As of 2022, more than 100 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes due to war, violence and persecution – including more than 30 million across international borders as refugees. Displaced people are often unable to return to their homes, and are faced with inadequate support and uncertain futures. In recognition of this unprecedented global challenge, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s newly created Refugees Initiative aims to partner with and improve the lives and livelihoods of refugee children and families, as well as the communities hosting them. Through our investments in evidence-based programming, research, evaluation, advocacy and locally-led responses, we will advance refugee inclusion and integration, ensuring that children receive care that enables their healthy development and that parents and caregivers have sustainable economic opportunities that foster self-sufficiency. The Refugees Initiative supports partners in Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia and Uganda.

Ideal state

In refugee-hosting communities, young children ages 0 to 5 receive quality care that enables their healthy development, and families access dignified economic opportunities that enable them to not only meet their basic needs but thrive.

Refugees are welcomed and accepted as contributors in their communities and have access to identity documents, legal rights and equitable services. Refugees, refugee-led organizations, and refugee leaders receive direct support and shape policy and program decisions affecting their lives.

The global refugee field delivers evidence-based programming focused on quality outcomes for displaced people, and service delivery is localized, shifting power and resources to local and national organizations and institutions.

History and background

The Hilton Foundation has a long history of providing emergency relief in the United States and around the world. The Foundation’s Disaster Relief and Recovery funding began in 1989 and has included providing safe water for refugees in Kenya, education for Syrian refugees, and resettlement support for refugees in the United States. The Refugees Initiative was created in 2020 and approved by the board of directors in November 2021 with the goal of investing in, advocating for and catalyzing solutions to address a key global challenge of our time. It builds on the Foundation’s experience and expertise in early childhood development (ECD) and workforce development. The Refugees Initiative is now separate from the Foundation’s Disaster Relief and Recovery work.
GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE
• The Foundation’s Refugees Initiative supports partners in Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia and Uganda.

EQUITY FOCUS
• Invest in equitable approaches that achieve outcomes for refugees and those who are most marginalized, including children and parents/caregivers.
• Invest in local and refugee-led organizations to serve their communities with a target of 25 percent of grant funds to these organizations.

OTHER KEY METRICS
• Shape policies, systems and financing related to protracted displacement, and advocate for inclusion, integration and more effective ECD and livelihood policies.
• Shift the narrative around forced displacement and support the agency and potential of displaced people at the center of analysis, advocacy and solutions.

CHALLENGES
• COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted refugees and the communities that host them; these populations face lost livelihoods and education, food insecurity, spiraling poverty, social unrest and increasingly restrictive policies negatively impacting mobility and access to services and markets.
• Xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment could disrupt social cohesion and the policy environment, and make it difficult for refugee-focused organizations to operate in the open, with full transparency.
• Coordinating with governments, donor governments and organizations to ensure refugee livelihoods and ECD are prioritized in the midst of unprecedented global emergencies and funding needs, along with domestic considerations related to COVID-19.

OPPORTUNITIES
• Elevating the voices of refugees and collaborative models that develop local leadership and solutions.
• Investing in research and programming that will inform the global knowledge and evidence base and advance effective and scalable solutions for refugees and their host communities.
• Helping create enabling environments that ensure decision-makers at all levels of government, donors and relevant stakeholders mobilize sufficient resources and implement policies that accelerate progress toward self-sufficiency and improved early childhood outcomes among refugees and their host communities.

The Refugees initiative is still deciding its geographic scope. Colombia, Ethiopia, and Uganda are early possibilities.