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Schouw Iversen, Karen

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Participation as Confrontation: Resistance Within and Outside the *Mesas de Participación* Established for IDPs in Colombia

KAREN SCHOUW IVERSEN 

International Development Department, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK

kschouwiversen@gmail.com

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This article discusses resistance related to the *mesas de participación*—invited participatory spaces established for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia. While the existing literature on participation has shown that such spaces can enhance stability and delegitimize dissent, this article foregrounds these spaces’ political ambivalence, pointing to the resistance they facilitate. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Bogotá between October 2017 and August 2018, the article argues that the mesas have paved the way for two kinds of resistance. First, they have engendered resistance around the meaning of participation itself. Second, IDPs have utilized opportunities conferred by the mesas to strengthen ‘confrontational collective action’ in the form of occupations and protests outside of these government-sponsored spaces. By highlighting the connections that exist between resistance happening *within* and *outside* institutional spaces, the article contributes both to a growing body of literature that has emphasized the agency of IDPs in Colombia and, more broadly, to the literature on forced migrants’ participation.

Keywords: internal displacement, participation, Colombia, resistance

Introduction

In April 2018, two *mesas de participación* (henceforth mesas), or participatory councils, were held at the prestigious University of the Andes in Colombia’s capital city of Bogotá. During the mesas, delegates representing Bogotá’s internally displaced persons (IDPs), and others victimized by Colombia’s civil war, met with state officials and academics to discuss the housing policies the government offers to the city’s IDPs. Since the late-1980s, Colombia’s conflict has displaced over eight million people (UARIV 2021). In 1997, the Colombian government committed to providing IDPs with humanitarian assistance (El Congreso de la República de Colombia 1997), while in 2011 it grouped them together with other

‘victims of the armed conflict’—a policy category commonly referred to as simply ‘victims’—entitling both to rights restitution measures, including preferential access to subsidized housing (El Congreso de la República de Colombia 2011). The mesas represent the main spaces where IDPs and victims are invited to participate in the development and implementation of the state’s policies on displacement (El Presidente de la República de Colombia 2011).

While the mesas held in April 2018 were established to discuss the housing concerns of IDPs in Bogotá, what the participants experienced over the course of the 2 days was instead a series of generic presentations, followed by a Q&A session. Five speakers were invited to present in each session, and only after all of them had finished, was time allocated for questions. Only one IDP representative presented across the two meetings. Most of the information discussed was of little relevance to Bogotá, with a presentation by the Ministry of Agriculture, for instance, detailing their rural housing policies, which did not cover the capital city.

None of this was lost on the IDP representatives. During the first session, one delegate exclaimed that she had heard enough and demanded the return of her ‘rights as a citizen, as a black woman’. She stormed off, telling the participants, ‘I will leave here disappointed’. Before doing so, however, she invited the assembled crowd to a meeting that she was convening for a Popular Housing Organisation, which fought for housing for its members through a strategy of occupations and protests.

This article argues that the mesas in Colombia have given rise to two types of resistance. First, the meaning of IDP participation has itself become contested. Second, these spaces have provided the displaced with opportunities for engaging in ‘confrontational collective action’ (Alvarez *et al.* 2017) outside of government sponsored arenas. In exploring resistance related to the mesas, the article contributes both to the literature on forced migrants’ participation and, more specifically, to the literature on internal displacement in Colombia.

It adds to the first set of literature by emphasizing the political ambiguity of invited participatory spaces. The existing literature on forced migrants’ participation has illustrated that such spaces often function as a form of what Foucault (1982, 2009) calls government—power concerned with regulating individual behaviour. Frequently permitting merely ‘tokenistic’ input (Kaiser 2004; Horn 2010; Arnstein 2011; Olivius 2014), invited participatory arenas can be used to discourage confrontational activist tactics outside of their confines (Alvarez 2017; Alvarez *et al.* 2017). Nevertheless, this article suggests that the mesas have been unsuccessful in taming IDP activism in Bogotá. On the contrary, they have fuelled it.

The existing literature on displacement, humanitarian aid, and transitional justice in Colombia has highlighted the need to take seriously the way in which IDPs contest the state’s policies, as well as the ways in which they have used these policies strategically in their political work (Olarte and Wall 2012; Gómez 2013; Sandvik and Lemaitre 2013, 2015; Tapia Navarro 2019). This article corroborates this literature, building on it by illustrating that IDPs have not just utilized existing institutional spaces—such as the mesas—to work *within* the system; they have also

used these spaces to build a resistance strategy *outside* of the system, in the shape of occupations and protests.

