

# Breaking the cycle of violence

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A psychosocial approach to understanding the ecological effects of armed conflict and forced migration in Cali, Colombia, and the implications for stabilization and development

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“I was a very happy woman on my farm, I worked the earth, I sang, I danced, I ate well. They killed my son and everything came to an end, including my goods; I found myself left with nothing, like lazy people who haven’t worked a day in their life. When I returned to the farm and saw my son I felt the world crash on top of me; I didn’t eat, I didn’t sleep, I watched the empty world and there weren’t people around me but shadows, I no longer desired to live and each day I awaited death.

The ladies made me remedies, *yerbas*, *secretos*, massages, very eager to heal me and finally they got me back on my feet. They anointed me with *manteca león con cerdo* and *manteca de boa* and ‘*suelda con suelda*’, they put a toad on my head, and so on during a whole day because this would give me back my mind, they blindfolded me all day, and they took care of all of us. These ladies were part of the family of my mother.

Now what has happened to me is that I’ve disconnected. Since the death of my son I have memory problems, I don’t sleep properly and I think endlessly of things that I can’t stand. I no longer have tears, tears no longer come out of me.

We pray that we could return, because here we are poor, with no money, with hunger, living in poor conditions in an alien home. I have much family here, but they are already tiring of our presence. People started seeing you as a nuisance when you are in this state.”

- *Rosalba, a woman displaced from Tumaco after assailants assassinated her son and attempted to rape her daughter*<sup>1</sup>

“My profession is killing people (*he is nervous and uneasy*.) The only thing I know how to do is kill....Now, I am tired of that, I want a job. My family is happy that I’ve changed, but there is unemployment.

My life has been horrible. I’ve had to kill and dismember....I want a quiet life now....I have children, but there is hunger, brother. There is no chance for those who want to reinsert themselves in the system here. Everyone wants to kill you.... Marihuana is my only friend (*laughing*).

*How are you psychologically?* “Fine, I am fine, I have no problems. It’s just that I’m tired of this life....There are many like me. We don’t want to kill anybody else...”

*What is your support?* “Nothing and nobody. You can’t trust anyone. You can only have faith in God. God is the only one.... I am going to tell my children they need to have faith and stay away from violence.”

*Why?* “Because violence was brought from outside.... We do not like to kill. But we have hunger. We have nothing. I don’t know what’s going to happen. Only God, brother.”

- *John Jairo (J.J.) is a young Colombian adolescent from Cali, who was forcibly recruited by a paramilitary group when he was 14 years old; he would desert 5 years later. He returned home after hiding for several months.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Solivida, 2009: 13(Translation from Spanish by the author)

<sup>2</sup> Pérez-Sales, 2010: 409

## **I. Introduction**

The city of Cali, Colombia, has been recognized as one of the most violent cities in the world.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, in the city's most troubled communes, a large portion of the city's population appears to be trapped in a vicious cycle caused by the mutually reinforcing effects of socio-economic exclusion, poverty, and violence.

Faced with an urgent social crisis driven by seemingly intractable, multi-dimensional forces, what solutions can be offered? While no simple panacea can be hoped for, a search for the root causes of the crisis is perhaps the best way to help identify which measures can serve to stabilize the situation and perhaps even gradually reverse the momentum.

With this goal in mind, the following paper will focus on one crucial dimension of Cali's social reality – the instances of armed conflict and forced migration which have affected large segments of the city's already vulnerable population. For the better part of two decades, the country's internal violent conflict has caused a steady flow of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to arrive in Cali each year after being forced to flee from their homes in surrounding rural areas (see graph 1 in Annex 1). Moreover, in recent years this initially mostly rural conflict has metastasized and begun to increasingly penetrate the country's urban centers. The result has been significant levels of urban violence and the rise of what has been termed 'intra-urban displacement'. The situation in several parts of Cali is therefore one where many people arrive each year in a very vulnerable state, seeking refuge from potentially traumatic events, only to encounter a new environment that is not only culturally foreign but also often quite hostile and dangerous.

This paper will focus on studying how certain communities in Cali are affected by the psychosocial impacts of social stress and cultural dislocation caused by past and on-going armed conflict and forced displacement. The objective is to emphasize the importance of studying the interaction between the individual and his or her immediate social ecology when trying to understand the persistence of socio-political violence in Cali. Taking an ecological approach helps us to appreciate the role of both individual psychology and family and community structures, and the crucial functions the latter often serve, such as the provision of psychosocial support or the (re)production of socio-cultural meaning. Through this lens, we can better gauge the consequences that arise when a combination of socio-political violence and forced migration systematically chips away at these basic pillars of society.

In a first section, a brief theoretical framework will serve to justify our focus on the ecological model and psychosocial interventions. This framework will justify approaching social dynamics by looking at the individual in relation to his or her immediate socio-cultural environment, as opposed to strictly micro/psychological or broader macro/structural perspectives. In a second section, we will turn to look at the specific case of the IDP population in Cali, Colombia, in order to illustrate how a psychosocial perspective can allow us to understand some of the drivers behind the current persistence of social conflict and under-development. Armed with these insights, our final section will be dedicated to providing some suggestions for grassroots psychosocial interventions that would seek to change social dynamics by strengthening family and community support structures, and reconstructing a social fabric.

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<sup>3</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013

## **II. Brief note on information collection**

In addition to being based on written reports and published articles, the information and views presented on the situation in Cali, Colombia throughout this paper have also been shaped by first-hand observations by the author during two field visits in January and March, 2014. While the specific research conducted during the field visits was focused on an assessment of the municipal-level political participation of IDPs in Cali, this experience nonetheless created the opportunity for multiple encounters with many members of the city's IDP population through several focus groups and the application of a survey (n=334), as well as a number of semi-structured interviews with community leaders, civil society and IDP organizations<sup>4</sup> and municipal-level government officials specifically charged with the management of IDP policies<sup>5</sup>. While none of the qualitative or quantitative data collected during these field visits will be used directly here, it nonetheless bears mentioning that these experiences – the expressions of despair, anguish, anxiety, frustration, and nostalgia from displaced individuals, as well as the signs of resilience, perseverance and strength also evident in the latter - have strongly influenced the views and opinions developed and presented in this paper.

## **III. Theoretical framework**

To begin, the psychosocial approach to communities affected by social conflict and political violence needs to be distinguished from two other approaches that are often more prevalent in Western research. Both are explained here and illustrated in the diagram 1 below.

### **Psychotherapeutic models**

In contemporary psychological research, the dominant approach to studying the effects of social conflict and violence was long focused on the analysis of the origins and manifestations of psychiatric disorders, within the limited scope of the individual psyche.<sup>6</sup> Emerging in the 1980's in American research, but with its roots firmly set in long Western intellectual traditions such as logical positivism<sup>7</sup> and Cartesian philosophy<sup>8</sup>, this dominant approach focused on the study of the intra-psychic supposedly universal, ideal-type human individual, minimized the importance of contextual and ecological factors.

“The model implies an essentialist conceptualization of psychological distress: Although the social context may exert some influence on the expression of psychiatric disorders, the same underlying mechanisms are assumed to be at work within individuals across contexts, and careful assessments should be able to identify roughly the same core patterns of psychiatric symptomatology largely independent of social context.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Including: Fundacion Paz y Bien, Solivida, AFRODES, Taller Abierto, COPDICONIC, Andas Valle, FORO Nacional por Colombia

<sup>5</sup> Including: the municipal Public Advocate (Personeria municipal), the Office of the Peace Advisor (Asesoría de Paz), and the Victims Unit (administrative entity that coordinates the national system of institutions related to IDP policies).

