



Housing and reincorporation strategies in post-conflict Colombia: Mismatch of micro-level visions and macro-scale approaches

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Abstract

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There is a consensus among scholars and policy makers that durable peace after violent conflicts is contingent upon addressing affected communities' livelihood needs and, in particular, housing. Post-conflict reconstruction is challenging, but at the same time an opportunity to address pre-existing housing deficits. In this Update, we present the ongoing endeavours of a community of former combatants to establish a mutual aid housing cooperative in Colombia following the peace agreement of 2016 and their efforts to attain affordable and adequate housing in a context characterised by a fragile peace process and unfavourable housing policies. We focus here on the interlinkages between micro-level visions, aspirations and strategies of the communities involved in the establishment of housing cooperatives and macro-level political and institutional factors enabling or constraining their emergence in post-conflict Colombia. Attention is drawn to opportunities to contest existing housing systems and to advocate for other forms of housing.

Keywords

Cooperative housing, mutual aid, post-conflict Colombia, peacebuilding

Housing cooperatives are being globally rediscovered as a potentially viable strategy to tackle global housing challenges (Baiges *et al.*, 2020; Duyne Barenstein *et al.*, 2022; ICA (International Cooperative Alliance), 2012). However, their role in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and post-conflict reconstruction is yet to be explored. *Ciudadelas de Paz*

(Citadels of Peace), a cooperative housing initiative led by 350 ex-combatants following the signing of the peace agreement in 2016 in Colombia, provides a unique opportunity to study the dynamic process through which a divided society is seeking reconciliation and, in the process, innovating its housing sector through cooperative initiatives. The preliminary findings presented here are part of the ongoing research “Negotiating Space for Housing Cooperative’s in Latin America”¹. It combines insights from: (a) our national, macro-level review of the interlinkages between Colombia’s peacebuilding, housing and cooperative policies based on both secondary sources and key informant interviews, with (b) a micro-level in-depth case study of *Ciudadelas de Paz* that involved observations, individual and group interviews, and an analysis of their proposed cooperative model, its organizational structure along with its architectural and settlement plans.

Ciudadelas de Paz: testing a housing cooperative initiative in post-conflict Colombia

After more than 50 years of armed conflict, in 2016, Colombia’s government and the largest guerrilla group in the country –the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)– signed a peace agreement and initiated efforts to reintegrate over thirteen thousand ex-combatants into civil society. An important element of the peace negotiation included the option for ex-combatants to reintegrate collectively as a means to maintain their identity and social cohesion. Across the country, twenty-four temporary camps referred to as Territorial Spaces for Capacity Building and Reincorporation (ETCR) were set up with this aim². Over the last six years, approximately 3000 ex-combatants and their families have been living there in prefabricated camp-like structures (See Figures 1 and 2) attempting socioeconomic reincorporation through the establishment of productive projects, mainly related to agricultural activities, and access to housing. The ETCRs, which were designed as spaces of transition, lost their legal status in August 2019, turning now into former ETCRs (AETCR, in Spanish)³. For the communities still living in camps, this marked an urgent need for durable livelihoods and housing solutions.

Until recently, the main housing strategy of the Colombian government has been limited to offering access to existing housing programs. From the 1990s onwards Colombia has

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² Reincorporation of ex-combatants is conceived as a comprehensive process that includes economic, social, and political dimensions. AETCRs were intended as spaces for early reincorporation activities to facilitate the initial stages of adaptation of FARC members to civilian life by providing support in the establishment of collective or individual productive projects, access to land, access to housing solutions and the provision of goods and services, in coordination with local authorities and the National Government. In practice, the economic dimension has been prioritized through financial and technical support of individual productive projects (Red Paz, 2022). Collective initiatives, including housing have been met with multiple challenges including lack of access to land and absence of adequate and timely housing solutions for those aspiring collective reincorporation.

