

Measuring local integration in Ecuador

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In 2014-15 UNHCR Ecuador developed an index to measure the degree to which refugees are integrated in their host country, using three main dimensions of local integration: legal, economic and socio-cultural.

Ecuador has the largest recognised refugee population in Latin America. Of the more than 230,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country, 60,500 are registered refugees, 90% of whom are from Colombia.¹ Refugees and asylum seekers have freedom of movement within the country and access to basic rights and services, according to Ecuadorian law. Several studies have shown that most Colombian refugees and asylum seekers in Ecuador seek to become locally integrated due to sharing a culture and language with the host country. However, they face obstacles such as discrimination, lack of recognition of documentation, and poor socio-economic conditions – all factors that stand in the way of full integration.

In 2013, in line with the Ecuadorian government's National Plan for Good Living, UNHCR Ecuador developed a Comprehensive Solutions Initiative (CSI), complemented in 2016 by a multi-year, multi-partner solutions strategy (2016-18). The multi-year strategy is implemented in coordination with public institutions, civil society and the private sector, and has distinct legal, social and economic dimensions. In order to assess the impact of the CSI and the multi-year strategy on local integration, UNHCR Ecuador designed a Local Integration Index (LII), which would also serve as a tool to best identify and assist the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers.

Defining integration

UNHCR Ecuador commissioned an extensive study of statistical information on the socio-cultural, economic and legal situation of Colombian refugees and asylum seekers. The survey consisted of 130 questions on specific issues such as migratory status, documentation, work, education, health care and economic conditions. The resulting

baseline data show that enjoyment of rights and access to services are, in general, available to refugees and asylum seekers in Ecuador, while economic factors still present challenges. While success of local integration depends to a large extent on objective criteria (such as legal status, freedom of movement, adequate employment and access to basic services), there is also a subjective element, namely the perception of individuals. The LII seeks to combine the objective and subjective elements and thus calculate the level of local integration across legal, economic and socio-cultural dimensions.

Each respondent was read a definition of local integration that incorporated elements of various definitions of local integration:

Local integration means forming part of a society where you have access to education, health, housing and employment, among others, and where you are able to maintain good relations with the people around you, in your neighbourhood and civil society organisations.

In order to determine people's subjective perception of integration, respondents were asked whether they felt integrated or not. The responses were used to determine the extent to which the different variables (such as legal status, access to education, health and income level) influenced an individual's perception of being integrated. Depending on the degree of its influence on the perception of local integration, each variable was given a certain weight.

The weighting of the variables is an essential element of the LII and relates to the specific context of the operation in question. For example,



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in some countries persons of concern may attach more importance (weight) to legal status, while in others priority is given to employment. We found that the socio-cultural integration of Colombian refugees and asylum seekers in Ecuador was greater than their economic integration, which was in turn greater than their legal integration. One significant finding of the survey in Ecuador was a correlation between a lack of legal status and being below the poverty line. When these weights were applied to the baseline data the result was an LII of 61.1% for Colombian refugees and asylum seekers in Ecuador, the average level of legal integration being 50.6%, socio-cultural integration 62.3%, and economic integration 59.5%.²

The versatility of the LII allows for analysis at group and individual levels, which in turn enables more precise interventions, targeting persons at the lower end of the

integration index. This, for example, can be through their inclusion in the Graduation Model,³ which the Office in Ecuador has been implementing since 2016 with promising results, where participants are selected are selected based on, among other things, their household's score on the LII. The Graduation Model (or approach) comes from the world of development assistance and is aimed at 'graduating' people out of poverty. The model consists of a sequenced set of interventions that include consumption support, skills training, mentoring, financial training and inclusion in safety networks within the community. Ecuador is one of few countries applying the model in a refugee situation. Families 'graduate' according to their performance against four criteria, which in Ecuador are: eating at least three nutritious meals a day; having a family income above the poverty line; having 5% of



Colombian refugees and Ecuadorians nationals in Santo Domingo participating in an integration activity as part of a 'Living Together in Solidarity' campaign.

income in savings in a bank; and belonging to a community or social network such as a church organisation. Of the 1,810 families currently supported by UNHCR Ecuador, 59% have achieved all four graduation criteria. In addition to use as a selection tool, the LII can also be used to measure the progress of those families participating in the Graduation Model towards local integration.

Conclusions

In Ecuador, the LII shows that, based on data collected in 2014, Colombian refugees and asylum seekers achieved relatively high levels of integration.⁴ At the same time, there is progress to be made for a significant proportion of the population. A mid-line study is currently under way, which will use the LII to measure the progress made by UNHCR's multi-year, multi-partner solutions strategy. Given its versatility, the LII is a tool to help design programmes

aimed at improving the integration of a given population, with respect to a certain type of integration or for a specific sector of the population. Regular calculations to update the LII will show how local integration evolves over time within a specific operation.

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1. Data from Ecuador's Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility.
2. To go from the level of integration in each dimension to the global LII, it is necessary to apply the specific weights calculated for each dimension at an individual level and then calculate the average for the whole population. For details of the methodology and full results contact Santiago Cordova.
3. <https://trickleup.org/graduation-approach/>
4. 'Relatively' refers to the scale of the LII, with 0% representing no integration, such as a closed refugee camp with 100% dependency on humanitarian assistance in all sectors; and 100% representing full integration, such as naturalization.