Displacement, time and resistance: The role of waiting in facilitating occupations led by internally displaced persons in Colombia

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Abstract
This article contributes to the existing literature on the politics of waiting by discussing occupations led by internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia. This literature has emphasised both the power that waiting frequently entails and, increasingly, the agency it can comprise. Yet less has been said about the potential role of waiting in generating resistance. Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of power as intimately tied to resistance, this article explores how waiting can, in some instances, produce resistance. It uses fieldwork conducted in Bogotá, Colombia, between October 2017 and August 2018, including ethnographic observations and 120 interviews conducted with IDPs and state officials, to explore the centrality of waiting to IDPs’ experiences of displacement in Colombia. Contrary to those who would argue that such waiting encourages passivity, the article draws on a discussion of a two-year-long occupation by IDPs in Bogotá to argue that the long waiting periods facing the occupation’s participants prior to partaking in it were instrumental to facilitating the occupation. Waiting enabled the occupation in two major ways: by bringing together a group of people who would not have met had they not been forced to spend prolonged time together in close quarters and by constituting a key source of frustration motivating the occupation.
Introduction

In this article, I contribute to the literature on the politics of waiting by exploring the role waiting plays in enabling resistance amongst internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia. My interest in this topic first arose during an interview I conducted with a woman who I will refer to as ‘Cristina’, to protect her identity. A black woman displaced to Colombia’s capital city of Bogotá in the early 2000s, I met Cristina in July 2018, during doctoral fieldwork I was undertaking at the time to explore the occupation of public spaces and buildings by IDPs – a key tactic used to claim collective rights in Colombia since the 1990s (Olarte and Wall, 2012). Cristina herself had partaken in and helped organise several such occupations, taking over various government buildings, as well as a government owned plot of land.

I was surprised to hear, then, that Cristina had stumbled upon her first occupation by accident. ‘When I arrived at the occupation, I arrived… I didn’t exactly arrive for the occupation, and I didn’t know there was an occupation’, she recounted. Instead, Cristina had gone to request humanitarian assistance from the Colombian government, but a group of IDPs had staged an occupation outside the government office she attended, many of whom had sewn their lips shut in protest. ‘When I saw people tied to poles, with the mouth sewn up, I asked if I could participate, and they said yes, so I stayed’. Cristina decided to join the occupation, which lasted over a month, because she felt her rights had been violated – recounting how she had spent years waiting for access to subsidised housing, humanitarian assistance and other reparation measures that she was entitled to because of her displacement.

Experiences of queueing outside government offices, such as the one where Cristina encountered her first occupation, as well as instances of having to wait years or even decades for access to humanitarian assistance or reparation measures, are common amongst IDPs in Colombia. In fact, waiting is common to experiences of displacement more broadly and central to both humanitarian and post-conflict temporalities (Brun, 2016; Mueller-Hirth and Rios Oyola, 2018). The literature on the politics of waiting has emphasised the power waiting entails, highlighting how it can regulate behaviour and generate docility (Auyero, 2012; Drangsland, 2020; Hage, 2009). It has also documented how long waiting periods are often a time fraught with marginality (Griffiths, 2014; Haas, 2017). Increasingly, this literature has also emphasised the agency that waiting can comprise (Bissell, 2007; Brun, 2015; Rotter, 2016), as well as the strategies...
employed by displaced populations to resist unwanted waiting (Ilcan, 2020; Mountz, 2011). However, less has been said about the role of waiting itself in enabling resistance. In this article, I discuss the case study of IDP-led occupations in Bogotá to build on the existing literature by arguing that waiting can also facilitate resistance.

The argument unfolds as follows: In the next section, I review the existing literature on the politics of waiting and draw on Foucault’s (1978) insistence that power is not only repressive, but also productive, to argue for the need to investigate how waiting, as a form of power, brings new opportunities for resistance. Then, I briefly outline the ethnographic context and the research methods the article draws on. Following this, the empirical sections of the article first detail how my research participants faced endemic waiting, both in their day-to-day experiences of queueing for humanitarian assistance and in terms of awaiting government services. I explore ways in which this waiting operated as a governmental technology of control. Yet, in the final section, I argue that waiting can also enable resistance in two ways. Firstly, by slowing down time and forcing people to wait in queues, waiting can provide people who would otherwise not have met with the opportunity to organise. Secondly, the frustrations generated by experiences of waiting can constitute a key motivation for collective resistance that aims to speed up time.

