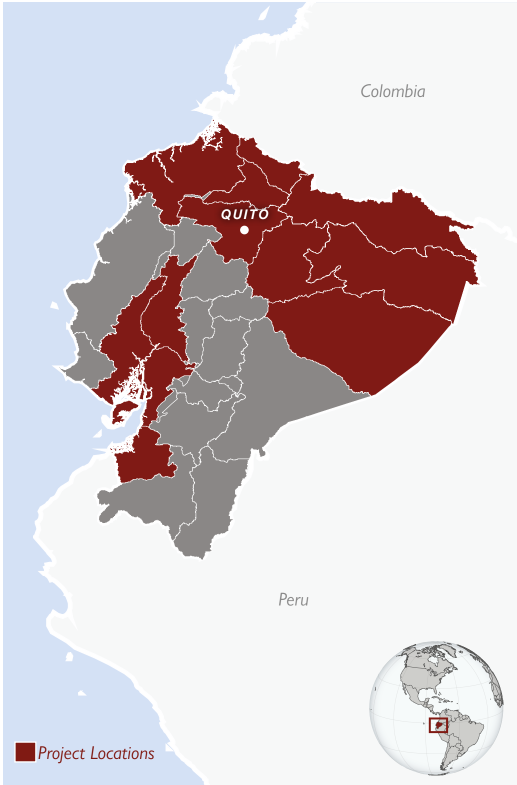
CASE STUDY

ECUADOR 2020-2024 / COMPLEX CRISIS

CONTEXT / SETTLEMENT SHELTER TYPE SUPPORT METHODS

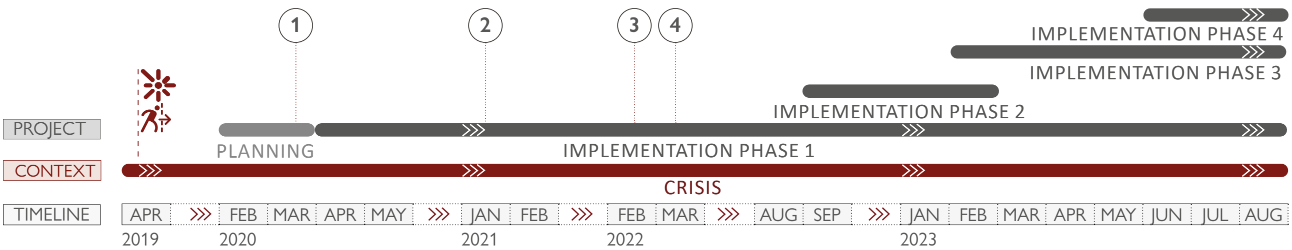
CRISIS	**Complex regional migration dynamics**
PEOPLE DISPLACED	**366,596 ind. of Venezuelan nationality***
PEOPLE WITH SHELTER NEEDS	**122,000 people** in need of temporary accommodation as of 2020, the start of the project*
PROJECT LOCATION	El Oro, Carchi, Guayas, Sucumbíos, Pichincha, Orellana, Esmeraldas, Imbabura, Los Ríos, Napo and Pastaza
PEOPLE SUPPORTED BY THE PROJECT	**31,951 individuals** with rental assistance (approx. 9,411 households)
PROJECT OUTPUTS	**12,491 people** received essential household items. **507 homes** included in the Landlord Network. **Landlord engagement in human rights** education, migrant rights and housing, land, and property issues. **4 multi-family dwellings** renovated under the pilot phase, upgrading living conditions and communal spaces.
DIRECT COST	**USD 450** per household (USD 150 monthly)
PROJECT COST	**USD 540** per household (for the rental assistance) **USD 15,000** for upgrade works on average



* R4V, 2020. *https://www.r4v.info/*

PROJECT SUMMARY

Since 2020, adequate housing has been one of the most pressing needs for refugees and migrants in Ecuador. The program provided up to three months of rental support through direct payments to landlords, enabling households to select their own accommodation, improve security of tenure and access safer, more suitable housing options. To consolidate gains, a network of landlords was established, pairing rights awareness and community participation with the evaluation and improvement of housing units and common spaces to build trust and cohesion among host and displaced communities.