<sup>6</sup> Honwana, 1999: 107

<sup>7</sup> Miller et al., 2006

<sup>8</sup> Honwana, 1999

<sup>9</sup> Miller et al., 2006: 411

Possibly the most important implication of the predominance of this paradigm was that research on the impacts of war and violence on individuals and communities across the world was overwhelmingly focused on trying to identify the same disorders (and symptoms) originally identified in Western, industrialized societies – the most prominent of which was post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This undifferentiated focus on PTSD was so deeply institutionalized that PTSD, despite the gradual rise of critical perspectives for over a decade, to a certain degree its lasting legacy continues to affect psychological research today<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the implications of the focus on intra-psychical disorders also affect questions of prevention and treatment. For a long time, the standard prescribed treatment has been individual counseling sessions inspired by Western psychotherapy, an exercise that can prove of very limited utility, and even sometimes harmful, in other cultural contexts.<sup>11</sup> Without simply dismissing the important advances achieved by PTSD research<sup>12</sup>, it is therefore important to move beyond the inherent limits of this paradigm. In order to do this, one needs to appreciate the role that the social and cultural context can play in mediating the way individuals are affected by violence, conflict, and other potentially traumatic events.

*In trying to correct for the limits of psychotherapeutic models, a psychosocial perspective requires acknowledging the psychological impact of traumatic events and stressful social arrangements on the individual, but without taking the individual as the sole unit of analysis, or focusing on psychological dysfunctions in a way that might “transform social problems into individual pathologies.”<sup>13</sup>*

### **Structural models**

At another end of the spectrum, it is important to note that much social science research on the origins and potential solutions to socio-political conflict often focus too much on structural factors and processes. Prominent explanatory models emphasize the importance of broader socio-economic or political factors, such as economic inequality, governance structures and political institutions; while these perspectives are certainly valid, they seem to overlook the role of individual psychology, and the way that culturally-shaped individual- and community-level factors can affect larger social dynamics and processes. If one explains social conflict and persistent under-development by relying on large-scale structural problems or political processes, it is also at this level that one will look for solutions to the problems, and therefore not appreciate the importance of targeted support to individuals and communities.

*In order to correct for this limited perspective, the psychosocial approach requires acknowledging the role of larger structural factors, without an exclusive focus on external forces*

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<sup>10</sup> Miller et al., 2006: 410

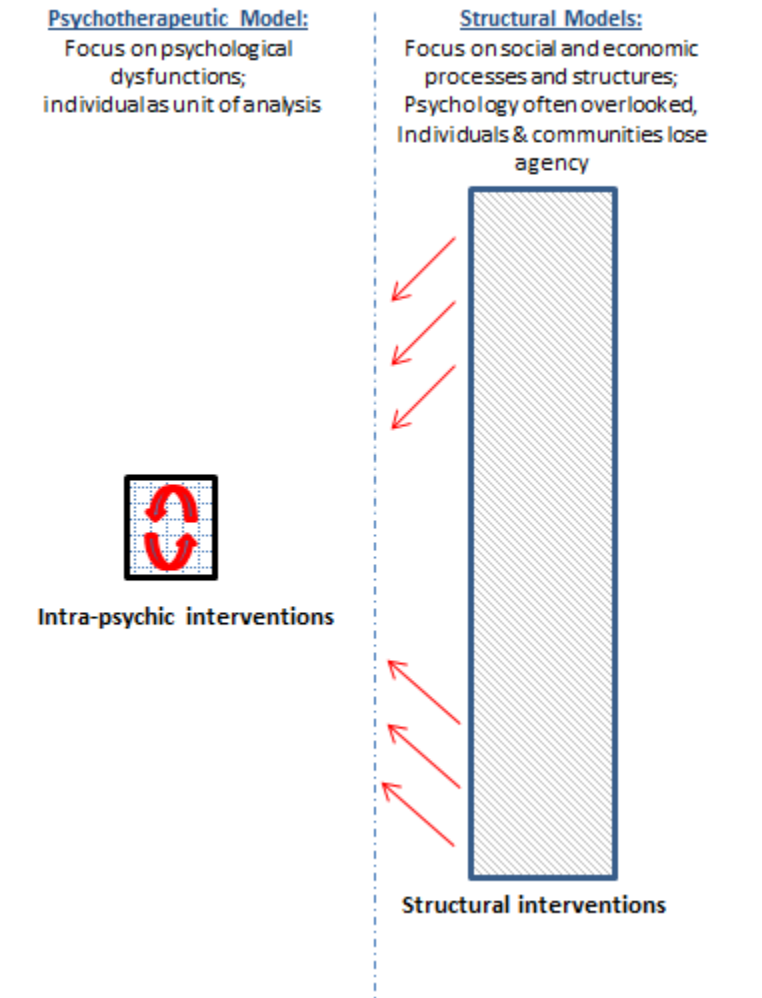
<sup>11</sup> Honwana, 1999: 108; Miller et al., find that “a narrow focus on individual psychopathology and intrapersonal explanatory variables is likely to suggest interventions that ameliorate distress by altering psychological factors while failing to address aspects of the social environment that could promote healing and adaptation; thus, we see a reliance on psychotherapy and psychiatric medication stemming from the emphasis on PTSD and other psychiatric disorders.” (2006: 417); IASC guidelines write “Providers of aid from outside a local culture commonly think in terms of individual symptoms and reactions, such as depression and traumatic stress, but many survivors, particularly in non-Western societies, experience suffering in spiritual, religious, family or community terms.” (2007:106)

<sup>12</sup> Miller et al., 2006: 411

<sup>13</sup> Horwitz, 2007: 285

*that might diminish the importance of individual agency and studying how he or she relates to their reality to subjective models shaped by culture and context.*

**Diagram 1 – Two predominant Western models for social conflict analysis**



**The ecological model**

In many ways, the ecological model corresponds to a middle ground between the two previous models. Focusing on psychosocial dynamics at the community level is based on the idea that the individual’s mental health, and capacity to function properly in society, is intimately tied to his or her relation with the environment in which he or she operates. This statement means that when looking at how traumatic events or stressful social arrangements affect individual well-being, one needs to pay close attention to the crucial elements that mediate this relationship between the individual and his social ecology– the individual’s cultural constructs and communal relations.

