

Lost in the definition
Environmental displacement in Salgar, Colombia
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In the early hours of the morning in the municipality of Salgar, Colombia, on 18 May 2015, heavy rainfall and flooding resulted in a landslide that marked one of the country's deadliest single-environmental disasters since 1999. In the immediate aftermath it was reported that the landslide in Salgar had left more than 93 people dead and 300 to 782¹ people displaced ("Falsa alarma sobre nueva avalancha causó pánico en Salgar, Antioquia," 2015). The event was not only a shock in terms of the loss of life, but reignited fierce debate about appropriate humanitarian response, legal challenges of land rights, and more importantly how to suitably address displacement caused by environmental disasters. Colombia, after all, is a country that often faces environmental challenges in part because of its topography and climate, as well as high disaster risks due to settlements in environmentally vulnerable zones. Furthermore, as of 2014, Colombia has one of the highest levels of forced migration and internal displacement in the world (second only to Syria) due to political violence and strife (COHA, 2015). However in Colombia, policies and responses to environmental migration have varied over the years. In light of the country's civil strife, a policy narrative has emerged whereby environmental induced-displacement is seen as a temporary and often short-term effect that is not necessarily addressed in the same way as conflict-induced displacement. Noting the events that took place, the humanitarian response, the policy narrative, and the legal challenges regarding return, the case of Salgar provides interesting insight into how a government with experience in forced migration addresses a different type of migration—environmentally induced displacement.

The Landslide: What happened?

In the days leading up to the landslide, the municipality of Salgar had been hit by heavy rainfall, common to the season. However, unlike previous seasons heavy flooding occurred around the Liborina gully leading to a landslide. At 3am, residents awoke to find entire neighbourhoods completely destroyed, including almost the complete destruction of La Margarita, a village that is part of the Salgar municipality. The landslide not only affected the semi-urban² area considered as the city of

¹ Numbers reported vary across media. This was the immediate number reported across several media outlets (*El Espectador*, *Teleantioquia*, *El Tiempo*, etc), although it subsequently changed, as people were able to return. It should also be noted that, as explored below, the exact number of displaced people is difficult to pin down because of the differences in terminology.

² This study considers Salgar as semi-urban because although the city itself has a high concentration of population in comparison to nearby villages, it is not urbanized like Medellin, the closest city.

Salgar, but it also broadly affected the surrounding area where the majority of the inhabitants are farmers. Prior to the landslide an estimated 17,608 people lived in the municipality (“Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE),” 2005.). After the landslide, the first reported number of “damnificados” was 782, and during the two weeks following the event, the reported number in the media fluctuated from 250 to 750.³ In an interview with Cuadros Usma, one of those affected by landslide, he noted that the number is inconsistent because a lot of the people that had family in Medellin left before registering with the government, while others that were in nearby municipalities having heard of aid tried to register under false pretences. Furthermore, immediately following the landslide, agencies from different NGO’s, people from different municipalities, the media and even independent GIS cartographers arrived at the scene but shortly after arriving the government ordered all non-government agencies to leave the area, considering that the best way to coordinate the response was through one single entity.

The Humanitarian Response

Immediately, after the landslide, the Colombian government promised to rebuild for free all houses lost in the landslide (“Gobierno anunció paquete de ayudas para damnificados en Salgar, Antioquia,” 2015), and also promised to provide temporary housing to those affected. Over the following weeks, as people started to try to find those missing, some recovery efforts were also undertaken by NGOs, and even the private sector participated in the humanitarian response. Companies like Starbucks, the national federation of football, and real-state agencies made commitments to help rebuild Salgar—but rebuild for whom? An answer that the government wanted to immediately know and as such set up offices in Salgar and Medellin,⁴ where people could go to register for free as a “damnificado.” The offices also offered free identity cards to replace all those lost in the landslide, and a legal clinic for those needing to register and identify deaths in their families. Immediately, reports from residents of Salgar emerged claiming that people who were not from the municipality were claiming to be victims. As a result the Ministry of Housing made a statement that all those falsely claiming to be affected with the aim of receiving free housing could face up to 12 years in prison (“Hasta 12 años de cárcel podrían pagar falsos damnificados en

³ It seems that differing publications all had different estimations and numbers with no consensus on an exact figure.

