The Politics of Participation: Metropolitan Region Greenbelt Planning  
(Medellin, Colombia)

Summary
The Medellin Metropolitan Planning Agency, serving the capital of the Colombian province of Antioquia and surrounding cities, is exploring plans for creating a regional greenbelt to curb metropolitan region growth and sprawl. The project is important for Medellin’s long-term growth management—as the region received 101,887 internally-displaced persons in 2011 alone—and for conserving water resources, natural, and agricultural lands surrounding the valley.

The project has run into controversy with the eastern community of Comuna 8 (Villa Hermosa), largely made up of informal settlements and about 40% recent rural migrants. Government officials proposed a pilot greenbelt project with conceptual renderings depicting a territory eerily similar to that of Comuna 8 but without much of the existing human settlements it currently has, alarming and mobilizing the area’s residents. The community has been calling for more participation in the planning process and for their right to remain in the area. Additionally, both the local and the regional governments feel pressure to provide updates to the regional plan for Medellin or risk losing the city’s reputation as an international example for forward-thinking urban planning practices. Finally, the local administration is up for reelection soon and needs visible, completed projects to demonstrate their active role in addressing the needs of the region.

As a planner for the regional government, do you continue the greenbelt plans to address the pressing needs of uncontrolled growth at the risk of losing the cooperation of and potentially even disenfranchising the community of Comuna 8? Work collaboratively with the community in a longer term planning process, but jeopardize losing political backing during the upcoming elections? Or, move forward with the metropolitan region plan update without the greenbelt component and without addressing any of the needs of Comuna 8?

Background
Medellin is the capital of the Antioquia province and the second largest city in Colombia. The city has a population of 2.4 million and the region 3.7 million. Medellin has more than tripled in size in the last 60 years, from just under 500,000 in 1955. This growth has been driven by industrialization—although the city is now undergoing deindustrialization dynamics—and people displaced from rural areas by armed conflict. As a country, Columbia has the largest number of internally-displaced persons (IDPs)—between 4,900,000 and 5,500,000 as of 2012. In 2011 alone, the city of Medellin received 101,887 internally-displaced persons (IDPs). Medellin sits in the Aburrá Valley, bisected by the Medellin River, and surrounded by steep mountains. As they moved to the city, many of these rural to urban migrants constructed their own accommodations in informal settlements on unregulated land, most notably the precariously steep slopes of the Aburrá Valley.

One of the communities that has received a large portion of migrants is Comuna 8 (Villa Hermosa) on the east-central edge of the city bordered by the Pan de Azúcar mountain. Comuna 8 is largely an
informal settlement, made up of self-built housing and pathways. Although Comuna 8 is close to the city center, its upper part is not easily accessible. Its location along steep slopes makes access difficult. According to a door-to-door survey done in 2010, over 155,000 people live in Comuna 8. About 40% of this population has been displaced from rural areas in Colombia by violent conflict, and between one and four families continue to arrive every day. Comuna received some 15,600 displaced people just in 2011.

Medellin plans to implement a Metropolitan Greenbelt (Cinturón Verde Metropolitano or Jardín Circunvalar) as a measure of urban growth containment. The plan aims to address complicated issues of land squatting, barrio (neighborhood) upgrading, governance, and ecosystem loss but, according to inhabitants living in the territory of the proposed greenbelt, this does not adequately take into account issues at the community level. When early design schematics of the greenbelt were presented, the residents and the Planning and Local Development Council of Comuna 8 recognized that a portion of the greenbelt would pass through Comuna 8, but the preliminary designs did not seem to include the presence of the community. In the plan proposals, it was not clear what would happen to the population, if they would participate in the process and if they would be relocated inside or outside the neighborhood.

The community called for more substantive participation throughout the planning process and to remain in the area. They began partnering with domestic and international universities to assist in the articulation of their goals and provide planning project alternatives and trade-offs. This included possible interventions for the area and potential areas for relocation as a last resort. These strategic partnerships provided more visibility for the Comuna 8 community and addressed how the greenbelt could be implemented by responding to both environmental and social concerns. Among the issues discussed between the universities and the community (and later with local urban planners) was the integration of community representatives at different decision making points and at various scales of government. Additionally, the community recognized the importance of growth containment and the idea of a greenbelt. They stressed the possibilities of “common ground” and cultural translations through mutually beneficial interventions supporting housing, food security, land-slide risk mitigation, integral barrio rehabilitation, and job creation through agricultural and tourist uses in the greenbelt. Another issue that emerged through discussions with the universities was the importance of supporting economic and physical integration into the urban setting for many of the Comuna 8 residents, since a large portion of them are recent rural migrants.

