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Just Transitions from the Bottom-Up

Case study: Bogotá's southern peri-urban communities

Waterloo Climate Institute Technical Brief

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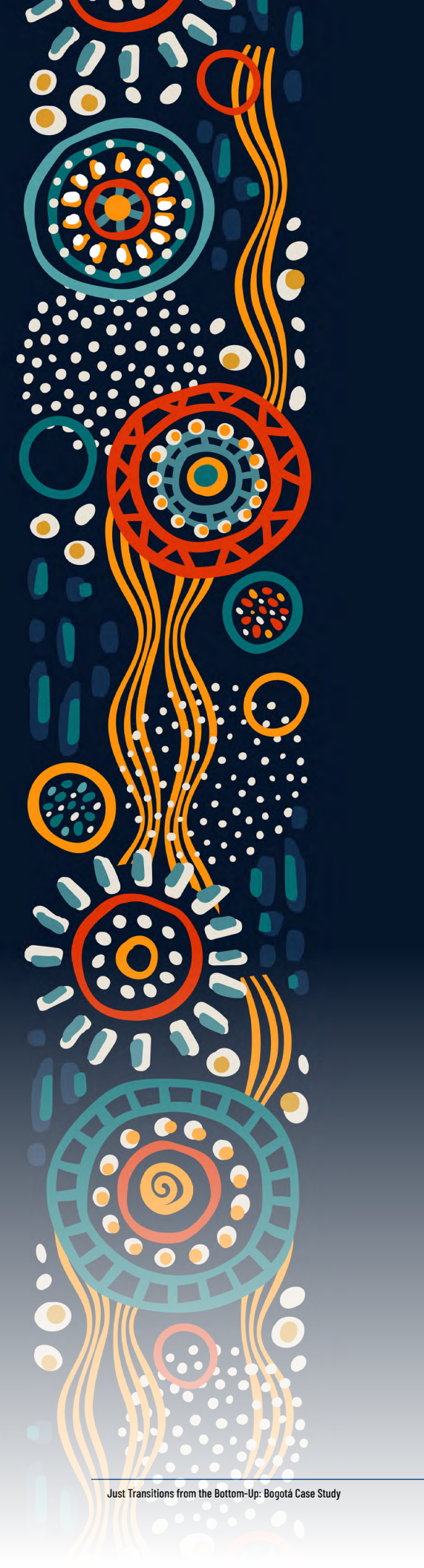
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Rooting in risk zones: ARRAIGO, Huertas, and climate justice in Bogotá's Hillside Barrios

ARRAIGO's work with hillside neighbourhoods in Usme, San Cristóbal, and Ciudad Bolívar in Bogotá, supports community organizing efforts resisting displacement and insisting on the right to live in place. Using community circles, festivals, dance, video interviews, and women-led urban farms, residents document the conditions in which they are learning how to challenge the government narrative that believes relocation is the only solution, even while the government approves new apartment building construction in the same neighbourhoods. We analyze “rooting” (arraigo) as both metaphor and practice: staying put, replanting gardens, and building alliances with schools and local officials. We argue that community diagnostics from below challenge technocratic climate policy from above, as we insist that just transitions in Bogotá must protect existing neighbourhoods and the waters and mountains that sustain them.

Box 1: ARRAIGO: Platform of People Affected by Risk and Relocation in Bogotá

ARRAIGO translates to “rootedness,” and refers to the work that communities have been carrying out to make their homes, gardens, neighbourhoods and livelihoods in relation with the mountains, rivers, and territories in the south end of Bogotá.



Mariela Celis and Mariela Caro – community leaders receiving a gift to commemorate 10 years of working with ARRAIGO and a lifetime of organizing urban gardening in their neighbourhoods.



Left: Visiting Mariela Celis' *huerta* – a food producing garden near her home in San Cristóbal.

Below: Mariela Caro hosting workshops with staff from the Museum of the Self-Constructed City in her *huerta* in Ciudad Bolívar.



Territory of struggle: the struggle of Arraigo in Bogotá through the lens of Abya Yala

The experience of Arraigo sits within a broader geography of interconnected injustices at a continental scale. In Bogotá, the struggle of peri-urban communities reveals deep asymmetries in the production, distribution, and attribution of risk. However, this asymmetry is not contingent, but rather constitutive of a broader system characterized by dynamics of territorial dispossession, the racialization of poverty, and the differential hierarchization of the value of life.

