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The huge humanitarian crisis of Venezuela

Report from [Save the Children](#)

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The deteriorating economic and political conditions in Venezuela have caused a huge humanitarian crisis that has not received as much attention and concern as it really should. Four million Venezuelans have already left their country in the last [5] years (and that number is expected to reach 5 million by the end of year), these figures are closely comparable to the number of refugees that fled Syria during the country's 8-year violent civil war.

This number is steadily increasing. An estimated 2,000 people cross the Venezuelan border into [Colombia](#) every day; half of them with the intention of permanently resettling and the other half returning to Venezuela with basic supplies like food and medicines. The Government of Colombia estimates that 1.1 million people – including Venezuelans and returning Colombians – have arrived in Colombia although the true number is likely to be much higher.

What is the situation in Venezuela?

These numbers are staggering when you consider that there is no active fighting happening in the country and that this is a purely economic, man-made, huge humanitarian crisis of Venezuela. Even more staggering is how wealthy Venezuela used to be and how envied the availability of free universal healthcare and education in the country once was. Nowadays hospital staff tell patients to bring their own disinfectant and medicines with them if they want to be seen and regular nationwide blackouts mean operations are ill-advised. It is for these reasons that you'll find streams of expecting mothers crossing the border into Colombia through informal and dangerous routes in order to give birth in the hospitals there (because going into labour is considered an 'emergency' which would be treated under the Colombian healthcare system for free regardless of legal status). Soaring prices and supply shortages mean a lack of nutritious food and vitamins for pregnant women; it also means a lack of ante-natal scans, including any pre-screening for any potential issues with the mother or baby.

What is Save the Children doing?

Recognising the desperate situation expecting mothers in Venezuela were facing and the mounting burden on the Colombian health care system, Save the Children's Emergency Health Unit opened a sexual and reproductive health clinic in Maicao, approximately 10km from the Colombia-Venezuela border in April this year. The clinic provides prenatal care, postnatal care, mental health services, family planning resources and treatment for sexually transmitted infections for Venezuelan migrants and returning Colombians. When they are due to give birth, Save the Children refers pregnant women to the hospital in Maicao to ensure they receive free quality healthcare. The clinic also provides services for women who are gender-based violence survivors. So far, more than 1,800 patients have accessed the clinic's services. When I visited the clinic this July with a journalist from [the Economist](#) we spoke with many women who told us of the practical impossibility of finding or affording contraception, medical care or supplies in Venezuela. Moreover, those who did get to a hospital did so at their peril. Alicia*, who was 40 weeks pregnant when she came into our clinic for a scan, told us that she decided to move to Colombia after her nine-year old girl almost lost her leg due to a repeated knee infection caused by the lack of sterile operating equipment in Venezuela. That experience along with her previous difficult pregnancy there two years earlier convinced her it was time to leave; "I almost gave birth outside, in the hospital grounds, because they couldn't take me and I had to wait for a space to become available. It was hard. Nowadays everything is difficult in Venezuela."

What has happened to the education system?

And it isn't just healthcare that has crumbled. Children's access to [education](#) is also in great peril. Many of the millions who have left are teachers leaving behind run-down schools and emptying classrooms as less and less people can afford to send their children to school, even if it is free. When inflation is at well over 1 million percent, the cost of notebooks and uniforms becomes a 'luxury' to dispense with. As more and more Venezuelans move to neighbouring countries, the burden on local schools increases while the same economic hardships facing these incoming Venezuelans means the financial barriers to children going to school remain high. This is why the other way in which Save the Children is assisting on the Venezuela response is through the opening of temporary learning centres in some of the informal settlements Venezuelans are residing in.

There are over a dozen or so informal settlements in Colombia's Maicao. 'Homes' made of reused waste materials, scrap metal and tarp all cobbled together and coated in flimsy plastic sheeting. It's incredibly hot and humid there and sandy winds whip everything. There are no wash facilities (not allowed because it would make the settlement seem more permanent) and people facing this huge humanitarian crisis in Venezuela rely on NGOs like ours truck in drinking water and offer cash assistance.

Save the Children has set up Temporary Learning Centres

Temporary Learning Centres are a place for children who live in the settlements and who aren't enrolled in formal education to still learn skills in numeracy, literacy and emotional learning. It is an opportunity to allow children who have missed out to catch up on what they've missed with the chance of enrolment in school. Children are so eager to learn and despite the brutally basic conditions they live in, their primary wish is to attend school and to get an education.

As one 12-year old boy I spoke with told me he learned at our TLCs, "we all have the right to life, to have a nationality, we have the right to study, we have the right to everything because we are all equal and so we all have rights."

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