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Armed conflict, land grabs and primitive accumulation in Colombia: micro processes, macro trends and the puzzles in between

Carlos J. L. Gómez, Luis Sánchez-Ayala and Gonzalo A. Vargas 

Armed conflict is widely believed to disrupt agricultural production and ‘reverse’ development, but it may also involve the violent transformation of rural economies from subsistence to commercial agriculture. The case of Las Pavas, an estate in northern Colombia, provides further evidence that armed conflict created opportunities for violent land grabs and the expansion of commercial agriculture in Colombia. However, aggregate data suggest that primitive accumulation may be only part of the story behind the massive scale of forced displacement and dispossession. A research strategy that accounts for the diversity of subnational contexts, processes and outcomes is needed.

Keywords: Colombia; conflict; agriculture; land grab; primitive accumulation

Introduction

Armed conflict is often assumed to reverse development by disrupting agriculture, reducing output and, possibly, causing hunger, among other things. Yet international and subnational empirical analyses show that is not always the case. While measurement problems may be part of the explanation, an alternative view is that violence and forced displacement are often part of a process of primitive accumulation, whereby peasants are expelled from their land, which is then consolidated into larger estates and employed for more profitable enterprises such as commercial agriculture and cattle ranching. Thus, rather than simply destroy, armed conflict could transform rural economies.

This paper provides further evidence that a process of primitive accumulation has taken place in contemporary Colombia and that armed conflict offered a convenient cover for it. In particular, the paper shows how in the late 1990s and early 2000s, violent, forced displacement often occurred in areas with no armed clashes or insurgent presence. However, the paper also suggests that primitive accumulation is only part of the story. Given the variety of agricultural landscapes that characterise the country, and the heterogeneous nature of armed conflict itself, the impact of forced displacement on agriculture was probably diverse. The paper suggests studying such diversity entails the combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods as well as more balanced selection of cases, including areas where forced displacement was perpetrated by insurgents.

The following section of the paper reviews the international literature on the subject and finds that, whereas most analyses confirm the negative impact of armed conflict, a few anomalous cases exist. The second section reviews the literature on the Colombian case and shows that agriculture has shown resilience, and even flourished, despite protracted armed conflict in rural areas. An increasingly prominent explanation is that violence has

enabled a process of forced displacement and primitive accumulation. The third section illustrates this hypothesis with a case study of the agricultural estate of Las Pavas, in northern Colombia; the case is documented with satellite images and testimonies from peasants, obtained in 2013. The fourth section asks whether Las Pavas and other similar cases are representative of a wider trend and analyses national and subnational trends of armed conflict, forced displacement and agricultural production; it shows there is confusing and conflicting evidence on this matter and concludes that the impacts of armed conflict on agricultural production are likely (and unsurprisingly) diverse. The fifth section discusses the methodological problems involved in studying such diversity and highlights the importance of triangulating sources, combining qualitative and quantitative methods and tapping new sources such as judicial records and satellite imagery. The sixth section concludes.

Armed conflict, agricultural production and food security

A fall in agricultural production and food insecurity are among the most predictable and destructive effects of war (World Bank 2011; Gates et al. 2012). Most contemporary armed conflicts are internal and, as such, they entail a political and military struggle to control or displace the population (Azam and Hoeffler 2002; Kalyvas 2006; Themner and Wallenstein 2012). Alternatively, they may be about plundering and extorting civilians, be they peasants or multinational firms (Keen 1997; Collier 2000). At any rate, war disrupts the production and trade of food and, indeed, warring factions often use (access to) food as an ‘instrument of war’, for instance, to weaken the social base on which insurgents rely or to win over their hearts and minds – through their stomachs (Macrae and Zwi 1992). Beyond its immediate manifestations, armed conflict provokes a long-lasting deterioration in the ability of households to access food and, even when this is not the case, it increases the risk of malnutrition (Messer, Cohen, and D’Costa 1998). Thus, armed conflict has negative impacts on the three pillars of food security – availability, access and use – all of which have been evident in recent conflict-related humanitarian crises.

Broadly speaking, the existing empirical analyses confirm such impacts. For instance, nine of the 12 countries with the worst scores in the Global Hunger Index 2003 had been at war at the time or in previous years or were recovering from severe conflicts (Ahmed et al. 2007, 23). Fuglie and Rada (2013) found that armed conflict caused significant losses in agricultural productivity in 31 countries of sub-Saharan Africa from 1977 to 2005. Teodosijevic (2003) selected a sample of 38 countries that experienced conflict between 1961 and 2000 and found that:

[a]gricultural and food production levels in per-capita terms are on average about 10 percent lower during conflict, and in the five years after the conflict, than in the five years before conflict. Food production growth is 2 percent lower in the conflict period as opposed to peace time. In per-capita terms food production falls by about 1.3 percent per year, which is about 1 percent worse than during peace time. (Teodosijevic 2003, 11)

Yet the causal relation from conflict to food insecurity is not always straightforward, and ‘anomalies’ are not hard to find. Countries such as Peru, El Salvador and Colombia, which recently went through intense and/or chronic armed conflicts, have low to moderate scores in the Global Hunger Index (Ahmed et al. 2007; von Grebmer et al. 2011). When Messer, Cohen, and D’Costa (1998) estimated the effects of internal wars on food production levels in 14 countries of sub-Saharan Africa between 1970 and 1993, they found

that annual food production per capita dropped, on average, by 12.26 percent in war years (compared to non-war years). But they also found significant variability in the figures, ranging from a dramatic 44.52 percent drop in Angola to a 10.20 increase in Uganda. Similarly, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO 2000) estimated average losses of 28 percent of agricultural output due to conflict in more than 20 countries around the world from 1970 to 1997, but their analyses also show significant variations across continents and decades, and the authors reported that regressions were not statistically significant for all countries.

A possible explanation for these anomalies concerns the choice of variables. As Messer, Cohen, and D'Costa noted, 'such variation is expected given the widely differing scope and scale of the conflicts', which is not captured by the war dummy (1998, 19). A way out of this problem is using cardinal, rather than categorical, indicators of armed conflict (i.e. measuring intensity and not just presence/absence of conflict) but most datasets are limited in scope, covering battle deaths but not civilian deaths (which may be more relevant), and there is heated controversy about the accuracy of those that do (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005; Obermeyer, Murray, and Gakidou 2008; Spagat et al. 2009).

Another explanation concerns issues of aggregation. As Cederman and Gleditsch warned, 'many of the non-findings and conundrums in the existing cross-national research on civil war appear to follow at least partly from the near exclusive reliance on country-level attributes' (2009, 488). If violence in civil wars is highly localised within a given country, as they argue, there is no reason to expect a fall in gross national agricultural production. Furthermore, subnational studies allow researchers 'to control for ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions to a far greater extent than is usually possible in studies that compare national units' (Snyder 2001, 96). This is because, at least in principle, there should be less heterogeneity within a given country than between countries.

