

"In all, we had more than 45 children and we immediately started getting funds to save a schoolhouse which was on the point of being closed down. We repaired the walls, painted the place and got pots and pans and some plates for a school cafeteria. The Colombian Family Welfare Institute gave us food for the children's lunches," recalls Sandra, who in 1997 had been forced by the FARC guerrillas, along with her family, to leave the region of Santa Elena del Opón in Santander.

This early achievement of their collective efforts motivated them to create the Association of United Small Farmers of Buena Vista and New York (Asopubun) with the support of the National Federation of Popular Housing (Fenavip). They divided the farms into 22 small holdings and began to convince government bodies and non-governmental agencies that they did really want to contribute to building up their country.

The first donations they received included hoes, picks and shovels, machetes, fencing wire, cans, sinks, materials for septic tanks, water tanks, fertilizers and seeds to plant corn, rice, colander, tomato, lettuce and onions, amongst others. This stimulated them enough for each family to set about building a home on their own property. They were starting from scratch, since nothing at all remained of the land and the animals they had left behind when they were expelled by violence, and the State has never given them any idea about when and how they will be compensated. By the end of 2001, each family had its own dwelling

They have received not only donations, but also mini-loans from various NGOs with which to buy hens, tools and seeds, as we were told by Ismael Antonio Prada, the Asopubun president, a man with a black moustache and a mournful look.

In search of credit

There's plenty of land, but not much water, says Antonio, and it is difficult and most unlikely that the State bank, much less private banking, will give us much credit. "Nobody has faith in the displaced," Ismael says sadly. He tells us that two years ago they designed a project for fattening cattle which would have cost 300 million pesos, but the necessary loan was not approved. Why not? Because the people don't have titles to their land, since they still owe 30% of the price which they were left to pay after the government had subsidized the remaining 70%. "Besides that, they asked us for guarantors, but we don't have anyone to offer collateral for us," says Ismael.

Even so, they didn't give up. They visited their neighbors, owners of larger properties, asking them to lend them animals which they could fatten on a sharing basis. And they have been successful. So much so that now they have 180 head of cattle on their land.

Proof that they are ready to do whatever it takes to secure a better future for themselves is the fight they are putting up now to get water, since for the moment it is rationed. They only have water for two hours a day in each house and at different

They get together to work "one day for me in exchange for another day for you".

times, so that everyone can have access to water. "When I have had my two hours," says Marlén González Monroy, widow and mother of four, "I turn off the tap so that my neighbor can start getting water."

In their efforts to obtain proper water supply, they have left no stone unturned. They need to get 25 million pesos to buy the 15 hectares of woodland where there is a source of water that supplies the local aqueduct. The idea is to protect it and increase the volume of water so that everyone can have access to it for home use. They already have obtained 19 million pesos in donations, and they will get another five from loans. All they

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need is one more million and they will have achieved their goal.

They have pinned their hopes on being able to buy that woodland so that their crops will not fail. "It's very dry around here. The other day we planted a large amount of bean seed but the hot weather burnt the plants. So we can't plant tomatoes or peas or anything much at all," says Reynaldo Acosta, displaced from the Pozo Azul area of Southern Bolívar province.

They don't have enough money to pay workers, but in this they have once again shown their ingenuity: they have invented a system of working "one day for me in exchange for another day for you."

"If one of us needs to clear the soil around the maize plants, or harvest a crop or any such job, we let the others know and everyone turns out for a day to work. Later, that same person who has benefited from the joint labor, works one day for the rest," we are told by small farmer Gustavo Sánchez.

Like all organized communities, this one has its own working committees to solve any problems that crop up, to work for the benefit of the elders, to subsidize home building and electricity supply, and to establish a joint trading system to facilitate the sale of crops.

They know that this New York of theirs is not the world's capital, but they know it is full of human capital. With it, as well as Buena Vista's capital, they will find ways to overcome the consequences of the armed conflict. ▀

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Lebrija's New York and its immigrants

Forced off their land by violence, twenty-two farming families settled on two rural properties near the city of Bucaramanga. Their new farms were known as New York and Buena Vista. They got organized to till the soil, created an association and today they have made a new start from scratch.

By Manuel Navarro



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Members of 22 families arrived to the farms named New York and Buena Vista to begin a new life.

This is the chronicle of 22 families who weren't subjected to the usual strict demands of obtaining a visa in order to enter New York. Nor did they have to learn to speak English or have dollar bills in their pockets. All they had to do was be ready to keep their courage up despite all the dreadful things that had happened to them. They assure us that they are the only people in the world who didn't need to comply with all the usual requisites in order to "live in New York." Instead of The Big Apple, they found a farm of corn and fruits.

Ironically their passports were issued by paramilitary and guerrilla violence which, over five years ago, threw them off their small holdings in the Santander province and in the south of Bolívar, obliging

them, initially, to crowd together in makeshift accommodations or with relatives in the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga.

They reached New York, Colombia, on foot, some in trucks on loan from the Lebrija local council, with their clothes in sacks or in cardboard boxes, bearing the memory of a dozen of their nearest and dearest who had been murdered.

Sandra Disney Durán Quiroga recalls how they arrived there in 2001. "The first families got here in January, and the last ones in April," says this 32 year old widow, mother of three children.

They didn't find an "asphalt jungle," but rather a green landscape, 258 hectares of fields, trees, fresh air and infinite peace in a high mountain district from which they could see the Sogamoso River and the old railway line that links Bucaramanga to Middle Magdalena Valley.

New York is a farm, as Buena Vista is also. And this is where these families

settled after getting a government loan of 310 million pesos which enabled them to buy both properties.

Starting over again

Beginning life anew in this corner of Santander, about one hour by road from the town of Lebrija, has not been easy. On arrival at New York and Buena Vista, the one hundred and eight family members crowded into a brick building, an old house and a cattle coral, with no electricity, just a trickle of water out of a quarter-of-an-inch hose, and no telephone. The farms are on an unmade road, a two-hour walk from the main Bucaramanga-Barrancabermeja highway.

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