

COMMENT – The State of Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia: Ongoing Issues and Possible Solutions

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The ongoing economic and political crises in Venezuela have spurred unprecedented levels of migration into Colombia. This essay argues that while Venezuelan migration to Colombia has created challenges, they are not insurmountable. A brief historical overview of Venezuelan migration to Colombia highlights the unique nature of current migration, with migrants unlikely to safely return home to Venezuela in the foreseeable future. Migrants in Colombia face challenges that violate their constitutional protections, as well as sometimes international human rights norms related to employment, livelihood, health, asylum, and nationality. Although the influx of migrants could possibly overwhelm Colombia social welfare systems and harm its economy, large numbers of young and educated migrant workers could also benefit Colombian development. Measures to integrate migrants and bolster the formal economy include offering housing subsidies and job training, health insurance and services, and pathways to citizenship.

Ongoing economic and political crises in Venezuela have spurred historically unprecedented levels of Venezuelan migration to Colombia. More than three million Venezuelan migrants have arrived in Colombia over the past six years, most of whom have deep-rooted Venezuelan backgrounds – indicating they are not Colombian emigres returning to Colombia (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019). Colombia has the most Venezuelan migrant arrivals of any country, and most of these migrants are young professionals and their families. Additionally, 54.9% of migrants report migrating for better employment opportunities, even though most respondents reportedly lacked a job ready for them at their destination (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2019). Many Venezuelan migrants have resorted to working in manual labor and the informal sector, where they have depressed wages that exacerbate inequality in cities heavily populated by migrants (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2021). This underemployment and a lack of formal and legal immigration channels lead to negative outcomes for Venezuelan migrants related to healthcare, socioeconomic status, and wages compared to their

Colombian counterparts (Tribín-Urbe et al., 2020). The plight of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia has the potential to adversely affect their fundamental human rights outcomes – especially in relation to the right to health, employment, and adequate standard of living – as well as the Colombian economy, since heavy migration threatens to overwhelm the country's social welfare system (Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016; Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019; Tribín-Urbe et al., 2020).

This essay argues that Venezuelan migration to Colombia has created challenges, though they are not insurmountable. A brief historical overview of Venezuelan migration to Colombia highlights the unique nature of current migration, with migrants unlikely to safely return home to Venezuela in the foreseeable future. Migrants in Colombia face challenges that violate their constitutional protections, and sometimes international human rights norms related to employment, livelihood, health, asylum, and nationality. Although the influx of migrants could possibly overwhelm Colombia social welfare systems and harm its economy, large numbers of young and educated migrant workers could also benefit Colombian development. Measures to integrate migrants and bolster the formal economy include offering housing subsidies and job training, health insurance and services, and pathways to citizenship.

Historical Background of Venezuelan Migration to Colombia

The relationship between Colombia and Venezuela has long been one of immense complexity and interconnectedness, with historical migration trends reflecting this reality. Once considered to be one of the most dynamic borders in Latin America, the 2,219-kilometre Colombian-Venezuelan border used to experience thousands of crossings daily, with rapidly shifting movement patterns being the norm (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019). The direction of mobility has changed significantly over the past five decades. The rising political and economic troubles of early 1950s Colombia led to increased Colombian emigration to Venezuela, a trend that continued into the 1980s and 1990s amidst emerging drug and militant violence. Thus, by 2011, Colombians made up the majority of foreigners residing in Venezuela, numbering about 700,000 (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019). However, recent events have reversed these trends. Beginning in the early 2010s, Colombians who migrated to Venezuela had begun to return to Colombia because of the increasing political and economic tensions in Venezuela (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019).

In the mid-2010s, Colombian-Venezuelan migration patterns shifted once again; this time, most migrants to Colombia from Venezuela were of Venezuelan descent rather than descendants of Colombian emigres from the twentieth century (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019). Constituting one of

the largest migrations in modern human history, approximately 4.8 million people were motivated to leave Venezuela by push factors such as soaring inflation, murder rates, unemployment, and political corruption (Pico et al., 2021). Colombia has been the chief recipient of Venezuelan migrants, with around 1.8 million Venezuelans migrants by 2020 – a significant increase from the mere 200,000 migrants in 2015 (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020; Pico et al., 2021). Contrary to popular belief, migrants are spread throughout Colombia rather than centering on border regions (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020). The overwhelming majority of migrants reportedly wish to move to urban areas, with around 10% wishing to relocate to Bogotá, the Colombian capital (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019).

