



The refugee entrepreneurship process from/in emerging economies

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Abstract

The paper examines several refugee experiences in Mexico and presents their reasons for leaving their home countries. A gap in research is identifying the entrepreneurial process experienced by refugee entrepreneurs. We use the case study of 10 Latin American refugees in Mexico to propose a conceptual framework that describes the entrepreneurial process of refugee entrepreneurs. We have found that this process begins with the abandonment of the country of origin, followed by the traumatic experiences that caused flight and the difficulties they face in the pilgrimage to the host country. These events help shape the entrepreneurial intention of the refugees.

Keywords Refugee · Entrepreneurship · Emerging economies

Introduction

Population displacement has increased in recent decades, resulting from social and economic effects. Studies on migration seek to understand what mobility entails for the individual, the reason for its occurrence, and its effects on the countries of origin, transit, and destination. Over the past decade, studies have shown that many people

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have been affected by threats and extortion from gangs, drug trafficking entities, and criminal groups operating in the home countries, among other factors, including political ones. Under these conditions, migrants seek a certain formal and protected status that only refugees are allowed access to. The 1951 Refugee Convention defined a refugee as “someone who cannot or does not wish to return to his country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR 2010, p.3). According to UNHCR data (2019), 74.79 million people have been displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations; approximately 25.9 million (one-third) have received refugee status.

Previous studies have analyzed refugees’ economic life (Gold 1988, 1992; Mawson and Kasem 2019) and the economic activities developed by refugees (Beehner 2015; Alloush et al. 2017; Bizri 2017). Among the studies, which include institutional analysis, there are several that have identified different institutional barriers, such as employment restrictions and discrimination (Garnham 2006; Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Roth et al. 2012; Vinokurov et al. 2017), that have influenced their decision to become entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial spirit of immigrants/refugees is to form a driving economic force already established in many countries (Kwong et al. 2006; Panayiotopoulos 2008; Rusinovic 2008; Wadhwa et al. 2007; Thi Thanh Thai and Turkina 2013; Ma et al. 2013; Zhang and Chun 2018). Forced migration and the experiences gained during this process (Bhugra 2004; Garnham 2006) as well as previous work experience influences the birth of an entrepreneurial spirit in the host country (Mawson and Kasem 2019).

According to the Secretary of Human Rights, Population, and Migration (INM 2019) of Mexico, approximately seven thousand people from emerging economies have crossed the Mexican territory to immigrate to the United States. Migrants from Central America and the Caribbean come to Mexico because of complicated living situations within their countries (low income, economic and social inequality, widespread violence, high levels of poverty, government corruption, among others) with the expectation of achieving the American dream. An example has been the Migrant Caravan,¹ which came to the fore in 2019. The exceptionally large size of the caravan allowed many subjects not to be questioned by immigration authorities in Mexico (Government of Mexico 2019). Inevitably, a large number of these migrants would seek formal status and protection as refugees in Mexico. In Mexico’s particular case, refugee cases have increased, largely due to problems experienced in most Central American and Caribbean countries (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, Venezuela).

Given the nature of the phenomenon, a qualitative methodology based on multiple case studies with retrospective analysis was applied (Yin 1994; Eisenhardt 1989). Based on the proposed framework, ten subject studies in total met the adopted criteria, which included that the immigrant: (a) obtained legal status during the last two years or less, (b) is native to a country in Central America and the Caribbean, (c) has undertaken

¹ Caravana was the name given to the mass and extraordinary flows of people who began arriving in Mexico in the last quarter of 2018. In addition to making the migration of Central American countries, mainly to Mexico, with caravans have changed some characteristics that were previously observed in such flows, such as the number of groups and their form of organization (Rutas 2020).

a commercial enterprise in the last 5 years, and d) has been a working professional for the past 3 years. Our theoretical contribution is based on the premise that the entrepreneurial process of refugee entrepreneurs in the host country begins with the departure of these refugees from the country of origin. The traditional entrepreneurial process starts from the business idea; however, we propose that the traumatic experiences in the country of origin and the difficult pilgrimage to the host country provide the refugees with unique attributes and capabilities that contribute to the entrepreneurial intention.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the empirical and theoretical findings which will build the practical concept of an entrepreneurial migrant in an emerging economy. The second describes the study methodology adopted in this research. The third shows the findings and discusses them in the light of previous studies, to finally conclude with the implications and research agenda.

Theoretical background

Minority entrepreneurship has gained substantial attention in recent times, in particular, the situation of immigrants and refugees who move to emerging economies with the expectation of a better future. Immigrants and refugees, though foreigners in foreign lands, cannot be considered within the same population group as the motivation to leave their countries is different. Immigrants leave their country voluntarily to seek better living conditions or greater professional and personal development. Among immigrants, there are people who have the necessary resources to help them make a smooth transition into the destination country, while others face greater difficulties due to their scarce resources. In the case of refugees, the situation is different. They have had to flee their country of origin to save their lives or escape persecution on the grounds of race, religion, and politics, among others. Refugees are a highly vulnerable population because many are stripped of their material possession and have gone through traumatic experiences. Others have had to leave their families in the country of origin, do not speak the language of the destination country, and carry with them customs and cultural values that may be very different from those of the host country. Some are even discriminated against in the destination country, as the refugee crisis is a controversial issue, and their survival depends to a large extent on assistance provided by communities and international organizations in each country (Farmaki and Christou 2018; Alexandre et al. 2019).