These findings are based on doctoral fieldwork conducted in Bogotá between October 2017 and August 2018, including eight focus groups and 95 semi-structured interviews with IDPs—of whom 25 belonged to the mesas—and 9 semi-structured and 3 focus group interviews with Colombian state officials. This fieldwork also involved ethnographic observations of the two mesas held at the University of the Andes and observations of state officials from the Ministry of Housing and the Ombudsman's Office in their day-to-day interactions with the displaced. All interviews used in this article have been anonymized, and all names used are pseudonyms.

The next section reviews the existing literature on forced migrants' participation and on displacement in Colombia, while discussing the development of IDP participation in the country. Drawing on a Foucauldian framework, the second section dissects the mesas as a form of government (Foucault 1982, 2009)—emphasizing the limited conceptualization of participation that these spaces are based on and the way in which they have been used to explicitly delegitimize dissent. Nevertheless, the final section illustrates how these participatory arenas have failed to discourage IDP activism but have rather helped foment it.

Background

This article intervenes in a complex set of fields, spanning forced migrants' participation and the legacies of the Colombian state's humanitarian and transitional justice policies. Since the late 1990s, humanitarian actors have introduced participatory initiatives in their work (Rajaram 2002; Kaiser 2004; Olivius 2014; ILcan and Rygiel 2015). Colombia is no exception. Over the past 30 years, the Colombian state has created a set of policies providing humanitarian assistance and rights restitution measures to IDPs and victims (Vidal 1999; Vidal López 2007; García-Godos and Lid 2010). In the 1990s, the state assumed responsibility for providing IDPs with humanitarian assistance (Vidal 1999; Abrisketa 2009; Aparicio 2012). Meanwhile, the 2000s saw the progressive emergence of a transitional justice framework addressing the consequences of the conflict (Sandvik and Lemaitre 2015; Mora-Gómez 2016). Initiated as part of a paramilitary demobilization process in the early 2000s (García-Godos and Lid 2010; Meertens 2010), this latter policy-development culminated with Law 1448 of 2011, known as the Victim's Law (Forero-Niño 2012; Gómez 2013; Mora-Gómez 2016). This provided victims—a group encompassing IDPs—with the rights to reparations and humanitarian assistance (Forero-Niño 2012; Sandvik and Lemaitre 2015; Mora-Gómez 2016).

Colombia's 1991 Constitution emphasizes citizens' participation (Koch and Sánchez Steiner 2017) and IDPs are invited to participate in policy-development through the mesas (Lemaitre 2013; Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015; de Waardt and Weber 2019). The first of their kind was set up in Bogotá in 1998 to create a space for dialogue (Osorio Pérez 2007: 221). In 2004, the Colombian

Constitutional Court called for a national framework for IDP participation (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2004, Sentencia T-025; de Waardt and Weber 2019: 215), and the following year, the first national IDP mesa was established (Lemaitre *et al.* 2014: 30). After a series of Constitutional Court rulings in the late 2000s (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2008, Auto 116; Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2009, Auto 008)—the country adopted its first protocol for IDP participation in 2009 through Decree 1997 (El Ministro del Interior y de Justicia de la República de Colombia 2009). Subsequently, the government established mesas also at the subnational level, inviting IDPs to partake in municipal planning activities (El Ministro del Interior y de Justicia de la República de Colombia 2009; Berrío 2013: 23; Lemaitre *et al.* 2014: 30–31; Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015). Decree 1997 emphasized the need to include representatives from both academia and the private sector in these processes (El Ministro del Interior y de Justicia de la República de Colombia 2009), helping explain how a private university could host the mesas held in April 2018.

