



**SPRING 2019 THE VENEZUELAN
MIGRATION CRISIS IN
COLOMBIA:**

**LOCAL GOVERNANCE
CHALLENGES**

The Venezuelan Migration Crisis in Colombia: Local Governance Challenges

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SPRING 2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approach

- The International Republican Institute (IRI) designed and conducted qualitative research in the city of Cali, Colombia, and the Colombian border town of Villa del Rosario to better understand how the Venezuelan migration crisis¹ is straining local and national governance institutions in Colombia. IRI set out to identify the most acute governance challenges in areas that have received this influx and to learn how local governments are preparing to respond to the demands they generate. IRI also wanted to understand the gaps in the current response, as well as the needs and perspectives — especially those related to governance — of Venezuelan migrants and Colombian residents.
- IRI asked a Colombian research firm, *Centro Nacional de Consultoría* (CNC), to facilitate focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) from January to February 2019 with Venezuelan migrants, Colombian residents and government and nongovernmental (NGO) representatives from Cali and Villa del Rosario.
- This report draws on data from eight FGDs and 10 IDIs, encompassing a total of 147 participants.
- As is common in qualitative research, findings from these FGDs and IDIs do not necessarily represent the opinions of all Venezuelan migrants in Colombia or Colombian residents. Moreover, they are a snapshot in time.

Findings

Finding #1: The influx of Venezuelan migrants puts an immense strain on local services in Colombia and dealing with its immediate impact hampers planning and strategy to effectively address emanating issues.

Colombia's national government has not coordinated sufficiently with local governments to offer a concerted response.

Finding #2: Though both Venezuelan migrant and Colombian discussants agreed that Colombians were initially open and welcoming to Venezuelan migrants, discussants from both groups noted that tensions associated with the growing Venezuelan presence are increasingly pervasive.

Finding #3: Most Venezuelan migrant discussants had limited understanding or were unaware of how the Colombian government or other key stakeholders can help their situation.

Finding #4: Although Venezuelan migrants are mostly grateful for and content with their host communities in Colombia, they reported facing serious challenges meeting their basic needs, including trouble securing documentation, housing and employment.

Finding #5: Political instability and lack of access to food and health services were among the key reasons why Venezuelan migrants decided to leave their country.

Finding #6: Some Venezuelan migrants underwent traumatic experiences during their journey to Colombia.

Finding #7: Venezuelan migrant discussants were divided when asked about their desired future. Some Venezuelan migrants would like to stay in Colombia, while others would like to return home to Venezuela only if the political and economic situations improved.

¹ While some departing Venezuelans are refugees, IRI will use the term "migration" to encompass all forms and motivations. We also recognize that the dire humanitarian situation has diminished voluntary movement and forced some individuals to flee from their homes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Government officials at all levels should focus planning and resource allocation on long-term strategic issues that warrant preparations and institutional strengthening to bolster the governance mechanisms needed to respond to the presence of Venezuelan migrants.

Recommendation 2: The national government of Colombia should proactively improve horizontal coordination (across agencies and with international partners) and vertical coordination (with local government and civil society organizations) to harmonize funding and programming solutions to the Venezuelan migration crisis. For example, the national government should consult local stakeholders and involve them in the formulation of policy and initiatives that directly affect their municipalities.

Recommendation 3: Political parties, national legislators and city councils should collaborate to better understand and address the challenges posed by mass migration. This should include strategic planning to identify long-term governance solutions that address these issues and mitigate intercommunal tensions. It is essential that stakeholders collaborate across ideological positions to devise meaningful solutions and avoid falling prey to polarizing stances that politicize the migrant crisis.

Recommendation 4: Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should work with local authorities to expand outlets for social interaction between Venezuelans and Colombians in order to build trust between the two populations. NGOs should also provide opportunities for Venezuelan migrants and refugees to showcase their culture, talents and skills through activities such as organized sports, art and educational opportunities. These activities may provide a much-needed platform to reduce prejudice and mitigate growing societal instability.

Recommendation 5: The government, the media and NGOs should articulate and amplify the perspectives and experiences of Venezuelan migrants in clear and accessible language to counter social instability and community fracturing. It is critical to raise awareness of the key challenges facing Colombian communities as a result of the migration crisis, particularly to address disinformation and counterfactual narratives that spread in the wake of this societal shock.

Recommendation 6: NGOs and local authorities should conduct proactive outreach and implement civic education initiatives to Venezuelan migrants. Such initiatives are particularly imperative in order to shift negative or fearful attitudes toward the government that may remain from the effects of poor governance in Venezuela. Not only could these programs help build trust among communities, but they will also help ensure self-reliance of migrants and allow a balance between host community resident and migrant populations prior to any escalation of tensions.

Recommendation 7: NGOs should provide psychosocial support and protection for Venezuelan migrants who have been victims of violence or human rights violations. Without such support, traumatic experiences not only impede quality of life, but could also manifest in increased reclusive behavior and undercut the potential for integration into Colombian society.

INTRODUCTION

More than 3.8 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants² have fled from their homes as the humanitarian situation continues to spiral downward.³ Driven by a range of factors, including food insecurity, the growing health crisis and widespread violence, this mass exodus represents one of the largest and fastest displacements in contemporary history.⁴ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) project that 5.3 million Venezuelans will flee their homes by the end of December 2019 if the current dynamics continue unabated.⁵

Colombia has borne the brunt of the crisis, having received more than 1.2 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants as of April 2019 — representing more than a quarter of the exodus.⁶ Venezuelan migrants are in dire need of humanitarian support, as many suffer from chronic and infectious diseases or require reproductive health and maternal care. The sharp increase in the number of medical patients is severely straining Colombia's resources, especially because many migrants have complex health needs.⁷ The number of reported cases of Venezuelans seeking medical care in the border region of North Santander alone skyrocketed from 182 in 2015 to 5,094 in 2018.⁸ Illegal armed groups are using the border for smuggling narcotics, arms and other contraband; in some places, they control the so-called “*trochas*,” or illegal trails through which many migrants cross daily.