⁴ This was not in the report, but it was the answer provided in email exchanges with the municipality

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Salgar, Antioquia," 2015). In addition to this statement on 25 May, seven days after the landslide the Ministry of Housing claimed they had received only 383 claims from families who lost their homes.

Reported numbers from the 18 of March, Municipal Report (Translated from Spanish)		
People killed	93	37 men 34 women 10 boys 12 girls
People disappeared	11	
People hurt	62	All have been discharged
People affected	1,465	522 men 494 women
Families Affected	462	259 boys 213 girls
Families Assisted	462	
Houses Destroyed	66	
Houses Semi-Destroyed	24	
Houses affected	219	
Families registered	462	Government Registered Only
Bridges for vehicles	8	7 affected 1 destroyed
Bridges for pedestrians	9	4 affected 5 destroyed
People living in shelters	0	0
People receiving Red Familiar (economic substaincence from the government)	675	Under Plan Padrino
Government Construction of Homes	42 186 50	Lote la Habana. 34% completed. Apartments. Lote la Florida. License approved for first 124 apartments Lote la Pradera, semi-detached homes. 7.1 % completed
Private construction of Houses ¹	30-45	This includes the building La Aldea Margarita, which will be 30 detached homes. The project was donated by the Estate Farm Corporation La Margarita. In addition other agencies have promised to build a few houses for those affected by the Landslide

¹. This was not in the report, but it was the answer provided in email exchanges with the municipality

Almost a year later on 18 March, the municipality of Salgar released a report updating the figures and reporting progress, which is shown in the adjacent table. From this humanitarian response, it can be deduced that at least 200 people lost their homes and were most likely immediately displaced to another town or city.

In an interview with Marianna Johnson Hurtado, a person displaced by the disaster, she noted that majority of the people that completely lost their homes left Salgar to work in Medellin, as the monetary assistance they were receiving from the government was not sufficient. She explained that in addition to losing their homes, staying in Salgar was difficult for many because it was there that they had lost loved ones. She noted that for her, coping with the disaster was not only financially better in Medellin but also emotionally so, as her sister lives there and they could mourn together. However, as one of the beneficiaries from the free homes provided by the government she may return to Salgar, pending financial opportunities but as that time she seemed uncertain. Similarly, Cuadros Usma also noted some people left Salgar after the landslide not because of the loss of their home, but because of the loss of their primary source of income. He noted particularly that many farmers lost their livestock and/or produce and could not afford to stay. This also explains why according to the report, the government is spending around 1.2 billion pesos (\$405,000 USD) on agricultural projects ranging from building greenhouses to providing livestock. All the funding is currently under the plan named Response and Recuperation, which, under UNGRD and the municipality of Salgar seeks to restore the area to what it was prior to the landslide by the end of 2019.

Challenges in the response

A legal challenge that arose out of the Salgar case was that across the municipality some people who lost their homes did not have land titles (either never officially registered or lost and could not be found). Without procuring land titles they were not able to access any housing benefits provided by the government. In fact, a few months later in November, Margarita Maria Restrepo, a member of the government representing the department of Antioquia, penned a letter fiercely criticizing the government for abandoning Salgar (Restrepo, 2015). In the letter, she noted that heavy bureaucracy was affecting the most vulnerable, highlighting the plight of people whose only proof of home purchase was a paper that they kept in their home, thus once the home was lost, so was the only proof of purchase. For Restrepo, the government's insistence on official documents is not only

