

A black and white photograph of a man in a white jacket and cap hugging a woman from behind. Both are wearing face masks. In the foreground, a young girl with long hair is also wearing a face mask. The background shows a makeshift shelter made of a tarp and some foliage.

A CRISIS WITHIN A CRISIS

The fragile humanitarian and security status of Venezuelan refugees and internally displaced people within Colombia

January 2021

Context

The Venezuelan refugee crisis is second in scale only to Syria. Currently, at least 5.5 million¹ Venezuelans (approximately one in six) are seeking refuge in other countries, fleeing the unprecedented hyperinflation, chronic lack of services and basic needs such as food and medicine, political unrest and violence in their home country. The majority have stayed within the region, with the largest number – at least 1.7 million² – choosing Colombia, a country that has kept an open border for Venezuelans. Many other Venezuelans pass through Colombia on route to other countries, and some 3.4 million regularly commute from Venezuela to Colombia to access basic services³.

However, the situation in Colombia itself is extremely fragile. While poverty rates have fallen in the recent decade, Colombia remains one of the world's most unequal countries⁴. Colombia is emerging from decades of armed conflict, from which over 7.9 million Colombians remain internally-displaced or unsettled today⁵. Despite the 2016 Peace Agreement negotiated between the Colombian government and FARC, evidence shows renewed escalation of armed conflict⁶.

Further still, in 2020, Colombia experienced high rates of COVID-19, ranking in the top ten globally for caseload and top 15 for fatalities⁷. In order to control the spread of the virus, the government introduced restrictions that negatively impacted people's livelihoods and economic wellbeing. On top of this, Colombia has the tenth highest economic risk for three or more hazards in the world, including earthquakes, flooding and landslides⁸.

Given these layers of risks, the situation for Venezuelan refugees, Colombian internally-displaced peoples and returnees, and many Colombians themselves remains dire. Cities and communities in Colombia are struggling to cope with the diverse and pressing needs of their increasing populations. Women, children, and other vulnerable groups, experience each of these overlapping insecurities more acutely.

While the international community is providing much needed humanitarian support to Venezuelan refugees in Colombia and elsewhere, these interventions do not match the scale of the growing need and insecurity by multiple cohorts of people in the country. Colombia's longer-term development also need consideration, including improving employment opportunities, housing and services for all. Without additional, accelerated action, this crisis within a crisis situation in Colombia could spiral further, deepening an already grim humanitarian catastrophe and ultimately holding back our collective responsibility to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1 Coordinating Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V/GIFMM) (data updated 5 November 2020) <https://r4v.info/es/situations/platform>

2 Ibid.

3 WFP "Colombia Situation Report" (December 2019) <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/wfp-colombia-situation-report-december-2019>

4 OECD "Economic Surveys: Colombia" (October 2019) <https://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/Colombia-2019-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

5 UNHCR data (accessed 2 December 2020) <https://reporting.unhcr.org/colombia>

6 UNSC "Verification Mission in Colombia: Report of the Secretary-General" (25 September 2020) <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/943>

7 WHO data (accessed 2 December 2020) <https://covid19.who.int/table>

8 World Bank "Natural Disaster Hotspots: A Global Risk Analysis" (2005) <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/7376>

Resilient communities: GOAL's work in Colombia

Globally, GOAL works with the most vulnerable communities to help them respond to and recover from humanitarian crises, and to assist them build transcendent solutions to mitigate poverty and insecurity.

Since October 2019, GOAL has been working in urban and rural Colombian communities on the north-eastern border and coast close to Venezuela, starting in the Norte de Santander and La Guajira departments, and more recently expanding to Santander and Atlantico.

The areas in which GOAL is active are prone to natural hazards and face high levels of multi-dimensional poverty resulting in overlapping income, education, food and health insecurities. Geographically, some of these territories are difficult for government services, official security or police, or humanitarians to access. The influx of high numbers of Venezuelan refugees and Colombian returnees into these fragile communities is challenging their socio-economic systems, public services, infrastructure and social cohesion – leaving them more exposed to external threats or tensions.

