



HUMANITARIAN CRISIS ON THE BORDER

Rapid Needs Assessment for Vulnerable Venezuelans in Colombia: La Guajira and César

MARCH 2018

Background and Context

The dramatic economic collapse in Venezuela has led to an estimated 1.5 million Venezuelans flowing into neighboring countries and beyond. In addition, nationals of other countries residing in Venezuela – in particular Colombians and “mixed” Colombian-Venezuelan families – are also leaving the country. Migration out of Venezuela is taking place for a variety of reasons, including threats by armed groups; fear of being targeted on account of real or perceived political opinion; insecurity and violence; lack of food, medicine or access to essential social services; as well as loss of income.

Colombia is the host country most directly impacted by the political and socio-economic situation in Venezuela. Official counts estimate that more than 600,000 Venezuelans have recently arrived and are now living in Colombia, double the estimated 300,000 as of mid-2017. Tracking this number is challenging; some speculate that actual numbers are far higher than official estimates, and that there are already more than 2 million Venezuelans in Colombia. On April 8th, the Colombian government started conducting a census of all Venezuelans in Colombia in order to get an accurate estimate, which is scheduled to end June 8th. In an attempt to curb the number of Venezuelans crossing into Colombia, the President of Colombia announced on February 8, 2018 that from that date Venezuelans must have passports to cross into Colombia. However, there are multiple barriers to getting passports for Venezuelans, including cost and delays by the issuing offices due to lack of paper. Seven official checkpoints are only open to Venezuelans with passports, forcing thousands to use the 130+ illegal crossings along a border stretching 1,500 miles. These paths are dangerous and expensive, as armed men and landowners require anyone using them to pay.

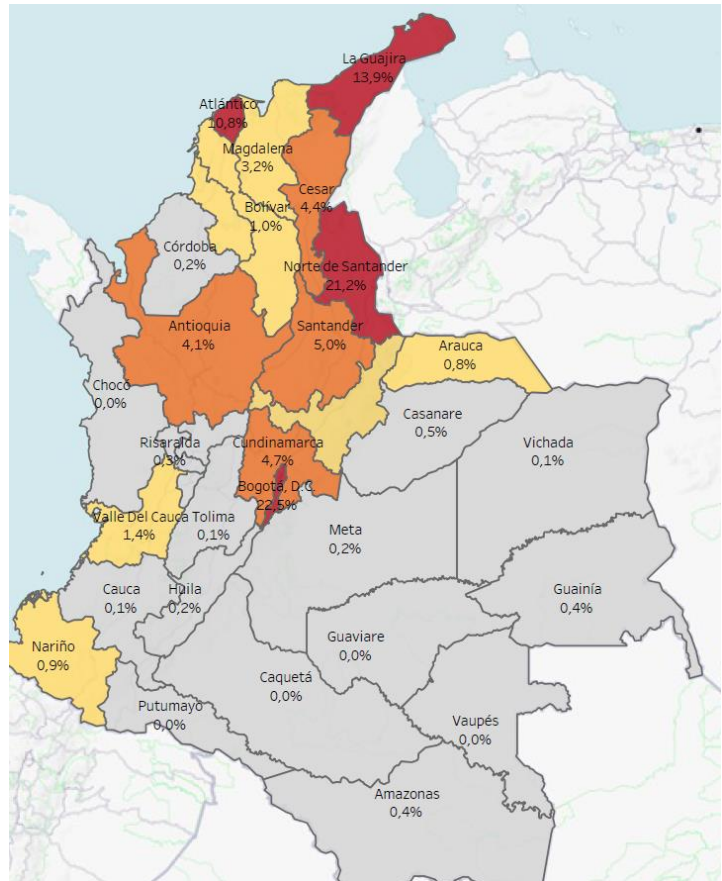
There are groups that cross back and forth on a regular basis, selling goods and services in Colombia to earn money that will help them provide resources for their families in Venezuela. Other groups migrate to Colombia in search of long-term employment. Still others treat Colombia as a transit country on their way towards Panama, Ecuador, Peru and elsewhere. Many migrant women are especially vulnerable to sex trafficking and labor exploitation. There are reports of migrant children being recruited into armed groups in Colombia. Xenophobia is also on the rise and many Colombians view Venezuelans as replacing them in the labor market and the cause of increased criminality. Malnutrition has also affected both children and adults. A recent study found an average 24-pound decrease in Venezuelan adults in 2017.

