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Refugee Livelihoods in Urban Areas: Identifying Program Opportunities *Case study Ecuador*

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Despite a growing body of research about the livelihood problems of refugees in urban areas in countries of first asylum, there is little evidence about which humanitarian programs work, what livelihoods initiatives refugees undertake themselves, and where opportunities for programming interventions lie. This study addresses this knowledge gap by analyzing the urban livelihoods context for refugees and asylum seekers, and identifying programming opportunities and examples of promising program initiatives. The study's key objective is to find ways to strengthen existing livelihoods and generate new ideas from related fields of inquiry, such as low-income urban development and youth employment, that could be adapted for refugees in countries of first asylum.

We selected three case studies -- Cairo, Tel Aviv and Quito, Ecuador -- because they represent contrasting refugee policy contexts and livelihoods experience, and offer lessons for other host settings. Each case study begins with a review of existing livelihood programs in the country. This includes a mapping of commercial, humanitarian and governmental organizations that provide programming, advocacy or other resources that support the livelihoods of refugees, migrants and low-income citizens. We then interviewed asylum seekers and key informants to deepen our understanding of the livelihoods context in each country. Our main program recommendations, based on all three cases, can be found here: fic.tufts.edu

Key Findings

Asylum System

- Recent government shifts in asylum policy, such as restrictive pre-admissibility registration procedures and a narrowing of the refugee definition as a result of Decree 1182 of June 2012 – create obstacles to a fair and efficient Refugee Status Determination process.
- The centralized asylum system has created a large backlog of asylum-seekers, expected to reach 35,000 individuals by January 2013. This lengthy process creates protection gaps, and slows the local integration of persons in need of international protection, as asylum-seekers may not be able to fully access their rights or settle in until they have been granted asylum.

Livelihood Obstacles

- Colombian asylum-seekers and refugees face widespread xenophobia and discrimination in Ecuador. This discrimination creates barriers in access to employ-

ment, housing, education and healthcare, despite their legal right to these services.

It also makes them more susceptible to exploitation in the workplace.

- Colombians face discrimination in Ecuadorian society and its fragile economy because they are believed to have strong sales and customer service skills, and are thus perceived as illegitimate competition.
- Refugee women face particular challenges in accessing employment and other income generation activities due to stereotypes against Colombian women as being willing to engage in sex work. Many women have trouble finding employment that matches their skills, and those that do work are often verbally, physically and sexually harassed on the job.
- Access to capital to start or grow a business is a challenge.

- Asylum-seekers and refugees are allowed to work, but employers insufficiently understand this right. Employers do not regard refugee visas as sufficient proof of right to work legally; and work permits for which refugees qualify require tri-monthly renewal and engagement in bureaucratic procedures.
- Refugees who have undergone professional training and/or licensing in Ecuador are likely to have an advantage over those who do not have such local credentials.

Livelihood Enablers

- Refugees who have access to networks in Ecuador (e.g., family, other Colombian nationals, religious groups) established prior to or following arrival integrate more easily than those who do not. Networks allow refugees to avoid some of the obstacles present when seeking services on their own, such as discrimination and reference requirements, and facilitate access to employment, small loans, and housing.
- Among refugees in urban areas (60% of refugees in Ecuador), those who lived in urban areas in their country of origin fare better at securing a livelihood than those from rural areas, since they are more likely to have transferrable livelihood skills.
- Refugees often prefer self-employment and purposefully pursue a diverse set of livelihood activities. This allows them to have more steady income, and to be resilient against shocks experienced in one or more of the activities.

Humanitarian Assistance Support

- Quito hosts a number of refugee-assisting organizations, but access to information regarding humanitarian assistance and livelihoods programming is not sufficiently disseminated amongst the refugee population. Accessing and taking full advantage of these offerings requires being proactive to navigate social networks, humanitarian assistance agencies, and livelihoods programs.
- Refugees in Quito and Guayaquil face similar difficulties, but there are many fewer services in Guayaquil, where refugees are more dependent on intra-communal social networks.
- Some refugees experience protection risks and even persecution in Ecuador by armed actors that operate in the country or cross the border to locate targets. Persons experiencing such risks are not systematically protected by Ecuadorian authorities and are not systematically resettled, so they must learn to manage their risks and pursue livelihoods in such a way that sufficiently responds to their needs.



Many refugees in Quito live in Comité del Pueblo, a neighborhood in the far North of the city. Photo by Sandra ten Zijthoff

Introduction:

Refugees in Ecuador

Ecuador hosts the largest population of refugees^[1] in Latin America. By September 2012 Ecuador had recognized 55,639 refugees^[2] and has over 21,000 asylum-seekers.^[3] Over 98% of these refugees are Colombian nationals. This population continues to grow; UNHCR estimates that 1,200 de facto refugees enter the country every month.^[4] UNHCR's planning figures for 2012 and 2013 show how it expects the refugee and asylum-seeker population to grow:

Table 1: UNHCR 2012-2013 planning figures for Ecuador (Source: UNHCR Global Needs, p. 278)

UNHCR 2012-2013 planning figures for Ecuador							
TYPE OF POPULATION	ORIGIN	JAN 2012		DEC 2012 - JAN 2013		DEC 2013	
		TOTAL IN COUNTRY	OF WHOM ASSISTED BY UNHCR	TOTAL IN COUNTRY	OF WHOM ASSISTED BY UNHCR	TOTAL IN COUNTRY	OF WHOM ASSISTED BY UNHCR
Refugees	Colombia	59,100	59,100	67,970	67,970	76,830	76,830
	Various	900	900	1,040	1,040	1,170	1,170
People in refugee-like situations	Colombia	60,000	--	60,000	--	60,000	--
Asylum-seekers	Colombia	43,120	43,120	41,360	41,360	39,600	39,600
	Various	5,880	5,880	5,640	5,640	5,400	5,400
Others of Concern	Various	5,500	5,500	6,000	6,000	6,500	6,500
Total		174,500	114,500	182,000	122,000	189,500	129,500

Colombia has endured more than fifty years of armed conflict between national armed forces, guerrilla groups, and paramilitary forces. Throughout the conflict the civilian population has been directly targeted, and is often caught between armed actors that seek to establish and maintain territorial control. Colombians have fled their country for reasons ranging from individual persecution for political opinion or membership in a particular social group, to situations of generalized combat and violence. Based on our respondents' stories and the well-documented literature,^[5] the following reasons explain Colombian refugees' flight from their homes:

[1] We include people in refugee-like situations, asylum seekers and legally recognized refugees.

[2] Source: Ecuadorian government's Dirección General de Refugio, <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/refugiados/estadisticas/indice.html>

[3] Most recent available statistics on cumulative pending asylum claims are accurate as of September 2011. Presented on UNHCR website , reflecting Ecuadorian government figures. [http://www.acnur.org/t3/index.php?id=166&tx_refugiadosamericas_pi1\[uid\]=ECU](http://www.acnur.org/t3/index.php?id=166&tx_refugiadosamericas_pi1[uid]=ECU)

[4] "UNHCR in Ecuador 2012", 1

[5] See United Nations High Commission on Human Rights, "Report of the UNHCHR on the situation of human rights in Colombia", March 4, 2010; UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Colombia - <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4bfe3d712.html>

- Attacks on civil infrastructure
- Forced recruitment (e.g. of respondents' children)
- Intimidation or threats
- Forced labor (e.g. Coca production in Colombia)
- Kidnapping, extortion, confiscation of property
- Attacks on civilians, massacres, murders (e.g. family members) and other acts of terror
- Lack of state protection and access to justice
- Fumigations ordered by Colombian Government
- Forced displacement and other forms of restricted freedom of movement
- Belonging to a marginalized social group

The most common agents of persecution are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), National Liberation Army (ELN), new paramilitary groups which emerged following the demobilization of the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) between 2003 and 2006, and Colombian security forces (military, police, Administrative Department of Security).

