

# Promising Practices

**The human rights-based approach (HRBA) in German development cooperation: promoting the rights of refugees, migrants and members of host communities in the border regions of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.**

## Background

As a result of the humanitarian, political, social and economic **crisis in Venezuela, more than 7.72 million people** (approximately 25% of the population in 2016) left the country between 2017 and November 2023, and around 6.54 million of them went to other South American countries. This massive influx of people is having far-reaching effects on communities in **Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, the main destinations for refugees and migrants from Venezuela.** Moreover, within this context, the region faces the additional challenge of accommodating a substantial number of internally displaced Colombians and Colombian refugees. The host communities are often located in **disadvantaged, remote areas** where a large proportion of the population live in precarious conditions and are unable to meet their basic needs. Refugees and migrants often encounter **substantial barriers in accessing basic services as they lack a regular migratory status.** This includes access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, increasing their risk of becoming victims of exploitation and violence. In the border regions of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, this is further **exacerbated by the presence of criminal groups** engaging in illicit activities, such as smuggling, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. Migrant women and girls, members

of the LGBTIQ+ community, individuals with disabilities – among others – face an elevated risk of falling victim to physical and sexual violence. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a comprehensive and intersectional approach that recognizes and prioritizes the vulnerabilities of specific groups within the affected population, acknowledging that discrimination can often occur based on more than one perceived characteristic.

The **GIZ Programme “Supporting Host Communities for Refugees and Migrants in the Border Regions of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru (SI FRONTERA)”** – implemented on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and co-financed by the European Union (EU) – strengthens the state and civil society. The principle objective of SI Frontera is increasing the capacities of host communities to manage the high number of refugees from Venezuela and Colombia in a socially responsible and employment-effective manner. To fulfil this objective, SI FRONTERA implements activities along the following thematic areas:

- **Decentralized and integrated refugee management (Ecuador only):** improve the conditions for respecting the human rights of refugees from Venezuela and Colombia and the population in host communities in Ecuador’s border region with Colombia and Peru.

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- **Migration Governance:** strengthen the capacity of responsible state institutions to govern the movement of refugees from Venezuela into the project area.
- **Services for refugees and host communities:** broaden the range and increase the quality of available services for refugees and the host population.
- **Promote peaceful coexistence in host communities, with a particular focus on employment and income generation:** in selected municipalities, help create the conditions for the peaceful coexistence of different population groups, also in cooperation with the private sector.
- **Protect victims of violence, human trafficking and exploitation:** increase the capacity of state and civil society to offer services for the protection of victims of violence, human trafficking and exploitation.

States are obligated to **respect, protect and fulfil the human rights** of their population within their territories, **irrespective of migratory status**, gender identity, age, disability, and other factors. Various human rights conventions play a crucial role in this context, such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of **Racial Discrimination**, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of **Discrimination against Women**, the Convention on the **Rights of the Child** and the Convention on the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.

Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru have ratified all fundamental human rights treaties and report regularly on progress and challenges. Numerous human rights standards and principles apply to refugee protection under the **Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees**. These are pertinent to migrants with regular and irregular migratory status, as outlined in the aforementioned conventions and the Convention on the Protection of the **Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families**.

## Towards a human rights-based approach

SI FRONTERA promotes social and economic rights for refugees, migrants and disadvantaged persons in host communities in a dual approach: on the one hand, the programme supports the **capacity development of state and municipal authorities to meet their human rights obligations**; on the other hand, it promotes **participation of target groups** to support their empowerment and provides **information on their rights**. SI FRONTERA considers this dual approach to be necessary to ensure tangible impacts on the ground. The programme applies the human rights-based approach as follows:

- **The guiding principle is non-discrimination**  
SI FRONTERA aims to **include refugees and migrants into national systems** (register, protection, health, education, among other basic rights). Its approach is based on the principle of non-discrimination, advocating for better access to services not only for refugees but also for other marginalized individuals at the local level. In Ecuador, for instance, five priority groups have been identified: women, children and youth, refugees (including people on the move), Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Ecuadorians,



Verdad sin Fronteras, event with survivors of the Colombian armed conflict and the host community in Ecuador



and persons with disabilities. In its initial phase, the programme conducted **studies to assess the availability and accessibility of social, economic, and legal services for these groups**. The programme focuses on employment and income, psychosocial support, education, legal advice, health services, initial reception, survivor protection, and violence prevention. The **identified formal or informal barriers** to accessing these services were **then addressed specifically**, giving particular attention to **intersectional discrimination** – for example, discrimination based on gender and nationality, which has a negative impact on women’s abilities to integrate into the host communities.

- **Participation by default: “Nothing about migrants without migrants”**

SI FRONTERA promotes the active participation of the affected target groups in the planning and implementation of measures. It upholds the international advocacy of refugee organizations expressed in the phrase **“Nothing about us without us”**. Specific mechanisms for participation include **dialogue forums, round tables and local feedback loops** for service

delivery. Representatives of the government, organized civil society as well as local institutions like institutional councils (e.g. on the protection of children and minors, against gender-based violence, GBV), defensores comunitarios (local human rights defenders) and ombudspersons participate in these forums. They identify problems and work out solutions to guarantee the rights of their communities such as access to basic services among other topics.

- **Cooperating with human rights defenders**

SI FRONTERA supports ombudspersons in the three countries at both the national and local (Peru) level in **monitoring and evaluating the human rights situation** in the communities. This reinforces the accountability of the three states regarding their obligation to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights. The programme supports the establishment of a cross-border observatory on the human rights situation.

