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Irregular Migration in Ecuador since the turn of the millennium –
development, economic background and discourses

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Database on Irregular Migration (<http://irregular-migration.hwwi.net>)

This website aims at increasing transparency in the field of irregular migration. The database provides an inventory and a critical appraisal of data and estimates in the European Union. Quantitative information is accompanied by substantial background materials, both on issues of general concern and on the situation in individual countries.

The database was created in the context of "CLANDESTINO: Counting the uncountable – data and trends across Europe", a project funded by the European Commission, DG Research, Sixth Framework Programme (2007-2009) (<http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/>). The Hamburg Institute of International Economics (HWWI) hosts the database and aims at expanding and updating it in the coming years.

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1 Introduction

During the past decade, migration has become an important issue for Ecuador¹ due to the social, political and economic impacts generated by several migration contexts. Ecuador, as an origin and recipient country of migration, refugees, domestic migration and transit country is a very special case for study. Despite its small territorial dimension and the difficult economic situation, the country is characterized by all the aforementioned migration patterns.

Over a million and a half Ecuadorians have migrated, mainly in the last ten years, particularly to Spain, Italy and the United States. This has changed the political and social perception of migration since it has generated, *inter alia*, foreign income, increased irregular migration and a new model of transnational families. Furthermore, Ecuador has received the highest number of refugees and displaced people in the Andean region in the North of Latin America. It has become a recipient and transit country for nationals from different countries, causing social, economic and cultural changes at different levels. These impacts have not been sufficiently studied and assessed.

Unfortunately, Ecuador still lacks effective and firm policies that could enable a precise statistical study of the country's migratory status. This is partly explained by the fact that both international and domestic migration have been mostly irregular and, thus, very difficult to track in records. This is compounded by the fact that migration control agencies have several parallel responsibilities and that each one of them keeps separated records with no adequate exchange of data.

The purpose of this report is to analyze the abovementioned realities linked to the country's migration development, from different historical, political and social perspectives. It will be based on a literature review and the analysis of articles on irregular migration published in the last 13 years by *El Comercio*, a Quito-based newspaper. The analysis covers three periods: 1997-2001, 2002-2006 and 2007 to the current date. 1997 was chosen as a starting year for the analysis as there was a significant increase of emigration of Ecuadorians to other countries after this year.

The Ecuadorian migration context is extremely complex and diverse and concerns both regular and irregular outflow of Ecuadorian citizens to other countries and regular and irregular

¹ Ecuador is located on the Northeast coast of South America. It borders with Colombia on the North, Peru on the South and East, and the Pacific Ocean on the West. It has 24 provinces distributed in four natural regions: Coast, Highlands, Amazon and the Galapagos Islands; its territory extends over 256 370 sq km. It has approximately 13 900 000 inhabitants. The country's official language is Spanish and the official use of traditional indigenous languages is recognized. The US dollar is the legal tender. According to the Council for the Development of Nationalities and Communities of Ecuador (CODENPE), there are 13 indigenous nationalities in the country (IOM, 2008:14).

inflows of citizens of other countries into Ecuador. Studies on this phenomenon tend to address one but not all migration patterns; therefore, a significant effort has been made in this report to collect and summarize information on the most relevant aspects of all these migration flows.

2 Economic background

Ecuador's economic development has undergone several changes since the country returned to a democratic rule in 1980. In 1999, the country suffered a serious financial crisis, which led to bankruptcy declarations by several banking institutions and had disastrous impact on the domestic economy and lives of Ecuadorians. Savings accounts and investments were frozen before a - yet to be completed, process of restitution was undertaken. The lowest GDP was recorded in that period, with a rapid decline from USD 23.25 billion in 1998 to USD 16.67 billion in 1999. The number of poor people grew exponentially and the population's general well-being consequently deteriorated. In 1999, per capita income was USD 1 429 compared with 2 035 dollars in 1998, a record low figure under the 1993 per capita income which was of USD 1 460. The per capita income of Ecuador barely reached 43% of the Latin American average, the second lowest after Bolivia.

Main macroeconomic indicators like GDP and income per capita for these years can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 Gross Domestic Product and income per capita

Year	GDP in million US-Dollars	Per capita income in US-Dollar	GDP change compared to previous year
1997	23 635	2 008	4.05 %
1998	23 255	1 946	2.12 %
1999	16 675	1 376	-6.30 %
2000	15 934	1 296	2.80 %
2001	21 250	1 703	5.34 %
2002	24 899	1 967	4.25 %
2003	28 636	2 230	3.58 %
2004	32 642	2 506	8.00 %
2005	37 187	2 814	6.00 %
2006	41 763	3 115	3.89 %
2007	45 789	3 366	2.49 %
2008	54 686	3 961	5.32 %
2009	51 106	3 649 ^{a)}	0.98 %

Source: Central Bank of Ecuador, own compilation from yearly reports

a) Ministry of Industry Ecuador 2010

This period of economic crisis was characterized by a very high level of Ecuadorian emigration to other countries. According to an estimation of the Ecuadorian Institute of Statistics and Surveys (INEC), around 15% of the 1 571 450 Ecuadorian migrants living abroad left the country in the years 1999 and 2000 (*El Universo*, 06.03.2008). The number was calculated on the basis of the records of arrivals and departures of Ecuadorians. It should be pointed out that these figures do not take into account irregular channels of migration, which are not captured in official records.