## Culture

First, understanding culture is important because of how it shapes the interpretive lens through which individuals perceive and engage with the world around them. Through a process of signification (assigning meaning), culture defines the customs, rituals and symbols that give meaning to social life and the rules that need to be followed to maintain a sense of harmony between the individual and his or her surroundings. Similarly, culture also serves to guide social interactions - it establishes (generally informal) rules and codes of conduct, and also assigns legitimacy and status to certain social roles, such as religious leaders (whether this be a traditional healer, or an Orthodox priest), or heads of families, tribes, clans. For example, Pérez-Sales et al. have the following to say about religion:

Besides providing an explanatory framework to understand reality, religion is an essential element for the understanding of community processes. In the context of everyday life, other than the capacity of prayer to regulate emotions (Fabbro, 1999), religious rites create symbolic spaces for the sharing of emotions, increase a sense of belonging to a group and offer an efficient framework for social contention.<sup>14</sup>

More specifically, the way that this relates to mental health is powerfully illustrated by Honwana (1999) in her description of how culture influences the “understanding of the origins, manifestations, and treatment of mental health problems”<sup>15</sup> in Mozambique and Angola. Drawing a sharp distinction with the “Euro-American (...) biomedical conception of the self framed by the philosophical premises of the Cartesian dichotomy”<sup>16</sup>, Honwana explains that in settings such as Mozambique and Angola, an individual’s health is traditionally understood very differently, “[it] is defined by the harmonious relationships between human beings and the environment (their surroundings), between human beings and the spiritual world.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore the manifestations of physical or mental illnesses are interpreted and explained in fundamentally different ways – these events can be “perceived to be the result of intervention of malevolent forces (...) or also a sanction of the ancestral spirits for incorrect behavior, or a sanction of other spiritual forces.”<sup>18</sup> As a result of this perspective, individuals and communities have become dependent on “complex sets of rules and practices which govern society [and] maintain a balanced state of affairs.”<sup>19</sup> These rules and practices generally involve rituals and customs which have been assigned highly symbolic meaning and can therefore be crucial for an individual’s sense of security, harmony and well-being.<sup>20</sup> Miller et al. (2006) also refer to the importance of understanding “communities where emotional distress is generally ameliorated by traditional healers and religious leaders and where discussion of

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<sup>14</sup> 2005: 378

<sup>15</sup> Honwana, 1999: 107

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. On the mentioned Cartesian dichotomy, Honwana writes “Dominant western biomedicine is based on the premise that some afflictions are purely physical in nature (the domain of the body) and others are purely psychological (the domain of the mind). This dichotomy has a very long history that goes back to Descartes in the seventeenth century, when he articulated the split between the tangible body, which should constitute the field of science, and the intangible mind, the field of theology (Swartz, 1998).” (1999: 106)

<sup>17</sup> Honwana, 1999: 109

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Wessell and Monteiro, 2004: 71



individual or family problems with strangers is strongly discouraged.”<sup>21</sup> The authors support this point with the example of a Bosnian refugee deeply affected by depression during an extended period of mourning for the death of her son, for whom “one meeting with a priest [from a local Greek Orthodox Church] accomplished what months of psychotherapy and medication had failed to achieve (...).”<sup>22</sup> These examples reflect the fact that, for many communities around the world, one cannot hope to truly understand or adequately address issues of mental health without first learning about the cultural lens through which the community interprets these issues, the ‘culturally salient idioms of distress’ through which they may express the issues, and the customs and practices through which the issues are addressed locally.

### **Community**

Community, meanwhile, will be used here in a general way to refer to a loose network of social relations that implies both some degree of personal and/or cultural proximity and a relationship of reciprocity between members. Even if this reciprocity is sometimes enacted indirectly, it implies an interdependence between members by virtue of belonging to the same group, with shared meanings and attitudes and established customary practices (culture). In a sense, from a functionalist perspective belonging to a community can be understood as a compact along the following lines: *‘I accept to adopt certain behavioral norms, certain constraints and sacrifices, and I provide support to other members, because I have reason to believe that other members are doing and will do the same in return.’* Viewed this way, community becomes a web of social supports on which the individual can rely in times of need. However, community doesn’t only provide access to support or resources – it also gives an individual a social position and role, and can build or support self-esteem by giving a sense of purpose and satisfaction from being able to give back and contribute to community life. We also see that community is often closely related to culture, since the latter plays a prominent role in maintaining a sense of corporate unity and solidarity between the members of a community. Shared cultural practices might be said to have an integrative function – to a certain degree, by engaging in these practices, members are signaling and re-affirming a reciprocal commitment to each other and to the community, therefore sustaining a sense of socio-ecological security and stability.

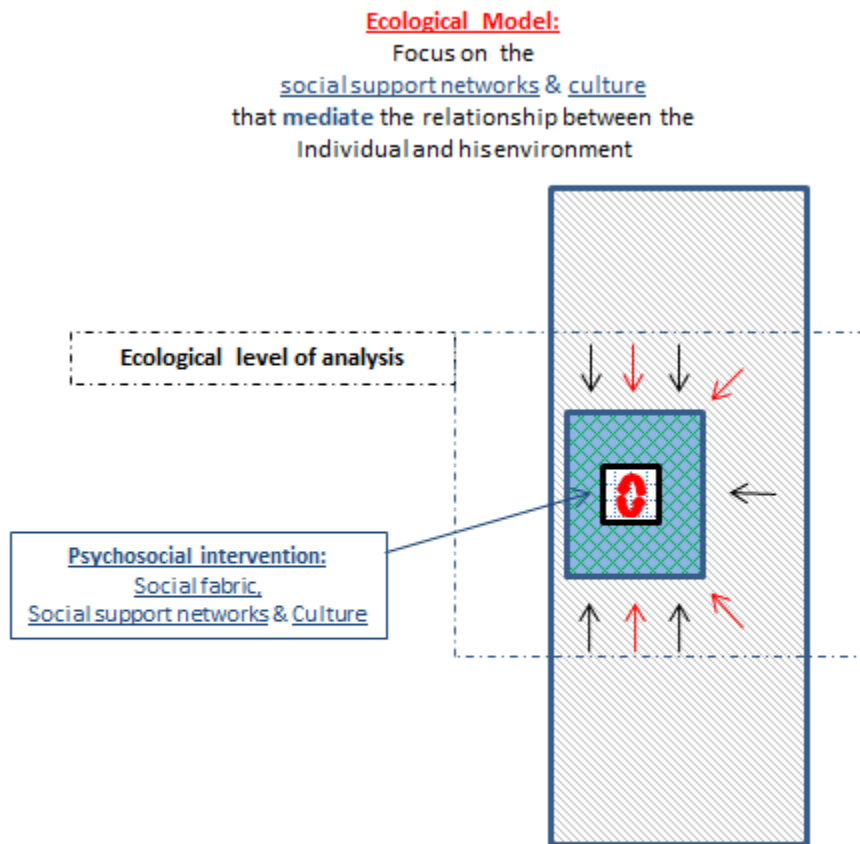
The following diagram illustrates how, combined, culture and community interact to constitute a social fabric that mediates the relationship between the individual and his/her immediate environment.

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<sup>21</sup> Miller et al., 2006: 417

<sup>22</sup> Miller et al., 2006: 418

**Diagram 2 – The Ecological model for social conflict analysis**



### **The ecological effects of social violence and forced migration**

The psychosocial approach is predicated on the idea that exposure to either social or political violence (as in chronic insecurity due to crime or political repression), or forced migration, can have severe impacts on an individual's mental health due to highly disruptive or destructive effects at the ecological level. In the case of forced migration, individuals, families, or sometimes even large segments of a community, are forced to flee in order to escape from violence or persecution, following the death of loved ones or the physical destruction of homes. This involuntary and often abrupt escape often involves the break-up of communities and therefore a radical disruption in pre-existing lifestyles, patterns of social interactions, webs of relationships and social support networks. Moreover, the subsequent arrival in a new environment can itself be a very difficult and trying process, requiring adaptation to a new culture and language or dialect, new social norms, new natural environment and climate, and/or new 'rules of the game' for access to key resources. Integration into a new community is often especially difficult when the host community or social system is not predisposed to welcoming the new arrivals. Antagonism and resistance can result from pre-existing inter-group tensions (such as historical or identity-based animosities), and/or because the host community is overwhelmed by a large wave of refugees and

therefore might resent the destabilizing pressure placed on the previous equilibrium. For all of these reasons, it has been said that the experience of exile and forced migration resembles a “battle on two fronts,” where:

