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United in the Struggle: The Role of Land Titles for Communities of Internally Displaced Persons in El Salvador

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United In the Struggle: The Role of Land Ownership for Communities of Internally Displaced

Persons in El Salvador

Corie Welch

May 2018

A Master's Research Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of International

Development, Community, and Environment

And accepted on the recommendation of:

Denise Humphreys Bebbington, Chief Instructor

Abstract:

United In the Struggle: The Role of Land Ownership for Communities of Internally Displaced
Persons in El Salvador

Corie Welch

Multiple episodes of dispossession and displacement characterize the lives of landless rural and semi-rural families across El Salvador. The residents of 30 de Abril, a semi-rural community in El Salvador formed from displaced families, engaged in a five-year struggle to force the government to make good on its promise of land to the rural poor. Now, with legal titles in hand, residents continue to work together to seek additional services and resources for their community, proving their resilience in the face of displacement. Based upon the experience of 30 de Abril, this paper explores the trajectory of one community's struggle for land and the importance residents attribute to land ownership in terms of physical security and economic opportunity. The paper argues that for displaced families, land ownership mobilizes mutual trust and cooperation resulting in increasing levels of social capital that can then be used toward addressing broader community development needs and priorities.

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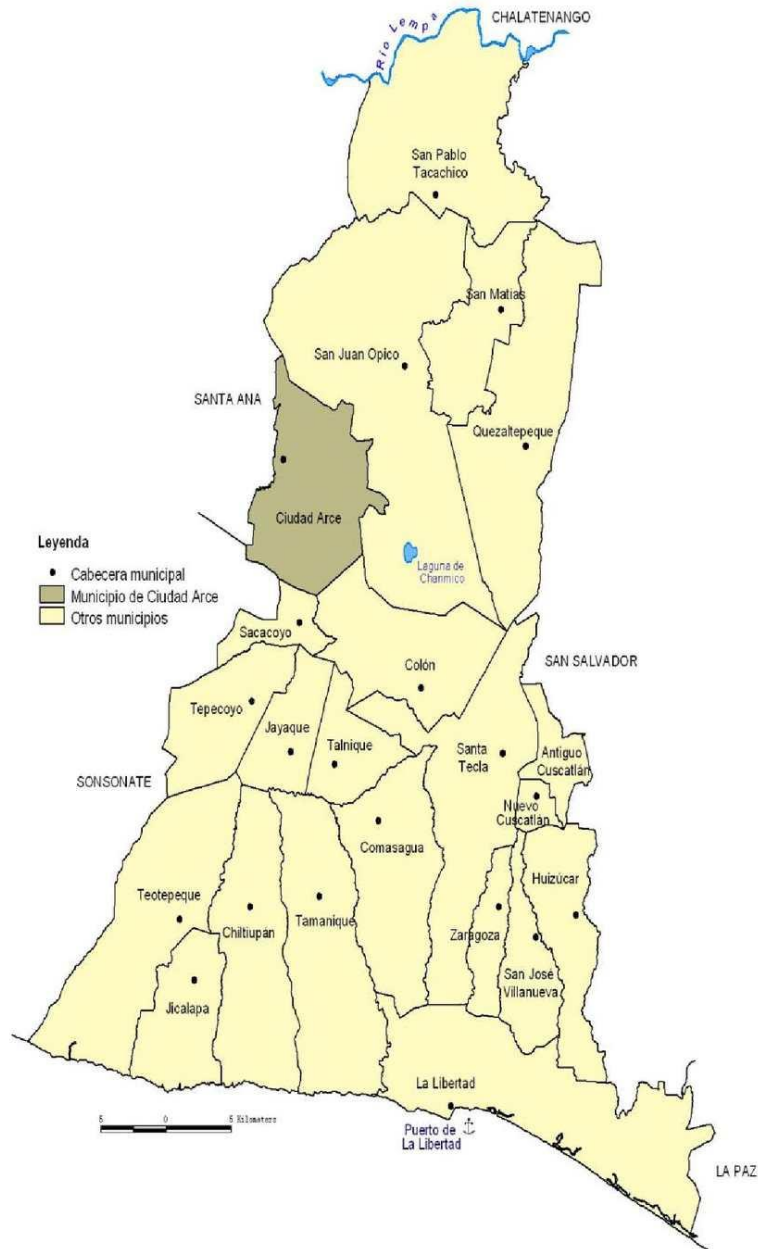


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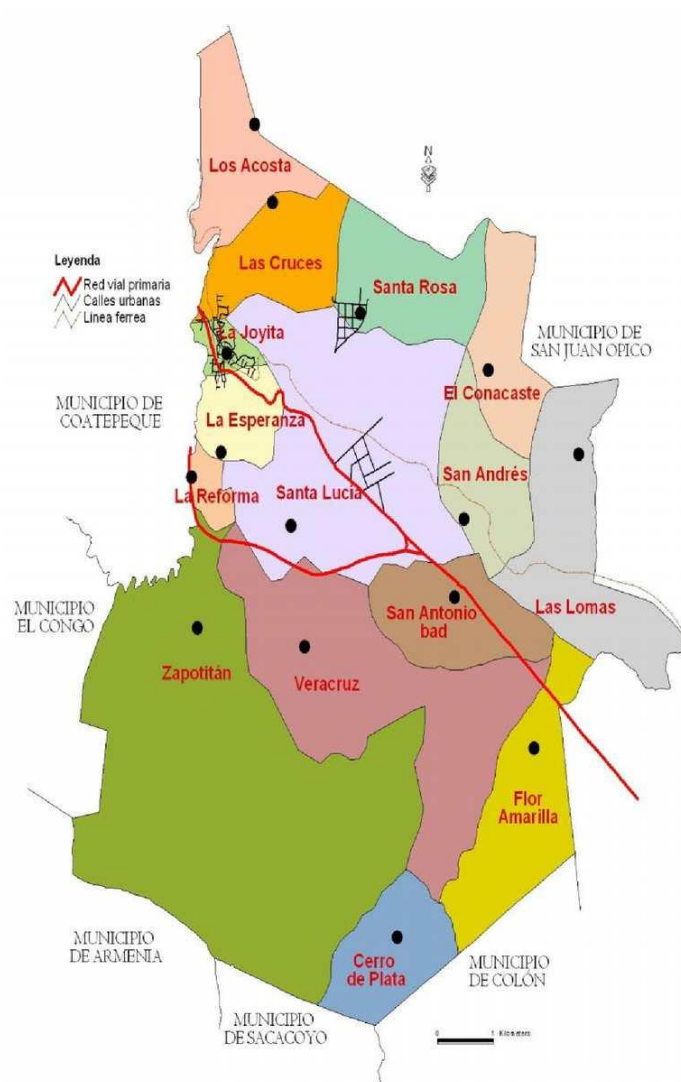


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List of Abbreviations:

Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA)

Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, Farabundo Martí National

Liberation Front (FMLN)

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

Instituto de la Legalización de Propiedad, Institute for the Legalization of Property (ILP)

Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria, Salvadoran Institute of Agrarian

Transformation (ISTA)

