CASE STUDY: Santo Domingo, Ecuador
Migrant and Refugee Insights Shaping Local Policies

From the Global Programme on Making Migration Work for Sustainable Development (M4SD) in partnership with UNHCR Ecuador

KEY WORDS: data, participatory policymaking, displacement, mixed migration, information campaigns, community-driven development, local governance

MEET LUISA

The Ecuadorian city of Santo Domingo lies in the foothills west of the Andes. Known for its commercial importance, residents of many different backgrounds settle and prosper there. As in many other cities, local and regional governments do not always have enough information to identify the needs of new residents and respond to these ever-changing dynamics.

Luisa is a Venezuelan entrepreneur who has lived in Santo Domingo for four years with her daughter and grandchildren. In Venezuela, she sold real estate but here she sells jewellery, an idea she got from an Ecuadorian neighbour. She brings her merchandise with her wherever she goes because, "You never know when you might meet a client!" Given that she does not hold a regular migratory status, Luisa has found it difficult to grow her business, access loans to expand or hire staff. She also struggles to establish a network of regular customers and market her jewellery.

Luisa's challenges are typical of many migrants, refugees and displaced persons who live in Ecuador. Many people must work in the informal economy and lack the paperwork they need to find jobs in their previous careers. The government is striving to open opportunities for business owners, especially through a new regularization process to provide temporary residence visas to Venezuelan migrants and refugees.

THE SOLUTION?

In Santo Domingo, the Cantonal Human Mobility Consultative Council was created to ensure that migrants, refugees and returnees can exercise their rights and have a voice in policymaking. The Council provides information, giving advice to people like Luisa to navigate administrative processes, access local services, etc., and gathers data about migrant and displaced people's needs. The Council is composed of migrants, refugees and returnees in Santo Domingo, which enhances trust with the community and allows for ownership. Anders is one of the Council's members, a Venezuelan migrant who worked at a civil society organization (CSO) in his hometown and moved to Santo Domingo a few years ago. Anders and other members use their knowledge about migrants' and refugees' situations to provide   recommendations to the municipal government, shaping policy, programmes and key decisions

> "Information is vital to understand who we are, where we are, our economic needs and to fight misconceptions. They distrust us when they don't know us. For example, there is a local perception that lending money to a migrant is risky. But our data finds that 75 per cent of Venezuelans in Santo Domingo pay their loans on time. Data like this can change perceptions and decisions. This is the beginning of something bigger."
>
> **Consultative Council on Human Mobility in Santo Domingo**

HOW IS IT DONE?[1]

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

TARGET 16·7 — ENSURE RESPONSIVE, INCLUSIVE AND REPRESENTATIVE DECISION-MAKING

The information the Council gathers is used to **make stronger policies and to eliminate barriers** for migrants and refugees to contribute and benefit from society. The Council acts as an institutional form of participatory policymaking, since the information and recommendations from migrant representatives influence decision-making. Ultimately, this body strengthens coordination processes and ensures decisions are based on the real needs of all community members.

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

TARGET 11·1 — SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Councils maintain a two-way relationship with migrant communities. Besides deepening the understanding of mobility, they also **provide orientation and act as a community information network.** Council members give out a catalogue of local services and guide people where they need to go, to access services and understand their rights; the Council supported 320 Venezuelans to submit regularization paperwork from August to November 2022.

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

TARGET 17·16 — ENHANCE THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are fundamental to this approach. The Council is made of migrants and refugees but it works hand in hand with the **local government** (Santo Domingo and the Cantonal Council for the Protection of Rights), the **national government** (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility, National Council on Equality for Human Mobility), **civil society** (migrants' and refugees' associations, local Consultative Councils on Human Mobility) and the **UN** Migration Agency (IOM), **UN** Development Agency (UNDP) and **UN** Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

TARGET 8·5 — FULL EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK WITH EQUAL PAY

The **Council members, who are themselves migrants, refugees and returnees, act as data collectors.** The community benefits from these people's significant professional skills, experience and education. Many Venezuelans and Colombians in Ecuador have university degrees but are unable to find jobs. Some Council members worked in NGOs before moving to Santo Domingo. Aside from applying their experience, Council members also gain new skills as researchers, policy advisors and neighbourhood guides. It is a win-win-win, empowering migrants and refugees to support their own communities. As Anders said, "I want to continue and develop my abilities."

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

TARGET 10·3 — ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND END DISCRIMINATION

The Council is **by migrants and refugees, for migrants and refugees.** Councils create spaces to encounter, exchange, meet and share, destigmatizing migrants and refugees and bringing communities closer together. The Council **gathers a range of data** on human mobility in the city, including socio-economic information, nationality, reasons for migrating, education level, willingness to stay in Santo Domingo, family composition and level of integration within their community. Data is collected in Kobo surveys by Council members.