Colombia has the second highest number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the world, at between 3,600,000 and 5,200,000.^[6] It is common for refugees in Ecuador to have previously been internally displaced in Colombia.

Ecuador has received refugees from Colombia since the start of the armed conflict; however, the majority of asylum-seekers have been registered since 1999. At present, 80% of all Colombian asylum-seekers are in Ecuador.^[7]

Refugees in Ecuador do not live in camps, but rather are allowed to settle freely throughout the territory. The largest concentrations live in the northern border region, in the central province of the capital city Quito, and the coastal province around the city of Guayaquil. Some 60% of the population lives in urban areas, and 40% in rural zones.^[8]

[6] [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpPages\)/22FB1D4E2B196DAA802570BB005E787C?Open-Document](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpPages)/22FB1D4E2B196DAA802570BB005E787C?Open-Document), <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia>

[7] "UNHCR in Ecuador 2012", 2
[8] "UNHCR in Ecuador 2012", 2

Legal Framework for Refugees in Ecuador

Ecuador is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees.^[9] It is committed to the 2004 Mexico Plan of Action for the protection of refugees in Latin America, which aims to improve self-sufficiency and the integration of refugees.^[10]

Ecuador's 2008 Constitution stipulates the right to apply for asylum, and that refugees will have their rights protected in the country.^[11] According to the constitution, all foreigners in Ecuador have the same rights and duties as Ecuadorians,^[12] including the right to work.^[13] Refugee protection principles in the Constitution are

complemented by expressed principles of promoting universal citizenship and free movement of all humans.^[14] Refugees are accorded access to the judicial system as well as health, education, housing, social security, financial and other services. Presidential Decree 1182 states that refugees will have equal rights to Ecuadorian citizens, with the exception of voting.^[15]

The country does not have asylum legislation, but Presidential Decree 1182 of 2012 establishes the procedure for refugee status determination (RSD). The Ecuadorian "Dirección de Refugio" or Directorate for Refuge, is the governmental entity responsible for the RSD process. The Directorate has offices in Quito, and three other locations in the north and south of the country. Asylum seekers must approach this office to apply for asylum. If accepted into the asylum procedure, they are registered and issued a provisional asylum-seeker certificate, in the form of an identity card.^[16] This card provides legal status for sixty days, and allows them to remain in the country without being deported. During this period, the Directorate must conduct the necessary interviews to make a recommendation to the eligibility commission. If the process takes longer than sixty days, asy-

[9] <http://www.acnur.org/biblioteca/pdf/4191.pdf?view=1>; The Cartagena Declaration on Refugees is a regional refugee protection tool that establishes an amplified parameter of inclusion based on the regional context, to include "persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order." (Cartagena Declaration, Conclusion 3)

[10] The 2004 Mexico Plan of Action was adopted by 20 governments and is a continent-wide framework for the protection of displaced people. The Plan has three main pillars for finding durable solutions: Borders of Solidarity; Cities of Solidarity; and Resettlement in Solidarity.

[11] Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, Art. 41.

[12] Articles 9 and 11 of the Constitution guarantee equal rights for refugees. Article 9 states "Foreigners in Ecuadorian territory shall have the same rights and responsibilities as Ecuadorians, in accordance with the Constitution." Article 11 part 2 states "No one shall be discriminated against for reasons of ethnicity, place of birth,...migratory status, ... nor for any other distinction, personal or collective, temporary or permanent, that has the purpose or result of impairing or nullifying, the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of their rights." (Asylum Access, 2011. "To have work is to have life")

[13] Article 33 of the 2008 constitution

[14] Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, Art. 416 (6).

[15] Decreto 1182, Art. 3

[16] Decree 1182, Art. 34

lum-seekers can renew their certificate until the commission decides on their claim. Recognized refugees receive documentation of their status, and are legally protected against refoulement. Refugee status documents must be renewed by the Directorate every two years. After three years with refugees status, individuals may apply for permanent residence and Ecuadorian citizenship.^[17] Children of refugees born in Ecuador receive Ecuadorian citizenship under the *ius solis* principle.

An eligibility commission composed of government officials makes decisions on asylum claims. UNHCR and civil society actors can participate in the commission, but do not vote. UNHCR does not conduct refugee status determination in Ecuador, but supports the government in the analysis of asylum claims.

Protection Challenges in the Asylum System

Ecuador has a strong refugee protection policy, and generally offers a favorable protection environment. Refugees and asylum-seekers are allowed freedom of movement. However, several factors pose obstacles to obtaining asylum and to attaining a durable solution in the country. These factors include inefficient and increasingly restrictive policy on accessing the asylum system, the politicization of asylum, and discriminatory practices by employers and other members of society.

[17] Decree 1182, Art. 61

In general, the complexity and the centralization of the asylum decision-making process means the RSD system does not keep pace with the high volume of asylum claims, and there is a significant backlog of pending claims. As of September 2011, over 21,000 asylum-seekers were awaiting a decision.^[18] An effort to de-centralize the system in 2009 was abandoned despite its success, and a new vetting procedure adds a layer of bureaucracy, as discussed below.

Refugee visas from Enhanced Registration Process

In 2009-2010 the Ecuadorian government established the “Enhanced Registration Process (ERP)”, intended to provide prompt decisions to asylum-seekers. The ERP deployed field brigades to the northern border region, and was intended to facilitate access to the asylum system for persons in need of international protection who could not or did not feel comfortable approaching the centralized asylum system (so-called “invisible” or “non-registered refugees”), those who had presented a claim but had not yet received an answer, and those whose claims were denied under the more restrictive interpretation of the regular RSD system. The mechanism utilized an inclusion criterion to establish refugee eligibility that was based on the refugee definition in the Cartagena Declaration. An interview established whether the asylum-seeker had

[18] Presented on UNHCR website , reflecting Ecuadorian government figures. [http://www.acnur.org/t3/index.php?id=166&tx_refugiadosamericas_pi1\[uid\]=ECU](http://www.acnur.org/t3/index.php?id=166&tx_refugiadosamericas_pi1[uid]=ECU)

fled from a qualifying municipality in Colombia (according to a list of pre-defined municipalities), and whether their life, liberty or security was threatened in that municipality. If so, the individual could qualify as a refugee. This system was designed to allow asylum claims to be decided within one day. During its one year of operation (2009-10), the government approved the asylum claims of 27,740 individuals, and documented them as refugees. This is a stark contrast to the RSD recognition rates prior to the ERP (2,769 in 2007; 4,435 in 2008,) and after it was discontinued: 7,922 in 2010 (including 3 months of Enhanced Registration mechanism); and 2,624 in 2011.^[19]

In spite of its success at reducing the backlog, the ERP was not extended beyond 2010. There was public resistance based on the belief that the ERP did not adequately detect individuals who should be excluded from refugee status^[20] and that it was enabling Colombian citizens to commit crimes in Ecuador. The government was also criticized for its expenditure on the mechanism. As a result, the government discontinued the procedure and reverted to the normal asylum system.^[21]

Since then, the government has been reviewing and often revoking refugee visas that were acquired during the ERP of 2009-2010 based on the premise that, in many cases, refugee status was granted without adequate review. Many

who received their refugee visa through the ERP live along the northern border of Ecuador. In order to renew their visas, they must travel to Quito but are often unable to do so before the expiration of their visa. If their documents are expired, their case is immediately reviewed and their visa renewal likely denied.

Difficulty accessing and navigating the RSD process

Many asylum seekers lack information about the RSD process. This became worse after changes in the asylum process ("Decree 1182", discussed below) made it more difficult for asylum seekers to access the RSD process or qualify for a refugee visa. The parameters that asylum-seeker must meet are increasingly inflexible, and this has resulted in a large population of undocumented asylum seekers. The ongoing violence in Colombia means they have no option but to remain in Ecuador and attempt to eke out a living for themselves and their families; with another migratory status if they are able to attain one, or without legal migratory documentation.