Programa de Transferencia de Tierras, Land Transfer Program (PTT)

Introduction:

In the final stanza of the famous poem “Como Tu” (Like You) the Salvadoran poet, Roque Dalton, writes, “And that my veins don’t end in me but in the unanimous blood of those who struggle for life, love, little things, landscape and bread, the poetry of everyone,”. (Dalton, 1967: 9-16) Dalton illustrates the resilience of the Salvadoran people, collectively struggling against their stratified society to gain freedom from oppression and access to land after years of dispossession. Now, 25 years after the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords (1992) that put an end to the twelve-year civil war and established land reform, access to land remains elusive for many Salvadoran families. This paper explores the legacy of dispossession and extreme poverty in El Salvador, and the resulting process of internal displacement linked to the longstanding internal conflict. It traces how internally displaced families come together, organize and engage with government land redistribution programs in one region. I argue that while the roots of internal displacement are largely the product of civil war, the phenomenon of multiple or serial displacement is linked to additional factors, including increased land values post conflict, housing developments driven by private investors, recent natural disasters -likely made worse by climate change- and increasing levels of rural violence perpetuated by El Salvador’s criminal gangs. The experiences of families seeking land under the government’s land redistribution program suggests that the government has both failed to fully understand the complexity of internal displacement and provide meaningful solutions to the growing number of displaced families.

In this paper I ask the following questions: how does land ownership affect the lives of people who have experienced displacement? How does land ownership catalyze or strengthen

the social infrastructure¹ of communities of internally displaced families? Does land ownership help communities overcome exclusionary circumstances? To answer these questions, I draw upon research conducted with the community of 30 de Abril in El Salvador and highlight their collective efforts to struggle for individual land titles as they overcame their most recent displacement in 2010 from a flood.

To an outsider, the community of 30 de Abril looks like a typical poor, semi-urban community in El Salvador, but this particular community has an advantage that many similar communities do not enjoy; the families in 30 de Abril hold individual titles to their lands. This paper seeks to understand the role that legal land tenure plays in the community development process, specifically for a community with a history of internal displacement. I argue that for internally displaced persons, security of tenure frees families from the burdens of displacement. The land is an asset that families can mobilize for productive and social needs. In addition, the land title paired with this stock of newly built social capital allows communities to work together, drawing off of their positive experience to pressure the government to for services in the future. However, the positive freedoms that come from land ownership do not always translate across genders. In some cases, women reported assuming more burdens after securing their land title. Overall, land titles change communities positively, making way for beneficial development.

To convey the importance of land ownership for families and communities in El Salvador, I use the story of 30 de Abril that I gathered through a series of interviews with community members. My analysis merges a focus on Sen's "Development as Freedom" with a rural livelihoods framework to understand the freedoms that land ownership brings to families as

¹ In this example, social infrastructure refers to the organization of a community. Examples include decision making bodies and spaces for public participation that mobilize social relations within a community. It is the vehicles available within a community that create capacity to act.

well as the power of collective action. I first describe land as freedom, arguing that titles, when paired with social capital, relieve families of the burdens of displacement. Then, I explain the faults of ownership to change patriarchal structures within communities, leaving women with increased burdens. Next, I analyze the importance of the title in creating a sense of security for families that allows them to invest in the future of the community. In addition, I illustrate the importance of the process of pressuring the government which reaffirms the rights of the community as citizens. Furthermore, this struggle gives communities the ability to continue to work together to transform their lives. However, while the freedom that comes with legal land titles is transformative, as seen with land redistribution efforts of earlier decades, land titles alone do not address the underlying conditions of economic and social marginalization that reproduce poverty. Internal displacement is a growing problem in El Salvador and its full complexity and consequences are yet to be fully understood or addressed by government actors.

Literature Review:

I begin with a review of the literature to understand the role of land titles for communities of internally displaced persons in El Salvador. I consulted a wide range of historical and contemporary scholarly work on El Salvador's agrarian structure, land reform and peace process. Another literature I found useful is the work on freedoms, capabilities, rural livelihoods and social capital, including Amartya Sen's seminal book, "Development as Freedom". Finally, I draw from the body of scholarly and policy work on internally displaced persons. This includes more recent work on climate change, organized crime, and violence as drivers of internal displacement. I use these three sets of literature to understand the broader context of dispossession and displacement in El Salvador and its relation to communities of internally displaced persons like 30 de Abril.

History of Dispossession and Land Conflict:

The history of land in El Salvador is inextricably linked to social conflict. Present tensions emerge from the socialized notion that land in El Salvador is scarce. While this small country has the highest population density in Central America², land scarcity is the outcome of a long history of dispossession imposed by rural elites (Corriveau-Borque, 2013: 324). The land scarcity frame precludes a more in-depth discussion of El Salvador's agrarian structure and the unjust practices that sustain it (Corriveau-Borque, 2013: 325-327).

Following independence in 1821, the creole elite immediately seized land from indigenous and peasant communities to consolidate their wealth and status. (Navas, 2015: 3-7) Despite the expulsion of the Spanish Crown, the structures of power imposed by colonial rule remained in place as the creole elite merely sought to replace Spanish authorities. The government of newly independent El Salvador deepened racially based hierarchies through their explicit control over land and resources in the country. Power became directly linked to land; those who owned the land, controlled the country (Corriveau-Borque, 2013: 328-333). Using this power, the elite justified seizing land from indigenous communities using a narrative of productivity. "Productive management" became land management that focused on cash crops like coffee and sugar, (de Bremond 2007: 1535-1537). In this period, a clear division emerged, as landowners used their power to force peasants into a highly exploitative system (*colonato*) resembling serfdom (Lernoux, 1980: 70-80).

Not only did landlessness preclude the right to vote in El Salvador, the agrarian structure dehumanized peasant families who were seen as the illiterate, childlike workers that belonged to the landowner or *patron* (Lernoux, 1980: 75-77). With the break-up of communal lands, new policies trapped peasants into egregious wage labor conditions. These exploitative conditions

² 306 people per square km (World Bank, 2016)

resembled semi-slavery as families of workers lived on the peripheries of large plantations, abiding by the restrictions established by the patron (Lernoux, 1980: 78-80). Moreover, physical violence characterized the patron-peasant relationship as landowners used beatings as punishment for poor productivity, to quell dissent among workers and to establish and maintain obedience. Such inhumane conditions eventually proved unsustainable, as years of abuse fueled rising tensions and calls for social change in the form of land redistribution amongst the peasants (Corriveau-Borque 2013: 335-340).

By 1932, tensions between the landless poor and the elite exploded in a peasant rebellion. The revolt grew out of the deterioration of relations between landowners and laborers as the price of coffee fell rapidly in the 1920s and worsened during the Depression. Wages plummeted and landless workers and families were left hungry, angry and desperate. Farabundo Marti, led the rebellion in a guerilla style campaign calling for the redistribution of land. The fighting only lasted ten days before the National Guard forcibly suppressed the revolt and publicly executed Marti. Just days later, the National Guard under the command of Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez massacred 30,000 indigenous peasants, in an event known as *La Matanza* (The Massacre). While the revolution may have failed, the spirit of the struggle carried on in the hearts of the landless, fostering a desire to one day escape the brutal conditions as plantation laborers with land of their own (Chavez, 2004: 31-33).