**Displacement, waiting and resistance**

Experiences of displacement are often characterised by waiting (Brun, 2016). Humanitarian assistance to displaced populations tends to be driven by a narrative of ‘crisis’, with the result that it is perpetually concerned with alleviating suffering in the present (Brun, 2016; Redfield, 2005). The focus is on the ‘now’, while the future is only imagined in terms of a rupture in the form of potential crises yet to come (Brun, 2016: 402; Kaler and Parkins, 2018: 1317). Yet, this crisis temporality is often linked to waiting. In situations where displacement becomes protracted, the focus on the present can produce a sort of humanitarian ‘Groundhog Day’, stalling time, as measures that go beyond alleviating immediate suffering to instead restoring rights are pushed into the future (Brun, 2016: 402; Vandevoordt and Fleischmann, 2021: 190). Indeed, displaced persons frequently spend decades awaiting a solution to their displacement (Brun, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2015; McNevin and Missbach, 2018; Singh, 2019).

Moreover, such waiting does not necessarily stop after hostilities have ceased; waiting can also permeate post-conflict temporalities (Jaramillo, 2012; Meza and Ciurlo, 2019; Mueller-Hirth, 2018). Post-conflict endeavours are often characterised by a linear temporality, clearly distinguishing a violent past from a peaceful present and future, but violence and processes of marginalisation frequently continue after the formal end of a conflict (Mueller-Hirth, 2017;
Mueller-Hirth and Rios Oyola, 2018: 4). This means displaced communities and other survivors of violence can spend years, even decades, awaiting transformative post-conflict changes or reparation measures (Jaramillo, 2012; Mueller-Hirth and Rios Oyola, 2018).

The literature on the politics of waiting has explored the relationship between waiting and power, emphasising how waiting can function as a governmental technology of control, in a Foucauldian sense (Andersson, 2014; Auyero, 2012, 2021; Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski, 2021; Drangsland, 2020; Griffiths, 2014: 1996; Hage, 2009; Ramsay, 2017). Foucault (1982, 2009) sees power not as intrinsically tied to specific institutions, such as the state, but instead as manifesting through disparate governmental technologies – the often mundane methods and procedures that govern and regulate people’s behaviour (Rose and Miller, 2010). He explores how power governs individuals through modifying their behaviour, identifying a power he calls government, which, rather than working through coercion, structures ‘the possible field of action of others’ (Foucault, 1982: 790). Interestingly, Foucault identifies the control of time itself as a governmental technology, famously writing about the role of timetables in the emergence of industrial capitalism (Foucault, 1991: 150–152).

One way in which the control of time is linked to power is through waiting. Waiting involves unequal power relations between those who wait and those who withhold the object or event that others are awaiting (Bourdieu, 1997 cited in Auyero, 2021; Peteet, 2018: 48; Ramsay, 2017: 521). It is often experienced as a period of marginalisation, uncertainty and liminality (Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski, 2021: 3; Griffiths, 2014; Haas, 2017; Ramsay, 2017: 521). Waiting can create a sense of being unable to ‘move forward’ (Rotter, 2016: 86), and waiting time can be experienced as ‘sticky’, as those waiting often feel stuck (Griffiths, 2014: 1995). Writing about reparations and transitional justice measures in post-Apartheid South Africa, Mueller-Hirth (2018: 103), for instance, documents how ‘waiting for delayed payments of reparations and for change more broadly has fixed some victims in a permanent in-between state’, unable to properly address their victimisation.

Waiting also has governmental effects, regulating behaviour. Drangsland (2020: 320) has explored what she calls the ‘redemptive’ nature of waiting, whereby promises of rights in the future serve to make present suffering seem ‘worth it’. By orienting our attention towards the future, waiting can normalise and legitimise dominating power relations or suffering in the present (Drangsland, 2020; Povinelli, 2011: 24; Ramsay, 2017: 523). Hence, waiting teaches people ‘that they have to remain temporarily neglected, unattended to, or postponed’ (Auyero, 2012: 9), encouraging patience and passivity. For Hage (2009: 57), discourses centred on ‘waiting out’ a crisis, therefore encourage ‘restraint, self-control and self-government’.

For the displaced, control over time exerted by international agencies or the state – who force them to await humanitarian assistance, a resolution to their displacement, or reparation measures – can reproduce relations of subordination (Ramsay, 2017: 516–517). Discussing state reparations in post-conflict situations,
Jaramillo (2012) argues that waiting creates citizens who are conditioned to perpetually await reparations and who are, moreover, socialised into the dominant logics of the state. Here ‘waiting implies a type of temporal suspension which also generates subsequent lessons around the concrete forms of citizen inclusion, associated mostly with reparations’ (Jaramillo, 2012: 55–56, translated from Spanish by me).