Asylum seekers are often unaware of how quickly they need to apply for a refugee visa upon entering Ecuador, and of their rights as an asylum seeker. Many are not aware of common pitfalls^[22] when conducting the pre-admis-

[19] Ecuadorian government figures, accessed 11/5/2012 at <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/refugiados/estadisticas/indice.html>
[http://www.acnur.org/t3/index.php?id=166&tx_refugiadosamericas_pi1\[uid\]=ECU](http://www.acnur.org/t3/index.php?id=166&tx_refugiadosamericas_pi1[uid]=ECU)

[20] McGrath, 10
[21] Roldan, 84-85

[22] Common pitfalls include referring to economic reasons for migration, failure to mention persecution and other important details that justify flight.

sibility interview with the General Directorate for Refugees, and they do not know steps to take or alternatives to follow when they have been denied asylum. Two particular problems emerged^[23] with the RSD interviews conducted by the General Directorate. First, asylum seekers commonly make the mistake of mentioning the loss of income-generating activities as one of the reasons they left Colombia. The mere mention of this loss – even when it is a consequence of persecution (such as being charged “war taxes”) and/or internal forced displacement – can lead to applicants being designated as economic migrants, disqualifying them as refugees. Second, asylum seekers do not know their basic rights prior to the interview. Asylum seekers that are not native Spanish speakers do not know that they have the right to an interpreter. Likewise, women who have suffered from sexual and gender-based violence often do not know that they have the right to request another interviewer if they feel that their interviewer does not have their interests in mind.

Recent developments: Decree 1182

Decreto 1182^[24], issued in June of 2012, overrides all previous decrees and, while it includes a few positive changes such as the explicit guarantee of asylum seekers’ right to work, most adjustments have created additional obstacles for asylum seekers in Ecuador. To begin with,

[23] Based on accounts by representatives of NGOs, personal accounts by refugees, and interview transcripts disclosed by refugees.

[24] <http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2012/8604.pdf?view=1>

the decree does not include the 1984 Declaration of Cartagena refugee definition and instead relies solely on the definition provided in 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. In other words, displacement due to generalized violence and generalized human rights violations is no longer considered to qualify as reason for requiring refugee protection.

A second problem is that Decree 1182 establishes pre-registration admissibility vetting procedures that seek to identify cases that are “manifestly unfounded”, “abusive”, or “illegitimate”, prior to their entering the asylum system. Asylum seekers must go through an initial interview in which staff decide whether the claim can proceed to be analyzed in full depth.^[25] Individuals whose claims are deemed admissible are documented as asylum-seekers and allowed into the RSD system. Those whose claims are not admitted are expected to leave the country, or regularize their status through another migratory avenue. There is no process to appeal such decisions, however administrative recourse can be applied for within three days of the decision.

The admissibility mechanism opens new protection gaps in the asylum system. One such gap is that the preliminary interview does not allow refugees to sufficiently explain their reasons for flight and can be disqualified based on incomplete information. Another is that persons approaching the Directorate to apply for asylum are not considered asylum-seekers - and therefore are not documented as such - until their claim is determined admissible. Until they are

[25] Decree 1182, Art. 19

admitted they are only issued a “certificate of claim presentation” which allows them to remain in the country until their next appointment, but they are not identified as asylum-seekers. This leaves would-be asylum-seekers exposed to harassment by authorities, at risk of deportation, and unable to work legally.

Another gap is that the new decree allows for the rejection of “illegitimate” applications; for instance, asylum seekers that have committed a minor offense in Ecuador. This is a direct violation of the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Perhaps the most significant alteration has been the reduction of time granted to asylum seekers to apply for asylum upon entering Ecuador. Previously, asylum seekers could apply for a refugee visa within the first three months of their arrival. The new decree requires asylum seekers to apply for their visas within 15 business days of entering the country. This may prove a very short time for intending asylum seekers, for instance if they do not find out about the asylum system quickly enough, if they do not have sufficient resources to travel to the centralized Directorate offices, or if they do not feel comfortable approaching authorities. In addition, refugees are granted only 5 business days to appeal when legal status has been denied.



Two girls in Guayaquil look outside their terrace. Their mother, a Colombian refugee, had managed to make a small business after purchasing a sewing machine. Photo by Sandra ten Zijthoff

Refugee Assistance and Livelihoods Program in Ecuador

UNHCR works with international and Ecuadorian partner agencies to promote self-reliance and local integration through a mixed strategy of livelihoods support. The main tools are grants for small individual and community businesses, promoting access to micro-credit and banking services, and promoting refugee participation in public economic programs such as employment banks and business development support services.^[26] Recently, UNHCR has increased its focus on outreach directly to refugee communities. New strategies to disseminate information to refugees are being considered, such as using social media, text messaging and other online tools.

These programs are implemented in the regions where UNHCR has offices; however, in practice these programs cannot meet the refugee population's needs for livelihoods support. In large part this is due to insufficient funding.^[27]

Refugee assistance is provided by local and international organizations, such as HIAS, SJRM, FAS, GIZ, some of which are UNHCR operational and implementing partners, faith-based organizations, and Ecuadorian government institutions. Limited humanitarian assistance is provided during the first year after arrival, and

is intended to provide supplemental support to asylum-seekers and refugees while they adjust to their new circumstances. Refugees who initiate the RSD process upon arrival are eligible for humanitarian assistance and small cash transfers from UNHCR's implementing partner, HIAS. Humanitarian assistance includes emergency shelter; basic supplies such as clothing, blankets, foam mattresses, and cooking utensils; food baskets (*mercado*); psychosocial support; small grants to cover costs of medicine; and, in some cases, small cash transfers to cover the first three months of rent (provided on a case-by-case basis). Refugees who were not informed of the possibility to receive assistance from HIAS and who fail to initiate the RSD process within the first year are often denied assistance, as priority is given to new arrivals.

In some situations food is provided on a community level so as to benefit both the refugee and non-refugee local population.^[28] Asylum-seekers and refugees are eligible for state assistance programs, such as the 'solidarity bonus', known as a human development bonus,^[29] but in practice it is difficult for refugees to access this assistance. As one refugee explained:

[26] UNHCR Ecuador: "Estrategia sobre medios de vida...", 2-3
[27] UNHCR Global Appeal, 279

[28] UNHCR Ecuador: "Estrategia sobre medios de vida...", 1
[29] Decreto 1182, Art. 62

Every refugee that arrives knows of HIAS and UNHCR. Later, they begin to find out about other organizations, like SJRM. When they first arrive, their need is so great that the first thing they try to find out is who can help them. Almost everyone has asked for help from these organizations but they don't provide enough for what we really need. Our needs go beyond a "Mercado" that is consumed in one week. What we need is how to live in a different society. I feel privileged because I met good people and favorable conditions allowed me to "salir adelante" [get ahead], but for most refugees this isn't the case. Most live with very little and on the margins of society. It's important that the organizations study each case and offer support until a refugee family can support themselves with dignity in this country.

There is a significant difference between the assistance provided in Guayaquil and Quito. In Quito, there are numerous refugee organizations providing humanitarian aid and legal assistance as well as small grants, micro-credit loans and other livelihood programming. In Guayaquil, a few refugee organizations provide legal assistance but there is no humanitarian aid or livelihood programming yet.^[30] As a result, refugees in Guayaquil are less dependent on the services of refugee organizations, and they rely much more on assistance from their social networks. In Quito, the refugees rely more on humanitarian aid, sometimes for a year or more.

[30] In 2013, there are plans to provide credit plans for refugees through UNHCR and partner organizations like Hogar de Cristo and Agrupación Afroecuatoriana "Mujeres Progresistas" (AAMP).

