



# Venezuelan Migration in the Context of COVID-19

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## General Context

In December 2019, the existence of what is now called COVID-19 was announced, the initial outbreak of which occurred in the city of Wuhan, China, and on March 11, 2020, was declared a pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Worldwide, containment measures have created full or partial standstills across sectors and different economic, social, and educational levels, thereby halting the work activity of many people. For Latin America, the arrival of this pandemic has demonstrated the existing inequalities in the region and structural problems related to its economic activities, trade partners, living conditions of citizens, access/availability of technologies, and certainly the precariousness—on different scales—of health systems, with a total of 990,314 confirmed infected and 44,371 deaths as of June 5, 2020.<sup>2</sup> According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, COVID-19 arrived in the region at a time of great economic weakness, as the region's economy is forecast to contract by 5.3 percent before the end of the year, pushing almost 30 million more people into poverty.<sup>3</sup> This has meant that the most affected vulnerable populations, including migrants and refugees who—given their status as foreigners—are generally excluded from state policies, have greater difficulty accessing information and health services, in addition to being targets of discrimination and xenophobia.

## Context of Venezuelan Migration and COVID-19 in Latin America

The Venezuelan migration movement is the largest in the region today and—according to declarations of the Organization of American States—second only to global Syrian migration with a total of 5,093,987 people, of whom 69.1 percent are in just four countries: Colombia (36 percent), Peru (17 percent), Chile (9 percent), and Ecuador (7.1 percent).<sup>4</sup> The causes of this emigration can be summed up in two major nonexclusive aspects: the lack of

guarantee of their political and civil rights, and the existence of a complex humanitarian crisis that prevents them from meeting basic needs.

The situation for Venezuelans in the countries of the region was already complicated by various circumstances, and COVID-19 has deepened their problems: (1) limitations on their economic income due to informality of work (from day to day) or provision of services (domestic, care, restaurants, among others) that are restricted by quarantine, generating collateral problems such as lack of food and access to services, and increasing homelessness/evictions from housing, (2) fear of contagion/disease, stigmatization or eviction due to lack of care in health facilities, either because of their irregular status or limited resources to cover services, and (3) elevated risks due to border closures, passage using irregular roads to leave the country (with the dangers that entails), limitations on a “safe” return to Venezuela (where the situation is more serious because of the country's own conditions and health system),<sup>5</sup> and restrictions on access to services and goods that cannot be found in Venezuela (forcing migrants to commute to the border daily, creating pendulum migration). In short, it is a human group in need of protection that runs a double risk: that of being infected and/or being revictimized for not having adequate mechanisms to provide assistance in this situation.

## Immediate and Continuous Actions for Organizations, Civil Society, and Citizens In General

- Raise awareness about the situation of Venezuelans according to their migratory status, understanding that each has a different situation and therefore requires a different response. Differentiate solutions between (a) those with tourist status



who are suspended from returning due to the situation, (b) pendulum migrants, who make a living in border areas but live in/return to Venezuela, and (c) Venezuelans in need of protection: refugees, with or having requested asylum, with chronic diseases; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex population; children; women; and irregular migrants.

- Map and disseminate information about organizations on the ground. This includes sharing telephone numbers, email addresses, street addresses, and business names, so that migrants know where to go and organizations can continue to document and address complaints, ensuring access to justice and aid.
- Support and enhance existing initiatives. Prioritize and raise awareness about the initiatives that are already underway from community organizations and groups on the ground. Their experience and prior knowledge of the situation allows them to quickly identify the most vulnerable as well their priority resource needs, such as food, medicine, clothing, and housing/refuge, among others.
- Find mixed mechanisms (in-person/virtual) for providing services and information about aid and processes for the migrant population. Share social networks, WhatsApp groups, web resources, and evaluate possible alliances with local radio/TV stations that can broadcast this information among those who do not have access to the internet through posters in communities or by word of mouth through neighborhood leaders.
- Propose economic and also psychosocial support to migrant populations through virtual group meetings, activities, and teleconferences.
- Carry out virtual advocacy using the available dissemination channels (social networks, web, blogs, YouTube channels, among others) of organizations or civil society associations to increase visibility about the situation of these vulnerable groups through communiqués, virtual protests such as mass tweeting, and informational messages, raising awareness about complaints and requests.
- Involve migrant communities and citizens from Venezuela in aid and support initiatives, including fundraising campaigns, generating media content, or sharing information.
- In border areas, ensure (a) the protection of humanitarian channels, infrastructure, and biosecurity controls, (b) the presence of immigration officials trained in the health and legal controls of this population, (c) the presence of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ambassadors (or contact with them), to protect people with special needs (medical care, pregnancies, chronic diseases, treatments) who need to travel or request aid in the destination country, thus ensuring their right to mobility and protection.
- Denounce and reject anti-immigrant speech, the criminalization of people returning to Venezuela, and the construction of a narrative around them as “virus propagators” and

therefore enemies of collective society from civil society spaces of action.

- Raise awareness among the general population about the difficult situation of the returnees (in Venezuela and transit countries). Generate campaigns to promote empathy for a population seeking, during this difficult situation, to rejoin a society fragmented by its own political, social, and economic and existential conflicts, as well as their own family reunification.
- Evaluate the creation of a virtual space that consolidates information created to support this migrant population, including telephone numbers, safe routes, availability of aid, assistance programs, and communiqués from international agencies, which all may be valuable as reference information for potential beneficiaries as well as researchers, decision-makers, and political actors.
- Diversify the forms of advocacy and operation of civil society in making these issues visible to assist the population and maintain spaces of communication. There are advocacy opportunities in traditional media (radio, TV, local press), internet or web media, and word-of-mouth neighborhood groups.

