

Internal forced displacement and transformations of indigenous territorialities in Chiapas, Mexico

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Keywords: GIS, forced displacement, Chiapas, Southern frontier of Mexico.

Abstract

A geographical study was realized, incorporating temporal and spatial elements of the border region, on forced internal displacement (FID) in Chiapas, Mexico. The period analyzed begins in 2010 and ends in 2024, with the recording of forced internal displacement that becomes forced external or international displacement within the borders of Mexico and Guatemala, due to the dispute over control of the borders between drug cartels and organized crime groups, all amid heightened militarism and paramilitarism that has continued unabated since 1997. From a border perspective, the concept of DFI is used to reconstruct the territoriality of the affected communities. Methodologically, information obtained from various sources was processed in a GIS and verified in the field using GPS points, resulting in maps that allowed the increase in DFI to be visualized at the municipal level. The research is relevant because it provides georeferenced databases on the subject and because it takes an approach that is rarely used to study forced mobility in Mexico.

1. Introduction

Forced displacement is a problem that exists in different regions of the world and began to gain greater attention when, in 2022, the UN recognized the magnitude of the problem: more than 100 million people displaced globally (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). According to the same source, in September 2023, the figure rose to 114 million as a result of violence or natural disasters in places such as Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, and Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2023). By the end of 2024, global internal displacement (IDP) had increased to 123.2 million (UNHCR, 2024), and by April 2025, according to this agency's estimates, there was a 1% decrease, which translates into 122.1 million forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR, 2025).

Historically, the Latin American region has been marked by this type of forced mobility. Between the 1970s and 1990s, armed conflicts were the main trigger, unleashing waves of violence that mainly affected indigenous populations in countries such as Brazil, Peru, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and Colombia. Subsequently, with the start of the new millennium, we faced new challenges and actors in the area of IDPs without having resolved the problems that led to forced displacement in the last century. Such is the case of armed conflicts in countries such as Colombia and Mexico, which, far from disappearing, have undergone a reconfiguration marked by heightened territorial disputes in cross-border areas between illegal armed groups¹,

structures linked to organized crime and drug trafficking, with land ownership at the center of the dispute (Navarro, 2024).

In Mexico, IDP has been studied from different angles at the national level and in different regions (Darin, 2024; Muñoz *et al.*, 2022; Mancera and Egea, 2022; Vázquez *et al.*, 2020 and 2023; Argüello 2022; Salazar and Álvarez, 2018). For its part, over the last four decades, research on IDP in Chiapas has focused on the study of population expulsions due to religious, political, territorial, and armed conflicts (Pecker, 2019; Robledo and Cruz, 2015; Chamberlain, 2013; Rivera, 2013; Riego del and Arana, 2012; Topete, 2009); as well as the consequences of natural disasters and the result of a national and state political agenda to build hydroelectric dams (Alonso 2011, 2015; Briones *et al.*, 2013; Gallardo, 2014; Niño and Kauffer, 2020). In more recent years, research has linked the issue of IFDs to different forms of violence (Morales, 2025; Navarro, 2024, 2025).

However, geographical space is often seen as a complementary element and is sometimes absent from research. I therefore believe that more research is needed from a geographical perspective, in which the DFI in Chiapas is problematized temporally, spatially, and cartographically. It is my intention, therefore, to approach the issue from this perspective, drawing on a wealth of experience to rethink how to raise awareness of this problem, highlighting how one of its causes has been the use of violence by public authorities and various armed groups present in the territory that terrorize the population. This raises the question of whether, in addition to the social, economic, political, cultural, and territorial dimensions, we should also consider an emotional—or subjective—dimension that accompanies an individual or an entire community expelled from their territory and

¹ In Colombia, these include the National Liberation Army (ELN), dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). In Mexico, there are a variety of armed criminal and paramilitary groups, given the marked promotion of this type of shock group by the government since the

armed uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in 1994.

forced to make the decision to move to another, losing their original territoriality and sometimes rebuilding new territorialities.