Ecuadorian migration to other countries has had an impact on the country's economy as a result of remittances. Data provided by the Central Bank of Ecuador point out that in 1998, remittances amounted to USD 793.7 billion and had doubled by 2001 to USD 1 414.5 billion. A second more accelerated growth was registered between 2001 and 2005, with a two-fold the average annual increase of remittances, reaching USD 2 453.5 billion. A third phase took place between 2005 and 2009, where the amount of remittances increased moderately, reaching USD 3 085 billion in 2007, before decreasing by 27% during the first quarter of 2009 to USD 554.5 million (Central Bank of Ecuador, 2007,2009: Evolution of Remittances) .

Table 2 Annual Remittances Development

Year	Millions of US Dollars
1998	793 700
1999	1 084 304
2000	1 316 721
2001	1 414 508
2002	1 432 022
2003	1 539 455
2004	1 604 182
2005	2 453 500
2006	2 915 956
2007	3 085 000

Source: Central Bank of Ecuador 2007, own compilation from yearly reports

According to the Central Bank of Ecuador, the reduction in the amount of remittances during the first quarter of 2009 is linked to the current economic recession in the European Union which directly affected Ecuadorians living abroad. General unemployment rates in EU countries reached 8.3% and 17.4% in Spain which is a main destination country for Ecuadorian migrants. Remittances represent 14.4% of Ecuador's balance of payment current account income. Therefore, their reduction has a direct impact on the Ecuadorian economy that remains dollarized since 2000 (*El Diario*, 04-02-2010).

The Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta considers that several factors converged and directly influenced the Ecuadorian economic crisis of the years 1997-2000. The most important events are considered: (i) the weather phenomenon El Niño (around the change of the year 1997/1998) that weakened agricultural production; (ii) the drop in oil prices; and (iii) the banking system bail-out operation with capital flights for over USD 2.5 billion (Acosta, 2006:44).

With regard to the reasons for emigration, a study on economic migration carried out by the Ecuadorian Institute of Statistics and Surveys (INEC), indicates that 66% of the people who left the country had an economic activity or job with which they were not satisfied; 37.9% of them travelled in search of a temporary job or occupation, while over 35.4% travelled to obtain a residence status abroad. To understand economic migration and labour development in Ecuador it is important to take into account different labour parameters in the last decade, particularly regarding unemployment and under-employment.

Table 3 Unemployment and Under-employment rates in the age group from 10 - 65 years

Year	Under-employment	Unemployment
1997	42.4%	9.20%
1998	42.30%	11.50%
1999	46.0%	14.4%
2000	49.9%	10.30%
2001	34.9%	8.10%
2002	30.7%	7.70%
2003	45.8%	9.30%
2004	54.17%	9.90%
2005	55.96%	9.30%
2006	56.67%	9.06%

2007	53.7%	6.34%
2008	48.8%	7.50%
2009	50.50%	7.90%

Source: Central Bank of Ecuador, own compilation from yearly reports

In terms of magnitude, the biggest problem of the country's labour market has been and remains unemployment and under-employment, i.e., an occupation with an insufficient level of income and/or working hours per day that affects nearly half of the economically active urban population. An unemployment rate of 11.5% and an under-employment rate of 42.3% were recorded for 1998, while an unemployment rate of 7.5% and an under-employment rate of 48.8% were registered for December 2008. The data indicates a reduction in unemployment, in contrast with the growth of under-employment.

According to the INEC Director, Byron Villacís, the decline in underemployment and unemployment rates indicates that the quality of employment and wages has increased (*Ultima Hora*, 04.02.2010). This view is contested. Figures provided by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), point out that the rate of under-employment has worsened since 1990, reaching 55% in 2007. This means that one out of two people that have a job are working over 40 hours a week or have two or more jobs exclusively to earn enough to cover basic food and minimum household expenditures (United Nations Development Program, 2010: Millennium Development Goals).

The Economic Policy Coordination Minister, Diego Borja, hopes that the unemployment rate will be reduced by mid 2010, despite the consequences of the world economic crisis. The Minister stated that other consequences of the economic crisis have been reflected in the reduction of productive activity, investment, new businesses and access to credit (*El Hoy*, 23-10-2009).

3 Development of migration

3.1 Emigration

A study on international migration (“*La migración internacional en cifras*”) places Ecuador as the country with the highest ratio of migration outflows per thousand inhabitants in the Andean region (Migration in Figures, 2008:15). A recent study carried out by the Special Inter Agency Commission for Migration Statistics in Ecuador², points out that nearly 11% of the Ecuadorian population lives abroad (CEIEME, 2008:3). Herrera reckons that international migration of Ecuadorians is not new, and that for some of the country’s regions, it has been a survival and social reproduction strategy for over thirty years (Herrera, 2005:14). Migration is predominantly examined from a negative perspective, because the massive exodus of Ecuadorians resulted from the country’s economic, social and political crisis. Migration emerges under a more positive light when analysts take a closer look at remittances and their contribution to the national economy, as well as at personal success stories in recipient countries (Herrera, 2005:14).

Emigration waves from Ecuador can be divided in three periods with different characteristics: (i) emigration in the 1970s; (ii) emigration in the 1980s; and (iii) emigration in the late 1990s and early 21st Century (Herrera, 2005:17). Migration flows during the first period were directed to the United States, Canada and Venezuela. Families that left the country in the 1970s have not returned to Ecuador and paved the way for the expanded migratory networks that emerged in the 1980s. During the second migration period, the United States remained a preferred destination with an initially male-dominated migration wave. The migration law reform took then place in the United States and promoted an amnesty process under which many Ecuadorian citizens obtained legal status and settled permanently in the country. Herrera concludes in her research that these two migration waves were relatively successful processes which contributed to the perception of international migration as an alternative for those who stayed in the home country (Herrera, 2005: 19).