One aspect that has attracted academic attention is the entrepreneurial activity of refugees in the destination country. For instance, Fong et al. (2007) examine the successes and failures of refugee entrepreneurs, and conclude that successes and challenges occur at individual, family, and community levels. Al-Dajani (2019) explores the effectiveness and impact of institutional support for refugee women and the extent to which entrepreneurship contributes to poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. Kışman and Yalçın (2020) find that the business activities of enterprising Syrian refugees in Turkey play an important role in the country's economy. Thus, several studies have contributed to extending the literature in this field of research, providing more and more background to illuminate the reality of refugee entrepreneurs and their impact on host economies (Alrawadieh et al. 2019; Shneikat and Alrawadieh 2019; Beamer and Gleason 2020; Desai et al. 2020).

The intersection between refugees and entrepreneurship

Millions of people in dozens of countries around the world today have refugee status with only two things in common: a well-founded fear for their lives and the fact that none willingly chose to be a refugee (Comité Español de ACNUR 2017). According to Alexandre et al. (2019) and Ellis et al. (2016), resilience is an individual skill that characterizes business refugees because of what they have experienced (persecution, extortion, rape, and abuse of power). In their complex life experiences, they combine different cognitive, affective, behavioral and social characteristics (Bemak and Chung 2014). Distinctive features include previous work experience, motivation and obstacles within the process of integration into society, which can be caused by educational or vocational background, mental health problems and lack of financial resources (Dominik and Mauer 2019; Bizri 2017; Bakker et al. 2017; Obschonka et al. 2018). Entrepreneurial refugees have had to adapt to new situations and address poverty/unemployment (Tumen 2016; Bizri 2017; Slepjen et al. 2017) by creating business initiatives as a professional option (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2016; Dominik and Mauer 2019). In this sense, refugees produce and consume goods available in their host communities and become inevitable sources of human capital in the country of destination (Fielden 2008; Jacobsen 2001; Betts et al. 2014). However, business refugees also face barriers upon entry into the capitalist arena (i.e. language barriers, lack of knowledge, discrimination/racism, regulations and complex policies) when starting a business in the host country (Sepulveda et al. 2011; Jones et al. 2014; Collins 2017).

Individual determinants of refugee entrepreneurship

Human capital For refugees, generic human capital determines access to jobs, as well as the possibilities for creating companies in the host country (Martin et al. 2013). However, given the restrictions on entry into the labor market, many refugees decide to create a new company as a mechanism for integration into the host market (Mahroum 2000). In this regard, Lamba and Krahn (2003) and Ibrahim and Galt (2011) found that human capital (education and work experience) have been the main determining factor that causes refugees to successfully use the host market (Canada). However, poor work experience, as well as lack of skills in local jobs, lead to lack of access for specific jobs and a disadvantage in the local labour market (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003). The authors explain that host labor markets generally consider the educational/work experience of their home country of lower quality, leading to immigrants who are more prone to self-employment (Kanas et al. 2009; Neville et al. 2014). Self-employment can be a possible solution to combating poverty/inequalities faced by refugees (Alexandre et al. 2019). Therefore, the quality of their business initiatives will depend on their specific human capital (Parker 2009). For refugees, specific human capital represents prior business education/training, previous business experiences and knowledge acquired as a result of being part of a family business or having entrepreneurial parents (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008). This type of human capital can also be acquired from business organizations that, as part of their daily activities, promote and encourage the development of business initiatives (Anton and Yao 1995).

Social capital Entrepreneurship literature has recognized that social relationships (friends, ethnic groups, religious groups) influence the professional decisions of individuals. In this sense, Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as social connections that can be converted into specific economic conditions. The share capital represents a network of agents that can be used to make a profit or add value by exploiting their resources and capabilities. With this assumption, social capital will determine whether an individual may gain or lose something (Bourdieu 2011). The volume of share capital held by a private agent therefore depends on the size and scope of the network that it can effectively mobilize, and the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) of those with whom it is bonded (Bourdieu 2011). Refugees participate in social media in their host countries, as well as those in their home countries. The nature of these connections would influence their professional decisions: employment, self-employment or entrepreneurship (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008).

Institutional determinants of refugee entrepreneurship

Formal and informal conditions Institutions shape human interaction and are defined as the rule of the game (North 1993). Formal institutions are related to written rules, while informal institutions are related to unwritten standards such as beliefs, ideas and attitudes (North 1990, 2005; Peng et al. 2008). Institutional frameworks define formal/informal rules that influence business strategies, especially emerging economies (Brouthers and Brouthers 2001; Meyer et al. 2009; Peng 2003; Estrin et al. 2009). These institutional factors are therefore prone to act as facilitators or obstacles during the integration of refugees into the labour market (Banki 2004; Landau 2004; Jacobsen 2005; Mata and Alves 2018). If favourable conditions towards entrepreneurship and integration characterize the host country, refugees will be more likely to develop business initiatives than in countries with lower integration statistics (Castles et al. 2002). In this regard, Jacobsen (2001) argues that regulatory frameworks in the host state for refugees influence the perception of the benefits/disadvantages of refugees in the country. Formal institutions (property rights, constitutions and laws) can reduce the disadvantages that immigrants from some countries have in relation to others, while similarities in informal institutions (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, codes of conduct, culture, language) between the receiving country and the country of origin can mitigate the disadvantages of adapting to the country (Pedersen et al. 2008).