The Colombian government, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UNGRD (National Disaster Response Unit), has attempted to manage the situation, but relies on the capacities of municipalities to support basic needs. Only within the past few weeks has the government invited the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) to support registration processes for Venezuelans. They still have not been given the mandate to meet basic needs of food, water, sanitation, health, household kits, education, livelihoods, protection and shelter.

Assessment Objective

The main objective of Mercy Corps' rapid assessment was to better understand the situation of vulnerable Venezuelans near the border. Specifically:

- Better understand the needs of Venezuelan and Colombian families in Riohacha, La Guajira department;
- Assess the markets and if they can provide what is needed and at what prices;
- Identify the intentions of Venezuelan families: if they would like to return to Venezuela, stay in Colombia or go to another location;
- Make programming recommendations based on the findings.



Methodology

Members of Mercy Corps' Colombia and emergency response teams traveled to La Guajira and César departments in mid-March 2018 to conduct focus group discussions with Colombian and Venezuelan families, as well as key informant interviews with UN agencies, NGOs and local authorities. The assessment team collaborated with a human rights volunteer network with experience in La Guajira and César to make the appointments with the families and key informants.

The assessment team conducted **six focus group discussions**: three in Riohacha, one in Maicao and two in Valledupar, with a total of 25 women ranging in age from 20-58 with approximately 80% of them under 30 years of age. The focus group discussions were conducted only with women.

Additionally, the team conducted a total of **four key informant interviews** in La Guajira and two in César:

La Guajira

- Two in Riohacha
- One at the border
- One in Maicao, at the Migration Center

César

- Two in Valledupar

Data Analysis

The raw data was compiled and analyzed in order to identify the major trends in needs in each of the target communities. However, it is important to note that the results of the individual surveys only represent major trends at the time of the assessment (March 2018). Due to the limited time available to conduct this rapid assessment, Mercy Corps was unable to conduct enough individual surveys required for a statistically reliable sample.

Information and data collected during six focus groups and key informant interviews was reviewed and compiled for each community and a summary of results was created, highlighting the major conclusions and key findings.

“We did not come here to be parasites. All we want is to be given the same rights and protections as Colombians. We want to work, but with dignity.”

— Female Venezuelan migrant in Riohacha

Key Findings

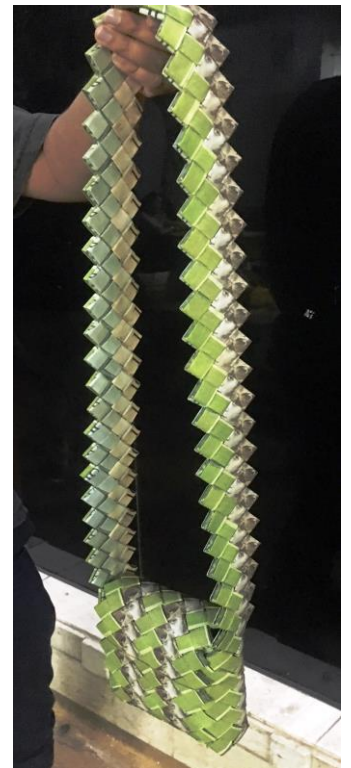
The collapse of the Venezuelan economy has sent millions of desperate people fleeing over the border into Colombia.

The women Mercy Corps interviewed all agreed that they left Venezuela because the situation there has gotten increasingly difficult since December 2017: food is extremely scarce; medicine is impossible to find; hyperinflation has made money almost worthless; there are limits on how much can be withdrawn from the bank and withdrawal fees are very high. Approximately 80% of the women interviewed were in their 20s and

The value of the Venezuelan Bolivar is now so low that some Venezuelans are using it to make bags and other handicrafts for tourists. A handicraft is worth more than the money used to make it.

came to Colombia alone or with a friend or neighbor, leaving their families and/or children behind in Venezuela, in order to earn money to send home. One woman mentioned that she previously had a good job working for the government, but due to the severe hyperinflation, her monthly salary is now the equivalent of approximately US\$ 10, which, at current prices, cannot buy enough food to last more than 2-3 days. Other interviewees were in a similar situation. One woman owned her own clothing store, but was now in Colombia selling cigarettes in the street. A woman who was a university student in Venezuela was selling candy. One woman was a lawyer and another an engineer, and both are now selling bread in Colombia.

