

Mobility and the informal city

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This text refers to Colombian cities, cities in continuous process of construction, with ongoing development projects and, above all, with significant disequilibrium in all respects. In reference to these cities, it is particularly interesting to express the situation regarding the informal city, and the right to mobility understood to the full extent of its significance and its connotations.

Thus, the so-called informal city becomes a mirror of a formal city with regard to the non-equitable distribution of the generated wealth and its complex distribution mechanisms. The fact that the informal city constitutes approximately 50%¹ of urban territories currently produced is not priceless, and neither is the fact that the magnitude they have today due to their size and problems creates some worries over the future of the development model in a globalized and urbanized world. The figures show that from a total of 6.134136² billion inhabitants of this global village, 2.802³ billion, 46% of the world population lives below the poverty line. Of these, 180,000,000 who at the same time inhabit the informal city are located in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Colombian territorial context and the city

A 2002 study on Colombia⁴ carried out by the World Bank states that 64% of the Colombian population lives below the poverty line (27,000,000 people in absolute terms) and 6,000,000 in absolute poverty. Population that is currently building the Colombian city and, in particular, the informal city.

Estimations from the National Planning Department (Departamento Nacional de Planeación or DNP) for the year 2003 show that at least 1.3 million Colombian homes⁵, are in precarious housing conditions, in informal settlements, without qualitative housing, located in risk areas or in housing units without possibility of improvement.

The DNP (2005) also considers that "...the growth of Colombian cities has followed an unbalances trend, with a small scale vision rather that a vision of a wide territorial model". It also highlights that within the resulting spatial phenomenon, we find the predominance of precarious settlements in the outskirts.

According to the Document CONPES 3305⁶ "precarious settlements⁷ constitute the physical sign of poverty and inequality in a country that is mostly urban". The natural growth of cities, the migratory influx of rural areas, the lack of economic alternatives for the population, as well as the inefficiency of the Government and its policies, among other factors, generated a dynamic of informal and incomplete growth in Colombian cities"⁸.

This same CONPES Document calculates that the net area for residential use which corresponds to informal settlements built through what is called progressive development, with significant quality, habitability and sustainability problems in the main Colombian cities, varies significantly. In the case of the 5 most important cities, this is set at 16% on average. For the cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants, the percentage is 19%, and for those between 100,000 and 300,000 it goes up to 24%, which means there is a more serious problem in relative terms in this group of cities. A similar situation exists in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean.

¹ The United Nations global report for the year 2004 includes figures relative to this matter by country and region.

² United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects, The 2001 Revision, New York, 2002.

³ World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2003.

⁴ World Bank, Report and Indicators on Colombia, 2002.

⁵ They represent 16% of urban homes in Colombia

⁶ CONPES 3305 Document. National Council on Economic and Social Policy (Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social) Republic of Colombia. National Planning Department *Lineamientos para optimizar la política de desarrollo urbano*. DNP: DDUPA Ministry of the Environment, Housing and Territorial Development (Ministerio de Ambiente, Vivienda y Desarrollo Territorial) Approved Version, Bogotá, D.C., 23rd of August, 2004.

⁷ They are inhabited homes without basic services, constructed with inadequate materials, overcrowded or are located in high risk areas

⁸ Carlos Caicedo, et. al. *Formulación del Proyecto Operación de Crédito de Bogotá, D.C. Banco Mundial, para la financiación del Programa de Mejoramiento Integral de Barrios en el marco del Crédito de Servicios Urbanos*, Bogotá, agosto de 2002.

For the case of Bogotá, the capital, close to 25% of its inhabitants live either below the poverty line (1,241,722 people, 17.3%), or in absolute poverty (480,898 people, 6.7%); they mainly correspond to socio-economic strata of population 1 and 2. The Governmental Department for Social Welfare (Departamento Administrativo de Bienestar Social or DABS)⁹, indicates in its report from August, 2005, that in the city of Bogotá 3,572,810 inhabitants are in a social emergency situation, of which 2,232,629 (62.48%) of the total population live below the poverty line, and 669,766 inhabitants (18.74%) live in absolute poverty. This is despite the fact that Bogotá is the city with the best conditions and the best urban development indicators in the whole of Colombia.