This unprecedented crisis has the potential to undermine Colombia's shaky stability at a pivotal moment. Colombia was once in the reverse position; over the course of its 52-year internal armed conflict that came to a close in 2016, millions of individuals sought safe havens across the border, including in Venezuela.⁹ Amid ongoing struggles against other armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, ELN) and drug cartels, Colombian officials are still trying to implement the peace accords with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC).¹⁰ The FARC's demobilization has created power vacuums and territorial disputes across the country, further hindering effective governance.¹¹

As the crisis in Venezuela shows no signs of subsiding, host countries such as Colombia must consider long-term, democratic governance solutions in addition to addressing humanitarian needs. The complexity and urgency of the crisis necessitates a coherent and strategic response consisting not only of desperately needed humanitarian measures, but also steps to protect and improve democratic governance in order to secure Colombia's stability.

² Throughout this report, IRI may use the term “migrants” to reference refugees, returnees and migrants.

³ Betts, Alexander. “Research in Brief: Venezuelan Survival Migration as a Development Opportunity.” University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Center, *Reliefweb*, 11 Mar. 2019, reliefweb.int/report/colombia/research-brief-venezuelan-survival-migration-development-opportunity.

⁴ Selee, Andrew, et al. “Creativity amid Crisis: Legal Pathways for Venezuelan Migrants in Latin America.” *Migration Policy Institute* and OAS. Migration Policy Institute, Jan. 2019, www.migrationpolicy.org/research/legal-pathways-venezuelan-migrants-latin-america.

⁵ GIFMM and R4V, *Colombia: Situation Report — April 2019, Operation Portal: Refugee Situations*, UNHCR, data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/69770.

⁶ GIFMM and R4V, *Colombia: Situation Report — April 2019*.

⁷ *Venezuela's Humanitarian Emergency: Large-Scale UN Response Needed to Address Health and Food Crises*. *Human Rights Watch*, 11 Apr. 2019, www.hrw.org/report/2019/04/04/venezuelas-humanitarian-emergency-large-scale-un-response-needed-address-health.

⁸ *Venezuela's Humanitarian Emergency: Large-Scale UN Response Needed to Address Health and Food Crises*.

⁹ Some of these individuals — over 300,000 — were compelled to return to their country of origin as a result of the current crisis.

¹⁰ Composing militant communists and peasant self-defense groups, the FARC is the largest insurgent group in Colombia and the primary perpetrator of violence during the country's civil conflict. The FARC halted violence in 2016 after the passage of the peace accords and is currently in a period of reintegration.

¹¹ “Colombia.” *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/en-us/colombia.html.



IRI's Approach to Migration

Unprecedented migration flows are one of the most pressing challenges facing the world today — straining resources, fomenting political instability and presenting profound security challenges. Governments around the world are struggling to provide safety, basic services and legal resources for the new arrivals while coping with attendant problems such as human trafficking and the drug trade, extremism and transnational crime and the political instability that results from a large influx of migrants.

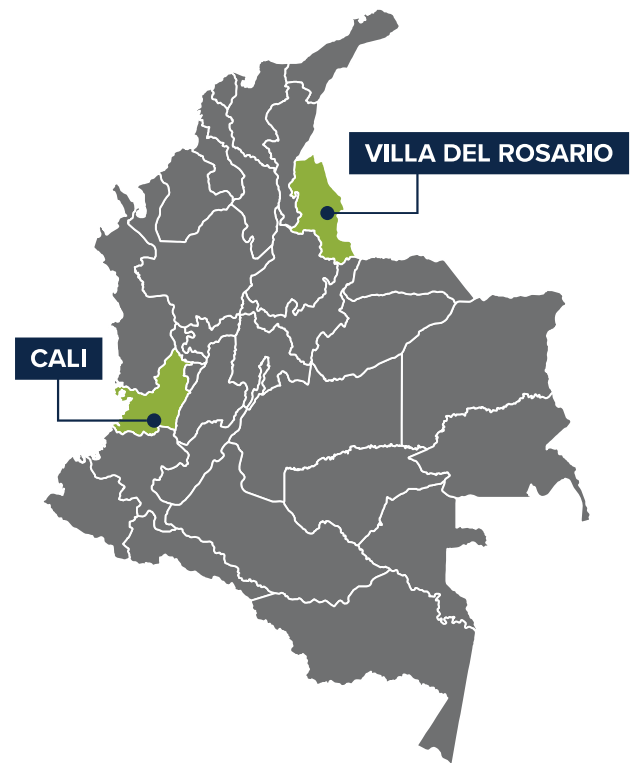
IRI approaches displacement and migration through the lens of democracy, human rights and governance. Recognizing that forced migration is both a driver and byproduct of instability, it is essential that governments and political actors — in conjunction with local community leaders — understand the perspectives and needs of refugees, migrants as well as citizens in order to strengthen democratic societies and create a more stable and prosperous future.

IRI deploys the Institute's substantial expertise in designing and implementing good governance programs to address and mitigate the challenges arising from migration, emphasizing three key elements: *research*, *coordination* and *connection*. IRI uses qualitative and quantitative research to provide objective information and analysis to better inform the responses of national and local governments, and helps the Institute to continually refine and improve our programs addressing migration. IRI coordinates with key stakeholders to support them in strategic planning and resource allocation in response to migrant crises — helping them to balance pressing humanitarian challenges with the needs of their own populations, while maintaining respect for the rule of law. IRI connects migrants to local government and civil society to address and understand their needs in order to foster social cohesion and respect for the rule of law.

METHODOLOGY

IRI designed and conducted qualitative research in Cali and the border town of Villa del Rosario to better understand how the Venezuelan migration crisis is straining local governance institutions in Colombia. Local and national government officials and civil society organizations have undertaken many efforts — mostly short-term, humanitarian assistance — to cope with this massive influx of people. IRI set out to identify the most acute governance challenges in the areas that receive this influx and to learn how local governments are preparing in order to respond to the demands they generate. IRI also wanted to understand the gaps in the current response, as well as the needs and perspectives — especially those related to governance — of Venezuelan migrants and Colombian residents.