With Law 1448, IDPs were invited to participate as ‘victims’, and participatory councils proliferated across the country (Berrío 2013; de Waardt and Weber 2019). The law stipulated that, ‘the state must guarantee the effective participation of victims in the design, implementation, execution, and monitoring of the fulfilment of the law and the plans, projects and programmes that are created related to this’ (El Congreso de la República de Colombia 2011: Article 192, translated from Spanish by me). From 2013, participatory spaces were set up at the municipal, district, departmental, and national levels, as well in localities in larger cities such as Bogotá (El Presidente de la República de Colombia 2011; Unidad Para las Víctimas 2019). During the first elections a total of 920 mesas were established nationwide (Unidad Para las Víctimas 2019), demonstrating their ubiquity. Today, Bogotá has a total of 23 such participatory councils (Alta Consejería para las Víctimas, la Paz y la Reconciliación 2017). In this article, I explore resistance related to these invited participatory arenas in Bogotá.

The existing literature suggests forced migrants’ participation is frequently cosmetic (Kaiser 2004; Horn 2010; Olivius 2014). Emerging evidence from Colombia supports this contention (Muñoz Caicedo 2008; Berrío 2013; Lemaitre 2013; de Waardt and Weber 2019). Authors writing on this context have explored the barriers that prevent IDPs from participating effectively through the mesas—ranging from a lack of institutional support (de Waardt and Weber 2019) and fragile local institutions (Berrío 2013: 25) to persistent death threats targeting their members (Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015). Meanwhile, Julieta Lemaitre (2013) has questioned whether these spaces offer opportunities for genuine participation. Distinguishing between participation as the right to be listened to and participation as the right to make decisions, she argues that the mesas in Colombia allow only for the former (Lemaitre 2013). This is reminiscent of Sherry Arnstein’s (2011) typology, envisaging participation as a ladder. The ladder’s bottom rungs represent ‘non-participation’ masquerading as participation, the rungs in the middle represent ‘tokenism’, and the top rungs represent ‘true’ participation, entailing a ‘redistribution of power’ (Arnstein 2011: 3). Lemaitre’s (2013) findings suggest

Colombian IDPs are only invited to participate in ways mapping onto the bottom rungs of this ladder. This is corroborated by other studies of participatory spaces in Colombia, established both for IDPs (Muñoz Caicedo 2008; Berrío 2013; de Waardt and Weber 2019), and for other groups, such as those targeting black and Afro-Colombian communities (Paschel 2016), or those encouraging citizens' participation in urban planning activities (Koch and Sánchez Steiner 2017).

Authors approaching participation from a Foucauldian perspective have detailed how invited participatory spaces become entangled with power (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Olivius 2014; Lupien 2015; ILcan and Rygiel 2015; Alvarez 2017). In his later works, Foucault (1982, 2009, 2010) became concerned with attempts to govern individual behaviour. Identifying a type of power he denominated 'government', he became interested in 'studying the techniques and procedures by which one sets about conducting the conduct of others' (Foucault 2010: 4). Building on his work, Rose and Miller (2010) have drawn out the knowledge, discourses, and systems of thought—what they call political rationalities—that lie behind attempts to govern individuals' behaviour, as well as the concrete programmes and techniques through which power operates. They refer to these programmes and techniques as 'technologies of government [...] the humble and mundane mechanisms by which authorities seek to instantiate government' (Rose and Miller 2010: 281).

Invited participatory spaces can function as a technology of government, regulating behaviour and legitimizing certain types of policies (Olivius 2014; ILcan and Rygiel 2015). Writing on such spaces in Latin America, Sonia Alvarez (2017: 319) has discussed how they can enhance what she calls *governability*, aiming 'to moderate democratic demands; to channel citizen discontent into controlled, symbolic, and often powerless "participatory" venues'. Spaces that are merely consultative discourage alternative forms of participation in the form of 'confrontational collective action' (Alvarez 2017: 320), so that a distinction is drawn between 'legitimate' participation and 'illegitimate' forms of confrontational collective action, such as protests (Alvarez *et al.* 2017).

However, approaching participation through a Foucauldian lens should immediately draw our attention to its potentially politically ambiguous outcomes. A central insight of Foucault's analysis of power is its inherent reversibility and intimate linkages with resistance (Foucault 1982). Power, in a Foucauldian sense, is not simply repressive but rather productive: 'it produces reality' (Foucault 1991: 194). This also means that it can be productive of resistance (Foucault 1982).

Examining the mesas in Colombia as a form of government should raise questions around the opportunities for resistance that they bring, as well as around how participation itself is disputed. Indeed, the existing literature suggests that this concept is essentially contested, and that competing perspectives invest the term with different meanings (Cornwall and Brock 2005). As Alvarez (2017: 317) puts it, participation can turn into 'a battlefield on which *multiple* and *multifaceted* sides [...] duke it out over citizenship, democracy, social, gendered, racial, sexual, environmental justice, and the like'.