However, others have argued that waiting is also a process involving agency (Bissell, 2007; Brun, 2015; Debele, 2020; Ibañez Tirado, 2019; Kallio et al., 2020; Mountz, 2011; Peteet, 2018; Rotter, 2016). Brun (2015: 29) argues for the notion of ‘agency-in-waiting’, reflecting how people waiting are rarely passive, but rather get on with their lives. Waiting also frequently signals a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a desire for the future to change, which can, in turn, engender resistance (Brun, 2015: 25,33; Vandevoordt and Fleischmann, 2021: 189). Waiting is therefore often active, involving hope (Brun, 2015; Kallio et al., 2020), anticipation (Bissell, 2007), and caring, as ‘one cannot be indifferent to something and wait for it’ (Rotter, 2016: 82).

Additionally, waiting time can be productive because those waiting can transform it ‘into a valuable resource’, using it to gain additional skills or knowledge (Rotter, 2016: 94). In some cases, those waiting can strategically use waiting time in ways that challenge dominating power relations (Ilcan, 2020: 11; Mountz, 2011). Writing on migrants held in offshore detention centres, Mountz (2011: 383), for instance, has explored how detainees do not simply wait, but also use their time to ‘organize, network, speak out and use technology to garner attention and collaborate with activists on mainland territory’.

In this article, I build on these insights, taking them one step further to suggest that not only can waiting be negotiated and resisted, but that waiting also brings new opportunities for resistance. In doing so, I draw on Foucault’s (1982, 2009) insistence that power and resistance are inherently connected. For him, power presupposes the freedom of the individual, because it ‘is exercised only over free subjects […] who are faced with a field of possibilities’ (Foucault, 1982: 790). This means that where there is power there is also a possibility for resistance, so that there is an ‘immediate and founding correlation’ between the two (Foucault, 2009: 196). Foucault (1978: 73) conceptualises power not as repressive, but instead as relational and productive, drawing attention not only to what power prohibits, but also to what it allows and produces. Thus, specific governmental technologies, such as the control of time, can also produce resistance. In this paper, I explore the opportunities for resistance that waiting has paved the way for amongst IDPs in Colombia. The next section details the research underpinning this exploration.

**Ethnographic context: Internal displacement in Colombia**

This paper is based on qualitative case study research undertaken as part of doctoral fieldwork in Colombia between October 2017 and August 2018,
including semi-structured narrative interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic observations. Due to the country’s long-standing civil war, over 8.1 million people are formally recognised as IDPs by the Colombian government as of February 2021 (UARIV, 2021). Many of these were displaced in the 1990s and early 2000s, two decades that saw a marked increase in forced displacement (Centro Nacional De Memoria Histórica, 2013: 71). Despite the official transition to a post-conflict environment following the signing in 2016 of a historic peace agreement between the government and the country’s largest guerrilla group – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (Paetau, 2019) – displacement persists to date (El Tiempo, 2021; UARIV, 2021).

Many Colombian IDPs have waited decades for a resolution to their displacement or for reparation measures. Since the 1990s, they have been targeted for a set of policies aiming to address both their immediate humanitarian needs and their socio-economic marginalisation, but the implementation of these policies has been slow. In 1997, the Colombian government formally assumed the responsibility for providing humanitarian aid to its IDP population through Law 387 (Vidal, 1999: 63). Under this law, the government provided IDPs with aid for the first few months after their displacement (Ibáñez and Moya, 2010; The Congress of Colombia, 1997), as well as with a dedicated set of rights (The Congress of Colombia, 1997). However, a survey of 1553 IDP households found that only 56.3% of officially recognised IDPs had received any type of government aid under this law (Ibáñez and Velásquez, 2009: 441).

In 2011, Law 1448 grouped IDPs together with other ‘victims of the armed conflict’, entitling both to reparations – including land restitution, housing restitution and the payment of damages – and humanitarian assistance (El Congreso De la República De Colombia, 2011; Summers, 2012: 219; Velez, 2014). A dedicated government agency, the Victim’s Unit, was set up to implement the law in 2012 (Mora-Gámez, 2016: 81). Yet its implementation has been slow, with official statistics in 2014 indicating that only 19.6% of those who had solicited the payment of damages had received this (UARIV, 2014: 15, 25). Similarly, a high-profile government initiative, the Free Housing Programme, that built 100,000 free two-bedroom housing units for victims of the conflict, only benefited a fraction of those who lost their houses through displacement (Sliwa and Wiig, 2016). In 2019, the Colombian government was so far behind in its enactment of the Law that the Constitutional Court ordered it to extend its coverage, originally due to expire in 2021, to 2031 (El Tiempo, 2019).

