

# Talking point

Understanding older people's experience

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## Displaced and invisible

Older people who have been displaced in Colombia's long-running civil war are among the most vulnerable, but also the least likely to receive support. *Fiona Clark* reports.

Don Gregorio is an 82-year-old farmer from western Colombia who was forced to abandon his land and his way of life three years ago to escape guerrilla and paramilitary attacks. He now lives in the city of Soacha with his son.

The two are desperate to start earning again. 'I registered with Acción Social [the government department responsible for the displaced population] last year. I would suggest that they provide credit for us to start up a small fruit stall or other income-earning activity. No one wants to give us work at our age,' he says.

Don Gregorio is just one of an estimated 200,000 people aged over 60 who have been uprooted by Colombia's decade-long civil war. Older people represent 12 per cent of the total displaced population – almost double the proportion of older people in the population as a whole – but they remain largely invisible in the eyes of the authorities.

Most older displaced people, like Don Gregorio, are rural farmers of indigenous or Afro-Colombian descent. Those who flee to the cities generally suffer the most from cultural upheaval, loss of livelihoods and assets, deteriorating health, and break-up of families.

Many older displaced people take on care of grandchildren because their parents have moved away or been killed. In the city of Cali, more than a third of older people receiving assistance from the voluntary organisation, Fundación Paz y Bien, arrive with children in their care. Most are grandmothers, with an average of three children.

### Hunger and despair

A range of humanitarian assistance and other forms of social protection exists to support older displaced people in Colombia.

The government provides three months of emergency support to people who become displaced. This includes food, money, shelter and free healthcare. In exceptional circumstances this may be extended for another three months. It is usually older people who are eligible for an extension because of the difficulties they face in re-establishing their livelihoods.

A small, social (non-contributory) pension equivalent to US\$35 a month is provided to the poorest 40 per cent of people over 65.

However, HelpAge International's consultations with older people and others in six cities in 2006 showed that many older displaced people are unable to claim these benefits. They are living a life of hunger, disorientation and despair.<sup>1</sup>

Lack of data broken down by age is a key contributory factor to displaced older people's neglect. Lack of awareness of their rights and practical difficulties in claiming them compound the problem.

'Life can get very complicated for older people who have to move about with small grandchildren,' said a local government representative in the city of El Valle. 'On top of this, older people face the great problem of illiteracy, which hinders access to their rights, especially when government staff who attend to them are not aware of their specific needs. No special attention is given to older people.'

The free healthcare to which displaced people have a right is often not granted, or does not cater for older displaced people's specific needs, especially psychosocial trauma and chronic illnesses.

The social pension can be extremely difficult for displaced older people to access. The pension is delivered through municipal governments. An older

person who has moved to another municipality must first de-register from the list of pension recipients in the municipality from which they have been forcibly displaced, and then re-register in the municipality of reception. However, they only become eligible for the pension after living in the municipality for two years, which means that an older person could go without the social pension for two years.

The critical situation of older displaced people has not been recognised in the policies or programmes of the government, NGOs or international aid agencies in Colombia. Apart from some local dioceses of the church, no institution specifically caters for the needs of this group. The attention that is provided is often very welfarist, denying older people their right to participation and to economic and social development.

**'We live with great pain because we have left our roots.'**

*Older internally displaced woman, Kankuama community, Colombia<sup>2</sup>*

### Call to action

HelpAge International makes the following recommendations:

- Collect data on the displaced population, broken down by age, gender, ethnicity and geography.
- Develop programmes and policies that target interventions at the diverse needs of the displaced population.
- Promote intergenerational strategies that help to rebuild families and communities, and empower displaced people to claim their rights.
- Strengthen government and private entities' ability to respond to the needs of displaced people



Jaime Andrés Gómez/HelpAge International

A displaced older woman who lives with her grandchild in Cartagena.

and include older people in their programmes.

- Educate displaced people and service providers about their respective rights and responsibilities.

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1. Gomez J A, Consultations in Cali, Cartagena and Sincelejo, February/ March 2006 for HelpAge International (unpublished)

2. Cases of human rights violations among older people, CESTRA, Bogotá, Colombia 2004