This report focuses on the third period, i.e., from 1997 to the current date. In this phase, migration acquires a different character. It has become a nation-wide, diverse and complex phenomenon which led to a massive migration flow in 2000.

² Special Inter Agency Commission for Migration Statistics was created in 2005, with the purpose to produce migration statistics and indicators and is chaired by INEC.

Table 4 Border registrations of Ecuadorians citizens entering Ecuador or departing from Ecuador

Year	Entry	Departure	Net Migration
1998	234 260	274 995	40 735
1999	294 547	385 655	91 108
2000	344 052	519 974	175 922
2001	423 737	562 067	138 330
2002	461 396	626 611	165 215
2003	456 295	581 401	125 106
2004	536 779	606 494	69 715
2005	598 722	660 799	62 077
2006	656 309	740 833	84 524
2007	752 684	795 083	42 399
2008	767 469	817 981	50 512
2009(January-August)	537 082	545 992	8 917

Source: Central Bank of Ecuador, own compilation from yearly reports

An official record indicates a peak in net outflows of Ecuadorians in 2000, when the number of departures (mainly to Italy and Spain) by air exceeded the number of returns by 175 000. It should be noted that this figure does not include individuals who left Ecuador through irregular routes and migrants to other destinations. The preferred destination during this period is mainly Spain, but also Italy, among other countries of the European Union. Gratton identifies the growing risk and expensive travel to the United States as some of the reasons for this choice, together with an increased demand for labour to cover vacancies in domestic services, childcare and senior healthcare in Spain and Italy (Gratton, 2005:43). Since 2004, when the visa requirement to travel to the European Union was introduced, there is a significant decrease in migration flows to these countries. However, migration outflows from Ecuador are still high in 2005 and 2006.

At this time, migration in Ecuador “changes from the status of a peripheral and casual issue to becoming a source of daily debate in the media and public opinion in general” (Herrera, 2005:13). Important changes take place in Ecuador during this time, from macro-economic impacts – such as increased remittances, to changes in household and family structures, and new cultural practices such as virtual communication (Herrera, 2005:14).

Trends for this period indicate that most migrants came from urban areas – 73.16% (rural 26.83%) – from the biggest cities of Ecuador: Guayaquil, Quito and Cuenca. Migrants were mostly young men and women with an educational level above the national average and from different social origin. It has already been mentioned that the high flow of migrant women was linked to an increased demand for female labour in recipient countries, especially for domestic services and child and senior care (Shadow Report 2007:14). Different migration studies were carried out during this period, with different interpretations regarding the causes and motivations of international migration. The most relevant reasons for emigration are listed below:

- Economic and financial crisis caused by the freezing of financial assets and the banking system bail out in 1999, and consequently, the social reproduction crisis for many Ecuadorian families (Acosta, Lopez and Villamar, 2004:229).
- Political instability and weakening of the State's institutional framework, in a downward spiral since 1996, resulted in the overthrow of three presidents, respectively, in 1998, 2000, and 2005 (Zambrano and Hernandez, 2005:27).
- Declining agricultural production with losses of over two million dollars caused by the El Niño Event (Zambrano and Hernandez, 2005:27).
- Conceptions and social networks previously established acted as motivations for individual migration and played an important role in the decision to leave the country (Zambrano and Hernandez, 2005:27).
- Gender, sexual and ethnic discrimination acted as triggers for migration (Herrera, 2005:15).

3.2 Immigration

The few studies on immigration to Ecuador suggest that in the last six years it has become a country of transit and destination for immigrants, especially Colombians and Peruvians. Information on immigration is scarce, scattered and inadequately systematized, which makes it difficult to characterize these flows (Shadow Report, 2007).

According to the National Migration Office, migration flows to Ecuador have constantly increased in recent years. As data rely mainly on border registrations of arrivals and departures, it is not possible to distinguish between arrivals of persons who would like to take up temporary or permanent residences and short term visitors. However, it is clear that a high number of foreign national arrivals originate from North America, particularly from the United States and from Spain. They come mostly for touristic and business purposes. Other origins are more likely to be migration sending countries: Latin Americans from Colombia, Peru, Chile, Panama, Cuba and Asians particularly from China come to Ecuador to study or seeking better

economic opportunities. It must be noted that the number of refugees and asylum-seekers from Colombia has significantly increased in recent years (IOM, 2008:51).

The National Institute of Statistics and Surveys (INEC) calculated 1 173 005 net entries to Ecuador between 2000 and 2006. The numbers of entries and exits have been increasing, with a positive but decreasing net balance (see table 5). It is important to bear in mind that there are also numerous clandestine entry points in the border area of Ecuador³ and, therefore, this data should be perceived only as a trend regarding the actual number of coming migrants (Shadow Report, 2007).

Table 5 Border registrations of foreign citizens entering Ecuador or departing from Ecuador

Year	Entry	Departure	Net Migration
2003	760 776	519 801	240 975
2004	818 927	642 378	176 549
2005	859 888	703 555	156 333
2006	840 555	779 385	61 170
2007	937 487	898 012	39 475
2008	989 766	949 116	40 650
2009 (January-August)	654 380	638 346	16 034

Source: Ecuadorian Institute of Statistics and Surveys, own compilation from yearly reports

Scarce information on migrant flows to Ecuador makes it very difficult to describe the motivations, causes, consequences and profiles of immigrants. It can be said that Colombian migration to Ecuador is, on one hand, forced by the long-standing civil war waged in that country and the need to seek refuge elsewhere, while on the other hand, migration has an economic nature, linked to the appeal of the dollarized economy of Ecuador. These two motivations are so closely intertwined that it is very difficult to distinguish one from the other. Colombian migration peaked during the years 2000-2003. Colombians are involved in agricultural activities, formal trade, but especially informal commerce, manufacture and domestic services. Agriculture is a predominant activity in the border area (Shadow Report, 2007:75).

