



Gentrification in geographies of conflict

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This brief contributes to a greater understanding of how the presence of extractive industries and armed conflict exacerbate and affect gentrification processes. The aim is to surface the dynamics and effects of gentrification in marginal cities of Colombia, but the research contained is applicable to similar contexts in other low- and middle-income countries.

The consequences of investments in urban transformations are not fully expected or mitigated. Often socio-spatial deterioration or disinvestment followed by urban renovation or land use change processes, can bring segregation while expelling vulnerable groups. Consequently, it is critical that policymakers and stakeholders understand the systematic displacement resulting from these processes.

As it stands, gentrification is more readily understood in the context of large cities, but less is known about how it translates in marginalised cities, particularly in territories with abundant natural resources, where illegal armed groups and extractive industries operate freely in the absence of the state. These conditions are characteristic of Colombia and similar in other low-and middle-income countries, particularly in certain African countries.

Policymakers and practitioners can achieve significant gains from effective land use management of areas with ample natural resources. These gains come from improvements to the well-being of local populations, more sustainable development and the generation of income from levying taxes. However, when there is a lingering presence of armed groups in these areas, there are implications on gentrification processes that must be considered.

Gentrification involves the displacement of local populations due to rising local land and rent prices. In marginalised geographies of Colombia, particularly in places rich in natural resources and where the state is largely absent, gentrification takes place in a 'mutated' way. **Illegal armed groups take advantage of unregulated land-use to launder money via investments in commercial businesses and local infrastructure, effectively crowding out diversity and poverty, pushing them to the city periphery. Inclusive and participatory urban planning can contribute significantly to improving local well-being while contributing to sustainable development.**



How does gentrification take place in marginal cities immersed in armed conflict?

Global trends of gentrification mutate in geographies of conflict and extractive economies, from structured processes of displacement to processes of capital “spatial fix” through the unregulated commodification of land use.

In low- and middle-income countries, marginal territories rich in natural resources, such as precious minerals or oil, attract not only extractive industries, but, also, armed groups. Transnational extractive industries generate strong pressure on nation-states to provide access to engage in extractive work in regions weakly administered and of strategic importance for economic gains (Omeje 2008: 13). Illegal armed groups also take advantage of the little to no presence of the state to procure profits from plundering natural resources and/or controlling extractive processes.

Illegal armed groups seek to legitimise profits from illicit practices through engaging in extractive processes. In this way, these groups manipulate local real estate markets through the injection of capital, primarily from illegal mining and narco-trafficking, resulting in urbanisation patterns that have contributed significantly to the process of gentrification.

Geopolitical marginality of these territories provides fertile ground for illegal armed groups

to achieve spatial accumulation by exploiting flexible and ‘permissive’ urban planning policies. For instance, the proliferation and domination of commercial land use in the city centre of Quibdó, a small city 230 km west of Medellín, supersedes traditional residential use, expelling residents from the city centre to peripheral areas. The increase of rents makes it impossible for lower-income families to continue living there. Money laundering creates a micro-economic real estate dynamic that inflates property and rent prices, which exacerbates existing inequities. This imposed shadow economy, generated through warfare, seems to mimic some of the consequences of gentrification, but in a mutated form.

The case of Quibdó

Local real estate distortions have transformed the city centre of Quibdó into a commercial district. In Figure 1, the left plan shows the land use of the traditional city centre in 2002 and the right in 2016. The red colour shows the commercial use, which increased significantly over the period of 14 years, displacing a prevailing residential function. The large cash flow in Quibdó, the product of illicit activities, is invested in real estate — particularly with retail businesses — which tentatively explains the dramatic land use change.

Who wins?

In conversations, residents say real estate property prices have been inflated to a point that it made selling irresistible for property owners: “...They [illegal rentiers] are paying whatever sum of money you ask for” (Local inhabitant, Conversation, Quibdó, September 2016). Local landlords are thus taking advantage of this ‘bonanza,’ which largely benefits landlords and real estate businessmen. Inspection of rental or purchase prices of property in the city centre shows the high-profit expectations of current owners, which rival that of larger cities like Bogotá, Medellín or Cali.

These real estate “bubbles” worsen the social inequalities that extractive economies generate. Further research is required to understand the phenomenon of commercial gentrification as the socio-spatial footprint of warfare.



Figure 1. Quibdó’s traditional city centre land use plan. Left- 2002 and Right-2016. Source: POT Quibdó 2002 and Study (unpublished) made by a local group of architecture students called Urbanismo y Desarrollo Territorial, led by Arch. Carlos Torres Chamat, between June and August 2016.