This situation is corroborated for Bogotá when it is said that, “Informal urbanization implies economic, social and environmental consequences which not only affect the low income population, but they also cause damages to society as a whole. Among these we may mention the deterioration in the quality of life; deficiencies in public services; viability and equipment; obstruction of public works; precarious professional degrees; fiscal fraud; and extra expenses for the public budget”¹⁰.

Mobility and the Colombian informal city

We will adopt the concept of mobility to refer to the way in which citizens in the informal Colombian city move about in the different levels of the city and, in turn, in society. Thus, I understand today's city as a predominant space of concentration of human beings in their condition as citizens, which offers a series of opportunities.

In this way, citizens should have the capability of freely moving about the territory; however, this is not the case, its space is fragmented with occupation processes and power theories that generate constant physical barriers as well as other types of barriers which prevent free mobilization and transport. In Colombia, the internal conflict which has been taking place for the last 40 years, makes the unitary territory of the nation established by the Constitutional Charter (la Carta Constitucional¹¹) impossible. This is due to the territorial allotment derived from the different logics and exercises of power taking place within the country by the armed actors of the conflict, including insurgents, paramilitary groups and the State's military apparatus.

Urban territories are not alien to this situation, in “...this scenery of social, economic and political problems which the city has turned into, made up of a wide variety of conflicts and tensions between the different parties involved, with the underlying acknowledgment of the representativity and the legality in the hand of he who finds it” (Torres T.: 1993). Each social agent considers himself socially recognized and the establishment of those with territorial control is attained through the degrees of legality translated into specific actions. Likewise, the armed parties exercise a territorial control because of the allotment of the city's downtown between exercises of power, turning these dynamics into an inherent part of inhabitants and urban communities. These end up adapting their roles to the new urban logics.

This situation generates mobility problems, since each territory is limited either really or virtually, and citizens must build their own “mobility routes” to be able to remain in these territories. The aim is to survive. A well known case, as an example of what we just described, corresponds to the processes of urban appropriation by urban militia groups or extreme -right paramilitary groups in neighbourhoods in the city of Medellín (North-Eastern and North-Western Communes) since the 90s.

Forced displacement and uprooting

The scenery previously described is connected with a phenomenon that is showing up and that cannot be ignored, i.e. the significant number of displaced population that reaches the cities as a consequence of the internal conflict. It is estimated that the effects of forced displacement has generated the mobility of 2,500,000 Colombians from the country to the cities in the last 15 years, according to CODHES's figures¹³. We can find a clear example of this dynamic over territory in the city of Bogotá, which, even if the effects of the migration country-city which date back to the so called violent times of the 50s

⁹ According to calculations from the DAPD, based on the National Home Survey (DANE, 2003).

¹⁰ City Hall Bogotá (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C.), METROVIVIENDA. *Ciudadela El Recreo: Memoria del modelo de gestión de MetroVivienda*, Bogotá: Panamericana, 2002, pp. 56-57.

¹¹ Asamblea Nacional Constituyente. Presidencia de la República. Constitución Política de Colombia. Bogotá: Ed. Impreandes S.A., 1991.

¹² Other terms being used are Social Actors, Civil Society, Community, Social Agents, among many other ways of expressing the different categories of analysis of the population at an urban level.

¹³ CODHES, UNHCR. Forced Internal Displacement in Colombia: Conflict, Peace and Development. Bogotá, Colombia 2001.

attracted plenty of population at that time, the most recent processes which arose at the end of the 80s and mainly in the 90s are the ones that have generated this attraction lately.