Institutional distances between home and host country Previous studies have recognized that context plays an important role in developing any business activity. Therefore, the entrepreneurship probabilities of migrants will also be determined by environmental conditions (political, social, economic, /and cultural) in the host country and the institutional distance from the country of origin (Khanna et al. 2005). In addition to the favorable/unfavorable conditions for entrepreneurship in the host country, institutional distances in terms of culture, language, social norms and regulation between the countries of origin and host will affect the creation of new businesses by migrants (Prime and Wanjiru 2017). However, these institutional distances are often formed over time.

Latin American refugees and emerging economies Depending on the situation in the country of origin, refugees differ in several respects. In the last decade the number of American refugees has quadrupled, mainly due to the inclusion of 3.6 million Venezuelans displaced abroad according to 2019 statistics. In addition, thousands of Central Americans have fled due to violence (Comité Español de ACNUR 2020). With emerging countries hosting more than two-thirds of the world's refugees, there is concern in these regions about the pressure to accommodate large refugee populations while meeting the needs of their own citizens (Merheb 2005). In the public spheres of host communities, increased refugee participation in the labor market is perceived as the main driver of labor market displacement for the local labor force (Sak et al. 2018). For this paper, our research setting is Mexico. According to the Secretary of Human Rights, Population, and Migration (INM 2019), approximately seven thousand people from emerging economies have crossed the Mexican territory to immigrate to the United States. Migrants from Central America and the Caribbean come to Mexico because of complicated living situations within their countries (low income, economic and social inequality, widespread violence, high levels of poverty, government corruption, among others) with the expectation of achieving the American dream. An example has been the Migrant Caravan, which took center stage in 2019. The exceptionally large size of the caravan allowed many subjects not to be questioned by immigration authorities in Mexico (Government of Mexico 2019). Inevitably, a large number of these migrants would seek formal status and protection as refugees in Mexico. In Mexico's particular case, refugee cases have increased, largely due to problems experienced in most Central American and Caribbean countries (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, Venezuela).

Proposed conceptual framework

At the individual level, generic human capital is associated with the level of education and previous work experience. These determinants commonly affect refugees, as they face the invalidation of their studies from their country of origin, as well as the non-recognition of previous work experience, which causes problems of discrimination. Experiences, whether as an individual or with family, reinforce the perception of opportunities and motivation to achieve a better quality of life for the refugee and his family. Social capital underlines the importance of refugee contacts and social networks in both the country of origin and destination; networks facilitate their integration into society. Institutional determining factors (culture, language, rules and social regulations) are conditions that can facilitate or create barriers for refugees in the destination country. The phenomenon of enterprising refugees begins with the flight of these people from their countries of origin due to political and racial persecution, human rights violations, war, among other conflict situations that justify fear for life. The characteristics of the host country will determine the conditions for refugee asylum. Even if refugees have formal education, entrepreneurial spirit and intent, and business experience or skills, these are not sufficient conditions to ensure success in the host country. Attributes such as economic situation, existence of asylum programs, racial diversity, international openness and social awareness will be fundamental in shaping an ecosystem suitable for the personal, occupational and professional development of

refugees. The conditions for asylum in the host country such as shared values, institutional flexibility and market opportunities have an influence on the attitudes and entrepreneurial orientation of refugees and are conducive to entrepreneurial activity. Finally, successful refugee entrepreneurs can achieve social acceptance, contribute to the economy of the host country, and achieve personal and family fulfillment. Figure 1 shows the entrepreneurial process of refugees, from fleeing the country of origin to achieving social integration in the host country.

For the particular case study, an important advantage is that of linguistic and cultural similarities, while ignorance of social laws and norms may influence employment opportunities as opposed to becoming an entrepreneur, in the case of refugees. Therefore, we assume that institutional distances between formal and informal conditions between host and home countries will influence the refugees' decision to become entrepreneurs.

Methodology

Research setting

The mass displacement of people from Central America and the Caribbean, specifically from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to the United States of America, through their passage through Mexico, makes them the subjects of this research. Although their initial goal is to grasp “*The American Dream*”, they eventually come to consider Mexico as a country full of opportunities and end up residing there. This is because Mexico provides guidance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the support of organizations that assist migrants and refugees.

According to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR), individuals are recognized as a refugee in any of the following cases: (a) due to well-founded fears of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, gender, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, one is outside the country of their nationality and cannot or does not want to take refuge in that country of origin; or that, in the absence of a nationality and being outside the former country