In the cases that will be presented, the community's capacity for reconstruction, and therefore for territoriality, is also motivated by impulses and emotions, among which I highlight desire and its links to the land, whether through the aspiration to possess it, resentment at losing it, hatred for recovering it, or fear of inhabiting it and the need to abandon it in contexts of flight, due to the terror generated by the presence of armed criminal and military groups² in the territory.

The research was based on mixed methodologies that integrated the cartographic analysis of the FID, developed from the information revealed in the interviews and field trips, as well as statistical data that was subsequently georeferenced, which allowed for the construction of the first spatial databases on the subject. Likewise, considering the importance of comparing data with the spatial reality of the issue addressed, GPS points were taken to spatialize the control exercised by the National Guard (GN) in the southern migration corridor of Chiapas. Data was also obtained from the Chiapas State Attorney General's Office () on its website <https://www.fge.chiapas.gob.mx/Servicios/Hasvistoa>, and from the 2022 report of the National Guard (Guardia Nacional [GN], 2023).

The interviews, the main source of qualitative data, were individual and sometimes group interviews, in some cases semi-structured and in others unstructured, based on guidelines designed for fieldwork. In some locations, the interviews were not recorded due to the informants' fear of talking about the subject. Recorded interviews were always conducted with the participants' approval and lasted between 35 minutes and just over an hour. Between 2023 and 2024, more than 40 displaced persons were interviewed, mainly peasant men, housewives, and some children with primary education, belonging to the Costa-Socónusco, Central, Zoque Northwest, and North regions of Chiapas. In all cases, the focus was on the experiences of the interviewees with the actors involved. The objective was to identify the causes that led them to make the decision to displace themselves.

Overall, the information was organized, analyzed, statistically processed, and georeferenced using geographic information system (GIS) tools (Figure 1), resulting in interesting graphs and new maps. Processing this data using ArcGIS Pro software provided input for cartographic production. This methodological design allows the social sciences and humanities to consider the cartography generated as an analytical tool, since its projection in GIS allows for the observation of spatial patterns of position, coincidence, and distance to other problems occurring in the territory, such as the disappearance of persons, the health and environmental consequences of open-pit mining concessions and

hydrocarbon exploitation, etc. It also offers readers the opportunity to learn about the experiences of those who move through the territory of Chiapas and beyond, with the aim of promoting a more comprehensive understanding that links the social and spatial dimensions.

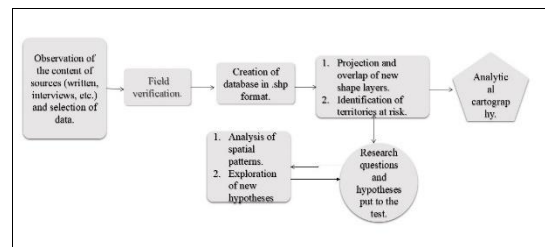


Figure 1. Methodological process diagram

The text, structured in three sections, analyzes the problem and how it has led to the loss or modification of original territorialities, emphasizing the impulses and emotions that accompany people during forced displacement through the territory until they settle in a new place, with a view to rebuilding their community and lost territoriality.

Forced displacement and loss of indigenous territoriality.

From Eurocentric and North American perspectives, it has been said that through territoriality, an individual or group seeks to influence, affect, or control the environment and the objects it contains. To achieve this, they physically and symbolically delimit the territory in which they establish themselves, thus affirming the control they exercise over it (Paasi, 2003; Sack, 1983). If we add a Latin American perspective to this position (Ramírez & López-Levi, 2015; Haesbaert, 2011; Gímenes, 2014), we will be in a position to give significant weight to the cultural and symbolic dimension in which territorialities are ascribed to the territory. Hence the relevance of Haesbaert's (2011) approach, in the sense that when discussing the territory of indigenous communities, it is more appropriate to use the category of territoriality, as it highlights both the symbolic nature and the notion of identity.

If we add to this a more local filter in which we bear in mind that the geographical environment influences but does not determine the construction of community in predominantly indigenous, internally displaced populations, we can consider territoriality as a human strategy, dynamic in time and space, which denotes identity through the symbolism and culture that is created or reproduced in the place, accounting for how one is in the territory. There is therefore a physical dimension related to the anthropization of the natural environment through the use and transformation of resources, which can be observed through marks on the landscape, but there is also a symbolic dimension that reflects the identity of the environment, creating or reproducing culture in the new place, hence the importance of the dynamic connotation of territoriality (García, 2008; Gímenes, 2014; Porto-Gonçalves, 2001).