The number of displaced people who have reached Bogotá (settling especially in the poorest territories of informal origin) due to the violence generated as a result of the intensification of the internal conflict in Colombia between 1985 and 2004, amounts to 558,140, grouped in 118,628 families originally from 27 of the country's departments¹⁴.

Furthermore, the Government¹⁵ of the city of Bogotá admits that in the year 2004, 45.1% of displaced families live in critical overcrowded conditions, with incomes no higher than 100,000 pesos a month (one fourth of the legal monthly minimum salary, equivalent to 35 Euros) for more than half of the family groups. 79% of the low income received goes towards the payment of rental fees and food. Likewise, 54% of these people is younger than 20 years of age, and 30% is younger than 10. Women constitute 51% of the displaced population, and in 52% of the cases they are the heads of the household.

The problem of internal displacements cannot be seen, then, as a simple migration process or one of regional or inter-regional mobility, neither as a circumstantial event, especially when, because of the intensification of the conflict, we are already seeing the first refugees in areas close to the border. Forced displacements restrict the mobility of urban and rural inhabitants and the solution implies the right to enjoy different expressions of individual and collective freedoms, with mobility among them.

Social space segregation

A current characteristic of Colombian cities is their high level of social space segregation, which reveals two urbanization processes, territorially marked between formal or planned city, regulated or autonomous, and "illegal" or informal city, each one of them with clear differences. The formal city, generally structured with adequate urban conditions, and the informal one, with great deficits that affect the urban quality of life, and within the latter, mobility.

The current city model based on real state speculation in Colombia has widened the social space segregation, and when added to the State's loss of importance in the direct promotion of the city, has left the formation and consolidation of the aforementioned city in the hands of private parties, therefore favouring an increase in the participation of informality as a way of building the city. At the same time the privatization of most of the domestic public services and of social programmes has produced a degree of segregation and of restriction of the collective consumption of these means. An example which illustrates the above corresponds to the great difficulty of access to basic health services¹⁶, where there is no equipment, no resources and not enough personnel to offer the basic service at a local scale, and this forces the citizens that inhabit the informal city to travel long distances looking for priority medical attention, when in the formal city these services are present with their different complexity levels and excellent locations.

This segregation, in relation to space, is expressed in the materiality of neighbourhoods inhabited by low income populations, in neighbourhoods of the informal city, which have very different expressions according to the particular characteristics of each city, the origin of the settlements, the time they have taken to consolidate, the perspectives they perceive regarding their permanence, the public policies implemented, the coexistence of multiple cultural forms, and the initiatives deployed by the inhabitants themselves in order to improve the constructive quality of homes and the habitat, as well as to resolve their minimum survival conditions. Despite all this, we should highlight that the non-formal urban character of the informal city contrasts with the urban behaviour of its inhabitants, who see themselves as citizens with full rights.

Accessibility and mobility in the informal city

The informal city, in its greatest extension, is located and structured in territories that cannot be urbanized, in grounds with steep slopes or in areas subject to floods, in reserved or environmentally protected strips, around bodies of water, under high danger areas due to high-voltage networks, oil or gas infrastructure, among other. The consequence of all this is the permanent dismantling of these

¹⁴ CODHES, Archdiocese of Bogotá. *Forced Internal Displacement in Colombia: Conflict, Peace and Development*. Bogotá, 1999. and DAPD. "Displacement in Bogotá, a reality that claims attention", Bogotá. 2004

¹⁵ Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C. Press release. Government Secretariat, Bogotá, 2005

¹⁶ Service which is privatized when the Law 100 of 1993 is issued, law which transfers social responsibility in health matters away from the state and onto individuals. This has meant the disappearance of almost all public hospitals in Colombia and the reduction of public networks of health services.

urban territories with the rest of the city, the formal city; at the same time, this prevents an adequate internal connectivity in their own territory.