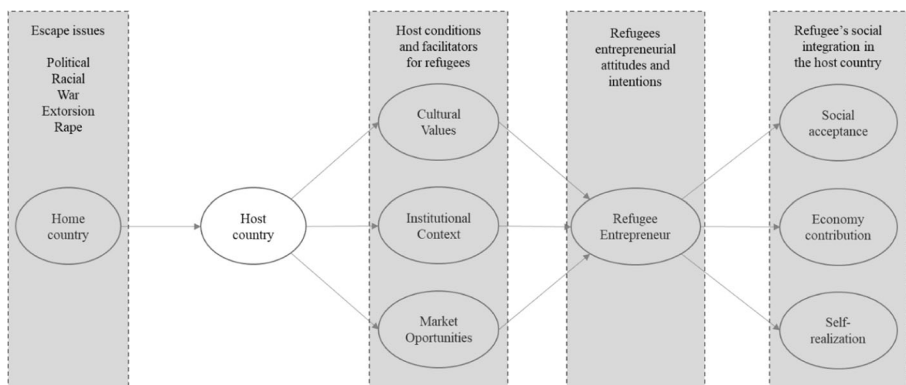


Fig. 1 Conceptual model. Source: Authors

of residence, you cannot or do not want to return there; b) have fled their country of origin for their life as their security or freedom has been threatened by widespread violence, foreign aggression, internal conflict, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and (c) that due to circumstances that have arisen in the country of origin or as a result of activities carried out during their stay in the national territory, one has well-founded fears of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, gender, membership of a particular social group or opinions; or their life, security or freedom could be threatened by widespread violence, foreign aggression, internal conflict, mass violation of human rights or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order (COMAR 2020a). Annex Table 2 shows the growth in the number of applicants from 2013 to February 2020. There was an increase from 2013 to 2019 of 69,313 refugee applications. Annex Table 3 shows the nationalities of refugees applying for legal status, confirming that the countries with the most applicants are Honduras, Venezuela, El Salvador, and Cuba.

Case study approach

Selection criteria Given the nature of the phenomenon, a qualitative methodology based on multiple case studies with retrospective analysis was applied (Yin 1994; Eisenhardt 1989). Based on the proposed framework, ten study subjects in total met the criteria adopted of: (a) having obtained legal status during the last two years or less, (b) being native to a country in Central America and the Caribbean, (c) having started a business in the last 5 years, d) having been a working professional for the past 3 years.

Data collection Data collection will focus on semi-structured interviews that follow a research-protocol design based on the proposed conceptual framework. The data was collected from August to December 2019, using a variety of resources to identify participants, including searches in local directories, visits to chambers of commerce in different municipalities of Jalisco and the Jalisco Migrant Institute; as well as, through the snowball technique with friends and acquaintances. Different companies were also visited within the state. For reasons of confidentiality, anonymous acronyms are used in place of the names of refugees. These interviews will be supplemented by secondary information (websites, official reports). Given the research approach, participants were encouraged to narrate personally, so that they could take their time recounting their experiences. Mawson and Kasem (2019) mention that such narratives have often been used in entrepreneurship research, particularly when people explain their place in a context or community and when it is important to leverage and make sense of current memory and experiences (Terjesen and Elam 2009). It was possible to collect the data of 10 refugees from emerging economies (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Cuba). Once identified, three analysis groups are put forth in this study using the following criteria to evaluate respondents: business refugees (people from emerging economies who decided to create a business in Mexico), migrant refugees (people from emerging economies who entered the Mexican labor market) and members of the migrant caravan (refugees), people from emerging economies whose goal is to achieve the *American Dream*. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the refugees included in the sample.

Table 1 Characteristics of refugee entrepreneurs

Characteristics of refugee entrepreneurs							
ID	Entrepreneurial family	Business	Employee / Self-employed / Entrepreneur	Age	Gender	Education level	Working experience
HON1	No	No	Employee	22	M	Primary	Cattle rancher
SAL1	No	Yes	Self-employed	20	M	High School	Welder
HON2	Yes	No	Employee	33	M	Bachelor	Soldier
HON3	No	No	Employee	21	F	Primary	Waitress
HON4	Yes	No	Employee	19	M	High School	Interior remodeling
HON5	No	No	Employee	23	M	Bachelor	Textile factory
GUA1	Yes	No	Employee	20	M	Bachelor	Supermarket
HON6	Yes	Yes	Entrepreneur	45	M	Primary	Construction, Cabinetry, Clothing Store
CUB1	Yes	Yes	Entrepreneur	32	F	Bachelor	Clothing store
CUB2	No	No	Employee	30	M	Bachelor	Restaurant

Source: authors

Data analysis The analysis of the research data was inductive, a process that allowed the selection, interviewing, recording, analysis and specification of each of the sources from which the information was collected, which reinforces the importance and particular interest in the investigation. Addressed experiences and reasons to leave their home country. In the initial interview process, the decision was made to consult multiple sources of evidence and to collect and analyze the subsequent information (Yin 1994). The analysis consisted of compiling each of the interviews and transcribing their contents. After organizing the information, the countries of origin, experiences and duration of refugee status were set up in a data matrix. Such examples show the circumstances, motivations and experiences that led to the abandonment of their respective countries of origin. They also reflect the fundamental reasons that drove skills development in the country of refuge. The categories mentioned are shown in the document in typology. The content of the interviews was coded using the methodology proposed by Gioia et al. (2012) for qualitative inductive methods. The evidence was analyzed to obtain the first order concepts. With these codes the second order concepts were constructed with the support of the literature review. The dimensions of the study were elaborated by grouping the second order topics, in order to obtain a complete data structure that would allow us to conclude, from the specific cases, about the theoretical contribution of this study. The findings were triangulated with the field notes, the researcher's observation log, and journalistic and historical information. The robustness of our analysis was validated by an external expert to ensure that the proposed data structure was logical and consistent.