The peri-urban southern communities—many of them composed of populations displaced by armed conflict—arrive in the city carrying rural knowledge that is fundamental to the construction and stabilization of territory, as well as to the creation of care networks and local economies. However, access to urban land and housing for these communities has historically been denied in practice. The formal housing supply of the city never addressed this demand, and self-construction became normalized as a means of accessing housing—a logic that has been encouraged and even capitalized upon by economic and political actors. The result has been the expansion of informal urban areas with deficits that exceed existing institutional capacities—urban spaces lacking both corrective and forward-looking capacity, permanently subject to contingent situations that communities must live with, or, in extreme cases, are interpreted and managed as risk dynamics that justify extraordinary institutional interventions.

These same communities are frequently classified by state institutions as inhabitants of “non-mitigable risk” zones, while at the same time new real estate developments are authorized in those very territories.



Walking the streets of San Cristóbal.



New high-rise construction is displacing communities of self-constructed houses.

This contradiction reveals a central point: **risk cannot be understood solely as a biophysical condition of land, but as the result of political decisions about which lives are protected and which are considered expendable.** Likewise, the issue of access to land in urban contexts takes on a deeper historical dimension, as it expresses the continuity of processes of rural dispossession within urban space. In this sense, the experience of Arraigo allows us to read the city as an extension of the long history of territory in Colombia, where the dynamics that produced rural displacement continue to operate in contemporary forms of urbanization.

Dominant/institutional story: the dominant perspective of risk as a technology of power

Technical knowledge is not neutral, but rather part of a broader web of power relations. Within this framework, the dominant perspective on risk can be understood as a technology of governance embedded in interconnected systems of oppression. This perspective operates through a separation between the “technical” and the “social,” concealing the power relations that structure the production of risk and legitimizing interventions that, in practice, lead to the displacement of communities.

Moreover, these forms of knowledge are not only incomplete, but also reflect the epistemological limits of the systems that produce them. From positions of institutional power, the capacity to imagine alternatives is constrained, since doing so would require questioning the very foundations of technical and political authority.

In the case of Bogotá, this logic is expressed in the classification of territories as “non-mitigable,” in the systematic devaluation of community knowledge, and in the transformation of risk into an opportunity for real estate valorization. In this way, risk functions as a language that translates structural inequalities into technical problems, contributing to the depoliticization of conflict and the reproduction of the conditions that generate it.

As they are told aloud, the dominant and institutional stories go hand in hand: the dominant one expresses the perspective of the north end of the city, which stigmatizes the south end as “dangerous” and its residents as “criminals”; the accompanying institutional story is that the state will protect its citizens by relocating them out of harm’s way.

Life/nature/teachers: the informal city as a space of oppression and liberation

In Bogotá, the struggle of peri-urban communities highlights the profound asymmetry in the production, distribution, and attribution of risk (López Meneses et al. 2022); however, this asymmetry is not contingent, but constitutive of a broader system characterized by dynamics of hierarchization of society, neoliberal extractivism and epistemological and administrative over-simplification of reality as a mechanism for monopolizing power.

The south end of the city sustains the north end in different ways. First, the south has been the site for extractive industries: the history of exploitation of mining resources is perfectly documented with a geography or spatial patterns linked precisely to these areas that have subsequently or simultaneously been configured as informal human settlements. The brick factories, for example, that supply materials for the whole city are located in the south—the environmental impact of these industries, including the destruction of local roads due to heavy truck traffic, stays in the south; meanwhile the materials are shipped where needed, providing benefit to those buying and selling the product. Second, the south supplies low-wage manual labour: a workforce willing to take on the jobs that are needed, but this also can put them in vulnerable positions, as underpaid, lacking proper safety protections, and ultimately disposable. Third, after a decision to relocate the city’s landfill to the southern peri-urban communities – 6,700 tons of waste per day – is part of a pattern of environmental racism.



An interview conducted by two students in the environmental club at the school in Usme.

The response from peri-urban communities – the fastest growing areas of the city – has been to mobilize demonstrations and protests, to improvise and to innovate. Despite segregation and stigmatization, the flows of people, matter and energy are sustained by networks and equipment that have been adapted in a reactive or improvised way, often through community initiatives, social protests, and local mobilizations. One major victory occurred when the communities united and successfully brought policy makers to meet with them and attract investment to build a cable-car transportation system, drastically reducing travel times for hillside communities.

