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GOVERNANCE NETWORKS FOSTERING PEACE  
AND HUMAN SECURITY AMONG  
ECUADORIANS AND COLOMBIAN FORCED MIGRANTS



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# Governance Networks Fostering Peace and Human Security among Ecuadorians and Colombian Forced Migrants

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Note: An abbreviated version of this article, entitled "Networked Governance Building Peace in Regions of State Fragility" has been published in *Forced Migration Review* 43 (May 2013), and is available online at <http://www.fmreview.org/> .

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### **Abstract**

*In many situations of state fragility, the government is unwilling or unable to guarantee the security of all people residing in its territory, so the interests of citizens are prioritized, often at the expense of forced migrants. The case of Ecuador shows how a networked governance approach can fill these protection gaps by forging cooperative relationships among state, non-state, and international institutions.*

### **Introduction**

In the humid streets of Esmeraldas, in the coastal region of Ecuador near the Colombian border, vibrant music and washed-out sandy streets form the backdrop for Ecuadorians and Colombians who have fished, farmed, and traded together in a close but sometimes uneasy coexistence over many years. Hundreds of kilometers away in the capital city of Quito, the Colombian population has grown dramatically over the past decade, with some of the newcomers starting small businesses, while others sell candy in the streets, or remain hiding in their homes, fearful to venture very far.

Ecuador's population of some 135,000 Colombian forced migrants who have fled their country of origin since 2000 make it the largest recipient of refugees and asylum seekers in Latin America. In Esmeraldas on the coast and Sucumbíos province in the Amazon jungle, the state has traditionally had a very limited presence, with sporadic military control checkpoints being the most visible point of interaction between government and society. Josep Herrerros, head of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) Quito unit, explained that “In the cities, the state is strong and has the resources to protect these people. In the border, the state presence is very weak.”

Especially during the 1980s and 1990s, the central government decentralized many of the responsibilities for providing infrastructure, social spending, and upholding the rule of law to regional and municipal governments, but in many areas they did so without allocating control over a corresponding share of the budget. In the 2000s, the newly escalated military campaign of the Colombian government against the FARC guerrilla group under Plan Colombia resulted in much higher levels of violence in rural areas than before, since law and order and protection for civilians was still very fragile outside of major cities, so many Colombians were displaced from their homes, seeking refuge in Ecuador. While some were able to achieve peace and prosperity in Ecuador, others found these goals to be more elusive than they expected.

### **Challenges to Governance for Human Security**

Despite Ecuador's progressive Constitution, which guarantees foreigners the same basic rights as Ecuadorians, many Colombians have encountered a hostile reception in their new country.

Many face difficulties in practice accessing the rights guaranteed them by the Constitution and by international refugee law. Even local officials charged with protection of law, order, and human rights sometimes mirror discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward Colombians, or decide to prioritize Ecuadorian needs and demands over the needs of foreigners.

A United Nations official in Esmeraldas province explained the political calculation that often confronts local officials in the provinces: "The needs are many, and the resources are few. Considering the political friction that occurs 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 prioritize those who are going to give votes and political support, meaning Ecuadorians. Colombians do not have as much to offer."

In some cases, state officials go beyond denying services to Colombians with more active persecution, in which they seek to bolster their political popularity with suspicious citizens (who vote) by blaming Colombians (who do not vote) for problems like insecurity and rising crime. According to a survey of 128 Colombians living in Quito that was carried out in 2009 and 2010 by the Center for Mediation, Peace, and Resolution of Conflict (CEMPROC), a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Ecuador, more than half of Colombian migrants who reported being the victim of a violent crime by an Ecuadorian said that they responded by doing nothing.<sup>1</sup> Only 15% contacted the police. In order to avoid confrontations with hostile citizens and government officials, many Colombian forced migrants try to maintain a low profile, avoiding contact with neighbors and the government alike.

A lack of legal documentation increases the vulnerability in which some forced migrants live even more. According to the CEMPROC survey, most forced migrants who were undocumented had not applied for a refugee visa for one of two primary reasons: because they could not afford the costs involved (38%), or because they did not know how to apply (34%). The absence of documentation made them more vulnerable at the same time that it reduced their ability to get assistance either from the state or from other potential allies.

In fact, while the greatest fears of Colombians with documentation was 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 representing the biggest worries that they reported. Undocumented Colombians responding to the survey reported receiving assistance from only half as many organizations as migrants with legal documentation. They were also more likely to be victimized, with more than half of the undocumented respondents reporting that they had been the victim of violent crime in Ecuador, compared with just over one-third of documented migrants.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Emily Ginsberg and Maribel Melo for their assistance in implementing this survey, and to Emily Ginsberg, Ling Chen, Magali Garcia-Pletsch, Ethan Gentes, and Lizeth Gonzalez for their assistance with coding and data entry.

Since the government acts as both enforcer of immigration and deportation laws and as the protector of rights and source of dispute resolution, migrants (both documented and not) frequently feel afraid to seek help from the state. In response to such practical gaps in the security protections 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. According to the CEMPROC survey, the most common sources of assistance received by Colombians in Ecuador are Colombian friends and family members in Ecuador, the UNHCR, Colombian organizations, and NGOs. These networks of personal contacts that forced migrants connect with 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.