HIAS grants assistance on a case-by-case basis, but food aid is normally provided for approximately three months. If recipients' needs persist after this period, refugees are referred to other organizations such as Misión Scalibriniana, which may provide for another three months. The Colombian Refugee Project also provides food and non-food items for up to six months. If well informed of the available assistance programs, a new arrival can benefit from up to one year of food and non-food provisions. Many refugees who begin the RSD process are not immediately referred to these and other organizations and are unable to access assistance when they need it most.

With the support of the World Food Programme (WFP), HIAS provides food assistance to relieve the most pressing needs of refugee families. The food basket consists of flour, lentils, vegetable oil, sugar and salt. Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction, stating that the food received was not proportionate to the household need. For example, a family of five received the same as a family of three. Respondents prefer the Misión Scalibriniana food assistance program, which provides vouchers so refugees can select their own food from the Mercado Mayorista. Beginning in 2013, HIAS plans to adopt a voucher system similar to that of Misión Scalibriniana.

I don't want to seem ungrateful, but the food that HIAS provides is not good. Just lentils, oil and flour. No sugar or salt. At Mision Scalibriniana the food is better because it's more varied. When I was able to

work I could buy other items to vary, apart from the food from the restaurant [where I worked].

Humanitarian assistance is premised on the assumption that refugees will achieve self-sufficiency within the first six months of arrival. However, many refugees and asylum seekers do not achieve self-sufficiency for at least one year, and sometime more, following their arrival in Ecuador. Refugee organizations do not have the resources or capacity to provide refugees

with humanitarian assistance for much more than three months. However, the need for long-term humanitarian assistance would diminish if employment was accessible in practice.



Pictured here is the entrance to the office of Misión Scalabriniana, one of the few organizations that provides services to refugees in Guayaquil. Photo by Sandra ten Zijthoff

Urban Livelihoods of Refugees in Ecuador

The second phase of our research in Ecuador focused on understanding the livelihoods experience of refugees.

Methods

Primary data collection, through semi-structured interviews with refugees and representatives of governmental and non-governmental entities, took place between January and May 2012. A total of 80 refugees and 24 governmental and non-governmental representatives were interviewed. Each interview took approximately 1 – 1.5 hours. Data collection was carried out by an experienced team comprising of two international and two local researchers.^[31] The research team met on a weekly basis to review the data and identify new relationships and issues to explore in follow up interviews.

We relied on making initial contact with refugees through local NGOs in Quito such as Fundación Ambiente y Sociedad and the Colombian Refugee Project, as well as UNHCR. Once we had met a core group of refugees we asked them to introduce us to others that would be available to interview. This reliance on convenience sampling and snowball sampling is not optimal but we were able to obtain a fairly representative

sample in terms of our key variables. We sought to achieve a balance based on sex, rural/urban backgrounds, and length of time in Ecuador. We identified about equal numbers of refugees who had been in Ecuador for less than one year and for more than one year.

Interviews were transcribed and in some parts the data was summarized. Data analysis was conducted using Hyper Research, a qualitative data analysis tool.

Demographics

Of our 80 refugee respondents, 67 lived in or around Quito, and 13 lived in or near the city of Guayaquil. Some resided in nearby provinces such as Manabí and had come to Guayaquil to renew their visas, among other reasons. In Quito, respondents lived throughout the metropolitan area depending on the cost of rent. Neighborhoods in the south and north of Quito tend to have lower rents. Refugees were clustered according to country of origin. Cubans tend to live in La Florida, while Colombians were found in Comité del Pueblo and Carapungo, in the North of Quito. While Colombian refugees were found to cluster in these and other neighborhoods, there are also many Colombian refugees that deliberately avoid living in neighborhoods with large Colombian populations – security con-

[31] International researchers: Lana Balyk, Sandra ten Zijthoff. Local researchers: Christine Fabara, Alexandra Lara

cerns related to persecution in Colombia have carried over and created lack of trust within the Colombian refugee population.

Just under half (35) our respondents were female. Two thirds were either married or in a civil union and 71% of respondents had children and/or dependents. Respondents ranged in age from 21 years to 70 years, with most in their mid 30's to late 40's. Only 3 respondents were over 60 years old (Table 1).

Table 2: Respondents: age by gender

Age	Men (n=45)	Women (n=35)	Total % (n=80)
21-30 yrs	7	7	14 (17%)
31-40	12	13	25 (31%)
41-50	14	10	24 (30%)
51 +	11	5	16 (20%)
Total	56%	44%	

Most respondents (79%), both male and female, came from urban settings in their country of origin and had lived in Ecuador for more than 1 year.

More than half of our respondents, 57%, had completed high school, and a few had completed university. The remainder had completed primary school and many were trained in a technical skill.

In terms of legal status, about two thirds of respondents were registered refugees with a refugee visa, and the rest (24 respondents) were

asylum seekers, of whom 7 had been denied refuge and were appealing the decision. Two respondents were undocumented, having been denied refugee status or because they had never applied.

Migration Experience

Four of our respondents were from Bangladesh, Cuba and Nigeria.^[32] The rest were Colombian, about half from large urban centers, including Bogota, Cali and Medellin. A third (34) came from Valle del Cauca (the region around Cali). The remainder came from Antioquia, Arauca, Caldas, Caqueta, Cauca, Chocó, Cordoba, Cundinamarca, Guaviare, Huila, Meta, Norte de Santander, Pereira, Quindio, Risaralda, Santander, Tolima,

Many respondents said they had been forced to abandon their assets in Colombia, though a few respondents arrived with savings and others exchanged what few assets they had to finance their departure from Colombia. One refugee said:

Before arriving here, we had a “finca” [ranch] and we planted vegetables and fruit. We had a chicken farm too. We ate well and lived well. It was our land and the armed groups began arriving and telling us we were with them and not the other. They declared us “objetivos militares” [military objectives] and we had to escape. But they

[32] According to the Ecuadorian General Directorate for Refugees, 98.45% of refugees in Ecuador come from Colombia; non-Colombian refugees originate from more than 15 different countries. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Integration, 2011

controlled us and we had a curfew. They would only let us out at 9am - 6pm. If we didn't follow their directions, they would kill us. Finally, we escaped by pretending my wife was sick.

We left everything behind like vehicles and more than 700 chickens. When we left, we only had a motorbike, which we sold for very little to buy shoes and to escape to Ecuador.

All Colombians traveled directly to Ecuador from Colombia, usually by bus, entering the country as tourists. Some used other modes of transportation such as boat, foot and hitchhiking when they were unable to cover the costs of bus transport (often the case when fleeing with dependents). According to one couple:

Traveling here was the hardest. We came here without any money. It took our family (5 members) 36 hours to get here. It took a week of hitch hiking. We came with one suit-



Map 1. Refugees in Ecuador originate from Colombia, Cuba, Peru and numerous other countries. However, the majority are of Colombian descent.

case for 5 people. We had no warm clothes, we got sick, we were cold.

Interviewer: How did you cope?

We asked at churches. Everything we have has been donated to us. The Mennonites gave a mattress to each person.

Experience in Ecuador

Most respondents went directly to Quito or Guayaquil. Respondents explained that they prefer to locate themselves in urban centers, as it is easier to remain anonymous and there are more housing and employment opportunities. A few respondents initially settled in the north for several months to several years, then migrated to Guayaquil or Quito when security concerns increased.

Housing

The few respondents who arrived with some financial capital used it to secure housing during the first months. Some stayed at a hostel until funds were depleted or until they found an apartment to rent. Those that arrived without funds relied on friends and/or family in Ecuador or, if in Quito, went directly to refugee assisting organizations. Several slept on the streets during their first days in Quito or found temporary shelter at one of the city's homeless shelters, such as Santa Rita.

Finding an apartment to rent is difficult due to discrimination. Ecuadorian landlords sometimes

refuse to rent to Colombians, regardless of their financial resources. Several respondents mentioned some experience of housing discrimination:

It took time to find an apartment or even a room to rent because, when they hear my [Colombian] accent, Ecuadorians say, "There are no more rooms for rent!" Or they simply slam the door in my face!