³ After the disarmament stage, former combatants arrived at 20 Transitory Zones for Normalization (ZVTN) and 7 Transitory Points for Normalization (PTN), before the operationalization of ETCRs. The latter became operational on August 15, 2017 and in 2019 lost their legal status thus now officially referred to as *Antiguos ETCRs* - AETCR (former ETCR).

Figure 1

AETCRs are made up of prefabricated temporary shelters where families are assigned a 6 x 4 meter sleeping quarter inside a cluster unit. After six years of the signing of the peace agreement, thousands of ex-combatants continue to live in AETCRs waiting for a permanent housing solution. In the picture, an overview of transitory dwellings in AETCR Tierra Grata. Photo: Daniela Sanjinés.

**Figure 2**

In the picture, an overview of transitory dwellings inhabited by the communities of AETCR Pondores. Photo: Natalia Quiñónez.



embraced the famous Chilean ABC housing policy model based on individual savings (Ahorro), government subsidies (Bono), and mortgage loans (Crédito). This neo-liberal approach to housing has reduced the role of the state as a facilitator that incentivises the private sector to develop social housing (Gilbert, 2014; McTarnaghan *et al.*, 2016; Murray & Clapham, 2015). This reflects Colombia's long-standing pursuit to expand homeownership through the construction of new homes, relying on the private market to provide cheaper housing options for the poor. With a growing housing deficit, in the last decades, national housing strategies have focused mainly on the development of large scale housing projects often located in peripheral areas with no access to infrastructure, services, public transportation, or livelihood opportunities thus further marginalising the poor (Acosta Restrepo & Henao Padilla, 2011; Hurtado-Tarazona *et al.*, 2020). These mainstream initiatives are considered inadequate by ex-combatants as they neither recognise their specific situation, nor those of the housing and livelihood needs of poor rural families in Colombia more broadly (Ospina, 2020).



Figure 3

Productive unit and hydraulic press to produce Compressed Earth Blocks in Tierra Grata.
Photo: Daniela Sanjinés.

Against this lack of adequate alternatives for durable collective reincorporation, two community-based initiatives recently started *Ciudadelas de Paz*, a cooperative housing project in AETCR Tierra Grata and AETCR Pondores, in northern Colombia, involving 350 male and female ex-combatants and their families.

Ciudadelas de Paz is inspired by the Uruguayan housing cooperative model⁴ and started with training and knowledge-transfer exchanges provided by the Uruguayan Federation of Mutual Aid Housing Cooperatives (FUCVAM). The project pursues a mutual aid, self-management approach and began with the development of four ‘productive units’ that produce stabilized earth blocks, carpentry works, metal welding and provide transportation machinery services, along with capacity building workshops in sustainable building techniques (See Figure 2). With the support of international cooperation agencies⁵, the production and housing cooperatives combine employment opportunities with the construction of a settlement that reflects their aspiration for a peaceful reincorporation, which includes collective infrastructure and services. In addition, *Ciudadelas de Paz* established partnerships with regional universities providing technical assistance as well as support in the participatory design of architectural and settlement plans (See Figure 3).

⁴ In Uruguay, mutual aid housing cooperatives emerged in the 1970s as a bottom-up movement, relying on a tradition of self-construction based on mutual aid. Today, they play a pivotal role in the provision of affordable housing with more than 22,000 families living in 627 mutual aid housing cooperatives in Uruguay (FUCVAM, 2019). FUCVAM, their federation, is actively engaged in international cooperation and expanding its model in other Latin American countries.

⁵ *Ciudadelas de Paz* has received support from numerous international organisations. The European Union Peace Fund funded the establishment of the four productive units and the training of the communities of Tierra Grata and Pondores in the construction sector. More recently, the Swiss housing cooperative ABZ solidarity fund supported the design of several collective spaces and the construction of one building in Tierra Grata, while We Effect has started to support Pondores’ multi-purpose cooperative (COOMPAZCOL) in their organizational strengthening strategies, which include the development of housing proposals aligned with ex-combatants reincorporation.