While this process has been fruitful in bringing other issues and possible solutions to the table, planners have realized that the greenbelt planning process will not be as fast as they originally expected. Additionally, they are approaching two other important events that may take some of their attention away from the greenbelt and Comuna 8: the Municipal Land Use Plan update deadline is looming and they are unsure how to address the greenbelt and Comuna 8—if at all. Government elections are also coming up and there is an internal need for visible projects for the current administrations’ reelections and to ensure continuity of the innovative planning programs that have launched Medellin into the global planning spotlight in recent years.
This case also holds national significance, as Colombia’s 1991 Constitution established a foundation upon which urban improvement plans and projects such as the Greenbelt are constructed. The Constitución sets up progressive notions that land and property should have both social and ecological functions, citizen opinion should inform urban policy, and that the costs and benefits of urban development should be fairly distributed among stakeholders. The Greenbelt has been framed as a plan that protects the environment and provides better living conditions for all of Medellin’s citizens, which would contribute to the ecological and social functions of this land. Yet, people in Comuna 8 and other poor, self-built areas of the city claim that they have not been justly included in the decision making for the project and the benefits that it will grant.

**Actors & Institutions**

**Medellín Metropolitan Planning Agency**: The Metropolitan Planning Agency promotes regional planning for the Medellín region, including the capital and 13 other municipalities. It is one of the most active and productive across Latin America. *Currently, its major planning directive is promoting growth for the region that is sustainable.*

**Comuna 8 Planning and Local Development Council**: The community in Comuna 8 is politically organized. They have been mobilizing since 1995, consolidating support from different groups within the city, and building alliances with larger organizations such as the United Nations (UN). They have been building a vision for their community, drawing support from the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the environmental sustainability movement, and incorporating concepts such human security and social construction of habitat. In 2007, the community consolidated its vision and formed the Comuna 8 Planning and Local Development Council. The Council is comprised of 32 people from different constituencies within Comuna 8 and is widely recognized as representative of the community. They meet monthly and organize public hearings and workshops around neighborhood development and changes happening in Comuna 8. The Council is organized into several subcommittees (*mesas*) addressing the different needs of the community, such as assistance for displaced people and women and youth subcommittees. *The Council critically engages the various city programs and interventions, and works to shape them to better fit the needs of the Comuna.*

**Medellín Municipal Government**: The municipal government has been innovative in addressing planning problems facing the city and its region. The city has won numerous international planning awards and is seen as a ‘best practice’ for its new systems of parks, multi-modal public transportation, increased access in informal settlements through cable cars and escalators, public policing, and library systems, among other interventions. *The current administration sees its main focus as growth management through the dual approach of limiting expansion (via an urban growth boundary or greenbelt) and densification of city center.*

**Antioquia Departmental Government**: The departmental government (equivalent to US states) largely supports (both economically and politically) the actions of the municipal governments and the metropolitan planning agency. A former mayor of Medellin, Sergio Fajardo, instrumental in many of
the innovative solutions mentioned above, is now Governor of Antioquia and has sought to continue the policies originally implemented at the Medellin city level.

Universities: Colombian universities, especially public ones, have a pronounced role in community outreach and engagement and see these activities as critical university functions. Some of their professors and students have played important roles in lending their expertise, analysis and recommendations to shape the Greenbelt. They have also collaborated with international universities to the same aims. Recently, several universities (three Colombian, one Spanish, and one from the United States) assisted the Comuna 8 Planning and Local Development Council in creating a community-based plan for the area. This group acted as advocacy planners—not speaking for the community—but rather acting as mediators in providing additional visibility for the community, the Comuna 8 Planning and Local Development Council, and their planning proposals.

The Decision
As a project planner advising the Medellin Planning Agency, you need to make a decision regarding the Greenbelt and Comuna 8. Your options are as follows:

a. Continue the Greenbelt plans with the displacement of large portions of Comuna 8. This will address the rapid, uncontrolled growth of the metro region and take steps to preserve water supplies, environmentally sensitive areas, and farmland. It will also fulfill the desires of the new mayor, Gaviria, to establish his own signature, visible project, continuing the momentum of good planning accolades that prior mayors’ projects brought to the city in recent years. However, this decision also comes at the cost of losing any collaborative opportunities with the residents of Comuna 8 and further alienation of other poor communities in the city periphery.

b. Continue the participatory and collaborative processes. This option should (eventually) address both the need to contain growth and the needs of Comuna 8. However, because this will require a longer planning process with an undefined timeline, you risk losing political backing if the upcoming elections result in a mayor and local leaders who do not prioritize this project.

c. Move forward with other aspects of the Local Land Use Plan and put aside the community demands and Greenbelt to potentially address later. This focuses on the administrative directives to complete the plan update in a timely manner. However, this leaves the issue of city and metropolitan growth unresolved and runs the risk of losing collaborative momentum built up with the Comuna 8 residents association, depending on if and when planners revisit the issue.