The main causes for Peruvian migration to Ecuador are the lack of opportunities in Northern Peru, the appeal of a dollarized economy because its purchasing power is better than the Peruvian currency, and the need for labour as a result of Ecuadorian emigration, especially in the Southern provinces of Ecuador. Migratory flows from Peru to Ecuador have fluctuated

³ The mayor political authority of the border province with Colombia indicates that there are around of 21 clandestine entry points.

though with a significant peak level in 2004-2005 when it became more difficult to obtain visa for the USA which is another preferred destination of Peruvian migrants. Most of this population is involved in informal trade, construction industries, banana plantations, mining activities and domestic services (Shadow Report, 2007:77).

Emigration from China to Ecuador has also been recorded for several years. According to the Chinese Embassy in Ecuador, this migration is linked to the dollarization process in Ecuador and is not necessarily generated in the country of origin, but rather in other Latin American countries where these migrants were previously living in. In general, they use regular migration channels to enter the country. In 2005, the illegal issuance of over 3 000 visas for so-called Chinese investors made the frontlines. Chinese immigrants manage family businesses, such as apparel stores and restaurants, while a few others work in other areas, such as the oil or cement industries, and computer systems (Shadow Report, 2007:78).

Cubans make up another migrant group whose numbers have increased at an accelerated rate in recent years. The Foreign Nationals Directorate of the Ministry of Government issued 350 visas with the permission to take up residence in 2006 for Cuban nationals, the third most numerous national group with this type of visa (Shadow Report, 2007:79).

Finally, it is important to point out that Ecuador has become a transit country, especially as a route for irregular migration to the United States. This is corroborated by several press articles reporting the detention of Chinese, Cuban and Peruvian citizens attempting to illegally depart from Ecuadorian coasts to reach the United States.

3.3 Refugees

UNHCR singles out Ecuador as the country that accepts the highest number of refugees in Latin America. Most of these refugees come from Colombia. Asylum-seekers' flows in Ecuador have been characterized by constant individual entries of families and individuals, but also by massive displacements. The General Migration Directorate⁴ data for 2000- 2005 register the presence of 368 318 Colombians in Ecuador who were either acknowledged refugees, denied petitioners, irregular migrants or who had some other migration status (IOM, 2008:51). It is important to understand that the aggregated numbers from different registration and estimation procedures have to be considered as estimates. According to the International Organization for Migrations (IOM), 57% of the refugee population in Ecuador are men, aged between 21 and 40 years. Most refugees have a low educational level and this precludes them from obtaining qualified jobs. Refugees and refugee petitioners are usually involved in informal

⁴ The General Migration Directorate belongs to the Executive and its function is to control and registration of migration politics.

trade, construction, domestic services and agriculture. Most refugees and displaced people live in marginal, urban and rural areas, with limited access to basic services (IOM, 2008:56)

Table 6 Refuge Petitions

Year	Petitions	Recognized refugees
2000	475	390
2001	3 017	1 406
2002	6 766	1 578
2003	11 146	3 326
2004	7 858	2 496
2005	7 091	2 486
2006	7 784	1 997
2007	11 544	2 654
2008	10 703	4 623
Total	56 384	20 956

Source: UNHCR

3.4 Irregular migration

Irregular migration of Ecuadorians to other countries

Restrictive migratory policies and more stringent border controls, both in transit and destination countries, have led to an increased use of irregular channels by Ecuadorian migrants. These mechanisms are activated at the place of origin, during transit or at the final destination with dangerous journeys and human rights violations (Shadow Report, 2007:20). Data from the 2001 Census show that a significant number of Ecuadorians left their home country in search of any labour opportunity. Zambrano and Hernandez conclude that they must have been part of irregular migratory processes, either at entry point in the country of destination or because they stayed later on without the necessary documents (Zambrano and Hernandez, 2005:33). Because of the complexity of this phenomenon, there are no statistics or reliable data. Specific research on irregular migration in Ecuador is scarce. Irregular migration is partially or collaterally treated in general studies on international migration.

Gratton argues that intensified migration controls and restrictive migration policies in countries of destination and transit have no major impact on the reduction of irregular migration. Instead, it has been observed that migrants pay a higher price and that they face increased danger to reach their destination (Gratton, 2005:42). Thus, after the signature of the

Alliance for Safety and Prosperity of North America (ASPAN) in 2005, the governments of the United States, Canada and Mexico have promoted reinforced border control mechanisms, which have led migrants to use more dangerous crossing points. Irregular migration flows to Europe are forced to use safer channels due to geographical conditions. Many migrants enter European Union countries with a three-month tourist visa and stay after visa expiration as irregular migrants. This is different in the United States, where migrants evade border controls and stay after an illegal entry (IOM, 2008:39).

Irregular migration networks have become an industry in Ecuador. They operate through human smugglers or “*coyoteros*”⁵, abusive money lenders or “*chulqueros*”⁶ and unscrupulous travel agencies that promote their services in rural and urban areas. The newspaper *El Comercio* reported that this illegal activity generates over USD 60 million a year (*El Comercio* 08.11.2006). The travel price varies and is currently estimated at USD 12 000 to 15 000. Migrants often lose their assets and property to the “*chulqueros*” in order to pay these amounts (Shadow Report, 2007:25).