TARGET 10·7 — RESPONSIBLE AND WELL-MANAGED MIGRATION POLICIES

Local Consultative Councils consult, observe and promote the rights of all people, and they help implement the Constitution's call for the **full participation of people in decision-making, planning and the management of public affairs**.[2] They are advisory mechanisms, permanent and participatory spaces whose purpose is to represent different groups of people and formulate proposals, but they do not set policies themselves. Local Councils work with the National Council for Equality in Human Mobility (Consejo Nacional para la Igualdad de Movilidad Humana, CNIMHU), a supervisory body for the assurance of human rights that **monitors human mobility policies** in the country to protect the rights of mobile people.

---

[1] Because activities between projects have sought good synergies to maximize the use of funding and to create whole-of-community engagement, not all the activities here were exclusively funded by the M4SD Programme.

[2] There are Consultative Councils that represent various groups of people: those of different gender identities, indigenous peoples and nationalities, Afro-Ecuadorian and Montubio people, children and adolescents, youth, seniors, people with disabilities, mobile people, and the LGBTIQ+ community.

SUCCESS FACTORS

TIP 1: **Diversity + inclusion = accurate information.** This model generates trust, based on peer-to-peer data collection, which is essential for quality data and more honest answers. Council members include a female Ecuadorian returning migrant; a Colombian refugee, mother and entrepreneur; and the President of the local Venezuelan Association, among others. Each person personally understands what migrants and refugees might experience. Because the Council is so diverse, data collectors speak to migrants and refugees in their own local dialects and use familiar terms, lessening misunderstandings and increasing the accuracy of information. Because they feel comfortable, more people will respond; data is therefore more representative. As Council member Anders said, "I arrived on a bike, not in a uniform. People don't see me as different."

TIP 2: **Gather information, give information.** Completing surveys may be perceived as a one-way street when respondents give information but never receive anything. By first asking what is needed and offering information and support (for example, navigating social services or how to enrol in school or pay rent), people tend to want to give back, participate more and offer more opinions when asked. Additionally, take an inclusive approach to "human mobility," and support regular and irregular migrants, return migrants, internal migrants, refugees, Ecuadorians with family abroad and many other people on the move.

TIP 3: **Empower migrants and refugees as community leaders and development changemakers.** Staff members build their own skills and make change in their communities. They learn qualitative research skills, participatory research practices and advocacy. They receive training, technical support and capacity building from IOM, UNHCR, the Cantonal Council for the Protection of Rights and the National Council on Equality for Human Mobility.

TIP 4: **Remain independent but maintain ties.** The Council is neutral; it is independent from the local government but maintains a close relationship, primarily the Cantonal Council for the Protection of Rights (CCPD). Independence allows groups like this to recommend policy developments that are in the best interests of people on the move, without being influenced by politics. Councils also create deeper coordination between diverse actors (government, civil society, etc.) in one municipality. There are many similar local councils on other issues: gender, race, youth.

TIP 5: **Make sure you have budgets, office space and staff costs.** Even though the Constitution mandates the existence of local Consultative Councils on Human Mobility, there is no budget to create and maintain them. Santo Domingo's municipal government designated an office for the Consultative Council, though laws ban them from providing any formal budget. IOM and UNDP (through M4SD) and UNHCR ensured that salaries were covered for a short period. Providing offices and long-term mechanisms to fund staff salaries ensures Councils are sustainable and functioning.

TIP 6: **Continue to test and improve this approach for sustainability.** As a pilot initiative, this approach continues to be improved through testing and refining the Council's approaches to ensure long-term success. Example challenges include capacity building and training for the Council; long-term funding; creating a centralized database of information that can be updated and shared. Although there is no one-size-fits- all approach, data and information collection strategies by migrants and refugees, for migrants and refugees allows community members to support newcomers, democratizes processes and allows for policy to be made from the ground up.

These activities have made life better for Luisa, Anders and their neighbours in Santo Domingo

The Consultative Council has helped local leaders to better understand migrants' and refugees' experiences and is led by migrants and refugees like Anders (SDG 10, reduced inequalities).

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Anders and his co-workers use their lived experiences, professional skills and talent to support the Ecuadorian and migrant community in their city (SDG 8, decent work and economic growth).

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Santo Domingo's municipal government is better able to collect data and know their own municipality's residents and their needs (SDG 17, partnerships for the goals).

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Leaders have the tools to understand and face the reality, but also to address people's grievances in standard ways. Migrants and refugees of all kinds have a voice in municipal decisions (SDG 16, peace, justice and strong institutions).

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

With new knowledge about the scale of support needed, local policies like the Territorial Development and Management Plan (PDyOT) and its budget can be formulated by the local government to fill these gaps, allowing leaders to expand services and support to everyone (SDG 11, sustainable communities and cities).

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Luisa and her friends now have new opportunities, too. With help from the Consultative Council, Luisa submitted her application to the national government's regularization process and hopes to receive her ID card soon (SDG 10, reduced inequalities).

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Thanks to the inclusive policies that the local and national governments have installed, Luisa will be able to register her small business and apply for a loan so it can grow (SDG 9, industry, innovation and infrastructure).

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Luisa might also get a job with a local real estate company. Local businesses and other private sector actors are learning how to employ migrants and refugees and the benefits of a diverse workforce through workshops run by the Cantonal Council on Protection of Rights and the local government (SDG 8, decent work and economic growth).

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC