PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT 2023

Perceptions of refugees and others forcibly displaced about insecurity and violence in Ecuador

Introduction

UNHCR defines participatory assessments as a process that promotes the meaningful participation of people in all their diversities through the application of consultation tools that enable the collection of precise information about the protection risks they face, as well as understanding their capabilities, resources, and understand the solutions they propose. Participatory assessments facilitate community mobilization to take collective action for their protection and provide essential information to analyze the current situation faced people forcibly displaced people and adapt the organization's response programme. In this sense, in 2023, UNHCR Ecuador carried out a consultation process and a related participatory assessment report named "Perceptions of refugees and others forcibly displaced about insecurity and violence in Ecuador."[1]

This report summarizes the main findings of the assessment created based on the voices of the people who participated in the consultation exercise.[2]

Background: context of insecurity

According to official figures of the Ministry of Interior, Ecuador registered an 82% increase in homicides in 2022 with 4,450 violent deaths, while 2023 (between January and July) registered 3,568 violent deaths. This accounts for an index of 19.83 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants[3,4].

Official sources attribute violence to drug trafficking, penitentiary crisis, warring gangs and the presence of international and organized crime groups[5,6].

Design of participatory assessments

The participatory assessment "Networks and human mobility in Ecuador"[7] conducted by UNHCR in 2022 provided evidence of the positive impact of community networks to improve the access and exercise of rights of people forced to flee. Violence and insecurity were among

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1 See: Participatory assessments 2023
2 The information in this report has been generalized.
3 News item (SPA): El 79% de víctimas de asesinato en Ecuador no tenía antecedentes (primicias.ec)
4 News item (SPA): La inseguridad en Ecuador escala a niveles históricos y se impone como prioridad del próximo Gobierno | Internacional | EL PAÍS (elpais.com)
5 News item (SPA): Las 4 razones de la crisis de seguridad en Ecuador (insightcrime.org)
6 News item (SPA): Quiénes son "Los Choneros", la pandilla ligada al Cártel de Sinaloa que infunde el terror en Ecuador - Infobae
7 News item (SPA): Disponible en Document - Ecuador: Informe de Resultados de los Diagnósticos Participativos 2022 - Redes y Movilidad Humana (unhcr.org)

the topics discussed during this exercise.

In this context, and considering the increase in violence in Ecuador, this participatory assessment focused on the security situation as the central topic. Hence, being a qualitative study, the following tools were used:

> • 7 semi-structured interviews with key informants in Quito and Guayaquil, including teachers, community leaders and entrepreneurs.

> • 9 focus group discussions with youth and adults in Quito, Esmeraldas and Guayaquil.

> • 5 sessions to share dreams, fears and commitments through a 'tree-matrix' with teens in Quito, Esmeraldas and Guayaquil.

81 people participated in the interviews and consultation groups[8] of this qualitative study, who were engaged between July and September 2023.

This participatory assessment reinforces, and complements information provided by refugees and migrants, partners, civil society, and community-based organizations across the country.

Aunque el diagnóstico participativo no contempló metodológicamente la consulta con población ecuatoriana, la situación de violencia e inseguridad que vive el país a nivel nacional y comunitario brinda indicios de la afectación que también podría estar sufriendo la población de acogida. Este impacto puede verse reflejado en el aumento del desplazamiento de ecuatorianos que, bajo circunstancias de amenaza, peligro e inseguridad, buscan alternativas en terceros países.

Although the participatory assessment did not consider consultations with Ecuadorians because of its methodology, the situation of violence and insecurity in the country at the national and community levels provides clues of what host communities could be facing. This impact could also reflect on the increase in the displacement of Ecuadorians who, under conditions of threat, danger and insecurity, seek alternatives in third countries.

Analysis framework

The analysis of the information was based on the central axis of security/insecurity and developed in three moments:

> • **First moment:** Reflections of people on their perceptions of security.

> • **Second moment:** Connections between insecurity and violence.

> • **Third moment:** Description of types of violence suffered by people, characterization of perpetrators and coping mechanisms.

8 During the registration of people, UNHCR used the short set of questions from the Washington Group to identify disabilities. However, no disabilities were identified among interviewees.

Main findings

Perception of security

People interviewed relate safety with the capacity to adapt to changes and overcome fears related to a life in a new home and gaining new knowledge and skills.