Decades after *La Matanza*, tensions over land worsened. By the late 1960's, a new movement swept Latin America, known as Liberation Theology, which was linked to the progressive wing of the Catholic Church. This philosophy encouraged people to reject systems of oppression in the name of Christ. In El Salvador, people organized themselves into Christian Base Communities that worked to empower the peasantry through literacy programs that

encouraged them to demand an end to the violent oppression of the landless. To the government, these communities threatened the existing order and authorities relied on violent repression to discourage discussion of social justice, (Lernoux, 1980: 79-85). After the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, an outspoken advocate for the poor and beloved figure in the country, on March 24, 1980, the people of El Salvador reached their breaking point. On October 10, 1980 the five leftist groups in El Salvador formed the FMLN and fought against the government, demanding land reform and structural changes, (Castillo, 2001: 1-10). The legacy of conflict relates directly to the structural scarcity of land resulting from systematic dispossession of the poor and violent repression of their efforts to enact change, (Navas, 2015: 15-20).

Land Reform:

The brutal fighting of the war ended in 1992, as mediators brokered peace between the conservative ARENA government and the leftist guerrilla FMLN. Negotiators from the FMLN sought a plan for land reform, but faced serious difficulties trying to balance land issues with other goals. (Castillo, 2001: 3-12) After much deliberation, land reform made its way into the Chapultepec Peace Agreement of 1992, but proved much weaker than FMLN constituents hoped it would be. Instead of the sweeping land reform that citizens dreamed of, El Salvador enacted the Programa de la Transferencia de la Tierra (PTT), or Land Redistribution Program (Wolf, 2009: 429). The plan determined eligible land for redistribution as: 1) state owned, 2) holdings over 245 hectares, and 3) “conflictive zones”. Beneficiaries included ex-combatants, renters and landless peasants. However, the PTT operated through a willing buyer-willing seller model meaning that in order for land to be redistributed, it needed to be willingly offered by the original

owner, (Corriveau-Borque, 2013: 336-350). This stipulation produced the first of many challenges to redistribute land.

First, as seen with the willing buyer – willing seller model, the design of the reform relied too heavily on market forces, which hindered the scope of the reform from the beginning. In addition, a large disconnect between policy and practice emerged, stunting the effectiveness of the reform (Castillo, 2001: 5-16). For example, without additional provisions like credit and technical assistance recipients of land reform failed. In addition, Conservative control of the Presidency from 1992 until 2009 significantly slowed land reform (Wolf, 2009: 429-433). With the election of an FMLN president in 2009, the new administration sought to increase the power of the Salvadoran Institution for Agrarian Transformation (ISTA), a main operational arm of the land reform that still operates today. Nevertheless, rural inequality remains.

Freedoms, Capabilities, Livelihoods and Social Capital

In 1999, economist Amartya Sen published “Development as Freedom”, creating a framework for understanding development beyond monetary values and into the transformative capacities of development. In “Development as Freedom”, Sen argues that poverty denies people the basic rights of life. Within international law, all humans are owed basic rights, but the economic system creates circumstances for many people that deny them these rights. Sen translates these rights into freedoms, such as, the right to be free from hunger, the right to be free from preventable disease and the right to live. Unfortunately, lack of resources prevents many people from experiencing these freedoms. Nevertheless, development, as understood by Sen, frees individuals, families and communities from the types of burdens associated with poverty, (Sen, 1999: 1-110). He argues, “Development can be seen, it is argued here, as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy,” (Sen, 1999, 1).

Furthermore, the idea of development as freedom meets at the nexus of functionings, capabilities and agency. Functionings are the various things a person may be doing or being. For example, engaging in agriculture, or being a farmer is a functioning. Capabilities are the ability to choose different functionings, meaning that an individual with many capabilities can choose from a variety of occupations. Finally, agency is the power of the citizen and the community to make decisions based on their values to determine what makes up a fruitful life. The ideas of what a flourishing life might entail, or agency, relate directly to the community and do not always translate into economic gains, as different cultures affect the values of what activities they consider productive. Accumulated wealth gives individuals the choice, or capabilities to choose from a variety of paths based on what the community values, which Sen argues is freedom. Development acts as freedom because it increases capabilities, functionings and agency for marginalized persons. However, development acts as a process, rather than a destination and requires collaboration between people in order to create circumstances that can ease burdens and create freedom. (Sen, 199: 2-200)

Next, I explored literature regarding livelihoods and social capital. I drew from two main sources to understand social capital and the role that it plays in discussions about development: “Capitals and Capabilities: A Framework for Analyzing Peasant Viability, Rural Livelihoods and Poverty” by Anthony Bebbington and “The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes” by Michael Woolcock. I found these to be the most helpful because they related best to understanding social capital in the context of rural livelihoods and community development.

Bebbington and Woolcock explore the role of social capital as a means of empowerment. In the piece written by Bebbington, he explains the different forms of capital in understanding

development of peasant communities. He refutes the tendency of development practices that rely too heavily on economic understandings of capital, providing alternative forms of assets that increase the wellbeing of communities. In particular, he explains the role of social capital, which he defines as relationships that allow people to transcend boundaries and improve their wellbeing through networks of support, (Bebbington, 1999: 2021-2030). As Bebbington explains, “Thus they add to the quality of life above and beyond their simple impact on poverty and income indicators, and are critical in enhancing rural people’s capacity to be their own agent of change,” (Bebbington, 1999: 2035). Similarly, Woolcock states, “At its best, a social capital perspective recognizes that exclusion from economic and political institutions is created and maintained by powerful vested interests, but that marginalized groups themselves possess unique social resources that can be used as a basis for overcoming that exclusion, and as a mechanism for helping forge access to these institutions,” (Woolcock, 2000: 16). According to these authors, the value of social capital lies in the linkages of support that allow marginalized peoples to overcome their circumstances to work with institutions to develop their communities.

Displacement and Gaps:

There are two distinct periods covered in the literature regarding displacement in El Salvador: the civil war and present day. I used historical and current academic and policy work to understand the context of internal displacement. I found that, those affected by wartime and present day displacement are disproportionately poor, (Chavez, 2004: 34). A gap that I found in the literature was the fusion of displacement to the concept of land ownership, linking displacement to land tenure.

Displacement in the wartime era occurred mostly in rural communities, as the majority of the conflict took place in remote locations where the FMLN managed to secure control of

territory. In particular, the areas with the highest rates of displacement were Chalatenango, Cabanas and Morazán. These communities suffered violence from government forces because of their affiliation with the FMLN. Throughout the war, the government employed a policy known as “drain the sea and leave the fish” which specifically targeted civilians, (Chavez, 2004: 36-40). This tactic aimed to discourage FMLN fighters by targeting their communities and eliminating their motivation to fight. Government soldiers committed major human rights violations as they destroyed villages and massacred children, women and men. This scorched earth approach displaced one million people within the borders of El Salvador as they fled for their lives, (Wood, 2008: 543-547). IDPs at the time of the war received little help from the government and outside organizations, (Bradley, 2011: 84). Therefore, with strong distrust for the government, IDPs relied on informal networks, choosing to settle in cities, which spawned a vast urbanization movement, (Todd, 2010: 1-10). However, IDPs squatted on land illegally because they could not afford to rent or to buy land in the city, leaving their living situations extremely precarious, (Garni2013).