The literature on Colombia has demonstrated how IDP policies have become objects of contention (Olarte and Wall 2012; Gómez 2013; Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015; Ochoa Sterling 2019; Tapia Navarro 2019). Beginning in the 1990s, organizations drawing on the ‘displaced’ and ‘victim’ labels emerged throughout Colombia (Berrió 2006; Osorio Pérez 2007; Muñoz Caicedo 2008; Romero Barreiro 2008; Juliao Vargas 2013; Arias Barrero and Carrera Díaz 2014; Murcia and Vahos 2015; Tapia Navarro 2019). Simultaneously, groups and individuals identifying as victims or IDPs began to put pressure on the government for access to rights or humanitarian assistance, both through established institutional channels and through protests (Olarte and Wall 2012; Zeiderman 2013; Arias Barrero and Carrera Díaz 2014; Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015; Eslava 2019).

The collective organization of IDPs and victims has partly been facilitated by the Colombian state’s transitional justice and humanitarian aid policies. Jemima García-Godos and Knut Andreas Lid (2010: 514) argue that the introduction of ‘victims’ as a legal category has ‘opened up a space for the formulation of claims that today have gained widespread legitimacy, both morally and legally’. Disparate struggles, such as the fight against impunity or for solutions to protracted displacement, are now framed in terms of ‘victim’s rights’ (García-Godos and Lid 2010: 515). Thus, the institutional and legal framework set up by the state to implement its humanitarian aid and transitional justice policies has provided IDP-led grassroots organizations with new opportunities for political mobilization (Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015: 29). Self-identified IDPs and victims have tactically used these frameworks to claim an expanding set of entitlements from the state (Sandvik and Lemaitre 2013). Hence, as Kristin Bergtora Sandvik and Julieta Lemaitre (2013: 38) argue, ‘the discourse and institutions of internal displacement have in fact created legal and political spaces for activism, in which beneficiaries can act both within and at the margins of the humanitarian system to improve their conditions’.

The policies and institutional frameworks developed for IDPs’ and victims’ participation have similarly become objects of contention and helped facilitate collective organization amongst IDPs. As argued by Sandvik and Lemaitre (2015), the mesas have brought opportunities that IDP-led grassroots organizations have used to their benefit. Lemaitre (2013: 15, translated from Spanish by me), for instance, observes that these spaces permit ‘leaders to get to know others, as well as the formation of networks’. The tokenistic nature of these participatory arenas has not gone unchallenged. Writing about an IDP mesa in the municipality of Mocoa, Sandvik and Lemaitre (2015: 25) detail how its members ‘resisted the passive role that the municipal government had assigned them’ and even started to attend municipal council meetings. Similarly, Julián Martín Berrío (2013) describes how victim representatives have criticized the tokenistic nature of the participatory spaces set up to implement the Victim’s Law.

While most of the literature on participation suggests that invited participatory spaces tend to be disempowering—serving to discourage forms of collective action

outside of their confines and legitimizing policies that are frequently developed in a non-participatory manner—the literature on Colombia highlights the need to take seriously the ways in which IDPs have used the political opportunities that humanitarian institutional frameworks bring. This article explores resistance around the mesas set up to implement the Victim's Law in Bogotá. In doing so it builds on the rich literature that has already examined how the Colombian state's humanitarian and transitional justice policies have become objects of contention and provided the internally displaced with new political opportunities. It contributes to this literature by exploring how IDPs' participation has allowed them to form networks that have helped facilitate what [Alvarez \(2017\)](#) calls 'confrontational collective action' outside of invited participatory spaces. Before doing so, however, the article first discusses the governmental effects of such participation.

Participation and Governability

We can analyse IDP and victims' participation in Colombia as a form of government ([Foucault 1982, 2009](#)). Seen in this light, participation can be understood as an attempt to regulate behaviour and to enhance what [Alvarez \(2017\)](#) calls governability.