In collaboration with Terre Des Hommes Italy, who have been working in Colombia since 2003, GOAL is applying its proven *Barrio Resiliente* ('Resilient Community') approach from Honduras⁹ in these Colombian communities.

- **Localisation:** *Barrio Resiliente* recognises that communities are made up of socio-economic systems that meet the needs of their residents. It acknowledges that addressing recurrent crises and building resilience requires an integrated systems approach. Through its local staff and partners such as civil society organisations and local government actors, GOAL has adapted *Barrio Resiliente* to respond to the specific socio-economic, political and environmental systems which underpin the challenges faced by these Colombian communities.
- **Relevance:** *Barrio Resiliente* combines the urgent work of addressing beneficiaries' immediate and diverse needs with building long-term resilience. At one end of the scale of interventions, unconditional cash transfers and seed capital support vital economic recovery

and survival. At the other, GOAL works with key local actors, particularly municipal authorities, to design and implement disaster risk reduction (DRR) and social cohesion approaches in such a way that builds local knowledge and capacity. *Barrio Resiliente* has been developed to address the needs of vulnerable populations living in informal settlements to strengthen and formalise their access to essential goods and services, and is seen as particularly relevant to supporting increased inclusion and resilience of Venezuela migrants and returnees within Colombia society.

- **Inclusivity:** GOAL promotes the inclusion of all beneficiaries, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups or those with least access to power. Based on a detailed analysis of the Colombian context, GOAL's interventions respond to the needs of Venezuelan and Colombian migrants and host communities with an emphasis on women, children (particularly unaccompanied minors), LGBTIQ+ populations, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Additionally, GOAL works with Indigenous communities – such as the Wayuu in La Guajira, and the Barí, Yukpa and Inga in Norte de Santander – facing chronic food and water shortages, a lack of basic services and secure employment options, and the risks associated with pendular migration¹⁰.
- **Coordination:** In order to avoid overlaps, maximise impact and ensure no-one is left behind, GOAL is part of the Inter-Agency Mixed Migration Flows Group in Colombia (GIFMM), co-led by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

The four strands of GOAL's *Barrio Resiliente* programme and impact in Colombia¹¹:

1: Increase community capacity to manage and mitigate risks

GOAL is collaborating with key actors to strengthen local government and community capacities for DRR. This includes identification of hazards, the development of policies and plans with local consultation, data collection, and implementation. A core component of this work is integrating women's participation in these activities and decisions.

⁹ Read more about GOAL's work in Honduras: <https://www.goalglobal.org/countries/honduras/> and about Barrio Resiliente: <https://www.goalglobal.org/stories/barrio-resiliente-building-resilience-changing-lives/>

¹⁰ HRW "People of Resilience: Colombia's Wayuu Indigenous Community Confronts a Malnutrition Crisis Amid Covid-19" (August 2020) <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/08/13/people-resilience-colombias-wayuu-indigenous-community>

¹¹ GOAL is grateful to the Governments of Ireland (Irish AID) and the USA (OFDA/USAID DHA) for their support to its interventions in Colombia.

2: Improve shelter and settlements

Due to a combination of factors such as lack of availability and affordability of shelter, and xenophobia, a large portion of refugees and vulnerable populations are concentrated in informal settlements on the outskirts of urban centres. These unplanned shelters are often unsafe and exposed to natural hazards. GOAL is working with local municipalities and communities to design and implement DRR measures and improve access to safe housing in at-risk settlements.

3: Improve early warning systems for natural and technological risks

Early warning systems for flooding and landslides improve community response and implementation of mitigation plans – but many neighbourhoods have no such preparedness plans in place. In target communities, GOAL is working with local actors to put in place and operationalise critical early warning and response systems against the principal hazards including flooding and landslide.