On the one hand, one is supposed to mourn all that he/she lost, heal the wounds and scars on the soul, accept the loss of working-place, profession, home, and all the other things one cherished. On the other hand, life in exile demands new strength for adaptation. In exile, one adapts to a new environment, different customs, collective life in a collective refugee center, life in constant poverty.<sup>23</sup>

Violence is of course closely intertwined with the experiences of forced migration as described above. The psychosocial impacts after often very similar. Whether past or on-going, whether one-time incidents of acute violence or chronic insecurity, exposure to violence risks not only having a psychological impact on an individual, but also causing lasting distress through physical impairment and disabilities, or the destruction of the social fabric that generally binds communities together.<sup>24</sup> “It is important to understand armed conflict as having a systemic effect on the risk for mental health illness, which, while also including direct experience of conflict-related violence, will also include disruption to social support networks, increased anti-social behavior, poverty, a limited ability to access essential services and a range of other interconnected effects.”<sup>25</sup>

#### **Distress vs. disorder**

Here it is important to distinguish once again clearly between two different types of outcomes from exposure to the kinds of stressful circumstances described above. While research and interventions on war-affected individuals and communities have often focused on traumata and lasting psychiatric disorders (traumatology and psychiatric epidemiology)<sup>26</sup>, a very important aspect of the psychosocial approach is the recognition that many mental health symptoms reflect “natural responses that non-disordered people make to stressful conditions” or “expectable and culturally sanctioned responses.”<sup>27</sup> This distinction has critical implications for the design of restorative interventions. Western approaches focused on providing psychotherapy and private counseling rely to a certain extent on the idea of a past event and its “traumatic sequelae” – such as might affect war veterans or survivors of disasters or attacks.<sup>28</sup> The psychosocial approach seeks to acknowledge the fact that the sources of distress are often not resolved – “the notion of violence is embedded in everyday life and touches on spheres such as poverty, hunger, displacement, loss of dignity (...) one can say that most people (...) are still living under violent and potentially traumatic circumstances.”<sup>29</sup>

#### **IV. Case study: Cali, Colombia**

Colombian society is deeply affected by a long-standing internal conflict between a multiplicity of different armed groups. This protracted and violent internal conflict has caused significant levels of forced migration across the country, and Cali has been and continues to be one of the highest recipient

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<sup>23</sup> Vlajkovic, 2000: 9

<sup>24</sup> Miller & Rasco, 2004 : 13

<sup>25</sup> Bell et al., 2012: 7

<sup>26</sup> Miller et al., 2006: 411

<sup>27</sup> Horwitz, 2007: 275

<sup>28</sup> Miller et al., 2006: 415 ; Perez-Sales, 2005 : 369

<sup>29</sup> Honwana, 1999: 108

cities for IDPs after Medellin and Bogota, and the highest in the country's Sur-Occidente (South-West) region. Graph 1 in the Annex shows the consistent influx of IDPs into Cali since the late 1990s; as of early 2014, the total number of IDPs in Cali has reached 119,000.

When trying to understand the challenges related to conflict and displacement in the current context of Cali, for the sake of simplification and conceptualization, one needs to differentiate between two moments. The first moment encompasses all the events that occur up until the IDP's displacement and arrival in Cali, and consists therefore mainly of the violence and oppression to which Colombians are subjected prior to displacement. The second moment occurs in Cali. For arriving IDPs it encompasses all the challenges related to transitioning and adapting to a new environment. Moreover, because of the already-mentioned marginalization and violence currently occurring in Cali, this second moment also involves continued violence and insecurity, and the growing phenomenon of intra-urban displacement, all of which affects segments of the population beyond the initial IDPs.

### **First moment: Forced migration**

IDPs are generally seeking refuge from the violence and conflict which have taken over their home region; these Colombians are fleeing conditions where competing armed groups have systematically resorted to terror tactics and acute violence as tools for social control in an attempt to assert their dominance over different regions.<sup>30</sup> These armed groups include guerillas, drug trafficking groups, paramilitary groups, and even sometimes the national army which has been said to resort to indiscriminate violence and bombings in remote areas such as the southern department of Nariño. Solivida, a small NGO with years of experience providing psychosocial and legal support to IDPs in Cali, writes in a 2009 report:

“The effects of terror disrupt one's perception of locations, of one's environment, and cause one to question the relations of trust and the certainties that previously gave a sense to life. This transformation of spaces affects the identity of individuals. Terror installs war inside of each individual. Terror is not simply a ‘factor of chronic stress’, terror is a way of expropriating the identity.”<sup>31</sup>

Solivida's report also notes that individuals subjected to constant violence and threats are deeply psychologically affected, facing a loss of all certainty and trust in many aspects of their immediate environment, as well as any certainty and optimism the future, due to a state of permanent crisis and insecurity.<sup>32</sup> Similar patterns are observed by another NGO in Colombia (Corporacion Avre): “Sociopolitical violence gravely attacks the social fabric by generating intimidation, fear and distrust. This leads people to become isolated, and makes them more emotionally vulnerable.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Second moment: Socio-cultural adaptation, conflict & intra-urban displacement in Cali**

While forced displacement already implies seeking refuge from pain and suffering, unfortunately, for a majority of IDPs arriving in Cali, displacement only represents the first step in a long and difficult process. Epidemiological research on the mental health impacts of violent conflict in Colombia specifically has shown that some of the most serious mental health risks faced by IDPs often occur due to

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<sup>30</sup> Solivida, 2009: 12

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. (Translation from spanish by the author.)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Cuellar, 2004: 235

ecological factors: “it is clear from the findings that mental health burden is not solely related to direct experience of armed violence as some of the most serious outcomes, like suicide-risk, depression and aggression, were linked equally or more strongly to experiences not directly associated with the conflict.”<sup>34</sup>

As they try to re-build meaningful lives in the new urban environment of Cali, IDPs face many of the day-to-day stressors which have been found to cause high levels of distress in such cases: socio-economic exclusion (discrimination, poverty and a lack of economic opportunities), and cultural dislocation (changes in lifestyles, loss of previously valued social roles and the destruction of family and community structures.)