Furthermore, communities participate in stabilizing steep slopes, planting gardens, and using ecological knowledge to manage water.



In the face of the expansion of the informal city with structural precariousness, the neoliberal logic of the State prevents the development or deployment of corrective or prospective capacities to mitigate or cover these multidimensional issues affecting people's lives in the city. Any urban intervention is subject to the convenience of businesses with profit margins and disabling financial intermediation, in addition, to cost-benefit analyses that do not take into account a social consensus but a business logic led by the State itself. There is no room left for "just transitions" within these narrow parameters. Meanwhile, the natural physical and ecological processes that underlie the general urbanization process are disrupted, and in this conflict risks are generated, and then amplified by climate variability and global climate change.

Click below to hear Maicol Ramirez, Mariela Caro and colleagues telling the story of the Museum of the Self-Constructed City, a bottom-up struggle led by communities and local organizations using memory, art, and activism to collaborate with institutional authorities.



Box 2: When Risk Reaches the People, the Story of Carlos Torres' Family

Speech prepared by Duván López for World Cities Day 2025, by invitation of the Future Cities Institute at the University of Waterloo, and of Mathieu Feagan and Leslie Wesler, lead researchers of the project Just Transitions As Consciousness Change: Learning from Frontline Communities.

"Let me read for you the following essay that I have elaborated to honour this International World Cities Day and the kind invitation of Prof. Math Feagan, Prof. Leslie Wexler, and the Future Cities Institute at the University of Waterloo. Thank you for this invitation. Let me please talk you about risk ... When risk reaches the people

In Colombia—and in many countries of the Global South—we often speak about housing gaps, structural poverty, and how many families end up settling on the lowest-value urban lands, those most exposed to so-called 'natural risks'. We tend to think that predetermined risky areas become settlements that revictimize vulnerable communities, due to the lack of effective enforcement and land-use planning; but today, I want to tell you a different story. I don't want to talk about how poor people settle in risk areas, but about how risk itself moves and approaches the places where the people live.

My friend Carlos Torres bought his plot of land in a decent, even promising place. It was close to an old train station—once part of a key transport corridor in Bogotá. His neighborhood was planned since the mid-twentieth century, but the destiny of that place would be rewritten by other forces. Macroeconomic decisions decreed that rail transportation in Colombia should disappear, opening



the market to large North American automobile industries and petrochemical companies. The train infrastructure was abandoned, and the San Juan de Usme station, close to Carlos—like so many others—fell into oblivion.

Colombian technocracy, dazzled by the American dream, tried to materialize that dream in Bogotá. The traditional and monumental Bogotá of colonial and republican inspiration was dismissed, replaced by the imagination of an American-style city of highways, condos, and consumption. The south of Bogotá

received waves of people displaced by war and drawn by the urban prosperity. Even more, following the linear logic of American urbanism, the materials that fueled the construction boom came from mining pits located in the south end of the city. Likewise, the city's waste was also sent southwards. Landfills and dumps were established.

While the elites built their dream, Carlos and his wife Margarita were also building up their own in San Juan de Usme. They raised their house next to the old train station and opened a small metalworking workshop. Through that work, their children were able to study and attend university to forge their own paths. Carlos and Margarita also became community leaders. Thanks to their efforts, the neighborhood improved its roads, legalized constructions, and opened schools.

But the surrounding environment kept changing. The station was demolished.



Massive occupants arrived searching for a plot — also mining companies and the main landfill of the city. Then, traffic became really heavy, pollution, and social pressure overloading the limits of the urban services. In 2010, a main aqueduct pipe broke. The community believes it was caused by heavy truck traffic and the use of explosives in nearby mining pits. Water flowed for days, soaking the slopes of San Juan de Usme... and soon, the landslides began.



The government intervened declaring the area a disaster zone and with that label Carlos and his neighbours would be forced to abandon their homes, under the promise of relocation subsidies. Carlos and his family have resisted ever since—just like the columns of his home still resist the pressure of the sliding land. Bogotá's relocation program—designed to protect the right to housing—never offered to Carlos compensation proportional to the real losses that affected his family home, his workshop, and his life story. Institutions offer a basic housing unit in exchange for decades of work, community building, and family dreams. Carlos faces not only the dismantling of his house, but the dismantling of his life project.



