

International Virtual Pledging Conference in Solidarity
with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in Countries in the Region, amid the
COVID-19 Pandemic

May 26th, 2020

**THE UNDERFINANCING OF THE SECOND LARGEST MIGRATION
PHENOMENON IN THE WORLD**

Context

According to the agencies of the United Nations System, since 2015, more than five million Venezuelans have left their country, fleeing from the internal multidimensional crisis whose magnitude steadily worsens as the hours go by. Of the total of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, 1,825,687 people live in Colombia and intend to remain in the country in the long term, accounting for 36% of the whole migration flow. Until March 13th, the National Government had kept its borders open without any kind of restriction, which translated into approximately 35,000 people crossing the international bridges in both directions on a daily basis, engaging in circular movements, in order to get essential supplies, food, health and/or education services. Moreover, the Government's migration authority estimates that over 500,000 Colombians who lived in Venezuela until recently have returned to the country.

This migratory flow is not static. According to projections presented by the United Nations in the International Solidarity Conference on the Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Crisis held in October 2019, the flow is expected to continuously grow in 2020 and reach 6.5 million Venezuelan migrants having fled Venezuela by the end of the year, 5.5 million of whom will have settled in the region, and between 2.4 and 2.5 million in Colombia. It is therefore apparent that it is increasingly urgent to give an integral attention to the needs of migrant populations and host communities, in support of the enormous efforts made by receiving countries.

Colombia and the rest of receiving countries have fostered a regional and multilateral approach to raise awareness and address the impact of this unprecedented exodus in Latin America. However, being the second largest forced migration movement in the world, awareness of this humanitarian crisis beyond the Americas has clearly been very limited and insufficient when compared to similar phenomena, such as in Syria, Myanmar and South Sudan. This happens despite the recurrent appeals to the international community done by South American countries and the United Nations agencies.

1. Colombia's response to the Venezuelan migration crisis: Solidarity and fraternity

The Colombian government has made outstanding efforts to articulate every partner that is involved in the response to the migration phenomenon through the establishment of a coordination mechanism that has enabled planning, executing and monitoring response actions to ensure the highest effectiveness possible.

In December 2018, the National Government established the Interinstitutional Unit for International Cooperation for the Migration Phenomenon, composed by the Presidency of the Republic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidential Agency for International Cooperation. The Unit has the primary role of presenting a comprehensive and holistic vision of the country's cooperation needs in the response to the migration phenomenon, coordinating the actions of various partners to ensure their alignment with the priorities of national and local authorities and orienting these actions towards the strengthening of institutional capacities for the response.

Cooperation resources are channeled mainly through agencies of the United Nations System and other operators —among which non-governmental organizations—. For this reason, Colombia is in permanent dialogue and communication with the Interagency Group on Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM) to guarantee the implementation of necessary actions in the field. The Group operates under the joint leadership of the United Nations Resident Coordinator Office, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and is in charge of coordinating the actions of 16 UN agencies, 6 organizations and national movements of the Red Cross and 46 NGOs, adding up to 68 members.

In the implementation of the response, national institutions have devoted a considerable amount of their financial and technical capacities to provide care to migrant populations and meet their most pressing needs, as well as to ensure their socio-economic integration in a progressive and sustainable fashion within host communities.

Regarding the health sector, between 2017 and 2019, the national health system reported 5,458,330 attention services provided to 794,444 Venezuelan migrants, including 283,743 children and adolescents and 141,575 pregnant women. The cost related to these services rose to COP557,423 million (approximately USD163.9 million). These efforts have generated, until the end of 2019, a budget deficit of COP427,423 million (approximately USD125.7 million) in the health public network.

Conversely, in the education sector the national Enrolment Integrated System reported, as of April 6th, 327,400 Venezuelan children and adolescents who were enrolled in Colombian

educational institutions all over the country¹. For 2019, the estimated annual costs of education for the Venezuelan student population added up to COP457,619 million (approximately USD135 million); meanwhile, the projected costs for 2020, with information updated until February, is expected to reach COP730,923 million (approximately USD209 million).