In summary, while authors such as Sack (1983) and Passi (2003) have provided a useful basis for understanding territoriality as the control and delimitation of space, this research includes cultural, symbolic, and dynamic aspects that are especially relevant in the context of communities affected by forced internal displacement in Chiapas, communities that, being affected by this forced mobility, have faced processes of loss or transformation of their territoriality, or rather deterritorialization, which has been mostly indigenous.

Forced displacement and criminal fronterization.

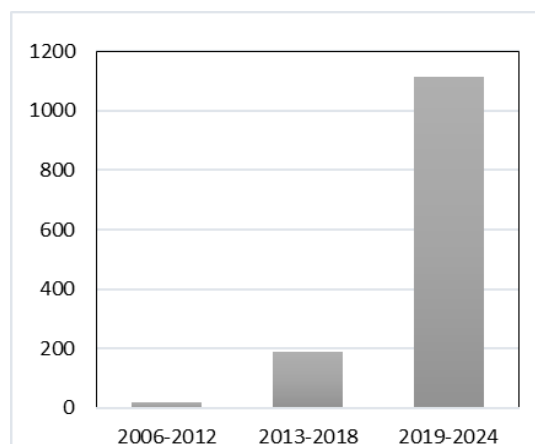
From a border perspective, FDI can be understood as part of forced human mobility, which in the Mexican state of Chiapas has been used as a fronterization strategy implemented by a variety of illegal armed groups, including drug cartels, organized crime groups, and paramilitary groups, who violently expel populations, mainly indigenous, based on various hegemonic and colonialist logics of emptying spaces, with the aim of controlling and appropriating certain territories.

On the other hand, between 2019 and 2024, the disappearance of persons has become one of the most frightening violent events for the population of Chiapas. According to these data, the proportion of missing persons increased by more than 400% compared to the previous state government (Navarro, 2024). This proportion was calculated based on information provided by the State Attorney General's Office on its website ¿Has visto a...? (Have you seen...?), which in this investigation was captured and used to generate georeferenced databases.

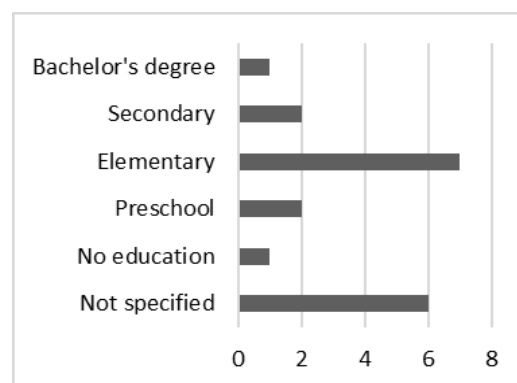
In the same vein, it is noteworthy how, once the data has been processed and projected in the GIS, a higher density of cases of disappeared persons can be observed in municipalities where the 11 National Guard coordination centers in the state are located: "Pichucalco, Palenque, Bochil, Ocosingo, Tuxtla, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Las Margaritas, Villa Flores, Comitán, Tonalá, and Tapachula" (National Guard, 2003:27), suggesting that the strategy for addressing the problem deserves to be discussed and, probably, rethought (Figure 2). Hence the importance of the research results, which are expected to be useful in prevention and land management in terms of public policy design.

Through media strategies that showcase violence, such as armed killings, the disappearance of people who mostly lack basic education (Graphic 2), and the forced recruitment of people, mainly those of working age (Graphic 3), these groups cause different types of forced displacement of local populations through fear and sometimes terror for owning certain lands—usually rich in mineral resources or with a certain geostrategic position. This means living at risk, so the desire to survive drives resistance strategies such as flight, causing people to leave

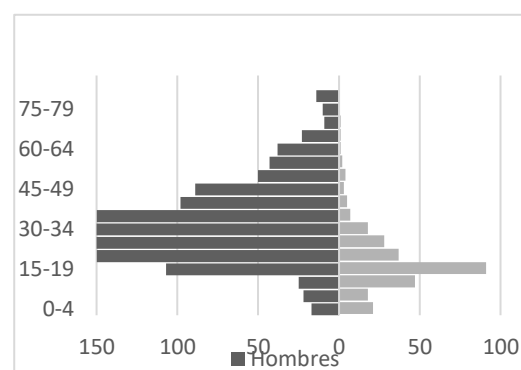
their lands, which are then presumed empty by criminal groups.