Most recent Venezuelan migrants to Colombia are younger families of professionals that fled the country due to economic and political challenges.¹ There is an almost even balance between male and female migrants, with 54.3% being male and 45.7% being female (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2019). Around 75% of Venezuelan migrants are between the ages of 20 and 39 (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019). Around 6% of migrant males are between the ages of zero and four, compared to only 4% of Colombian males (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020). Among those in the 20-to-39-year age range, 82.6% possess a college degree (Marzuela-Arias et al., 2019). When analyzing their reasons for leaving Venezuela, around 54.9% report leaving for better employment opportunities abroad, with 86% of migrants expressing a desire to return to Venezuela when the situation improves (Marzuela-Arias et al., 2019). Although most migrants sought better employment opportunities, many reported that they did not have a job ready for them at their destination (Marzuela-Arias et al., 2019). Most migrants thus expect to rely on the Colombian social services and remittance support necessary for achieving their economic goals (Marzuela-Arias et al., 2019).

Challenges Facing Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia

This section highlights key challenges facing Venezuelan migrants, in violation of constitutional protections and sometimes international human rights norms. Article 100 of the 1991 Colombian Constitution established that, aside from political participation, migrants have access to all the same political protections and liberties as citizens, and that position was upheld by the Colombian Supreme Court (Ruiz del Río & Hoyos Bula, 2020). However, the Venezuelan migrant crisis has tested the

¹ There are two key sources of information about Venezuelan migrants in Colombia. The first is *Migración Colombia*, an index comprised of official migrant registrations with the Colombian government. The second is DANE/GEIH. This index is more informal, predicated on a national survey that investigates individuals' countries of residence over the past half-decade (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020). This more informal source is useful for gleaning a more exact number of migrants, as some may have failed to register with state authorities.

Colombian government's ability to fulfill its promises. Meanwhile, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees universal and inalienable rights related to employment and livelihood (Articles 23 and 25), to health (Article 25), and to asylum and nationality (Articles 14 and 15) (United Nations, 1948).

Economic Hardships – Venezuelan migrants remain disproportionately poorer than their Colombian counterparts and face significant challenges related to their “right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family” (United Nations, 1948, Article 25.1). The largest proportion of Venezuelan households (around 45%) fall under the classification of Strato 1, Colombia's lowest socioeconomic stratum, which differs from Colombian households that usually center around Stratos 2 and 3 (Tribín-Urbe et al., 2020). Most Venezuelan families do not own the houses they live in, and their homes are smaller on average than the homes of their Colombian counterparts (Tribín-Urbe et al., 2020). A greater proportion of migrants report lower standards of living (37.5%) than they did five years ago, compared to 6% of non-Venezuelans (Tribín-Urbe et al., 2020).

One of the main causes of these disparate outcomes lies in the Venezuelan migrants' participation in the informal sector (Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016; Tribín-Urbe et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2021) and their inability to access their rights to employment (United Nations, 1948, Article 23). About 92.3% of Venezuelan migrants work in the informal sector (Galvis-Molano et al., 2020). Many Venezuelan migrants, therefore, fall into the trap of the “secondary labor market” – the part of the labor market associated with underground commercial activity and populated by workers who could not enter the primary or formal (that is, “legal”) labor market (Galvis-Molano et al., 2020). As a result, stability and wages for Venezuelan workers tend to be lower than their Colombian counterparts (Galvis-Molano et al., 2020). In 2018, more than half of Venezuelan workers reported having low job stability (Galvis-Molano et al., 2020). Researchers note that a one percentage point increase in immigration decreased informal sector wages by 10 percentage points in urban areas, totaling an overall wage decrease of two percentage points in 2017 (Caruso et al., 2021).

Health Challenges – Venezuelan migrants in Colombia experience significant hardships in relation to their ability to enjoy the “right to health” (United Nations, 1948, Article 25), including access to essential medical care and health insurance. For instance, Venezuelan migrants face a significant deficit in women's health resources, with 94% of women reporting a lack of access to prenatal care coupled with higher levels of maternal mortality compared to the rest of the Colombian population (Suarez Morales, 2020). Most Venezuelans in Colombia report difficulties accessing basic nutritional resources and assistance for chronic conditions such as HIV (Pico et al., 2021). Such poor health

situations often directly relate to the lack of general health insurance coverage for migrants. Almost 77% of Venezuelan migrants are not affiliated with any sort of health plan (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020). Additionally, high transportation costs for Venezuelans living in informal communities make mobility difficult and can delay emergency assistance (Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016).