### **Socio-economic exclusion**

Cali’s urban geography is very spatially segregated along socio-economic lines. Early on, the growing IDP population in Cali became overwhelmingly relegated to Cali’s most marginalized areas. IDPs generally arrive from rural areas characterized by low economic development, very low government presence and therefore low access to education. Each new wave of arriving IDPs is generally drawn to areas where they already have acquaintances and pre-existing networks. The result is a self-reinforcing process where IDPs arriving without the skills and resources needed to succeed in Cali are directly drawn to those parts of the city with the hardest living conditions and the fewest opportunities to succeed.<sup>35</sup>

The figure in Annex 3 provides a graphic illustration of the concentration of IDPs in very specific areas of the city, including the eastern sections of the city often referred to as Aguablanca (communes 13, 14, and 15), as well as commune 21. These sectors have consistently remained the city’s most poverty- and violence-stricken areas in recent decades, and continue to be so today, as can be seen in the graph in Annex 2.<sup>36</sup> Studies generally find that more than 90% of IDPs in Colombia live under the poverty line.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, it is crucial to note that forced displacement in Colombia’s Southwest region has been found to overwhelmingly affect the region’s large Afro-Colombian population. While the exact proportion of IDPs in Cali that identify as Afro-Colombian varies considerably between sources (for example it ranges from 50% in one government document<sup>38</sup> to 30% in another<sup>39</sup>), there is a general consensus not only that Afro-Colombian communities from the Pacific region, which represent a specific racial and cultural group, (and other minorities, such as indigenous groups) are heavily affected, but also that broader racial and ethnic discrimination against minorities in Cali exacerbates the socio-economic and cultural marginalization IDPs already face.<sup>40</sup> From a psychosocial perspective, it is crucial to consider the impact that racial and cultural discrimination can have on individuals and groups through its impact on identity and perceptions of self, on in-

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<sup>34</sup> Bell et al., 2012: 7

<sup>35</sup> Rentería, 2013: 32

<sup>36</sup> Personeria Municipal de Cali, 2014: 29

<sup>37</sup> Albuja and Cebalos, 2010; CODHES, 2010

<sup>38</sup> Asesoría de Paz (Office of the Peace Advisor), Municipio Santiago de Cali, 2011

<sup>39</sup> Personeria Municipal (Public Advocate) de Santiago de Cali, 2014

<sup>40</sup> This consensus was confirmed to the author by first-hand observation and discussions. Some IDPs spoke of arbitrary police violence and abuse targeted against vulnerable groups in marginalized areas.

group solidarity (due to internalized negative perceptions of self projected onto other group members), life plans, projects and aspirations.

### **Cultural dislocation**

Upon arrival to Cali, IDPs have also faced significant personal and cultural barriers to integration in their new environment. Adults and the elderly, accustomed to more autonomous lives closer to the land and their natural surroundings as farmers in rural areas, often find it very hard to adapt to fundamental aspects and requirements of the urban setting.<sup>41</sup> Simple things like food can become a daily source of suffering and nostalgia: on those occasions when they are able to obtain enough food, these men and women are often forced to consume artificially-modified foods that they feel are a world away from the fresh produce they remember growing on their farms. Many factors can threaten family structures. Often women find it easier to obtain jobs, thus causing a disruption in key gender roles by making the woman the bread-winner and also often by giving her access to new cultural influences and skills while the man remains idle due to the lack of adequate work opportunities. Youth are also quicker to adapt to the new urban environment and lifestyles. This generational difference causes a cultural split between members of families and exacerbates tensions created by the other ecological stressors. The changing attitudes of youth threaten parents who are no longer able to control or discipline their children, especially when these parents have to spend very long days away from home, working to earn a bare minimum, while the young children are left in the streets, vulnerable to temptations from or forced recruitment by gangs and criminal groups.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, there are many reasons to believe that, even though (or maybe because) they might have less difficulty adapting culturally to life in an urban setting, children and youth as a group may be particularly vulnerable to the influences of a context like that of Cali. This age group represents the majority of Colombia's IDP population.<sup>43</sup> In research conducted with Colombian children and adolescents, Posada and Wainryb (2008) found results that could suggest concerning conclusions on the behavioral norms of younger age groups in war- and violence-affected settings. Specifically, the findings show that, while both Colombian children and adolescent hold moral judgments that are similar to those found in non-war-affected settings (an encouraging finding), their expectations about, and levels of acceptance of, certain aggressive or criminal behaviors are noticeably different, especially in circumstances related to revenge and retribution. Moreover, another concerning finding was that Colombian adolescents fared worse than their younger

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<sup>41</sup> The transition was described in the following way to the author during interviews and focus groups in Cali: Families arrive to the city from rural areas where they lived in almost complete autonomy, mostly living on farms where agriculture and/or fishing allowed them to be self-sustaining and to eat very well. Family structures in the rural areas of the Pacific region are generally fluid - groups living together often do not adhere strictly to the 'nuclear family' model dominant in other settings, but are instead more flexible and inclusive of extended family. Men generally previously had no problem providing for their family; they often began their work at, or before, dawn, and were done for the day by mid-day. Government interventions, and access to public services, were minimal, leading to very low levels of education, and often even illiteracy, and limited reliance on modern health treatment or prevention methods. Instead, social functions such as education and healing were often assumed by local leaders, customs, and practices. Finally, IDPs often bear certain linguistic, ethnic or racial markers that make them the target of discrimination and exclusion. It is immediately clear how these previous living arrangements can clash with the requirements of an urban life.

<sup>42</sup> Cornell University, 2011: 23-25

<sup>43</sup> CODHES, 2010: 2

counterparts, suggesting increasing effects of the social environment on behavioral norms over time:

Adolescents predicted more stealing in the baseline condition (when considerations of need and revenge went unmentioned) and more violence against persons in the revenge condition, they referred more often to retribution and hate as reasons for expecting violence, they attributed more hate and happiness and less guilt and shame to perpetrators in the revenge condition; and they had a slightly higher tendency to be accepting of stealing and inflicting physical harm in the revenge condition.<sup>44</sup>

This finding is particularly worrying because it correlates closely with information about violence collected by the Social Observatory of Cali's municipal government. If one looks at specific data indicating the presumed motives behind homicides committed (in 2010) in each of most-affected communes mentioned early, the proportion reported as being motivated by 'revenge' ranges from a low of 23% (commune 14) to a high of 45% (commune 15), with the other communes (13 and 21) both at 33%.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, when looking at Cali's troubled areas, one must consider that a large segment of the population consists of recent victims of armed conflict and forced migration, and that these victims and displaced persons and families have arrived into a very difficult environment where they face continued violence and exclusion. As we have seen, such events have been proven to cause not only cases of psychological trauma, but also, more often, significant on-going distress due to often-radical ecological dislocation (social, cultural, spiritual, and economic dislocation).

Moreover, and just as importantly, one must also consider that the city's abnormally high rates of violence in the past few years have been shown to cause rising levels of intra-urban displacement between the most troubled areas, a worrying phenomenon that suggests that the damaging effects of combined armed conflict and forced migration most likely extend to an even larger segment of Cali's population.<sup>46</sup> In a recent report, a departmental-level government oversight body called the Defensoría del Pueblo called attention to the very serious risks emerging from the increasingly violent socio-political conflict in Cali, stating that as many as 250,000 residents (10% of the city's population!) are threatened by intra-urban forced displacement.<sup>47</sup>

## **V. Conclusion: Psychosocial interventions and 'Do No Harm' Considerations**

The previous sections have sought to highlight the ecological effects of armed conflict and forced migration by showing the significant psychosocial impacts on individuals, families and communities. After having long been overwhelmingly focused on the intra-personal, psychological impacts (traumatology and psychiatric epidemiology), research and interventions on war-affected individuals and communities are increasingly realizing the importance of studying psychosocial well-being and mental health from an ecological perspective that focuses much more on the relationship between the individual

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<sup>44</sup> Posada and Wainryb, 2008: 895-896

<sup>45</sup> Social Observatory, 2010

<sup>46</sup> Defensoría del pueblo de Santiago de Cali, 2014

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

and his/her immediate environment. We have seen that this broader perspective has at least two crucial implications:

- First is the realization that individual behavior and psychological symptoms often reflect distress caused by environmental, day-to-day stressors (lack of social support networks, lack of environmental mastery), rather than disorders caused by lasting psychiatric break-downs or dysfunctions. Building on their extensive experience providing psychosocial support in Colombia, Corporacion AVRE find that Colombians exposed to violence often suffer from “anxiety, fear, distrust, isolation and other behavioral changes as well as sleeping disorders (...) [which] all imply emotional suffering and in that sense imply psychological damage.”<sup>48</sup> However, the Corporacion also specifies that these “are not necessarily classified as pathology, but as normal responses to abnormal situations.”<sup>49</sup>
- Second is the acknowledgment of cultural factors that vary across contexts and can have a great influence on how individuals perceive and engage with their environment, meaning that the psychosocial impacts of events such as armed conflict and forced migration should also be expected to vary greatly (the symptoms through which they manifest themselves, the idioms through which they are communicated, and the practices through which they are resolved.)