With respect to childhood and adolescence care and protection, between 2015 and October 2019, the National Family Welfare System provided attention services to 160,720 Venezuelan children and adolescents. In 2018, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute allocated over COP145,308 million (approximately USD44.7 million) for care and protection of 62,247 Venezuelan children and adolescents. Between January and October 2019, 102,965 Venezuelan children and adolescents received care and protection services, which accounted for COP105,302 million (approximately USD32.4 million). During the first quarter of 2020, 64,740 children and adolescents have received these services.

In August 2019, the National Civil Registry Office, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, issued an executive decision to grant Colombian citizenship to children born in Colombia to Venezuelan parents, children who were at risk of statelessness. This measure comprises children born between August 2015 and August 2021 and, until May 2020, has already benefited 44,968 children.

Mindful of the barriers that migrants without a regular migratory status for access to some essential goods and services or for their socio-economic integration in host communities, the National Government has devised various transitory regularization mechanisms. As of April 2020, 687,332 special stay permits had been issued, allowing their holders to legally reside in the country for two years, with the possibility renewal, and enabling them to register in the health system and access the formal labor market. It is worth pointing out that all migrants have access to emergency health services, including COVID-19-related cases.

With the purpose of facilitating migrants' access to health and education services, in addition to food and other supplies, the Government has also issued almost five million border mobility cards which allow the holders to cross the border unlimitedly through formal border posts. The Colombian government also grants temporary transit permits, enabling their holders to move within the country on their way to other destinations.

2. The response strategy to COVID-19

¹ Venezuelan children and adolescents are reported to receive education in 1,045 of the 1,103 municipalities, and in all 32 departments in Colombia. Public schools represent 96.4% of total enrollments.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an important challenge for Colombia as well as for the other receiving countries, which has inevitably permeated the institutional capacity to respond to the phenomenon of mixed migration flows from Venezuela. Since the beginning of the health emergency, the National Government has decisively included migrant populations from Venezuela and their host communities in the response strategies to face the pandemic, reaffirming its solidarity and its approach to migration as an opportunity for development.

To this end, the Government designed the following six-point response plan:

2.1. Border closure

In response to the high epidemiological risk posed by the usual crowding at the international bridges, the executive authorities declared the closure of the Colombian-Venezuelan border crossings on May 13th. As a result, there has been a decrease of over 90% of the number of people transiting between both countries. Furthermore, between March 24th and May 14th more than 62,000 Venezuelan citizens have returned to their country. 26,000 of them were basically circular migrants stocking up on goods and services in the border, who returned to Venezuela during the first three days. About 36,000 additional people have returned through a process that is not promoted by the Colombian State but has required emergency humanitarian support to ensure compliance with sanitary and protection measures for Venezuelans wishing to return to their country and for the host communities they transit through on their way to Venezuela.

2.2. Access to health services

The Colombian government is committed to providing health services to every person in vulnerable conditions, regardless of his/her nationality. The health care route and standards for suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases is exactly the same for Venezuelan migrants as for any Colombian citizen. Migrants that are affiliated to the national health system can access health services through a health institution. Those not insured can access services by using their special stay permit or through emergency care.

2.3. Adjustments to the programs of our cooperation partners

In accordance with the health parameters defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 9 of the 57 established shelters were preemptively closed. The remaining shelters have restricted new entries, operate under the supervision of health authorities and are also implementing shifts for eating to avoid agglomerations. Likewise, all the response partners are working on alternative mechanisms to deliver food directly to migrant households as communal dining halls are currently suspended. Coordination with cooperation partners has also allowed a substantial increase of beneficiaries and amounts of multipurpose cash

transfers, with the aim of aiding migrants and their families with their housing and food expenses.