insensitive but a means to avoid its responsibility. In an interview with Edison Restrepo, a person affected by the landslide, he confirmed cases of people in such situations. He also noted that he knew of cases where people having heard the purchase proof was lost, had come back to claim benefits even though they had not lived in the house in question for years and had indeed sold it to someone else. In addition, he noted in some cases the most affected where people who lived in the homes of their parents, but had no official will leaving them the house. For example, in a family of three children one child took over the upkeep of the farm, but after the landslide, all three children tried to equally claim benefits in relation to the house despite the fact that only one was the caretaker. Edison Restrepo conceded that this was not very common, but nevertheless an issue that the “government’s strict bureaucratic rules did not know how to address or even have the compassion to try to comprehend”⁵ (Edison Restrepo, n.d.).

Restrepo also noted that for farmers who lost their livestock or produce, help was not coming fast enough. She noted that in many cases, government aid was being held back by bureaucratic procedures, the main problem being that many of the farmers are subsistent. Thus, without aid they were forced to beg, find other less well-paid work, or move outside the municipality. The 2007 World Bank report Environmental Priorities and Poverty Reduction, noted that in the context of Colombia, farmers who lose their homes or livelihood due to environmental disasters are at great risk. Colombia’s rural farmers tend to have lower levels of education and financial resources outside their farms, and in some peripheral cities even less social networks outside their specific municipalities. As such, losing their source of income could mean not only displacement to a larger city in search of work but also will most likely mean that when they arrive the city their standard of living will be very low—in most cases below the poverty line (The World Bank, 2007).

Past Policies and Salgar

To understand the political response to Salgar and the points of contention regarding the policies implemented, it is important to discuss the development of these frameworks through past case studies. Consequently, two main cases are key in this respect not because they were landslides, but due to the fact that as a result of a very high death toll and level of displacement, policies were enacted that are also at work in the case of Salgar. The two cases are Armero, which took place in 1985 as result of a volcanic eruption, and an earthquake in Armenia in 1999.

⁵ Translated from Spanish.

Armero

On the 13 November 1985, the volcano el Nevado del Ruiz, commonly nicknamed the sleeping lion, erupted. The icecaps that covered the volcano melted and resulted in heavy amounts of mud flowing down the volcano and subsequently burying the city of Armero. This happened at 9pm, while the residents of Armero were sleeping. As a result, when the mud flowing at a speed of 50km per hour, the majority of the residents were unable to escape, resulting in the second deadliest eruption of the 20th century with about 20,000 deaths (“BBC” 1985). However, the volcanic eruption not only resulted in a large amount of loss of life, but also territorial losses, as the 3,000 survivors were forced to move after the government declared Armero to be an unsafe permanent settlement and designated it as a “holy burial site.”⁶ The majority of people resettled in the nearby towns of Guayabal y Lérida (Avendaño Castro & Aguilar Rodriguez, 2014), which today are considered to be at high risk should the volcano erupt again.⁷ The death toll in Armero was actually the main proponent in expediting the development of SNPAD in 1988: it has been cited as the single most important disaster in inducing the development of environmental policy in Colombia (Avendaño Castro & Aguilar Rodriguez, 2014). Shortly after the disaster about 1,000 survivors sued the government for lack of emergency preparedness, in the first lawsuit of its kind claiming 20,000 million pesos, about 40 million pounds sterling, in damages. The government was absolved of the lawsuit as a result of the opinion of three experts that it was impossible for the government to know the extent of the volcanic activity at the time, and therefore impossible for it to plan accordingly. This created two precedents, one where if the government could prove “force majeure”⁸ it was not liable to pay damages. However, a second precedent—which can be discerned in both Armenia and Salgar—was that having set budgetary measures aside for environment-induced costs under SNPAD, the government can now provide some monetary alleviation for damnificados. The aim of this precedent is perhaps to mitigate future lawsuits but also to alleviate some of the burden of towns that may have to take in evacuees.

⁶ It should again be noted here that damnificados is used to describe the 3,000 people rather than the term “displaced”.

⁷ El Nevado del Ruiz is the second most active volcano in Colombia.