ARRAIGO has collected similar stories across different parts of Bogotá—stories of resistance, but also of deep asymmetries of power. Entire communities and territories are subject to decisions made in the name of progress... and in the name of risk. A key message is that **risk**

does not evolve around a natural physical phenomenon, but rather as a social and institutional construction—often a deliberate one.

In Bogotá, risk has been used to destroy and to create at the same time: certain spaces are degraded through mining, waste disposal, and institutional neglect, while others—including the same lands—are later re-valued through social housing or urban renewal projects. It is a perverse cycle of impoverishment and enrichment, where the suffering of some sustains the opportunities for others.

That is why it is necessary to think about just transitions from a human perspective, not just as a technical problem: to recognize that **sustainability cannot be built upon dispossession, nor by neglecting the community knowledge that rests at the very foundations of the city through effort, and a particular social, spatial, and communal intelligence."**

Methods-in-use (consciousness-raising): Arraigo as a space for the transformation of consciousness

The contribution of Arraigo goes beyond the realm of risk management or the right to the city, situating itself at the level of the transformation of consciousness—a central element for the construction of just transitions. The practices and **narratives that emerge from this process highlight that adaptability is not merely a technical issue, but fundamentally a social and relational one; that dignity is configured as an everyday practice of staying; and that territory must be understood as a living relationship between human and non-human communities.**



Masavi leading a community clap while visiting Usme.



DJ Portugal offering a song to honour Mother Earth in Usme.

In light of contemporary debates on just transitions, Arraigo not only embodies a social perspective on such transitions, but pushes it toward a point of radicalization. The experience of Arraigo interrogates the operability of institutionalized transition processes aimed at managing climate risk. The notion of risk is reoriented—not so much as a tangible reality that requires the deployment of institutional instruments and resources in response to a contingency or failure of the urban system, but rather as a manifestation of structural failures that imply the reconfiguration of existing systems and the socioeconomic order that sustains them.

From Bogotá, the experience of Arraigo enters into dialogue with analogous processes in other geographies across the continent, in which communities cease to be conceived as “beneficiaries” or “stakeholders” and instead assert

themselves as protagonists of the transition. This shift entails both an epistemological and political turn: transition is no longer understood as a public policy designed from above, but rather as a process of social reorganization perceived and enacted from below, even in tension with institutional frameworks.

In continuity with the premise that risk and the city are socially produced, the argument is expanded here: **transitions are also socially produced, and they hold the potential to reproduce or transform existing structures of oppression. Arraigo thus emerges not only as a space of resistance, but as a social laboratory in which alternative forms of consciousness and urban production are being tested.**



José Omar and Luz Dary, two community organizers leading festivals and dance in Usme.



Mariela Caro (and Alexandra holding the mic) about to give Jose Omar a gift honouring his work on ecological restoration and community festivals in Usme.



Kids participating in Alexandra dance troupe as part of Usme's Day of Water festival.

Contradictions, tensions, and solidarity practices

These experiences enable the articulation of solidarities across diverse but structurally connected struggles, raising fundamental questions about how to build alliances across different contexts without erasing their specificities, and how to prevent transitions from reproducing forms of exclusion in the name of sustainability. In this sense, the main lesson of Arraigo is that **there can be no just transition without a transformation of the social order that produces risk, dispossession, and inequality**. In this process, communities must not be conceived as objects of public policy, but as subjects of knowledge, agents of transformation, and architects of possible futures.

Certainly tensions and contradictions arise and persist, as the situation and its actors are dynamic, subjected to multiple incentive structures, and everyday lived realities. But the experiences of Arraigo allow Bogotá to be situated within a continental web of struggles, connecting debates on risk, territory, and transition with historical systems of oppression, and positioning itself as a space for the production of concrete alternatives.

In sum, just transitions are not designed exclusively within institutional arenas nor measured solely in terms of carbon: they emerge from contested territories, where communities reorganize life in the face of systems that have historically structured their dispossession.

Click to hear Carlos respond to 'institutionality' based on his experience in Usme.



Click to listen to Mariela Caro and Mariela Celis share their experience working with institutions that claim to be engaging with the communities...





Duván López and Mathieu Feagan planting the gifts offered by the Marielas to Jose Omar and the communities of Usme.

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