The political rationalities of participation—the ideas around what IDP participation *should* involve, understandings of why such participation is needed, and the language used to discuss participation in Colombia ([Rose and Miller 2010: 277](#))—limit the extent to which IDPs can influence policy ([Berrío 2013; Lemaitre 2013](#)). The emphasis on IDP participation stems partly from Colombia's 1991 constitution, which states that 'all citizens have the right to participate in the shaping, exercise and control of political power' ([Asamblea Constituyente de Colombia 1991](#), Article 40, translated from Spanish by me). Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court has reserved the right to make decisions to formal participatory mechanisms such as voting, referendums and plebiscites, treating other participatory spaces set up by the state as fulfilling the right to freedom of expression, rather than a right to self-government ([Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2003](#), Sentencia C-292 c.fr. [Lemaitre 2013: 19](#)). The court maintains that, while the state should consult these spaces, it does not need to obtain their consent before developing policies ([Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2011](#), Sentencia T-129 c.fr. [Lemaitre 2013: 19](#)).

This applies to IDP participation. In Auto 008 of 2009 ([Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2009](#) c.fr. [Lemaitre 2013: 26](#), translated from Spanish by me), the Constitutional Court stated that IDPs had the right to be listened to in the development of new policies, 'notwithstanding that the responsible entities adopt decisions about the plan in an autonomous manner'. This leads [Lemaitre \(2013\)](#) to conclude that IDP participation in Colombia entails only the right to be listened to and not the right to make decisions.

A similar conceptualization of participation underlies the mesas. Decree 4800 of 2011, defined victim participation as:

The right of victims to receive information, intervene, comment on, receive feedback and contribute voluntarily in the design of the instruments for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the provisions laid out in Law 1448 ([El Presidente de la República de Colombia 2011](#), translated from Spanish by me).

This definition had little to say on the right to make decisions, instead using more vague and passive terms such as ‘contribute’, ‘intervene’, ‘receive information’, and ‘receive feedback’. A 2013 protocol for victim’s participation similarly began by stating that the mesas should ‘serve as valid instances of dialogue and consultation’, suggesting their mainly consultative role ([Unidad Para las Víctimas 2013](#), translated from Spanish by me). While the protocol did go on to say that they should ‘influence’ policies, it fell short of giving them outright decision-making powers. It gave public entities a responsibility to inform these spaces whether they would include any of their proposals within 15 days, but notably put no obligation on state entities to do so ([Unidad Para las Víctimas 2013](#)). This issue was put bluntly to me by Alejandro, a local government official I interviewed:

The mesas [...] influence things, but they do not decide [...] because, let’s say, there’s a difference. It’s like we keep them in mind, but the decisions are taken by the administration. (Interview, 26 October 2017)

Upon observing the mesas held at the University of the Andes in April 2018, I witnessed the limited nature of IDP participation first-hand. The two sessions were structured as a series of presentations, followed by questions and answers. They involved very little input from the IDP and victim representatives, who were outnumbered by the state officials in attendance two to one. All but one of the presentations were given by a functionary, and most of the presentations contained only generic information on the housing offers the state provided for victims. Hence, the IDPs’ role at the mesas was largely consultative, limited to asking questions about premade policies.

To the extent the sessions involved any form of participation at all, this was restricted to listening to the representatives. During the two meetings, a functionary took notes on a set of posters. At the end of the day of the first session, these were displayed at the back of the lecture hall. The day’s discussion was neatly divided into four different posters entitled ‘strengths’, ‘weaknesses’, ‘opportunities’, and ‘threats’, using a so-called SWOT analysis, commonly deployed within organizations ([Chermack and Kasshanna 2007](#)), illustrating the technical and depoliticized approach adopted. Complaints raised by an Afro-descendant delegate that the existing housing offer resembled prisons and did not account for their cultural needs, was noted down as ‘campesinos have different needs’ on the poster entitled ‘threats’. The delegates’ concerns were reduced to a few bullet points, neatly catalogued and categorized, and emptied of much of their original substance and political connotations. In sum, the political rationalities of participation underlying the mesas limited their role to simply constituting spaces in which IDPs and victims could exercise their right to be listened to ([Lemaitre 2013](#)).