IRI asked the Colombian research firm, Centro Nacional de Consultoría (CNC), to facilitate focus group discussions (FGDs) from January to February 2019 with Venezuelan migrants and Colombian residents from Cali and Villa del Rosario. Ensuring anonymity, CNC also conducted 10 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with government and NGO representatives to analyze their understanding of the situation, and to examine needs and gaps in the existing response. Using a pre-screening tool designed by IRI, CNC identified participants based on socioeconomic factors, ages ranging from 18 to 65, and, for Venezuelan migrants, the length of time they have been in Colombia, among other factors. IRI sought to understand a diversity of perspectives, including Afro-Latino and indigenous populations. As is common in qualitative research, findings from these FGDs and IDIs do not necessarily represent the opinions of all Venezuelan migrants in Colombia and Colombian residents.



IRI selected Villa del Rosario because it is one of the first communities encountered by Venezuelans who cross the bridge from their home country into Colombia. Border towns have borne enormous burdens associated with the influx, so this perspective was integral. In Villa del Rosario, IRI conducted three FGDs with Venezuelan refugees and migrants and two FGDs with Colombian residents.

Cali is a city southwest of the nation's capital, Bogotá, that has begun to receive more and more refugees and migrants as the border towns and Bogotá become overcrowded. Cali's infrastructure and response has been particularly strained, as evidenced by the buckling camp environments and lack of services referenced by discussants. In Cali, IRI conducted two FGDs with Venezuelan refugees and migrants and one with Colombian residents.

Venezuelan Migrant Participant Profile Snapshot

- More than half of Venezuelan migrant discussants had been in Colombia for six months to a year.
- All Venezuelan migrant discussants said they had trouble buying items essential for survival.

FINDINGS

Finding #1:

The influx of Venezuelan migrants puts an immense strain on local services in Colombia and dealing with its immediate impact hampers planning and strategy to effectively address emanating issues. Colombia's national government has not coordinated sufficiently with local governments to offer a concerted response.

Although the Colombian government's response has been laudable given its welcoming and open stance,¹² there remain gaps in policy frameworks, coordination and implementation.

Given the country's history of armed conflict and violence, Colombia's existing policy frameworks primarily address issues that were once most pressing considering its turbulent history — internal displacement, outflows and returns. Accordingly, not only do Colombian policy frameworks have major gaps to address migratory *inflows*, but the rapid pace of the Venezuelan crisis has left Colombia ill-prepared to receive such a large influx of migration. Despite commendable efforts to strengthen policy, government responses have been reactive, slow to catch up and ambiguous.

The national government's incoherent policy responses have ripple effects at the local level; these deficiencies do not allow or provide sufficient legal backing for local government's public spending, asylum services and reception of migrations, especially at the current volume.¹³ Moreover, this incoherence allows local governments to develop their own responses based on political will and resources available. The result is a raft of widely ranging responses, from Cúcuta, on the border with Venezuela, which declares that Venezuelans should not stay long term, to Medellín, which is in central Colombia and is relatively open.¹⁴

The influx of migrants presents a tremendous strain on local government services, particularly the education and health sectors.

"I think the biggest challenge [for the] local governments is to be able to maintain health and education services. You do not know when you're going to get sick and if you do not have a special permit to stay, the problem will be stronger. Then each day, more [Venezuelan migrants] will come, and if there are no resources, I believe that at any time the hospital network will collapse."¹⁵
—Interviewee from the national government of Colombia

“

I think [the greatest challenge] is the institutional and political stability [which is in tension with] the decision-making [needed] to give support to [the Venezuelan] population. [Planning] diminishes [because of the need] to attend [to] this population [so] you lose political stability and governability.”

- Local government interviewee

¹² Baddour, Dylan. "Colombia's Radical Plan to Welcome Millions of Venezuelan Migrants." *The Atlantic*, 30 Jan. 2019, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/colombia-welcomes-millions-venezuelans-maduro-guaido/581647/.

¹³ Kalaw, Angelo Paolo T. "Bogota, Colombia: Scaling Up Local Response and Innovating towards Better Urban Inclusion." *Ash.harvard.edu*, Mar. 2019, ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/sypa_final_-_30_april_20191.pdf.

¹⁴ "Bogota, Colombia: Scaling Up Local Response and Innovating towards Better Urban Inclusion."

¹⁵ Quotes in this report may have been minimally treated to increase clarity. The original voices have been preserved to the maximum extent possible, and may retain errors in syntax, grammar, or word choice.

“The Venezuelan health system collapsed, so there are many highly complex patients who are coming to Colombia because there are no medicines [and] are being relatively well attended to [at hospitals] at no cost to many of them. That is generating an impact on the Colombian health system, which by itself [has] complex structural problems that cannot adequately serve all Colombians.”

—Interviewee from the Secretariat of Security and Justice, Cali

Colombia’s national government has committed significant amounts of support to address Venezuelan migrants and host communities — including a pledge of \$228 million¹⁶ to fund health services and address humanitarian needs in border departments. However, some interviewees noted that there is no additional funding allocated to local governments to implement the national government’s policies.¹⁷ National budgets and transfers are relatively inflexible, and local governments are often left to fend for themselves.¹⁸ This situation becomes particularly precarious as local governments decide to expand existing services to contend with the surge of migrant arrivals.¹⁹ National government officials rarely travel to districts struggling with the migration crisis and would benefit from enhanced consultations and visits to enhance their planning and coordination. Colombian discussants also mentioned corruption and favoritism as preventing a coordinated government response.

Insufficient policy frameworks and initiatives also hamper the government’s ability to plan and coordinate, leading to some political instability. As one interviewee from the local government noted, “I think [the greatest challenge] is the institutional and political stability [which is in tension with] the decision-making [needed] to give support to [the Venezuelan] population. [Planning] diminishes [because of the need] to attend [to] this population [so] you lose political stability and governability.” This local government interviewee also noted some adverse impact on the ability to govern effectively:

“Well, I think that new challenges were created [for] governance, the department was [previously] very organized, [but] new commitments [arose] to this population.” Further complicating these dynamics are time constraints; local government elections will be held in October 2019, which means that local officials have little time to design and implement coherent responses if they are to benefit electorally.

As Venezuelan migrants continue to stay in their Colombian host communities, the absence of long-term strategic planning and deficient national-local coordination will only compound pressures on services and social cohesion.

Finding #2:

Though both Venezuelan migrant and Colombian discussants agreed that Colombians were initially open and welcoming to Venezuelan migrants, discussants from both groups noted that tensions associated with the growing Venezuelan presence are increasingly pervasive.