These circumstances generate significant losses of time in the life of the inhabitants of the informal city which excludes them as citizens, which obligates them to endure long days of trips on foot or in improvised vehicles to be able to move around the city, to the sources of employment, to study and, in general, to use the existing service offer, both public and private. To this we must add the extension of the group of cities with an extremely horizontal model which generates great distances and times for mobilization, increased because of the inexistence of real systems of massive public transport¹⁷.

The reduction of the amount of time lost daily with the mobilization of inhabitants of the informal city would represent time savings which, in time, may add up to several years of life¹⁸. Solving or generating alternatives to this may constitute an improvement in the quality of life of the inhabitants of the informal city that may lead up to their own recognition as citizens, not because this is what they may be called, but because they may enjoy all the benefits associated with living in the city.

Social and political exclusion

On the other hand, the active processes of social and political participation by the citizens are indicative of democratic advances and horizontalization of the relationships of power and dependence. This is not the case of Colombian cities, where the processes of participation are relegated to an indirect decision making through the delegated vote, added to the inexistence of real political parties and the difficulties of organization in communities.

Even worse, the citizens of informal cities present major exclusion problems since their economic potential is unimportant, and their contribution is reduced to being part of the electorate subject to the will of the Colombian traditional political class. This condition of political exclusion is also a reflection of the social exclusion that has already been mentioned. The lack of an appropriate organization and the constant manipulation to which this population is exposed hinders their expression and mobility as a social group, and their capacity to demand is not translated into an independent political expression. In turn, this increasingly aggravates their condition since they have no recognized representation with negotiating and management capabilities with which to solve their growing problems.

The inclusion-exclusion relationship between the formal and the informal cities.

The networks that have been formed in informality have nothing to do with the ones in formality. Thus, the informal city is characterized from the formal city based on its different contributing parties, permanently reaffirming their condition of exclusion: Through the economy, that part of the city is considered from the point of view of an informal economy; from a judicial point of view, it is considered illegal; from an architectural point of view it is seen as informal or non-architecture like; from the urban analysis it is viewed as an incomplete city; and from the social point of view it is analyzed and considered as a marginal city. These types of segregation between formal and informal city, with different levels of complexity, ignore the many ways in which the population adapts based on the dynamics they generate. At the same time, they forget that the consolidation of the informal city happens at the moment when it becomes integrated with the formal city¹⁹.

In addition, when we talk about formality vs. informality or legality vs. illegality, this duality must be understood as a binomial that acts in an articulated and parallel way, perhaps as indicated in physics, i.e. for every action there is a reaction; however, it is essential to understand that this duality is not always positive and, simultaneously, neither is it bipolar, rather, on the contrary, it is constituted by multiple variants and modalities found in the intermediate polarity scenery²⁰.

¹⁷ In Bogotá city the transport system called TRANSMILENIO has been implemented lately, system which could be considered as a light metro system running on the surface.

¹⁸ Studies carried out in the city of Medellín demonstrate that thanks to the use of the Metro system, the only one existing in Colombia, the inhabitants gained one daily hour to enjoy other activities. In the case of Bogotá, the implanting of the TRANSMILENIO system is having a similar effect. Nonetheless, in those places in the city not covered by these benefits, its inhabitants spend daily between five and six hours sitting in a bus to go to their different places of activity, mainly for work.

¹⁹ TORRES TOVAR, Carlos Alberto. "La ciudad: espacio de inclusión y exclusión". p. 327. En: TORRES, Carlos, VIVIESCAS, Fernando and PÉREZ, Edmundo. La Ciudad Hábitat de Diversidad y Complejidad. Art School. Head of Academics. Site at Santafé de Bogotá. Universidad Nacional de Colombia. UNIBIBLOS publishers. Bogotá, 2000. 349 p.