⁸ A legal term, often known as an “Act of God”, designating events that take place out of human control and could not have been foreseen, and therefore no one can be held accountable.

Lastly, Robert Desjarlais, the author of *World Mental Health: Problems and Priorities in Low-income Countries*, used the Armero case to study the effect of natural disasters on mental health. He noted that survivors from Armero demonstrated high levels of emotional distress even years later (Desjarlais, 1996). The subsequent study of Armero by Desjarlais and general research about this subject matter thus indirectly allowed for greater policy awareness of the need to address mental health issues. In fact, in the case of Salgar, the City Hall reported in March 2016 having organized nine specific groups to address psychological wellbeing, 900 individual psychiatric appointments provided for free for those affected by the landslide, and assisted 430 families in grieving.⁹ Therefore, to an extent the case of Armero not only demonstrates the development of legal precedents and policy, but also can help to begin to understand fields in which Colombia's government has or has not evolved to address environment-induced displacement.

Armenia

Consequently, the second case study of Armenia is key because as of 2007 it was the only natural disaster in relation to which a comprehensive and systematic estimates of costs had been undertaken. On 25 January, 1999 an earthquake hit Armenia, a city located in the coffee-producing region of Colombia. The estimated number of deaths was about 1,000 though no exact number exists, and about 200,000 people were left homeless (BBC, 1999). The estimated cost was 1.8 billion USD in 1999, "which more than 70 per cent was housing and building damages" (The World Bank, 2007 pp 147). This cost has then been used to estimate annual costs for other natural disasters in the country henceforth, and has also been used by Colombia's government to set priorities in risk reduction under SINA and SNPAD. Consequently, in understanding how budgetary decisions were made in Salgar, a lot of the estimations from the municipality after the landslide were based on figures from the case of Armenia ("Unidad Nacional para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres," n.d.).

A more difficult subject to explore but also applicable to the case of Salgar is the legacy of addressing environment-induced displacement in cases where there is already existing conflict-induced displacement. Prior to the earthquake, Armenia was called the miracle city, and was one of the

⁹ The report was not clear on how it assisted 430 families in grieving, and to what extent. The report was made available to the author by Beatriz Helena Duran Diaz, who works in Salgar's City Hall.

fastest growing cities in the region. According to a report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) as a result of the growing prosperity of the city at that time, many of those who were internally displaced by conflict within the country moved to Armenia. After the earthquake hit the city, the number of people displaced naturally increased. However, when it came to benefits of the “damnificados” or “desplazados,” only damnificados—meaning those with direct linkage to infrastructure—were recognized for aid. Those that were living in Armenia because they had been internally displaced had a more difficult time accessing aid. Furthermore, the report by CEPAL notes that to this day the socio-economic impact of the earthquake is difficult to completely understand because of the multiplicity of displacement that existed at the time.

Conversely, 16 years later in Salgar, people displaced by violence from Salgar prior to the landslide were also affected when returning to Salgar due to the landslide. In February, TeleAntioquia, one of the main news agencies in the department, noted that the landslide had resulted in delays over housing promised for those displaced by violence. According to the report, prior to the landslide, 24 families that were displaced due to conflict were promised houses in Salgar, construction of which was nearing completion before the landslide hit. The UNGRD, citing structural concerns, halted further construction until further assessments can be made. According to the report, the families are still waiting for homes almost a year later, without any information. (“Desplazados de Salgar esperan vivienda de la que son beneficiarios,” 2016).

Colombia’s geographic vulnerability and Disaster-Risk Policy

The case of Salgar demonstrates the varying policy interventions at play in humanitarian response. In a broader context it demonstrates a willingness of the government to act to address the issue, but also the contentions between policy and implementation. This largely plays out due to the disaster-risk policy of Colombia.