Falconi and Ordoñez⁷ point out the involvement of several actors in irregular migration channels: the recruiters of potential migrants or “*enganchadores*” (hookers)⁸; family and friends who exert influence on the decision to migrate; financing networks made up by travel agencies, many of them linked to smuggling of migrants; domestic smuggling of migrants networks with international counterparts; and other actors, such as the “*coyotero*”, visa advisors, agents, swindlers, etc. (Falconi and Ordoñez, 2005:135). Irregular migrants risk being deceived so that their attempt to migrate fails.

The Ecuadorian Constitution prohibits trafficking in persons in all its forms. Smuggling of migrants is also established as a criminal offence. However, effective investigation, prosecution and sanction of the perpetrators of such offences are still not guaranteed and, thus, most of these crimes remain unpunished (Shadow Report, 2007:22).

Smuggling of migrants is part of the complex phenomenon of irregular migration. Although smuggling of migrants is a crime in Ecuador and despite the fact that a National Plan against Smuggling of Migrants has been developed with civil society organizations, there is still no indication of its effectiveness in achieving adequate prevention, investigation, sanction and eradication of this crime (Shadow Report, 2007:29). According to a study by the International Labour Organization, adolescent women are the main victims of human trafficking with

⁵*Coyotero*, *coyote* or migrant smuggler are the terms regularly used in irregular migration to describe the person in charge of making the arrangements, especially for migrants who do not have official papers, in exchange for a fee.

⁶*Chulqueros* is the term used for the person who loans money at excessively high interest rates.

⁷ Research elaborated by Italian ALISEI Organization.

⁸ The term *enganchadores* is used for the person who goes to towns or public meeting of potential victims to offer *coyote* services.

commercial sexual exploitation purposes, while children and teenagers mostly from poor indigenous communities are the main victims of trafficking in persons for begging, exploitation and forced labour, especially abroad (Shadow Report, 2007:30).

Zambrano and Hernandez point out that despite the enormous differences between trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants, these differences are not always clearly defined, and “...there is the danger of equating irregular migration with trafficking in persons as an effective political argument to justify migration restrictions – under victim protection measures, and adopt actions that could further increase the vulnerability of migrants who travel by irregular channels” (Zambrano and Hernandez, 2005:17).

Irregular migration to Ecuador

As far as irregular migration to Ecuador is concerned, the General Migration Directorate estimated that 500 000 Colombians and 300 000 Peruvians could have been living in Ecuador in an irregular situation in 2005 (Shadow Report, 2007:79). Most of them probably entered the country with an Andean Card. To get this tourist visa for 180 days, citizens of the Andean Community of Nations just have to present an official identity card at the border. This kind of visa expressly prohibits gainful work, so if a person with this type of tourist visa for citizens of neighbouring countries works, he or she becomes an illegal resident and runs the risk of deportation. Irregular migration also includes refused refugee petitioners and potential refugees who do not apply for such status out of fear or lack of knowledge. But these figures are only estimates. There is no precise data regarding the number of irregular migrants living in Ecuador (Shadow Report, 2007:79).

Faced with increased irregular migration into Ecuador, the Ecuadorian government has implemented different policies to control these migratory flows. The implementation of such policies and media coverage on this issue have contributed to the public perception of irregular migrants as criminals and to the violation of their rights through labour exploitation, social marginalization, discrimination and repression by the National migrants' Secretariate (SENAMI) and the general population (Shadow Report, 2007:82).

Ecuador has carried out three labour regularization processes: in April-December 2004 for immigrants in general; in December 2004-February 2005 for Colombian workers, and in December 2006-October 2007, for Peruvian workers. Regularisation numbers are not available, but experts indicate that the number of individuals who regularized their status through this processes was low compared with the magnitude of the problem and the needs of the population living in irregular situation in the country (Shadow Report, 2007:82-83).

The Latin American School for Social Sciences (FLACSO) believes that the perceptions of and assumptions about immigrants in Ecuador have been directly influenced by and are directly related to the media. They have contributed to create scenarios that reproduce xenophobia,

criminalize certain behaviour and discriminate against certain individuals (Shadow Report, 2007:106).

4 Public discourse on irregular migration: results from a pilot media study

As migration is of high importance for Ecuador, it receives considerable coverage in the media. *El Comercio*, the oldest daily national newspaper is currently the largest in the city of Quito and one of the largest and leading print media in Ecuador⁹. It even has a specific daily section called 'Migrantes', featuring articles concerning migration issues. There is a digital database of the newspaper with articles since 2001, but a comparison between the electronic version and the paper version revealed that the electronic version was incomplete. It was not possible to get information since when the complete version was available in digital form. Therefore, we decided to use the paper version consequently for this study. We screened all newspapers manually for headings relating to migration and then checked the full text whether the articles included information about irregular migration.

The search generated 354 articles for the time frame 1997 to 2009. We have chosen an earlier starting point for our analysis than other articles in this series in order to better display specific features of the Ecuadorian migration process.

Table 7 gives an overview over the main focus of articles. It clearly indicates that irregular migration of Ecuadorians to other countries received much more attention than the irregular migration of citizens of other countries to Ecuador. However, the latter gained importance in recent years which becomes evident from the discussion of newspaper coverage in the course of time

Table 7 Geographical focus of news coverage in Ecuador

Main focus of articles	Number of articles
Irregular migration of Ecuadorian citizens into other countries	309
Irregular migration into Ecuador	45
Total number of articles	354

Source: own compilation

The time frame was divided in three periods: 1997 – 2001, 2002 – 2006, and 2007 – 2009. The first period records a massive exit of Ecuadorians travelling abroad and little interest from

⁹ This newspaper was founded in 1906 and has a print run of 100 000 copies on business days, 120 000 copies on Saturdays and 180 000 copies on Sundays.

governments. During the second period, migratory flows continued – though less acute, and governments started to show certain concern. However, only isolated actions were undertaken with no concrete State policy concerning outgoing and incoming migrants. The third period began in 2007 with the adoption of public policies on migration. In this period, the 2008 Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador set an important milestone with the concept of migration, understood as a human right, and thus discarding the idea that unregistered migration may make a human being ‘illegal’. It also developed the concept of universal citizenship and laid the foundations for the development of a new legal framework in this area.

