

Networked governance in Ecuador's border regions

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In order to improve security for both Colombian forced migrants and Ecuadorians in the communities where they live, an approach that takes advantage of governance networks can allow residents to negotiate access to resources and rights that they otherwise would not be able to enjoy. It can also improve relations between the two groups.

Ecuador's population of some 135,000 Colombian forced migrants who have fled their country of origin since 2000 makes it the largest recipient of refugees and asylum seekers in Latin America. In the cities, the state is strong and has the resources to protect these people. In the border areas, however, the state presence is very weak.

Despite Ecuador's progressive Constitution, which guarantees foreigners the same basic rights as Ecuadorians, many Colombians face difficulties in practice in accessing the rights guaranteed them by the Constitution

and by international refugee law. Many have encountered a hostile reception in their new country; even local officials charged with the protection of law, order and human rights sometimes mirror discriminatory attitudes and behaviour toward Colombians. A UN official in Esmeraldas province, in Ecuador's coastal region near the Colombian border, explained the political calculation that local officials in the provinces often have to make: "When the revenue for a local government does not add up to the projected levels, naturally they are not going to be able to adequately serve the needs of the entire population, so they

prioritise those who are going to give votes and political support – meaning Ecuadorians.”

Undocumented migrants' lack of legal documentation reduces their ability to get assistance either from the state or from other potential allies. In fact, while the greatest fears of Colombians with documentation is being harmed by illegal armed groups and not having sufficient economic resources, undocumented migrants' fears were directed more toward the state, with deportation and incarceration being their biggest worries.

The role of networks

Since the government acts both as enforcer of immigration and deportation laws and as the protector of rights and source of dispute resolution, migrants frequently feel afraid to seek help from the state. In response to such practical gaps in the security protection guaranteed by the Constitution and Ecuadorian legislation, many Colombian forced migrants in Ecuador have turned to informal contacts and non-state actors for help in accessing protection, negotiating resources and resolving conflicts with each other and with Ecuadorians. The networks of personal contacts that forced migrants tap into can be key to their survival and success when they are fearful or do not know how to access rights and resources from the state.

Since local power brokers and NGOs gain authority by organising and representing migrants' interests to the state while providing resources and protection for migrants, their connections to government and international actors form a governance network that is often more responsive and accessible to non-citizens than government agencies alone. The ability to leverage the full spectrum of non-state, informal and state resources available through the migrant-related governance networks in Ecuador often represents a key factor in Colombians' success in Ecuador, as illustrated by two contrasting experiences.

Eduardo arrived in Quito in 2009 with his two daughters after his wife was a casualty of the conflict in Colombia. His sister had

already been in Quito for nine years, and upon his arrival she initially assisted him and his family with food, shelter and, even more importantly, good advice. He immediately met with UNHCR to request asylum, and he and his family were granted refugee status. Over the coming months he networked with new friends and other refugees, and heard about various organisations that assist refugees. From these he received food and assistance with living costs. Eduardo worked in various odd jobs that he discovered through his networks. In early 2011 he and his family were selected for resettlement to Canada.

By contrast Maria arrived in Quito with her husband and three children in 2011 not knowing anyone there, and they have not encountered any helpful networks. They are fearful to make any contacts, and they avoid leaving home because of continued threats from Colombian FARC members who attacked them shortly after their arrival in Quito and continue to pursue them. Maria is clearly traumatised by the encounter and does not trust anyone in their host community, especially not other Colombians, as she cannot be sure if they are friendly or not. Maria is concerned for her family's survival; their search for peace and stability is an even more distant aspiration.

If organisations that work in cooperation with (or sometimes in place of) the state as part of a governance network play a key role in providing human security and building peace in migrant-receiving communities, what types of interventions have been most successful? And how can the state, the UN system and the NGO sector incorporate these lessons into their programme strategies? The experience of Ecuador shows that cooperative working relationships among NGOs, UN agencies and state institutions that deal with migrant-related issues can provide informal or unofficial



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A Colombian refugee in northern Ecuador shows his new refugee visa. In the province of Sucumbios, mobile government registration teams (part of the Enhanced Registration initiative) are completing in a single day an asylum process that used to take months.

channels to access basic rights and economic resources for migrants who may not directly be able to access them from the state. These governance networks also have the potential to open up institutional spaces to foster tolerance between Ecuadorians and Colombians.

Negotiating rights and recognition

The Enhanced Registration initiative, a joint programme of the Ecuadorian Ministry of Foreign Relations and UNHCR, carried out mobile registration throughout the border provinces in 2009 and 2010, streamlining the lengthy refugee status determination process and bringing it closer to where many forced migrants actually live. This resulted in a doubling of the number of registered refugees with legal documentation in one year. The Enhanced Registration has been praised internationally as an example of governance networks producing concrete benefits for forced migrants while also strengthening the capacity of the state. In addition to increasing the number of permanent government refugee registration offices in the border provinces, the initiative also forged close and productive

working relationships between Ministry officials, UNHCR officers and NGOs that accompanied and ensured the accountability of the process. These NGOs continue to advocate for greater refugee protection and to provide legal assistance to forced migrants going into status determination hearings.

NGO and international actors can complement the state by providing spaces for common action across nationality lines, reducing power inequalities and fear. Network building through personal relationships is important in the Latin American context. Of those Colombians who reported having no interaction at all with Ecuadorians in a survey by CEMPROC, an Ecuadorian NGO, more than two thirds reported having a negative perception of Ecuadorians, and none reported a positive perception. In contrast, more than half of those Colombians who had meaningful interaction with Ecuadorians (through family, in the workplace or at school) reported having positive perceptions of their citizen counterparts.

If governments, UN agencies and NGOs actively seek to strengthen governance networks and carry out adequate public campaigns of diffusion and awareness raising, it could lead to more experiences like Eduardo's and fewer like Maria's, which would increase human security for everyone in fragile migrant-receiving regions.

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