Findings

Origin and consequences of refugee status

Reasons for migrating from the home country

The interviewed refugees have diverse life stories and different traumatic experiences that forced them to leave their country of origin. The situations that trigger departure from their countries and their living conditions before the traumatic experiences influence the personal, professional and familial expectations that refugees have when they arrive in the host country. Although some are former entrepreneurs in their home countries or are highly educated, the need to save their lives or escape from conflict situations is stronger than the aspirations for living conditions in the host country.

“I am Colombian, so I had problems with the guerrillas. I was kidnapped, tortured and held hostage for 6 months. They used a lot of psychological torture on me, and after I was released me from the hands of those people, I fled here because they kept looking for me to kill me. When I arrived in Mexico and I was given political asylum 10 years ago, and thank God I am well and working here.”
(COL1)

Refugees who have settled in Mexico face the problem of gangs, corruption, drug trafficking and a climate of insecurity, which also affect the Mexican population. Entering Mexico as a host country also has its difficulties, and these extreme experiences also affect the refugees’ perception of the living conditions they will have in the host country.

“...when you decide to come is not easy either, and your life is in danger because there are gangs who are waiting for the opportunity to take advantage of you. There are also people who have lost their lives along the way. We will not risk our children, but at least Mexico gave us shelter, and once I have my permit in a few months, I will be able to bring my family.”(CUB1)

Refugees feel that Mexico has the flexibility to receive them, in that it has the mechanisms to welcome and help them as they begin a new life. This support is only received once the refugees have managed to arrive in Mexico, as the risk of the journey must be assumed by them. However, Mexico is a desirable destination for refugees, where they can settle permanently.

“From the first moment you set foot outside your home and carry the thought of leaving the country, you are taking a risk...” (GUA1)
“...Mexico opened the doors for us, gave us the papers, gave us opportunities to live a better life than in Cuba and we are going to live well. Working here allows you to live well, and we do not want wealth, but to be calm and live comfortably”
(CUB1, CUB2)

Although Mexico has favorable policies towards refugees, the practical aspects of life in the host country are still difficult. It is not easy for refugees to become independent from the protection of the state and to function on their own in society.

“...because looking at it geographically, the only countries left were Honduras, Salvador and Mexico, nothing towards the south, so the best option was Mexico...” (GUA1)

“...once I was here in the hostel, I received all the information I needed to be able to regularize myself and be more calm (...) so far I already have a card that is for one year, but I have already started my process has to obtain the permanent license.” (HON2)

Recognition of the human capital of refugees in the host country

The human capital found in the cases was generic as most agreed to having prior skills, knowledge, experiences and abilities for starting a company (Becker 1964; Parker 2009). Refugees confirmed that their level of education and previous work experience have rarely been recognized. There are cases where informants highlight the importance of having previous studies, even basic ones. Some have taken the opportunity to start studying in Mexico with the support of non-profit institutions:

“From the start, my studies were not validated; with the help of FM4 I am now taking elementary, high school and pre-college exams because I want to continue studying at the university.” (HON2)

However, those with training were forced to seek other work activities, outside their profession, that would allow them to survive in Mexico.

“I have several trades: I have been a ceramic instructor, construction worker and cabinet door manufacturer; but in Mexico I currently work in a restaurant, because my previous work experience was not recognized.” (HON6)

During the interviews, a few informants mentioned that they had any business training. This implies that generic human capital comes from what was previously learned in the profession or in the family but that when migrating to another country and not having support networks (family and friends), they could hardly make headway in the business environment.

“In my bachelor’s degree in accounting, I took a course on how to create businesses.” (CUB2)

“I was a welder. It’s a skill you can learn and then you can become your own boss.” (SAL1)

Few were the cases in which individuals had a background as an entrepreneur, investor and *intrapreneur*. Among them were business owners who were working outside their skill set but adapted easily to the new opportunities.

“Before leaving Cuba, I had a small clothing business and had studied gastronomy.” (CUB1)

“I have had several businesses, including a clothing store and a construction company. I had previously immigrated to the United States, then returned to my country and started a clothing business to motivate my daughters to do the same.” (HON6)

The arrival in the host country and entrepreneurship adventure

Family tradition as a motivator for entrepreneurship in the host country

Economic livelihoods depended on family businesses attached to local economies (neighborhoods, colonies). In Central America and the Caribbean it is very common to find family, traditional and informal companies. Hence, it was not uncommon to find a similarity in forming a small-scale, traditional company in Mexico.

“My parents have a video game and football business in Guatemala.” (GUA1)

“In my family there is previous business experience, as my father has a grocery store.” (HON2)

Market opportunities and motivating factors for entrepreneurship in the host country

This first part gives evidence that enterprising refugees face various difficulties in competing in the target country market. Some see self-employment as an opportunity to improve their quality of life and that of their families, given the difficulty finding jobs with work benefits and adequate living wages. During interviews, some informants confirmed that improving their quality of life was an important motive, whether as refugee entrepreneurs, employees or through self-employment.