Two conclusions stand out rather clearly:

- **Diagnosis:**  
For those communities in Cali affected by significant past and on-going exposure to armed conflict and forced migration, it is crucial to consider how this can have multiplied and lasting repercussions on social dynamics (and the persistence of violence) through its corrosive effect on crucial ecological features, namely families, communities and culture. Without these features which together constitute a social fabric, community collaboration and empowerment are very difficult, and outbreaks of violence and conflict are more likely. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle, whereby social decay engenders more violence, and more violence causes more social decay.
- **Response:**  
Having diagnosed the causes and dynamics of this vicious cycle, we realize that psychosocial interventions intended to re-construct a social fabric should constitute a key component within the framework of multi-dimensional, integrated responses to a situation like the one witnessed in Cali. Psychotherapeutic responses such as private or small-group counseling are needed to address those cases of psychological disorders that do arise; and structural responses are key in order to reduce socio-economic exclusion and create crucial social, economic and political opportunities that individuals and communities can exploit. However, focusing solely on these two areas of intervention fails to address the crucial dysfunctions at the ecological level that can perpetuate social divisions and conflict rather than supporting cohesion, collaboration, and empowerment. The diagram below illustrates the hypothetical situation where both individual- and societal-level factors are operating positively, but dysfunctions remain at the ecological level.

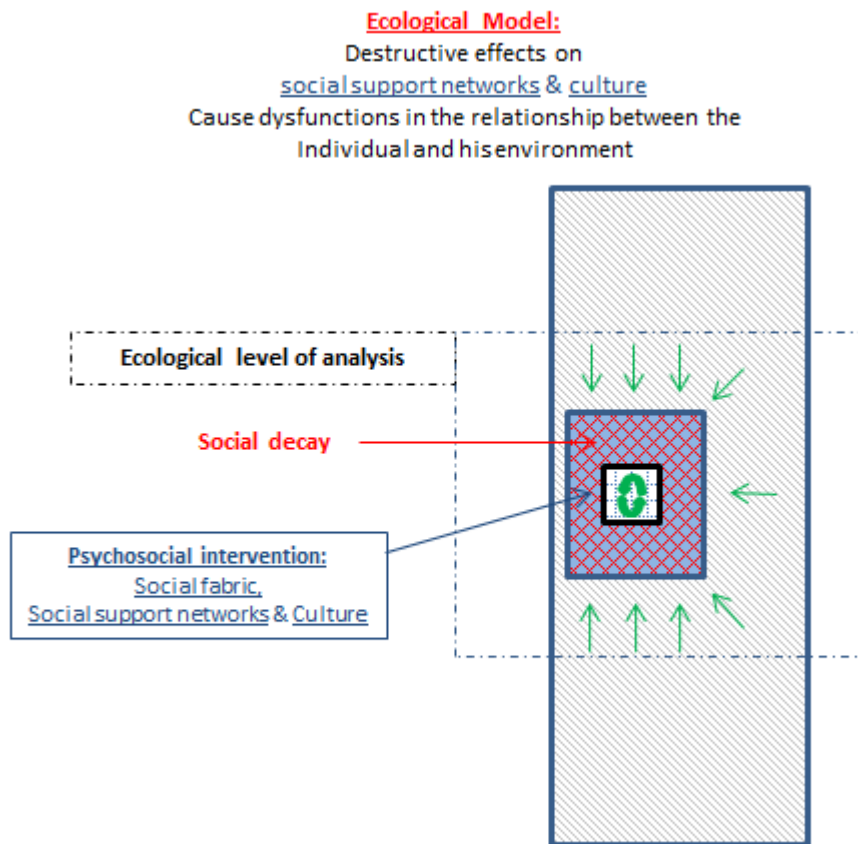
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<sup>48</sup> Cuellar, 2004: 236

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



### Diagram 3. Dysfunctions at the ecological level



In light of these observations, one begins to question the potential benefits of the policies that the Colombian state currently prioritizes, such as emergency humanitarian aid (which creates dependency), or education and training programs (which are often very low-quality and often do not change the structural absence of economic opportunities), or even worse more policing (which tends to be repressive and highly discriminatory). Even if very well designed and implemented, in such a difficult environment subsidies, education, training, and security become necessary but not sufficient.

Building on its long experience working with vulnerable ('victim') individuals and groups in Cali, the NGO Solivida writes:

"It is important to keep in mind, as we have seen from victims' narratives, that in these situations we notice the combination of subjective, symbolic and ethical issues, sensations, experiences, hardships and humiliations, with other difficulties that are eminently 'material', such as eating, having a roof, security, employment, access to health services. Support to victims needs to integrate these aspects."<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Solivida, 2009: 16

Therefore, it is important to reinforce projects that adopt a grassroots, family- and community-based psychosocial approach. These projects need to stabilize and empower these critical pillars of social dynamics, primarily through the reconstruction of social support networks and the promotion of social cohesion and collaboration through self-defined, culturally-appropriate means.

“The strength for coping can also be found in various positive beliefs which one can cherish: faith in God, justice, destiny, liberty, and more than anything else confidence in oneself and personal strength. One very important source of strength for coping is in people who surround a person experiencing a difficult situation. A lot of strength for coping can be found in care, understanding and love, which one can get from one’s neighbors.”<sup>51</sup>

Crucially, this approach would seek to first identify and then build on existing resources, and then develop new solutions only where gaps exist. “Ecologically-oriented capacity building entails genuine collaboration with community members, which in turn increases the likelihood that interventions will be designed and implemented in ways that reflect and respect local cultural values and norms.”<sup>52</sup>

- **Reinforcing support networks**

This includes direct and extended families, as well as other groups and networks formed through any type of voluntary association (religion, cultural custom, sports, arts, profession, region of origin). At the family level, one example of the type of work that can be done is given in Annex 4, which shows a familiogram, an exercise through which the NGO Solivida engages with families in crisis with complex life stories and challenges. This long process provides key insights into the ecological factors that must shape any intervention.

- **Cultural and spiritual activities:**

In some settings, these can be the only source of meaning, discipline and hope; they can re-create a sense of security and harmony, serve to produce positive and empowering narratives<sup>53</sup> as well as positive self-perception and life goals. These collective exercises can be especially important in providing support and guidance to, and building self-esteem in, individuals are facing difficult circumstances fraught with negative influences (discrimination and repression) and temptations (short-term gains of gangs & crime). “A preventive strategy could entail helping communities traumatized by experiences of violence develop communal narratives that provide some degree of shared meaning and eventual resolution to their experiences.”<sup>54</sup>

- **Information and guidance:**

It is necessary to provide counseling and advice on practical matters as well as legal rights, including basic education (for literacy at minimum) and legal support. These efforts promote “environmental mastery”<sup>55</sup> and facilitate access to key resources that may be technically made available but remain out of reach due to lack of information, orientation and guidance.