At the same time, as a technology of government (Rose and Miller 2010), the mesas have been explicitly used to delegitimize the protests and occupations that self-identified IDPs and victims commonly resort to (Osorio Pérez 2007; Olarte and Wall 2012). Discouraging occupations was explicitly a purpose of these spaces from their initial establishment in Bogotá at the turn of the millennium (Osorio Pérez 2007: 221–222). The Bogotá Mesa, set up in the capital in 1998, was established in a year when no fewer than 12 IDP-led occupations had taken place, including of the offices of UNHCR (Osorio Pérez 2007: 221). Meanwhile, a separate District Mesa was established in 2000, in the wake of a 2-year-long occupation of the headquarters of the ICRC. State officials at the time described this as a space meant to be ‘more open and more democratic where direct action does not predominate as the only way to sit down and talk’ (Osorio Pérez 2007: 222, translated from Spanish by me). The government promised to use the space to divulge information about their policies to IDPs, but in exchange for its delegates refraining from participating in occupations (Osorio Pérez 2007: 222).

Therefore, the mesas can be understood as a technology of government (Rose and Miller 2010) that aims to enhance governability (Alvarez 2017). For Alvarez (2017: 319), merely consultative participatory spaces that aim to ‘give voice’ to citizens often serve a broader purpose in the form of encouraging stability. Having received opportunities for being listened to, civil society ‘is expected to be civic and to make demands on the system only through established institutional channels of political representation’ (Alvarez 2017: 320–321). By extension, these spaces can discourage other—more raucous—forms of participation in the form of ‘confrontational collective action’ (Alvarez *et al.* 2017: 1).

The expectation that the mesas should serve as an alternative to confrontational collective action was expressed by several state officials. When I asked Alejandro, for instance, whether he thought protests could change public policies, he responded: ‘I think the best space for changing public policies is this framework of participation that they can arrive at through organisations’ (Interview, 26 October 2017). Likewise, Juan Andrés, a state official at the Victim’s Unit who specialized in participation, answered the same question by saying:

I think victims today have very valuable channels for participation. I think these channels for participation can influence the implementation of public policies, not only at the national level, but also at the local level. (Interview, 1 December 2017)

Moreover, when a group of victims in Cucutá staged an occupation, the Victim’s Unit—the state entity responsible for implementing the Victim’s Law—stated that, ‘this use of pressure has been equally rejected by the Municipal Victims Mesa’ (Unidad Para las Víctimas 2016). In this way, mesas can also function as a technology of government that delegitimizes dissent and attempts to enhance governability (Alvarez 2017). My findings, then, support those of others who have highlighted the limited nature of IDP and victim participation in Colombia and expressed concerns that this participation is simply used to legitimize the state’s policies (Muñoz Caicedo 2008; Berrío 2013; Lemaitre 2013; de Waardt and Weber

2019). The case of Colombia also corroborates findings by others who have highlighted the cosmetic nature of forced migrants' participation more broadly (Kaiser 2004; Horn 2010; Olivius 2014). At the same time, as the next section discusses, the mesas have also brought opportunities for resistance—suggesting that the effects of invited participatory spaces are not entirely negative, but rather politically ambiguous.

IDP Participation and Resistance

We can identify two kinds of resistance linked to the mesas: first, the nature of the participation they permit has itself become an object of contention. Second, as a technology of government (Rose and Miller 2010), these spaces have brought opportunities for wider resistance, strengthening IDPs' activism outside of them. This suggests they have ultimately failed to enhance governability (Alvarez 2017).

First, the IDPs I interviewed expressed a radically different understanding of participation to that of the state's discourse, believing that this should extend beyond mere consultation to also incorporate the right to make decisions (Lemaitre 2013). Lizeth, who belonged to several mesas in Bogotá, described with dismay the limited decision-making opportunities these spaces conferred. 'It's a cynical deceit, they invite you to participate, and you suggest something and maybe your suggestion even remains—yeah?—but it is never implemented' (Interview, 15 May 2018). She recounted one incident when the government had put forward measures for approval that she and the other representatives disagreed with. When they had objected to the measures, they had been told this was irrelevant because the functionaries attending the mesa outnumbered them, and the measures had been approved anyway. For Lizeth, this was an insult, because she believed participation should include decision-making abilities. She maintained that the purpose of participation was 'to work on the problems and policies related to victims' and asked how it was possible that they could be presented with policies 'made from behind a desk' by state officials (Interview, 15 May 2018), who did not even care if the policies had the victims' approval.