4: Support local economic recovery and market systems

GOAL is supporting refugees, migrants and host communities restore or start economic activity – including as a result economic shocks caused by COVID-19. With a key focus on women, and women's and migrants' associations, GOAL is providing coaching, training and technical assistance in establishing new small enterprises, as well as the provision of in-kind and cash seed capital for pilot projects. For the most vulnerable, GOAL also provides unconditional cash support to help beneficiaries meet their basic needs, to re-establish themselves financially, and seek protection and psycho-social support as necessary. GOAL is also introducing its Blue Economy programme which supports resilient and inclusive development of the small scale fisheries market system.

A crisis within a crisis: under-addressed security risks

The situation of Venezuelan refugees, internally-displaced and returning Colombians, and their host communities, is fragile enough. However, from GOAL's engagement in communities in the north-eastern Colombia, there is a growing security crisis which is threatening to exacerbate the situation.

1: Increasing xenophobia and violence against refugees

Many refugees and displaced people in Colombia settle in communities already challenged by poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and limited services, infrastructure and local government capacity. The fact that less than half of Venezuelans in Colombia have regular status¹² contributes to their insecurity and ability to access services and opportunities. While the Colombian government's announcement of Special Stay Permits for Venezuelan refugees is welcomed, the scarcity of employment options means that only 14% of permit-holders have formal work¹³.

These precarious socio-economic conditions foster tension between residents and, in these contexts, Venezuelan refugees are facing xenophobia, exclusion and violence. Recent surveys show that unfavourable opinion of Venezuelans refugees and migrants by Colombians has increased from 67% in February to 81% in April 2020¹⁴, and that in 2020 alone, 46% of Venezuelan households in Colombia reported experiencing discrimination¹⁵. A related impact is that misinformation about the services and opportunities available to refugees is rife¹⁶.

2: Rise in illegal economies and armed conflict

Many areas in Colombia are characterised by armed conflict, territorial disputes and illegal activities. Armed and criminal groups control many of the hundreds of informal crossings between the two countries, putting Venezuela refugees and Colombian returnees at risk¹⁷. This is especially true for Indigenous groups such as the Wayuu, who

¹² GIFMM "Fact Sheet: Trata Y Tráfico Ilícito De Refugiados Y Migrantes" ('Illicit Trade and Trafficking of Refugees and Migrants') (October 2020) <https://r4v.info/es/documents/download/74528>

¹³ UNHCR "UNHCR welcomes Colombia's decision to regularize stay of Venezuelans in the country" (4 February 2020) <https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/news/briefing/2020/2/5e3930db4/unhcr-welcomes-colombias-decision-regularize-stay-venezuelans-country.html>

¹⁴ ACAPS "Colombia: Risk Overview" (9 September 2020) <https://www.acaps.org/country/colombia/special-reports#container-1099>

¹⁵ GIFMM "Colombia: Joint Needs Assessment" (June 2020) <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/78013>

¹⁶ Profamilia and OFDA-USAID "Health services inequalities affecting the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population in Colombia: How to improve the local response to the humanitarian emergency?" (2020) <https://profamilia.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Health-services-inequalities-affecting-the-Venezuelan-migrant-and-refugee-population-in-Colombia-how-to-improve-the-local-response-to-the-humanitarian-emergency.pdf>

¹⁷ CARE "Rapid Gender Analysis. Latin America & Caribbean: Venezuelan Migrants & Refugees in Colombia" (May 2019) <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/care-rapid-gender-analysis-latin-america-caribbean-venezuelan-migrants-refugees>

regularly cross the border¹⁸.

Moreover, the precarious financial state of many Venezuelan and Colombian refugees, migrants and nationals leads them towards emergency coping mechanisms such as begging, and dangerous and illegal economic activities. This brings them close to illegal armed groups and crime organisations who, in some areas, have used the pandemic as an opportunity to exert and extend their local control¹⁹.

These security concerns are resulting in deeply troubling trends. Armed groups are responsible for homicides, disappearances, and human trafficking²⁰. Unaccompanied children are particularly at-risk of trafficking²¹, recruitment as child soldiers²² and other forms of exploitation. These insecurities result in further mass displacement of populations across Colombia²³.