“First of all, I want to continue studying. I long for the things we all want, like having a home, helping your parents and just living life. I love my life, so to speak. I want to have a peaceful and legal future, starting from scratch, but with a better future, coming out of where I am and always looking for the good wherever I find myself.” (HON1)

“[I want to be] a person who tries to be responsible, who sets goals and tries to fulfill them, a person who perseveres to get the things he wants, an honest and humble person, who likes to help others, while he can. [I want to] study and then start a business.” When asked where he saw himself in five or ten years,” he said: Well, the truth is that I want to ... study and then start a business.” (HON2)

Both generic and specific human capital demonstrate the capabilities of refugee migrants in Mexico for starting a business of their own. An important part is undoubtedly the culture. Although it appears that Central America and the Caribbean share similar values regarding family and traditional businesses, institutional distances

(family and friendship networks) manifest themselves in the distrust of the local population towards the businesses that they undertake.

Social capital and networks

Refugees have greater limitations than other groups of migrants when trying to lead a lifestyle equal to or better than the one they had in their home country. Some of the problems they face in Mexico are the time it takes to obtain refugee status and replace documents (educational, personal and professional), which are contingent to receiving any kind of employment. One way to find better opportunities is by turning to their nearest social networks, or what is called social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1990). The role of family and members of ethnic groups become the first sources of help refugees seek when trying to find employment.

Social connections are particularly important for migrant entrepreneurs, as social ties are essential to providing information for the successful navigation of an unknown environment and the availability of opportunities. For instance, in the United States, Latino migrants have collaborative networks (clubs) that help locate new arrivals in the country in a job. In the case of countries with emerging economies, these networks are not as strong and, because of the economic situation of the host country, job finding support is scarce. Two cases were found where, in spite of the lack of personal networks that are essential to helping build businesses in the destination country, contacts (external and internal to Mexico) worked positively for the migrants.

“Well, I think the contacts and family I have in my country will be of great help once I can set up a business in Mexico.” (GUA1)

“I currently work in a restaurant, I hope in a few months to open my own restaurant in Toluca, with a Honduran. We’ve already seen a place where we’d put it.” (HON6)

Together with the capital acquired by the individual during his migration to Mexico, there are other institutional conditions that need to be understood, not as obstacles but as opportunities for his business growth.

Cultural values and institutional context in the host country

Despite Mexico being a Spanish-speaking country, the regulation differs from other Latin-American countries. Cultural rules of conduct must be adhered to by migrants and ignorance of social norms can be detrimental when starting a business. During the interviews, some informants mentioned positive and negative regulatory aspects in their home country when attempting to start a business.

“At first, it was easy to open my business; but in Cuba all businesses belong to the state, nothing is yours, nothing can be private ... the only one that is enriched is the state; the people have no rights.” (CUB1)

However, prior to starting a business in Mexico, you must obtain the legal residential status and then work power? in the country.

“Yes, we think first of the United States, one never thinks of Mexico. We didn’t know that Mexico authorized documents like this ..., I think it was more rigorous before. We had to apply for legal documents in a week, and in 5 months, we received them and got our legal refugee status approved.” (CUB1)

“When evaluating the countries I could flee to, my best option was Mexico. I found it easier to regularize my immigration status.” (GUA1)

As for culture and social norms, informants do not find great differences between their country of origin and the country of destination. The only negative was the discrimination they suffered inside the country.

“At my job in the restaurant, I have suffered discrimination for being a refugee; co-workers despise me.” (HON5)

“... I also suffered discrimination, when I carry my big bag, people look at me with contempt.” (GUA1)

While refugee migrants know more about Mexican culture than a passing migrant, it is notable that differences still persist. Central America and the Caribbean have a cultural diversity that is often predicated on by a common language. Nevertheless, even in Spanish-speaking countries, racial discrimination prevails. This may present an obstacle when starting a business and/or achieving its survival.

Business environment conditions for entrepreneurship in the host country

Mexico is a country where the government is supportive of the fundamental rights of refugees, which gives them a greater degree of integration. Furthermore, according to the refugees interviewed, it has better conditions for both living and doing business than Central America and the Caribbean. Some institutional distances mentioned by the interviewees highlight Mexico as being significantly better than their countries of origin (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Cuba). Opportunities to set up businesses at home are few as the state does not encourage the population to become entrepreneurs. If they do attempt it, they suffer from extortion, threats, and tax increases, among others.

In terms of language, refugees from Central America and the Caribbean speak the same language as the local people; this is seen as a positive aspect for their integration into economic and social arenas (Kanas et al. 2009).

“... several words are different, but over time I’ve learned to talk to you, and I dream like any other Mexican.” (HON2)

Some refugees mention the difficulties they faced as entrepreneurs in their home country, describing problems at both the government level and in society where they suffered extortion at the hands of criminal groups in their country. During the interviews, most informants described that it was not feasible to start a business in their home countries.

“If you’re against them, they beat you, put you in jail, or kill you. Your children are mistreated at school. They are mocked and psychologically tortured. Police

dressed in civilian clothes go to your house and cut off electricity and water. They make your life impossible.” (CUB2)

“They won’t even let us talk to tourists. If you’re the tourist and you ask me something and the police see me talking to you, he takes me to the station the first time, and then the second. The third time, I’m sent to prison for four or five years.” (CUB1)

In the case of Cuba, the political regime does not encourage business creation or growth. Citizens are often harassed and feel economically repressed. At the same time, some interviewees mention that there are greater opportunities for growth in Mexico.

“This country has better academic and job opportunities. As far as my country is concerned, even if I wanted to do better, I couldn’t because they won’t let me.” (HON4)

“I would say the difference is that there are better opportunities for employment, government support, housing and rent. It all depends on what you’re looking for. If you don’t work, you’re not going to have anything. It’s everyone’s mindset.” (HON1)

According to the interviewees, the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Mexico is more conducive for starting a business than in Central America and Caribbean countries. Most informants described that it was not feasible to start a business in their home countries.