2.4. Inclusion of migrants in the Government's humanitarian aid programs

The National Government delivered 200,000 food items baskets in 71 of the country's municipalities to benefit almost 1 million Venezuelan migrants in highly vulnerable situations. Additionally, 73,655 Venezuelan children currently receive food packages to prepare at home and 135,371 Venezuelan children and adolescents, who were provided school meals through the School Feeding Program (PAE), will continue receiving them during the health emergency.

2.5. Targeting of programs in territories with the greater relative impact from migration

Some departments and municipalities, namely La Guajira and Norte de Santander (border departments with Venezuela), Nariño (border department with Ecuador) and Soacha (central municipality that neighbors Bogotá), have been prioritized to receive special attention, due to their high concentration of vulnerable Venezuelan migrant population. In border territories, the National Government and the international cooperation actors have distributed over 60,000 food vouchers, monetary transfers and cash; more than 100,000 health-related items; and over 35,000 hygiene kits. Moreover, more than 120 Refugee Housing Units (RHU) were also set up in these territories. They have also delivered 10,000 school kits to Venezuelan children and adolescents who live in Venezuela but are nonetheless enrolled in Colombian education institutions.

2.6. Strengthening of coordination and information exchange

The mechanisms established to promote a constant information flow amongst all the entities involved and the affected communities during the health emergency have allowed for effective progress in the efforts to respond to the new needs emerging from the pandemic. The Colombian government issued an executive order that prohibits evictions due to late rent payments during the emergency, which has had a differential positive impact on migrant populations.

3. The steadily rising challenges in the wake of the pandemic

Colombia has spared no effort to continue caring for those who have been forced to abandon Venezuela as a result of the ongoing tragedy in that country. Nevertheless, all the Government's actions to meet the needs of migrants are permanently placing the institutional and budgetary capacities of public entities to under extreme pressure, threatening to overstretch them and risking the sustainability of the response to the migration phenomenon.

In this context, Colombia has made recurrent appeals to the international community and the country's cooperation partners for the necessary support to close persistent gaps in various response sectors and to relieve the pressure that the massive migration flow has put on its institutions.

The Government's main priority is to considerably increase the support to the health sector due to the high costs that it has borne and will continue to bear in the response to the migration phenomenon. One of the main objectives is the significant expansion of the percentage of migrants registered in the health system, which would allow to decrease costs associated with health care services in the public network. Currently, of the 687,332 Venezuelan holders of the special stay permit, 199,316 are affiliated in the health system; 59% belong to the contributory regime and the remaining 41% to the subsidized regime. Widening the base of registered Venezuelan migrants has the potential of reducing the costs to the system, both through the increase of the number of contributors and the reduction of emergency care costs (the only route available in the system for unregistered people).

Furthermore, the payments owed to public hospitals for health care services provided to migrants amount on average to COP132,680 million (approximately USD39 million) every year. Focusing more international cooperation resources on health-related actions will ease the burden on these institutions by the migration-driven increase in demand for health services. The main health care needs that require support from the international community include primary health care and prevention; care for complex and high-cost diseases; expansion and improvement of hospital infrastructure; provision of technological and biomedical equipment; specialized maternal and perinatal care; and strengthening the provision of sexual and reproductive health services, prioritizing contraception and prevention of unintended pregnancies, particularly in adolescents.

The strengthening of the education sector is also a priority in order to continue caring for more than 327,400 Venezuelan children and adolescents currently enrolled in Colombian schools. This sector presents several needs that can be supported by international cooperation, including the supply of educational and technological elements and school furniture; teacher staff expansion and training; school transportation; increase in the number of meals of the School Feeding Program (PAE); school and hygiene kits; uniforms supply; remedial and tutoring school programs; implementation of comprehensive care routes; and improvement and expansion of existing infrastructure.