And another said:

We had great difficulty finding a place to live. They ask us [Colombians] for a larger down payment than Ecuadorians. Recently

we were looking for a place to live nearby. We went to a house and they asked me if I was Colombian. I said yes and they immediately refused us. We could really benefit from a housing program.

Another obstacle is the initial deposit that landlords require, which amounts to 1-2 months rent. Respondents lacking financial resources try to locate living spaces that do not require a deposit and are inexpensive (\$50-\$120 per month), and end up in places that lack basic facilities such as running water.

Due to the difficulties of finding housing and covering rent and initial deposits, both Colom-



A neighborhood in Guayaquil, home to a few of the study's respondents. Photo by Sandra ten Zijthoff

bians and refugees of other nationalities live in neighborhoods with low-cost housing, and often share living spaces to minimize costs. Families that arrive together may share a house, with one bedroom assigned to a family of five or more. Individuals may share a \$100 suite among four.

The Ecuadorian government offers a “bono de la vivienda” [housing subsidy] to families with scarce resources who would like to buy or build a house. While the subsidy is intended for families in highly vulnerable circumstances, refugees are not considered as possible beneficiaries.^[33]

Livelihoods

The three elements of success are work, entrepreneurship and resolve. (Colombian refugee in Ecuador)

In their countries of origin, respondents' work experience ranged from small business owners and administration professionals to street vendors and cosmetologists, as shown in Table 3. In Ecuador, refugees were engaged in similar livelihood activities. However some had found niche markets, such as the Nigerian refugee population, many of whom teach English. Almost all worked in the informal sector, and more were engaged in domestic work, street vending or as security guards than had been in their home countries.

About three quarters (73%) of respondents in Quito and Guayaquil were in wage employment (41%), self-employed (53%), or a combination of the two (5%). The remainder were unemployed but seeking employment. Semi-skilled and unskilled refugees were active mainly in casual labor and petty trade, including street vending,

Table 3: Respondents' livelihoods in countries of origin

Skilled work	carpenters, car mechanics; bakers; seamstress/tailor
Sales	street vendors (e.g. CDs); food vendors; shops and warehouses, beauty products
Manual labor	painting, soldering, construction
Services	waiter/waitress, domestic worker; taxi driver; bus assistant; nanny; hairdresser;
Professionals	secretary, administrator; marketing; social worker; engineer; accountant; paramedic; business manager; police officer; nurse
The arts	artist; composer/musician; writer/poet; beautician

[33] Sarmiento, Karina (2012). “Políticas públicas de acceso a la vivienda y personas en necesidad de protección internacional”. Entre Tierras: Boletín sobre Políticas Migratorias y Derechos Humanos: Urbanización de las sociedades, migraciones y derechos humanos – Agosto/2012

domestic work and construction work. Refugees with professional experience had difficulty practicing their professions or finding employment in their areas of experience. This is due to lack of access to capital and/or tools, and because local employers are hesitant to hire refugees, regardless of their legal status. Those with certain skills, such as tailors and seamstresses, hairdressers and cosmetologists, can become self-employed by offering their services directly to clients. However, this also depends on having access to the necessary tools.

Those with access to capital from savings or small grants, set up as food vendors, selling empanadas and coffee, or selling CDs and books on the street.

Respondents frequently diversify livelihood activities as steady work is difficult to come by and often does not cover all living expenses. Respondents preferred self-employment over wage employment with either Colombian or Ecuadorian employers. Self-employment often means performing diverse income-generating activities, such as odd jobs and street sales.

For instance, one of our Colombian respondents works as a street vendor in the morning when the weather is good for selling coconut juice, in a restaurant in the afternoons, and in the evenings weaves bracelets and other accessories to sell. While self-employment does not guarantee regular income, it means refugees are more self-sufficient and less likely to be exploited by employers. As explained by several refugees:

I perform odd jobs on my own. I make furniture, paint houses, and other things after leaving the workshop or during the weekends. People begin to notice my work and they call me.

I earn money through a variety of short-term jobs, such as construction, painting, restaurant work, and selling morochos on the street.. Success is owning one's own business, because then you are in control, you know how you get your income.

Documented respondents were often more effective in securing employment and said they were able to earn between \$200-\$600 per month. However, most refugees do not have access to legitimate and steady employment. Through odd jobs and intermittent temporary employment, most earn \$50-\$100, barely enough to cover rent, let alone cover emergencies.

Enablers and obstacles to employment

According to respondents, the first year in Ecuador often proves to be the most difficult. Refugees and asylum seekers arrive with little to no knowledge of the difficulties they might face in Ecuador. Where there are existing networks to assist new arrivals, refugees do much better. However, these networks cannot address all the difficulties refugees encounter. We review some of these difficulties in this section, beginning with the ways in which social networks help.

Networks

In other countries, we have explored the extent to which refugees rely on help from the diaspora (friends and family in other countries) as well as their co-national network within the country of asylum. In Ecuador, however, few of our respondents from Colombia rely on remittances. Those with relatives in the United States, Canada, or Europe occasionally received remittances, though this was irregular. Respondents from Nigeria and Bangladesh, however, did rely on remittances.

The refugee networks in Quito and Guayaquil, on the other hand, do provide valuable resources. New arrivals with previously established contacts, including relatives or friends, in Quito or Guayaquil tend to rely completely on them until they are able to secure housing and employment. Those who have not found a social network struggle to find reliable employment opportunities and are more likely to engage in risky livelihood activities.

Those who integrate with both the refugee and local populations, benefit from information (e.g. on housing, employment, sources of assistance), resources (food and non-food supplies through



Two Colombian refugees sharing information about employment over a coffee. Photo by Sandra ten Zijthoff

lending and borrowing between trusted contacts) and mutual emotional or spiritual support. Among the refugee population, access to information regarding housing and employment is of particular importance to new arrivals. As stated by one Colombian respondent:

In one year, it's difficult, if not impossible, to achieve everything. For us, it was also very difficult in the first 3 years, but within one month of our arrival we found a place to live. We have acquired more things (e.g. tools, home, income) in less time than most. I attribute this to the support we've received from the community, which occurs in a chain-reaction. When one of us is doing well and has work, he recruits other Colombians to come work with him...By helping others get work through you, they are more likely to tell you about opportunities when they have them.

Networks help in finding work. For example, they usually know of businesses that will hire refugees regardless of their legal status or nationality, and are often notified of employment opportunities.

Individuals who focused on expanding their social networks with other Colombians, with Ecuadorians and with local and international development organizations were able to access vital information on activities, workshops and livelihood opportunities. Additionally, small groups of refugees, whether family groups or acquaintances, will frequently share housing to reduce costs and help one another reciprocally with food and

information on employment opportunities when available.

It's like a chain or a gearbox. While one wheel turns, it moves another. Everyone moves forward this way. If we are fine and we have work, when someone calls me for a job, I take more Colombians to work with me...One always tries to help recent arrivals because we were once in that position as well.

The best way to find a job in Ecuador is through contacts, from here and also from Colombia, because while there are many who come, there are also some that leave and tell us about opportunities.

Networks also help with seed funding to establish small businesses such as hairdressing salons, tailors (from home), or restaurants and small food stalls. (Small grants from the refugee NGOs in Quito also provide seed capital as discussed above.) Extended family members loan each other funds or pool money together to establish a small business. Some respondents used their social networks to target individuals with resources that could help them e.g. with a business idea or to expand their professional network. As one said:

When I first arrived, I tried to befriend a group of Colombians in good status who were well off, educated, respected, well connected, businessmen who have been here for 20+ years. I have a real friendship with them, but I sought their friendship as

a way to integrate more by finding work or in case I needed help in some way in the future. I also tried to befriend and talk to anyone and everyone – Colombian or Ecuadorian. This helped me find opportunities, information and more friends.

