

Gramalote, Colombia: A displaced community in transition



The newly built town of Gramalote, Norte de Santander, Colombia. Photo by Carlos Arenas

Carlos Arenas and Anthony Oliver-Smith

October 2017

Background¹

In December 2010, extreme rainfall during “La Niña” triggered a set of events, including massive landslides, that destroyed the entire town of Gramalote in the department of Norte de Santander, Colombia. The slow onset of the landslide allowed for the complete evacuation of the population before the town was destroyed. Immediately following the disaster, the Colombian President promised to rebuild Gramalote at a new site, and to make it “better than before,” a process that is on-going currently and will continue for some time into the future.

After the evacuation, the 3,400 people of the urban area were dispersed to temporary housing in various locations in nearby municipalities. Many moved to live with family and friends in Cúcuta, a city of approximately 850,000 inhabitants, located about two hours from Gramalote, where they have received emergency assistance over the last six years, mostly in the form of food and rent subsidies.

Gramalote's long path to relocation

Perhaps not surprisingly, the ambitious relocation project promised by the government was initially beset by problems, delays, and frustrations, causing additional stress and suffering for the victims of the disaster. However, despite those initial problems, from a longer term perspective the relocation of Gramalote can also be characterized as well conceived, ambitious, comprehensive, participatory, and well-funded. All these latter characteristics, not generally typical of most post-disaster relocation projects, suggest that the Gramalote project has significant potential to be successful and perhaps possess elements that could be incorporated into and enhance chances of success for future relocation projects nationwide and worldwide.

In effect, Gramalote's relocation provides a unique context to examine whether resettlement/relocation can be seen as an opportunity for people displaced and dispersed by disaster to recover and reconstitute their former community. Although relocating communities facing natural hazard-related disasters (including climate change) presents undeniable risks and challenges, it can also provide opportunities to individuals and communities. When an entire community has been dispersed after a disaster and/or climate change effects, resettlement if done well, can provide an opportunity for community recovery for a displaced and fragmented population to come together and reconstitute the social fabric. Such community recovery also provides the context that can support people in overcoming individual trauma².

Problems with Gramalote's relocation project started when it took the Ministry of Housing, which initially was in charge of reconstruction process, two years to select and publicly announce a relocation site in a rural area called Pomaroso. However, the final decision had to

¹ The initial research for this project was done in 2015, and a subsequent report written by Carlos Arenas was published by Displacement Solutions. The authors would also like to thank the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado for a generous grant that allowed us to travel in early March 2017 to Gramalote to observe and document the first stages of occupation of the newly built town.

² Oliver-Smith, Anthony (2005). *Communities after catastrophe: Reconstructing the material, reconstituting the social*. In S. Hyland (Ed.), *Community Building in the 21st Century*, (pp. 45-70). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

wait longer, when a new state agency was charged with leading the process and subsequently determined that further scrutiny of relocations sites was required. In April 2012 the new state agency called *Fondo Adaptación* took charge of all reconstruction projects planned as a response to the nationwide disasters triggered by the torrential rainfall of “La Niña” during the years 2010-2011.

Signs of hope during the reconstruction process started to be visible when a participatory governance structure, called the Working Group on Gramalote (WGG), to guide the project was created. Under that mechanism local authorities and formal and informal community leaders were able to voice their opinions and influence all main decisions regarding the reconstruction, along with regional and national authorities, including *Fondo Adaptación*. The first major task that the WGG had to deal with was the final decision about the relocation site for the new town. In October 2012, *Fondo Adaptación* publically announced that a site called Miraflores scored the highest in a multi-criteria evaluation of five potential sites considered, including the one previously selected. The change of the relocation site caused considerable mistrust and polarization within the Gramalote community, which continues to some extent to this day.