For instance, Gibson (2012) found that cultivated areas in northern Iraq barely changed throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom. D'Souza and Jolliffe (2012) found that levels of food insecurity (as measured by the proportion of people who did not meet the minimum daily requirement of 2100 calories) were actually lower in the insecure provinces of southern Afghanistan than in the relatively peaceful north.¹

On a theoretical level, Cramer (2006) challenged the idea that armed conflict necessarily halts growth or 'reverses development', as Collier et al. (2003) put it. Violence, Cramer argued, could be the manifestation of a process of primitive accumulation, in which peasants are coerced to migrate and join the working class while their land is consolidated into larger estates so that subsistence economy gives way to capitalism (Cramer 2006). Therefore, violence and agricultural growth are not necessarily incompatible – indeed, if Cramer is right, violence could indirectly contribute to increase productivity and boost growth. The following section provides a brief review of the literature on the Colombian case which, as we shall see, poses similar puzzles, questions and controversies to those just mentioned.

Armed conflict and agrarian change in Colombia

Agrarian conflict has been an enduring trait of Colombian history since the nineteenth century and, without a doubt, one of the driving factors of political violence in the country (LeGrand 1986; Zamosc 1986; Thomson 2011; UNDP 2011). At its core, there

¹This paradox may just reflect the disconnection between availability and actual access to food, highlighted by Sen (1981) long ago but, without data on agricultural production, it is hard to say.

has been a protracted, iterative process whereby cattle ranchers, agro-industrialists, drug barons, national and transnational firms and land speculators, among other agents, displace peasants from their land, often through illegal, violent tactics, with the acquiescence of local authorities, thus pushing them towards the country's agricultural frontier, where the same process eventually recurs over and over (LeGrand 1986; Zamosc 1986; Grajales 2011; Thomson 2011; UNDP 2011). Throughout the twentieth century, several attempts to stop or reverse this cycle were frustrated by regional elites and, eventually, prompted violent responses from peasants; indeed, the largest insurgent group in Colombian history, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), was born in the 1960s as a confederation of armed, self-defence, peasant militias (Pizarro 1991; Wickham-Crowley 1992).

The emergence of the FARC and other insurgencies and the rise of drug trafficking added new layers of complexity to the agrarian conflict. On the one hand, drug barons bought and consolidated large rural estates throughout the country, thus laundering their wealth and acquiring local power (Reyes 1997). On the other hand, insurgencies turned to kidnapping and extortion to fund their struggle and agro-industrialists, cattle ranchers and drug barons were among their most common targets (Rubio 2004). In response, they created and funded several private militias, commonly known as 'paramilitaries', during the 1980s, often covertly supported by the army.

Surprisingly, the process just described did not have a visible negative impact on agriculture. Bejarano (1988) concluded that, despite the media attention, political violence did not have significant effects on agricultural production and investment or that, perhaps, their negative impacts had been offset by more favourable factors. Sarmiento and Moreno (1989) found that 'commercial agriculture' growth rates from 1983 to 1988 were slightly higher in relatively violent areas (*departamentos*) than in the rest of the country. While some of these areas were located in the country's southeast agricultural frontier (1989, 23), where an expansion of agricultural production was expectable, others such as Cordoba, Meta and the Middle Magdalena Valley were characterised by a growing influence of drug barons with the power to modernise cattle ranching and legal crops and to fund and deploy private militias to protect themselves from insurgent extortion and sabotage (1989, 94–97). Even in rural areas controlled by insurgents, agricultural producers apparently managed to absorb the additional costs associated with 'revolutionary taxes' and extortion (1989, 97). What is more, they also found that kidnappings had a very limited impact on short-term commercial agricultural growth rates (1989, 38).

As Bolivia and Peru made progress in eradicating coca, crops shifted to Colombia where they jumped from 40,000 hectares in the early 1990s to 160,000 hectares in 2000 (UNODC 2005, 7). The flourishing drug business, together with other sources of funding such as extortion and kidnapping, allowed insurgents and private militias to expand throughout the country and led to violent competition for territorial control. In 2002, after 3 years of unsuccessful peace talks, the government left the negotiating table with the FARC and launched an aggressive counterinsurgent strategy supported by the government of the United States under *Plan Colombia*.

Armed conflict peaked in 2002, causing massive migration, mainly from rural areas. While migration was often a preventive response of households to the risks of conflict (e.g. looting, landmines, forced recruitment of boys), forced migration was actively employed by the warring factions to deprive the enemy of social support or for economic reasons. Paramilitary groups, for instance, engaged in three types of 'active dispossession' (Gutiérrez 2014): first, strategic dispossession, which aimed to expel civilians from areas where guerrillas operated; second, clientelistic dispossession, in which paramilitary

organisations transferred land to local elites and collaborators in exchange for loyalty, thus strengthening their social networks; and third, opportunistic dispossession, aimed to enrich paramilitary members as individuals. Gutierrez's classification reminds us that 'part of the point of wartime violence may be to secure a commanding and lucrative position within the peacetime economy' (Keen 2000, 11).

By 2010, official records on forced displacement, systematically collected since the late 1990s, showed 3.6 million people had left their homes due to violence, but a 'verification' survey commissioned by the government that year ($n = 10,433$ households) suggested the actual figure could be 30 percent higher, as not all displaced households were included in the official register (Garay et al. 2010, 31). According to the same survey, 60 percent of displaced households used to live in rural areas (excluding rural villages), 40 percent lost their rural plots and 70 percent lost their livestock. Interestingly, 31 percent of the respondents claimed that they had been displaced by paramilitaries, whereas 41 percent pointed their finger at the insurgents (Garay et al. 2010, 36, 2011, 8–11).

In all, 6.6 million hectares were forcibly abandoned from 1980 to 2010 and only 500,000 have been recovered by their owners (Garay et al. 2011, 8–11). Garay et al. also estimated that 1.3 million hectares of cultivated land were abandoned, due to forced displacement, between 1998 and 2008 (2011, 8–22). Another study, based on an extensive review of official records, found that 6.5 million hectares (271,000 plots) were abandoned from 1995 to 2010, but the authors warned that, because of missing data, the actual figure could be close to 8 million hectares (Gonzalez and Kalmanovitz 2010, 120–23). Sixty percent of the plots abandoned were 10 or fewer hectares in size and, therefore, were likely to be subsistence farms. Subsistence farms are often occupied under legally weak forms of tenancy, and therefore it is very unlikely that their owners will ever recover them.

Yet the impacts of armed conflict and massive forced migration on agricultural production are far from clear. Gonzalez and Kalmanovitz (2010) hypothesised that the drop in agricultural labour should have reduced production. Over the last two decades, the agrarian gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a relatively low rate but, as they found, the overall drop in cultivated areas was marginal – well below the figures suggested by the two studies mentioned above. Therefore, they speculated, forced displacement was less about 'draining the pond' and weakening the insurgency, and more about territorial control and land hoarding, with a view to employ the acquired lands for pastures or legal, profitable crops such as oil palm (2010, 105–12). Thus, rather than causing a collapse of agriculture, armed conflict had been the cover for a massive land expropriation, and a violent transition from small-scale farming to commercial agriculture had taken place.