Within this context, Colombian IDPs have organised collectively since the mid-1990s to demand the rights promised to them by the government. In particular, they have been engaged in a strategy centred on the occupation of public space (Olarte and Wall, 2012; Osorio Pérez, 2007). Between 1996 and 2001 alone, IDPs occupied 27 government entities, seven religious institutions, four international institutions, two private institutions and five public spaces (Osorio...
Pérez, 2007: 102). In 1998, IDPs occupied the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for 25 days (Osorio Pérez, 2007: 233). Then, starting in December 1999, a group of IDPs occupied the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for 2 years (Osorio Pérez, 2007: 217). In 2008, IDPs generated domestic headlines after occupying a park in an exclusive area of Bogotá (Zeiderman, 2013), while in 2009 thousands of IDPs erected tents and provisional housing in a park only a few blocks away from the political centre of the city (Olarte and Wall, 2012). In this paper, I draw on IDPs’ own narratives of their experiences of waiting and participation in occupations to argue that the former has enabled the latter.

The study participants were recruited using a snowball approach (Bryman, 2012: 424) and fell into three broad groups. Firstly, I conducted nine interviews and three focus group discussions with Colombian state officials, and observed officials from the Ombudsman’s Office and the Ministry of Housing as they met with representatives from other state entities and IDPs. Access to this group was facilitated by local contacts in Bogotá. Secondly, I conducted 25 interviews and two focus group discussions with IDPs who had received subsidised housing as part of the Free Housing Programme. Access to these was partly facilitated by a contact in the Ministry of Housing and partly by a student activist. Finally, I interviewed IDPs who were members of self-denominated IDP or victims’ organisations or who had been involved in occupations or protests.

The latter constituted the majority of my sample. 59 of the IDPs interviewed individually, and six out of the eight focus groups had participated in an occupation or a protest, and 43 of the individually interviewed IDPs and 3 of the focus groups belonged to an IDP organisation, with significant overlaps between these two groups. I was initially introduced to these IDPs by a contact in the local government. However, most of my access was facilitated by a leader of an organisation that worked for the rights of black and indigenous IDPs, who allowed me to trail her, observe her in her-day-to-day activities, and conduct interviews with members of her organisation and her other contacts.

Far from being a homogenous group, IDPs in Colombia are traversed by cleavages dividing Colombian society more broadly. These social demarcations include gendered and racialised hierarchies, as well as class-based, political and regional divisions (Sachseder, 2020; Safford and Palacios, 2002). In particular, Colombia’s history of European colonialism (Safford and Palacios, 2002: 27) means the country is characterised by structural racism that privileges whiteness and puts the mixed, mestizo, population at the top, while the country’s indigenous and black populations face persistent marginalisation (Cárdenas et al., 2020; Paschel, 2016; Wade, 1993). Over half of the study participants self-identified as black, and issues related to racialised divisions emerged throughout their interviews.

To account for this diversity, I adopted a narrative approach to the interviews (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Silverman, 2010: 45), treating them as ‘an occasion
for purposefully animated participants to construct versions of reality interactionally’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 13; emphasis in original). This allowed me to be sensitive of internal divisions amongst IDPs in Colombia, while avoiding essentialising their experiences, investigating instead how the participants framed their stories and situated themselves vis-à-vis diverse subject positions (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 205), such as IDPs, victims, women and racialised identities.

During the interviews, I aimed to allow the study participants to construct their own narrative of their experiences of internal displacement, activism, humanitarian assistance and their relations with the Colombian state. I brought an interview schedule to the interviews, but adapted this flexibly, in line with the narrative approach adopted (Gillham, 2005: 49). Most of the interviews and focus groups lasted 1 hour, although some were shorter, and others lasted closer to 2 hours. All interviews were undertaken in locations chosen by the participants.

Conducting fieldwork with people who had experienced displacement also raised ethical concerns. The majority of the IDPs I interviewed had direct experiences of violence. To minimise the risk of harm, I asked the participants if they wanted to continue the interviews if these brought up potentially distressful subjects and reiterated that they did not have to talk about anything they found painful. Most interviewees expressed that they wanted to talk about these topics and told me they often came together to share stories of violence as part of a healing process. Taiwo Afuape (2011: 138) argues that ‘reclaiming memory’ through storytelling can be an importance form of resistance in the face of trauma, and I decided to respect their choices.