In the following section we characterize the occurrence of articles on irregular migration in the framework of the general migration reporting in the three periods.

4.1 First period: 1997 – 2001

This first period is characterized by a generalized apathy of the government regarding migration in Ecuador. There is a lack of public policies. Migrants become more and more vulnerable, particularly irregular migrants. The main migration-related topic found in *El Comercio* during this period is the deep economic crisis in Ecuador. Debates were supported with statistical data analysis, especially from the National Institute for Statistics and Surveys (INEC) and the Central Bank of Ecuador. In 1997 and 1998 there are isolated references to irregular migration. No statements on migratory flows by public officials are published. However, the contribution of remittances sent to Ecuador starts to make the news. Some articles identify irregular migration of Ecuadorians as a process whereby legal entrance to the United States or Europe is gained with a tourist visa, followed by an irregular stay in those countries. More references to irregular migration were found in 1999. Press articles become longer, and more articles are based on in-depth journalistic investigations. Different migration modes and destinations are highlighted. Besides the by-far preferred destination of that time, i.e. the United States, an exodus to Canada, Spain, Italy and Germany begins. In that year the only comment from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) addressed the speeding up of the passport issuance process. In 2000, statements by MFA officials are published (Heinz Moller- Minister of Foreign Affairs) with regards to the interdiction and arrest of Ecuadorians in high seas by the United States troops and to the presence of Colombian refugees in the country. In this period, information is published on the emigration of professionals and technical experts tailor-made to the needs of different destination countries; for example Chile appears as a land of opportunity for physicians. Since 2000 -the most recurrent issues are the “Voluntary Return Plan” signed by Ecuador and Spain to reduce particularly irregular migration flows, and – as an attempt to regularize a high number of migrants in an irregular situation - the new Spanish Law on Foreign Nationals. The idea of the new law was to regularize migrants who have a steady job, among other conditions. During

these years, several demonstrations were organized by irregular migrants in Spain and their families in Ecuador to request the regularization of their status. The precarious livelihoods and labour exploitation of irregular migrants in Spain and the United States were also addressed in different articles, mainly based on personal testimonies of migrants. Immigration to Ecuador was not covered by *El Comercio* in this period of time.

Analysis of selected articles

06.04.1997 Migration: 300 000 Ecuadorians on the tenterhooks

The lack of Ecuadorian government statements in this article reveals missing official concern for this matter. The main response came from organizations of Ecuadorians abroad. Remittances were identified as the main source of income for families in the Southern highlands and foreign currency income is reported at USD 600 million. Remittances had a welcomed impact on the deteriorated economy of the time, contributing to the revival of the domestic market and increased consumption. According to the figures provided by the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the United States, it was estimated that between 300 000 and 500 000 Ecuadorians lived in the United States, a significant percentage of which lived in irregular situation or had lived in the United States for less than 10 years.

18.08.1998 Murcia allocates 300 jobs to Ecuadorians

The local government of this region in Spain favoured the regularization of Ecuadorians, as stated by the Mayor of Murcia, Juan Morales. This was supported by local political parties and social groups. The economic contribution of Ecuadorians to agriculture in Murcia was underlined, as well as the importance of family remittances to Ecuador. The data that supported these assertions was provided by the Spanish local government. The article also emphasized that Spain is the most important country of Ecuadorian emigration because of the language.

15.08.1999 Ecuadorians prefer to migrate to five countries

The article indicates that irregular migration increased and mainly concerns the agricultural sector. Official data was provided by the National Migration Police of Ecuador and the Ministry of Public Affairs.

16.05.2000 Ecuadorians deported this year

Gonzalo Salvador, Deputy Secretary for Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out the concern of consulates abroad about irregular migrants who are arrested and prosecuted. The consulates try to expedite the release of these migrants. The intervention of

diplomatic officials to defend the human rights of Ecuadorians subjected to administrative processes was assured. Remittances continued to increase. Information was directly attributed to MFA officials, migration police officers, and the Passport Bureau.

31.01.2001 Agreement does not mention any figures

The Ecuadorian government provided no opinion regarding the agreement between Spain and Ecuador to regulate migration flows. Moreover, *El Comercio* criticized the Ecuadorian government for failing to negotiate a better agreement to protect the rights of irregular migrants. The article reports about the position of the Spanish government which made it clear that people who had no legal papers could not work and had to return to their countries of origin if they were not able to regularize their residence and work status. It was clear that Spain wanted to regulate migratory flows and tighten border controls through different agreements to avoid irregular migration. Spain also wanted migrant workers to be hired at their countries of origin and promised to allocate each year a certain number of job vacancies based on its labour needs. It thus made sure that the Spanish economy faced no difficulty due to regularized migration flows.