In a similar vein, Thomson (2011) argued that 'displacement is often an incidental consequence of conflict but in Colombia it is frequently the purpose of the violence' (Thomson 2011, 344). Thus, she concluded, Colombia 'fits Cramer's definition of primitive accumulation as "a twin process of forceful asset accumulation and displacement of people"' (2011, 348). Indeed, for Cramer and Richards, 'primitive accumulation has been [...] at the leading edge of developmental conflict in Colombia' (Cramer and Richards 2011, 289). Grajales went even further by adding that 'forced displacement as a land grabbing strategy [in Colombia] is sufficiently well-documented to be considered as a proven fact' (Grajales 2011, 783). Therefore, rather than 'development in reverse', armed conflict and massive forced migration would be the very instrument of development – or at least of land accumulation.

Several cases suggest that this is indeed what happened. For instance, Grajales has shown how violence by private militias and government forces opened the door for the expansion of oil palm agribusiness in the Lower Atrato Valley in Colombia (Grajales

2011, 2013). Likewise, Maher (*forthcoming*) argues that by displacing peasants and targeting labour unions in the department of Meta, government forces and paramilitaries enabled palm oil companies to expand geographically and suppress workers' demands for better wages, thus helping them to gain advantage in international markets. Similarly, Sánchez-Ayala and Arango-López (*forthcoming*) argue that in Montes de María, in northern Colombia, armed conflict secured the advancement and consolidation of the palm oil industry. These authors observed that armed conflict in Montes de María paved the way for the creation of a grand-scale system of land transactions and intensive land use for the cultivation of oil palm, which often took place on lands abandoned by victims of forced displacement (Sánchez-Ayala and Arango-López *forthcoming*). Another case involves the Colombian firm Argos, one of the largest in the country, which has developed a 14,000-hectare carbon capture project also in Montes de María on lands apparently acquired from peasants, under duress, in the 1990s. Argos claims they bought the land in good faith (Argos 2014). The following section presents the case of Las Pavas, which also illustrates the hypothesis of the violent transition to capitalism. In this way, we answered Cramer and Richards's call to shift the analytical and empirical focus to the 'rural areas and communities rather than remaining fixed at the national level' (2011, 279).

Las Pavas: a case of conflict, forced migration and food (in)security

This section illustrates the process of agricultural transformation through violence with the vignette case of Las Pavas, an estate first owned by a drug baron, then occupied by peasants and later by an agro-industrial consortium, where forced displacement was not a side effect of armed conflict but a deliberate tool of dispossession. In Las Pavas, peasant and agribusiness take part in an ongoing confrontation for the right to work the land and for food sovereignty, thus illustrating the complex geography of the struggle for the land.

To document the processes of occupation and dispossession that took place in Las Pavas, we employed a combined methodology of spatial analysis that included photogrammetry, fieldwork, interviews and participatory cartography. During our field trips to Las Pavas, in July and October 2013, we interviewed members of the directive board of the Association of Peasants of Buenos Aires (ASOCAB) and peasants living on the estate. Interviewees are referred to as Peasant 1, Peasant 2 and so on to ensure their anonymity.

We used remote-sensing techniques in a multi-temporal collection of more than 250 aerial photographs (covering the years of 1952, 1964, 1974, 1981, 1984, 1993 and 1995) and analysed and interpreted dozens of images from Landsat Satellites 4, 5 and 7, covering the years 1986 to 2010, as well as RapidEye images from 2013. We picked satellite images taken during the dry seasons to control, as far as possible, the effects of climate on the process of land cover interpretation. Having aerial photographs and satellite images taken in the same periods for the subject areas helped the land cover interpretation process. This allowed us to extrapolate the meaning of the different land covers and the images' pixels to the spatial patterns that could be interpreted from satellite images. The spectral resolution of the satellite images helped us to understand the meaning of the spectral signatures for these years, with respect to the land covers that were initially interpreted in the aerial photographs. This was very useful in the process of identifying the best combination of bands that would differentiate human occupancy patterns, and to extrapolate such information for the years that aerial photographs were not available.

Finally, the analysis just described was complemented on the ground through georeferencing and land cover identification, allowing us to have a more precise interpretation of the images and to corroborate any preliminary interpretations. The combination of these

techniques was essential to understand and confirm the peasants' version about the occupation, intervention and abandonment of the estate. These techniques also helped us to gauge the magnitude of agroindustrial intervention and the effects of armed groups actions on agricultural production.

The estate of Las Pavas is located in the municipality of El Peñón, in the department of Bolivar, and, together with other estates, was consolidated as a livestock *hacienda* owned by the consortium Ganadería Las Pavas Limitada (see Figure 1). However, in 1983, at the height of the drug cartel era in Colombia, a new player came on the scene: Jesus Escobar, uncle of the drug lord Pablo Escobar. Jesus Escobar bought Las Pavas and settled in the area until the early 1990s, when his activities were disrupted by two guerrilla groups – the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces

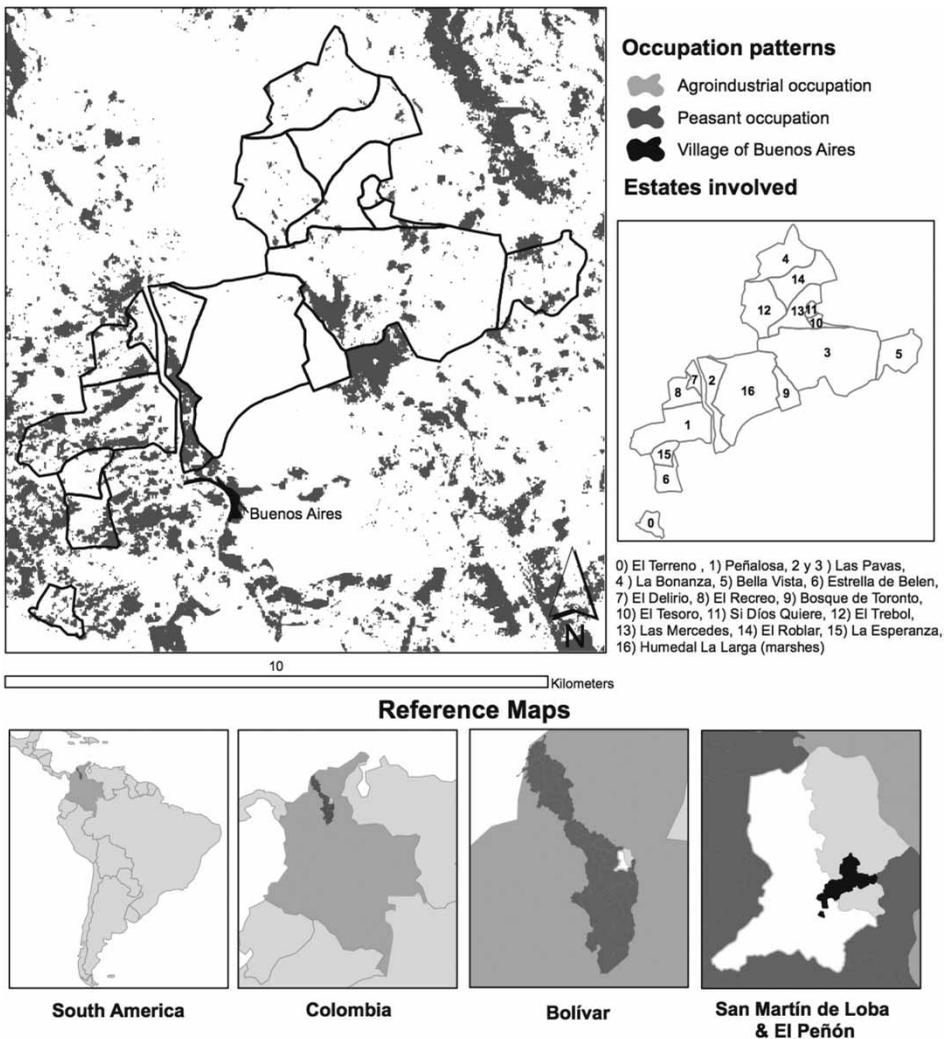


Figure 1. Las Pavas, occupation patterns 2002. Sources: Natural Earth (2002); SIGOT-IGAC (2013); Displaced Population Land Protection Project; USGS-LANDSAT(2002) RGB 451.

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(FARC) – who often stole cattle and extorted and kidnapped landowners. Eventually, in November 1993, Jesus Escobar abandoned his land and migrated to Costa Rica.

With Jesus Escobar in Costa Rica, the peasants of Buenos Aires, a village located only 700 m away from the limits of Las Pavas (see [Figure 1](#)), saw the opportunity to make use of the hacienda Las Pavas and others among Escobar's abandoned properties. Therefore, from 1995 to 2003, the main economic activity in Las Pavas was farming. In 1998, they founded ASOCAB, which brought together about 200 families dedicated to agriculture in the area, including in Las Pavas. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the areas occupied by peasants in 2002.

The peasants continued working the land until 2003, when paramilitary groups, acting on behalf of Escobar, expelled them from Las Pavas, forcing them to leave behind their crops. Escobar put Las Pavas up for sale and, in April 2004, representatives of the Colombian firm Aportes San Isidro visited the estate and expressed interest in buying it. According to press reports, they declared on their visit that they had not seen any evidence of settlers in the land. They tried to convince another firm, Palmeras de la Costa, to start a joint venture and buy the property to plant it with oil palm, but the deal did not succeed because Palmeras thought the area was prone to flooding (Abondano and Macías 2009).

With the demobilisation of the paramilitary groups in 2005, the peasants of Buenos Aires gradually reoccupied Las Pavas and ventured into the business of certificated cocoa production. The cocoa seeds were planted mostly in marginal areas of Las Pavas, where the peasants established a nursery with support from the municipality of El Peñón. Encouraged by this, the peasants tried to approach Jesus Escobar to find a way that would allow them to reach an agreement regarding Las Pavas and other nearby plots of land. Their attempts were unsuccessful, so they formally requested the Colombian Institute for Rural Development (INCODER) to undertake a process to revoke Escobar's land property rights due to abandonment, and to award them those rights through an agrarian reform operation.

INCODER officials visited Las Pavas and other neighbouring plots in June 2006 and found that, in effect, the land had been abandoned by its owner and the peasants had planted crops such as rice, maize, cassava, banana and cocoa. They concluded that the estate was suitable to advance a land reform programme and started the formal process to revoke the owner's rights in favour of the peasants. However, between July and September of the same year, Escobar returned to the premises with a group of heavily armed men in uniform, who destroyed the crops and forced the peasants to leave again. This time, Aportes San Isidro managed to get a business partner, C.I. Tequendama, a subsidiary of the Daabon Group, the largest producer of palm oil and its derivatives in Latin America, which exports its products to countries like Japan, South Korea, UK, Germany, Belgium and the United States, among others. This consortium bought the land from Escobar in early 2007.

The deal hampered the legal process initiated by INCODER and, to complicate things further, the same year, the Congress passed Law 1152, creating the National Rural Land Unit (UNAT) which assumed all administrative functions regarding land property rights processes, under INCODER's supervision. The UNAT hindered many of the processes to revoke land property rights in process in Colombia but, two years later, the Constitutional Court declared Law 1152 was unconstitutional, so INCODER regained all its former functions. Amid this legal limbo, in 2009, the peasants returned to Las Pavas in an act of pressure, looking for a response to their claims to the land. In response, the palm company argued that the peasants were illegally occupying private property and asked the police to expel the peasants. The police evicted the peasants, ignoring and undermining the process started by INCODER.

Several organisations and journalists reported the case of Las Pavas in the national and international media, raising national and international awareness about the events occurring

in Las Pavas. A key reason for such widespread interest was that, at the time, the well reputed, 'eco-friendly' British cosmetic manufacturer and retailer The Body Shop was sourcing palm oil from Colombia. *The Observer* reported that the chain 'buys palm oil from an organisation that pushed for the eviction of peasant families to develop a new plantation' (Syal and Brodzinsky 2009). In response, The Body Shop, which by then had been taken over by the cosmetic giant L'Oreal, hired an independent commission to verify and clarify the events taking place in Las Pavas. As a result, The Body Shop terminated its contract with Daabon Group, and its subsidiary sold its 50 percent stake in the consortium to their business partner, Aportes San Isidro, and withdrew all of its activities from Las Pavas. This transaction was publicly announced in October 2010 and became official in March 2011.

In April 2011, the Constitutional Court declared that the eviction had been illegal and ordered INCODER to reopen the process to revoke the land property rights in favour of the peasants as victims of forced migration. Emboldened by the events, the peasants returned to Las Pavas, this time accompanied by a humanitarian commission. However, after their return, the harassment and threats continued and, in June 2011, out of the blue, Pedro Moreno, a member of ASOCAB, publicly retracted his declaration regarding the forced migration from Las Pavas and claimed that the entire story was a hoax, thus accusing the Association of falsehood. His statement prompted an investigation by a prosecutor from Cartagena to 'corroborate the veracity of the events in the territory of Las Pavas' (Semana 2011). The investigation did not suspend the ruling of the Constitutional Court, but prompted a scandal in the media and speculations that the peasants, together with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), had orchestrated the whole media campaign in their own interest and manipulated a large group of organisations and scholars who had supported their cause, including the British Embassy in Colombia, Christian Aid, Chasquis Foundation, Peace Watch Switzerland, Corporación Sembrar, the nongovernmental Swiss Programme for the Promotion of Peace in Colombia, Swissaid Working Group Switzerland-Colombia, the Catholic Church's Pastoral Social, and the Universidad Javeriana.