Others I interviewed, similarly saw the right to make decisions as constituting a cornerstone of participation. The most common concern the IDPs raised was the limited decision-making opportunities they were granted. Hélder, part of one of the mesas, complained that 'we try to influence things, but we don't see it reflected, or they don't really pay any attention to it' (Interview, 2 July 2018). Similarly, Edward, also a victims' representative, was disappointed with the opportunities for participation they had. 'We have made proposals of all, of all natures. Even the easiest things we have proposed, and nothing! Not land, nor housing, nor self-construction' (Interview, 17 July 2018). Acutely aware of the limitations of state-sanctioned participatory spaces, many representatives instead expressed a desire for access to the places where decisions were made. Esperanza, who sat on multiple mesas, said they needed representation in Congress. 'We are participating here at the local level, and the district level, and the national level for those who are in the national mesas, but, in reality, the place where they are making the big

decisions, we have concluded, is in Congress, and that is why we want seats for victims' (Interview, 28 June 2018).

The representatives did not just raise these concerns in private to me; during the mesas held at the University of the Andes, they actively resisted the state's consultative understanding of participation. Throughout the two sessions, the IDPs challenged their one-sidedness. One of them did so by interrupting three of the speakers, including an official who had called the mesa an 'academic space', saying she instead she believed the purpose of the session was to come up with answers to their problems. Contesting the way in which the meetings were run, she therefore expressed an understanding of participation as a space in which they could exercise the right to make decisions (Lemaitre 2013).

The other representatives also contested the state's understanding of participation, using the Q&A sessions to do so. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the delegates told the assembled crowd that these mesas always left her feeling disillusioned and hopeless. Before leaving, she requested that the next time she would like a 'debate without so much mystery'. The use of the term 'debate' is significant. Elsewhere, Lemaitre (2013) has described how Colombian functionaries running a similar session requested that the participants engage in a 'dialogue without a debate'. In requesting a debate, then, the delegate explicitly challenged the one-sided conceptualization of participation that the mesas were based on.

Thus while the political rationalities (Rose and Miller 2010) underpinning the mesas are consultative, treating them as fulfilling the right to be listened to (Lemaitre 2013), the meaning of IDP participation in Colombia has been challenged by the displaced themselves, who demand decision-making abilities. This supports the argument that participation is an essentially contested concept (Cornwall and Brock 2005), which can become a 'battlefield' in which multiple sides 'duke it out' over its meaning (Alvarez 2017: 317).

Second, while the mesas can be understood as a technology of government (Rose and Miller 2010) meant to enhance governability (Alvarez 2017) and delegitimize any dissent outside of their confines, they have not fully succeeded in stopping delegates from engaging in 'confrontational collective action' (Alvarez *et al.* 2017: 1). In fact, many of those I interviewed did not see their participation in the mesas as an alternative to other forms of activism. Germán, who sat on two of these councils, expressed this to me in this manner:

I don't believe that, in an institutional space, the struggle can achieve much for a simple reason: because its design, in terms of regulations, laws, all of this, is made so that you cannot do anything apart from what they want you to. (Interview, 17 April 2018)

He recalled how he had decided to join the mesas not as an alternative to his activism, but to demonstrate 'once and for all that these spaces are not viable, that this system doesn't offer you anything but sweets and lies and refreshments' (Interview, 17 April 2018). In this manner, if they needed 'to do tougher things, then we can say "we tried to do it your way, following your logic, and you didn't

want to, so now we must be tougher''' (Interview, 17 April 2018). Partaking in invited participatory spaces did not stop him from seeing his relationship with the state as oppositional. 'My role is here, in the street, with the people', he told me. 'It is about demanding, not asking' (Interview, 17 April 2018). For Germán, participation was important only insofar that it helped his activism, noting that they were there to learn 'and trying to see with whom we can act outside' (Interview, 17 April 2018).

During my interviews, virtually none of those I spoke to saw their participation as a substitute for other forms of activism. Out of the 25 representatives I interviewed, all but two had participated in an occupation or a protest. In fact, the mesas have provided IDPs with increased opportunities for engaging in collective action. Jesús Alberto, one delegate, related how, on several occasions, they had organized occupations in the city, using their positions to convene hundreds of people.

