

**Kellogg-Kroc Undergraduate Research Grant
Project Report**

**Realizing Human Rights for Colombian Refugees in Ecuador: The Process of Local
Integration through State and Non-state Actors in Urban Centers**

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Ecuador is one of South America's poorest countries despite being blessed with the most biodiverse region on the globe, a long coast line, and an ancient trade route through the world's longest mountain chain, the Andes. Eight presidents in only nine years, a heavy debt load, and systemic corruption have meant slow progress for the country and its sixteen million people. Now add 500,000 Colombians to the mix of strained resources and ineffective governance, and imagine what the results might be. That was precisely my task during a research trip to Quito, Ibarra, and Lago Agrio, Ecuador this past August as I tried to determine how the process of local integration of Colombian refugees occurs.

Unlike many regions of the world that host large populations of displaced people, Latin America does not employ refugee camps to handle the outflow. Instead, through the hard work of state and non-state actors, refugees and asylum seekers integrate into the urban centers in the host country of first asylum, which in the case of Colombian refugees, is either Ecuador, Venezuela, Costa Rica, or Panama. In the international community, three options are recognized for refugees and displaced populations; these are repatriation, local integration, and resettlement.

Sadly, the violence in Colombia, arguably heightened in rural areas in the south of the country since the renewal of Plan Colombia, precludes repatriation for the vast majority of displaced anytime soon. Resettlement to a third country is traditionally only

a viable option for extreme protection cases and most Colombians are ineligible for resettlement in the United States because of post-9/11 changes to our Immigration Law that wrongfully classifies victims of terror as terrorists themselves. Thus, local integration is the only meaningful option for the hundreds of thousands that have come to Ecuador since 2003 in search of a better life.

Within my first few hours in the small Andean town of Ibarra, my initial impression that I would uncover a lot of positive information about the extent to which refugees were benefiting from integration projects was somewhat changed as Hermana Isabel, a Scalabrini nun, and Sonya, a lay Scalabrini missionary assigned to Pastoral Migratoria, outlined the challenges migrants of all kinds face in Ecuador.

Colombians face highly negative stereotypes, fueled by lack of awareness among the people and the media's tendency to highlight the occasional criminal acts of certain Colombians. Women refugees are assumed to be prostitutes, young men and boys *ladrones* or thieves; many are accused of being narcotraffickers or guerilla members bringing their violent ways across the border, and minority groups like Afro Colombians and indigenous suffer additional discrimination. Interviews with the refugees revealed the difficulty of trying to find work and housing, as time and time again landlords would shut the door upon hearing the Colombian accent or withhold wages for weeks on end.

Yet, as I was learning these disheartening truths about the refugee experience in Ecuador, I was sitting in an office of a Church-affiliated agency whose mission is accompaniment for the migrant and refugee wherever they may be in Ecuador. They and dozens of other agencies are taking up the challenge to combat xenophobia, to provide humanitarian assistance, psychological services, and education and employment

opportunities so that Colombians can be productive members of Ecuadorian society.

Thus, despite the challenges briefly outlined above, I think it is important that I focus on the signs of hope, the success stories I observed during my extraordinary time abroad, perhaps reserving my criticism for a longer analysis in my thesis. If any organization has truly mobilized for the needs of the migrants, it is the diocesan-based Pastoral Migratoria that is part of the Episcopal Conference's program called Movilidad Humana. On both sides of the border between Colombia and Ecuador, the church serves as the eyes and ears for the international community, reporting on human rights abuses and providing humanitarian assistance.

They also actively develop and implement local integration projects in the urban centers that have received the largest number of refugees. In Ibarra, the capital of Imbabura, a province that hosts thousands of refugees, the Pastoral built a nursery school for Ecuadorian and Colombian children. They serve both populations, thereby avoiding the most common complaint refugee aid agencies receive from the community, "We have these same needs too; why are you only helping the Colombians." Furthermore, the joint education helps familiarize the youths with each other's cultures, thereby mitigating the potential for racism in the next generation. For those students in grade school, the Pastoral facilitates cultural competence training to the teachers at those schools as well as provides after school programming. Many of the Colombians in Ibarra are single mothers, some having left after their husbands were killed in the conflict. Few reported having many Ecuadorian friends so the nursery school provides a place in which Colombian women can socialize.