Eventually, it emerged that Moreno had been hired by Aportes San Isidro, and his retraction lost all credibility. In March 2012, the INCODER followed the orders of the Constitutional Court. While the procedures to revoke the palm company's land property rights continued, the peasants reported harassment from employees of the palm company including crop damages, destruction of infrastructure, loss of livestock and even death threats to ASOCAB members. In November 2012, the INCODER finally revoked the company's property rights over 1290 hectares, declared the grounds of Las Pavas public lands of the Nation and opened the door for the titles to be granted to the peasants as their legitimate occupants. As of July 2013, the peasants were still waiting for the titles and reported more threats and crop destruction (see Figure 2).

Given the disputes surrounding the peasants' claims, we obtained and compared aerial photographs and satellite images to analyse changes and variations in the territory and explore the spatial behaviours that have occurred in this area in particular. A first group of photographs, taken in 1952 and 1964, shows a prevalence of tree and shrub cover as well as multiple human settlements. However, by 1984, one year after the estate was purchased by Escobar Fernández, the settlements had disappeared and there were large open areas and grasslands. Satellite images from 1986 show a similar pattern.

Images taken in 1991 show a recovery of the vegetation, which suggests the estate was abandoned. Later, in 1993, the images show a further recovery of the vegetal cover, not only in Las Pavas but also in adjacent estates; the open grassland areas visible in 1991 began to be populated by shrubs and vegetation. Furthermore, there are signs of tilling in a single concentrated area. These images are consistent with the peasants' story as recalled

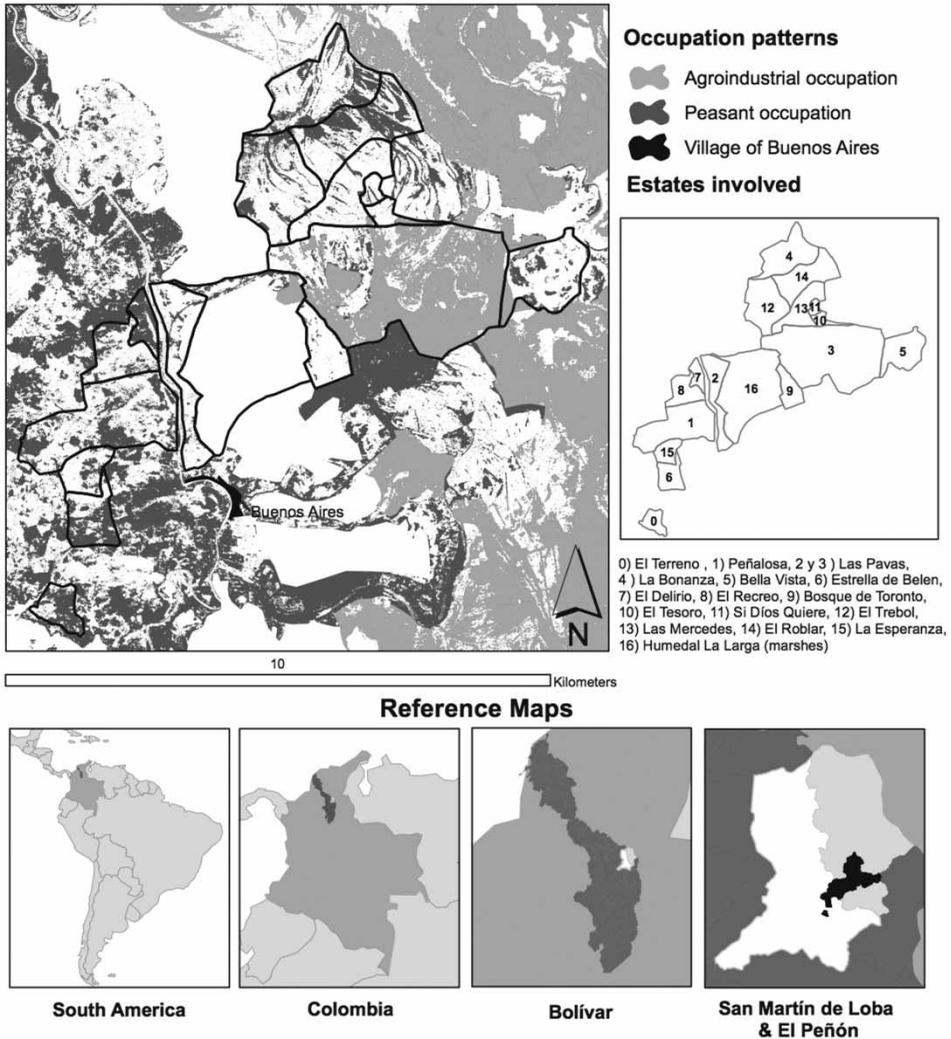


Figure 2. Las Pavas, occupation patterns 2013
 Sources: Natural Earth (2002); SIGOT-IGAC (2013); Displaced Population Land Protection Project; Rapid Eye (2013) RGB 421.

by one of the peasants we interviewed: ‘the abandonment of Las Pavas gave us the opportunity to re-use the hacienda and work the land’ (Peasant No. 1).

By 2002, the estate cultivated areas had expanded even more, as the members of ASOCAB reported. But rather than the Euclidean shapes characteristic of the large open grassland areas seen in 1986, the aerial photos and satellite images show small patches of intervention, typical of small-scale peasant farming (Ramirez 2002). Furthermore, the land cover patterns are consistent with the places where the peasants reported they had their crops. This pattern of intervention, introduced in 1998, continued in these places and is also visible in other areas where, the peasants say, they used to grow food in 2002 (Figure 1). Finally, the images taken in 2013 show the expansion of palm oil plantation over part of the estate. Summing up, our analysis, based on photogrammetry, satellite imagery

interpretation and reconstructive participatory cartography, helped us to triangulate and confirm changes in the occupation and use of land in Las Pavas and other surrounding estates.

During our field trips to Las Pavas in 2013, the members of ASOCAB we interviewed were hopeful that INCODER will eventually grant them titles over the land, but also fearful of fresh episodes of violence which, in the past, have affected their agricultural activities and livelihoods. One of them said: 'There is a humanitarian crisis in the horizon that has already begun, you must eat to work and work to eat. It will be our end if we cannot work ... if we have food we will always stand' (Peasant No. 2).

Their struggle is not only about their rights and livelihoods; it is also about the protection of their way of life. Their rejection of oil palm is rooted in their perception of how it changes the lifestyle of communities and, in particular, the detrimental effect they think the palm industry has on people and their food security. For instance, talking about Regidor, a nearby town where palm plantations have expanded, one of our interviewees argues:

There is no life in Regidor. There are no roads, no food. Everything is expensive. People are finished and abandoned by the oil palm. They buy cassava from us now. Those who cultivated the land cannot do it anymore because every corner is now covered by oil palm. Regidor has regrets. (Peasant No. 3)

The peasants also fear life in the cities and the consequent loss of their food sovereignty. As Peasant No. 4 put it: 'Here, in the estate, is where we have freedom (referring to Las Pavas). Bogotá is overcrowded ... freedom is in the land, because in our land we do not eat leftovers like in the city'.