4.2 Second period: 2002 – 2006

From late 2001, deportation, expulsions, repatriation and regularization campaigns were recurrent topics in the editions of *El Comercio*. Stringent border controls imposed to stop migration flows to both the United States and the European Union were underlined. This was particularly evident in Spain after the entry into force of the new Law on Foreign Nationals and its associated reforms and the visa requirement established to enter any Schengen country. Significant funds were invested in the United States on plans for migration control. Through the articles published during this period it could be observed that in spite of increased migration controls and harsh migration policies, detentions and deportations of Ecuadorians attempting to migrate through irregular channels, especially to the United States, continued unabated. This was also confirmed by the high number of Ecuadorians that left Ecuador and did not return. Several articles also show that the visa requirement to enter Schengen countries – established for Ecuadorians in 2003, resulted in a significant reduction of migration flows to Spain.

In this period, we find articles which point to isolated actions to deal with migration issues developed by the government of Ecuador, but still there is no comprehensive state policy to protect the rights of emigrants and immigrants. Emigration of Ecuadorians to other countries is described as the result of the economic crisis of Ecuador in these years. Poverty and the lack of opportunities are brought up time and time again as the cause for the massive exodus of migrants to other countries. The importance of remittances for the Ecuadorian economy is

reiterated in different articles, as a contribution to consumption and to the development of the country in different areas. It is important to take into account that references to the importance of remittances do not include the irregular migrants or their contribution through remittances as a priority in this period of time.

Despite the obvious marginal coverage of migration issues, they start to receive increased attention in this period, particularly in 2004, when accrued Ecuadorian border controls becomes a recurrent topic. Migration police puts immigrants coming to Ecuador under close scrutiny, especially Colombian and Peruvian citizens, who are a group of particular interest for border authorities.

Analysis of selected articles

01.12.2002 European Union prepares massive return of illegal aliens

European Union spokespersons said that EU countries were compelled to stop illegal immigration. On the other hand, the Ecuadorian government announced that the President would travel to Spain to try to stop the imposition of a visa requirement. This article clearly stated the European Union's intention to get rid of its three million illegal aliens, giving a green light to the Action Plan for the Return of Illegal Immigrants. It is not mentioned how the figure of three million illegal immigrants was estimated. One of the measures to be adopted was the visa requirement which had demonstrated to be an effective instrument for migration control and improved border oversight. The EU Commission was said to believe that the threat of a forced return and its immediate application would send a clear message to illegal immigrants in member States and to potential migrants outside the EU.

06.01.2003 5 558 people repatriated in 2002

This article described the intentions of the President Aznar Administration in Spain to restrain the irregular entry of Ecuadorians to that country. It was noted that an increased number of irregular migrants living in Spain had been expelled in recent months and that more stringent controls would be implemented to detect "immigrants disguised as tourists". Airport controls had been intensified with this aim. A Spanish government official pointed out that smuggling of migrants was one of the worst scourges to be faced by countries in the European Union. These arguments were supported with the following figures: "Security authorities in Spain dismantled 735 networks of human trafficking and arrested 2 070 *coyoteros*" and "25 Ecuadorians are expelled on a daily basis".

14.06.2004 Migration by sea to the United States skyrockets

This article described that the fight against the smuggling of migrants in the United States clashed against powerful economic interests, because the country's economy depended on thousands of illegal workers. The economic importance of remittances was underscored. It was argued that Latin American governments were dependent on the money sent by migrants abroad and, thus, were not interested in the implementation of laws against smuggling of migrants. It was also mentioned that income from migrant smuggling operations represented nearly USD 20 billion dollars throughout the Americas, being the second most lucrative illegal activity after drug trafficking. Poverty was described as the main driver in the smuggling of migrants: "poverty motivates both migrants and mafias. It is a business of the poor, for the poor". To support these allegations, the article mentioned that the smuggling of migrants from Ecuador to the United States had increased in the past four years to 250 000 Ecuadorians that had attempted to reach the United States. These figures were mentioned in a report of the New York Times.

09.03.2004 Economic policy with Colombia must take a new turn

Senior Ecuadorian government officials referred to migration flows to Ecuador and mentioned that discussions were taking place regarding the regularization of Colombian citizens working in Ecuador, so that they could enjoy the same rights as any other worker. By the same token, it was mentioned that failure to comply with this process will entail the deportation of irregular Colombian migrants.

11.01.2005 Emigration is alien to the Government

The Ecuadorian government's response to migration problems was criticized in this article. The newspaper considered that the control-based approach taken by the government had overlooked measures to fight smuggling of migrants. The 9th of January Migrants Association described 2004 as a year deprived of public policies on migration. The reduction of migration flows with the imposition of the Schengen visa was also highlighted together with the mobilization of migrants associations for the development of plans to regularize the situation of migrants abroad. This same article pointed out that Ecuador was also a recipient country, especially of Colombian and Peruvian citizens, and that deportations of these citizens had taken place in past months.

8.11.2006 Exodus is not seen as a State policy

The director of the Migrants House in Quito stated that family disintegration and its consequences were the main problems associated with the migratory process. The Social Pastoral of Cuenca mentioned that labour conditions offered in other countries and the circumstances in Ecuador precluded the return of migrant workers. Smuggling was

characterized as big business, moving over USD 60 million dollars a year in the country. Smuggling of migrants grew in correlation with controls applied in destination countries. The article supported these arguments with different figures and charts on migration.

4.3 Third period: 2007 – 2009

The articles of this period enabled us to observe significant changes in migratory policies – incorporated in Ecuador’s new Constitution, and evident in different government actions, such as the creation of the National Secretariat for Migrants. They featured declarations by public officials, such as Lorena Escudero, National Secretary for Migration, and the Ombudsman, in favour of human rights and the Ecuadorian policy on migration. Remittances were directly channelled through savings and loans agencies in Spain who entered into agreements with Ecuadorian counterparts. The data are taken from the declarations of Ecuadorian public officials. Since 2009, articles reflect the impact of the world economic crisis on migration reporting news on higher rates of migration returns, job losses, a drop in remittances, increased difficulties to obtain legal status in foreign countries, increased real estate sales by migrants abroad. Several articles report government concern in Ecuador and address public policy developments to face the crisis. Relevant data were provided by national government sources as well as by recipient countries governments.