People feel safe when being in close quarters. They mainly mention their homes, religious centres and specific sectors they perceive as locations where they can find protection. In some cases, they mention shelters.

LGBTIQ+ people report feeling safe with their families and friends, as well as in entertainment and leisure spots.
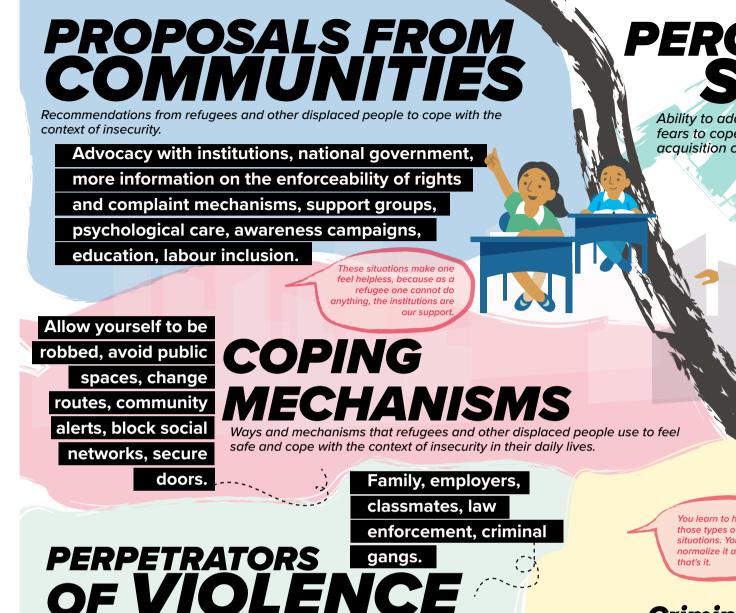
Insecurity and types of violence

The presence of criminal gangs causes extreme fear among people interviewed, compelling them to stay at home and avoid going outdoors as a self-protection measure, which, in turn, affects negatively the social fabric. Several interviewees report cases where gangs threaten people into committing crimes and, in others, extort people with small businesses.

Several criminal and violent practices have been normalized, including drug sales in schools or parks, assaults and attacks in public transportation, the occupation and appropriation of streets and public spaces by members of criminal and organized crime groups. There is a generalized concern over the growing and exacerbated violence, confrontations between gangs, recruitment, hired assassinations and dismemberments.

Those interviewed cite frequently gender-based violence over women, LGBTIQ+ people, as well as domestic violence. In general, teenage girls mention facing gender-based violence in the street, plazas and in public transportation. However, amidst the generalized violence they face in their neighbourhoods and communities, this type of violence has been relegated to a second stage despite the growing complexity of members of criminal groups seeking women to recruit them at partners; sexual violence is common un such context.

On the other hand, harassment in schools is another type of violence identified by interviewees. This violence has a basis of discrimination by nationality and translates to psychological and physical violence. Other forms of violence identified is the one perpetrated in labour environments, which relates to lower salaries, lack of benefits and exploitation. Finally, xenophobia and discrimination continue to be an important base for other types of violence faced by refugees and others displaced in Ecuador, greatly exacerbated by the current context.

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PROPOSALS FROM COMMUNITIES

Recommendations from refugees and other displaced people to cope with the context of insecurity.

Advocacy with institutions, national government, more information on the enforceability of rights and complaint mechanisms, support groups, psychological care, awareness campaigns, education, labour inclusion.

These situations make one feel helpless, because as a refugee one cannot do anything, the institutions are our support.

COPING MECHANISMS

Ways and mechanisms that refugees and other displaced people use to feel safe and cope with the context of insecurity in their daily lives.

Allow yourself to be robbed, avoid public spaces, change routes, community alerts, block social networks, secure doors.

Family, employers, classmates, law enforcement, criminal gangs.

You learn to h... those types o... situations. Yo... normalize it a... that's it.

PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE

Refugees and other displaced people identified the presence of perpetrators in their intimate family space, the neighborhood, community, city, school and work environments, where they live or carry out their daily activities.

PERC... S...

Ability to ad... fears to cope... acquisition o...

Crimin... v...

Violence carried out by ... in neighbourhoods. Peop... their lives during shoot... extortion, re...

Comm... crime

Incidents that ... feared to occu... neighbourhoo... routes to work...