Refugees' interaction with other refugees and Ecuadorian society directly affects their success in obtaining employment, accessing services and adjusting to life in Ecuador. Those who are undeterred by discrimination or being noticed and actively seek information through social networks or elsewhere tend to fare better, as they are able to access valuable information regarding employment and training opportunities. This information is not actively distributed and can be difficult to access by those less engaged in community or NGO networks:

You arrive somewhere and there's information about other places. But some people don't look for that, you have to ask and search.

Those who isolate themselves to avoid negative interactions with the host society tend to fare worse.

For those with technical skills, the key to securing a livelihood is obtaining the tools to execute their skills. Without capital, refugees rely on different strategies to obtain the tools they need. Several of our respondents obtained tools from non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations and sometimes through personal contacts. A Colombian refugee family in Guayaquil told us:

When we arrived here in June 2010, we had nothing. In 2011 we were able to obtain these sewing machines ...from Misión Scalibriniana and FAS. We also received a machine to cut grass.

We met a man who was a mechanic and had a workshop. We made a deal with him. We would give him commission from the work we did in order to use his space and his sewing machines. This man, an Ecuadorian, was reliable and treated us well.

One day, I brought home a label I had found at the workshop. It was a phone number of who produced the label. I called and spoke to the owner, explaining our situation. The owner agreed to give us 2 machines that we would pay off little by little.

Once we had machines, we moved into our own space where we now live and work, but the money needed for this space took 2 years to save.

Church communities represent an important source of support for refugees. They provide emotional and spiritual support and are one of the only non-discriminatory spaces where refugees can interact with one another and local populations. Many churches assist refugees through donations of food, clothing, school materials and even tools for work.

As in all networks, there is jealousy. Individuals who serve as contacts for local and international community development projects sometimes

hoard information about upcoming workshops or activities, ensuring that their families and/or friends benefit first. However, a much more serious problem is the way in which insecurity in Ecuador, stemming from fears of being followed and found by their persecutors from Colombia, undermines the networks, as discussed in the next section.

Security problems

The power of social networks is diminished by the security problems many Colombians face in Ecuador – asylum does not guarantee protection, even to those who have obtained a refugee visa. The epicenter of the Colombian armed

conflict borders Ecuador's northern provinces and sometimes spills over into Ecuador. Many Colombian refugees have faced threats and attacks by their persecutors while in Ecuador, which forces them to live in hiding or constantly change locations to avoid being tracked down. One respondent said: "I've been persecuted even here in Ecuador. They [persecutors] search for me like a needle in the haystack. Even among other refugees my life has been threatened."

Fear for their personal security and that of their family results in limited mobility and reduced social interaction. To avoid encountering their persecutors or other Colombians that might



A Colombian refugee inquiring about work at a pharmacy. Though well experienced and documented, he was turned away because the employer did not understand that refugees would legally work in Ecuador. Photo by Sandra ten Zijthoff

recognize and identify them to persecutors, many respondents said they did not avail themselves of refugee assistance programs if they are required to gather in large numbers in the waiting areas outside an organization to receive their mercado or attend and appointment with a social worker or livelihoods officer:

I would like to move somewhere else because I do not feel safe in Quito. I've seen different paramilitary members here. I worry about meeting other Colombians, as I do not know who they are connected to. I want to have a secure livelihood for my family, but I also want basic safety.

Thus, despite the networks, many refugees remain isolated, unable to access information and social networks to obtain humanitarian, legal, or psychosocial assistance, let alone livelihood opportunities or employment.

Discrimination

Refugee and non-refugee Colombian nationals systematically face discrimination in Ecuadorian society. Colombians –typically distinguishable from Ecuadorians or other Latin Americans by their accent- are often perceived as being associated with crime, drug trafficking and prostitution. Colombians are also perceived as possessing entrepreneurial qualities, such as sales and customer service abilities, that threaten Ecuadorian competitiveness.^[34] This discrimination has many direct effects on refugees' ability to integrate within their country of asylum.

Employers are often unwilling to hire refugees,^[35] and they regularly face rejection when applying for employment, school enrolment, housing, and public services. Respondents all mentioned some experience of discrimination, most commonly related to acquiring housing and employment as discussed above, but also against their children in public schools (by both peers and teachers/principals). Often discrimination was associated with workplace abuse, particularly for female Colombian refugees who experience sexual and physical harassment.

The Ecuadorian government has addressed this issue, in part, by organizing several campaigns in partnership with UNHCR to raise public awareness of the refugee definition and refugees' rights. Campaigns such as "Todos Somos Migrantes" [We are all Migrants] and "Convivir en Solidaridad" [Living Together in Solidarity] seek to decrease discrimination and xenophobia toward refugees as well as afro-descendents and other Ecuadorian minorities. Despite these campaigns, discrimination remains an obstacle for refugees, making it difficult to access safe, legal employment and other livelihood opportunities.

Refugee status and work permits

Employment opportunities depend on refugee status although even those with refugee visas have difficulty securing employment. While refugees without proper documentation can sometimes secure low-skilled jobs, increasing security measures by the Ecuadorian govern-

[34] <http://americasquarterly.org/node/3281>

[35] Americas quarterly: "Ecuador's Invisible Refugee Population"

ment require employers to submit all employee documentation immediately, or face fines and possibly jail-time for employing an improperly documented worker.

By law, refugees in Ecuador are guaranteed the right to work. Recently, this right has been explicitly stated to include asylum seekers. However, documentation is sometimes a cause for misunderstanding and often prevents refugees from accessing employment. Most employers and business administrators still believe that refugees and asylum seekers are not permitted to work in Ecuador, and that an applicant must be in possession of a national ID card, or cédula, in order to work. Employers are more likely to hire a refugee if he or she has a work permit. As a result, the Ministry of Labor began to provide free work permits that expired every three months. Even when an employer agrees to employ a refugee using the refugee visa, the refugee visa number cannot be easily inputted into the national social security system, and employers sometimes decline to hire refugees because they want to avoid the bureaucracy needed to enter them into the social security system.

Refugees who have been residents in Ecuador for more than three years are eligible for naturalization, which would then provide access to a cédula. However, the naturalization process can cost between \$800 and \$1200 and in practice few refugees are able to afford this expense.

Because many refugees are unable to find work in the formal sector, they resort to activities in the informal sector. This comes with its

own set of risks, particularly for those without proper documentation. Many refugees working as domestic workers, construction workers or street vendors experience exploitative working conditions with little or no financial or personal security. Respondents in this study had regularly experienced verbal abuse and harassment in the workplace, underpayment and often no payment. A number of respondents were accused of theft in their workplaces and fired without several months' payment. Without a contract, refugees are often helpless in these circumstances. Similarly, street vendors that are unable to provide proper documentation have their goods confiscated by municipal police. According to one respondent:

When I worked in construction they didn't pay me enough. You work and work and work and they don't let you do another type of work, just what they say they hired you for. I had to carry really heavy material with another Colombian and we weren't getting paid as much as the others [Ecuadorians] even though our work was much more strenuous. We didn't have any insurance and were working four-stories up, passing each other heavy material without ropes or anything. I left that job because I thought, 'the day I fall, no one will respond for me. And what about my daughters?' So I left.

Gender and livelihoods

Single refugee women and mothers enter Ecuador with few resources. Like other refugees, they are often unable to access economic

opportunities and may resort to activities that make them particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Discrimination towards Colombian women is often linked to the fact that some Colombian women in Ecuador are involved in sex work. Some of these women are victims of trafficking, and others, particularly in the northern provinces, resort to sex work because they cannot find other employment. This has led to negative public perceptions of Colombian women, and to refugee women being stigmatized in a way that presents an obstacle to their local integration- and indeed may put them in danger.