²⁰ TORRES TOVAR, Carlos Alberto. "Dualidad formal informal, el modelo de producción de la ciudad colombiana. Una mirada desde los años 90" p. 140. En: RINCÓN PATIÑO, Análida (Editora Compiladora). Espacios Urbanos no con-sentidos. Legalidad e

In conclusion

Latin America and the Caribbean, and in this particular case Colombia, must think about the city in its totality. Paraphrasing Frank Marciano²¹, I would point out that recognizing the existence of the other city is the only way of revitalizing the Colombian city. This focus must be followed through as a way of facing the urban separation and exclusion that prevail in the city, and as a way to deal with this uncertain future currently present in any urban reflection. The challenge is still set at shortening the distances between those who are integrated and those who are excluded from the benefits of quality urban life, between those connected and disconnected; in finding passageways between the formal and the informal: facts capable of imbricating themselves, of becoming hybrids in order to create new urban realities resulting from the fusion of characteristics from both structures.

Nonetheless, the constant growth, consolidation and advance of the informal city generates new outskirts that go further than the existing ones, limited only by insurmountable geographic accidents.

On the other hand, María Isabel Espinoza²² warns us that, "...the modern city of the fifties, displaces the pedestrian in favour of the automobile, while in the (informal) neighbourhoods, the main character is, even today, the pedestrian. In the informal neighbourhood the urban structure is compact, much like the one in Medieval cities but without its churches, castles or squares and markets".

Thus, the most popular way of mobility of the inhabitant of the informal city is by foot, and this is why we must place value on this attribute as a structure of this city. Despite the inexistence of public space per say, or of clearly defined streets and platforms, or even less defined borders or boulevards, or of gathering places, be it called a square, urban node, or park, or maybe bicycle paths. What the informal city does have is empty and residual spaces, still to be transformed and incorporated to the city despite the difficulties and conditions they present. This would improve the mobility and the quality of urban life of the inhabitants of this city and it would contribute in its integration with the formal city. As pointed by María Inés Pocaterra²³, structuring a pedestrian network becomes the catalyst of what is urban thus overcoming the atomization and disintegration inherent to the structure of informal neighbourhoods. That which is pedestrian becomes the organizing force behind the way of life.

The precarious mobility and accessibility of the informal city contrast with the capability of its inhabitants to construct a city where difficulties are not an obstacle. This is confirmed by "...the determination and audacity in the manufacturing of "solutions" capable of standing alone even if, apparently, the contrary seems true"²⁴.

To seek the right to an adequate mobility of the inhabitants of the informal Colombian city, and, why not, the Latin American one, is one of the substantial components which will guarantee the overcoming of the exclusion and marginalization conditions suffered by the majority of society. Only an equitable and balanced construction of the urban and rural territories will guarantee the sustainability of future societies and, within them, the inclusion of the citizens of the informal city in one sole city, a humanized city.

Due to this, urban marginalization and, in turn, the informal city, must be permanent object of discussions. Moreover, a structural review of the basic dimensions of territorial transformation (physical-space, political, socio-cultural, judicial, environmental and economic) and its intervention mechanisms must be done. Likewise, if we understand the city as a dynamic process and the expression of a cultural context in a particular moment and environment, we cannot accept that with the experience and knowledge we have today for the production of the main vital space for human beings, our cities, and especially their marginal areas, continue to grow based on precarious means in all their dimensions. Today, this is one of the expressions of a model of global development, which is intolerable from a human and urban point of view.

The Right to Mobility must be part of the rights of the fourth generation claimed by low income populations today in order to achieve a global town for everyone.

Caracas, 26th of October, 2005

ilegalidad en la producción de ciudad. Colombia y Brasil. Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Alcaldía de Medellín, Área Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá. Medellín, 2005.

²¹ Professor, Central University of Venezuela In: Revista URBANA No. 35

²² Interview on Revista URBANA No. 35. Magazine published by the Urbanism Institute, School of Architecture and Urbanism of the Central University of Venezuela, and by the Research Institute of the School of Architecture and Design of the University of Zulia.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ As indicated by Marisela Monagas and Ana María Campos In: Revista URBANA No. 35

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