In 2004, the World Food Programme assessed that out of Colombia’s 32 departments, 19 departments had high to severe vulnerability to disaster risk (Acuña, 2014). In addition, Colombia, which is located at the northern tip of Latin America, “has the 10th highest economic risk to three or more hazards in the world, according to the Natural Disaster Hotspot study by the World Bank” (GFDRR and The World Bank, 2010). Colombia has six active volcanoes, most of the country’s largest urban areas are located in zones with high levels of seismic activity, the country is prone to flooding,

and has the highest level of landslide risk in South America. Climate change is also increasing these vulnerabilities, and, according to a World Bank report, “for both hydrometeorological and geological hazards, Colombia is probably the most densely monitored country in Latin America” (GFDRR and The World Bank, 2010).

As a result Colombia adopted several disaster risk protocols and treaties to address these disaster-risk vulnerabilities with an aim to go beyond simple emergency response to overall risk reduction. The first type of notion of disaster risk or the need for the management of it came into effect in 1979. Following the Tsunami in Colombia’s Pacific Coast, the government implemented Law 9, which created the National Committee of Emergencies. Then in 1988, Law 46, National Disaster Preparedness and Response System, or SNPAD (in Spanish) was implemented, which called the government to involve both private and public agencies in the prevention and response to natural disasters, and rehabilitation of areas affected by disasters (Galvis, n.d.). This in itself was an important legal amendment because it now allowed for the inclusion of civil society groups and non-government agencies in mitigating disaster risk. It also created a high-level committee that worked alongside other government ministries from environment to defence, to develop frameworks to help to understand geographic and disaster risk vulnerability. Consequently, ten years later in 1998 under Decree 93, it mandated both national and local institutions to form detailed plans to address disasters. Under the National Environment system (SINA in Spanish) and SNPAD, the government has decentralized responsibilities to multiple stakeholders, while also formally including disaster risk management as a main priority for policy development (The World Bank, 2007). As a result in 2001, recognizing the need to encourage local authorities to invest in disaster mitigation, the national government passed law 715 allowing municipalities to spend part of their budget on disaster prevention and response (GFDRR 2010). Furthermore, the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (UNGRD) was created, which actively monitors environmental changes and is responsible for reducing any environment-induced risk. At the international level, Colombia has also adopted the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change and the Kyoto protocol.

At the policy level, in the context of disaster-risk reduction it is clear that Colombia’s governments are committed to understanding disaster-induced risk on a long-term basis. However, the case of Salgar demonstrates two areas of friction: policy related to disaster or environmental risks vis-à-vis policy related to displacement, and general policy vis-à-vis actual implementation.

“Damnificados” or “Desplazados”

Consequently, having outlined the basic environmental policy in Colombia regarding disaster-risk reduction is it also important to note the terminology used to refer to people displaced by environmental disasters or phenomena. In Colombia, when people are affected by natural or environmental disasters they are called “damnificados,” the translation from Spanish to English can vary from “victims” to “survivors” if used as a noun, or “affected” or “damaged” if used as an adjective. In none of the articles, either from the media or reports from Salgar’s City Hall, was the term “desplazados” or “displaced” used. In fact, the term was only used when talking about people from Salgar who had been displaced by violence prior to the landslide.¹⁰

This is important to note because it means that as such no precise data of displacement exists regarding any environmentally-induced movement because the word displacement is never used. Even in cases where there is clear displacement, as is the case of Armero, the words displacement or displaced still do not appear in any official document. In fact, Sebastian Rubiano Galvis addresses this point in his article regarding the protection of environmentally displaced people in Colombia, by stating that this clear division in terminology is a direct result of legal and political frameworks put in place so that environmental displacement is clearly addressed in a different manner than conflict induced displacement. This will be addressed below when seeking to understand the legal challenges presented in the case of Salgar. Furthermore, it is also important to note that none of those that were interviewed in the framework of this paper used the term displaced, though they did note that families had to move and that as a result of the landslide they were now living in other cities or areas.