Venezuelan migrant discussants said that they felt welcomed by, were thankful to and had a sense of immense solidarity with their Colombian hosts. Venezuelan migrant participants in Cali asserted, “The Colombians are very generous,” and “[We received] too many blessings.” One Venezuelan migrant interviewee noted that, six months ago, some Colombians brought the migrants food and gifts. Colombian discussants mirrored such sentiments, remarking that the Venezuelan migrants have integrated easily.

Underlying this sense of fraternity is the long-standing history of migration between the two countries. During the years of protracted conflict in Colombia, Colombians flooded into Venezuela looking for safety and work. The memory of that difficult experience has led the Colombian population to be more welcoming and accepting of the Venezuelan migrants now that the situation is reversed.²⁰

¹⁶ GIFMM and R4V, *Colombia: Situation Report — April 2019*.

¹⁷ Cúcuta, which is a city at the border with Venezuela, recently requested national government funds to help address issues associated with the migration influx. See Kalaw, “The Venezuelan Migration Wave to Bogota, Colombia: Scaling Up Local Response and Innovating towards Better Urban Inclusion.”

¹⁸ Kalaw, “The Venezuelan Migration Wave to Bogota, Colombia: Scaling Up Local Response and Innovating towards Better Urban Inclusion.”

¹⁹ Kalaw, “The Venezuelan Migration Wave to Bogota, Colombia: Scaling Up Local Response and Innovating towards Better Urban Inclusion.”

²⁰ Janetsky, Megan. “Here’s Why Colombia Opened Its Arms to Venezuelan Migrants — Until Now.” *Foreign Policy*, 14 Jan. 2019, foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/14/heres-why-colombia-opened-its-arms-to-venezuelan-migrants-until-now/.

However, our research also indicates that tensions are growing. Some working Venezuelan discussants believed that they were being paid less, treated unfairly and subjected to discrimination.

“Of course, at first it is a bit strong because you feel the look of ‘This is [a] Venezuelan, you have to be careful,’ and you felt like you were from another planet.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“[T]hey were abusing my work or getting more out of what I was earning. [My boss] paid me when she felt like it or what she [felt like giving me].”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“[Discrimination is] why there are many people here who reject us, that’s why they say that we take jobs from [them]. [It] is not because of the need. I still do not know what the minimum wage is. At least one day of work for 40,000 pesos (about \$12) seems worthy to me.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali

Many Colombian discussants alleged that there was an increase in petty crime, disease and prostitution as a result of the influx of Venezuelan migrants. Others believed that they have replaced Colombians at work. Resentment over Venezuelans’ receipt of humanitarian assistance was also widespread, as Colombian residents thought that they were struggling with the same issues and not receiving the same support.

“[The presence of Venezuelans is] negative because the Colombian people who are in such need. Many Colombians [wonder] why for them [and not] for us since we are having the same [problems] as them.”

–Colombian discussant, Villa del Rosario

“The consumption of drugs, HIV and what is happening because certain Venezuelans are practicing prostitution, [charging] 2,000, 3,000,

4,000 and 5,000 pesos.”

–Colombian discussant, Villa del Rosario

“Until the month of November, 100,000 Venezuelan people with AIDS had entered,²¹ those treatments are expensive, and here they get them for free. I want to protect the country because many of these girls already contaminated come to prostitution. Here in Cali, there is a problem where you leave at six, seven at night and see all those girls offering themselves to the taxi drivers. It’s confirmed by the government.”

–Colombian discussant, Cali

“They are leaving us poor; this municipality goes from bad to worse. People earn here in pesos, transfer it to Venezuela and there they buy their belongings. That is, if they consume what they are earning there, then here there is no investment. They take it here and spend it in another country.”

–Colombian discussant, Villa del Rosario

“Here, there are families that have lost their jobs because of the Venezuelans. Your family is unemployed, and you see the Venezuelans working.”

–Colombian discussant, Villa del Rosario

Interviewees from the NGO and government sectors noted that these negative sentiments have begun to take hold in Colombian communities; however, they posited that increases in crime and disease attributed to Venezuelan migrants are exaggerated.

“They attribute increased violence or insecurity and theft to the Venezuelan population. [But] statistics issued by INPEC, [*Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario*, the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute] do not show a significant growth of the Venezuelan population in prisons, so I do not know if it is a subject of perception.”

–Interviewee from an NGO

²¹ As of 2018, an estimated 7,700 Venezuelans with HIV are living in host countries, with almost 2,000 Venezuelans with HIV in Colombia. See “2019 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (December 2018).” UNHCR, [www.unhcr.org/en-us/partners/donors/5c330bc74/2019-regional-refugee-migrant-response-plan-refugees-migrants-venezuela.html?query=venezuela colombia hiv aids](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/partners/donors/5c330bc74/2019-regional-refugee-migrant-response-plan-refugees-migrants-venezuela.html?query=venezuela%20colombia%20hiv%20aids); Center for Global Health and MedGlobal. “Addressing the HIV Crisis among Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia.” *MedGlobal*, medglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Addressing-the-HIV-Crisis-among-Venezuelan-Migrants-in-Colombia.5.16.2019.pdf.

²² “Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela.” *Operational Portal: Refugee Situations*, UNHCRdata2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform.

²³ GIFMM and R4V, Colombia: *Situation Report — April 2019*.



It would be wrong to say that the massive arrival of Venezuelans has generated an increase in crime. It is not true, and it is not shown by the statistics. [This same trend] happened when [Colombians] went to live in Venezuela or Chile or other countries; [people] in those countries blame the Colombians for the crime, it is not true. What happens? When a Venezuelan commits a crime and [it] goes out on the news, everyone says: ‘Ah, this Venezuelan committed a crime,’ or ‘This Venezuelan citizen killed that person.’

Every Venezuelan who commits a crime, there is another thousand, or 2,000 or 3,000 that are working quietly without generating any problem; that does not appear in the news. So that is called ‘cognitive bias’ ... the media coverage of these things [generates it]. In Cali, there are 40,000 Venezuelans, and so far, [only 30 Venezuelans] have been arrested for committing a crime.