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 of Colombian refugees interviewed for CEMPROC's study: one refugee who managed to access various state and non-state resources, and another who fell into the growing gaps in refugee protection. The difference between the two cases illustrates the vast discrepancies, in both security as well as standard of living, between those who are able to access various networks of protection, and those who are not.

### **Networks Make a Difference**

Eduardo\* arrived in Quito in 2009, with his two daughters, as 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 and shelter, and more importantly with good advice. He immediately met with the UNHCR to request asylum, and he and his family were given refugee status by the government of Ecuador.

Over the coming months he networked with new friends and other refugees, and heard about various organizations that assist refugees. He received food supplies and assistance with livings costs from HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), FAS (Fundacion Ambiente y Sociedad), Mision Scalabriniana for their first few months, and then from the Colombian Refugee Project.

Eduardo worked various odd jobs that he discovered through his networks; however he could not find anything regular, and was often underpaid and faced discrimination, despite having legal working documents. However, he was lucky to find a landlord who was willing to rent to him and his family. In early 2011 he and his family were selected for repatriation to Canada (along with several other single parent families), and they left in early 2012. Eduardo and his family had their share of struggles in Ecuador, however he felt very lucky to be resettled to Canada.

Maria\* arrived in Quito with her husband and three children in 2011. They did not know anyone in Quito when they arrived, and have not encountered any helpful networks. They are fearful to

make any contacts, and they avoid leaving home due to continued threat from FARC members who attacked them shortly after their arrival in Quito, and continue to pursue them. Maria is clearly traumatized from the encounter, and does not trust anyone in their host community, and especially not other Colombians, as they cannot be sure if they are friendly or not.

They went to the UNHCR to seek asylum, however the government denied their request, and their case is currently in appeal. In the meantime they lack legal status to live in Ecuador. They were referred to HIAS and Mision Scalabriniana for assistance with living costs and well as food supplies for their first few months. They do not know about any other organizations, and are fearful to seek out any others, due to potentially unfriendly encounters with other Colombians.

Maria's husband worked long hours in a restaurant, however the owner quit paying him, so he is currently seeking other means of employment. The search has been slow and difficult due to his lack of legal working documents, and the fact that he is in hiding. Their legal status has also made it impossible to find a school that will accept their children, so currently they remain isolated at home with their mother. Maria is concerned for her family's survival, let alone their search for peace and stability.

The cases of Eduardo and Maria differ in their ability to connect with local community networks, the government, and refugee serving organizations. Their living standards differ drastically, as does their quality of life. While life as a refugee is not an easy one for most, without access to resources and protection, the level of hope for a decent quality of life is dismal; which is what those in the growing gaps in protection are facing.

### **Institutionalizing Governance Networks to Increase Peace**

If organizations that work in cooperation with (or sometimes in place of) the state as part of a governance network play such 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 learned into their program 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 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 can also open up institutional spaces to foster tolerance between Ecuadorians and Colombians.

The Enhanced Registration initiative, a joint program of the Ecuadorian government's Ministry of Foreign Relations and the UNHCR, carried a mobile registration team 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 one-year initiative resulted in a doubling of the number of registered refugees with legal documentation. Although restrictive visa renewal requirements and a few bad apples gaining access to refugee credentials

have spurred some criticisms of the process, 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, such as the Jesuit Service and Asylum Access. These NGOs continue to advocate for greater refugee protections and to provide legal assistance to forced migrants going into status determination hearings, and their clients benefit from their experience during the process.

In order to increase human 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, and it can improve relations between the two groups. A peacebuilding and conflict prevention program targeted at youth in 2010 through 2012, for example, was funded by USAID and implemented by Ecuadorian NGOs in Sucumbíos and Esmeraldas provinces. One of the interventions, a series of weekend retreats in Sucumbíos, brought together Colombian and Ecuadorian youth to define an agenda of priorities to present as a unified bloc to the municipal governments, as well as participating in facilitated dialogue aimed at reducing prejudice among the youth of both nationalities. While the funding came from international cooperation and the implementation of the recommendations was the responsibility of the respective municipal governments, most of the participants were identified through their contacts with local NGOs, the Church, and the UNHCR. NGO experts facilitated the content training and dialogue components, and the relationships that were forged among participants helped to create closer cooperation among the agencies that initially identified them.

This type of network building through personal relationships is important in the Latin American context. Colombian respondents in the CEMPROC survey were asked both about where and how they interacted with Ecuadorians and about their general attitude toward Ecuadorians. Of those who had no interaction at all with Ecuadorians, 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 (i.e. through family, in the workplace or school) reported having positive perceptions of their citizen counterparts, with only 16% having a negative perception. The experience of the conflict prevention programs in Sucumbios and Esmeraldas shows that NGO and international actors can complement the state by providing spaces for common action across nationality lines, and by empowering Ecuadorian and Colombian community members with mediation and conflict resolution skills, reducing power inequalities and fear that might prevent Colombians from resolving conflicts through the courts or the police.

If governments, UN agencies, and NGOs actively seek to strengthen governance networks like these, 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.

\* names have been changed for protection purposes

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