Although the war ended in 1992, El Salvador maintains an alarmingly high rate of internally displaced persons. According the International Displacement Monitoring Centre, El Salvador experienced 220,000 new displacements from violence and 480 from natural disasters in 2016. (International Displacement Monitoring Center, 2017) Gangs engage in extortion of communities which causes hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes and become internally displaced. (CMS, 2017) In addition, according to Bebbington, El Salvador is particularly vulnerable to climate change because of its location and history of poor land management that weakened its resilience to natural disasters, (Bebbington and Bury: 2015, 189-200). Poorer communities are more likely to be displaced by both gang violence and natural

disasters because economic exclusion forces the poor into insecure tenure arrangements making them vulnerable to gangs and natural disasters, (Todd, 2010: 6-15).

One concept I found useful is “protracted situations”. While academics and policy maker use the term “protracted refugee situation” frequently, the term “protracted displacement situation” is less used. A protracted refugee situation, according to the UNHCR is a situation in which refugees, “...continue to be in exile for 5 years or more after their initial displacement, without immediate prospects for (the) implementation of the Durable solutions,” (UNHCR,2009). This definition can apply to IDPs, but is often overlooked, especially in the case of El Salvador. For example, most families displaced by the war never found permanent residence and therefore experienced multiple displacements, (Bradley, 2011: 84). For many individuals and families in El Salvador that experience multiple displacements, their situations are unresolved and therefore protracted.

The major gap I found in the literature centered on internal displacement in the country and its connection to land ownership. While the literature establishes a clear connection between land ownership and marginalization in Salvadoran society; fewer authors relate the displacement of millions of people directly to their ability to own land. How does displacement represent an unfreedom that relates to the history of dispossession in El Salvador? Are land conflict and displacement different conversations or do they both emerge out of state-sponsored violence and exclusion of the poor? This paper addresses this connection, revealing how displacement in El Salvador relates directly to land ownership. Moreover, it seeks to understand the role that land ownership plays in the ability to end cycles of displacement as well as contribute to the development of communities.

Methodology:

Informed by the literature, I constructed a methodology to study the role of land titles for communities of internally displaced persons. I decided to study the relationship between displacement, land ownership and community development because of my work with Foundation Cristosal as an intern over the summer.

During June and July of 2017, I interned in San Salvador with Foundation Cristosal and conducted my research in the community of 30 de Abril, a semi-rural community located in Canton Flor Amarilla of the Municipality of Ciudad Arce in the Department of La Libertad.³ Community members in 30 de Abril had recently fought for and won the formal legal title to their lands. As part of my research, I reviewed a broad range of secondary materials including materials in Spanish and materials produced by Foundation Cristosal, a leading source of information on internal displacement and violence in the El Salvador. Once settled, I met with and later interviewed members of the community of 30 de Abril. I chose a case study approach in order to understand how the experiences of a particular community help us understand the catalytic role of land ownership in communities of internally displaced persons. I also interviewed government officials from the Institution for Rural Transformation, the Institute for Legality of Property and the Community Development Unit of Ciudad Arce. Finally, I enriched my interviews through participant observation in the community as well as attending a titling ceremony for a neighboring community, Pequeña Inglaterra.

Foundation Cristosal and 30 de Abril

Foundation Cristosal formed in 2000 through a partnership between Episcopal Clergy in the United States and El Salvador. Since then, the organization has grown significantly, employing over 50 people throughout the Northern Triangle of Central America to promote human rights. The Foundation's programs include Research and Learning, Victim Advocacy,

³ See Figures 1, 2, and 3

Strategic Litigation as well as Community Development. As a Human Rights Organization, Cristosal uses the “Human Rights Approach” which seeks to empower citizens to exercise their rights. Cristosal sees people as agents of their own development and works to enhance the capacity of individuals to transform their lives, rather than provide services for them. For example, the Community Development Program works with communities to strengthen citizen participation and grassroots democracy. The community of 30 de Abril participated in one of Cristosal’s Citizen Formation Programs, which allowed me to work with them.

The strong relationship between Foundation Cristosal and the community of 30 de Abril was an important entry point for this study and allowed me to become acquainted with community members through regular visits. The trust between staff and community members was fundamental to my ability to connect with people for my research. Along with Foundation staff I spent time in meetings and discussions. I conducted 12 individual interviews with ten women and two men out of a total of 400 households in 30 de Abril. I also conducted a group interview with representatives of the Community Directorate. Each individual interview lasted between twenty minutes to an hour and used a semi- structured format to allow participants to elaborate on topics they felt most relevant. Participants were identified using the snowball method; I received members to interview based on suggestions from my contacts in the community and then those interviewees provided me with more community members. Finally, throughout the study I kept a detailed log of the on goings in the community.

Beyond the community I interviewed three government officials, Romeo Chacon, head of community relations with the city of Ciudad Arce, Eduardo Gonzalez from the ILP and finally the President of ISTA, Carla Mabel Alvanes Amaya. The goal of these interviews was to

understand the viewpoint of different levels of the government regarding the role of land ownership in communities and to elicit their views on internal displacement.

Positionality and Limitations

Clearly my position as a young, single white woman from the United States affected how community members reacted to me and the questions I asked. Community members often receive visitors from the United States as part of the human rights seminars led by the Foundation. These visits occur several times a year, so I expect that my presence and interest in their community was less surprising to residents and allowed members to speak more openly with me.

However, I experienced some significant limitations as I navigated my role as a researcher. I needed to take steps to ensure my own safety as well as those I met with. This meant that I could visit 30 de Abril only during daylight hours and I believe that skewed my sample of interviewees. Ten of the twelve interviews were with women because male members work outside of the community during daylight hours. In addition, the status of 30 de Abril as a community with limited gang presence does not reflect the experience of many communities where gang presence is strong. Nonetheless, 30 de Abril still exemplifies the struggle of internally displaced families and communities across the country who are fighting to secure legal title to the piece of land they occupy.

Case Study: The Community of 30 de Abril and the fight for land

To better understand how land ownership affects families and communities of internally displaced persons, I use the example of the community of 30 de Abril. The chronology of 30 de Abril illustrates the lengthy and difficult struggle that internally displaced families endure to gain legal title to land. I begin with a description of the community, including a discussion its origins,

its geographic location and the socio-economic activities of the community members. Then, I describe the legalization process, comparing the official policy of titling as explained to me by the President of ISTA with the experiences of the families in the community. Finally, I look into the implications beyond owning the title that set up the grounds for my discussion.

From displacement to precarious settlement

The story of the community of 30 de Abril is one of courageous resilience and persistence. Before my arrival in the summer of 2017, community members achieved what seemed like an impossible goal: obtaining legal titles to the land they occupied for several years.