Most women interviewed had been in Colombia less than a month and were arriving for the first time. The women who left family and children behind planned to stay for a few weeks or



months to earn money to send home and then return to their families in Venezuela. Some of the women who brought their children with them wanted to either stay in Colombia or move on to Ecuador or Chile, but almost all said they would return if the country leadership changed and the economic situation in Venezuela improved. All women interviewed lamented the prices and cost of services in Colombia compared to Venezuela prior to the crisis. For instance, a doctor's visit and subsequent treatment are not free in Colombia, as they were in Venezuela.

Some desperate Venezuelans are turning to sex work and other risky endeavors in Colombia.

Due to the desperate situation of many Venezuelans in Colombia, some women have had to resort to survival sex to earn enough money for rent, food and a little extra to send back to their families in Venezuela. Some of the women interviewed who were not engaged in survival sex said that there is now a reputation that all Venezuelan women were engaging in this and they are propositioned by men multiple times every day. This is causing a great deal of stress and the women were visibly upset when describing what was happening. Almost all of the women interviewed in Valledupar who were engaging in survival sex are in their early 20s; one is the woman who previously worked for the government in Venezuela. They said that by engaging in survival sex, they were able to earn an average of approximately 120,000 COP (US\$ 40) and did not have to work every day, in contrast to the women who were selling items in the street or cleaning houses, who earn a daily average of 8,000 – 15,000 COP (US\$ 2-5). Most of the women interviewed who were engaging in survival sex had children in Venezuela and one was pregnant at the time, putting her pregnancy at risk.

In addition to survival sex, several of the women said they had been approached by men offering to help them earn money in the nearby mountains or through the drug trafficking business. There was speculation that this may have been an orchestrated intimidation technique to get them to move out of public spaces, like the park by scaring them, rather than an actual offer. However, out of desperation some of them have left with the people making these offers, hoping that they would be legitimate and safe and allow them to earn money to send back to Venezuela.

La Guajira

The expensive and dangerous journey across the border leaves many migrants with nothing when they arrive in Colombia.

The women interviewed described dangerous conditions of the journey to cross the border. Via WhatsApp, people communicate with one another regarding the different routes and the costs they must pay to armed men. One woman said that she started on the path with 100,000 Colombian Pesos (COP) (US\$ 33.50), but upon arrival in Colombia, she had only 5,000 COP left (US\$ 2). She was forced to pay out the rest to armed men and owners of the land they were crossing. If someone runs out of money along the route or is unable to pay, the armed men on the path will confiscate their items.

Many of the women interviewed said they used whatever they had left when they arrived in Colombia to purchase coffee, candy, bread or other small items to sell to try to earn enough money to rent a hammock in the patio of a private home, buy some food and save a little to send back to Venezuela. By selling these small items, they are able to earn an average of 8,000 – 12,000 COP (US\$ 2-5) daily. Of this, they spend 5,500 – 10,000 COP (US\$ 2-3.5) on lodging. Some of the less expensive places also charge 1,500 COP (US\$ 0.50) for cooking and 1,500 COP for bathing. Most of the inexpensive lodging consists of hammocks hung close together in a covered patio. More expensive lodging may be a room in a house, but it is usually a small room with little or no furniture and multiple women share the room. If they are not able to earn enough money for rent, then they will sleep in the park, on the beach or under the bridge until the early hours of morning, when they try to move on before immigration authorities can arrive to deport people.



In March 2018, the situation was so desperate that many migrants did not even have enough to eat every day.

Approximately one quarter of the women interviewed had brought their children with them to Colombia, hoping to find economic opportunities enabling them to meet basic needs for their children, such as food, diapers, medicine, etc. The majority of women either had no children or had left their children behind in Venezuela, hoping to find work and send money back to ensure they were fed.

Food security was one of the main issues facing the interviewees when they still lived in Venezuela, and continued to be an issue in Colombia earlier this year. Many of the women said that they would only eat if they could earn enough money. The refugees and migrants in their group would try to share whatever was available. If only a small amount of money was available, a typical meal was some coffee and a piece of bread; if more money was available, then meals might consist of soup, rice and bread. In Riohacha, it was common for people to go an entire day without eating. One woman produced her local Venezuelan ID to show how different she looked because she had lost so much weight due to food insecurity. Additionally, drinking water is only available for purchase, so must sometimes be prioritized over food.



“We may only eat every other day in Colombia, but it is better than Venezuela. There, we were lucky to eat once a week.”