Of course there are Venezuelans who ... arrive and they are co-opted by existing criminal networks, and of course there are Venezuelans committing crimes, but there is nothing to indicate that the massive presence of Venezuelans is generating an increase in crime rates ... I repeat, because the immense majority that arrive are honorable, hardworking people who are escaping from a very difficult situation. My call has always been to the media [is] that we [Colombians] do not fall into xenophobia, and do not do to Venezuelans the same thing that they did to us in many countries of the world, including Venezuela itself ... and that is to blame us for criminal processes.”

- Interviewee from the Secretariat of Security and Justice, Cali

As Venezuelan migrants remain in Colombia and services and resources become scarcer among the burgeoning population, some governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders believe that attitudes will only worsen.

“Clearly, they [Colombians’ attitudes toward Venezuelan migrants] have gotten worse. At first, six months ago in Cali, citizens in the community brought them food [and] gifts. I have noticed that there has been a growing feeling of fatigue and rejection and stigmatization as well because cases [of discrimination] have been presented and because more are coming. Then, the longer [they are here], the more complicated it becomes.”

—Interviewee from the Secretariat of Security and Justice, Cali

As these tensions continue to bubble beneath the surface, there is cause for concern that attitudes may worsen as the influx continues at its current pace without enough opportunities for decompression or relief.

Finding #3:

Most Venezuelan migrant discussants had limited understanding or were unaware of how the Colombian government or other key stakeholders can help their situation.

Assistance has flooded to Colombia in response to the immense needs faced by Venezuelan migrants and host communities. In April 2018, UNHCR and IOM launched a national coordination platform in Colombia, the Interagency Mixed Migration Flows Group (*Grupo Interagencial de Flujos Migratorios Mixtos*, GIFMM), to channel more than \$315 million of assistance. Composed of 38 UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross, GIFMM establishes a coordinated response to address the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, including humanitarian assistance, emergency response, social cohesion and government capacity-building.²²

As of April 2019, 270,000 beneficiaries had been reached in Colombia — a small fraction of the total 1.2

²⁴ “Colombia Gets \$31.5 Million Grant to Aid Venezuelan Migrants.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 12 Apr. 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-imf-worldbank-colombia/colombia-

million Venezuelan migrants.²³ The World Bank, the UN and the Islamic Development Bank also recently approved a \$31.5 million grant for Colombia.²⁴ The Catholic Church has additionally played a key role in addressing the burgeoning crisis by providing meals, clothing, medicine and hygiene items.²⁵ These are just several of many stakeholders that have mobilized in response to the dire humanitarian needs, with other major contributions from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union, charities and other key stakeholders.

Although Venezuelans mentioned churches, NGOs and the Red Cross as having helped them — mostly by providing food and housing — these references were limited, and the help provided was far outweighed by the migrants' unmet needs.



What I say to the local government is that the only help I ask of them is to look for the way [to] buy a pound of rice, a piece of chicken. I ask the government to give us work.”

- Venezuelan migrant, Cali

“Some [people] make large donations, and that’s why they give free breakfasts and lunches to Venezuelans. In December, I understand that they also gave the children toys.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“They said that there was [help from the] Red Cross but that was for the neighborhoods. Where we live, there is never any of that.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“[A church] gave us a bag [of food] to eat last year.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

Many discussants emphasized the need to sort out their documentation and get jobs to ensure their self-sustainability. However, most Venezuelan migrants from both focus group locations said they had not received help with documentation and had difficulty securing employment.

“In six months, I [would like to] see myself with a good job. If you have a job, you can buy a home yourself and feed my children, feed my family.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali

The severe lack of knowledge and information about what services are available and which stakeholders can provide support further underlines the highly varied responses among different communities. In some municipalities, for example in Bogotá, there are information centers that delineate where Venezuelan migrants can turn to for legal support and humanitarian services.²⁶ Discussants were not aware of anything similar in Villa del Rosario and Cali, yet amplification of information and available assistance is highly needed.

Finding #4:

Although Venezuelan migrant discussants are mostly grateful for and content with their host communities in Colombia, they reported facing

gets-31-5-million-grant-to-aid-venezuelan-migrants-idUSKCN1RO2LC. These funds are provided through the Global Concessional Financing Facility, which was previously deployed in countries like Jordan and Bangladesh. See Huang, Cindy. “Making GCF Financing a Win for Venezuelans and Their Colombian Hosts.” *Center for Global Development*, 28 Jan. 2019, www.cgdev.org/blog/making-gcff-financing-win-venezuelans-and-their-colombian-hosts.

²⁵ “Church in Colombia Aids 5,000 Venezuelan Emigrants a Day.” *Catholic News Agency*, 6 Oct. 2018, www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/church-in-colombia-aids-5000-venezuelan-emigrants-a-day-26326.

²⁶ Kalaw, Angelo Paolo. Bogota, Colombia: Scaling Up Local Response and Innovating Towards Better Urban Inclusion.” *Ash.harvard.edu*, Mar. 2019, ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/sypa_final_-_30_april_20191.pdf.

serious challenges meeting their basic needs, including trouble securing documentation, housing and employment.

Across the focus groups in Cali and Villa del Rosario, discussants expressed contentment with their host communities. Venezuelan migrants noted that Colombian residents were kind to them, and that their neighborhoods were walkable and convenient. Some even said that they were originally planning to travel elsewhere but decided to stay because they liked Colombian communities that hosted them. One Venezuelan migrant said, “I was going to Ecuador. I arrived here, and I was struck by the kindness.” Another discussant echoed this sentiment: “I also think that Cali is the best of Colombia.”

Despite these expressions of gratitude, most discussants faced challenges with accessing basic services, such as electricity and water, as well as difficulties with documentation and employment, which are critical to a sustainable future in these communities should Venezuelan migrants stay.

Legal Documentation

In recent decades, Latin American countries have encouraged freedom of movement by easing legal regulations for citizens in the region, with visa and sometimes passport requirements removed.²⁷ As the exodus from Venezuela intensified, these relatively open borders were put under pressure, and in some instances, legal requirements were put back in place in order to regulate the flow. Even so, some South American governments have also adopted special rules to provide legal permits that allow Venezuelan migrants to work and gain access to services. These policies were likely introduced in recognition that the Venezuelan government agency responsible for migration services, is in bureaucratic disarray, leaving Venezuelans waiting for passports for over two years on average. Yet the rapid deterioration of the situation in Venezuela did not allow for a delay in departure.