While I was doing my fieldwork in 2018, on average one activist was assassinated every day (El Tiempo, 2018), meaning most of my participants faced substantial security risks. To avoid putting my participants at additional risk, I made sure to only record the interviews if they were comfortable with this and to encrypt and store all recordings securely. I sought informed oral consent from the participants prior to the interview and made sure to anonymise the interviews during the transcription process. Any names cited in this paper are pseudonyms, and I have omitted the names of specific IDP organisations. In the next section, I draw on my participants’ narratives of their displacement to explore the centrality of waiting to their experiences.

**Experiences of waiting amongst Colombian IDPs**

Waiting was a central theme in my participants’ narratives, related both to frequent delays they confronted in obtaining humanitarian assistance and reparation measures, and to long queues facing them when accessing state services. Upon first registering as IDPs with the government, many related how it took months or years before they received humanitarian assistance. Lizeth, a displaced woman in
her forties, recounted how she went to register with the government in 2002, but only received aid in 2004. ‘I went to the municipal ombudsman’s office to declare the displacement’, she said. ‘This was in 2002 and they didn’t begin to give me aid until 2004. So that was two years later.’

Lizeth was far from alone in experiencing such delays. Doña Marina, a black woman in her fifties, related how she frequently had to wait almost a year to receive humanitarian assistance. ‘You’ll ask for this now and they will give it to you after a year.’ This, she said, put her in a difficult position. ‘Yes, of course! Because you need to eat daily, you need to buy clothes at least twice a year, and buy other things, and the aid is very delayed.’

Waiting was also central to the IDPs’ narratives of accessing reparation measures. All those I interviewed who had received a flat through the Free Housing Programme, for instance, related how they had signed up for housing during calls for expression of interest in the mid-to-late 2000s (Contraloria, 2017), but had only received a flat after 2015. This was the experience of Juliana, a resident in the Plaza de La Hoja housing project in Bogotá. ‘I signed up and I had to wait seven years.’ She continued, ‘So, I signed up immediately, because I thought you don’t lose anything by signing up, and I thought within a year… and I signed up, and then after seven years […] they called me.’

In addition to waiting years for humanitarian assistance or reparation measures, the IDPs also reported having to wait hours to be attended to when soliciting government assistance or services. To facilitate the implementation of the legal frameworks pertaining to IDPs, the Colombian government has set up a number of assistance centres, where the displaced can ask for humanitarian assistance or access other government services. These are known in Bogotá as Local Attention Centres for Victims, frequently referred to by the Spanish acronym CLAVs (Alta Consejería para las Víctimas, La Paz y La Reconciliación, 2018). At the CLAVs, IDPs encountered long queues.

This was what Doña Marina experienced when she first went to ask for humanitarian aid. ‘I had to queue from early in the morning. I mean, you had to arrive at like three or four in the morning, or more,’ she related. ‘Like that, six, seven, eight hours could easily pass waiting for them to attend to you.’ Likewise, Alexandra, a young, black woman, related how she frequently had to spend the entire day waiting at the CLAVs. ‘They give you an appointment at one hour and attend you at a different hour. I mean, you’re there from 6 AM, and then you leave at – at least for me, I have left at 5 PM.’

The delays and long waits facing the IDPs were compounded by the frequent marginalisation confronting them in their daily lives. Amongst those awaiting reparation measures, was Alba, an indigenous woman in her fifties. While lucky enough to secure a flat in Plaza de la Hoja, Alba was awaiting the payment of damages when I met her. In the meantime, she was barely staying afloat. Unable to secure employment in Bogotá, she sustained her family through debt, owing 2
million Colombian pesos (£380) for electricity alone. Despite this, she was told by the government that she had to await her turn. ‘Look, my fridge is empty’, she told me, gesturing at her bare flat. ‘I have now spent three years living here, and it has been three years looking for reparations, and you know what they say? That I have to wait.’

Alba was not alone in being told to wait for the payment of damages. As Nicol, a black woman in her forties, said, ‘Whenever you go to the Victim’s Unit they say “you need to wait, it’s being processed. You’re on the list for reparations,” but it never comes.’ The delays the IDPs experienced in accessing reparations while they were struggling to get by highlight the marginality that often characterises experiences of waiting (Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski, 2021; Griffiths, 2014; Haas, 2017). While the internally displaced suffered in the present, rights restitution measures were pushed into the future (Brun, 2016). Meanwhile, the promise of future rights restitution served to obscure the marginality of people like Alba in the ‘now’, underscoring the ‘redemptive’ quality of waiting (Drangslid, 2020).