Graphic 1. People who disappeared in Chiapas between 2006 and 2024. Source: Author's own work.



Graphic 2. Level of education of missing people in Chiapas, 2019-2024. Source: Author's own work.



Graphic 3. People who disappeared in Chiapas 2006-2024 by sex and age group. Source: Author's own work.

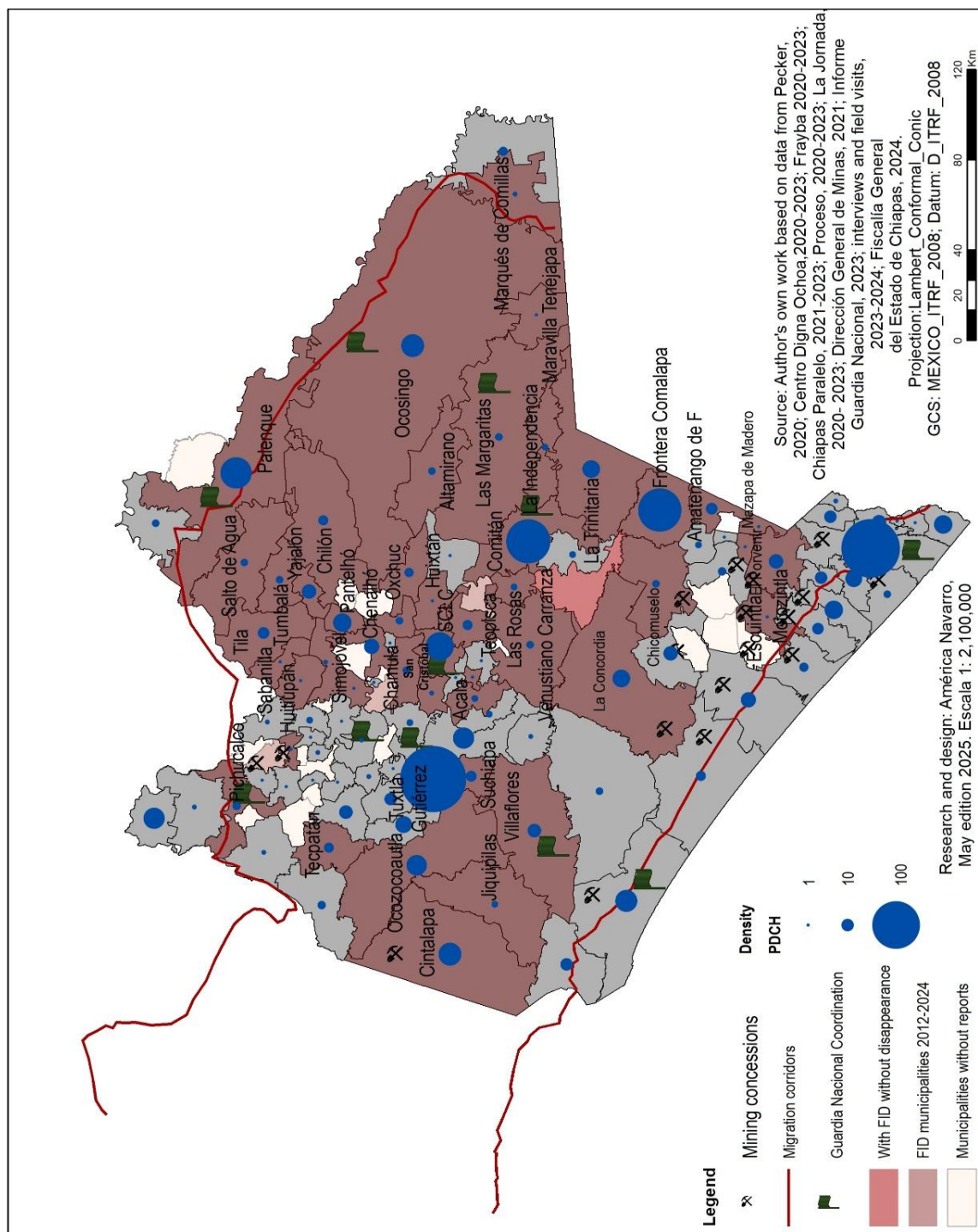


Figure 2. Disappearance density, FID and presence of the National Guardia and concessions granted in municipalities of Chiapas, Mexico, 2019–2024.

Source: Author's own work.

In the last two years, the practice of emptying spaces through terror strategies aimed at the population has occurred more frequently in municipalities on the border between Mexico and Guatemala, such as Frontera Comalapa, and in municipalities in the Sierra region, such as Chicomuselo. These types of violent

events and the forced displacements they have caused have been documented mainly by the written and audiovisual

media. One of the most obvious consequences is the impossibility of rebuilding the territoriality of displaced persons, due to their dispersion not only within Chiapas,

but also in different states of the national territory and internationally, particularly in countries such as the United States and Guatemala.

From forced internal displacement to forced external displacement forced external displacement.

In Chiapas, after the Zapatista uprising of 1994, the promotion of shock troops or paramilitary groups has not ceased, and they are now heavily armed. On numerous occasions, these groups have been identified by those affected as the operators or instigators of various forced displacements, hence the trend of a continuous increase in episodes of forced mobility in the state.

The DFI has been characterized by the use of extreme violence, which contributes to terrorizing the population, causing them to flee and leaving areas empty, as well as diversifying the type of displacement that, when crossing borders, becomes international, with no possibility of return.

In the last five years, the DFI in Chiapas has crossed national borders, becoming a DFE, causing trajectories in different directions as a result of extreme violence perpetrated by illegal armed groups. Such is the case of the inhabitants of the municipal capital of Tila, in the northern Cho'l region of Chiapas, against people settled in the same place and in nearby localities. Although the most decisive antecedents of the conflict date back to 2021, the aforementioned displacement occurred on June 4, 2024, with intra-municipal, inter-municipal, interstate, and international movements.