“The regime does not allow anyone to grow, it does not incentivize or support [economic proactivity]. On the contrary, it limits everything.” (CUB1)

“All businesses in Cuba are state-owned. In Cuba, nothing is yours, nothing can be private. The only one that gets enriched is the state, and people have no rights.” (CUB2)

“My country is complicated, because once you open a business, the extortion begins, week after week. If you don’t pay, you have to close your store and there’s no point in continuing.” (HON2).

“It’s always the same: so much police and federal government corruption, the same as in our country.” (HON1).

The testimonies coincide with the difficulties that exist in Central America and the Caribbean when establishing businesses in any government regime and confirm that institutional distances are widening. However, it is interesting to note that in spite of business start-up difficulties in their home countries, migrants seek to replicate it in Mexico in the hopes that it will be different or they will have more luck.

Discussion

This study analyzes the individual migration experiences of 10 refugees when undertaking the entrepreneurial process. Throughout the research, we have tried to complement theory and practice by researching various authors. Some mention the positive

impact that entrepreneurial refugees have on the economy (Dominik and Mauer 2019; Tumen 2016; Bizri 2017), while other studies mention that refugees have fewer opportunities to start a business compared to other migrant groups (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2016). An important part of the research on refugee entrepreneurs has focused on the conflicts in the Middle East. The situation of Latin American refugees has received little attention overall. In this study, we found similar results to those mentioned in the referenced research. Bemak and Chung (2014) mentioned that the characteristics of enterprising refugees are different from those of other migrant groups; other authors mentioned that their integration process is more difficult, either because their studies and work experience are not recognized or because they have mental or health problems, among others (Dominik and Mauer 2019; Bizri 2017; Bakker et al. 2017; Obschonka et al. 2018). On the other hand, other studies focus on the institutional barriers faced by entrepreneurial refugees (Sepulveda et al. 2011; Jones et al. 2014; Collins 2017). In the case of enterprising refugees from Central America and the Caribbean, it was among the individual determining factors that the academic certificates as well as previous work experience in the country of origin were not recognized. Some refugees had taken business courses that led them to start a business in their home country; others came from a line of entrepreneurial families. Their motivations for fleeing the home country were to escape situations of violence, improve quality of life, reunite with family, find a stable job and start a new business. The study also presented situations discussed in other areas of research such as the difficult integration into society because of migrant status, racial discrimination, and institutional gaps similar to those found in their countries of origin. Notwithstanding, they are willing to face any adversity and become entrepreneurs wherever they end up.

In this research we propose a conceptual framework that explains the entrepreneurial process of entrepreneurial refugees. This process is different from that of migrant entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs in general. The entrepreneurial process of refugees begins with the abandonment of their country of origin. Their previous living conditions and the traumatic experiences of flight are key in shaping their expectations of the future that refugees have in the host country. The decision to escape from the country of origin can be considered an entrepreneurial activity in itself. After the period of uncertainty that refugees go through to reach and settle in the host country, they are also faced with a new context defined by cultural values, institutional conditions and market structure. These environmental elements ultimately shape the entrepreneurial spirit of refugees, whether they are starting a business in the host country or becoming self-employed. If refugees achieve business success through entrepreneurship or manage entry into the labor market in the host country, then they will achieve social integration. This integration manifests itself through social acceptance, contribution to the economy of the host country and personal fulfillment as a refugee, which may include reuniting with family members left behind. (Fig. 2 shows the conceptual framework of the entrepreneurial process of refugees from emerging economies, according to the results of this study).

Our theoretical contribution is based on the concept that the entrepreneurial process of refugee entrepreneurs in the host country begins with the departure of these refugees from the country of origin. The traditional entrepreneurial process starts from the business idea. However, we propose that the traumatic experiences in the country of origin and the hard pilgrimage to the host country provide the refugees with unique

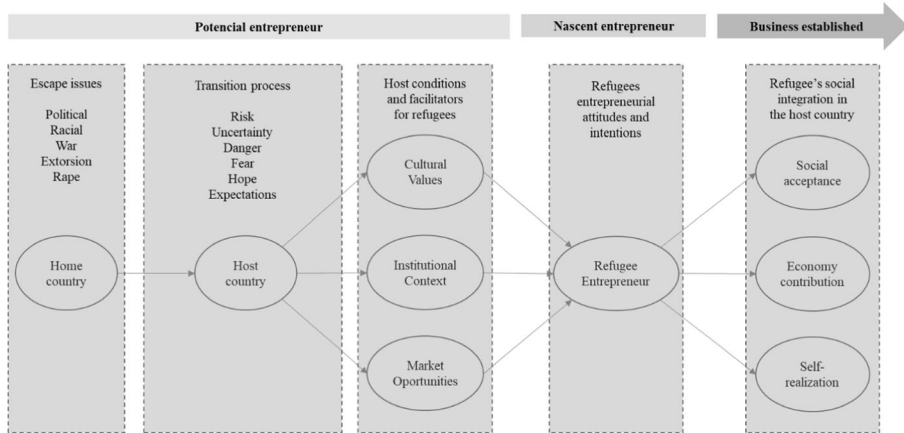


Fig. 2 Entrepreneurial process of entrepreneurial refugees. Source: Authors

attributes and capabilities that contribute to the entrepreneurial intention. Aspects such as risk taking, alertness to opportunities and resilience of refugees are reinforced in the stages of flight and transition, better preparing them to face the challenges of starting a new business. The richness of this process is unique in that it establishes a theoretical foundation exclusively for refugee entrepreneurs that differentiates them from migrant entrepreneurship and positions them in a separate field of research.