This case illustrates the complexity of one of the most controversial territorial disputes in Colombia. It shows how in the Colombian rural areas, armed conflict means much more than armed clashes; it involves the use of force against civilians for the benefit of agribusiness projects supported by state policies. Whether by extortion, harassment, threats, physical violence or murder, forced migrants become vulnerable in terms of food security, due to the disruption of their livelihoods and the obstacles that the conflict poses to their agricultural activities. As one of the peasants of Las Pavas puts it: 'Our main fear is hunger' (Peasant 1).

Do local cases add up to macro narratives?

Violence against civilians in irregular wars is sometimes an unintended effect of armed conflict or a means to weaken the insurgency, but it can be an economic enterprise in itself (Keen 1997, 2000; Collier 2000). Thomson argued that 'displacement is often an incidental consequence of conflict, but in Colombia it is frequently the purpose of the violence' (2011, 344). As we noted above, historical accounts suggest a process of primitive accumulation has been underway in Colombia for more than a century. What is more, this process apparently still continues in the twenty-first century. Without a doubt, cases such as the Lower Atrato Valley (Grajales 2011, 2013) and Las Pavas, to mention two, illustrate the use of forced displacement to grab land and show that the concept of primitive accumulation remains relevant in understanding the relation between violence and development in contemporary Colombia. They also exemplify the ambiguous role of land authorities in relation to property rights and how 'the rule of law frequently legalises and legitimates the dispossession of the powerless' (Peluso and Lund 2011, 675). The community of Buenos Aires, supported by international and civil society organisations, prevented this process from running its full course.

In Colombia, in recent years, similar cases have grabbed the attention of civil society organisations and the media and thus helped to advance and legitimise the cause of the

victims, to prompt judicial investigations and to advocate legal reforms and land restitution public policies in the country. Scholars have played an active role in documenting and legitimising such claims. The Universidad Javeriana's Legal Clinic, for instance, has supported the Buenos Aires community and provided legal assistance for several years. Forced displacement and massive land grabs are one of those issues in which 'academics and researchers are duty bound to be aligned, where there is clear evidence that the public interest lies clearly in one direction' (Bastow, Dunleavy, and Tinkler 2014, 179).

However, given the massive scale of forced displacement in Colombia, it is worth asking whether these cases are actually representative of a wider trend, and to what extent. To answer this question, in this section, we explore national and subnational statistics on forced displacement, armed conflict and agriculture. Given that most of these data have been systematically collected only since the mid 1990s, our analysis is confined to the period 1997–2010. While this period may seem short, according to Garay et al. (2011, 10), the abandonment of land due to forced displacement in Colombia reached its highest level from 1998 to 2008; hence, the period of analysis should reflect the impact that violence and forced displacement had on agriculture.

Data on armed conflict comes from two sources: the Colombian *Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos* (CERAC)'s dataset (CERAC 2010), available from their website, and the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP)'s '*Noche y Niebla*' reports, which compile events on armed conflict and political violence across the country, and data on clashes and civilians killed, which can be used to measure armed conflict intensity (CINEP 2014). Data on forced migration come from the official register of displaced people, put in place in 1997 and based on individual declarations made by the victims themselves. The register collects detailed information on the losses regarding each individual case, but the government has released only a fraction of this information, hampering research efforts (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas 2014). Data on agricultural activity come from two official sources: the official agricultural survey (*Encuesta Nacional Agropecuaria*), and the Ministry of Agriculture's yearbook (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística 1998; Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural 2009, 2014).

In the contemporary Colombian context, the primitive accumulation hypothesis can be understood as a three-part argument: first, forced displacement occurs not as an unintended consequence of armed conflict but as a violent, deliberate, illegal land-grabbing process which often occurs under the pretence of military or paramilitary operations. Second, the weak forms of tenancy that characterise small farming in Colombia facilitate this process, as new occupants can easily claim and legalise ownership with the help of corrupt officials and notaries. Third, while the process is violent and illegal, in the end, it aims at consolidating large tracts of land which then are employed for profitable, legal enterprises, notably agribusiness such as palm oil plantations. Thus, the process involves a further concentration of wealth and a transformation of agriculture.

The cases of the Lower Atrato Valley and Las Pavas illustrate the first part of the argument: according to Grajales (2013), during the counterinsurgent operation that prompted the massive displacement from the Lower Atrato Valley, only one armed clash was reported (2013, 319). Similarly, although the municipality of El Peñón, where Las Pavas and Buenos Aires are located, is not far from two heavily contested zones (Montes de María and Southern Bolívar), several sources indicate forced displacement peaked at a time when no fighting was reported. To be precise, the official register indicates that forced displacement reached its height in El Peñón in 2002 and 2003, when more than 1500 people had to leave their homes. However, no clashes between government forces and insurgents have

been reported there since September 1997, and the latest insurgent attack occurred in 2000, when the insurgents attacked El Peñón's town hall. In San Martín de Loba, the neighbouring municipality, there was a first wave of forced displacement in 1998, at a time when insurgents, paramilitaries and government forces struggled to control the area. That year, eight guerrillas were killed after a failed attempt to capture the town, eight civilians were killed by a paramilitary death squad and more than 1200 people fled their homes. However, from 2005 to 2007, a second wave of forced displacement took place, this time without any sign of armed conflict or insurgent presence in the area. Thus, the evidence suggests violence against civilians was explicitly aimed at destroying peasant economies, and instrumental in consolidating large-scale properties.

In this respect, Las Pavas and the Lower Atrato Valley and similar cases were not exceptional. Across the country, forced displacement often happened in the absence of armed conflict – that is, of clashes or attacks between armed factions. This suggests that the violent expulsion of civilians was not always aimed at undermining the insurgency. According to the official displacement register, the number of municipios from which people were forcibly displaced between 1997 and 2010 was in the range of 650 to 1036 (out of 1120). However, yearly data from CINEP and CERAC show that the number of municipios where armed clashes occurred or where insurgents were reportedly active in the same period (and therefore counterinsurgent operations were logically possible) was significantly lower (see Figure 3). While it is possible that the datasets employed miss the true scale of armed conflict, the gap between municipios with armed conflict and municipios with forced displacement is remarkable.

