

# Social protection: a fourth durable solution?

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**Although asylum seekers and refugees in Europe and in Latin America are very different in terms of numbers, a solution being implemented by Brazil and Ecuador may show the European Union a way forward on sharing the responsibility within a regional bloc.**

A pilot project called 'Regional Mobility and Socioeconomic Integration of Refugees' was proposed in 2014 as part of the Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action.<sup>1</sup> In practical terms it consists of a project to bring Colombian refugees in Ecuador to Brazil. Over a period of two years, 200 persons would come to Paraná in the south of Brazil to work, under employment agreements assured by the Brazilian government. Besides their salaries, extra financial assistance from

UNHCR would be granted for a short period of three months to Colombian families (one to five persons) living in Ecuador and with at least one family member of working age (18 to 45 years old). Through partnerships with local private actors, jobs were identified in the service sector, construction, agro-industry, textiles and supermarkets.

These families would be recognised as refugees by the Brazilian government and would have their protection assured but



UNHCR/Mark Verwey

Colombian refugees arriving in Chical, Ecuador.

they also would be able to request residency in the country. This is possible because since 2013 Brazil and Ecuador have been part of the Mercosur visa agreement by which residents of the regional bloc member countries<sup>2</sup> are eligible for residency inside any of the signatory countries, without reference to their migration status.

This pilot project is above all about labour mobility and it clearly extends refugee protection beyond the legal level towards social protection. In the beginning the pilot project was framed as a fourth solution but later became known as a special modality of resettlement. It is different from traditional resettlement since the beneficiaries would be entrepreneurs or people who are available to work and not vulnerable groups or persons with their security under threat.

But it can also point a way forward as an innovative addition to the three traditional durable solutions of local integration, repatriation and resettlement. Criticism around those three solutions has been mounting due to an unprecedented high number of both new and protracted refugee crises. Levels of repatriation are at a record low, financial crises are damaging integration efforts, and resettlement still only has the support of a limited small group of host countries.

The Brazilian government initially proposed the pilot project, and a bilateral agreement was presented to the government of Ecuador in December 2014. Implementation of the programme was initially expected by

October 2015 but remains pending acceptance from Ecuador. An important legal debate is still taking place over whether Colombian refugees from Ecuador should keep their refugee status in both Brazil and Ecuador during the initial three months of adaptation or not, with arguments focusing on the guarantee of protection in case refugees do not adapt to life in Brazil and want to go back to Ecuador.

Replicating a labour mobility pilot like this in other regions of the world would necessarily demand adaptation to each region's

reality but it is certainly an initiative that suggests how to improve coordination of regional asylum mechanisms through social protection. While traditionally protection for refugees has been centred around a legal understanding, increasingly the issue is also being addressed through the lens of social protection,<sup>3</sup> including welfare policies of labour market interventions, social insurance and social assistance. This implies a pragmatic acknowledgement of the reality that refugees fleeing persecution need protection not only through documents and rights but also through access to the job market, to food and to social services. This kind of labour mobility project can help to spread the effect of a regional influx of refugees, especially in contexts where small or poor countries are the first and most affected; Italy and Greece come to mind.

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1. [www.acnur.org/cartagena30/en/brazil-declaration-and-plan-of-action/](http://www.acnur.org/cartagena30/en/brazil-declaration-and-plan-of-action/)

2. Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, Guyana and Suriname.

3. See the World Bank definition: policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to manage economic and social risks such as unemployment, exclusion, sickness, disability and old age. World Bank (2001) *Social protection sector strategy: from safety net to springboard*, Washington, D.C. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2001/01/828354social-protection-sector-strategy-safety-net-springboard>