Conclusions

The results of this work give us a first-hand view of refugee entrepreneurs from countries with emerging economies, analyzed from individual paradigms (qualified human capital versus unskilled human capital) and institutional (short and long distance). Our results relate to the vulnerable situation of how refugees lived in their country (extortion, rape, gang violence, death threats, among others) and how, through organizations such as *FM4 Paso Libre*, they manage to insert themselves into the public society through the immigration regularization, psychological aid, employment and other services.

Refugees face additional difficulties (lack of capital, lack of credit history, unrecognized human capital, limited social and family networks in the destination country, lack of knowledge of the institutional and legal framework of the destination country, among others) when trying to establish their own business, compared to immigrants. It is therefore justified to study them separately. The objective of the research was to explain the individual and institutional factors that motivate a person (potential entrepreneur) of a home country (emerging economy A) to seek refuge in the host country (emerging economy B). The individual factors that were highlighted in refugee entrepreneurs were intrinsic motivation, being their own bosses, family-business background, cultural influences and their human capital (which helps us explain why non-entrepreneur refugees prefer to get a job to have a better quality of life with job stability, reducing the risks of entrepreneurship) trying to avoid the dangers that forced them to leave their country, as well as revalidating and continuing their studies for better growth

opportunities. In terms of institutional factors, refugees mentioned that Mexico is a country full of diverse opportunities compared to their home countries. Coupled with the welfare state that has been manifested in recent years by the current government and which translates into employment opportunities, basic services, infrastructure, the rule of law and options to generate initiatives that can be consolidated in the near future are also meaningful considerations. Interviewees also acknowledged occurrences of social drawbacks such as corruption, discrimination by some authorities and the support of national and international refugee aid agencies.

This research contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship and refugees (Tumen 2016; Bizri 2017; Dominik and Mauer 2019; Alexandre et al. 2019; Mawson and Kasem 2019) because while business refugees are studied in different contexts from emerging economies to countries with developed economies, as well as from emerging economies to emerging economies, there is a lack of work on this in the Latin American context. Therefore, this document contributes to the knowledge of the situation of enterprising refugees specifically in Mexico. Most of the refugees interviewed have secondary and basic education studies, which denotes that there is no professionally qualified human capital. With regard to institutional distances, although similarities include the same language and similar cultures, Mexico is a country with greater opportunities (employment, studies, housing, and security) where people can improve their quality of life. It is also a country with established systems for fostering entrepreneurship. This is found lacking in countries of Central America and the Caribbean, since neither the state nor criminal groups allow people to thrive without suffering threats of extortion and the imposition of higher taxes every time the business grows.

The limitations of this work are as follows: (a) lack of longitudinal study; (b) the life of the migrant (each case will have its particularities that can generate biases in our results); (c) access to confidential information given the characteristics of the phenomenon and institutional gaps (corruption, violence); (d) the number of interviews per country; and (e) the filtering, measurement and analysis of information according to the paradigms and perspectives of the researcher. Future lines of research are: (a) the execution of a longitudinal study to uncover the evolution of refugees and to be able to measure whether their perception changes over time; (b) research on how their lives have changed and whether they found differences at the individual and institutional level with respect to their arrival in Mexico; and (c) the expansion of samples from interviewees to strengthen the study so that the results can be extrapolated.

For academic purposes, this research provides information on shelter? entrepreneurship in emerging economies, as well as an agenda to continue exploring these areas of interest in other emerging economies. This research also provides a better understanding of the destination options, experiences and possible scenarios of refugees for legitimizing their status in the countries of origin and destination. For policymakers in countries of origin/destination, this research generates information on refugees that could be useful in formulating effective policies that support migrant entrepreneurship. In this context, we propose that universities contribute to the academic training of refugees through workshops and courses on entrepreneurship with the aim of fostering an entrepreneurial culture and facilitating their insertion into society as future entrepreneurs.

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Annex

Table 2 Refuge applicants by year 2013–2019 (persons)

2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
1296	2137	3424	8796	14,619	29,630	70,609	11,873

Source: COMAR (2020b)

Table 3 Refuge applicants by nationality 2018–2019 (persons)

Top10	Nationality	2018 persons	Top10	Nationality	2019 persons
1	Honduras	13,678	1	Honduras	30,187
2	Venezuela	6327	2	El Salvador	9039
3	El Salvador	6193	3	Cuba	8708
4	Guatemala	1347	4	Venezuela	7677
5	Nicaragua	1271	5	Haiti	5548
6	Cuba	214	6	Guatemala	3800
7	Colombia	210	7	Nicaragua	2240
8	Haiti	78	8	Colombia	559
9	E.U.	35	9	Brazil	554
10	Yemen	29	10	Cameron	514
	Other countries	248		Other countries	1783
	Total	29,630		Total	70,609

Source: COMAR (2020b)

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