Across the board during my interviews, education was especially emphasized as a key component to the integration of the refugee population. Whereas wealthier and more educated Colombians tend to migrate internally to large cities like Cali and Bogotá, the Colombians that arrive in Sucumbios, Imbabura, and Carchi (border provinces) are mostly *campesinos*, poor people with very little education if any and a limited skills set restricted to agriculture. In urban areas, then, the challenges are that much greater for the displaced. In response to this reality and recognizing that Colombians by law have the right to primary education, an organization called the Refugee Education Trust (RET) began operations in 2001 to help improve access to secondary education. According to their worldwide studies, fewer than 13% of refugee children are enrolled in school beyond grade 6, and most of these are male. RET gives scholarships for students of particular academic prowess to pursue education at private secondary and tertiary institutions. Other students can participate in training for jobs in mechanics, design, and cosmetology.

But perhaps what impressed me most about RET was their whole philosophy of collaboration with other agencies also working with refugees so as to be part of a more holistic system of integration. The Lago Agrio field office for UNHCR had space for their own protection staff as well as offices for RET and another crucially important partner in the integration effort, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society or HIAS. So many times it seems like mental health services are considered secondary priorities for international agencies. Yet how can people find jobs or do well in school if they struggle each day with lingering fear or symptoms of trauma? HIAS has a team of 12 psychologists working in 4 cities in Ecuador helping the men, women, and children who

have often seen terrible violence or suffered traumatic losses heal. Over the course of my time in Ecuador, time and again I heard both from the refugees themselves and many NGO representatives that mental health is the bridge to integration.

Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI) understands this relationship. This Italian NGO is UNHCR's implementing partner for all programs related to economic and social integration in Ibarra, Lago Agrio, Tulcan, and Esmeraldas. Their role is to find ways to bring themes of displacement, peace, and integration into the public eye and help get people on their feet in terms of employment, education, and social stability. One of the most unique efforts they have undertaken involves a partnership between the provincial *futbol* team, a graphic design team, and local youth groups. COOPI selected a group of Colombian and Ecuadorian children between the ages of 9 and 14 to develop and design a new mascot for the soccer team around the theme of integration. After months of hosting workshops with the children, the team will soon announce their new mascot in the next few weeks.

Integration thus can be seen on many levels. There is the process that is very personal, that involves individuals dealing with the emotional consequences of displacement and then seeking to reestablish their lives economically, and then there is the macro-level at which all of society needs to change its negative perceptions for the sake of sustained cohesiveness. Just as COOPI chose to work through the publicity around a well-loved soccer team, Jesuit Refugee Services launched a campaign built around something else well-loved to the Ecuadorian people- their brothers, sisters, husbands, and wives who now make a living overseas in Spain, Italy, or the United States. The goal of the campaign is to remind the Ecuadorian people how much the

challenges faced by Ecuadorian emigrants have in common with the Colombians who now live amongst them. And from that follows a version of the Golden Rule, “Treat Colombians as you wish your relatives abroad to be treated.”

And that lesson brings me back to my original reason for traveling to Ecuador in the first place. I wanted to study a region of the world where refugees are not warehoused in camps for protracted periods, where their worth as people can be forgotten and their rights denied. In Ecuador, despite the lack of resources and the obstacles for complete integration, refugees can live relatively full lives, even if at the moment only 15,000 have legal status. Thus, my hope is that the case study I develop from this research might in some small way contribute to the body of knowledge advocating integration over prolonged encampment, an alternative way of thinking about displaced peoples in which the approach is truly to treat those individuals as we ourselves would like to be treated.