— Female Venezuelan migrant in Riohacha

The team also interviewed a group of mothers sleeping in the park or on the beach with their children, paying to use public bathrooms and bathing facilities (approximately 1,500 COPs = US\$ 0.50). Most had one or two children with them, but one of the interviewees brought all six of her children with her. Because there were so many and she was the only income earner, she was never able to afford a place for them to stay. Medical care for their children was an issue. Hospitals would treat them for free only if it was an emergency situation. Even in instances when the interview subjects did receive medical care, after the doctors conducted the consultation they prescribed medicine that people would need to fill at a pharmacy, but it was rare they could afford the cost of the medicine. Two women had children with infections requiring antibiotics, which cost 50,000 COP (US\$16.50). Neither could afford to purchase the medicine. Medication for chronic illnesses, such as for asthma or diabetes, was completely unaffordable, leading one mother to just take her child to the emergency room when having an asthma attack.



Maicao

Resources and assistance from non-governmental organizations are extremely limited.

Those interviewed in Maicao (all women in their early 20s without children, except for one man) said they had been going back and forth between Venezuela and Colombia on a weekly basis for the previous three months. Some had slept in the street; others paid 1,000 – 1,200 COP (US\$0.30-0.35) to sleep in a room with 8-10 other people. All had been able to sleep at a Migration Center located there. The average number of days people can stay is three days with up to a maximum of 15 days for very vulnerable people (pregnant women or mothers with newborns, persons with disabilities, people who were ill). They spoke very highly of the Center, saying they could sleep in a bed, bathe, get food and water, and also get an orientation on their legal rights or lack thereof.

On average, the women in Maicao ate once a day, unless they received assistance, which they would use to eat twice a day. Everyone interviewed said they had gone an entire day without eating at least once in the previous seven days, and had also begged for food or medicine. They said business owners sometimes made food available for people.

Additionally, it was very difficult for the Venezuelans in Maicao to access health care and drinking water, so water either had to be purchased or given by businesses or community members. Most people bathe when they go back to Venezuela and wash their clothes there.

In Maicao, those interviewed were also selling items to earn income; however, in contrast to Riohacha, they were selling plastic cups, keychains and notebooks they brought with them from Venezuela. With their income, they send money to Venezuela, purchase new goods to sell and buy food. They have not received any assistance from non-governmental organizations or the Colombian government. However, the business owners seemed to provide quite a bit of assistance with food and water.

The interviewees said that they often had nowhere to sleep but they didn't want to sleep in the park, because Immigration frequently conducts sweeps of the park at night to deport Venezuelans to the border.

The Border (La Frontera)

One key informant estimated that there might be as many as 130 informal paths leading into Colombia, with maybe five or six used frequently. During a 20-minute period, the Mercy Corps team observed three trucks crossing into Colombia, each of which carried an estimated 20-30 people; a total of 60-90 people crossing in that short period. Some of the women interviewed speculated that if President Maduro wins the April Presidential election, many more will likely leave Venezuela.

At the border, people frequently asked for drinking water, food, diapers and other non-food items, medicine/healthcare, and money for transportation.

César

Valledupar

While the needs in Valledupar are very similar to those in La Guajira (e.g. a legal way to work, food and water, medicine, protection), the situation in which migrants are living is a bit different. The women interviewed in Valledupar were much more nervous about being picked up by immigration authorities. The city is much further from the border and when people have been picked up, the women were not sure where they would be taken.

All of the women Mercy Corps talked to had places to sleep. Apparently, there are quite a few communal homes that have several separate rooms around a courtyard and the rooms can be rented out, as opposed to hammocks in the courtyards in La Guajira. There are still people sleeping in the park, but it appears to be far fewer than in La Guajira. Overall there are fewer people in Valledupar than in La Guajira as well; informal estimates are around 28,000.

The interviewees in Valledupar talked about the cost of rent for the month, rather than by the night, as in La Guajira. They are paying an average of 75,000-90,000 COP (US\$ 25-30) per person (for shared rooms of 3-5 people) for the month, plus utilities, which average approximately 900-1,250 COP per person per day.