Others may have lost documents during their journey or encounter difficulties receiving documents that remain in Venezuela.

The Colombian government requires that Venezuelans have passports to enter, but has also created two programs that allow for some free movement, including the Border Mobility Card (*Tarjeta de Movilidad Fronteriza*, TMF), which allows brief trips to the border regions, and the Special Permit of Permanence (*Permiso Especial de Permanencia*, PEP), which is a two-year authorization that allows Venezuelan citizens who entered Colombia legally to obtain work permits and access health, education and other services. As of March 2019, approximately 593,383 Venezuelan migrants received a PEP — only a little less than half of the 1.2 million.²⁸

Yet the PEP has some deficiencies. According to one NGO interviewee, “Most [Venezuelan migrants] do not even have the PEP, which is an immigration document, but it is not a legal document. It does not allow [them] to buy property. It does not allow [them] to buy goods and does not allow [them] to execute a lawsuit and proceed with the lawsuit in any type of violence that may occur. There is a lack of protection by Colombian legislation to proceed with the cases.”

In addition to its legal gaps, our research found that the PEP can be difficult to obtain. Many cannot or will not access the program due to fears of deportation or simple access issues, as the PEP has not been issued systematically but instead under certain conditions.²⁹ This subjects individuals who retain irregular status to significant barriers to employment and other basic needs. One Venezuelan migrant in Villa del Rosario noted, “I saw a policeman in the corner. I was afraid that they would grab me and deport me [because I entered without an ID]. [A]nd then [once you have returned] you would get your passport in Venezuela, [and] you have to pay [a hundred] dollars, when you did not even have [enough] to buy a kilo of [rice].”

²⁷ Selee, Andrew, et al. “Creativity amid Crisis: Legal Pathways for Venezuelan Migrants in Latin America.” Migration Policy Institute and OAS, *Reliefweb.int*, Jan. 2019, reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VenezuelansLegalPathwaysBrief-English-Final.pdf.

²⁸ Colombian Ministry of Exterior Relations, Migration, “Total de Venezolanos en Colombia Corte a 31 de Marzo de 2019 / Total of Venezuelans in Colombia as of March 31, 2019.” *El Tiempo*, images.eltiempo.digital/uploads/files/2019/05/02/RADIOGRAFIA%20VENEZOLANOS%20EN%20COLOMBIA%20MARZO%202019.pdf.

²⁹ The Colombian government issued this document to Venezuelan migrants who entered with passports before July 28, 2017, then extending this to December 17, 2018, and to those who entered irregularly but registered with the government in spring 2018. See Selee. “Creativity amid Crisis: Legal Pathways for Venezuelan Migrants in

“I have a daughter-in-law who is pregnant. When we go to the hospital, they tell us that they cannot attend [to] her there because she is Venezuelan. Then I had to get references for one of the centers so that they could attend to [her]. We left in 2017, [but] by 2017 the [ID] card was about to expire. For her to be in the center they are demanding the identity card, [which had lapsed]. I think there should be a little bit of flexibility [for] precisely [this reason] ... It is [not] possible [to renew your Venezuelan] ID card.”

—Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“Without a document you cannot speed up anything, you cannot have health because you cannot go to the emergency room because you do not have a card with which you can enter. You do not have the card that they are asking for so that you can study, to access education.”

—Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario



I believe that sometimes we flee to what is paperwork. Actually, when I heard about refugee status, [neither government nor nongovernment actors] have even advised me in what it consists [of], what benefits it brings.”

— Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

In some cases, discussants referenced unwillingness on the part of Colombian companies to employ Venezuelans due to lack of information about hiring migrants and to avoid the hassle of bureaucratic procedures. A Venezuelan migrant from Villa del Rosario mentioned, “[Companies] demand a Colombian ID [in order to work].”

Venezuelan citizens have sought asylum at an increasing rate.³⁰ However, our research found that many Venezuelans were uncertain how refugee status benefits them and were concerned that they may not be able to provide the papers required to attain it. A discussant from Villa del Rosario remarked, “I believe that sometimes we flee to what is paperwork. Actually, when I heard about refugee status, [neither government nor nongovernment actors] have even advised me in what it consists [of], what benefits it brings.”

Over half a million Venezuelans are still in an irregular situation with no alternative due to “prohibitively expensive” passport attainment.³¹ Without access to legal employment and basic services, the strain associated with the migratory influx will only compound or foster illegal economies. Moreover, it hampers economic and development opportunities that have proven benefits for both migrants and citizens.³²

Basic Services

Living conditions have also presented challenges, ranging from insufficient service delivery to violence and insecurity. A discussant from Villa del Rosario mentioned, “[W]here I live now, the water does not arrive every day.” In Cali, the Venezuelan migrants interviewed were living in a makeshift camp, where services were scarce and unreliable. Venezuelan migrant FGD participants in Cali noted:

“I sleep on the floor; I put a cloth down and I lie [on it].”

Latin America.”

³⁰ There were 375,000 asylum seekers from Venezuela in the period from 2014 to 2018. This represents a 4,000 percent increase. See “Venezuela Situation.” *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/en-us/venezuela-emergency.html.

³¹ Betts, Alexander. “Research in Brief: Venezuelan Survival Migration as a Development Opportunity — Colombia.”

³² “Migration from Venezuela to Colombia.” *Open Knowledge Repository*, World Bank, 2 Nov. 2018, openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/30651.

“Because I do not have a tent, I do not have a bit of sleep. I cannot move.”

“There are many people there who do not have a mattress, they do not have a tent.”

“Yes, the full pump does not give us [enough water]. Most people bathe in a river.”

Finding #5:

Political instability and lack of access to food and health services were among the key reasons why Venezuelan migrants decided to leave their country.

Venezuela’s humanitarian crisis is a man-made disaster resulting from decades of disastrous economic policies, rampant corruption and increasing authoritarianism. Once the richest country in Latin America, Venezuela is now in economic freefall.