Apr 2019: Venezuelan migration influx

1. **Mar 2020:** Decision to implement direct payments to landlords, a first-of-its-kind approach nationally.
2. **Jan 2021:** Introduction of housing evaluations based on habitability criteria, to reinforce dignity and tenure security.
3. **Feb 2022:** Creation of the Landlord Network to promote safe, decent rental housing and improve relations between host and migrant communities.
4. **Mar 2022:** Increased host-community interest and interaction around the Landlord Network, improving information flow on available units and common issues.

The project supported refugees and migrants via rental grants paid to landlords.

CONTEXT

Ecuador has hosted significant numbers of refugees and migrants in recent years, including a sustained presence of Venezuelan nationals. Since 2018, regional displacement has continued to shape needs across urban centers and border areas in Ecuador, with housing consistently ranking among the top three priorities in needs assessments, even further aggravated during the COVID 19 pandemic.

The program's geographic footprint reflected the dynamics of mobility and the practical reality that both host and displaced communities shared the impacts of constrained local rental markets. This multi city presence informed the program's design choices: align with market realities, strengthen protection, and pursue solutions that can scale in complex, fast changing conditions.

SITUATION BEFORE / DURING THE CRISIS

Prior to the current crisis trajectory (from 2019 with the influx of Venezuelans), Ecuador's urban areas already showed uneven access to affordable, adequate housing for low income households. The subsequent increase in arrivals magnified existing gaps, reinforcing the importance of cost effective, tenant centered approaches that could work with private rental markets while upholding safety and dignity.

As new arrivals accelerated, families often confronted barriers to renting: irregular income; documentation constraints; discrimination; and concerns about safety, privacy and overcrowding. The pandemic added operational constraints and protection risks, making in person processes risky and sometimes impossible.

PROJECT DESIGN

Within Ecuador's multi actor response to recent human mobility, housing assistance has been commonly delivered through market based modalities. The project's distinct contribution was to institutionalize direct landlord payments while reinforcing protection safeguards: verification of landlord ownership to reduce HLP risks, habitability checks to orient choices toward safer units, and engagement with landlords through a Landlord Network to normalize good practices and improve cohesion. Policies allowing Venezuelans with regular status to access formal employment also provided a critical enabling environment: when income stabilizes, households are better able to sustain their rental arrangements after subsidies end.

The modality provided up to three months of rent via direct payments to landlords for dwellings independently selected by beneficiaries. This preserved autonomy of location and housing type, while sending a clear signal to landlords that rent would be covered during the support period and therefore reducing a common barrier to access. Joint assessment of the dwelling by the household and the organization before assistance confirmation ensured a minimum standard of habitability and a basic alignment of expectations among landlord, tenant, and the organization.

From early 2022, **Living in Community: Network of Safe and Sustainable Landlords** became the second strategic pillar, designed to:

- incentivize safer, more dignified rentals;
- foster dialogue and trust among landlords, tenants, and local actors; and
- promote rights awareness and community participation.

The Network's development was phased, reflecting budget availability and the need to pilot, refine and scale tools and commitments with landlords across diverse neighborhoods and markets. Beyond outreach and rights awareness, the Network also introduced a practical housing improvement component and, in its final phase, piloted improvements to multi-family dwellings.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The program was launched in March 2020 with a remote operating model, developing procedures to verify identity and family composition across multiple online platforms to mitigate fraud and ensure accurate targeting. These adaptations were key as well later on: they enabled timely assistance during lockdowns and helped standardize remote casework practices for rent support.

While the earliest disbursements used cumulative rent payments, the project shifted to a monthly payment approach. The change helped teams monitor progress, support beneficiaries and landlords more closely, and resolve issues quickly. This new cadence also contributed to improved coexistence among communities: during the months covered, timely rent flow and regular contact stabilized relations and reduced tensions that were common when household finances and shelter options were less predictable.

A network of safe landlords was established to support dialogue and trust.

When households faced late payments or other difficulties beyond the subsidy, project staff used mediation to retain housing whenever possible. HLP checks, confirming that the landlord was the rightful owner, helped prevent future disputes and promoted transparency.

