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In the time following my research in Ecuador, I remain particularly struck by the depth of human connection and conversation experienced throughout my fellowship. On behalf of the Kellogg Institute, I researched and conducted interviews from May until August in fulfillment of an Experiencing the World fellowship. My research initiative, entitled “Refugees’ Right to Work and Barriers to Asylum in Ecuador”, involved interactions with various non-governmental organizations, refugees, asylum-seekers, private sector representatives, and multilateral institutions positioned throughout Ecuador.

At the onset of my research experience, I aimed to address a set of questions involving the extent to which refugees in Ecuador face (and respond to) barriers to participation within the private sector field of employment. Quickly, I realized the depth of the problem of refugees’ economic integration stretches far beyond securing employment through formalized means. For this reason, I directed special attention to a secondary research objective: examining the extent to which refugee entrepreneurship and self-employment is an effective means of evading private sector barriers. Consequently, my interviews shared several common themes, such as widespread discrimination occurring in the workplace, school systems, and general societal interactions.

Throughout the course of my research progression, I collaborated with the non-governmental organization Asylum Access- a nonprofit with which I had previously worked during a summer internship at their Oakland, California headquarters office. With assistance and supervision from the organization’s staff, I was able to more easily identify refugee individuals and communities dispersed throughout Ecuador. During interviews, I conversed with refugees on the basis of trust established through the organization’s longstanding presence in various

communities. Conducting interviews focused on themes of forced displacement and discrimination implied a deep sensitivity to possible traumatic histories. Therefore, I aimed to embody high ethical standards for each interaction. The guidance and connections provided by Asylum Access were deeply integral to the trust-building process in various contexts, and their role as a host organization was indispensable to my research.

Without nullifying or diminishing the strength of services offered through NGO networks, local governments, and the UNHCR offices in Ecuador, my research aimed to examine gaps in transitional assistance for refugees. Especially in light of UNHCR economic integration pilot programs throughout Latin America such as the Graduation Project, this research occurred at a critical junction. I found that economic integration techniques employed across urban and rural settings hold innovation at the heart of refugees' livelihoods. Particularly since I chose to study International Economics and Peace Studies with the aim of understanding innovation within the context of the forced migration field, studying and reflecting upon the efforts of the UNHCR to actively pursue these strategies was encouraging, both personally and academically.

Furthermore, observing “economic innovation” techniques employed by NGOs and multilateral institutions posed a new series of questions of future interest in a quantitative light. Following my ethnographic observations and subsequent interviews with women's entrepreneurship associations, refugee group empowerment groups, career training programs, refugee-owned and employed businesses, and urban refugee community organizing associations, the word “innovation” adopted new meanings. Rather than maintaining a narrow approach to economic assimilation (overcoming and destroying private sector barriers), a multifaceted solutions treatment based on situational capacity seemed more appropriate.

The challenges of pursuing an introductory fieldwork experience through this research fellowship were matched with equal, if not greater, benefits. As a non-native speaker, my ability to convey nuanced, empathetic statements was limited at times by my understanding of rhetorical connotations. Furthermore, within the scope of four months spent researching, even my best efforts to become integrated into the academic and social activism landscape of Quito were limited by a time constraint. While I viewed participation and understanding of Ecuador's broader social and political context as integral to my research, I feel full comprehension of this complexity could only be achieved through years of investment.

Despite these challenges, I enjoyed the benefit of fluidity in conversations, experiences, and research direction. For example, while I relied heavily on my host organization to provide connections and support with the refugee community and neighboring human rights organizations, invariably these contacts yielded "domino effect" connections of their own. This led to a richness of perspective and voice throughout the interview process. Many of my most rewarding conversations occurred through the freedom of time and storytelling, often allowing for moments of empathetic silence and reflection with participants. Particularly while participating with female refugee associations and women's groups, I enjoyed the sharing of presence and experiences prior to conversation. I feel deeply indebted and gracious to the men and women who, during a period of transition, vulnerability, and incertitude about their futures, allowed me into their narratives and lived experiences.

Returning from my time in Ecuador entails, in many ways, the comprehension, processing, and dissemination of narratives with which I am entrusted. As I reflect upon these conversations and their significance for a future path within the field of forced displacement and refugee studies, I seek to uphold the human element- perhaps the most difficult and necessary

task of returning to an academic setting. Ultimately, I seek to hold to a statement I constructed during my first month in Ecuador, in which I expressed my fears about conveying an eventual narrative about my experiences: It is difficult to avoid aggrandizing an experience- to avoid distortion by those who receive its account. To share it purely, fully raw and in its human element, would require overcoming the fallibility of language. So, we must choose what is most important- preserving in glass casing the purity of our lived truth, or enacting that which we have reaped: a belief that at the heart of all things, we are irrevocably connected... and accountable.