Panoramic view of the newly built town of Gramalote. Photo by Carlos Arenas

Actual construction of the town did not begin until March 2015 and continues to this day. At the moment of writing this article, in addition to water and electricity infrastructure and services, approximately 40% of the projected 1,000 houses have been completed as well as a municipal office building and a large covered market structure. Still to be constructed are a police station, school, and the church. At the time of our fieldwork in March 2017, the first 56 houses had been legally transferred to their new owners. Of those, thirteen families, referred to as “*los pioneros*” had moved into their new houses. During our fieldwork others began to arrive and by May the town had 32 families in residence as the transfer of titles and the transition continue. In addition, over the last two years, each family has had the support of a family advisor to help families deal with the transition and adjust to the new built environment and the changes involved in that process.

In general, Fondo Adaptacion and affiliated organizations have foregrounded the participation of the Gramaloteros. For instance, public events were organized to hear opinions and get feedback on various issues, such as the overall design of the town and the design of the different housing prototypes. People interviewed expressed the opinion that there were channels for participation during the process to decide on the physical aspect of the town and the houses.

While a participatory planning process can contribute to the foundation for social recovery, the transfer and occupation of the new houses and settlement constitute the initial steps in the material existence of a new community. Since resettlement is complex and difficult at every stage³, the transition process in which a new settlement is occupied has been shown to present particularly challenging situations and conditions that can have serious repercussions for the reconstitution of community, particularly after displacement has dispersed the affected community for an extended period of time.

Post disaster resettlement also is, in effect, the reconstitution of a social structure, in which not everyone was equally invested. The degree to which such differentiation is reflected in the form and spatial organization of the new settlement will also play a role in the reconstitution of the new community. Particularly, the distribution of housing has consistently proven to be a difficult process, however organized, and has often provoked high levels of hostility and conflict among affected people, sometimes undermining the reconstitution of community integration in the new settlement. The original plan devised by *Fondo Adaptacion* for Gramalote was to use a raffle system in which people would draw lots for housing assignment. However, an experienced member of the relocation team advised basing the distribution of houses on the traditional spatial organization of the old community. *Fondo Adaptacion* proved sufficiently flexible to alter their original plan.

As a result, Gramaloteros were able to choose their houses according to their old barrio identity each of which was assigned a particular section of the new community. All the old

³ de Wet, Chris (2006). Risk, complexity and local initiative in involuntary resettlement outcomes. In C. de Wet (Ed.) *Development induced Displacement: Problems, Policies and People* (pp. 180-202). Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

barrios have thus been reconstituted in the new community with their dense social networks more or less intact. People interviewed were unanimously happy about the fact that they will be living with their old neighbors and friends. The reconstitution of these social networks is thus far one of the most successful features of the relocation process in Gramalote.

In the old Gramalote roughly 60% of the people were homeowners, and around 40% were renters. In contrast, in the new Gramalote, 100% of its original population will be homeowners. Former renters will have a new house that is smaller than the houses of people who were owners. However, the new town will not be socially divided into sectors of former owners and former renters, as the housing for former renters will be scattered in the various barrios of the city. A Gramalotero summarized it in this way, "We left unequal and came back as equals."



First public meeting with the 13 pioneer families moved to live in the new Gramalote. Photo by Carlos Arenas

In general, the new houses have been well received. Some of the people who had bigger houses in the old Gramalote recognized that it was not easy for them to adjust to living in a smaller house, but were grateful that Gramalote had been rebuilt, and also appreciated the quality of the houses that they received. The fact that the new houses also allow for expansion and modification is an additional reason for the satisfaction with the design for most people. People

also liked the fact that all the houses have a front room that can be used for some business enterprise.

Lessons learned

Resettlement is by nature a long-term process. As a result, this evaluation of Gramalote's experience must be seen as very preliminary regarding achievements and problems. However, even at this early stage in the existence of the new community, a number of features appear promising, both for the future of the community as well as for their potential for the field of resettlement practice.

The project administration has also shown itself to be both participatory and flexible, capable of adjusting plans to address changing circumstances as the project evolved and the needs of Gramaloteros required accommodation to achieve positive outcomes. In some contexts, this need for flexibility has increased costs. However, it can be argued that the project is more expensive only in the short term. Investing more resources now means that more resources will not have to be allocated in the long-term to repair or replace mistakes, as has so often happened.