Domestic work exposes women to exploitation, as expressed by several of our female respondents, including one Colombian who said:

I found a job caring for an older person. This woman humiliated me and the work was enslaving. She threw clothing at me. I worked there for two months until I could no longer stand it. She never paid me.

Our findings indicate that women who entered Ecuador with their spouses or families play an important role in expanding the household's social network and in securing employment for themselves or their spouses. Ecuadorians tend not to perceive Colombian women as a security threat, whereas Colombian men are associated with drug trafficking and other crimes. Thus, Colombian women are able to establish potential work relationships on behalf of their male partners. In this way they enable the household's local integration.

In addition, among Colombians, women often migrate first, and later bring their male spouses and children, a role normally taken by males. According to one woman respondent:

What I've noticed is that women are the first to obtain work and they are the ones that help the rest of the family. My mother helped my father come and then they brought over the whole family. She found me and my father work and also found herself a job administering this food business.

Rural vs. urban experience

Those respondents who came from urban settings in their home countries were more experienced with urban types of employment, such as sales and customer service. Respondents from rural backgrounds were often intimidated by their new urban surroundings in Ecuador, unfamiliar with bureaucratic procedures required in the RSD process and the norms regarding employment. In addition, they often struggled to create resourceful social networks:

When I was a boy I would go work on the ranches. As a couple, we first lived in a town and I (husband) would go work out in the fields. I grew up that way, in the countryside. I've never worked in sales and wouldn't know how to do it. That's another reason one loses motivation here.

Livelihood programming

The vision of aid needs to change; these organizational bodies need to work on comprehensive programs, not on issues as they arise. (Refugee interview)

Livelihood programming initiatives in Quito are focused on small-business start up programs; non-formal education; vocational and skills training programs; job placement programs; and microcredit schemes. The overall aim is to increase income-generating activities among the refugees, thereby facilitating local integration. However, information about these opportunities is not widely disseminated, and few refugees are aware of them. Respondents that have participated in trainings and workshops generally learned about them through their social networks rather than through refugee organizations, through refugee organizations endeavor to inform refugees of activities and opportunities when they come in for assistance or when organization staff conduct field visits. One respondent said, *"Most refugees aren't informed about any assistance programs, even less services. It's not that we don't need it, but nobody tells us about them."*

Training and continuing education

Many respondents came to Ecuador with technical skills or higher education, but local employers often disregard credentials from other countries, particularly in the case of Colombian refugees. Therefore, one strategy is to pursue training or continued education through

non-governmental organizations' livelihood programs or free courses provided by government-funded institutions. Said one Colombian respondent:

Our greatest achievement is establishing our own business. It was so helpful to study in SECAP^[36] because I obtained an Ecuadorian [credential], something that is recognized here and that allows you to participate in many events.

Just under a third of our respondents have received training or education in Ecuador. State sponsored training is available to documented refugees, but civil servants responsible for registering participants in skills training programs and organizing courses are not well informed on refugee rights and often discriminate against refugees. According to one respondent:

While I was in Atacama's, I was trained in Client Service. When we [first] went to ask about these trainings, the man told us that they only had space for Ecuadorians, not foreigners. We felt bad because he was discriminating. We went to talk to the director of the chamber of tourism in Atacamas and she told us that we had the right to attend these workshops. She helped us get in and spoke to the man.

Those who had obtained training usually did so through refugee-assisting organizations, or other

[36] SECAP is the Ecuadorian Service for Professional Training (Servicio Ecuatoriano de Capacitación Profesional), a public institute that provides workshops and training to Ecuadorians and residents in Ecuador.

organizations such as CONQUITO (Agencia Metropolitana de Promoción Económica), a public-private entity that promotes local, sustainable economic development. The latter is among several institutions and organizations that provide vocational and skills training programs to refugees. When they have completed a training program through a local Ecuadorian institution, refugees obtain an Ecuadorian diploma or certificate, which may serve as an asset when applying for work.

Our respondents also said they were unable to access training in Ecuador because of lack of time and money. Working people may have more than one job and thus limited time available. According to one respondent:

I have never been able to develop my educational level. Up to now, I have only been able to finish primary school and it is even worse here (Ecuador) because the job I have is full time. I only have Saturdays and Sundays free, but during these days I do other activities to bring in money.

Respondents reported that because employment is often precarious, it may be not worth the risk of asking for time off to take classes. In addition, trainings often come with costs, such as registration fees, materials and transportation costs that refugees cannot cover using their own resources.

Currently, organizations such as Fundación Ambiente y Sociedad (FAS) and HIAS provide small-business development trainings. These

trainings help individuals or collectives formulate business plans, which they submit to partner institutions, such as Cooperative Maquita Cusunchic, where applicants may qualify for a small to medium loan to start their business.

Financial services

Given institutional barriers to refugees' access to financial services, UNHCR has partnered with a number of organizations to facilitate loans to refugees for business development. Nonetheless, these projects have proven difficult to implement successfully because refugees often do not have the resources to fulfil the terms of the loan, and other challenging aspects of local integration such as unstable housing and discrimination by potential customers make it difficult to maintain businesses. For example, in 2009, Maquita Cusunchic began to work with UNHCR to provide small to medium loans (up to \$800) to urban refugee populations. The project was suspended after two years of operation, as many recipients were unable to make their payments.^[37] The project is expected to continue, pending the acceptance of new terms and conditions.

They demand way too much. For instance, if they lend me \$800, I have to pay \$85 in the first two months. But no business that you

[37] Es decir que, por un lado ACNUR dice que una tasa de morosidad del 14% representa un éxito en comparación a otros programas de generación de ingresos en otros países, pero MC se encuentra totalmente preocupada ya que manejan una tasa de morosidad de 0%-0,8% con gente ecuatoriana, lo que aumenta el riesgo de la cooperativa.[“On the one hand, UNHCR says that the loan rate of 14% represents a success compared to other income-generating programs in other countries but for Maquita Cusunchic this is worrisome as a loan rate of 0%-8% is managed with Ecuadorians, which increases the risk for the cooperative.”]

set up legally will produce profits in the first 3 months. After 3 months I would already owe more than \$200. A credit of \$800 turns into \$1000. If they would say “pay \$50 over the course of 6 months”, that’s doable. At Maquita Cusunchic they give you money and the very next month you need to pay them back, but it’s impossible. (Colombian refugee)

FAS and other organizations such as the Colombian Refugee Project^[38] provide grants to refugees seeking to start or strengthen a business. However, these programs are problematic as the grants are generally insufficient in size (\$50 to \$100, usually provided in materials) to cover start-up costs. Also, they encourage activity in the informal labor market without ensuring that recipients obtain permits required by the Ecuadorian government. Street vendors without permits are likely to have their goods and tools (e.g. cart) confiscated by the municipal police. Many refugees who have had their goods confiscated think that they were targeted discriminatorily because they are Colombian nationals.

In 2007, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed the number of digits in the refugee identification card to facilitate its entry into financial services as well as the social security system. However, in order to be registered in the social security system, a fictitious number must be generated. Staff in financial institutions and social security are often not properly trained in entering and processing identification numbers, which in practice serves as an obstacle to refugees’

accessing this system which legitimizes refugee businesses and stands to provide them greater financial and social stability.

Legal advice

Respondents expressed the need for legal advice regarding the paperwork needed to establish a legal business. Particularly with the Decree 1182, legal assistance is of increasing importance as refugees need to be fully aware of their legal rights and the steps necessary in accessing the RSD process. Legal aid is provided by organizations, such as SJRM and Asylum Access Ecuador. In addition, refugee rights training is provided by Asylum Access Ecuador in an effort to make refugees and asylum seekers aware of the rights they have and the ways in which they can exercise these rights (e.g. the right to lawful employment). Until recently, legal aid was also provided by the Ecuadorian local government through Casa de la Movilidad Humana.