The Network complemented rent support by addressing issues that lie beyond short term subsidies. Through community meetings and one to one engagement, landlords learned about program criteria, good rental practices and basic rights and duties. The Network also became a forum for discussing price stabilization during and after support. Some landlords chose to subsidize 30–50% of rent during participation and kept rents more accessible after subsidies ended, enabling more families to remain in place.

In parallel, through the construction and upgrading component, the project evaluated housing units according to habitability standards, and selected properties received light repairs and infrastructure improvements to address deficiencies identified during assessments. These works focused on practical measures such as improving locks and partitions for privacy and safety, upgrading deteriorated elements in housing units, and rehabilitating common or communal areas where they affected the overall adequacy of the accommodation. Later on, a few pilot multi-family dwellings were completely renovated, and shared spaces were revitalized.

TARGETING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The project prioritized households facing acute vulnerability and protection risks, with a deliberate focus on girls, adolescents, women and LGBTIQ+ individuals. Targeting processes balanced urgency with due diligence, ensuring that assistance reached those most likely to be excluded from the rental market without support, while maintaining safeguards for them.

The initiative surfaced local issues (e.g., information gaps on unit availability, misconceptions between neighbors), and gave landlords and tenants a structured channel to address concerns. As interaction increased, the host community's interest grew around the Network, improving communication about available housing and prompting collective conversations on coexistence standards.

CROSSCUTTING ISSUES

Crosscutting concerns, particularly gender, GBV risk mitigation, and security of tenure, were integrated throughout. Beyond targeting, practical safety measures included ensuring non shared spaces between genders where feasible and supporting the installation of locks in rental units, recognizing that basic physical safeguards are preconditions for dignity.

COORDINATION

Internally, operational coordination linked case management, HLP verification and landlord engagement to ensure that no single step became a bottleneck. Externally, the approach complemented broader market based practices in Ecuador's response to human mobility by focusing on tenant choice, HLP safeguards and community level engagement with property owners through an organized platform.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The principal environmental consideration arose from enabling continued use of existing housing stock rather than promoting new construction. While not a dedicated environmental project, the modality's reliance on local rentals reduced the material footprint that accompanies physical shelter works. At the same time, the project's light repairs and upgrading approach extended the useful life of existing units and multi-family dwellings, avoiding more resource-intensive replacement. The project encouraged households to select units in areas not prone to specific risks, integrating basic risk filters into decision-making during the joint assessment of potential rentals.

Selected properties were upgraded with light renovation works, which usually involved common spaces such as laundry areas (left photo) or courtyards (right photo).

EXIT/HANDOVER

At the outset, an economic analysis assessed affordability after subsidies, taking into account family size, location, and local rents. During the three month rental support, close monitoring supported early problem solving. Post subsidy follow up showed that many households remained in the same unit, supported by price stabilization commitments within the Landlord Network and by the broader legal environment that allows Venezuelans with regular migratory status to access formal employment.

MAIN CHALLENGES

- **Launching under COVID 19.** Starting a rental program in March 2020 demanded a rapid pivot to remote operations and a suite of fraud mitigation measures. These investments in procedure and verification were resource intensive but proved essential to maintain assistance and trust.
- **Payment cadence.** The shift from cumulative to monthly payments required retraining and process change, but improved monitoring, reduced disputes and supported healthier landlord–tenant dynamics.
- **Adapting to diverse rental market conditions across cities.** Implementing the same modality in Quito, Guayaquil, Manta, Lago Agrio and Huaquillas meant confronting different price levels, housing availability and market dynamics in each location. This required continuous adjustment of targeting and assessment criteria to keep the modality relevant and effective across highly heterogeneous local contexts.

Launched during the pandemic and implemented across a wide geographical area, the project faced several challenges, including for remote implemetation.

OUTCOMES AND WIDER IMPACTS

Scale and reach. Rental assistance was extended to 9,411 households, each receiving up to three months of support through direct landlord payments. By centering tenant choice and verifying HLP conditions, the program improved access to safer, more dignified housing for families at risk of exclusion from the private rental market.

Tenure and stability. Through habitability checks, HLP verification and monthly payment oversight, the project helped stabilize tenancies during the support period and, in many cases, beyond. Follow up indicated that a significant share of families remained in their units after assistance ended, supported by landlords who kept rents accessible and by improved income prospects for those able to regularize their status.

