



UNIVERSITY OF  
OXFORD

REFUGEE  
STUDIES  
CENTRE

RSC Research in Brief, 12 March 2019

# Venezuelan Survival Migration as a Development Opportunity

## Mission Report



**Author: Alexander Betts** (Professor of Forced Migration and International Affairs, Refugee Studies Centre)

### Background

Between 3 and 9 February, I undertook an **independent mission to Colombia at the invitation of the Presidency and with the support of USAID**. The purpose of the mission was two-fold: 1) to learn about Colombia's response to the Venezuelan influx; 2) to share experiences and best practices based upon my own research relating to the socio-economic integration of refugees and migrants, notably in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. During the mission, I **visited La Guajira and Norte de Santander along the border, spent time in Bogotá**, and spoke to a wide variety of people, including national and local government, NGOs and international organisations, business and the private sector, and Venezuelan migrants and their representative organisations. At the end of my visit, I presented my preliminary thoughts to a multi-stakeholder audience at the Presidency, the US Embassy and undertook interviews with a number of national newspapers.

Overall, **Colombia is embarking on an inspiring and progressive approach towards the socio-economic integration of Venezuelan migrants**. It has created a dedicated office within the Presidency to coordinate the response at the border. Its leadership recognises the potential to see the crisis as an opportunity for national development. It deserves praise and international support in implementing this approach.

I should make clear that **I am not an expert on Colombia or the region**. My contribution emerges from the research I have undertaken in Africa and other parts of the world relating to how host countries can socio-economically integrate large

influxes of refugees and migrants, in ways that can also offer a development opportunity to receiving states and societies.

### Overall vision

The international community's predominant response to the Venezuelan migration crisis remains focused on humanitarian relief. This is important, for two populations: a) the over 50,000 'pendular' migrants who go back and forth across the border every day in order to access food and basic services; b) those who seek residency in Colombia or another country, and require immediate support in terms of food, shelter, and medical access.

However, for the over 1.2 million migrants who have settled in Colombia, a longer-term vision is needed. It must be based on seeing **Venezuelan migration as a development opportunity**, one that can **benefit both migrants and citizens**.<sup>1</sup> Colombia faces a series of structural challenges, and the migration crisis offers an opportunity to attract international investment and assistance in pursuit of national development priorities. The crisis represents a particular opportunity to support the regional development of the historically neglected border zones. But if donors remain exclusively focused on humanitarian assistance, Colombia may miss an opportunity for long-term development, and **vulnerable migrants will have few prospects beyond emergency relief**.

A development-based approach can succeed. Colombia has many advantages. Colombians share a common language,

culture, and history with Venezuelans. Although Colombia has no significant history as a migrant-receiving country, Colombians have experience of being refugees in Venezuela and of responding to internal displacement. Furthermore, the country has a vibrant private sector and the World Bank has also recently recognised Colombia as eligible for the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCF), becoming only the second eligible middle-income country (after Jordan) on the basis of its position as a receiving country for refugees and migrants.

What is **at stake is the shared future of Venezuela and Colombia**. If Venezuelans are empowered through jobs and education, they will be better equipped to ultimately return home and contribute to the rebuilding of a post-crisis Venezuela. If, on the other hand, we fail to invest in their human capital, a stable and prosperous Venezuela becomes less likely. Put simply, **how we treat Venezuelans in exile will shape the future trajectory of the country**. Meanwhile, the future stability of Colombia is also at stake: there is a growing risk of rising xenophobia in the border areas, which risks translating into a populist backlash in the context of the October 2019 local elections, and in the worst-case scenario, the spread of revolutionary politics.

## Survival migration

It is important to label the crisis. Beyond the region, the global public is unsure whether this is a refugee crisis or economic migration. **One possible label is ‘survival migration’** (*migración de supervivencia*) – a term I coined to capture situations in which people are fleeing fragile and failed states but are not recognised as refugees.<sup>2</sup> The **nearest parallel is the exodus of Zimbabweans from Mugabe’s regime in the early 2000s**. Between 2003 and 2010, around 2 million

Zimbabweans fled across to South Africa and other neighbouring states. Like Venezuelans, most were fleeing the economic consequences of the underlying political situation, rather than political persecution per se. Basic services were no longer available; poor governance and hyperinflation had ravaged the economy.