Through interviews, the inhabitants of Tila pointed out that the root of the problem was the creation of shock groups, warning of their polarization and the intensification of violence as a result of disagreements between the different groups that hold power and which, in turn, were responsible for the emergence of new armed groups.

[...] We left on Friday. When the army arrived, people began to leave at 5 and 6 in the morning, because, you see, there was no trust in the army. Four or five months ago, the army entered the town with two patrols, two trucks, I think between fifteen and twenty soldiers... but what happened? They were outnumbered by the people in conflict and they were chased away, intimidated, practically kicked out of the town, and so... that's why there was no trust. So when the army came in eight days ago, we thought, let's take advantage of this escape, and that's why people left... Then, there is no trust either because once we were here in Yajalón, the military threatened us: we are going to take everything from you, your supplies, and we are going to take you to Tila, where we will give you food, and they left, and since no one was there because it is empty, only the bad guys stayed there, because the army returned yesterday,

they are back here in Yajalón. (D. Gómez, personal communication, June 15, 2024).

After the June 2 elections, and even with the magnitude of this episode of displacement in Yajalón, the federal and state governments minimized the scale of the event, arguing that it was a problem between some residents, between families. However, faced with the overwhelming reality, they had to accept that it was an exodus of just over 4,000 displaced persons. According to data collected in this investigation through interviews with displaced persons who took refuge en masse in the municipality of Yajalón, the figure was around 12,000 displaced persons, also distributed in communities adjacent to Tila, and in other municipalities in the state such as Tuxtla Gutiérrez and Palenque; also, in other states of the country such as Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatán, Oaxaca, Michoacán, and, finally, in neighboring countries on both the northern and southern borders.

