

Venezuelans Refugees in Colombia and the COVID-19 Crisis
By Milena Gomez Kopp, Ph.D.

Background

The approximately five million Venezuelans, who have left their country in recent years, represent the largest exodus of migrants in the recent history of the Western Hemisphere. Colombia has openly welcomed “our brothers and sisters” and, according to the Organization of American States (OAS), it has received the greatest number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees (1.6 million), followed by Peru (900,000), the United States (422,000), Ecuador (400,000) and Chile (400,000). The arrival of this cohort to Colombia also marks the largest presence of immigrants in the country’s history and, today, more Venezuelans are living in Colombia than the population of most of its cities, with the exception of Bogotá, Medellín and Cali.

Ironically, Venezuela has historically welcomed immigrants ever since 1936 when it established its first migration policy allowing an influx of immigrants (predominantly from Italy, Spain and Portugal) to settle in the country. Colombian semi-skilled and skilled laborers also benefitted from Venezuela’s open-door policy, arriving in thousands in the 60’s and 70’s. Colombians found lucrative jobs in the service sector as housekeepers, drivers and gardeners, in part due to a prosperous economy derived from the growing petroleum boom. Venezuela became Colombia’s rich cousin.

“Executive emigrants”

At the beginning of the XXI century, everything changed. One of the wealthiest countries in Latin America, with the world’s largest oil reserves, became a net exporter of its population. The exodus of Venezuelans to Colombia began in the beginning of this century when highly educated professionals fled the country, fearing the policies of the government of Hugo Chavez. These “executive emigrants”, as the local Venezuelan press called this group of highly skilled professionals, left their country for various reasons, including a difficult job market and insecurity amid deep political polarization that engulfed their nation.

“Executive emigrants” arrived to Colombia in the first wave of Venezuelan migration. They enriched the country with their high purchasing power, skilled labor and investment capital. Former employees of Petroleum of Venezuela (PDVSA), the state-owned oil and natural gas company, for example, provided knowhow to the growing petroleum industry in Colombia and some credit them for spearheading the boom in this sector. Others invested in drug and pharmaceutical companies, restaurants and diverse local businesses while a growing number of the highly educated found jobs in leading universities and many young Venezuelans crossed the border to study in academic institutions across Colombia. The first wave of Venezuelan migrants brought prosperity with them. Locals, at this time, joked that the best thing that happened to Colombia was Chavez.

“No es vivir, es sobrevivir”

As the situation in Caracas deteriorated, the exodus of Venezuelan citizens continued. By 2014, the economy continued to collapse and the bolivar, the national currency, plunged leaving a large percentage of the population without basic necessities. Food and healthcare services were scarce for most, forcing thousands to contemplate the difficult decision to abandon Venezuela and leave behind their few material possessions. These individuals were not fleeing a war, but were abandoning a country mired in insecurity and lacking access to services, food and medicine. This second wave of migrants were poor and downtrodden, a stark contrast to those *“compatriotas”* who arrived a decade earlier.

By August 2015, the country reached a turning point when President Nicolas Maduro closed the border between Colombia and Venezuela and, paradoxically, the flows of people to Colombia increased.

2020

At the beginning of this year, Venezuelan migrants and refugees continued to arrive in huge numbers, nearly overwhelming Colombia’s capacity to absorb and settle them. The country continued to face innumerable challenges in this process, but the biggest by far has been financial. Although Colombia has received support from foreign governments and international organizations, such as the UNHCR and the OIM, the country is increasingly overstretched for resources. Fiscal constraints inevitably limit the capacity of the government to continue providing public services to a rapidly growing population in dire need. This crisis has only been able to mobilize a fraction of the international support other groups receive. For example, according to the OAS, Syrian refugees have received \$33 billion in donations, South Sudan \$9.4 billion and Myanmar \$1.2 billion, providing a sharp contrast to the \$600 million offered to Venezuelans.

The arrival of COVID – 19 to the region

With the arrival of COVID 19 to the region, Colombia, like most countries, faced a complicated sociopolitical situation. Despite the government’s strict lockdown rules, the virus spread rapidly in the country, particularly in large dense cities. By October 21st, Colombia had approximately 974,000 confirmed Covid-19 cases and 29,272 deaths (worldmeters.info). Although Colombia exhibited a slower rate of contagion relative to other countries in the region, the virus has had a devastating effect on its economy. According to National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) of Colombia, economic activity shrank by 15.7% and unemployment reached 21% in the second quarter of this year. The IMF estimates that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will shrink by 7.8 % and poverty levels are expected to rise by 15%.

Not surprisingly, the pandemic has disproportionately affected the thousands of low-skilled Venezuelan migrants and refugees residing in Colombia. The lockdown measures, which triggered mass unemployment among them, lack of access to health services and forced evictions have depleted the livelihood of the refugees. Without a community support system and labor options, the dire situation forced more than 100,000 Venezuelans to return to their families back home, either via a long march home by bus, humanitarian flights or by foot. Venezuelans residing in Colombia today are invisible victims of the pandemic’s externalities and, regrettably, have been disproportionately displaced, further

exasperating their socioeconomic distress.

Future- what is next?

In spite of the various limitations, analysts predict that many of the Venezuelan refugees and migrants who left Colombia will return, projecting a dramatic increase in the migration flows. El Tiempo, a local Colombian newspaper, estimated that for every Venezuelan who left, two will cross the border back to Colombia in the coming months. The newspaper predicts that there will be an influx of over 200,000, especially in view of the recent collapse of world oil prices and the pressures caused by the coronavirus pandemic in a country where health services barely function. Before the onset of the pandemic and the dramatic drop in oil prices, the OAS estimated that by the end of this year, the total number of Venezuelan refugees could reach 7 to 7.5 million. As such, the situation is likely to deteriorate even more, triggering further out-migration. Today, Venezuelans represent the second largest exodus of migrants and refugees in the world, only overshadowed by the Syrians. However, if the numbers continue to grow at the estimated rate, they may eclipse the Syrians as the largest group of refugees globally. The international community should immediately take action and increase their support to Colombia and other recipient countries to mitigate the plight of desperate Venezuelans and their overwhelmed hosts.

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