Migration flows to Ecuador gain significant attention in this period. Regularization, especially of Peruvian and Colombian citizens has been discussed. Migration controls at borders are increased and corruption in different institutions that issue immigrant visas is exposed. There are more frequent articles on issues, such as xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants and their poor living conditions due to a lack of work permits. Rising number of Cuban and Columbian migrants were addressed.

Analysis of selected articles

19.04.2007 Legalization of 2000 Peruvians that work in the Highlands does not move forward

Ecuadorian government officials say that the aim of the legalization of Peruvian citizens who are in the country “without papers” is to guarantee the rights and stability of Peruvian labour. Although the regularization process faced many obstacles and it might have been inadequately organized, it demonstrated that the government starting to adopt a pro-active approach to migration policies to protect migrants’ human rights. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that it was difficult to obtain data on the number of migrants entering Ecuador, with 36 entry points only on the Southern border. In regards to economic aspects, the Chairman of the Construction Chamber declared that Peruvian workers had helped to lower construction costs. It was also pointed out that Peruvian citizens migrated to Ecuador in search of a better future,

motivated by a potential income in dollars and fleeing Peru's difficult economic situation. To support the importance of regularization, the Peruvian consulate added that 4 000 Peruvians worked in Southern Ecuador and stated that there are no other official estimates.

06.05.2008 Europe: the fence around the "paperless" narrows

Declarations were made by the Spanish government and guidelines were adopted by the European Union regarding irregular migration and increased controls. A general correlation is acknowledged between labour and jobs. The article indicates that around 460 000 Ecuadorian inhabitants are living in Spain, according to Spanish government officials. Such numbers were announced together with repatriation figures and estimates of the number of illegal migrants that might be faced with repatriation procedures.

19.05.2009 The golden days of remittances are over

A Spanish specialist, Iliana Olivie, states that the economic crisis in Spain has reduced remittances by at least 10%, due to crumbling employment and the world crisis. Approximately 40 000 Ecuadorians were unemployed, had little savings and were unable to repay their mortgages. The crisis has forced Ecuadorians to ask for money to be sent from Ecuador in order to cope with the crisis. Return plans have not had expected results. It is inferred that irregular migration flows would be reduced.

5 Conclusion

Irregular migration has received increasing attention from the Ecuadorian media and government since the beginning of the severe economic crisis in Ecuador in the late 1990s. At the beginning, the plight of irregular Ecuadorian migrants living in the United States and Europe and their contribution to the Ecuadorian economy was in the centre of interest, while later the situation of irregular immigrants from neighbouring countries in Ecuador gained relevance. The current development of more comprehensive Ecuadorian migration policies is highly influenced by the fact that Ecuadorians abroad are faced with restrictive migration policies. In view of this situation, the state of Ecuador seeks to implement more open immigration policies for Ecuador as destination country.

It is important to point out that the 2008 Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador establishes migration as a human right so that it eliminates the category of illegal person, used for foreign nationals who live in Ecuador without the adequate documentation. The Ecuadorian Constitution also proclaims in Art. 416 universal citizenship as a progressive principle to be fulfilled in the medium and long term, with the aim of eliminating barriers or differences between immigrants and non-immigrants, and establishing a single category of “universal citizens”. This principle is not only a mere title; it has practical consequences in the elimination of visas to enter the country and the use of the immigration records as the only tool to supervise migration flows. It is important to underline that the expression “human mobility” used in Ecuador encompasses all the concepts related to migration flows. This change in definition seeks to provide a comprehensive and consistent response to the different needs and demands of the people who live in different contexts of human mobility, while guaranteeing their human rights, by avoiding discriminatory terms that frequently stigmatize the migrant, refugee, displaced person, etc.

Migration law-making development stems not only from the Constitution. There is evidence that the Metropolitan District of Quito has issued several regulations to protect people in situation of human mobility, thus, Regulation 071 of February 2nd, 2009, defines human mobility as:

“Art. I.(2).- Definition of Human Mobility.- Human mobility is part of the globalization process, by which different stakeholders and social groups reproduce inequalities and find opportunities in a context of deepening inequities and worldwide discrimination and of a systemic correlation between economic policies and the deterioration of the situation of the population. This should be positively transformed and thus the right to migrate is acknowledged. No human being will be identified or recognized as illegal by his/her migratory status”.

In sum, the new regulation seeks respect for the rights of migrants, regardless of their migration status, as well as the creation of new mechanisms for participation that guarantee the rights of individuals in a situation of human mobility to organize themselves and actively participate in the social, cultural and political life of the country. In this sense, it should be noted that an innovative feature of the current Constitution is that immigrants are granted the right to participate in Ecuadorian presidential elections. Several government institutions are currently developing the Organic Code for Human Mobility. The main characteristic is the pre-eminence of the international principles of respect for human rights over the logic of control and security. This represents a shift in current regulations that date from the dictatorial regime of the 70s and incorporates in the same legal framework all existing migratory regulations.

These developments in Ecuador are unique in the world, according to our knowledge. It will be very interesting to follow very closely how migration develops under these new conditions, and how the government reacts if problems occur in the migration process. Ideally, the Ecuadorian experiences with universal citizenship may show that a much more open migration policy is possible without imposing substantial burdens on the native population.

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