

Ecuador: Strengthening Livelihoods and Caring for the Environment



Photo: UNHCR Ecuador

In the community of Lita, Imbabura Province, twenty families have formed an agricultural association to strengthen livelihoods opportunities while caring for the environment. The association brings together local and refugee families from Colombia, who believe that by supporting each other they can improve their quality of life.

Despite the violence and suffering that previously displaced many of the members of the association, they have found support and understanding in the communities that host them. Four years ago, the families got together to pursue their dream of forming an agricultural association. “We worked hard for the legal establishment of the organization,” says Juliana, one of the group leaders. “Some people thought that it would be impossible; that it was an unreachable dream. But we should never give up, because dreams can be realized.”

With determination, the support of UNHCR and its partners, and thanks to the welcoming context that they found in Ecuador, the Awá Association for Small-Scale Farmers was formed. It brings together Ecuadorians and Colombians and has close ties with the binational Ecuadorian-Colombian Awá indigenous community.

Following the establishment of the group, and adding a small capital raised through the sale of agricultural products, personal savings and loans from credit unions, the association acquired eleven hectares of land in Bareque, a rural area located between the provinces of Imbabura and Esmeraldas. The land, rich in flora and fauna, was equally distributed among the members.

The association receives permanent support from UNHCR and its partners: *Pastoral Social*, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and *Fondo Ecuatoriano Populorum Progressio* (FEPP). In line with efforts outlined in the *National Plan for Good Living*, families who are part of the association are given seeds and supplies for the production of sugar cane, cassava, bananas, corn and fruit crops. Since 2014, the association has also cultivated soybeans and peanuts, and raises guinea pigs and fish for income generation purposes. These products are part of the families’ diet and also have strong marketing possibilities.

In addition to contributing to the self-sufficiency and integration of families within the community, the process has generated a high level of environmental awareness and responsibility. “We work very closely, guiding and monitoring the entire production process, including the distribution of supplies, production of bio-fertilizers to avoid the use of agro-chemicals, always aiming to protect water sources,” explains FEPP’s Silvia Ortega.

The association also installed a bio-digester, an eco-friendly method that uses waste from animals to produce natural gas. “We look after ourselves while looking after Mother Earth,” says Juliana. Ecuadorian and Colombian members of the association are proud of their efforts and the results of their daily activities.



Photo: UNHCR Ecuador

As noted by Maria Clara Martin, UNHCR Representative in Ecuador, “communities are spaces for integration that have shown solidarity with refugee families arriving in Ecuador. We believe it is essential to support these collective efforts, which have a positive impact on economic development and sustainable livelihoods for refugees.”

Juliana says she is happy and proud to be part of her association. “The association is my family. I think other refugees living in nearby communities could do the same. We would be happy to guide them.”

Ana Rubiela Rodríguez, UNHCR Ecuador

Sport: A Lifeline for Communities

Seventeen-year-old Francisco plays football in the first division of a municipality in the border State of Táchira, Venezuela, where he lives with his family. Francisco and his 15-year-old brother Carlos were born in Colombia. Their passion for football started when they lived in the Department of North Santander, watching their father play in their community’s local team. “My dad was the team captain,” notes Francisco.

Due to the armed conflict in Colombia, the family left the country and sought asylum in Venezuela. In the community where they now live, Francisco and Carlos joined the local school’s football team. “When I was 12 years old, I received a medal as the top scorer in a championship,” recalls Francisco. He says that he prefers to play as a forward because he likes to score. Carlos, on the other hand, prefers to be the goalkeeper.

These brothers are grateful for the impact that football has had in their lives and they want to share their passion for sport with others by organizing a local football school for children in their community. “Our local team won two games where my brother scored twice!” says Carlos proudly. “After that, the group had the idea of forming another team for the younger children. They look forward to playing and already call us trainers,” adds Francisco.



Photo: UNHCR Venezuela

With support from UNHCR and its partners, and as part of the *EU Children of Peace* initiative, young people like Francisco and Carlos are receiving football and life skills training in rural areas on the Venezuelan-Colombian border. The project involves children and adolescents of concern, local youth and civil servants to enhance positive attitudes toward refugees and asylum-seekers in host communities.

“We received training from the *Deportivo Táchira Football Club*. They taught us playing skills and gave us the opportunity to gain experience that we can now share with others,” says Francisco. The coaching also included leadership training, team-building, planning and local integration messages that the youngsters now want to teach to other children in their community.

With their recently restored pitch, Francisco and Carlos will start the football school for children in early 2016. “The kids are really happy with this new pitch. Thirty kids have already signed up to participate.” They are also planning to involve the parents to increase the impact of the initiative.

Francisco and Carlos want to share positive messages and experiences with children in their community. They believe that solidarity, just like sport, has no borders. “Do not lose faith that You can be someone someday,” says Francisco.

Zasha Millán, UNHCR Venezuela

Finding Solutions for Colombia’s Urban IDPs

Since 2012, the Colombian Government has been engaged in peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), amidst an armed conflict that has been ongoing for over 50 years and has generated close to 7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 350,000 refugees. Most IDPs have fled to marginal areas of Colombia’s largest cities, where they face integration difficulties.

While armed hostilities between the Government and the FARC have diminished thanks to the peace negotiations and related cease-fires, other illegal armed groups continue to operate. Such groups rooted in officially demobilized paramilitaries are estimated to have several thousand members in more than 400 municipalities, notably in urban areas.

The Colombian Government has made significant efforts to foster solutions through policies and measures in areas such as public health, education, income generation, and the reparation of victims, including land restitution. State institutions still need to strengthen their capacities to protect and guarantee the human rights of displaced populations and communities at risk of displacement. IDPs also suffer from poverty, inadequate housing and limited access to public services.



Photo: UNHCR Colombia

The peace accords reached thus far in Havana reiterate a commitment to improving economic infrastructure, social services, security and good governance in rural areas that hitherto have been controlled by the FARC. This focus is mirrored in the Government's National Development Plan and its Stabilization Strategy for the first 18 months following the conclusion of the peace agreement and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), which aligns with the Government's development priorities.

Since the establishment of its operation in Colombia in 1997, UNHCR has supported national and local authorities in adopting and operationalizing rights-based approaches in the planning and implementation of solutions initiatives in urban areas. The support includes technical assistance for the design and management of legislative and institutional frameworks, public policies pertaining to housing, access to land, health and education.

UNHCR works with displaced and receiving communities in urban settings with a view to strengthen their self-determination and capacities. This empowers them to be meaningfully involved at all stages of durable solutions processes. UNHCR also helps strengthen the presence of State authorities in marginal neighborhoods that have received IDPs, and enhances the capacities of authorities to protect human rights. As an example, UNHCR has assisted the Office of the Ombudsman in establishing *Houses of Rights* in troubled urban neighborhoods where IDPs can address human rights issues affecting them.

In addition, as part of the Transitional Solutions Initiative (TSI), UNHCR, together with UNDP, has launched projects in various urban areas to improve the quality of life of IDPs, strengthen the capacities of displaced and reception communities, and help affected persons reclaim their rights. In this regard, UNHCR has helped legalize informal IDP settlements, enabling persons to access public services.

UNHCR is actively advocating with national authorities and the UN to address urban IDP integration needs as part of the implementation of the peace agreement.

Martin Gottwald, UNHCR Colombia

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All names of PoC included in the articles have been changed to maintain confidentiality.