The second part of the argument points towards weak forms of tenancy as a factor that facilitated the legalisation of titles over land expropriated through violence. Ibáñez's findings (2008) partially back this idea: using municipal data on forced displacement (1999–2007), she found that collective, forced migration (i.e. internally displaced persons who fled their homes collectively, in groups of 50 or more) was unrelated to the number of 'terrorist attacks' but significantly and negatively correlated with the degree of formalisation of property rights in each municipio ($n = 996$). Therefore, she concluded, forced displacement in Colombia was likely to be a strategy to 'grab valuable assets such as land' (Ibáñez 2008, 55). Indeed, according to the government's verification survey, which we mentioned in a previous section, although 78 percent of the people who lost their land declared they

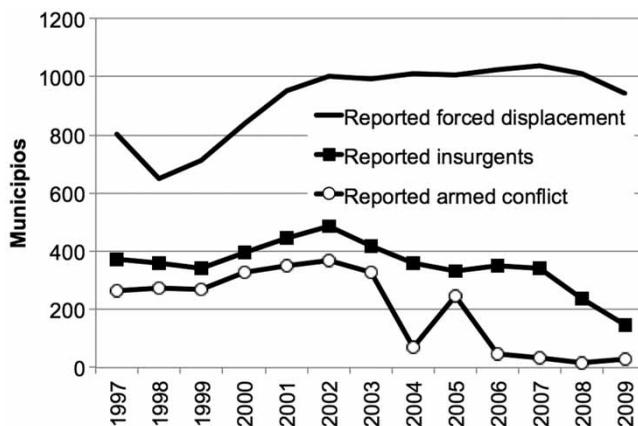


Figure 3. Colombian municipios where forced displacement, insurgent presence, or armed conflict (clashes) were reported, 1997–2009.

were the legitimate owners, only 22 percent could produce a proper, ‘registered’ title deed (Garay et al. 2011, 13–14).

However, it is worth noting that less than 20 percent of victims of forced displacement fled their homes collectively; most migrants actually trickled out their homes. This suggests most people fled because they were singled out as guerrilla collaborators and forced to leave, or as a result of individual household decisions, rather than a consequence of sweeping expropriation operations. In contrast with collective forced displacement, individual forced displacement was positively and significantly correlated with ‘terrorist attacks’, but not with property rights formalisation (Ibáñez 2008, 53). More than half of the respondents to the verification survey declared they fled their homes after receiving ‘direct threats’ to their lives (Garay et al. 2011, 34).

Econometric regressions surely cannot tell us what happened on the ground, but they may help us to generate new hypotheses. Ibáñez’s results regarding collective forced displacement are consistent with the primitive accumulation hypothesis, but her findings on individual forced displacement bring to mind a typical irregular war scenario in which forced displacement results from selective (as opposed to indiscriminate) violence against enemy collaborators – leading to ‘strategic dispossession’, as defined by Gutierrez (2014). They may also be consistent with a scenario of opportunistic denunciation, in which self-interested civilians raise accusations of collaboration against neighbours in the hope of obtaining material benefits once they are dead or displaced, for example by gaining access to abandoned land and livestock (Kalyvas 2006; Gutierrez 2014, 67). Either way, the abandoned plots would likely be scattered and, hence, would hardly be suitable for large-scale plantations. They may have remained abandoned, been occupied by neighbours or been transferred to local supporters of armed organisations, as reported by Gutierrez (2014), so their use may not have changed radically. In other words, land may have changed hands but not the use it was given. Thus, while land accumulation at a very small scale may have happened, for example, someone annexing his neighbour’s plot, the aggregate level of such changes would be imperceptible both in terms of scale and use – like in a musical chairs game.

The third part of the argument concerns the purpose of forced displacement. As noted in the third part of this paper, scholars have suggested violence was actually used to accumulate land for economic reasons, including agribusiness projects which ‘in terms of profitability, economic growth, export earnings and other capitalistic notions of progress count as development’ (Thomson 2011, 349). The increase in the Gini index of land ownership in Colombia, from around 0.87 in 2000 to 0.89 in 2010 (Ibáñez and Muñoz 2010, 298), is consistent with this hypothesis. However, as Ibáñez and Muñoz acknowledged, ‘it is surprising that increments in Gini [index] are not more pronounced, given the massive abandonment of lands reported by the displaced population’ (2010, 298). However, given the poor quality of the cadastral information and the low degree of formalisation of property rights, Gini estimates of land concentration in rural Colombia should be interpreted with caution. As Kalmanovitz and López (2006, 321) have shown, Gini index estimates in Colombia show substantial variation depending on the information and the method of calculation employed.

But the point of primitive accumulation is not just the violent appropriation and accumulation of land, but its application to profitable enterprises in the context of a market economy. Thus, primitive accumulation should also lead to changes in the way the land is used – for example, new crops and the technologies employed. While clear-cut distinctions are risky, it is generally accepted that peasant households tend to grow different crops than larger estates due to their economic and technical demands. For instance, while oil palm and sugar cane are usually grown in large-scale plantations, cassava and plantain are often grown in small, mixed-cropping farms. According to the

national agricultural survey ('ENA'), carried out by the National Statistics Department ('DANE') and based on a statistical sample of farms, from 1997 to 2008, the total cultivated area in the country fell by 813,000 hectares – that is, 19 percent. Furthermore, the cultivated areas of cassava and plantain fell by nearly 390,000 hectares; this is consistent with the verification survey analysed by Garay et al. (2011), which shows these were the two most badly affected crops. Meanwhile, palm oil plantations grew by 127 percent (over 180,000 hectares); likewise, pastures grew by 11 percent (about 3.1 million hectares) and livestock by 7.6 percent (about 1.9 million cows).

Garay et al. (2011, 22) estimated the total cultivated land abandoned by forced migrants from 1998 to 2008 at around 1.3 million hectares. Since crops as a whole did not fall as much as Garay and colleagues estimated, it seems a large part of the abandoned land was eventually reoccupied and exploited. Furthermore, the observed contraction of areas cultivated with peasant crops, as well as the expansion of cattle ranching (both pastures and livestock) and oil palm plantations, are consistent with the primitive accumulation hypothesis. Still, for all we know, these changes may be unrelated. For instance, the expansion of oil palm and pastures may have occurred at the expense of forests and not of peasant communities.

To refine the analysis, we decided to analyse the same variables at the subnational (departmental) level, but the samples used in the national agricultural surveys were not always large enough to produce departmental estimates.² In view of this, we turned to another official source: the Ministry of Agriculture's yearbook, which is based on municipal reports ('*evaluaciones agropecuarias*') and provides disaggregated, departmental data. The results were disconcerting: according to the yearbook, the total cultivated area in the country actually grew by seven percent in the same period (1998–2008). While it confirms the vigorous growth of palm oil crops, the yearbook shows cassava crops grew by three percent (about 5400 hectares) and plantain areas dropped by five percent – that is, nearly 20,000 hectares, far less than the survey suggested.

But the Ministry of Agriculture's yearbook shows a more complicated picture at the subnational level. Figure 4 shows changes in cultivated areas of 'predominantly peasant' and 'predominantly capitalist' crops in five Colombian departments (out of 32), from 1998 to 2008. This classification follows the categorisation proposed by Forero (2003) and Garay, Barberi and Cardona (2010) and excludes crops equally likely to be grown in large estates or small farms. Together, the departments of Antioquia, Caqueta, Meta, Cesar and Bolívar account for 51 percent of all the land abandoned in the country due to forced displacement (Gonzalez and Kalmanovitz 2010, 148). The yearbook does not include data on pastures and woods, so figures for these areas were taken from the agricultural survey. Figure 4 shows how peasant crop areas fell only in Caqueta, as did capitalist crops in Antioquia; meanwhile, pastures grew in Antioquia and Bolivar but fell in Cesar and Meta. Thus, none of the departments with the largest land dispossession figures displayed the changes in the use of land consistent with a scenario of primitive accumulation. Indeed, there is no single pattern of change across departments.