In a third round of interviews with people affected by forced displacement caused by extreme violence in the municipality of Tila, most of the population that was at high risk of suffering serious consequences if they returned preferred not to go back to their homes. Their current living situation is itinerant, which makes it very difficult to locate them and impossible to consider any plan for rebuilding their original territory. Those who decided to return did so with the intention of recovering their homes and their land, and also under pressure and encouraged by the social programs offered by federal government officials. However, according to the people interviewed, to date, after nine months, they have not received any economic benefits:

[...] we are displaced persons, and what about the census? What has happened? They just sweet-talked us with government programs, and to date, there has been nothing, no support whatsoever. Those whose homes were burned down are on their own, looking for ways to fix them... talking about it, and then nothing happens. (R. Madrigal, personal communication, March 27, 2025).

This is the situation of the DFI and DFE in Chiapas, with no possibility that the third stage of the study will provide conditions for the reconstruction of lost territories.

Final reflections

Analyzing from a geographical perspective the loss and, in some cases, the reconstruction of various territorialities in contexts of violence due to forced displacement in Chiapas, a state on Mexico's southern border, was a complex and interesting experience. The complexity lay in identifying and subsequently interpreting a subjective dimension that led to the emotional scale as one of the elements that trigger the decision to move through the territory.

Thus, desire in its link to land ownership became the trigger for emotions such as resentment, contempt, hatred, revenge, fear, and terror, which drove a person or an entire community to be forcibly displaced with a view to possessing or ceasing to possess the land.

This research is contributing to the creation of georeferenced databases on the DFI, which are pioneering on the subject at the national level, in response to a UN recommendation made two decades ago. In addition, by applying GIS tools to spatialize the phenomenon, possibilities for preventive schemes are opened up if geographical approaches are taken into account in public decision-making.

The cartographic visualization and geographical analysis of the DFI in Chiapas made it possible to identify the expansion of the territory involved, as well as to understand this forced mobility as a strategy of frontierization, dynamic in time and space, used by a diversity of armed actors that obeys different logics of territorial control by different actors.

Among the most significant contributions of the research is the continued construction of georeferenced databases on the subject, which are pioneering in their type at the national level. This has been an attempt to contribute to the observation made by the UN twenty-five years ago about the need for data on the FID in Mexico. A notable contribution is that by spatializing FID using GIS tools, preventive public management schemes can be proposed to decision-makers and public policy designers in closer dialogue with academia. In this sense, the observation of spatial patterns of other problems occurring in the territory in municipalities in the Costa-Soconusco, Zoque Northwest, and North regions warns of possible areas at risk of FID. Constant and preventive mapping can be of great help, given the importance of the territory in terms of its natural, mineral, cultural, and human resources.

IDF was linked to other issues that were also projected in the GIS, such as the disappearance of persons or the granting of concessions for the development of mining and fossil fuel extraction projects, realities that also contribute to the proliferation of this forced mobility. Some results were surprising. For example, on the issue of disappearances, in places where there is a greater military presence, cases of disappearances increase.

With regard to the issue of disappearances, the results suggest that the current strategy deserves to be discussed and possibly rethought, taking into account the voices and experiences of other actors, such as academia and those affected by this or any of the other issues (DFI, DFE, extractivism, etc.) present in the territory, which result in the loss of territoriality.

Finally, among the most significant contributions is the detection of a process of loss of territoriality in a period characterized by the proliferation of widespread extreme violence in the state, which keeps the displaced

population scattered and with little communication, fearing for their lives outside or with ly within the national borders. Thus, an imminent loss of original territorialities can be inferred in the current context of violence in Chiapas. Another important aspect is that the DFI takes on an international connotation (DFE) given the current level of intensified violence in this part of Mexico's southern border territory.

Funding

This research was funded by PAPIIT-DGAPA UNAM, number IA301424, and SECIHTI, number IH-2025-I-253.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the reviewers of this article for their insightful comments. The research was conducted within the framework of the projects «Desplazamientos forzados y transformaciones de territorialidades indígenas en la frontera sur de México. Chiapas 1970-2022» y «Observatorio de geografía humana y cartografía crítica para el monitoreo del desplazamiento forzado y desaparición de personas en Chiapas: una propuesta desde las humanidades digitales».

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