## **Immediate and Continuous Actions in Venezuela for Political Actors, Officials, Civil Society, and Organizations**

- Identify political actors and/or authorities who can implement support programs for Venezuelans abroad with care needs during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Assess the possibility of financial aid from the host or transitory state to support Venezuelans abroad during the COVID-19 crisis (directly or through organizations).
- Build alliances between embassies across the region and non-governmental organizations, international agencies, and civil society to develop a more effective response.
- Offer and publish general balance sheets that show updated statistics on the situation of Venezuelans abroad in the midst of the pandemic.

## **Immediate and Continuous Actions for Countries in the Region**

- Comply with the various pronouncements made by international bodies on migrants, displaced persons, refugees, or asylum and shelter seekers.<sup>6</sup>
- Include migrants within aid and assistance policies targeting vulnerable populations.
- Promote campaigns against xenophobia and stigmas due to nationality or health status, highlighting the benefits of



migration and its integration. Aim them at citizens and officials from state, immigration, and media institutions in the recipient countries.

- Ensure/supervise a safe return for Venezuelans. States and their authorities should refrain from persuading this population to return to Venezuela without first verifying and ensuring measures of protection, assistance, and access to adequate information.
- Resume and expedite pending legalization processes to ensure greater stability for people via expanded access to employment, health services, and integration of Venezuelan/foreign health professionals who can provide support in this situation.
- Insist on the publication of gender-differentiated statistics and the implementation of policies for assistance, care, and prevention of risks targeting women and girls. Females are often more exposed because of their role as caregiver (at home or work) and situations of gender-based violence, as well as a lack of sexual and reproductive medical care.
- Publish statistics differentiated by nationality to show the number of foreign and Venezuelan infections, recoveries, or deaths due to COVID-19.
- Evaluate the possibility of accessing international funding or support (such as that of the International Development Bank communiqué of March 26, 2020) that could serve to implement policies targeting these vulnerable populations.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Pan American Health Organization, “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19),” accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.paho.org/es/tag/enfermedad-por-coronavirus-covid-19>.
- <sup>2</sup> Total for Latin America from Pan American Health Organization, “Cumulative Confirmed and Probable COVID-19 Cases Reported by Countries and Territories in the Americas,” accessed June 5, 2020, <https://ais.paho.org/phip/viz/COVID19Table.asp>.
- <sup>3</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Measuring the Effects of COVID-19 to Think about Reactivation,” April 21, 2020, [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45445/1/S2000286\\_es.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45445/1/S2000286_es.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> R4V, “Response for Venezuelans,” updated March 6, 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform>.
- <sup>5</sup> The COVID-19 National Impact Survey from May 2020 reveals that the Venezuelan health system is not able to cope with the pandemic, with a resource scarcity of up to 70 percent. Human Rights Watch, “Urgent Aid Needed to Combat Covid-19,” May 26, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/26/venezuela-urgent-aid-needed-combat-covid-19>.

## Long-Term Actions for Countries in the Region

- Consider legislation and public policies that promote effective integration processes for migrants, including assessments of migrants’ technical and professional skills to better incorporate them into different areas of social and productive life in that country. This would promote greater regularity, stability, and better use of human and intellectual capital, reducing their vulnerability.
- Think about mechanisms and legislative frameworks that exist or could be created between or among countries in the region to address the issue of human mobility and migration adapted to the Latin American context.

## Final Commentary

It is important that the different actors to whom these recommendations are directed take into consideration the internal political situation and conflict in Venezuela. The illegitimacy of Nicolás Maduro’s presidency and the limited capacity of the National Assembly inhibit its ability to provide consular protection or adequately address the pandemic’s effect on Venezuelans abroad and worsen the precarious situation of migrants in other countries and their families in Venezuela, as they no longer receive assistance through remittances.

- <sup>6</sup> International Organization for Migration, “IOM Declaration on COVID-19 and Mobility,” March 20, 2020, [https://iom-nederland.nl/images/Covid\\_19/IOM\\_COVID-19\\_Key\\_Messages\\_ES.pdf](https://iom-nederland.nl/images/Covid_19/IOM_COVID-19_Key_Messages_ES.pdf); Organization of American States, Resolution No. 01/20, “Pandemic and Human Rights in the Americas,” <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/pdf/Resolucion-1-20-es.pdf>; R4V, “Regional Guidelines on Assistance to Refugees, Migrants, and Host Communities in the Context of COVID-19,” <https://r4v.info/es/documents/download/75562>; Organization of American States, *Guide to Inclusive and Rights-Focused Responses to COVID-19 in the Americas*, ch. 7, “Considerations for an Inclusive Response for Internally Displaced Persons, Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees,” [http://www.oas.org/es/sadye/publicaciones/GUIA\\_SPA.pdf](http://www.oas.org/es/sadye/publicaciones/GUIA_SPA.pdf); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Legal Considerations on Access to the Territory for Persons in Need of International Protection in the Context of the Response to COVID-19,” <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/75552.pdf>.





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