Durable Solutions and Future plans

Half of our respondents wish to remain in Ecuador, and the rest wish to leave, either to migrate to other countries (in South America or further afield, such as Canada), or to return to Colombia, regardless of the protection risks involved. UNHCR does not promote **voluntary repatriation** to Colombia, given the ongoing armed conflict and lack of guarantees for returnees. However, a number of Colombian refugees have requested voluntary repatriation from UNHCR.

[38] As of mid 2012, the Colombian Refugee project has ceased to provide small-business start up grants

When asked why they would like to return to Colombia, they give reasons related to unliveable conditions in Ecuador, including poverty resulting from lack of employment, and because their persecutors have followed them to Ecuador and they do not feel any safer than they would in Colombia. One respondent said:

If they gave me the opportunity to go to another country, for many reasons, because of the discrimination there is here, because of the lack of employment, because of everything...I would go. I would like to go to another country like Canada. I know some compatriots who have done well there.

And another respondent:

I would like to go to another country because I've been followed here. They have tried to kill me and I'm afraid for my children, we don't feel safe anywhere.

UNHCR operates a small **resettlement** program as a responsibility sharing/solidarity mechanism and a protection tool for refugees who cannot achieve legal and physical protection in Ecuador (for example, because their Colombian persecutors have identified and pursued them in Ecuador), and those who due to exceptional factors do not have local integration prospects. Resettlement countries include the United States, Canada, Brazil, Chile and Argentina.



A Colombian refugee attends to a client in a hair salon that he established with his siblings. Photo by Sandra ten Zijthoff

Candidates for resettlement remain vulnerable while they await a decision and the necessary paperwork. One respondent, upon approaching UNHCR for voluntary repatriation, was informed that his would be a good case for resettlement. While he received this as good news, the respondent was nervous about how long it would take to get resettled and whether he would be able to provide for his family while they waited. For the first few months of the resettlement process, HIAS assisted him with money for rent, food and other supplies. However, as the months passed, he was no longer provided enough to pay rent and was increasingly unhappy with the food rations supplied. When we conducted our interview, the respondent and his family had been waiting for more than one year and were living in very poor conditions.

UNHCR considers **local integration** to be the priority durable solution for the majority of the refugee population in Ecuador^[39] because of the country's favorable protection environment. Decree 1182 of 2012 states that "refugees in the national territory will have the same rights and responsibilities as Ecuadorians, according to the Constitution of the Republic and the pertinent legislation".^[40] This includes access to health services, education, and employment. The 2011 Decree explicitly states that refugees and asylum-seekers are authorized to work in "licit economic activities."^[41] Despite their rights, local integration is difficult for Colombian refugees. As discussed above, the main obstacles stem from lack of familiarity with their rights, discrimination in both public and private sectors, and insecurity.

[39] UNHCR Ecuador: "Estrategia sobre medios de vida...", 1

[40] Decree 1182, Art. 3

[41] Decree 1182, Art. 35

Conclusion and Recommendations

Durable solutions include a combination of strategies addressing resettlement, repatriation and local integration. The growing population of Colombian refugees in Ecuador represents a protracted situation whereby the most effective solution for most individuals is to provide safe and sustainable livelihoods to facilitate local integration.^[42]

Although Ecuador's constitution promises refugees rights that should enable them to secure housing, employment, and to successfully rebuild their lives in Ecuador, in practice these rights are not accessible for much of the population. Discrimination throughout society and inadequate livelihoods support programs have made local integration a long-term challenge for many refugees. As a result, refugees are unable to become productive members of Ecuadorian society. Discrimination and xenophobia cause marginalization of refugees as well as the loss of human capital.

Based on our findings, we recommend the following policy and program changes:

Policy-level

- Rescind Decree 1182, which backtracks from the progressive refugee policy that

made Ecuador a model for refugee rights. The government should adjust Decree 1182 in the following ways:

- Recognize refugees under the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees previously included in Ecuadorian legislation.
- Extend the 15 business-day limit during which asylum seekers may apply for refugee status.
- Extend the 3 business-day and 5 business day limits during which asylum seekers may appeal negative decisions for those not admitted to the process and those denied at first instance, respectively.
- Accept applications from asylum seekers who have committed offenses within Ecuadorian territory, rather than considering these cases illegitimate and rejecting them, thus violating international refugee law.
- Develop and execute a policy to promptly reduce the backlog of more than 35,000 asylum-seekers, and with due protection guarantees.

^[42] However, for some cases, resettlement is the only option available.

- Ensure that potential asylum seekers are well-informed on the asylum procedure, and their rights and obligations within it.
- Strengthen training of border, migration, and law enforcement officials on the national asylum system and how to effectively refer potential asylum seekers to the system.
- Enable refugees' access to housing by including them in existing housing subsidy schemes intended for highly vulnerable populations in Ecuador, e.g., the bono de la vivienda, bono de desarrollo humano.
- Improve training for government officials on refugees' rights in accessing the RSD process.
- Increase sensitivity and awareness-raising campaigns for local populations regarding the refugee definition, refugee rights, and reasons for flight from Colombia in order to decrease discrimination-based barriers to local integration.

We encourage refugee assistance agencies to strengthen, and where appropriate incorporate anew, the following elements

Regarding the promotion of refugee rights and access to refugee status determination procedures

- Complement Ecuadorian authorities' orientation for new arrivals to ensure that they receive sufficient legal orientation on the asylum system.
- Ensure access to legal assistance for asylum-seekers whose claims have been denied.
- Ensure that refugees are trained on their rights in Ecuador and how to access them (i.e., employment, education, health, etc.).

Regarding access to basic needs and humanitarian assistance

- Provide information regarding refugee-assisting organizations and services to new arrivals (when they need it most), especially those that lack social networks.
- Improve efforts to follow up with refugee recipients of aid services, particularly amongst isolated populations. Conduct more proactive home and neighborhood visits that increase understanding of local integration and protection challenges, and assist with catering responses accordingly.
- Improve the channels for identifying and analyzing the situations of refugees experiencing threats, persecution or other protection challenges by Colombian armed actors in Ecuador, and facilitating their effective access to national protection mechanisms or international protection when necessary.

- Provide alternative channels to access humanitarian and other assistance for refugees facing protection challenges in Ecuador that do not increase their risk (i.e., not requiring that they approach assistance agencies that agents of persecution may monitor).
- Improve identification and reporting mechanisms on sexual and gender-based violence, and accompaniment through the health and legal systems, in order to adequately address the needs of victims as well as mitigate risk of further harm.
- Avoid parallel programming for refugees and urban poor Ecuadorians in order to avoid increasing discrimination and stigma toward refugees.
- Provide services to help refugees legally establish a small business or acquire the necessary street-vending permits. Provide financial support for acquiring the necessary paperwork as needed.
- Incorporate strengthened gender-sensitive livelihoods programming that helps women overcome discrimination. Ensure that aid agency staff are trained on the differential effects of livelihood program for vulnerable men and women.
- Increase refugee rights training for government officials, refugees, asylum seekers, and local employers, particularly regarding employment rights and inclusion in the national social security system.
- Disseminate information regarding available services for refugees and, in particular, livelihood programming initiatives to governmental and non-governmental organizations serving both refugees and Ecuadorians.
- Develop a cross-cutting and systemized method of delivering humanitarian aid to individual and refugee families to increase coordination and accountability between refugee-assisting institutions.
- Increase collaboration with local and provincial governments to include refugee populations in development plans, i.e., training and education programs.

Regarding livelihood programming

- Cater microcredit schemes specifically to the needs of Colombian refugees, based on their existing skills and knowledge.
- Ensure that banks are aware of refugees' rights to access credit when they qualify and utilize formal banking services.
- Strengthen follow-up and comprehensive support (technical assistance) for small business owners to increase the effectiveness of existing programs.
- Provide improved business develop-



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