



# Toward More-Effective Multilateral Responses to the Venezuelan Crisis

A Discussion Paper by Thomas Legler

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## Context

At first glance it would appear as if the prospects are bleak for regional and global multilateralism to play a meaningful role in the Venezuelan crisis. The multilateral system is in crisis and apparently cannot undertake decisive actions in response to the needs of Venezuela's citizens. However, the UN Human Rights Council, the International Organization for Migration, the Lima Group, the Organization of American States (OAS), the OAS Working Group dedicated to migration from Venezuela, the Pan American Health Organization, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the United Nations special envoy for refugees and migrants continue efforts to address the Venezuelan crisis. The purpose of the following six recommendations is to strengthen those efforts.

## Recommendations

### **Prioritize the multilateral agenda with a humanitarian focus.**

The generalized, complex, multidimensional, cross-border, and dynamic nature of Venezuela's crisis creates competing priorities for multilateral responses. Issues related to democracy, development, and security all require international attention. However, the magnitude and urgency of the human tragedy taking place inside Venezuela and among the neighboring countries through the migration crisis demands that multilateral actors prioritize humanitarian concerns.

### **Develop a temporary and a long-term framework for multilateral efforts related to Venezuela.**

Despite the urgency of humanitarian responses, the aforementioned nature of the Venezuelan crisis is such that there are no fast or easy solutions for the multiple problems within

the country. Irrespective of whether democracy is restored or if short-term human rights improvements occur, the truth is that the human, social, educational, health, and development consequences of the crisis will take many years to improve and may only do so with external assistance.

### **Use both political and specialized technical multilateralism to resolve the Venezuelan crisis.**

It is important to keep in mind that the situation in Venezuela requires two types of functionally distinct multilateral responses, one political and the other nonpolitical. The multilateralism of political governance is essential in the sense that in the highly polarized political and social environment of contemporary Venezuela, it is probable that a peaceful, negotiated political solution to the crisis will only be found with outside mediation.

On the other hand, multilateral specialized technical assistance is urgently needed to address Venezuela's humanitarian challenges, including public health and education problems, and the challenges of moving more than two million migrants and refugees across borders. Given that Venezuelans are confronted with adversity in all areas of their lives, these forms of multilateral assistance should be apolitical and unconditional, regardless of party lines or ideologies.

### **Multilateral actors must adopt positive ways to independently leverage the negative elements of the Venezuelan government.**

Diverse multilateral organizations and their member states, including the European Union, the Lima Group, the OAS, and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), have applied a series of negative leveraging methods to pressure the government of President Nicolas Maduro to change its behavior in relation to democracy, elections, human rights, and dialogue. These



methods include condemnatory declaratory diplomacy, diplomatic isolation, and targeted sanctions. To date, these measures have not brought Venezuela closer to a solution to its crisis; rather, they have increased the determination of its government to resist their efforts and prevent these actors from helping the Venezuelan citizenry. Currently, there are few positive incentives for the Venezuelan government to cooperate with multilateral actors and play a more constructive role to resolve the country's problems.

### **Complex multilateralism is the road to take, but ensure multilateral negotiating opportunities for nongovernmental actors.**

Venezuela's humanitarian challenges require the combined efforts of governments, intergovernmental organizations, and transnational networks of actors from civil society, or what has been called complex multilateralism. In this sense, there is a vast reserve of unexploited energy, resources, and experience among nongovernmental organizations and common citizens, in the Americas and in the world, that may be of benefit to Venezuela. However, in many cases, these nonstate actors require multilateral negotiating opportunities to help coordinate their actions and maximize their potential contribution. For example, the new United Nations special representative for Venezuelan migrants and refugees, Eduardo Stein, is a potential multilateral interlocutor who could help coordinate nongovernmental efforts in this area.

### **The Lima Group must create a management structure to play a more constructive role with respect to Venezuela.**

The creation of the Lima Group is symptomatic of the failure of the OAS to arrive at a consensus on a course of action vis-à-vis Venezuela. The Lima Group will continue to exist as long as the Permanent Council and the General Assembly of the OAS remain deadlocked with respect to the situation in Venezuela. On the other hand, the Lima Group also reflects a broader international trend toward the less formal multilateral governance. Its

informality and membership (not including the United States) provide it the flexibility to align with the government of the United States in some decisions while retaining the ability to take independent courses of action and develop associations with civil society actors.

However, unless the Lima Group is to continue simply as a mechanism for generating declarations critical of the Venezuelan government, it must create a managerial structure in order to coordinate and sustain more-ambitious courses of action. One possibility, in line with the experience of the Commonwealth of Nations with respect to crisis among its member states, is to create a troika of countries authorized to act on behalf of the members. The troika may help to cover/dischage the multilateral leadership deficit that currently affects the Americas, serving as a mechanism to open lines of communication with the Maduro government and the opposition, to negotiate and explore multilateral action with other international actors such as the European Union and China, and to officiate the discussion to coordinate humanitarian action involving nongovernmental actors in the Americas. There are various countries with broad merits in this area, such as Canada, Costa Rica, and Mexico, that may all be acceptable candidates for such a troika.

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#### **About the Author**

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