From a legal perspective, Venezuelans could certainly be recognised as refugees under the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. Most fit the regional refugee definition of fleeing “massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order”. The legal case is incontrovertible. And, in theory, all could be given ‘prima facie’ recognition but the value of refugee status comes mainly from the rights it offers.

The relevant question is: in this case, **what value would the ‘refugee’ label add?** Colombia already has a backlog of over 2000 people in its asylum system and registering Venezuelans for refugee status determination would be slow and cumbersome. When I asked the UNHCR staff member at the Cúcuta border how many of the roughly 50,000 Venezuelans per day crossing the Simón Bolívar Bridge enquire about asylum, he said it was around five on average. In practice, most Venezuelans are protected against forced return, they have access to some basic humanitarian support, and, with registration, can access many of the same rights and social services as Colombian nationals. Meanwhile, **many asylum seekers actually find themselves in a worse situation than regularised Venezuelan ‘migrants’**: unlike PEP (*Permiso Especial de Permanencia*) carriers, they are not allowed to work and risk exclusion from the labour market for the duration of the asylum process.

Regardless of how Venezuelans are labelled, it is important to ensure that both the host states and displaced Venezuelans receive **the full support of global refugee governance, including through UNHCR’s engagement** and the application of development-based approaches to displacement, and international responsibility-sharing, as envisaged by the Global Compact on Refugees and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). And, given the circumstances that Venezuelans are fleeing, they must be guaranteed the rights afforded to refugees.

## Recalibrating humanitarian assistance

The humanitarian crisis is real, and it requires immediate relief at the borders and within Colombia, including through ongoing donor support for national and international NGOs. Food assistance, emergency shelter, and access to information on rights and services are being provided at the main border areas and must continue to be available. But there are three areas in which reflection is needed relating to humanitarian aid.

First, a number of international NGOs and donors are advocating cash assistance to Venezuelans. In the Colombian context, however, there is some evidence that **cash assistance may be problematic**. A number of Colombian sources, including elected



Photo: The Divine Providence community kitchen in Cúcuta, near the Venezuelan border.  
Credit: Alexander Betts.

officials, complained that cash risked exacerbating xenophobia and resentment among the host population, especially in the border areas. This is because in the context of a significantly informal economy (up to 50% of the economy at national level, and higher in the border regions), Venezuelans appear to be displacing Colombians from the informal economy. In areas from street vending to prostitution, prices are being undercut through increased supply, diminishing opportunities for Colombians. There are also concerns that many beneficiaries of these programmes do not even live in Colombia and so do not spend this money in Colombia. These concerns are contributing to xenophobia and local politicians at the departmental and municipal level voiced significant concerns relating to cash assistance programmes. This is a particular concern in light of the upcoming local elections in October. Instead of cash assistance, there is a need to consider alternatives that may offer opportunities for the host community. For example, as in Ethiopia and Kenya's refugee programmes, **forms of vouchers or artificial currency (like the World Food Programme's 'Bamba Chakula') could be used to license local businesses as designated providers for a given basket of goods and services.**<sup>3</sup>

Second, at the moment many Venezuelans access humanitarian aid for just the first few days following their arrival in Colombia. Thereafter, many risk 'going off a cliff'. **A more structured 'transition' or 'graduation' is needed that enables some ongoing assistance for the most vulnerable.** At the moment, the only assistance available beyond the first few days is through opening public services for people who have regularised their immigration status, or through faith-based organisations that assist regardless of status. In urban areas, for example, forms of **'temporary vouchers-for-housing'** might be considered that reduce the risk and offer viable return for Colombian landlords, while allowing arriving families to move from very short-term shelters into medium-term housing options.

Third, there is an urgent need to **depoliticise humanitarian assistance.** The delivery of assistance to Venezuelans in Colombia and the neighbouring countries needs to be clearly distinguished from the politics of regime change within Venezuela. To have credibility, assistance must be delivered with respect for humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. It is also important that a focus on Venezuelan migrants does not detract from the need for ongoing assistance in support of Colombia's internally displaced populations.

## Regularisation

Even though more than half of Venezuelans in Colombia are now regularised through PEP, **over half a million are still in an irregular situation.** The third phase of the PEP (known as 'PEP 3') offered an effective means for Venezuelans to regularise their stay. PEP 4 does not because it requires Venezuelans to have a (prohibitively expensive) passport from Venezuela to regularise their status. It effectively places Colombia's immigration policy in the hands of Nicolás Maduro.