I suffered from a lot of xenophobia in the workplace, I had to do everything because I am Venezuelan, a lot of labour exploitation. I lasted a week.

Gender-based violence

Incidents of harassment or abuse reported, mostly by women and girls, occurring on the streets, at home or on public transportation.

School bullying

Discrimination based on nationality which translates into psychological and physical violence and deprivation of items in school environments. In addition, people highlight the fear of being assaulted or that boys and girls will be recruited on the road or inside schools.

Sometimes, they have tried to assault me. Despite not having anything of value, they want to hurt me just because I have nothing...

Download the infographic here.

...CEPTION OF ...SECURITY

...apt to changes, to new places, face ... with life in a new home and the ... of knowledge and skills.

RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL CENTRES

THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS OR COMMUNITIES

THEIR HOMES

SHELTERS

Let's not forget our fears, because they will always be there. But focus on the future and being able to achieve what we want to achieve.

At home I feel safe. I have control of who comes in and who goes out.

WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

COMMUNITY AND INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES

Many things scare me. To go out one day and not come back; to end up one day in a ditch raped and abused. As young women, we are more at risk.

INSECURITY & VIOLENCE

Insecurity represents different issues for refugees and other displaced people in Ecuador. These are often issues that hinder their integration.

¿WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TO FEEL UNSAFE FOR PEOPLE FORCED TO FLEE IN ECUADOR?

...handle ... ...u kind of ...nd

...al gang ...violence

...organized crime groups ...le report fearing losing ...ngs, or being victims of ...cruitment or kidnapping.

...on

...occur or are ...r in ...ds and/or on ... or school.

The fear of violence arises due to confrontations that among armed gangs or due to violent robberies in the streets.

FEELING FEAR

LACK OF RESOURCES

LACK OF EMPLOYMENT

XENOPHOBIA RACISM

OWNING A BUSINESS

PARTICIPATING IN THE COMMUNITY

DRUG SALES IN THE COMMUNITY

GOING TO SCHOOL

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

Refugees and other displaced people identified the types of violence that are common or particular depending on the space.

Theft of mobile phones, backpacks and other valuables.

Perpetrators

Among the profiles identified by interviewees the most are family members, employers, control and public force authorities, students and bullies in education settings, teachers using physical punishments in schools, strangers, acquaintances, or distant relatives. In addition, other profiles add to the equation, including criminals linked to extortions, moneylenders, hired assassins and other members of criminal groups, smuggles and human traffickers.

Those consulted, mainly women, identified members of organized criminal groups and the main causes of violence.

People describe dangerous areas where criminals meet and exhibit, more frequent than ever, symbology related to criminal groups.

Coping mechanisms

Participants in the assessments reported they have learned to live amid insecurity and have normalized certain precautions like changing routes, avoid places or restricting schedules, blocking their social media, refrain from visiting places they consider dangerous or going out in groups.

To cope with this reality, people have started to come up with care strategies, like allowing criminals to rob them to avoid becoming victims of something worse, locking themselves up in their homes or coming up with distractions in lockdown.

Spirituality and trusting a higher being are resources interviewees use to address incidents of insecurity.

Similarly, family support is described as a source of strength and resilience for many.

In relation to reporting to authorities as a coping mechanism in the face of insecurity and violence, people mentioned they refrain from denouncing to avoid retaliation or impunity.

The strategies to protect children include accompanying them to and from school, changing education institutions, withdrawing them altogether or seeking tele-education options.

Youth opt for using digital communications tools, like chat groups to connect with neighbours and stay abreast of the situation and support each other in dangerous situations. Young LGBTIQ+ participants are more confident in the action and organizational capacity of the community.

Proposals from the community

To face situations of insecurity and violence, people have made several proposals of action at the community and institutional level:

> • Advocacy with public institutions in charge of security;
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> • Creation of support groups to maintain regular dialogue with the communities;
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> • Provision of information that supports integration, the exercise of rights, access to services as well as enforcement

and complaint mechanisms, and the issuance of awareness campaigns about rights and services;

• Strengthen community interventions, particularly in neighbourhoods most affected by insecurity;

• Deliver mental health and emotional wellbeing programmes and services;

• Address humanitarian assistance needs exacerbated by insecurity;

• Provide accompaniment and orientation in the context of violence.

In addition, they request UNHCR, international cooperation agencies and organizations to create spaces to advocate afore the national Government to address these issues.

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