

Higher education cooperation for sustainable development between Ecuador and Flanders (Belgium)

October 2021



Ecuador is one of the key partner countries of VLIR-UOS. From 2003 to 2021 VLIR-UOS spent 24 million Euros in cooperation with Ecuador, including 2 long-term Institutional University Cooperation programmes with the Escuela Politécnica del Litoral (ESPOL) and the University of Cuenca (UCuenca).

The national **Network in Biodiversity** coordinated by ESPOL and 3 other Ecuadorian universities is currently the cornerstone of the Ecuador country programme.

Higher education as a driving force for sustainable development

There is a longstanding history of cooperation between Ecuadorian and Flemish higher education institutions. After nearly **25 years of successful cooperation**, Ecuador assured itself a special place in the VLIR-UOS portfolio.

VLIR-UOS revised its country approach towards an 'Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development' centered approach, where country reference frameworks (CRF) are worked out. The CRF document supports teams of academics when identifying and formulating project proposals, by providing a context analysis focused on Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the higher education sector in a given country, and by providing an overview of Belgian development actors, their ongoing projects and partners in that country in view of exploration of opportunities for synergy and complementarity within the **Joint Strategic Framework** of Belgian Non-Governmental Actors active in Ecuador. On the other hand Belgian HE and Science actors joined in a thematic Joint Strategic Framework (JSF) on HES4SD.

VLIR-UOS cooperation in Ecuador has always been strongly aligned with the Ecuadorian national strategies for **improving the quality of life** ('Buen vivir') and with its priorities in terms of Higher Education and Science supporting the **strengthening of higher education institutions** in their role as driver of change by improving education, research and extension of new knowledge, applications and services in various domains. This is in line with the objectives of the thematic JSF.

HEIs as drivers of change

Results of long-term institutional university cooperation with ESPOL

Between 1998 and 2010 ESPOL was a partner university of the Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) project of VLIR-UOS. Jorge Calderón, professor at ESPOL and former local coordinator of the IUC programme, testified on **the impact of the partnership** on the university:

‘We were the subject of university cooperation with several countries: Sweden, France, Japan, the United States, Germany among others. But only the one with the Flemish universities lasted. What makes the difference? I think it is because **it aimed to change the culture of the university system**. It’s the long-term effort with emphasis on research that brought this change. This IUC cooperation really moved the university in a different direction, trying to focus on knowledge generation. It’s the **long-term effort**, among other things, that really brought this change.’

IUC with the University of Cuenca

The IUC with Cuenca University started in 2007 ended in 2019. The aim of the programme was to **improve the quality of life in the southern highlands of Ecuador**.

The programme aimed at institutional capacity building, as also on the following themes strategic for Cuenca, the Azuay region and Ecuador: **biodiversity** (mainly medicinal plants) and **natural resources** (focus on water management), **health** and **educational matters** related to quality of life (nutrition; sexual education) and managing national/global and cultural **heritage**.

Network Ecuador: Universities unite on biodiversity

The Network University Cooperation brings together expertise about biodiversity and natural resources with a particular focus on **water management** and **biodiscovery**. The VLIR network Ecuador achieved in setting up first **interuniversity master programmes** in Ecuador and link up with regional and international initiatives. During the 2nd Phase of the programme these linkages are further strengthened.

The network also contributed strongly to the establishment of REDU, a **research network** of Ecuadorian universities.



VLIR-UOS partnerships

The biodiversity Network is based on a partnership between four Ecuadorian universities and three Flemish universities. The goal of these partnerships is **capacity building** based on long term investments in human capital and **building up networks**.



Focus on sustainable development priorities

TEAM projects and Short Initiatives (SI) aim to strengthen the research and education capacity, exploring and building capacity in view of creating sustainable solutions to local and global development challenges.

Biodiversity and natural resources

The lakes in Northern Ecuador provide important ecosystem services to local communities, such as fisheries, acting as a tourist attraction pole, and providing drinking water to cities or irrigation water for agriculture. **The quality and quantity of water** in the lakes, however, is declining and there is a need for **sustainable management** of these lakes. A finalised TEAM project with Universidad Tecnica del Norte (UTN) was assessing the ecological status of four major lakes in the region and links water quality issues in these lakes with human activities in the catchment basin.



Another project focuses on **forest management systems and networks** for long-term ecological research on biodiversity and ecosystem functioning in natural and reforested areas along a large environmental gradient in a highly diverse, strongly anthropogenic tropical landscape (Andean-Chocó). This project is realised in close collaboration with local and international stakeholders (landowners, NGOs such as BOS+).



Education

Close cooperation with VVOB and the Ecuadorian ministry of Education has already led to a number of pilot initiatives with a national impact. The aim is that these projects reinforce the other activities of VLIR-UOS in Ecuador, bringing these experiences to a national level. As such projects supporting **educational research** and the national pedagogic institute (UNAE) were supported. Other educational projects in Ecuador focus on early childhood education and train the trainers.

Circular Economy

There is an increasing interest in the circular economy to tackle the challenge of finite resources for sustainable development. Ample attention is given to economic and ecological value from an international perspective, but less attention is paid to the social consequences at the local level. In many countries the poorest families often survive by sorting garbage and selling recyclable materials. A TEAM project with Ucuena and UASD wants to study the possibilities for Latin America of incorporating informal recycler cooperatives in the circular economy.



Scholarships

Scholarships are powerful tools. It allows Ecuadorian students to broaden their horizon, learn to look at problems from the perspective of multiple disciplines and to grow into a **skilful researcher**.

Also Flemish students spend time in an Ecuadorian institution and **create close ties**.



About the Country Reference Frameworks

VLIR-UOS **Country Reference Frameworks** (CRF) support teams of academics when identifying and formulating project proposals, by providing a context analysis focused on Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the higher education sector in a given country, and by providing an overview of Belgian development actors, their ongoing projects and partners in that country in view of exploration of opportunities for synergy and complementarity within the Joint Strategic Framework of Belgian Non-Governmental Actors active in Ecuador. On the other hand Belgian HE and Science actors joined in a thematic Joint Strategic Framework (JSF) on HES4SD.

The country reference frameworks consist of three components: (i) overview of VLIR-UOS projects in the country; (ii) context analysis focused on the Agenda 2030 framework and the higher education sector; (iii) overview of Belgian development actors (ANGCs involved in thematic or geographic JSFs & Enabel), their local partners and their regional/thematic focus

More information:

vliruos.be/ecuador



Total budget Ecuador 2003-2021 (in €)	
Projects	€ 20.956.901
Individual scholars	€ 3.139.303
Total	€ 24.096.204

Scholars from Ecuador in the context of VLIR-UOS cooperation (2003-2020)	
PhD*	1
Short Term*	58
Study/Master*	66
Total	125

* Only scholarships outside projects and programmes are shown; a lot of scholarships are included in projects or programmes.

In addition to Ecuadorian scholars coming to Belgium, 477 Belgian scholars were granted a travel grant (short term) to Ecuador and 2 students were granted a sandwich Ph.D. scholarship. More information on the scholarships of VLIR-UOS: www.vliruos.be/scholarships.

About VLIR-UOS VLIR-UOS supports partnerships between universities and university colleges in Flanders (Belgium) and partner countries looking for innovative responses to global and local sustainable development challenges. VLIR-UOS is part of the Flemish Interuniversity Council and receives funding from the Belgian Development Cooperation. www.vliruos.be

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