The health emergency has also generated a setback on achieved social progress and has altered the balance in humanitarian assistance that were achieved during the past year with migrant populations and hosting communities, mainly regarding food security and shelter and the ability of these populations to satisfy their own basic needs. According to the rapid needs assessment conducted by the GIFMM in May 2020, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak,

83% of migrant households live in a room/house under a rental modality, followed by 8% that live in a relative's or friend's house without having to pay and a remaining 2% that are homeless.

As mentioned above, the National Government, with support from the GIFMM, works to provide multipurpose cash transfers that allow migrants and host communities to cover their housing and food expenses, ensuring compliance with the guidelines developed under the leadership of the Government's technical entity in charge of social programs, with the aim of guaranteeing maximum impact interventions that are aligned with the "do no harm" principle. The Government has also designed medium and long-term housing projects alongside the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank, which include rent subsidies, housing improvement to boost offer in high migration flow zones, improvement of urban infrastructure and house purchase support.

On top of that, cash-based interventions have gained prominence as a Government-prioritized instrument to tackle the sharp shortfall of livelihoods and income generation of migrant populations that relied on informal economic activities and were strongly struck by the mandatory preventive isolation measures declared by the executive authorities in response to COVID-19.

4. Socio-economic integration: the main challenge in a post-COVID-19 setting

Aware of the need for a sustainable response to migrant populations intending to remain in the country indefinitely—which also demands a medium and long-term approach—the Government continues to develop actions oriented towards their socio-economic inclusion, as well as income-generating opportunities for these populations.

On the one hand, international cooperation can support the strengthening of communication campaigns and initiatives to combat xenophobia, since the pandemic has resulted in a surge of discrimination and xenophobic expressions towards migrant populations. The pandemic has also rendered these populations' vulnerability more visible in mass media due to, among other reasons, the unlawful evictions they have been subject to for late payment during the health emergency.

It should be stated that public support to migrant populations has been declining. According to Gallup's most recent poll, published in April 2020, over 80% of the survey respondents have an adverse opinion regarding the prospect of Venezuelans remaining in Colombia. This deteriorating collective feeling further reinforces the need for international cooperation to ensure the continuity of the open-border policy that the Government is firmly committed to.

On the other hand, it is necessary to pave the way for a more effective integration for migrants to become development agents through improved training options, increased

business or enterprise development opportunities within the formal economy and further alternatives for community interactions that enable a better correspondence between supply and demand of migrant workforce in the country.

As a public policy priority, the National Government devised the *Income Generation Strategy*, which presents a route for the economic integration of migrants through their access to the labor market or managing their own businesses. This document also identified the following 10 prioritized short and medium term actions that require support from international cooperation:

- Enable mechanisms to continue regularizing migrants in the country.
- Perform descriptive studies of the socio-economic profile of migrants and monitor the evolution of the economic integration process.
- Reduce time and costs to processes of recognition of qualifications and create alternatives for the apostille requirement.
- Expand the alternatives for the access of migrant population to skills certifications and vocational training programs.
- Implement a specific route inside the Employment Public System for migrant population and strengthen the articulation of labor information systems.
- Raise awareness among employers on the fight against forced labor and discrimination at work, and strengthen the capacity of labor inspection.
- Adjust the existing regulations and procedures to foster foreigners' access to financial support funds for entrepreneurship.
- Work with financial institutions to facilitate migrant populations' access to financial products and services, and invest in financial education campaigns.
- Promote equal access of women to the various socio-economic integration programs and expand child care capacity.
- Mobilize financial resources to foster local economic development with migrant workforce contribution: investment in public works, creation of special economic zones, stimulation of tourism development, strengthening of the orange economy, etc.

All efforts made and all aforesaid needs provide strong evidence on Colombia's urge to receive support bilaterally or through United Nations' agencies for the regional response plan to support humanitarian as well as long term development issues, taking into account that the attention to migrant populations will remain a major regional challenge for the years to come.

It should be stated that efforts to care for Venezuelan migrants have not been limited to the policies and strategies of the National Government. Local governments, non-governmental organizations and academia have also worked in close collaboration and contributed to ensure an integral response to the phenomenon.