The complications associated with adopting such an approach are clear. The social reconstruction processes involved needs to be highly participatory and internally-driven (in order to generate legitimacy

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<sup>51</sup> Vlajkovic, 2000: 18

<sup>52</sup> Miller and Rasco, 2004: 47

<sup>53</sup> Pérez-Sales et al., 2005

<sup>54</sup> Miller and Rasco, 2004: 42

<sup>55</sup> Miller and Rasco, 2004: 37

and empowerment through real ownership). The process therefore cannot be expected to be rapid or linear, with predictable and clearly measurable short-term outcomes.

Fortunately, in the midst of so much cause for concern, the Colombian setting can often be quite surprising – given that the problems of conflict and displacement have already lasted so long, both Colombian society and the political system have begun to take encouraging steps towards reconstructing a social fabric.

First of all, when looking at local government policy documents, one notices that the government has committed to supporting and undertaking cultural and psychosocial programs and activities. For instance, the municipality's health department has a whole plan for "Psychosocial attention and comprehensive health programs for Victims of the Armed Conflict." Moreover, Cali's 'Plan de Accion Territorial 2012-2015', a document in which the municipal administration lays out its priorities and policies for IDPs and other victims of the armed conflict, one finds specific activities such as:

- Documentation of the "Historical Memory of Victims of the Internal Conflict" in order to promote shared narratives and reconciliation.
- Support the creation of cultural and artistic activities that reinforce ties within the victims population of Cali (artistic workshops, cultural events).
- Literacy programs intended to reach all illiterate IDPs so as to achieve 100% literacy.
- Promotion of sports and recreational activities.
- Support to the maintenance of "ancestral knowledge" and traditions of minority communities such as Afro-Colombians, *palenquera*, or *raizales*.
- Support to the ancestral ritual of adoration for the sun *inti Raymi*.

Unfortunately an in-depth evaluation of the design and implementation of these initiatives is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. While it is unclear to what extent these activities are actually implemented, it is nonetheless encouraging to see them formally adopted with the government's strategic policy framework, since this represents a necessary first step towards actual implementation.

Looking towards civil society, some organizations such as Organizacion Avre, Fundacion Paz y Bien and Solivida have already been built up significant experience in guiding and supporting the very activities described above, over extended periods of time. As such, their experiences and work would provide a solid foundation to start from, and crucial lessons learned, in building up a broader and larger-scale framework of intervention.

And finally, the following are a series of reflections and

- Communities can probably reconstruct their social fabric by themselves, if given the needed space and stability – Why should outsiders with limited knowledge about local context intervene? Will this intervention distort what would otherwise be a natural process? Will outside actors be manipulated by established 'leaders' in the community in order to simply reinforce their existing power?
- Developing interventions that target 'cultural practices' opens the door to the risk of essentializing or reifying those aspects of culture, 'traditions' and 'customs' which are to be targeted to be reinforced. In reality, these social elements are constantly evolving and adjusting to

changing conditions and circumstances, and therefore trying to target one fixed and pre-determined version can be highly problematic. “Cultures are rarely static, nor do they exist in isolation from other cultural values and practices.”<sup>56</sup>

- Despite their potential to provide crucial social goods, community and culture should not be idealized, not all of their constituent elements are positive or salutary; however, who decides which elements should be supported and which ones should be suppressed, or targeted for change? Once again, this problem evokes the delicate balance external intervention (which may carry important normative implications) and local autonomy (which may lead to outcomes deemed objectionable or undesirable to outsiders).

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<sup>56</sup> Miller and Rasco, 2004: 44

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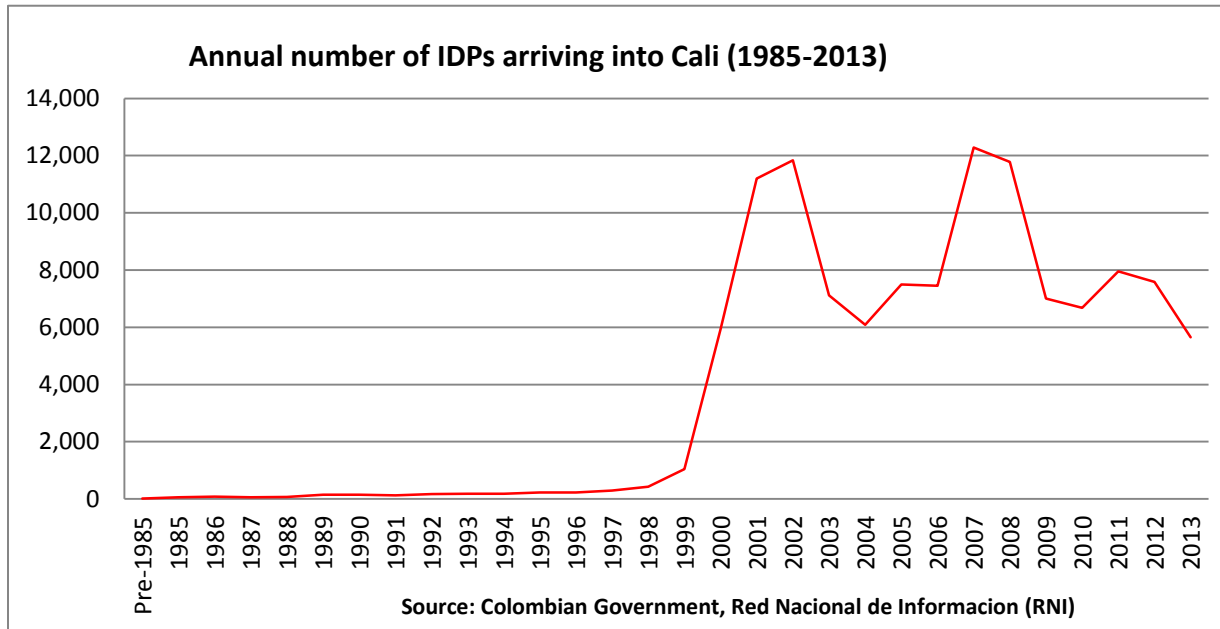
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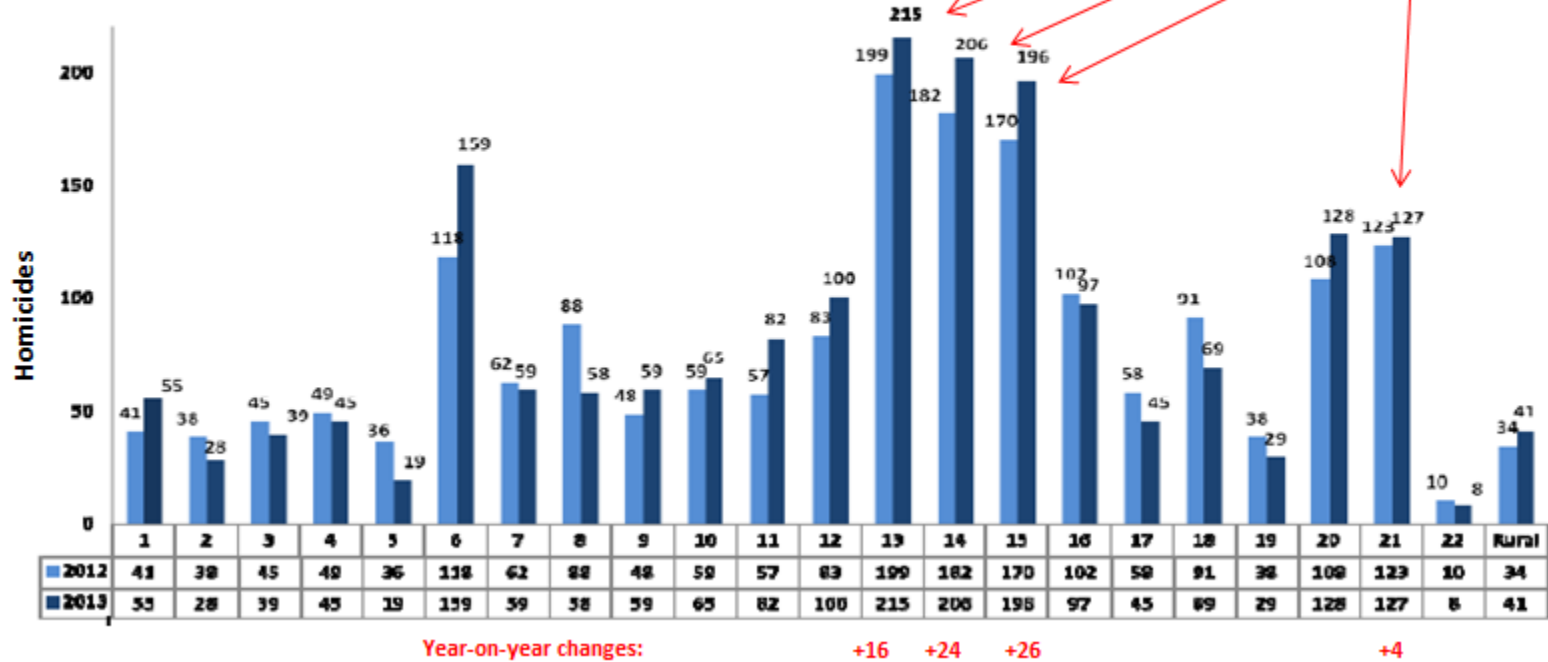
**Annex 1.**