As a result of the divergence in terminology around “displaced people” and “damnificados,” it is impossible to firmly claim exact numbers because the concept of “displacement as a result of environmental causes” does not exist in official government reports, literature, or data. Yet, international organizations such as IOM in Colombia have previously (in English press releases) used the word displaced to refer to people that migrated because of environmental causes. However, the word “damnificados” is predominantly only used in Spanish publications, which also happen to be in the majority or the only publications available on the subject matter.

¹⁰ I will explore later in the paper, how people also displaced by violence, were further affected as a result of the landslide.

The Legal Challenge of conceptualizing environmental displacement in Colombia

Two main reasons: existing law related to conflict-induced displacement and geopolitics.

Law 387 in 1997, the government introduces a series of programs and policies to help address the needs of those internally displaced by conflict. Originally in Colombia displaced people, regardless of the reason, received help from government agencies dealing with emergency and/or disaster. As conflict began to increase and the number of people internally displaced by conflict rose:

Verdict T-025 in 2004, declared the state of displacement to be unconstitutional as it left populations in extreme conditions of vulnerability.

Law 1448 in 2011 named programs for people displaced by violence, including a specific note whereby if people are victims of natural disasters caused by actions of armed groups they can be counted as displaced. This was the only mention of natural disasters as a source of displacement.

Law 1523 in 2012 comes into effect, whereby it formally established the category of “damnificado” as someone that is in need of attention from the state. However, the law does not establish the type of attention required from the state.

Geopolitics: The hesitance for the government officially recognize environmental displacement is in part a consequence of geopolitical views on environmental migration. For governments like Colombia, framing environmentally induced displacement as forced displacement, can not only mean that it could be subjected to accepting people from nearby countries as refugees, but it can also affect other international relationships.

Source: Galvis, n.d.

Salgar Today

In the interviews one of the main themes that came across was that people essentially felt that after the media storm ended they were forgotten. In Colombia's complicated political landscape, with the media focusing on peace talks that could possibly end the civil war, efforts to rebuild or assist those displaced by environmental disasters are not always a priority. One of the main examples of this is the citation of locals of a bridge that was

finally built in Salgar that would help re-connect agricultural communities to the town of Salgar almost 6 months later, while in a similar town nearby the same bridge was built much quicker but for the purpose of a development project. Generally many of those affected that had income to leave or family in Medellin have not returned, while farmers (the majority of those that lived in this area) returned. Some measures around disaster risk reduction have also been put in place where residents undertook a training course of what to do in the case of another landslide or similar disaster (“En Salgar Antioquia hubo simulacro de evacuación para prevenir desastres—RCN Radio,” 2016). Nevertheless, from progress reports it seems that the government is at least committed to re-building the community for those that want to return and those that stayed. Recent photos on the Soy Salgar Facebook group show rebuilding of communal areas such as parks, which many in the comments applauded as a sign that Salgar is returning to the city they once knew—whether this means the return of those displaced or not is a broader issue.

Conclusion

The case of displacement after the landslide in Salgar and, more generally, the case of displacement as a result of environmental factors in Colombia offers unique insight into how environmental migration can be indirectly addressed by a government. Furthermore, legal and policy-related challenges also increase the difficulty in understanding environmentally induced displacement from other perspectives, such as gender or socio-economic angles. The case of Colombia is also unique because it is a country that is already under great financial strain from addressing conflict-induced displacement (Carrillo, 2009). Meanwhile, increasing factors related to climate change and general geographic vulnerability mean that cases like Salgar will continue to occur, but the country will face varying degrees of environmental changes which may result in displacement. Essentially, Colombia’s displacement policy and response will continue to be at a cross-roads, because the current conceptualization limits the development of any guiding frameworks, research, or even policy regarding environmental migration.

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INTERVIEWS

- Interview with CUADROS USMA, person affected by disaster, April 12, 2016 by Skype.
- Interview with EDISON RESTREPO, person affected, on April 22, 2016 by Skype.
- Interview with JOHNSON HURTADO, person affected, on May 1, 2016 by Skype.