These delays also functioned as a governmental technology encouraging passivity (Auyero, 2012; Hage, 2009). For some, being told to wait every time they approached the government for assistance made them reluctant to do so again. Juliana, a young woman, related how her experiences of waiting made her hesitant to approach the government for aid. ‘I don’t like to go to beg for aid, because you lose the entire day there, only for them to say “wait, wait another four months.”’ Similarly, Patricia, a resident in Plaza de la Hoja related how waiting 8 years for subsidised housing meant that when she was finally called in for the meeting where she was allocated a flat, she did not want to go. ‘My son’s father said “go, go,” and I said, “for what? So that they tell me the same?”’ Being told to wait had tired her out. ‘I went grudgingly, because I was tired of spending eight years in every office for them to tell you to “wait and wait and wait.”’

Moreover, during interviews with Colombian government officials, I noticed how a discourse of future rights restitution was used to delegitimise claims to rights in the present. Alejandro, a high-ranking functionary, had the following to say about a group of IDPs who had chained themselves up in front of the headquarters of the Victim’s Unit to demand the payment of damages: ‘it is unjust that just because a person chains themselves up, they receive damages before someone else who deserves it because they queued’ (emphasis added). Similarly, Mauricio, another government official, complained about a tendency among many IDPs to resort to legal means to access the reparations measures.

They are jumping the queues! Imagine I am a victim of the conflict, and I am following the correct procedures, but then someone else arrives who has money and who is in the same conditions as me, or in a less serious one, but then because he went to a judge, they give him the damages first.
Juan Andrés, another functionary, also compared IDP protests to queue-jumpers. ‘Some victims of the conflict believe that “if I chain myself up, then I will receive the payment of damages quicker, and I will put myself before those who are queuing.”’ The waiting facing IDPs thus reinforces the value of patience and passivity, as suggested by the existing literature (Auyero, 2012; Griffiths, 2014: 1996; Hage, 2009). The IDPs patiently queueing and awaiting their time are positioned as deserving of rights restitution measures, while those claiming their rights in the present are presented as queue-jumpers. At the same time, it also obscures the protracted liminality and marginality of waiting (Griffiths, 2014; Haas, 2017). However, as the next section argues, in Colombia, waiting has also opened up new opportunities for resistance.

Waiting and resistance: The Montebello occupation

While the pervasive waiting facing Colombian IDPs in some ways encouraged passivity, this section argues that it has also enabled resistance. By forcing IDPs who did not know each other previously to wait in close proximity for hours, it has allowed them the opportunity to organise collectively. Simultaneously, the long waits facing IDPs have been a key source of frustration for many, serving as an impetus for resistance. These dynamics are evident in what became known as the Montebello community. In March 2015, around 40 families occupied a government-owned plot of land in the neighbourhood of Montebello (El Tiempo, 2015; Semana, 2016). Located high up in the mountains surrounding Bogotá and prone to landslides, the plot itself was classified as a ‘high risk zone’ by the local government (El Tiempo, 2015). In this hostile terrain, the group, consisting of black IDPs from all over Colombia, built provisional tents and housing out of plastic sheeting.

In Montebello, the families stayed for over a year, despite attempts by the local authorities to remove them. Soon after the families arrived in the area, the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD), Colombia’s riot police, attempted to evict them. Recounting these events, Francisco, one of the participants, told me how the women confronted the riot police, while the men hid with the children, afraid they would be detained. Raquel, another of the occupiers, related how she had told her kids they were playing hide and seek and instructed them to run from the police, who used teargas against the families.

In the end, the ESMAD failed to remove the families, who began to organise collectively to put pressure on the government. Their primary demand was housing – they requested inclusion into a local government programme known as the Comprehensive Programme for Effective Housing (PIVE). In parallel, the families initiated legal action against the government, calling for the suspension of any forced evictions from Montebello, as well as the protection of their constitutional right to dignified housing (Decision T-267, 2016).

The Montebello community’s occupation points to two ways in which waiting can enable resistance. Firstly, the families themselves came from disparate parts
of Colombia and had little in common apart from their forced displacement. They got to know each other while waiting at a CLAV, queueing for humanitarian aid and other government services. As put by Paula, ‘What we all have in common is that we go to the Victim’s Unit to run errands and ask for humanitarian aid. So, in this place, we got to know that they were planning to stage the occupation.’ As Raquel related, at the CLAV ‘we got to know various victims of the conflict, like when you go for an appointment, and we started to talk about how the state often doesn’t put itself in your place.’ Instead of generating passivity, as suggested by some (Auyero, 2012, 2021; Hage, 2009; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Meza and Ciurlo, 2019), waiting brought the families in Montebello together – a group of people who would not have met had it not been for the long waits facing them at the CLAV – and allowed them to organise collectively.