Food shortages, failing health services and hyperinflation were some of the most frequently cited factors that prompted discussants’ migration. According to the UN, 11.7 percent of Venezuela’s population — 3.7 million people — are undernourished, including 21 percent of pregnant women.³³ Discussants mentioned that Venezuelan supermarkets and warehouses were empty and that they stood in line for hours to wait for food. As one discussant mentioned, “There was a day that, in the morning, I did not have food to give to the children.”

Participants noted the pressing scarcity of health services, with an extreme lack of medicine and deficient services in hospitals. This often served as a trigger for departure.

“In my case, the main reason [for leaving Venezuela] was my daughter’s medication. She has to take a medication [to live], and in Venezuela they do not [provide] it, and she has to take it daily. That was my greatest reason to come here.”
—Venezuelan migrant, Cali

“Actually, we decided to come after my husband’s operation. My husband had surgery on the spine two years ago, and it really was very difficult for him to have no antibiotics — the wound was too bad.”

—Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

According to official statistics from the Venezuelan government, maternal mortality rose by 65 percent and infant mortality rose by 30 percent from 2015 to 2016, the most recent years for which the government released data.³⁴ More than 8,000 pregnant Venezuelan women entered Colombia as of 2018, according to the Colombian government, and the majority had no access to prenatal care in Venezuela.³⁵ This data was echoed by some of the discussants.

“Pregnant women suffer more because there is no medicine, there are no vitamins that they give to children; most of them are born malnourished, [and], sometimes, they are not born.”

—Venezuelan migrant, Cali

“[The hospitals] have nothing. The children are born, and they put them in cardboard boxes.”

—Venezuelan migrant, Cali

For many Venezuelans, hyperinflation rendered salaries insufficient to buy food and maintain their living conditions.

“Now people are abandoning the work positions in the companies, because, [for] example, if you now increase the salary to 19,000 sovereigns, right? But a kilo of meat costs you 5,500 sovereigns.³⁶ What can you buy in one month with 19,000 sovereigns? Only three or four products, and it has to last for one month.”

—Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“[I]n the blink of an eye, not even two shifts of work [could help me provide for my family]. I saw how my son was getting thinner. My family lives in San

³³ *Venezuela’s Humanitarian Emergency: Large-Scale UN Response Needed to Address Health and Food Crises.*

³⁴ *Venezuela’s Humanitarian Emergency: Large-Scale UN Response Needed to Address Health and Food Crises.*

³⁵ *Venezuela’s Humanitarian Emergency: Large-Scale UN Response Needed to Address Health and Food Crises.*

³⁶ “Sovereigns” refers to Venezuela’s currency, which is the sovereign bolivar.

Cristóbal [in Venezuela], and I told them I'm going to leave my house, all my things.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

Venezuelan migrant discussants attributed the economic insecurity that forced them to flee to governance deficiencies.

“There is no other issue but the political, social and economic situation that we suffer in Venezuela, that was what gave us a [reason to leave]. In fact, I believe that we are all here for the same reason.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali

“That same corruption that rotted the country has led [to this point].”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

As the political situation remains uncertain, the humanitarian crisis has only worsened and migration from Venezuela remains steady.

Finding #6:

Some Venezuelan migrants underwent traumatic experiences during their journey to Colombia.

Discussants referenced distressing experiences that motivated their journeys to Colombia. Several participants referenced the death of a relative as a result of the country's humanitarian crisis as the reason why they left Venezuela. One discussant in Villa del Rosario said, “Our relatives die there for lack of medicine.”

These journeys were often harrowing experiences during which migrants became victims of crimes including attempted violence and sexual assault or lost vital belongings such as immigration documents. Most Venezuelan discussants walked from their homes in Venezuela prior to settling in Cali or Villa del Rosario.

“I lost my documents because that day they had closed the border and the marina...and several children were clubbed. Many lost documents, [lost] everything.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali

“I went with my son in Cúcuta to ask for water, and they threw it at me. And they took a little machete, and they made us run.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali

“[W]e had several scares in the night. They tried to rape us, but we managed to leave. We were two [18-year-old] girls alone.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

These anecdotes not only illustrate the immense risks and dangers associated with the migratory journey, but also shed light on the need for psychosocial support and protection for Venezuelan migrants given high levels of vulnerability for sexual exploitation, violence or even recruitment by drug traffickers and armed groups. Without such support, the trauma suffered by these migrants could also manifest in increased antisocial behavior and undercut the potential for integration into Colombian society.

“

I went with my son in Cúcuta to ask for water, and they threw it at me. And they took a little machete, and they made us run.”

- Venezuelan migrant, Cali

Finding #7:

Venezuelan migrant discussants were divided when asked about their desired future. Some Venezuelan migrants would like to stay in Colombia, while others would like to return home to Venezuela only if the political and economic situations improved.

When asked whether they would like to stay in Colombia or return to Venezuela, discussants in the Cali and Villa del Rosario focus groups were divided. Of those who said they would like to stay, most specified that this was contingent upon being able to secure employment. Feeling welcome in the community also underlay much of the desire to stay.

“I’m really trying to see if I can suddenly work. When I have the permission, they told me I can work in any company, I can study, I have medical benefits, see?”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“As an immigrant, if I am given the opportunity to stay here, I’ll stay.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

“The idea is that we stay here. I like it a lot here, one reaches everything, there is everything. One would aspire in the name of God to stay here, but it also depends on [different] factors and the opportunities that [I will have here].”

–Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

Discussants with relatives who had already settled in Colombia or had citizenship were also likely to express a desire to remain in the country.

“The possibilities of us returning to Venezuela are very few because we are planning to start a new life here in Cali. My wife has a Colombian identity card, but I do not yet. I have worked in several places. With permission or without permission, it is difficult [for Venezuelan migrants]. We simply have to grab and work what [we are offered]. I have had to work for very little money, many hours, the last



The idea is that we stay here. I like it a lot here. One would aspire in the name of God to stay here, but it also depends on the opportunities that one may have.”

– Venezuelan migrant, Villa del Rosario

job was 14 hours per day for 35,000 pesos (about \$10).”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali

Some of those discussants who said they’d like to return indicated that they had a house, family or a job waiting for them in Venezuela. Further, a few individuals specified that the political and economic conditions must be stable before they would consider whether to return.