5. An appeal for a greater commitment from the international community

The main receiving countries have made recurrent appeals in several fora to the international community for increasing its support to the response to this complex phenomenon. However, the response of the international community has been insufficient and very timid when compared to other similar mass movements².

On December 14th, 2018, in Geneva, the GIFMM presented the Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) 2019, with the aim of mobilizing USD738 million for 22 countries in the region, 43% of which would be allocated to Colombia (USD315 million). This plan reported contributions for the amount of USD389 million (52.7% of the total).

The RMRP 2020 was launched on November 13th, 2019, in Bogotá, with an original financial requirement of USD1.35 billion to underpin care, protection and integration efforts for four million refugees and migrants from Venezuela in 17 receiving countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent emergence of new needs and priorities in the response, the RMRP 2020 was revised in May 2020 with an updated requirement for USD1.41 billion. As of May 20th, 2020, the response plan reported contributions worth USD61.6 million (4.4% of the total requirement).

This year, the response in Colombia intends to implement actions for USD782.3 million for 2.26 million people, including Venezuelan migrants, Colombian returnees and host communities. After the COVID-19 revision, the sectors requiring the most attention and financial support in the country are health (USD219.2 million); food security and nutrition (USD184.3 million); and multipurpose cash-based interventions (USD78.9 million). As the RMRP comprises actions and strategies in both the humanitarian and development spheres, the efforts towards socio-economic integration (USD107.3 million) are also fundamental in the plan's financial requirement for achieving an integral response to the migration phenomenon in Colombia.

Closing remarks

The Venezuelan migration is the second largest forced human mobility phenomenon in the world, and it calls for a multilateral response proportional to its magnitude.

A substantially stronger international commitment is required to promote a greater financial and technical support to meet the humanitarian needs of migrant populations and relieve the pressure on Governments' institutions.

² See Annex.

Colombia's response has been recognized by the international community as a public good and as a best practice in terms of receiving vulnerable migrant population. For the response to continue, there is need for a renewed and strengthened financial engagement.

The tragic circumstances inside Venezuela and the prospect of the COVID-19 pandemic worsening them have the potential of forcing more Venezuelans to flee their country, thus affecting Colombia in a critical manner.

Colombia is implementing the ambitious Agreement signed with the former FARC guerrilla, facing a complex situation derived from the disproportionate increase of illegal crops between 2013 and 2018 and striving to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. This, coupled with the migration crisis and the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, places the country in a juncture of needs of key interest to the international community and whose response calls for joint action.

ANNEX

Funding figures reveal that the attention the international community has given to the regional response to Venezuelan migration has been extremely timid and insufficient, even when compared to other migration phenomena in the world.

The following data regarding the 2019 regional response plans underlines this situation:

For 4.8 million migrants, the RMRP for Venezuelan migration reported resources for USD389 million, equivalent to USD82 per migrant.

For 5.6 million migrants, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis (3RP) received a USD3.1 billion funding, equivalent to USD558 per migrant.

For 2.2 million migrants, the South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP) mobilized USD592 million, equivalent to USD267 per migrant.

For 915,000 migrants, the Joint Response Plan to the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis (JRP) received USD691 million, equivalent to USD756 per migrant.

Throughout 2020, the underfinancing of the regional response to the Venezuelan migration phenomenon continues to be evident, as per reported until May 20th:

For 5.1 million migrants currently reported, the RMRP for the Venezuelan population registers contributions of USD61.6 million, equivalent to USD12 per migrant.

For 5.6 million migrants, the 3RP for the Syrian population reported financing for USD447 million, equivalent to USD80 per migrant.

For 2.3 million migrants, the RRRP for the South Sudanese population mobilized USD33.7 million, equivalent to USD15 per migrant.

For 860,000 migrants, the JRP for the Rohingya population received USD260 million, equivalent to USD302 per migrant.