The occupation in Montebello is far from the only instance in which IDPs have used their waiting time outside government offices to organise. Many of my participants related how they first decided to become involved in IDP organisations or occupations while waiting. Cristina, whose story I opened this article with, decided to join her first occupation while queueing for humanitarian aid. Similarly, Lina, who was the leader of an Afro-Colombian organisation, first heard of the organisation the day she went to register with the government as an IDP. Doña Elena, an indigenous activist, also related how she was recruited for an organisation while queueing for government assistance. Likewise, Ingrid, who had participated in the infamous occupation of the headquarters of the ICRC in 1999, recalled how she first heard of the occupation while in the queue outside the Ombudsman’s Office. The long queues facing many IDPs while accessing state services, then, have encouraged the emergence of social networks amongst them, which have, in turn, allowed them to form organisations and plan occupations.

Secondly, in the case of the Montebello occupation, experiences of waiting also became a key source of frustration driving the occupation. The families had experienced delays in their access to state services and humanitarian aid and were often forced to wait years for solutions to their issues. Paula related how she only received humanitarian assistance sporadically and had to wait years between each time she received it. According to Raquel, these kinds of delays motivated their occupations. ‘A lot of IDPs spend years here and the state entities don’t resolve anything, so we said we’ll do this occupation.’

In particular, the families were frustrated at the time they spent waiting for housing. Many of the families did not have a place to live, making their housing situation an urgent issue to solve. As Raquel explained, ‘When you arrive here in Bogotá, they give you aid for a year, for rent and food, and then you return, in a month, they don’t give you anything.’ She continued, ‘so, we said, let’s organise, because it’s difficult to find a place to rent with three children […] As a family who practically didn’t have a place to live, this was, like, our priority.’ The families’ focus on housing was strengthened by their experiences of racism in
Bogotá, whereby many struggled to find landlords willing to rent to black people. As put by Paula, ‘We always focus on housing, because it really impacts us […], many don’t rent to us, because they say they don’t rent to black people.’ Hence, waiting not only enabled the Montebello occupation by allowing the families to meet and strategise in the CLAVs’ waiting rooms. Waiting also constituted a key source of frustration motivating it, heightened by the racism the families faced in the rental market.

As an act of resistance, the occupation succeeded in disrupting the waiting facing the IDPs, helping the families access temporary shelter and humanitarian aid more quickly. Through the occupation, the families were successful in securing at least a short-term solution to their housing needs. In June 2015, a court ordered the local authorities to abstain from evicting the families until they could guarantee their transfer to a temporary shelter (c.fr. Decision T-267, 2016). Then, in May 2016, Constitutional Court decision T-267 ordered the Victim’s Unit to offer shelter to the families for 7 months, extendable for another 7 months, and ruled that the families’ right to dignified housing had been violated (Decision T-267, 2016). A year later, in May 2017, around half of the families moved into a government-run shelter close to the CLAV where they had initially become acquainted with each other (UARIV, 2018).

In terms of access to humanitarian assistance, the occupation also upended the ‘sticky’ sense of time (Griffiths, 2014) frequently characterising its provision – related to the fact that IDPs had to wait for long and uncertain periods of time between applying for and receiving aid. In Restrepo, the Victim’s Unit provided the families with food and humanitarian assistance (UARIV, 2018). In addition, it helped the families access services such as healthcare, education and childcare (UARIV, 2018). Reflecting on the outcome of the occupation, Raquel noted, ‘it sped up the aid they gave us. Before we went there [to Montebello], like I said, they gave us aid only once a year. And after, they started to give it to us every four months.’ Hence, the occupation in Montebello forced through a change of tempo, from an uncertain and irregular pattern of waiting, to a much speedier and regular pace of aid delivery.

Interestingly, the occupiers succeeded partly by appealing to the crisis temporality that frequently motivates humanitarian efforts (Brun, 2016; Redfield, 2005). The plot the families had occupied was classified by the local government as a ‘high risk zone’, prone to natural disasters. Indeed, the previous residents in Montebello had already been evacuated by the Fund for Popular Housing, whose job it is to relocate people from such areas (Decision T-267, 2016). While Paula was keen to stress during our interview that the families did not know it was a ‘high risk zone’, the decision to occupy the plot proved opportune.

