the distribution of humanitarian aid and the transformation of the built environment—also impacts how residents live, relate to their neighbors, and organize in two different ways. First, residents are encouraged to embrace the appearance of poverty, *vis-à-vis* others, to justify their right to receive social aid. Second, they also end up privileging vertical over horizontal relations to solve internal tensions and needs. Within this neighborhood environment, it is more difficult for residents to articulate a common critique about their living conditions, and they have a harder time claiming a collective right to improved forms of consumption, taste, and social distinction. These obstacles indicate that the design of aid provisions, based on individual benefits and individual assessments, can also tarnish efforts by displaced peoples to make collective claims for post-conflict reparation.

By emphasizing this multiplicity of complex challenges, I am not arguing for the futility of public housing. Quite the opposite, housing is a much-needed resource, especially in a city with large numbers of poor displaced families. It is, however, important to acknowledge that there are unique challenges, particularly in smaller cities, to the consolidation of state enabled neighborhoods with strong community organizations. In Makatoa and Sabana, the neighborhoods were created through the provision of public housing and with this came a specific framework for individual action, social organizing, and claims making. From a policy perspective, the key puzzle in these types of neighborhoods is how to bolster horizontal relations and informal social control among those who live in free or public housing neighborhoods before generating expectations of vertical authority. In other words, public officials need to pay attention to the different ways in which housing provisions are provided and legitimized by local residents, to allow for a mix of

government support with underlying processes of community formation. For example, the imposition of a national scheme in the distribution of free housing units not only tarnished the legitimacy of free housing provisions at the local level, but also created a missed opportunity to cultivate horizontal relations among prospective residents before they came to live in the new neighborhoods. Authorities could also attempt to bolster pre-existing forms of community organization, like long-established victims' organizations, by involving them in the creation of communal spaces (e.g., parks, community centers) from the beginning, through the design and implementation phases of housing projects. Lastly, it goes without saying that the lack of transparency in the distribution of different forms of aid provisions—besides housing—will inevitably contribute to keep a community further apart, and the implementation of incomplete policy efforts towards material provision—reaching only a few members—can do more harm than good to the neighborhood community as a whole.

Bearing neighborhood formation process in mind, the following questions offer new possibilities for action in the provision of public housing: Are all the adopted regulations necessary? What are the regulations that tend to be enforced? What are the regulations that tend to be compromised? Should the latter be revoked, transformed, or re-negotiated with residents? How can governments incentivize communities to create their own regulations and mechanisms of control? If governments must grant access to housing “on the basis of need,” should a selection scheme not be socialized with the groups representing those who do not have housing? Should a selection scheme be defined at the local or national levels, or a mix of both? Should different forms of aid—besides housing—be distributed at the neighborhood level, instead of the individual or household levels?

Note on primary sources

All interviews of residents of Makatoa and Sabana were conducted by the author between 2018 and 2019 at the residents' homes. When allowed by interviewees, interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. Interviews of public officials were also conducted by the author in person between 2017 and 2020. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated by the author. In addition to interviews, the author reviewed City Council Minutes in Granada dating from January 2001 to December 2016. These sources contain information on the provision of aid and different kinds of services to displaced families in the city. The author also participated in several public meetings to examine how residents of the neighborhoods made claims to public authorities and organized to solve problems amongst themselves. To reconstruct the system of aid provision to Colombia's internally displaced persons, the author examined public documentation at the national entity *Unidad para la Atención y Reparación a las Víctimas*' official website (<https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/>) as well as the following rules and regulations:

Sentencia Constitucional T-025 de 2004

Ley 1448 de 2011

Ley 387 de 1997

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