- **Empowering rights holders**

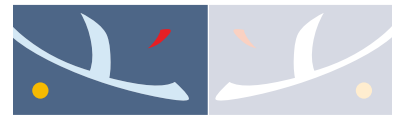
In addition to enhancing access to social and economic services and fostering participation, SI FRONTERA empowers the target groups by **strengthening their self-help capacities and self-efficacy**. In cooperation with local civil society, target groups gain access to information about their rights and receive guidance, e.g. on regularization procedures, prevention and protection against human trafficking as well as on access to the state social protection system.

- **Recognizing youth as agents of change**

In Ecuador, SI FRONTERA engages with **youth and youth organizations in developing “Youth Agendas”**. The goal is to empower youth of the northern border of Ecuador, to recognize themselves in their diversity and to propose ideas to promote and exercise their rights. The “Youth Agendas” provide a tool to empower young people and to strengthen their capacities.



Verdad sin Fronteras, event with survivors of the Colombian armed conflict and the host community in Ecuador



- **Addressing the underlying structural causes of exclusion**

SI FRONTERA addresses structural causes of exclusion at the institutional level in all three countries, for example by **advising local governments on the legal framework of protection systems** or its implementation. Recognizing that everyday discrimination significantly decreases access to services and protection against violence, the programme organizes **campaigns to promote non-discrimination and tolerance** at the national and local level.

## Achievements and Impact

### Meaningful participation of the target groups is crucial to design needs-based solutions.

- With the aim of strengthening rights protection systems, SI FRONTERA advised 28 **roundtables** set up by state institutions and civil society to coordinate the management of **cases of rights violations** in the communities according to their specific needs. The established management models involve young people and women in decision-making. Video: [Espacios de articulaci3n territorial interinstitucionales \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Espacios de articulaci3n territorial interinstitucionales)
- Several major **dialogue processes** at municipal and provincial levels have facilitated the **joint development of measures**. For example, the stakeholders identified difficulties in accessing the regularisation systems for migrants and discussed these with the Ministry. Due to this dialogue, migrants were included in special state systems according to their needs: The Ecuadorian government created a special procedure with low formal requirements for the regularisation of unaccompanied minors. It enables unaccompanied children and youth to obtain a regular residence permit quickly and effectively. This is an important step towards better protection for minors.

- Governments developed **47 rights-based public policy instruments** in joint processes with civil society, incorporating the perspectives of women, youth and migrants in the development of legal frameworks. For example, local governments on the northern border now have a legal framework for the implementation of projects, the provision of gender-sensitive services and services to prevent violence against women.

- **900 young people** developed 31 “**Youth Agendas**” that include the identification of social and environmental problems and possible solutions. The initiatives are implemented with the support of local governments, companies and civil society. The scaling up of the initiative resulted in **1,200 young people** taking part in the **implementation of several projects** of the Youth Agendas. A Committee of the Youth Agendas participated in the **reformulation of the national youth law**. In the long term, the leadership and organizational skills of young people have been strengthened through the process and agreements have been reached between the organized youth groups and local governments. Video: [Agendas Juveniles Frontera Norte / 2021\(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Agendas Juveniles Frontera Norte / 2021)

### The human rights situation of particularly disadvantaged groups has improved.

- Due to the joint development of socially sustainable solutions by state and non-state actors at the local level, **1,150,000 refugees and migrants** were **registered** and given **access to other services, e.g. legal advice** in the process of **regularization of their residence status**.
- **104,000 migrants** in vulnerable situations received **guidance on preventive measures** to reduce risks, protection measures and access to local protection systems.



Youth build their action agendas in Sucumbios

- **30 Protection Spaces** were equipped and strengthened with management models and process improvement. Due to the programme, shelters for survivors of GBV, centers for comprehensive care for extreme marginalized populations, Gesell Chambers and medical facilities operate, reaching more than **242,000 people in the most marginalized zones**, which are areas of extreme poverty and lack health services and protection.

**Addressing the structural causes of discrimination is necessary to overcome inequality.**

Besides the aforementioned approaches on a political level to address causes for inequality, SI FRONTERA supports the economic empowerment of marginalized groups and social cohesion in local communities:

- **558 young people** took part in employment trainings, which include **skills development** as well as entrepreneurship certification. The training courses are based on methodologies focusing on migrants, youth, women and women survivors of violence. They cover the phases of founding, launching, equipping and supporting the expansion of a company.
- More than **3,000 people** have participated in trainings on **peace mediation, community leadership, peaceful coexistence** and protection to promote change in their community.



## Challenges and lessons learned

**Sustaining the work with communities** around peaceful coexistence and protection of the most marginalized **is a constant challenge** in the situation described above. Nonetheless, **local activities have contributed the most to maintaining spaces for dialogue**: neighbourhood festivals, community sports and youth work involving migrants have proven to be more effective in creating spaces for coexistence than large-scale national campaigns.

The **crisis at the state government level** makes implementation difficult as partners and staff in ministries are constantly changing. **Sustaining approaches** and capacities in state institutions **has been a challenge**. One of the programme's strategies is to ensure the training of local government technical staff who often remain in their positions despite institutional changes. The second route was the design and approval of **public policies with a human rights-based approach** that made it **possible to maintain the regulations** despite changes in the governmental structure.

The work on **peaceful coexistence between women** from host communities and migrant women has been **one of the main challenges**, as prejudices had a strong influence in creating tension between the two groups. Promoting interaction had to be based on the **destruction of these stereotypes** and strengthening sorority networks between women.

**One of the programme's most successful approaches** has been working with the **younger population**. The community organisation of young people has led to substantial improvements in the communities of which they are a part and to the scaling up to the national level with important impacts e.g. on the Youth Law in Ecuador.

Access to health care for people in vulnerable situations in Santo Domingo



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