The semi-rural community of 30 de Abril is located in the Canton of Flor Amarilla in the Municipality of Ciudad Arce. The community consists of about 600 families and encompasses several smaller hamlets in close proximity. When referring to 30 de Abril in this paper, however I will refer only to the main section of the community which consists of 400 families. It is this group of families that organized to pursue formal legalization of their lands. The majority of community members fall below the poverty line, and like many in El Salvador are underemployed and/or working in the informal sector. None of the members of 30 de Abril have ever owned land (prior land ownership makes families ineligible to seek land through ISTA). Community members vary in age: from newborn babies to the elderly. Families here have come from different parts of the country and so kinship ties, ubiquitous in many villages, are rare here. The families in 30 de Abril lost their previous homes and became displaced as a result of natural disasters, but for many this was not their first displacement but one of a series of displacements. In particular, some families experienced their first displacement during the war,

never staying in a single space for more than a few years. However, the experiences of each family in this community differ widely and should not be lumped into a single story.

In 2010, a flood overtook several communities in the Canton of Flor Amarilla, forcing many families to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. One community member spoke of wading through water up to her waist, carrying her grandchildren on her back to escape the floods, “The storm caused the river to overflow and all the water rushed inside the house. The next day we left the house ... when we returned home there was too much water.” With nowhere else to live, a group of families began looking for somewhere to settle.

They stumbled upon an abandoned sugar cane field and settled on a strip of land near the highway in the municipality of Ciudad Arce. Families pieced together tin, plastic and bamboo to fashion roofs over their heads. While a few families knew each other from their communities of origin, many of the new community members considered each other strangers. However, because families did not have permission to occupy the land, they risked removal at any time. So in 2011, the group began the process of petitioning the government for legal land titles, a process that would last five years and involve multiple government agencies and political actors. The process culminated on April 30, 2016 when ISTA and the Municipality of Ciudad Arce awarded the families legal titles to the land. To honor their struggle, the community named itself 30 de Abril, to commemorate the sacrifice and celebrate the struggle of community members.

Pressuring the Government to Uphold Rights of Citizenship

The Salvadoran Constitution (1992) recognizes the right of all citizens to own land. However the process to operationalize this right, the legal recognition of land titles, is both costly, time consuming and often out of reach for most communities. 30 de Abril began their

process of legal recognition by sending an appointed member of the community to the ISTA office in the capital city, San Salvador. He traveled alone to ask for a meeting with the President of ISTA but was turned away. “They closed their doors on me. They did not want to meet with me.” This marked the long struggle that the community would have to endure for the next five years.

After the unsuccessful attempt to meet with ISTA officials, the community regrouped to discuss how to move the process for legalization forward. They established a community Directiva (Community Directorate to meet regularly and advance the process for legalizing land titles). At one meeting of the Directiva, a member told me, “That’s why we made the directiva, to get the titles.” The community agreed to select the members of the Directiva to head the fight for the titles, so long as they met once a week with the entire community to discuss progress, tactics and the status of the process. The first decision made by the Directiva was to send a group of representatives from the community back to ISTA to demand a meeting with the President. These community members traveled to the office of ISTA and sat in the waiting area, refusing to move until they were attended to.

The community needed to stay unified throughout the struggle as they hit many roadblocks working with ISTA. ISTA requires a series of procedures to legalize the land in a community, requiring members to stay focused and organized to meet all of their requirements. With each step, ISTA slowed, forcing the community members to pressure the government into moving the process along. One community member declared, “[We earned our titles because of] the pressure that we made so that ISTA would transform the land and would listen because we were in the right.” After five years of hard work, ISTA and the Municipality awarded the community with their titles.

Beyond the Legalization Process

The community of 30 de Abril fought together for their land titles. They united themselves in the struggle for land to build a community for their families after facing displacement from natural disasters. This case serves as an important insight for understanding the role of the land title in a community consisting of internally displaced persons because it reveals how collective action serves as a unifying force. Their success holds implications for other communities in El Salvador, revealing the need to unite to pressure the government into upholding their promises to its citizens. The next section identifies these implications, discussing the results I found through my research in this community.

Analysis:

As the case of 30 de Abril reflects, the sustained collective effort of families, but with a strong sense of shared purpose, helped them gain access to land titles after experiencing multiple displacements. Having successfully organized and mobilized collectively, the community increased its stock of social capital and was then able to use this capital as a platform to address other shared needs and priorities. The positive experience with land titling, is not only a symbolic win, it reinforces the notion that personal sacrifice, risk-taking and collective action can produce change. With new land titles in hand, community members are now planning to solicit government agencies for basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation and a school within the community.

In this section, I focus the discussion on a set of five key findings I list out below. These findings reflect the role that land titles play for families with histories of displacement and the implications for communities in El Salvador.

1. *Land is an important asset for families that opens access to other economic opportunities, but of itself it is not a sufficient condition to transform the unequal and resource constrained situation of families and communities, which expands freedoms when paired with strong social relationships.*
2. *Female access to land in laws gives women a greater say in decision making in land management, but women report that this newfound protagonism does not necessarily transfer into an improved economic situation and an alleviation of burdens.*
3. *Land ownership ends protracted displacement, which grants personal safety and gives the possibility of a future, creating a sense of place in a community where families can pass land down to future generations.*
4. *Land ownership, as seen by the families of 30 de Abril, is a fulfilled right to citizenship that defines the state-citizen relationship and reaffirms the rights of marginalized communities.*
5. *The struggle for land ownership here, spurred successful collective action that in turn gave rise to a virtuous circle that further unified the community to take on additional development.*

Land as Freedom

In El Salvador, land titles are a powerful tool with more than sentimental significance, especially for people that have been displaced. Displacement results from many overlapping “unfreedoms” and represents an “unfreedom” itself. For instance, displacement prevents citizens from exercising their right to live where they choose, build a permanent home in one space and live a productive life. It also greatly diminishes freedoms of citizens because it reduces capabilities, functionings and agency. Nevertheless, during my time spent in the community of

30 de Abril, the interviewees conveyed how their titles changed their lives positively. Using Sen's "Development as Freedom", I argue that in El Salvador, land, when paired with strong social infrastructure frees communities from the burdens of displacement.

First, owning land frees communities to participate in formal markets. Sen believes that "The freedom to participate in economic interchange has a basic role in social living." (Sen1999, 7) For the members of 30 de Abril, prior to earning their titles, they were excluded from most formal markets, leaving their economic activities on a smaller, informal scale. Without land or a leverageable resource, these citizens could not apply for loans and enter institutional markets. In the community, their land titles transformed their ability to access formal markets by eliminating a longstanding barrier to entry in El Salvador: land. Owning a title helps citizens participate in large-scale institutionalized markets because it allows citizens to use loans to expand their businesses and participate on a larger scale in larger markets.