“I would return [because] at least in my particular case they are still waiting for me at work, and they told me that they could wait for another year. I sold my car and nothing else, to come here.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali

“[I would like to return, but only if there is] medicine.”

–Venezuelan migrant, Cali



COMPARING AND CONTRASTING CHALLENGES IN CALI AND VILLA DEL ROSARIO

Although discussants shared numerous commonalities, there are important distinctions between the findings in Cali and Villa del Rosario. Venezuelan migrants in Cali, for example, had already undertaken a significant journey — oftentimes on foot — from Venezuela, through the border region of Norte del Santander and other Colombian cities, and sometimes to other countries prior to settling in Cali. Some of the Venezuelan migrants in Cali were, at the time, living in a makeshift camp;³⁷ thus, meeting basic needs was cited as a more pressing challenge in Cali than in Villa del Rosario. As the Venezuelan migration situation becomes more fluid and critical, it will be essential to tailor responses based on the specific needs of the Venezuelan migrant and host community populations.

Patriotism and national identity contributed to the desire to return. One discussant said, “[Others] are not going to rebuild our country, who is going to do it? We have to do it ourselves.” Another FGD participant from Villa del Rosario expressed, “I am very grateful to Colombia, yes! But I would go to Venezuela, that is, I will continue to struggle in the name of God [so that] in the future I may return to my home with my grandchildren.”

Whether Venezuelan migrants would like to integrate into their host communities in Colombia, move to a third country or return home, these decisions have significant implications for local governance. As inflows continue and Venezuelan migrants are unable to return or migrate to a third country, it is critical to forecast several scenarios and plan accordingly.

³⁷ This camp is pictured at the top of this page.

CONCLUSION

Colombia's stability remains under threat as it grapples with the remnants of its decades-long conflict and the new challenges presented by the Venezuelan migrant crisis. There are major security vacuums across the country, including in the border regions where Venezuelan migrants most often settle. Although the country's response to the arrival of Venezuelan migrants has been laudable, there are signs of mounting tensions that may be exploited by politicians and others eager to exacerbate social divisions for their own ends. Moreover, the strain on resources that has resulted from the migrant crisis could severely undermine the gains made during the post-conflict transition. Long-term planning and strategic messaging from the government must be enhanced to avoid exploiting societal fracturing and to address the mounting pressure on services and growing tensions in communities.

The recommendations listed below are designed to offer program entry points and policy guidance for organizations, officials and implementers working to address the significant challenges stemming from the Venezuelan migration crisis in Colombia. The recommendations represent a first step toward using the research findings in this report to develop evidence-based strategies for coping with the mass influx of migrants. These recommendations focus specifically on how enhanced democratic governance — from both supply- and demand-side actors — can be leveraged to develop inclusive, sustained strategies for addressing second-generation issues emanating from the growing migration challenge.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** **Recommendation 1:**
Government officials at all levels should focus planning and resource allocation on long-term, strategic issues that warrant preparations and institutional strengthening to bolster the governance mechanisms needed to respond to the presence of Venezuelan migrants.
- 2** **Recommendation 2:**
The national government of Colombia should proactively improve horizontal coordination (across agencies and with international partners) and vertical coordination (with local government and civil society organizations) to harmonize funding and programming solutions to the Venezuelan migration crisis. For example, the national government should consult local stakeholders and involve them in the formulation of policy and initiatives that directly affect their municipalities.
- 3** **Recommendation 3:**
Political parties, national legislators and city councils should collaborate to better understand and address the challenges posed by mass migration. This should include strategic planning to identify long-term governance solutions that address these issues and mitigate intercommunal tensions. It is essential that stakeholders collaborate across ideological positions to devise meaningful solutions and avoid falling prey to polarizing stances that politicize the migrant crisis.
- 4** **Recommendation 4:**
NGOs should work with local authorities to expand outlets for social interaction between Venezuelans and Colombians in order to build trust between the two populations. NGOs should also provide opportunities for Venezuelan migrants and refugees to showcase their culture, talents and skills through activities such as organized sports, art and educational opportunities. These activities may provide a much-needed platform to reduce prejudice and mitigate growing societal instability.
- 5** **Recommendation 5:**
The government, the media and NGOs should articulate and amplify the perspectives and experiences of Venezuelan migrants in clear and accessible language to counter social instability and community fracturing. It is critical to raise awareness of the key challenges facing Colombian communities as a result of the migration crisis, particularly to address disinformation and counterfactual narratives that spread in the wake of this societal shock.

- 6** | **Recommendation 6:** NGOs and local authorities should conduct proactive outreach and implement civic education initiatives to Venezuelan migrants. Such initiatives are particularly imperative in order to shift negative or fearful attitudes toward the government that may remain from the effects of poor governance in Venezuela. Not only could these programs help build trust among communities, but they will also help ensure self-reliance of migrants and allow a balance between host community resident and migrant populations prior to any escalation of tensions.
- 7** | **Recommendation 7:** NGOs should provide psychosocial support and protection for Venezuelan migrants who have been victims of violence or human rights violations. Without such support, traumatic experiences not only impede quality of life, but could also manifest in increased reclusive behavior and undercut the potential for integration into Colombian society.

LA CASONA: FREE LEGAL SERVICES AND ADVICE FOR VENEZUELAN MIGRANTS

A governmental initiative, La Casona provides free legal services and advice to Venezuelans, including to those seeking documentation. Many Venezuelan migrants in Villa del Rosario mentioned this “house” as an exceptionally useful service.

“Many Colombians have told us to go to such a site, ask, find out about the documentation, what kind of documents will you need to prove your Venezuelan nationality. [The] lawyers treat us very well and give us all the information possible. Now, I can get [legal] permission [for] my children, thanks to them which [granted them] permanence for two years.”

“You get advice in all legal [aspects] with respect to documentation. For example [I lost my daughter-in-law while in transit, so] I went there and [they helped me] with a lot of kindness.”

La Casona is part of the Colombian government’s attempts to undertake a mass registration exercise (RAMV, in its Spanish acronym). It is part of a critical initiative to expand understanding of the Venezuelan migration phenomenon and could be built on to amplify information about services available to migrants.

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