In particular, the housing dimension appears to be eliciting a significant level of satisfaction, both in the design and dimensions of houses as well as in the way they were distributed to returning Gramaloteros. The distribution of houses was done following the same structure of former neighborhoods. Families from the same neighborhoods were allowed to decide that by consensus among themselves, instead of by lottery or by a bureaucratic decision. This is an aspect that will nourish the social reconstitution of the community.

Although somewhat understaffed, the family advisor program has also enjoyed some success. The family advisors, generally younger men and women from the region, were seen as very helpful in assisting the new residents in dealing with the legal and economic issues in the transition process and the new housing. Having family advisors has also proved effective in building ties and channels of communication between the beneficiaries of the project and the project administration.

Notwithstanding these positive outcomes, there are still issues that remain to be resolved. The site selected for relocation is still somewhat contested by some Gramaloteros. However, many of the people who opposed the project have been very surprised and impressed when visiting the new Gramalote for the first time by the quality of what has been built in the municipality.

A basic measure of overall success or failure of a resettlement process is the economic rebirth of a community. However, despite the fact that several years ago a plan to improve coffee production in Gramalote was successfully implemented, the project still lacks an economic plan to support urban Gramaloteros. The old Gramalote was supported by its economic relationship with its rural area. However, it is still not clear if the *campesinos* from rural areas of Gramalote will want to market their goods and make purchases in the new Gramalote. In addition, the long-term sustainability of Gramalote's resettlement process will depend in part on whether the younger generation, in effect, those who have come to maturity over the last 6.5 years in

other places, will return to the new town. The new Gramalote must provide sufficient economic opportunities for young people to return.

The fact that almost none of the newly elected municipal administrative staff is in place while the community is being occupied means that, apart from electricity and water, very few of the necessary public services, such as the garbage collection, are functioning. Also, lack of a resident police force is a concern to citizens and has delayed the move for many people. In addition, while the market building is finished, at the moment, sales in the market have not yet begun. Residents also expressed concern that there is no medical clinic and staff for the community while the hospital is being constructed.



A Gramalote family in front of their new house and store. Photo by Carlos Arenas

Due to the role of religion in the identity and culture of the old town, the delay in the planning, design and construction of the Catholic Church may affect the level of identification of Gramaloteros with the new settlement. The church was the most symbolically important building in the old town. It is still uncertain if the projected new church will contribute to creating a sense of pride among Gramaloteros or become an additional source of disputes.

Future policy implications

Seventy years of research on development forced displacement and resettlement projects have generated a large literature that documents the risks and losses imposed on displaced and resettled people, facilitating the identification and diagnosis of processes that lead to the impoverishment of people and failed projects. However, despite this impressive body of knowledge, there have been only slight improvements in resettlement projects with the vast majority of outcomes remaining poor as most projects continue to impoverish and disempower resettled people. This failure greatly concerns researchers, policy makers, and practitioners, particularly since resettlement is increasingly seen as a viable option for disaster risk reduction as displacement due to natural hazard-induced disasters increasingly intensified by climate change.

Nevertheless, while the need for the resettlement option for climate change affected communities is becoming more recognized, most of the literature continues to focus on the displacement process and much less on actual resettlement. The lack of attention to resettlement from climate change has been noted most actively by Bronen⁴ who faults governments for failing to establish legal protections and procedures for people facing displacement from climate change. The failure of governments to effectively address resettlement is compounded by an approach that frames post-disaster and climate change driven resettlement as basically a set of material transfers that disregard the profound socio-cultural challenges presented by these processes.

While still too early to draw definite conclusions, we believe the Gramalote resettlement project will provide significant lessons for future projects and policies regarding disaster/climate change driven displacement. Given that climate change triggered disasters are now considered by national governments and national and international agencies to have high potential for displacing whole communities, documenting and assessing the actual resettlement process in Gramalote has proven to be highly relevant to increase our understanding of this increasingly frequent outcome of disasters.

⁴ Bronen, Robin (2011). Climate Induced Community Relocations: Creating an Adaptive Governance Framework Based on Human Rights Doctrine. *N.Y.U. Review of Law and Social Change*, 35, 356-406.