For example, within the community of 30 de Abril, interviewees expressed the benefit of their ability to apply for loans once they received their land, which helps them to engage in new income generating activities. The title acts as collateral to the bank that allows individuals and families to take out loans. For some, they used their loan to improve the house, making it a more permanent structure. Others expanded their business capabilities, investing the loan in entrepreneurial endeavors. One woman in 30 de Abril took out a loan to invest in a store that she now runs out of her home. Before she received her title, she could not run this business because she lacked the seed capital to buy the supplies to sell in her store. For rural areas in particular, loans play an important role in the ability of the peasant to engage in farming which requires a large upfront investment. However, without access to loans, the rural landless poor lack a choice in their economic endeavors, but a title opens new possibilities. The loans that individuals can

receive as landholders play an important role in the development of a family because it opens the freedom of choice.

Furthermore, owning land also allows families to diversify their incomes by engaging in different endeavors on the land, which strengthen communities to withstand shocks and enjoy greater freedoms of life. Community Member 6 described the advantages of having the title to their land saying, “You have more opportunities. It’s because of the titles.” In addition, many different community members began farming their land and used the crops to sell on the market and use for themselves. Diversity of income helps vulnerable communities by increasing their resilience against shocks; it gives families a sense of economic security in cases of low wages, strikes or uncertain employment. While some community members engage in wage labor nearby, the additional income allows families to support themselves if their employment changes. For communities like 30 de Abril, owning their land frees families by opening avenues for increasing their income to endure shocks.

Still, the title does not instantly lift marginalized communities out of poverty. Many community members expressed the continued “lucha” or struggle that 30 de Abril faces. In the Directiva Meeting, a member stated, “You need to know that even though we have our titles, there are many needs in the community. We struggle every day to survive, but because we have our titles we can continue to do so and we can do it together.” The social relationships within the community allow members to leverage their land more effectively for financial capital. For example, within the community, a group of women work together to procure loans to start their own businesses. Community Member 5 explained, “Right now I’m involved with a group of women trying to get loans to develop our business. One day we’ll make more and our hope is to grow our business, but with our titles that dream is closer.” While individual development is

possible with the ability to enter markets once land is procured, collective action is most effective. For communities in El Salvador with a history of economic marginalization, land tenure increases the economic capacities of families, but can only be most efficiently leveraged for financial capital through strong communal relationships.

Importantly, the title gives meaning to life for the members of the community. Given the history of El Salvador, land has sentimental value to the Salvadoran people. I asked each member of the community to name the benefits they saw to owning their own land. While many community members struggled to articulate the benefits, their facial expressions reflected pure pride and happiness when discussing their title. For example, one community member stated, “It’s mine. It is something I had never thought I would have, but here I have it. It’s remarkable.” In this case, land gave meaning to the lives of the community members by expanding their abilities to work together to change their livelihoods using their titles. In particular one woman stated, “For me, it’s very positive because it means that all of my struggles in the past, all of my suffering was worth it. This is the happiest I’ve been in my life.” Land ownership gives meaning to the lives of people that have experienced displacement beyond increasing incomes by turning the dream of land into reality, which in turn is freedom.

Freedom for everyone? Increased burden on women in rural El Salvador

However, women experience the benefits of land titles differently than men, often taking on more responsibilities and burdens. In El Salvador, the government recognizes that gender inequality persists and prioritizes fair treatment of women in programs and policies, especially in regards to land ownership. For women, land titles decrease many economic “unfreedoms” but also adds more responsibility to take care of the land. Moreover, women often faces challenges in exercising voice as men continue to dominate collective action bodies, like the *directiva* in

Flor Amarilla. For women, decision making on a community scale is done through female-centric bodies that allow women to work within a male-dominated structure. While land ownership empowers women to control more aspects of their lives; it also saddles them with more burdens.

The government bodies of ISTA and ILP prioritize the inclusion of women in their policies of granting land to the poor in El Salvador. Each body conducts gender equality trainings with communities during the legalization process to ensure that all women are included and considered. For example, President of ISTA, Alvanes, stated, “Often women were kept out of holding titles, so we work to empower women and educate communities about the need for equal distribution of land between genders. We’ve had thousands and thousands of women educated to be able to learn how to struggle against the patriarchal culture of agrarian life and start to produce their own goods.” As the head of ISTA, she speaks for the whole institution and recognizes the cultural inequalities for women in El Salvador, especially in rural areas, and actively works to educate the population to change that. While these policies aim to protect women, in practice, traditional gender roles remain entrenched in communities.

Through my interviews, ten out of my twelve interviewees were women. While spending time in the community, men seemed to have much less of a presence. Three interviewees reflected the absence of men in their family life, including husbands and sons. For example, Interviewee 2, a woman in her 60’s-70’s revealed that she held all of the responsibility for maintaining her household because her husband died and her son left. While she recognized the many benefits to owning her land, she also felt the burdens of ownership because as an elderly woman, she could not work the land by herself. When asked how her title impacted her ability to open her own business, she explained, “I don’t have many ways to get it [money] because I live

in my house alone and I have a son but he likes to drink, so he doesn't have the ability to help me,". In her case, because she owns the land in conjunction with the men in her family, she is responsible to maintain it, even if the men are absent. The land adds additional burden for women which inhibit their freedom to choose.

Another gap in the implementation of female centered land policy is the lack of autonomy for women in collective decision-making. While land ownership empowers women to participate in bodies like the Directiva, women remain sidelined within community decision making apparatuses. For example, in the Directiva for all of Flor Amarilla, the three women at the meeting were representatives of the women's committee as opposed to the men that were appointed as representatives by their communities. In the conversations at the meeting, men occupied much more space, often interrupting and talking over the female representatives. For women, the power in their decision-making paled in comparison to the men in the group given the way the Directiva is structured. This reflects a clear discrepancy in the sharing of burden and power between men and women in communities once titles have been obtained.

While land ownership adds burdens to the lives of women, women in El Salvador continue to make great strides. Owning their titles opens up possibilities that were previously closed to them like leaving abusive relationships and starting their own businesses. Sheer title ownership reflects a change in attitudes and a step forward for women in El Salvador. That being said, women continue to face more challenges in society regardless of gender-informed policies. For women, all-female organizing within communities, allows them to work together to push for an equal say in community decision making. When understanding the benefits of secure tenure for communities as a whole, it is imperative to also consider the differences in experience between genders.

Land and the End of Protracted Displacement: What does that mean for the future?

For displaced persons, landlessness prevented members of the community from building a future before they received their land titles. Each community member I spoke with explained their own reasons for settling in the community of 30 de Abril and while each experience is unique, displacement drove many of the families to the community. Some individuals faced a single displacement that led them to 30 de Abril, while others endured multiple displacements that began during the civil war. Within the literature, El Salvador scholars identify two main eras of displacement: first, from the Civil War in the 1980s and more recently displacement in the 2000's. I found that the literature fails to fuse these eras together, looking at these of displacements as unconnected. I argue that the legacy of insecure tenure contributed to a protracted situation manifested in the perpetual cycle of displacement in El Salvador. However, for 30 de Abril, land ownership symbolizes the end of displacement because of the physical security that it grants as well as the ability to visualize a future.

In particular, for poor landless families, insecure tenure carries over into generations and poses significant burdens on their lives. During the war, IDPs settled on extra-legal spaces saddled with constant threat of expulsion. Even after the war, the poor continued to lack access to formal institutions and arrangements that into their instability. For example, one member of the directiva lived their whole life as a displaced person, settling in a new space every few years after facing removal from his land. He explained that during the war, his family fled violence from the army and settled near San Salvador, squatting on land they did not own. However, the owner of the land removed his family, forcing them to live somewhere else. After three experiences moving from plot to plot, he settled with his family near the river in Flor Amarilla, but years later, the flood destroyed his home. He explained that his situation is common, stating,

“I think the majority; it wasn’t their first time being displaced. Many have been moving constantly since the war,” For people that lack the means to purchase land, their insecure living arrangements threaten their personal safety and increase the likelihood of displacement in the future.

The title gives the individual, family and community the right to live, use a space, and build a home without fear of removal from outside forces. For example, in the case of 30 de Abril, one member acknowledges that the title allows her to rebuild her home in the case of a natural disaster, rather than having to move somewhere else as an internally displaced person. She states, “One advantage for me is that my house was destroyed but if it gets destroyed again I can build it back. Without it, I could not construct it again. I am secure here. I feel content now, thank god.” For many of the community members, lack of secure tenure prevented their families from staying rooted in a community because of constant removal. Without legal recognition to build a home, community members faced cycles of displacement from natural disasters, extortion and speculation. The title ends the years of displacement and to these families, constitutes a permanent solution to their protracted situations. Here, the formal ownership promotes the idea that citizens will not undergo further displacement, which increases their physical security overall.

Physical security frees the owner of the burden associated with protracted which contributes to an increased wellbeing. Fifteen interviewees mentioned the importance of physical security. In particular, many community members discussed the role that owning their land played in their ability to move freely, which they had never experienced before. Prior to obtaining their titles, precarious land tenure forced community members to spend their time watching over the house to ensure that it was not burgled, destroyed or taken, imposing a

significant strain on their lives. For example, Community Member 2 explains that, “This is the first place that we have the confidence that we can walk from one place to another.” According to Community Member 4, “We used to watch our houses until twelve in the night to make sure that no one would rob our houses or take our land. I had a daughter, who is now studying that had to stay home to watch the house. Now she can go out to school and to work and know that no one will burgle the house and tear it down.” This shows that access to a title gives a type of security that allows communities to live with more freedom and choices. For example, for Community Member 1, “Because the people feel more secure in their land, there is a better security to work.” Secure tenure frees community members from burden by allowing them to take control of their time and movements without the fear of losing their homes.

In addition, the security gained from the title helps community members envision a future on their land. This includes investing in a more permanent structure for a house, development of agriculture on the land as well as starting a business in the home. In the case of 30 de Abril, “It’s that because we can have [with the help of god] a house and no one can come and take it,” The President of ISTA supported this idea, arguing that, “It’s more than that. It’s the security that it brings to a community where they feel they can invest their resources,” Security of the land granted by the title implies the ability to invest in a community, which makes way for community growth in the future.

To foster community growth, the land reform established the “Bien de Familia” or “For the Good of the Family” law. As explained by the President of ISTA, “You can give the land to your children and grandchildren through the law we call the Bien de Familia ... You can’t sell the land for 20 years,” The law reflects the ideals expressed by members in the community that in order to build a sense of place, there must be deep roots in the community. These roots are

made by intergenerational occupation of a space, revealing that a true sense of belonging is linked to longevity of stay. The President of ISTA elaborated, saying, “It’s designed to ensure that the land is kept in the hands of the peasants for generations and generations.” Because the communities are new, the hope is that community members will take care of the land if they will pass it on to their children, engaging in productive lifestyles that contribute to the community.

Furthermore, as seen through 30 de Abril, the titles plays a vital role in establishing a sense of belonging among families. 30 de Abril consisted of families with histories of displacement, who lived under constant threat of expulsion, which posed a challenge for families to feel connected within the community. Owning a title establishes permanence in the community by allowing families to build their lives on the land and pass it onto their children. For example, Community Member 8 explained, “For them, they’ll have a place to live. So I say that is a great advantage. My kids are going to have a future ... I can give them something.” Passing down the title to future generations ensures that the struggle for land was not in vain. This act of collective sacrifice to obtain the titles establishes the community narrative. Individuals connected to the narrative can build a future in the community which leads the way for community social infrastructure building that is vital for development.

Relation to the State and Affirmation of Citizenship

Given the long history of land dispossession in El Salvador for the poor rural majority, community members and government officials expressed a desire for land that inspired the addition of land reform into the constitution. For the rural sector, holding land affirms your existence as you can control and work your own space to support yourself. Because structural oppression excluded peasants from owning land, possessing a parcel gives a citizen roots that feed into a deep emotional satisfaction. Moreover, the new Constitution (1992) establishes a

social contract between the government to redistribute land. Eight interviewees, including all three-government officials discussed the role of the state to provide access to land to citizens in El Salvador as a mandatory component of the state-citizen relationship. These interviews highlighted the perception that as a citizen of El Salvador, the right to life directly links to the right to possess land for living and working.

Community members used their rights as backing for their efforts to mobilize the legalization process. Community Member 1 understood, “That all of us have a right and ... it’s from that they gave us our space to live here.” One member of the in the *directiva* explained, “It’s in the constitution that every person should have their three hectares of land, but that is usually not the case,”. Because the law dictates the right of citizens to own land; the government must uphold the law by helping them acquire titles. For community members, they did not say that the government needed to hand them land but rather that the government had a duty to guide communities along the pathway to obtaining their titles.

Moreover, the government interviewees of ISTA and the ILP echoed the community members, conveying their own role as facilitators of land ownership for the people of El Salvador. Specifically, the President of ISTA, Carla Mabel Alvanes Amaya, stated, “Well it’s an obligation from our government and part of our constitution. It’s a constitutional right and we are conducting justice by giving people the land that they have a right to.” Using rhetoric of justice and right reveals the longstanding struggle for land in El Salvador for the poor and its importance to society. For the community members, they believed that with their land, the government recognized their citizenship and upheld their social contract.

The Virtuous Circle: Strengthening social relationships for local development

In the context of land ownership in El Salvador for internally displaced persons, I argue that social capital constitutes an important asset that can be used to support community development. Michael Wolcock explains, "... the basic idea of social capital is that one's family, friends, and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be leveraged for material gain," (Wolcock, 2000: 32). For the community of 30 de Abril, their collective action helped them obtain their titles, and gave them the confidence to work together in the future to improve the lives of families within the community. First, the process of legalizing land brought families together and forged a common purpose. United, the community then exerted pressure on the municipality and ISTA to grant families their titles, which required the organization, the mobilization of resources and constant meetings leading to the creation of the community's social infrastructure. Their success as a community in gaining their land titles created a virtuous circle, motivating them to continue mobilizing to obtain a broader array of services that will benefit the community. Finally, these social relationships constitute an important capital, when used with the land title that can be used as a tool for marginalized communities to overcome exclusionary circumstances.