Annex 2

Homicides by Commune, in Cali  
Totals for 2012 and 2013

Communes with high numbers of IDPs



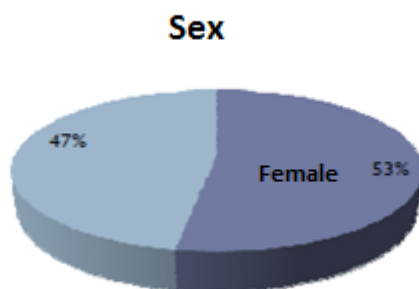
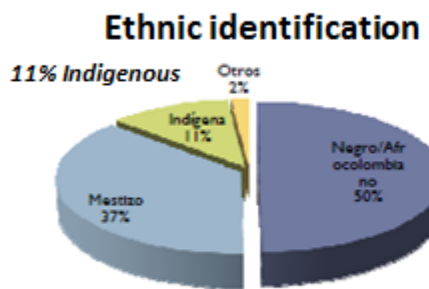
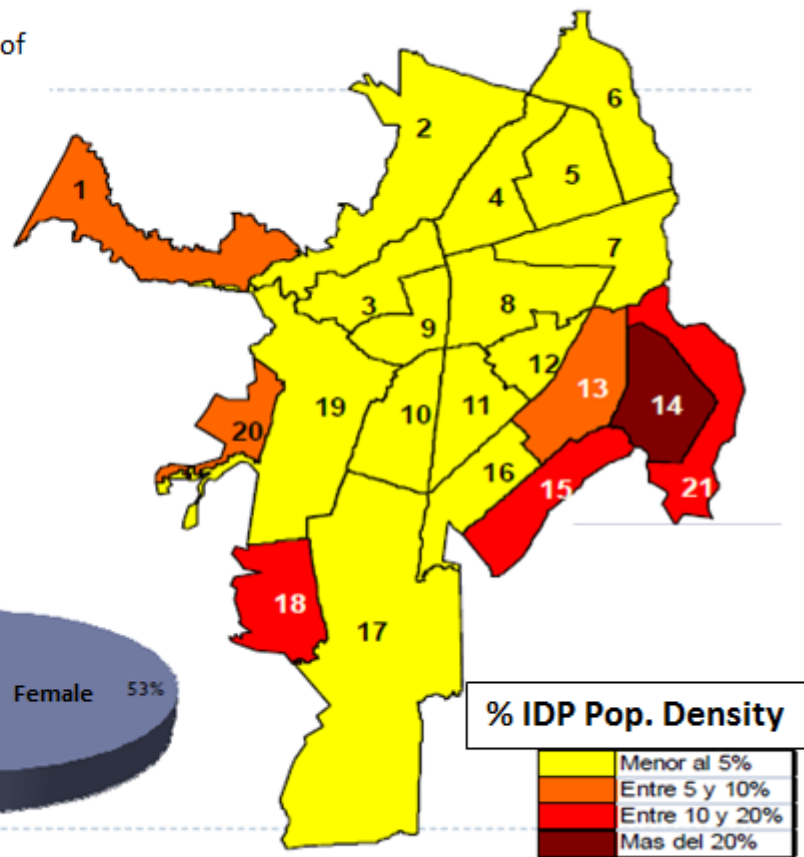
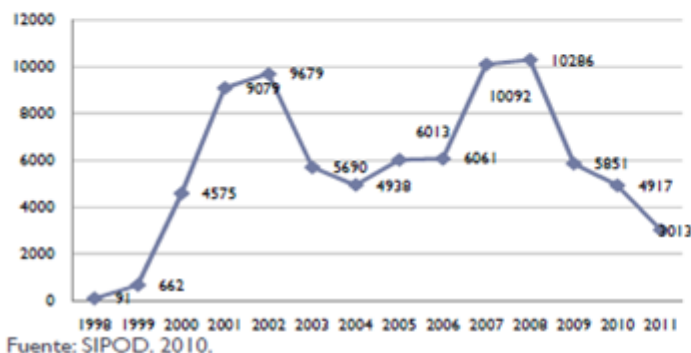
Source: Santiago de Cali municipality, Social Observatory – Report for Second Semester 2013



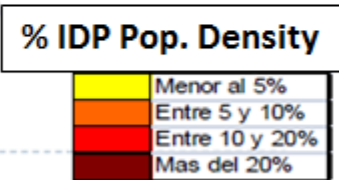
**Annex 3**

**Location and characteristics of IDP Population in Cali, as of 2011**

Cali is the 3<sup>rd</sup> city in the country in terms of reception of IDPs: by 2013, there were 119,000



50% Afro-Colombian



Source: Santiago de Cali Municipality, Office of the Peace Advisor, Report on Internal Displacement to the Constitutional Court, 2011

**Annex 4.** This is a familiogram provided by Solivida as an example of their work to reconstruct family and community social support networks. Given the complexities of each case, the NGO first works with each familial group (generally bits and pieces of an extended family) in order to better understand their situation, what they have faced in the past, what potentially traumatic events might need to be addressed, and what resources can be mobilized. Here, the red squares represent family members that were killed; the green ones represent members that have been 'disappeared'; and the circled area indicates those family members that were living together as one familial group.