3: Increasing rates of sexual and gender-based violence

Like many countries in the region, Venezuela and Colombia are highly gendered societies. Men tend to control family assets and decision-making, while women are expected to comply with conservative and restrictive social norms and roles²⁴. There is virtual impunity for sexual and domestic violence with extremely low levels of reporting²⁵.

Given this context of machismo, scarcity of resources and services, and insecurity, women and children experience acute vulnerabilities compared to men, whether in-transit or in host communities.

To cope with the lack of financial resources and employment opportunities, some women and children resort to negative coping mechanisms that expose them to violence and abuse, such as transactional sex²⁶. Refugee and migrant women also tell of being stigmatised for being – or being assumed to be – sex workers²⁷. People of LGBTIQ+ identities are especially prone to economic insecurity, marginalisation and sexual violence²⁸.

The gendered dynamics of violence affect refugee and migrant women in profound ways, particularly for those without official documentation or using informal border crossings often controlled by illegal armed groups. Official Colombian government data indicates that women are disproportionately affected by trafficking; in 2019, 89% of victims of trafficking were women²⁹. Illegal and armed groups are reported to use sexual violence as a tool of social control³⁰.

All told, this increased vulnerability to violence and sexual abuse creates greater need for sensitive and comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare, psycho-social support, and protection services – services which can be already under strain in host communities, not equipped to support the specific needs of different vulnerable populations, or not available at all³¹. Additionally, the increasing trend in xenophobia against refugees in Colombia can create additional barriers to access, such as disinformation, stigmatisation or intimidation³². Moreover, some women refugees say they avoid reporting incidents and seeking support for fear of reprisals and deportation³³.

18 HRW per above <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/08/13/people-resilience-colombias-wayuu-indigenous-community>

19 UNSC Report per above <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/943>

20 Ibid.

21 GIFMM Fact Sheet per above <https://r4v.info/es/documents/download/74528>

22 HRW “Colombia/Venezuela: Armed Groups Control Lives at Border” (January 2020) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/01/22/guerrillas-are-police/social-control-and-abuses-armed-groups-colombias-arauca>

23 Ibid.

24 Calderón-Jaramillo et al, “Migrant women and sexual and gender-based violence at the Colombia-Venezuela border: A qualitative study”, in *Journal of Migration and Health* 1–2 (2020) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666623520300039>

25 Ibid.

26 CARE per above <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/care-rapid-gender-analysis-latin-america-caribbean-venezuelan-migrants-refugees>

27 Calderón-Jaramillo et al per above <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666623520300039>

28 Profamilia and OFDA-USAID per above <https://profamilia.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Health-services-inequalities-affecting-the-Venezuelan-migrant-and-refugee-population-in-Colombia-how-to-improve-the-local-response-to-the-humanitarian-emergency.pdf>

29 Colombian Ministry of the Interior. Trafficking data. <https://tratadepersonas.mininterior.gov.co/observatorio-del-delito-trata-de-personas/casos-de-trata-de-personas>

30 UNSC Report per above <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/943>

31 Profamilia and OFDA-USAID per above <https://profamilia.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Health-services-inequalities-affecting-the-Venezuelan-migrant-and-refugee-population-in-Colombia-how-to-improve-the-local-response-to-the-humanitarian-emergency.pdf>

32 CARE per above <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/care-rapid-gender-analysis-latin-america-caribbean-venezuelan-migrants-refugees>

33 Ibid

Recommendations

Colombia is experiencing a crisis within a crisis. Many Colombian cities and communities that were already socially and economically precarious are being pushed beyond capacity by the arrival of Venezuelan refugees and Colombian returnees and internally-displaced people. This multi-layered humanitarian crisis is being deepened and exacerbated by an overlapping security crisis which is causing violence, illegal activity and human rights abuses to rise.