Figure 4

The community of Tierra Grata and Pondoires have built two model houses where they have tested the productive units and different construction elements. In the picture, Tierra Grata's model house in an advanced stage of construction. Photo: Ramón Bermúdez.

Although the communities of AETCR Tierra Grata (150 ex-combatants) and Pondoires (200 ex-combatants) have been working together in structuring the housing project, it was to be developed on two separate sites. In the case of Tierra Grata, ex-combatants purchased a plot of land adjacent to the AETCR, where they are currently building their homes. In the case of Pondoires, after a long process, the Colombian government bought land a few kilometres away from the existing AETCR and granted it to this community for the development of a contractor-led housing project to be defined by the government. However, the collective aspirations of both communities have met numerous challenges. This is due in large part to two conflicting approaches related to housing and the reincorporation of ex-combatants.

On the one hand, the national government's approach has been limited to promising individual access to existing subsidies, savings and loans programs, and to contractor-led housing projects, replicating a conventional housing supply model that stands in sharp contrast to the needs and demands of the ex-combatants and most rural communities for that matter. On the other hand, community-led initiatives propose self-managed mutual aid housing projects leveraging ex-combatants' experience in collective living, use of local materials, and drawing on regional actors' knowledge and ability to provide technical assistance. This has resulted in a fragmentation of the joint housing project: Tierra Grata has continued to build their cooperative housing project through a mutual aid approach⁶ without government support in land that is not recognised as viable by the state, while the community of Pondoires is still awaiting government support for the construction of their homes. However, the government has indicated their support will not include mutual aid approaches nor collective ownership and will be led by a construction company following state construction standards and designs, despite the demands of Pondoires' community for their

⁶ By the end of 2022, the Tierra Grata community has built 20 new houses, while 26 are now under construction.

Figure 5

In the picture, Pondores' model house in its final stage, currently being adapted as the administrative offices of the multi-purpose cooperative of the Pondores community, COOMPAZCOL (Multi-purpose Cooperative for Colombian Peace). Photo: Natalia Quiñónez.



insertion as labour force in the construction of the housing project and the utilisation of the blocks they produce as building material (Padilla, 2021). As a result, collaboration between the two communities has dwindled as they experience both approaches with uncertainty and frustration.

The experience of Ciudadelas de Paz is as much an example of how a paradigm-shift may be possible within the Colombian housing system, as it is a cautionary tale. It has undoubtedly set a precedent of the potential of community-led and self-managed housing projects not only for other ex-combatants attempting a collective reincorporation⁷, but for neighbouring rural communities who see the advantages of pulling together resources and sourcing international collaboration support to address their housing needs. In fact, we found that even though currently there are hardly any housing cooperatives in Colombia due to a lack of institutional support and enabling instruments, a legal framework that recognises housing cooperatives and collective homeownership exists (Law 79, 1988). Even more promising is the fact that the recently elected government (August 2022) has not only pledged more support for the implementation of the peace agreements but also recognizes the importance of diversifying the way housing is produced and delivered, explicitly emphasizing the crucial role that social organizations can play in that process. As an example of the novel administration's level of commitment with the peace process could be the fact that assassinations rate of former combatants during the first 100 days of their government period has reduced in 58%, as stated by the Interior Minister (Colprensa, 2022). Our research is shedding light on the many supporting infrastructures such as policies, programs, instruments, and institutions that are needed to enable the emergence and sustainability of

⁷ Tierra Grata hosted in January 2022 the national forum on housing and reincorporation where representatives from all AETCRs across the country came together to discuss housing strategies and visit the Ciudadelas de Paz cooperative model. Furthermore, in February 2019, neighboring communities, including Representatives of Victims of the area, approached the community of Tierra Grata for support in replicating their cooperative approach.

cooperatives over time and to ultimately permeate what remains an extremely inflexible housing system.

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