### Irregularity leads to horrendous outcomes for migrants.

For example, I met 3-year-old Esteban with his parents at the new Migrant Centre in Bogotá. Originally from Venezuela, they had spent the previous week walking 1000km from Quito in Ecuador because they had faced xenophobic backlash there. After arriving in Bogotá, they were given 3 days shelter accommodation but now faced homelessness, unemployment, and had no capital to set up a business. But **irregularity is also likely to lead to negative externalities for Colombian society.**

Colombia **should revert to a model (like PEP 3) that allows Venezuelans to regularise their status irrespective of whether they have access to a passport.** There is no evidence that this will lead to a greater pull-factor given that the migration of Venezuelans is being driven mainly by push-factors.

## Rethinking job creation

Job creation is the most important but challenging aspect of turning migration into a development opportunity. To be sustainable, Venezuelans cannot simply displace Colombians; **new jobs must be created.** And that requires new investment from multilateral financial institutions, bilateral donors, and the private sector. The public sector employment service cannot fulfil this task alone. It currently has 9240 job vacancies across the entire country. In Norte de Santander it has 314 vacancies listed, and around 40,000 people registered as looking for work, of whom around 4000 are Venezuelans.

During the European 'refugee crisis', Germany and Sweden successfully created **dedicated structures for refugee and migrant employment.** These structures worked at two levels. First, with migrants themselves. Rather than expecting migrants just to adapt to the system, an adapted parallel system was created to ensure they were offered the most relevant, specialist advice and guidance for their needs. In the Colombian case, SENA, for example, might be supported to offer



Photo: The Divine Providence community kitchen in Cúcuta, near the Venezuelan border, is staffed by local and newly arrived volunteers. It serves up to 5000 meals every day to Venezuelan refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Credit: © UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo.

programmes that fit the needs of migrants. Second, with employers. Businesses were sensitised to the potential opportunity and business case for recruiting refugees and migrants. Existing business associations like ANDI could serve as the intermediary for such discussions.

Creating new jobs, though, relies upon **facilitating new investment**. This depends upon building a clear development plan with investable opportunities. In a number of refugee-hosting countries, from Jordan to Turkey, quotas have been used to define a ratio for refugee-to-citizen employment in order to be eligible for particular incentives. Such ratios ensure a perception that citizens also share in the benefits of job creation. A **1:1 ratio of one job for a Colombian for every new job created for a Venezuelan** may offer such an opportunity. A gendered approach (including, for example, a similar 1:1 ratio) may also be needed as female migrants suffer from additional discrimination.

Designing schemes for job creation relies upon first identifying market opportunities and then creating incentive structures in those areas. Initial research by UNHCR suggests that Venezuelans might fill important gaps in the **fast food sector or the seasonal flower industry**, for example. Public infrastructure programmes may also offer opportunities for both migrants and citizens.

## Border development plans

**Migration should be inserted within the national development plan**, which will soon be updated by the President. In addition, though, one of the greatest opportunities lies in creating specific sub-national plans, notably in the historically neglected and comparatively poor border regions. Historically, a number of other countries have used the mass influx of refugees as an opportunity for regional development in remote border areas. Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula benefited immensely from the local integration of Guatemalan refugees during the 1990s. Uganda has attracted development assistance to remote border areas in both the South-West and Nile Valley regions of the country, for example. The remote Turkana County area of Kenya has recently recognised the role that the refugee presence offers as an opportunity for regional development.

This requires **market studies of the sectors in which there is investment potential** in particular departments. In La Guajira, for instance, opportunities may exist to expand traditional sectors such as the ecotourism industry, while also creatively exploring non-traditional sectors. In Norte de Santander, opportunities were identified relating to textiles or agriculture, for example. Such market studies could then form the basis of clear development plans that present programmatic opportunities for donors and viable investment opportunities for companies motivated by a combination of core business and corporate social responsibility goals.



Photo: Venezuelan migrants sleep in front of the bus terminal in Maicao, September 2018.  
Credit: © UNHCR/Stephen Ferry.

A particular challenge for Colombia is that relations between the central and local governments are sometimes challenging. In some of the border areas, central government authority is weak and there is endemic corruption. These structural challenges are not easy to overcome but the migration crisis may offer an **opportunity to build a new relationship between central government and the border departments**. If municipal-level mayors and department-level governors can be involved in the creation of border development plans, and share in public credit for the outcomes, it may gradually contribute to more integrated governance.