The Constitutional Court’s decision to order the Victim’s Unit to provide the families with shelter was based on the fact that the families’ lives were at risk there (Decision T-267, 2016). It held that in cases where IDPs had settled in high risk zones because they had nowhere else to go, the state had to rehouse them in conditions that complied with the constitutional right to dignified housing. Thus,
it was by putting their own lives in the present at risk, and by appealing to the humanitarian imperative to protect lives in the face of crisis, (Brun, 2016; Fassin, 2005; Redfield, 2005), that the families succeeded in interrupting the waiting that faced them. Hence, the occupation was not only enabled by the families’ experiences of waiting; the families also took advantage of a humanitarian crisis temporality to claim rights.

The occupation was not wholly successful; crucially it did not succeed in securing a permanent housing solution. In the shelter, the Victim’s Unit helped the families sign up for the PIVE programme (UARIV, 2018). However, the programme had a long waiting list, according to José Manuel – one of the participants – reintroducing waiting into their lives. When I met the families in July 2018, their time in the shelter was almost up, and they were uncertain about their future. They held biweekly meetings with the Victim’s Unit, the Ombudsman’s Office, and other government entities, but nothing truly concrete came from these. As Paula recounted, ‘there’s meeting after meeting but no actions, no solutions! We’re told to wait and wait, and the only ally we have right now is God.’ As such, the occupation was only partly successful at disrupting the waiting facing the IDPs.

Still, it did, if only briefly, upset the Colombian state’s monopoly over the control of time, implicit in the endemic waiting facing most Colombians IDPs (Auyero, 2021; Jaramillo, 2012). Against prior IDP experiences of time as ‘sticky’ (Griffiths, 2014) – as they were stuck for decades awaiting state-provided housing, or for years awaiting humanitarian assistance – the families in Montebello used their waiting time strategically to organise an occupation that succeeded in speeding up the pace of aid delivery and in securing temporary shelter. Moreover, by putting their lives in the ‘now’ at risk and appealing to a crisis temporality (Brun, 2016), the occupants undermined the ‘redemptive’ nature of waiting (Drangsland, 2020), drawing attention back to their suffering in the present, if albeit only by attenuating such suffering through situating it vis-à-vis an immediate threat of landslides and natural disasters. Far from encouraging passivity (Auyero, 2012; Hage, 2009; Hyndman and Giles, 2011), waiting instead enabled the families to resist their experiences of subordination, providing them both with the time and opportunity to organise, and with a key motivation for doing so.

**Conclusion**

The narratives depicted in this article illustrate how waiting is endemic to experiences of displacement in Colombia. The IDPs I spoke to related how they were told to ‘wait, wait, and wait’, every time they asked for anything from the state – be it humanitarian assistance or rights restitution measures. In the meantime, many were left in marginal conditions, barely getting by. Thus, at least to some extent, the waiting confronting IDPs functioned as a governmental
technology of control, obscuring their suffering in the present, while teaching patience and passivity, as suggested by the existing literature (Auyero, 2021; Drangsland, 2020; Hage, 2009; Hyndman and Giles, 2011).

Yet, at the same time, the Montebello occupation reveals that waiting, as a technology of power, can also open new doors. In this case, it opened the doors for strategies of collective resistance, reminding us of the intimate linkages that exist between power and resistance (Foucault, 2009).

Indeed, the waiting facing the participants in the Montebello occupation provided them with the opportunity to meet others in a similar situation. It gave them the time and opportunity to organise, as news of the occupations, and others like it, spread by word of mouth while the IDPs queued and awaited government attention. Thus, waiting time, referred to by some I spoke to as a ‘waste’, was translated into a resource, reiterating how waiting can be productive (Rotter, 2016). Additionally, the long years the families spent waiting for access to housing became a key motivation driving the occupation.

While the existing literature on waiting has increasingly emphasised that waiting is not simply an ‘empty interlude’ (Rotter, 2016) – but instead a process involving agency (Brun, 2016) that can moreover be productive (Mountz, 2011; Rotter, 2016), or even resisted (Ilcan, 2020) – less has been said about the role of waiting in directly facilitating resistance. The narratives I have drawn on in this article highlight the need to take seriously, and further theorise, the relationship between time and resistance.

This is also important for our understanding of experiences of forced displacement more broadly, particularly in relation to experiences of humanitarian assistance and post-conflict contexts. Increasingly, attention has been paid to ways in which displaced populations and others afflicted by conflict exercise agency, negotiate categories such as ‘displaced persons’ or ‘victims’, and claim rights through disparate strategies of resistance (see, for instance, Agier, 2011; Ataç et al., 2016; Lemaitre and Sandvik, 2015; Olivius, 2019; Tapia Navarro, 2020). Paying attention to waiting, then, can perhaps allow us to better understand the conditions that make such resistance possible.

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