The process of obtaining land titles catalyzed the creation of social bonds within the community because it united the members to struggle collectively. Before the titles, the bonds between families were weak, as many of the families had recently arrived from their latest displacement. Titles plays an important role in forming a community because it unifies families to struggle for a unifying cause: formal recognition of their land. In addition, no formal body existed for community members to voice their opinions, concerns and recommendations. However, the struggle for the titles changed the truncated state of the community. The community needed to meet regularly to work on the process of obtaining their

land titles and thus established the central organization of the community, The Directiva. In a meeting of the Directiva, one representative explained, “That is why the directiva formed: to get the titles.” The Directiva consists of elected representatives that work together to discuss changes to be made to benefit the community. For the members of 30 de Abril, they decided to form a directiva because of their commitment to transparency and participation in decision making. The struggle for titles served as the foundation for the community to unite, which later gave the members experience, tactics and confidence working together towards a common goal.

After years of hard work as a collective, the community earned their titles to their land which helped strengthen inter-communal relationships within 30 de Abril. According to the President of ISTA, after receiving your title, “Your way of living changes in your community ... You have the confidence to change [your community] and feel rooted where you are.” She elaborated, using the example of the community of Monsignor Romero saying that even after obtaining their land, “They’re continuing to improve and support each other. They feel more comfortable and the community has come together to support itself now that they own the land legally.” This unity manifests into strong relationships within the community that allow members to support each other in times of need. For example, within 30 de Abril, the community established an arrangement through the directiva that allows community members to ask for help in times of emergency. She explains that, “Here in the community, we’re all working together. Whenever a neighbor asks for help, we support them. Sometimes there are cases when someone gets sick and the directiva gets together to support that person to get better and have a little money.” Formal tenure fosters unity which allows community members to rely on each other, improving their overall wellbeing.

In addition, this collective action gave the community an important experience which creates a virtuous circle that encourages communities to work together to pressure the government for services in the future. For 30 de Abril, the community uses a variety of platforms, including social media to demand meetings with representatives from the municipality and file complaints to have electricity and potable water in the community. Once the community gains experience working together, as seen through their struggle to obtain titles, they have the tools to put pressure on the government to uphold their duties. For example, community Member 12 describes how the relationships in the community create support for projects, declaring, “The community works together and supports each other now. There are a lot of people to support our projects like the water and more.” For the community, the land titles validate their efforts of collective action and helps them exercise their rights as citizens.

In addition, the social capital built through obtaining the titles gives the community agency and allows members to act as agents of change. Bebbington states, “The framework thus understands these assets not only as thing that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation; they are also the basis of agents’ power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources,”. (Bebbington 1999, p. 2022) After fighting to secure the titles, the community gained the skills to work together in the future to challenge an unfair system. The community continues to work together which serves as an asset for development; their social relationships are a transformational source of power. The land title alone cannot create change, but when paired with organized citizens, the community can challenge an unequal system. For the community, the long history of dispossession and displacement at the hands of the state created a significant barrier for the members to change

their livelihoods. While owning land plays a vital role in the ability to earn livelihoods, the social infrastructure that comes out of the process is vital to the success of a community.

The community achieved their success through their collective action, revealing the limits of individual agency and the power of social relationships. Although the government promises to award land to all citizens in the constitution, obtaining a title requires diligent work to pressure the government, which cannot be done alone. The asset that 30 de Abril possessed when fighting for their titles was their unity as a community. Land tenure helped build the social relationships because the struggle catalyzed the unification of a collective body. The success of the process reveals the importance of collective action for the community, reinforcing the bonds to work together to rise above their circumstances of marginalization. Social capital is important for communities like 30 de Abril because “With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other,” (Sen, 1999: 11). For the community, their social bonds came out of a mutual struggle, rather than years of living together. Their fight to achieve their titles established powerful relationships that can now help transform the future of the community.

Conclusions:

The long history of dispossession, inequality and civil war have shaped El Salvador’s current crisis of internal displacement. For the community of 30 de Abril, their battle with serial displacement seemingly ended upon receiving legal titles to the land they have occupied for five years. While families were rightfully jubilant at gaining title to land, there is little to suggest that their mobilization and collective action has addressed the underlying forces that drive internal displacement in El Salvador today. Critically, I would argue, the constellation of rising property values, rising demand for housing, damaging climatic events and increased levels of gang

violence points to ever increasing levels of displacement – not only impacting rural families but also urban families. I cannot say that land titles solve the crisis of internal displacement plaguing the nation of El Salvador. However, the members of 30 de Abril provide a valuable example of the power of collective agency and its ability, when paired with a land title, to transform the lives of families within a community.

Land titles serve an essential role in promoting community development for people with a history of internal displacement. First, the title frees community members from the burdens of displacement. Communities can use the land to leverage capital, enter markets and diversify their incomes which relieves some of the burdens associated with scarce resources. However, titling outcomes can be negative, especially for women. Owning titles can saddle women with more responsibility to maintain the land, increasing their load of burdens. Moreover, titles do not transform gender dynamics within communities - male-dominated structures of decision making and organizing remain intact. Nevertheless, land grants a physical security that ensures the permanence of a community, ending protracted displacement and allowing members to envision a future. Finally, titles give an opportunity when combined with a social capital that builds the capabilities of a community to be used productively. Essentially, the struggle to obtain titles operationalizes the ability of a community to catalyze their development.

As seen through the case of 30 de Abril, land ownership provides families with a real sense of security and sense of future beyond the symbolic win experienced by the community. The importance of owning land extends beyond the individual monetary and material benefits of a title and provides communities with sense of power and capacity to act. First, the title represents the end to multiple or serial displacement for landless families that gives them the confidence to build a life without the constant fear of removal. Moreover, when communities

decide to gain legal title to land, it unites community members under a shared struggle to pressure the government to uphold their rights as citizens. A successful experience of working together reinforces the power of collective action, fostering trust and willingness to take mutual risks. Importantly, it give the community a horizon to guide future efforts. Finally, the strong social bonds paired with their titles frees individuals from burdens associated with precarious living situations.

Can families fleeing violence from gangs join communities like 30 de Abril and struggle for a title in a group? Do titles prevent gangs from extorting communities? This paper focuses on the experiences of a community whose members faced multiple displacements, however, the interviewees spoke little of the conflicts between the community and organized crime. Because gang related violence is a main driver of displacement, the implications of this paper may not apply to all internal displacement situations. I believe that more research is needed to understand gang related displacement and the role of land titles for communities.

Although landtitles bring many benefits, they cannot resolve structural issues that perpetuate poverty, inequality and displacement in El Salvador. Rather, this case draws attention to the power of communities to organize themselves to pressure the government to uphold their rights. In the context of deep rooted dispossession and displacement, this community united to struggle for land of their own. The struggle itself serves as a valuable example to understand the power of collective action to transform exclusionary circumstances. The fight for their titles was a positive experience that came to fruition because of the resilience and determination of the people within the community. While land ownership supports social infrastructure building, it is the agency within communities that allows them to work together to transform their lives. The true power of development lies within community members themselves.

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