## Cities of solidarity

Colombia faces two distinct development challenges relating to Venezuelans: those at the border and those in the major hosting cities. The Mexico City Plan of Action of 2004, developed in the context of the Cartagena Consultative Process and reaffirmed by the Brazil Plan of Action (2014), has **relevant concepts for refuge in Latin America: 'Cities of Solidarity' (Ciudades Solidarias) and 'Borders of Solidarity' (Fronteras Solidarias)**.<sup>4</sup> Both concepts are especially applicable to the context of Venezuelan migration. 'Cities of Solidarity' aimed to ensure the enjoyment of displaced populations' economic, socio-cultural, civil-political and legal rights in urban settings.

Supporting the integration and self-reliance of urban Venezuelans involves a series of elements, many of which might be externally supported through focused and clearly defined projects. These include the rehabilitation of infrastructure, investment in public services such as health and education, the creation of entrepreneurship opportunities including through training and finance, and urban renewal in heavily affected urban areas. **The key is to ensure that urban projects and programmes include both Venezuelans and Colombians**. Invoking the language of the Mexico City Plan of Action and the Brazil Plan of Action is likely to be useful

as it offers a specifically Latin American solution, and has already elicited considerable international donor support.

One particularly important means to promote economic opportunity in urban areas is through entrepreneurship. In theory, regularised Venezuelans can access existing government training programmes in Colombia. In practice, there remain barriers. For example, many programmes last 2 years and the PEP elapses within a 2-year window, preventing registration. **Designing a bespoke entrepreneurship programme for both migrants and host citizens, which integrates training, access to capital, and mentorship** could offer sustainable opportunities in cities like Bogotá, Medellín, and Barranquillo. These could be designed with direct input from the business sector, including the experience of relevant business associations.



Photo: The Divine Providence community kitchen in Cúcuta, near the Venezuelan border, October 2018. Credit: © UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo.

## Socio-economic inclusion model

A characteristic of the influx is Venezuelans' geographical dispersal around the country. One option in order to manage the geographical distribution of the most vulnerable migrant populations might be to create specifically designed settlements in order to concentrate aid delivery to the most vulnerable. In other parts of the world such as Kenya, settlements like the Kalobeyi settlement have been recently designed to offer integrated service provision and market-based opportunities to both refugees and the local host communities. Their advantage is that they offer a space for the most vulnerable and, within an integrated framework, may simultaneously offer opportunities to disenfranchised citizens, possibly including IDPs.

However, there are **a range of arguments against adopting camps or settlements in Colombia**. First, land is scarce and access to land is highly contested within Colombia. Identifying spaces for such settlements risks being divisive and exacerbating existing social conflicts. Second, the country has had a challenging recent experience of creating settlements for the demobilisation of armed actors, with limited success. Given these constraints, models based on sustainable spontaneous dispersal are likely to remain the most viable. Camps and settlements should be avoided, and full socio-economic inclusion should be supported through international responsibility-sharing.

## An International Conference on Venezuelan Migrants

The key to unlocking the development potential of Venezuelan migrants will be large-scale investment in the Colombian economy. Such investment should come from the World Bank, the IADB, international donors, and the business sector. This will need to be undertaken through a coherent, structured and credible process. It will have to involve four steps:

- i) Building a **clear vision** for including Venezuelan migration in national development plans;
- ii) Undertaking **research and engaging in dialogue** to identify particular sectors of opportunity that can support particular *Ciudades Solidarias* and *Fronteras Solidarias*;
- iii) Outlining a **series of programmes and projects** for the border zones and cities, which benefit both migrants and citizens;
- iv) **Pitching these plans of action** to prospective donors and investors.

An international conference may offer a vehicle and focal point around which to structure such a process. **Historically, the International Conference on Refugees in Central America (CIREFCA) of 1989** offered such a process in support of the self-reliance and local integration of hundreds of thousands of displaced Central Americans.<sup>5</sup> It focused on refugees, internally displaced persons, externally displaced persons, and returnees. The conference focused on seeing the integration of refugees and displaced persons as a potential development opportunity, and it attracted around half a billion dollars of investment, mainly from European donors and the United States. Crucially, the conference was not a one-off pledging conference but a multi-year process that built trust and credibility, and included concrete follow-up mechanisms. It involved leadership by an inter-agency secretariat.