Cohesion and landlord practices. The Landlord Network provided a platform for dialogue and collective action. Some owners voluntarily subsidized 30–50% of rent during the project and retained moderated pricing afterward. This contributed to coexistence and strengthened relations with tenants, demonstrating that structured engagement can shift local market behavior in ways favorable to vulnerable households.

Housing quality and shared spaces. The addition of light repairs, infrastructure improvements and pilot upgrading of multi-family dwellings broadened the project's impact beyond rent coverage alone. By improving selected housing units and communal areas, the intervention contributed to safer, more functional and more dignified living environments, while also showing that targeted investment in existing rental stock can support longer-term habitability for both displaced and host communities.

Operational learning. Remote casework, digital verification and the monthly payment cadence became enduring features of implementation, improving oversight and case resolution. These adaptations show how market based shelter programming can uphold protection standards while remaining agile under constraints.

The project ultimately supported nearly 32,000 people in finding decent and safer accommodation options.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

STRENGTHS

√ **Direct landlord payments** with tenant choice enabled rapid access to safer housing, improved tenure security during the support period and reduced a key barrier to market entry for vulnerable households.

√ **Joint assessments and habitability criteria** ensured basic safety and dignity standards before assistance was confirmed, aligning expectations among tenants, landlords and program staff.

√ **Protection mainstreaming** was operationalized through prioritization of girls, adolescents, women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, HLP verification of ownership, and practical safety measures such as locks and non shared spaces.

√ **The shift to monthly rent payments** strengthened monitoring, supported timely problem solving and fostered healthier landlord–tenant relations.

√ **The Landlord Network fostered social cohesion** and encouraged better rental practices, including price stabilization during and, for many, after the subsidy period.

√ **Remote operating procedures**, such as beneficiary declarations, digital evaluation forms and identity verification, safeguarded program integrity during COVID 19 and standardized casework.

WEAKNESSES

× **Early absence of payment guarantees** and defined channels for late rent risked undermining tenancy stability, requiring ad hoc mediation and flexible arrangements in the initial months.

× **Sustained landlord engagement proved uneven:** developing and maintaining a communication platform that met varied expectations across cities remained a persistent challenge.

× **Dependence on external market and legal conditions.** The sustainability of exit strategies relied partly on factors outside the project's direct control, such as rental price behavior after subsidies ended and beneficiaries' ability to regularize their migratory status and access formal employment. Clearer exit strategies could have been expolred, as shifts in these external conditions could directly affect a household's capacity to sustain rent payments once assistance concluded.

FURTHER READING ON SHELTER PROJECTS

On Ecuador: SP 9TH ED. / A.13 / ECUADOR 2020-2022

On the Venezuela regional crisis: SP 9TH ED. / A.11 / 2019-2023;

On rental support: SP 13-14 / B.02 OPINION PIECE; SP 9TH ED. / A.21 GREECE / 2019-2023; SP 10TH ED. / A.20 POLAND.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Establish landlord commitments early.** Clear explanation of roles, obligations and co responsibilities for Network members should precede admission; simple checklists and pre enrollment briefing can reduce drop outs and disputes later.
- **Use monthly payment cadence to enhance accountability.** Regular disbursements with caseworker follow up improve oversight, reduce misunderstandings and enable swift mediation when issues arise.
- **Integrate HLP verification systematically.** Confirming that the landlord is the rightful owner (and documenting that status) reduces downstream tenure disputes and increases both parties' confidence in the agreement.
- **Build remote casework capacity from the outset**. Digital tools, such as identity checks, declarations and evaluation forms, are vital to scale safely when in person access is constrained.
- **Link rental support to community level engagement.** Organizing landlords into a network helps address issues that cash alone cannot solve, including pricing norms, communication gaps and coexistence standards, thereby supporting longer term stability for tenants.

RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

A key change for future projects would involve strengthening the initial socialization process of the commitments of landlords who agree to join the Network. Despite the successful creation of the Landlord Network, challenges arose due to a lack of specific knowledge of their obligations. To improve, we would integrate a communication mechanism to ensure that landlords fully understand and commit to their roles within the Network. This could include more rigorous controls and co responsibility actions before admitting landlords into the Network, thus reducing problems related to landlord withdrawal and ensuring a higher housing standard for beneficiaries.