Apart from expelling traditional inhabitants, what other consequences does “commercial gentrification” have on historic urban centres?

“Commercial gentrification” creates mono-functional urban areas that lose their character of centrality as they become devoid of diversity (Carrión 2005), expelling poverty rather than addressing it.

The unregulated proliferation of businesses can transform traditional city centres into mono-functional commercial areas. This phenomenon is not merely associated with marginalised cities; it can be observed in cities like Quibdó, but also in Medellín, for instance. Historically, the importance of urban centres is intrinsically related to the diversity of activities concentrated within them. Therefore, land use standardisation and centrality become antonyms when urban centres become merely commercial hubs.

Commercial land use homogenisation becomes a political issue driven by socioeconomic goals, such as employment generation for residents. However, legitimising the practice of “commercial gentrification” does not necessarily reduce poverty, but, rather, expels it. What seems like a familiar process of rent-seeking leads to transformations in the built environment that result in the loss of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as an increase in crime due to the desolation

during night times, when commerce is closed. As a result, many historic urban centres have lost their character, transformed into day-time shopping districts.

In Colombian geographies of conflict, urban real estate markets are often manipulated by non-conventional, ‘invisible,’ or extra-legal, rentiers. These actors find in this process of “accumulation by dispossession” an instrument of capital legitimisation that exacerbates existing urban inequalities. Therefore, micro-economic real estate dynamics in those areas are imposed by the shadow economy that is generated by warfare, rather than promoting a democratic spatial development.

How could vulnerable populations in marginal cities be protected from gentrification?

The firm presence of the state and the guarantee of inclusive urban planning policies are necessary to mitigate for socio-spatial inequalities in geographies of conflict, making it possible to control real estate investments in city centre areas through land management regulations.

Most marginalised cities of Colombia are immersed in geographies of conflict, where the tentacles of neoliberalism arguably move more freely through a largely stateless void, namely in regions dominated by either the legal or illegal mining industries. This setting, bolstered by the

combination of weak governance and a political arena dominated by small local elites, allows for harmful practices such as corruption and clientelism that has a strong impact on urban development.

For instance, the Land Management Plan (Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial, or POT) of many marginalised cities in Colombia are not used, or out of date; for instance, Quibdó's plan hasn't been updated in 17 years. Inertia characterises the planning of municipalities with extractive industries that are sites of warfare, commonly the case in marginalised areas of Colombia. The outdated POT, containing technical approaches and standards that have not been updated to reflect current realities or emerging evidence, seems to benefit – and even protect – the interest of private businesses.

But updating POTs is not enough. Urban planning policies need to address local socioeconomic realities, and require appropriate community participation. These are essential to discouraging real estate market pressures on local economies, and thus discontinuing socioeconomic segregation and gentrification processes.

Conclusion

Gentrification is not an exclusive phenomenon of large cities, nor a prescriptive theory. The displacement of vulnerable groups in marginal cities in Colombia through processes of urbanisation suggests that understanding gentrification demands an engagement of a more diverse set of realities, like urban development in areas of ongoing armed conflict. The case study of Quibdó shows that gentrification can be considered a means to an end: the means as the displacement of vulnerable lower-income populations; the end as higher profits from real estate investment.

As pointed out by López-Morales (2015), theories of gentrification are arguably useful to understand the harmful effects of rentier capitalism in marginalised cities, despite their 'mutant' conditions. One particular challenge, in terms of defining (or discarding) gentrification theory in marginalised cities subject to geographies of conflict is the fact that 'gentrifier forces' are not well-defined, due to the

illegality in which rentier actors move around. For instance, in Santiago de Chile, the state plays a primary role in structuring gentrification through its policies (López-Morales 2005, 569). However, in Quibdó, with the weak presence of the state and the existence of a 'parallel state' that implements its own 'policies', it is difficult to define (even through the creation of ad-hoc groups) a specific gentrifier class. Ghertner (2005: 559) complains that "gentrification scholars often cling to the concept for its strength in identifying processes of urban class formation", but in the case of Quibdó, it is – to quote López-Morales (2005: 568) – 'clear that the exertion of class power . . . takes different shapes, but this does not mean this process is not gentrification'. Preventing gentrification in a context such as that of Quibdó should account for the diverse realities of urban development. In this way, land management policies could be customised to protect vulnerable populations from displacement.

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