**An International Conference on Venezuelan Migrants** (*La Conferencia Internacional Sobre Los Migrantes Venezolanos*), convened for example in Bogotá would serve as a catalyst for a development-based approach. It would offer a context in which to leverage existing commitments by the World Bank and others in order to elicit support for a development-based model. In order to be effective, such a conference would probably need to keep in mind the following elements:

- i) It would need to be a conference **for the entire region**, and include Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile, for example, within the project and programme submissions;
- ii) It would require a small upfront investment by donors in the creation of a **conference secretariat and steering**

**committee**, whose role would be to manage the process and develop projects and programmes in keeping with the ethos of ‘Venezuelan migration as an opportunity for development’;

- iii) It would need to work **collaboratively with existing structures and processes**, notably the Quito Process, the UNHCR-IOM joint Platform under the oversight of Special Envoy Eduardo Stein, and the upcoming GFMD to be held in Quito;
- iv) The approach could potentially be one of the first **Solidarity Conferences envisaged by the new Global Compact on Refugees**.

In order to manage such a process, a key step would be for the donor community to support greater secretariat capacity including within the central governments of affected host countries like Colombia.

## Borrowing from existing governance mechanisms

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. A range of governance innovations, applied in other contexts, have applicability to Colombia. In particular, **UNHCR’s Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)** may offer a framework for thinking about development-based approaches to a large-scale influx. In part because the Venezuelan crisis has not been labelled a ‘refugee’ crisis, the CRRF has not yet been considered as directly relevant. But in its pilots elsewhere in the world it has created governance solutions of relevance to some of the structural challenges facing Colombia.

For example, in Uganda, it has created a **mechanism to bridge coordination across government departments, between national and local government, and across UN agencies**. It involves a secretariat to lead the process and a multi-stakeholder steering group, comprising relevant line ministries, local government, international organisations, NGOs, and the affected community. It is working on creating financing mechanisms that empower local governments but insulate external funding from potential sources of corruption.

## Acknowledgements

This report represents the independent reflections of the author. Nevertheless, I am especially grateful for the practical support and feedback of Vicente Encandia, David Khoudour, Jennifer Laakso, Felipe Muñoz, and John Patterson, as well as the wide range of people who made time to speak to me during my mission to Colombia.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> World Bank Group (2018), *Migración Desde Venezuela a Colombia* (Washington DC: World Bank Group); Fedesarrollo (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Betts (2013), *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Betts et al (2018), *Self-Reliance in Kalobeyei? Socio-Economic Opportunities for Refugees in North-West Kenya* (Oxford: RSC).

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR (2004), Mexico City Plan of Action (Geneva: UNHCR) Online at:

<https://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/archivo/3453.pdf?file=fileadmin/Documentos/archivo/3453>

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Betts (2009), *Protection by Persuasion: International Cooperation in the Refugee Regime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

Cover photo: Venezuelan migrants crossing the Simón Bolívar Bridge from Venezuela to Colombia. Credit: Alexander Betts.

Colombia already has the GIFMM (*Grupo Interinstitucional de Flujos Migratorios Mixtos*) as a coordination platform co-chaired by UNHCR and IOM. The GIFMM could draw directly upon some of the insights for the CRRF in order to ensure a greater focus on development approaches, rather than mainly humanitarian response.

In addition to the CRRF, a range of other **pre-existing institutional innovations** are of great relevance to the Venezuelan crisis. These include the Global Compact on Refugees’ emphasis on Solidarity Conferences; the precedent of CIREFCA discussed above and its deliberate inclusion of ‘PRODERE’, a component that focused specifically on IDPs; and the ideas contained within the Mexico City and Brazil Plans of Action relating to the Cartagena Consultative Process.

## Why this matters

There is more at stake here than just humanitarian needs. Speaking to local politicians and Colombians in the border area reveals growing hostility and xenophobia. Although Colombia has the advantage that its population shares a common language and culture with Venezuela, people are increasingly concerned about economic competition and displacement. With local elections in October, there is a real possibility of populism. If the world gets this right and creates opportunities for Colombians and Venezuelans, it will shape a positive shared future for both countries. If it gets it wrong there is the risk that populism and even revolution could spread. Transitioning to a development-based approach offers an opportunity for Venezuela, Colombia, the wider region, and the international community. It creates the possibility to empower Venezuelans to become self-sufficient, to address longstanding structural challenges within Colombia, and to ensure the future stability of the Andean Community. This is a regional challenge that requires regionally-specific solutions and global solidarity.