GOAL is asking for the international community to urgently recognise the scale and complexity of the humanitarian and security crises facing vulnerable Venezuelans and Colombians in Colombia alike.

Specifically:

- **The international community should urgently mobilise the financial support to implement the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP), and direct it to those most in-need**

GOAL welcomes the \$2.79 billion pledged by donors at the International Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees in May 2020³⁴. It is critical that these pledges materialise, and that they are rapidly funnelled to the areas and populations of most need. Latest figures suggest that there is an 80% gap in the required funding for the implementation of RMRP in Colombia alone³⁵.

- **The international community should develop a clear pathway from supporting Colombia's humanitarian emergency to its longer-term development in pursuit of the SDGs**

Many of the Colombian communities and cities hosting large numbers of refugees and migrants already experience multi-dimensional poverty and a paucity of local services and opportunities. While humanitarian support is critical for addressing the immediate needs of the most vulnerable, these communities also need development interventions to build their long-term prosperity and resilience. In doing so, local capacity should be invested in – both at the municipal government level and civil society.

These interventions should also take into consideration the impact of climate change on already hazard-prone communities.

- **The international community should provide the Colombian government with the necessary support to comprehensively implement the 2016 Final Peace Agreement, and in accordance with UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution on Women, Peace and Security**

GOAL welcomes the UNSC's statement of 19 October 2020 reiterating its "full and unanimous support for the peace process in Colombia"³⁶, but is gravely concerned by the estimate that the implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement could take 25 years with current levels of expenditure³⁷. Given the concerning trends in violence and insecurity in Colombia, the international community should provide the necessary support - financial and otherwise – to implement the 2016 Peace Agreement.

GOAL also welcomes the UNSC's noting of the "exemplary focus on the participation of women in the Final Peace Agreement"³⁸. The recent twentieth anniversary of landmark Resolution 1325 is a reminder of the critical role that women play in peacebuilding efforts, and the importance of truth and justice for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

- **The Colombian Government and the international community should strengthen services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly migrant women and girls.**

While an integrated care route for survivors exists in Colombia, there remain serious limitations to provision particularly at the local level where supplies, specialist knowledge and services, and funding are lacking³⁹. This is compounded by misinformation among migrant populations and host communities alike. With these types of violence on the rise, it is essential that services are strengthened and comprehensively communicated. It is also recommended that an in-depth analysis be conducted to understand the strengths and gaps in protection service-providers, in order to identify and ensure trusted referral pathways for survivors.

³⁴ UN News "UN agencies welcome donor pledges for Venezuelan refugees and migrants" (27 May 2020) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064922>

³⁵ GIFMM "Colombia: Financial Report" (September 2020) <https://r4v.info/en/documents/details/83128>

³⁶ UNSC "Security Council Press Statement on Colombia" (19 October 2020) <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14332.doc.htm>

³⁷ UNSC Report per above <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/943>

³⁸ UNSC Statement per above <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14332.doc.htm>

³⁹ Calderón-Jaramillo et al per above <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666623520300039>

■ **The Colombian Government and international community should recognise and provide for the intersectional nature of insecurities facing different vulnerable groups in Colombia**

Refugees and migrants with marginalised identities and status experience distinct and overlapping insecurities. The diverse risks and specialised needs of vulnerable groups should be considered in planning and delivering services and interventions. These should also take in to account that these groups are often the hardest to reach. In particular, GOAL calls for attention to be paid to women, children (especially unaccompanied youth), Indigenous groups, LGBTIQ+ populations, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

■ **The Colombian Government should implement anti-xenophobia campaigns, targeted at the most in-need communities.**

Efforts to support the urgent needs of Venezuelan refugees are being hampered by increasing discrimination and stigmatisation. Urgent and targeted anti-xenophobia campaigns should be produced and disseminated to remove these barriers to service access, and in order to promote integration and social cohesion. These will be most effective if designed and delivered in collaboration with local authorities, civil society groups, and the local population.



GOAL