Immigration Complexities – Hardship is also tied to the liminality of current Colombian immigration policies. Although the Colombian government has significantly improved its immigration procedures over the past decade with relaxed border crossing procedures and the creation of Special Stay Permits (PEP) that offer temporary protection (Ruiz del Río & Hoyos Bula, 2020), Colombia does not provide pathways for more permanent integration of Venezuelan migrants (Del Real, 2022). For instance, the PEP – the legal classification under which most Venezuelan migrants currently fall – allows migrants to reside in Colombia, acquire employment, and enjoy the rights delineated in the constitution (Ruiz del Río & Hoyos Bula, 2020; Del Real, 2022). However, the benefits of the PEP are restricted to two years, and presidential administrations have control over whether the PEP will remain in place (Del Real, 2022). Hence, the PEP fails to provide Venezuelan migrants with a comprehensive path to citizenship (Del Real, 2022) and reinforces the idea that the Venezuelan migration issue is a temporary one contingent on the political stability of Venezuela – an unrealistic view given the steady migration surge over the past two decades (Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019). Migrants are therefore unable to access rights to asylum or nationality (United Nations, 1948, Articles 14 and 15), which would facilitate their long-term integration into Colombian society.

Potential Economic Impacts of Venezuelan Migration

The rapid migration of working-age people raises the question of how Venezuelan migration could impact Colombian economic development. First, the Colombian social welfare system risks being overwhelmed by this influx of migrants. Since the early 2020s, the Colombian government has spent around \$600 USD on each migrant, and it has needed to accept a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to support its social welfare measures (Arena et al., 2022). Second, the presence of informal and depressed wages could hinder progress on inequality reduction. Particularly in highly populated urban areas, Venezuelan migrants experience increasing inequality, with national studies reporting further divergences between the primary class of Colombian workers and the secondary class of Venezuelan migrant workers (Galvis-Molano et al., 2020; Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020; Caruso et al., 2021). There is also the concern that Venezuelan migrant workers might replace Colombian manual labor and disrupt the Colombian labor market (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020).

However, the economic consequences of Venezuelan migration on Colombian development measures are more ambiguous. Venezuelan migration has negligible impacts on Colombian employment, but there is a slight negative correlation between Venezuelan migration and the range of occupations available for Colombian workers (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020). Although there was a strong negative association of Venezuelan migration and wage growth, this mostly impacts migrants themselves (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020). Nonetheless, government reports find that increased Venezuelan migration is positively associated with a more flattened Phillips Curve, which means prices are not as affected by unemployment as they had been previously. This is because Venezuelan workers accept much lower wages than the average Colombian worker, thus decreasing the level of inflation that arises from high employment (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020). There were also trends associated with higher real gross domestic product (GDP) growth related to increased migration – although costs for the Colombian government remained high (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020).

The large, young, and educated Venezuelan migrant population could provide Colombia with the opportunity to grow its economy by integrating these workers into the formal labor force. There is much work to be done to accomplish this goal, however, and the large presence of Venezuelan migrants in the informal sector could potentially disrupt Colombian development attempts.

Recommendations

To protect the rights of Venezuelan migrants and enhance Colombia's economic development, I offer three key recommendations. These recommendations would improve the quality of life for migrants and allow them the foundation for integrating into Colombia society and becoming contributing members of the formal economy. First, housing subsidies and job training should be provided to Venezuelan migrants. A proposed budget of around \$600 million USD could assist Venezuelan migrants in urban areas to acquire affordable housing, providing migrants the crucial financial resources for moving out of informal communities and developing their investments to acquire greater economic security (Arena et al., 2022). Additionally, government-sponsored job training programs would help facilitate the transition of Venezuelan migrants into the formal economy, thus reducing the negative impacts of informality (Suarez Morales, 2020). Second, the Colombian government should expand healthcare access to Venezuelan migrants and create a registry that allows them to track assistance needs. This approach would enable the state to provide optimal care to those in need and focus on the specific needs of Venezuelan migrants. Third, a pathway to Colombian citizenship for Venezuelan migrants is necessary to provide them with a permanent and stable residency

option. This policy could include provisions that award legal nationality after specific periods of legal residency, for instance. Given that the economic and political situation in Venezuela has not shown signs of significant improvement, long-term options for integration should be offered to those who migrated and cannot safely return home.

Colombian attitudes and policies toward Venezuelan migrants need to change, transitioning from indifference to integration and acceptance. Rather than relying on temporary and ad hoc approaches to migrant support, more long-term planning should recognize that Venezuelan migrants in Colombia are there to stay. By implementing the recommendations listed above, the Colombian government could safeguard human rights and its economic development.

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