None of the women we spoke with had gone an entire day without eating or even had to reduce the number of times they were eating per day, but they have had to switch to eating less preferred foods while in Colombia. They did note that in Venezuela, almost all of the food insecurity indicators are true: eating less per meal, eating less per day, going an entire day without eating, prioritizing feeding children over adults, sending family members to live somewhere else for lack of food, switching to less preferred foods, etc. This

is very different from the situation in La Guajira, where everyone said that they had gone at least one full day without eating in the past seven days.

In Valledupar, interviewees informed us that some of the longer paths through the jungle in Venezuela (up to 12 hours by foot) are starting to open up as alternative routes become more and more expensive. But people in Venezuela are becoming more desperate. Many are selling their homes extremely inexpensively, approximately 200,000-300,000 COP (less than US\$ 100). This is also an indication that there may be more people leaving Venezuela in the near future, with an expectation that their move will be permanent.

Those interviewed in Valledupar had varied income streams. Some women were selling coffee, candy and bread in the streets. Some were involved in survival sex. Others were cleaning houses or doing manicures. Only one had papers and was able to work as a mechanic. They all said the main thing they want is the ability to work legally in Colombia to help get a reliable, higher wage, along with all the protections and rights of Colombians.

Conclusion

The main needs expressed by interviewees in all locations included:

1) A path to legal entry in Colombia that does not involve passports.

Obtaining a passport has become increasingly challenging. According to one woman, the previous cost of a passport was 150 Bolivars and is now 10,800. The issue is not Venezuelans' unwillingness to get the passport; even if they are able to gather enough money to pay, they may be told for months that the passport is unavailable due to a lack of specified passport paper.

2) The legal right to work in Colombia with the same wages and protections as Colombians.

Currently, Venezuelans are engaged in exploitative work, informal petty sales or survival sex. Allowing them the "right-to-work" would allow them to seek better opportunities at the same wages and under the same protections as Colombians. Similarly, this may alleviate some resentment in host communities, with complaints that Venezuelans are taking jobs because they are willing to work for less. It would also provide recourse for Venezuelans to lodge a complaint should there be any incidents in the workplace or if they are approached by criminal elements, something they are not currently able to do.

3) Access to shelter, food and water.

Because Venezuelans are forced to take informal paths to enter the country, they must spend what little they have to make the crossing, and they risk losing everything every time they cross. This is creating major protection issues amongst this population in Colombia. In La Guajira, it was not uncommon for women,

WE ARE ALL HUMANS

There are some very good people who are so kind to us and there are people who yell at us and are mad at us for even being here or talking to them. It's not our fault what is happening to us. We are all humans. We just wanted to be treated with dignity.

— Female Venezuelan migrant in Riohacha

especially those accompanied by children (who prioritized food for the children over eating themselves), to go an entire day without eating anything, or only eating a bit of bread with coffee as recently as March. Additionally, in La Guajira, not being able to afford to rent (even a hammock, one among 20 or 30) means there are hundreds of women and children sleeping on the streets, making them vulnerable to illness and personal violations, as well as a major lack of personal hygiene. Furthermore, a lack of access to healthcare and medicine both in Venezuela, and in Colombia, puts all migrants, especially those with chronic illnesses, at severe risk of hospitalization and death, resulting in a major public health risk. Some of the people crossing self-reported infectious illnesses. Without access to proper and regular healthcare, this poses an extreme risk, not only to them, but to the Colombian public as well.

While protection programming will need to be incorporated into all aspects assistance programs due to the extreme vulnerability of the affected population, this will be difficult to do without creating protection interventions directly. Because the majority of Venezuelans don't have legal status in Colombia, they are unable to access the referral mechanisms that are in place, meaning for the time being, any protection interventions need to be implemented by NGOs directly.

Recommendations

- New assistance programs should first prioritize helping Venezuelans meet their most basic needs through the provision of food, shelter, water, medicine and other essential supplies. Providing support to cover the costs to meet basic needs will free up funds for Venezuelans to pay for rent or other short-term shelter options more regularly on their own.
- Vouchers (ideally electronic cards) or pre-paid debit cards should be used to provide people dignity of choice to purchase what they need the most, and to support local businesses.
- Programs should also include protection mechanisms given the extreme vulnerability of new arrivals to sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, exploitative labor practices and recruitment into drug trafficking and armed groups. Women, especially those traveling alone with children, should be prioritized. With additional funding, psychosocial support should be provided.
- Where possible, support should be provided for local organizations and centers that are already providing shelter, food, healthcare and legal assistance, but need additional resources and expanded capacity to meet the increasing need as more Venezuelans arrive.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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