Similarly, Catalina, who sat on one of the local mesas, confessed that they were planning to stage an occupation. 'We are thinking about occupying something else, in the next days to see how we can get together the right people and do it' (Interview, 17 July 2018). Edward also discussed his plans for staging another occupation. 'It's gotten to the point where I'm now inviting my comrades and the other mesas to do occupations' (Interview, 17 July 2018). Rather than enhancing governability (Alvarez 2017), then, the mesas have provided people like Germán, Jesús Alberto, Catalina, and Edward with opportunities for organizing 'confrontational collective action' (Alvarez *et al.* 2017).

While attending the sessions at the University of the Andes, I witnessed the way in which IDPs strategically used the mesas in their activism. As mentioned, one of the representatives invited the assembled crowd to a meeting organized by a Popular Housing Organisation, due to be held later that month. Popular Housing Organisations (in Spanish: *organizaciones populares de vivienda*, henceforth OPVs) grew out of solidaristic collective action around housing associated with self-management in informal settlements at the outskirts of Colombia's major cities in the 1950s (Orozco Herrera 2015: 196). For IDPs, OPVs have become crucial in their struggle, having gained access to housing for several hundreds of their members in Bogotá (Mejía *et al.* 2015).

Significantly, many of the founding members of these OPVs were also part of Bogotá's mesas, according to my interviews with them. Victim representatives from the Suba locality, for instance, were heavily involved in the OPVs, securing housing for over 700 families. Two of them related how this had come about on the back of a 2-year-long campaign. 'We achieved this through marches, sit-ins, we had to do it by force, the bad way' (Interview, 18 July 2018).

It was therefore significant that one of the representatives invited the assembled crowd to an OPV meeting. She was not alone in using the mesa in this manner. Several of the IDPs who attended the sessions were also members of OPVs. They turned the one-sided delivery of information evidenced to their advantage, using it to acquire information on the government's housing policies. One delegate asked so many questions—mainly technical and concerned with specific housing

programmes—that the state officials began to pull faces at each other while he was talking. In this manner, the OPV members utilized the mesas to strengthen their collective action outside of these spaces—building networks and inviting others to attend their meeting, as well as gathering information, which they could later employ in their activism.

The mesas have turned into a space in which IDPs engage in strategies of resistance against the state—contesting the meaning of participation and building networks and gathering information that they can wield in their ‘confrontational collective action’ (Alvarez *et al.* 2017). This side to these spaces has not gone unnoticed by the state. During my fieldwork in February 2018, I observed a group of functionaries planning an event in the Suba locality—where the local mesa has been heavily involved with the OPVs. They spent considerable time devising strategies for excluding the local mesa from the event they were planning on the grounds that its members were ‘difficult’. This suggests that these invited participatory spaces, initially established to enhance governability (Alvarez 2017), have instead become another site in which IDPs challenge the state.

Conclusion

Rather than participating passively in the mesas, Colombian IDPs have contested the way these spaces are run, by extension challenging the meaning of participation itself. Crucially they have expressed an understanding of this concept that extends to the right to make decisions (Lemaitre 2013). Furthermore, IDP and victim activists have used the opportunities that the mesas bring to strengthen their advocacy outside of these state-sanctioned spaces.

While the existing literature suggests that invited participatory spaces often enhance governability and legitimize policies that are made in fundamentally non-participatory ways (Kaiser 2004; Horn 2010; Lemaitre 2013; Alvarez *et al.* 2017), the evidence from Colombia is more mixed, suggesting these spaces can be politically ambiguous in their outcomes. At once functioning as a form of government (Foucault 1982, 2009) meant to tame unruly IDPs, the mesas have also helped foment and strengthen their activism. Rather than channelling IDP concerns into tokenistic participatory spaces, the mesas have brought new opportunities for networking and information gathering that IDP and victims have taken with them back onto the streets. This supports Foucault’s (1982) argument that power is linked to its mirror image of resistance.

The case of the mesas also adds to our understanding of IDP activism in Colombia more broadly. The existing literature on displacement and state policies in the country has highlighted the need to take seriously the agency of the displaced, and the savvy way in which they have used existing institutional structures in their struggles. What my study shows is that we need to theorize the linkages that exist between resistance strategies that take place *within* state-sanctioned spaces such as the mesas and confrontational collective action (Alvarez 2017) *outside* of such spaces if we are to fully understand IDP and victim activism in Colombia. Rather than the former substituting the latter, IDPs’ engagement with

institutional spaces has, if anything, strengthened their ability to confront the state.

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