Given that armed conflict and forced migration had a variable intensity across different Colombian regions, and that those regions had different ecological and agricultural landscapes, we should not be surprised to find that forced displacement had a different effect on agrarian change in different departments. Indeed, this finding illustrates how a reliance on country-level aggregates may obscure the understanding of the impacts of violence in

²Please note some authors translate *departamento* as 'province'; there are 32 departments in Colombia.

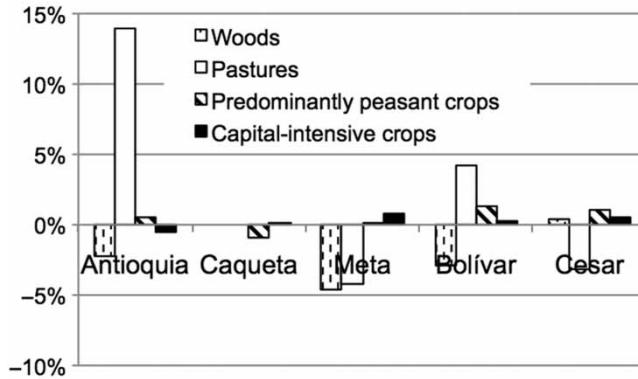


Figure 4. Agricultural change in four Colombian departments, 1998–2008

civil wars which, by nature, are highly localised, as Cederman and Gleditsch (2009) warned. An important implication of this is that, significant as they are, cases such as Las Pavas and the Lower Atrato Valley are probably part of a more complex and diverse story. They do provide empirical evidence in favour of the primitive accumulation hypotheses but, since they were selected because of that, they cannot capture the diversity of processes and outcomes that characterise forced displacement and agricultural transformation in the country. Indeed, they are a textbook example of selection on the dependent variable (Collier and Mahoney 1996).

Summing up, in contemporary Colombia, armed conflict has provided a cover for processes of primitive accumulation. As several cases illustrate, private militias, often in tandem with government forces, have expelled peasants from their land in areas where no clashes or insurgent presence were reported, thus engaging in a process of ‘opportunistic active dispossession’ (Gutierrez 2014) which, in the end, has enabled cattle ranchers and agroindustrialists to gain access to land. Paramount among them are palm oil producers, who have thus managed to enter the global market and profit from globalisation. However, the aggregate evidence suggests this is not the full story: a massive displaced population was the exception rather than the rule; land ownership inequality has worsened, but not as much as expected; the shift to commercial agriculture is not as large as thought and sub-national figures suggest armed conflict probably had disparate effects on agriculture. Furthermore, so far, most analyses have focused on areas where forced displacement was effected by paramilitary forces but, as we noted above, most victims of forced displacement declared they were expelled by insurgents. Hence, a more balanced selection of cases is needed.

Methodological issues

Although the case of Las Pavas does not quite fit the definitions of land grabs proposed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) or by Borras and colleagues (Borras et al. 2012), in which foreign interests are paramount but violence is not, our work shares similar methodological complications to those discussed by Scoones et al. (2013) and Oya (2013). In particular, our paper illustrates the shortcomings of relying exclusively on either quantitative or qualitative data: on the one hand, rigorous statistics are necessary to estimate the scale of these phenomena, to select new case studies in a more insightful manner and to incorporate into the analysis variables that so far have been omitted, such as weather, prices and imports. But the discrepancies between different

sources of agricultural data are a sobering reminder of the deceptive precision of statistics. We are not talking just about sampling errors but about the assumptions, methodological choices and compromises that underlie the collection and aggregation of data, which are not always fully reported by their sources or properly considered by their users. Indeed, in writing this paper, we faced what we could call the paradox of data abundance; in particular, having several quantitative sources did not enable us to triangulate findings but actually worsened our uncertainty and led us into the temptation of cherry-picking the data set most convenient to our original hypothesis. While we were tempted to take that way, we preferred to remain reasonably agnostic rather than precisely wrong. We concluded that further triangulation of information, through non-quantitative sources, is needed.

Qualitative evidence, on the other hand, is not without its troubles. Without a case identification strategy that accounts for the diversity of contexts in which forced displacement took place, case-based approaches risk conforming to a single narrative, thus leading to a simplistic interpretation of reality that, despite being grounded in qualitative evidence, may be just as limited as one based only on aggregate figures. In particular, while cases such as Las Pavas and others mentioned in the second section could help in understanding why agricultural production may rise in times of armed conflict, we should not forget that they are probably only part of the story.

To conclude, we echo the call by Scoones and colleagues (2013) for ‘complementary efforts and, crucially, for the different sources of evidence to speak to each other’ (2013, 478). In the case of Colombia, judicial archives are a valuable source of information to consider and, despite the slow pace of the land restitution programme, which according to Gutierrez (2013) might take centuries to be completed, the evidence from judicial proceedings that has begun to emerge could shed light on the impact of forced displacement and agriculture. A national agricultural census, currently underway, also promises to shed light on the state of rural economies and land ownership. And, given that FARC insurgents appear to be responsible for nearly a third of all the forced displacement that has occurred in the country (Garay et al. 2010, 36), a peace agreement between the Colombian government and these guerrillas could help in uncovering their motives and the uses they gave to the land they emptied.

Finally, we share Edelman’s view that countering dispossession requires precise and accurate data (2013). Researchers should thus keep an eye on how datasets are collated and, whenever possible, triangulate them with other sources such as satellite imagery and interviews with local actors. Developing a comprehensive, consistent narrative of land dispossession requires interdisciplinary dialogue and the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods as well as of macro and micro analyses.

Conclusion

This paper provides further evidence of violent land grabs in contemporary Colombia and shows that a process of primitive accumulation whereby ‘masses of human beings [a]re suddenly and forcibly torn away from their means of subsistence’ (Marx 1933, 793) through ‘blood and fire’ is still very much underway in the country. In particular, the case of Las Pavas is a clear example of how complex power relations related to property rights can generate processes of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation among the members of a community. However, the paper finds contradictory evidence regarding the extent of such phenomena and suggests that primitive accumulation may be only part of the story behind the massive scale of forced displacement and dispossession. Based on subnational information on forced displacement and agricultural production, we

hypothesise that the effects of armed conflict across the country are likely (and unsurprisingly) diverse and, therefore, the temptation to subsume the complexity of economic change under a single narrative should be avoided. We also hypothesise that the failure to appreciate and document such diversity has resulted from an exclusive reliance on local case studies, paired with a selection bias towards cases with paramilitary perpetrators and in zones where oil palm expanded. Overcoming such bias entails a combination of research methods, a triangulation of sources and a more rigorous and balanced choice of cases.

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