



Situational Analysis of Refugee and Migrant Venezuelan Children Ages 0 to 8 in Colombia

COMMISSIONED BY:



CONDUCTED BY:



Executive Summary

Since 2017, Sesame Workshop has actively worked with global partners to provide early learning and nurturing care to children affected by migration crises around the world. In light of the rapidly expanding Venezuelan migration crisis in Latin America—a region in which the organization has enjoyed a presence for more than four decades—Sesame Workshop commissioned an analysis of the situation of refugee and migrant children ages 0 to 8 in Colombia.

The study sought to:

- Identify the most important needs of children and families affected by migration.
- Establish existing institutional arrangements and services available to support refugee and migrant children.
- Contribute insights to the design of a response strategy focused on supporting early childhood development that can be of use to all relevant stakeholders.

The study was carried out over eight months (May-December 2019) and involved interviewing national- and local-level actors in Bogotá, Cúcuta (in the Norte de Santander province), Riohacha and Maicao (both in La Guajira province). It included workshops with refugee and migrant children; focus

groups with caregivers and ethnographic observations. Given the study's qualitative nature, many statements from findings quote interviewees directly and should not be interpreted as generalized opinions.

CONTEXTS FOR THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND MIGRANT PHENOMENON IN COLOMBIA

The current flow of Venezuelan migration into Colombia began more than a decade ago as an outcome of Venezuela's economic and political crises. It is calculated that five million Venezuelans currently live as refugees or migrants, making this the world's second-largest migration phenomenon, after Syria and its 6.5 million cases. Among all people who have left Venezuela, it is estimated that nearly 35% (1.7 million) are presently in Colombia. The diversity of migratory flows—added to the speed and volume with which they occur—makes this one of the world's most acute migratory problems.

The crisis has been characterized as a “mixed migratory flow” that involves four types of migration:

1. Returning Colombians who once resided in Venezuelan territory, estimated at 400,000 Colombian nationals, to date;

2. Pendulum migration, characterized by Venezuelans who cross the border to acquire goods and services in Colombia then return to Venezuela. Of the 45,000 people who cross borders in this group every day, some 5000 will remain in Colombia;
3. Migration in transit, defined as Venezuelan persons who enter Colombia with the intention to leave for other countries, via airports or other border crossings. In 2019, close to one million individuals entered Colombia in transit; most of whom hoped to leave the country through the Rumichaca crossing on the Ecuadoran border. It is estimated that one of every ten individuals crossing Colombia to reach Ecuador is less than seven years old; and
4. Migration with intent to stay, which encompasses Venezuelans who express their desire to settle permanently in Colombia. Of these, 754,085 hold regular status, i.e., hold a PEP, visa, or foreigner credential; 1,017,152 are classified as “irregular”, for having violated defined stay limits or entered the country via unauthorized border-crossings.

THE SITUATION SURROUNDING REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND THEIR FAMILIES

While there are approximations to the number of Venezuelan children living in Colombia and the main issues affecting their wellbeing, statistics and information remain uncertain and imprecise.

By looking at the institutional responses to the migratory crisis, we find that, in the case of education and early childhood services, the Colombian government has enabled access to

all children interested in enrolling, regardless of their migratory status. 52.6% are served by Colombia’s Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar); 43.98% by the educational sector and 3.42% by Bogotá’s Secretariat of Social Inclusion (Secretaría de Integración Social). Greater access is afforded to children ages 3 to 4, while children under one-year-old have the least access to services. The healthcare offering is limited to emergency services; only children five and under have access to complementary health services.

From the non-governmental sector, major actors such as UNICEF, the Norwegian Refugee Council, Save the Children, and World Vision have focused their actions on areas such as supporting enrollment and designing flexible learning models; developing methodologies for preventing xenophobia; distributing school-supply kits; and providing technical support for teachers. Nevertheless, there are significant limitations when it comes to adapting the education in emergencies offerings to early childhood; aligning the response to the country’s existing public policies; expanding the education systems’ capacity for absorbing students; working with over-age or out-of-school populations; adjusting services for migrants in transit, and incorporating a focus on psychosocial support in educational settings.

Similarly, in the child protection sector, despite the significant work of organizations like UNHCR, SOS Children’s Village and Plan International in helping raise alerts, activate responses and generate awareness on risks, critical challenges still exist in relation to the quality and relevance of services, the availability of psychosocial support for

children and families and coordination with stabilization strategies.

The ethnographic research conducted within this study allowed us to examine the various risks that different refugee and migrant groups face. For example, children and families that cross the border regularly as pendular migrants—though they have housing in Venezuela—are vulnerable due to the precariousness of education and health services in their home country, and the barriers to access those services in Colombia. They also face dangers at border crossings where illegal armed groups are present.

Families in transit to other countries, especially those who travel on foot, suffer the effects of harsh traveling conditions, lengthy distances, climate changes, en-route security risks, and the general uncertainty experienced by children and adults. Migration entails detrimental effects on children's wellbeing due to prolonged immobility when carried in arms; muscle and skin injuries; malnutrition risks; as well as extended periods without proper stimulation and support for learning.

Families that seek to remain in Colombia have a high risk of homelessness and being impressed into forced or hazardous labor; children face high probabilities of abuse, sexual exploitation, child labor and lack of schooling. Even when a decision is made to settle in the country, families must constantly seek out housing, employment, and income. As a result, they continue to move within urban centers and across municipalities. In that sense, uprootedness is ongoing for children; and guaranteeing their right to education, health and protection are permanent challenges for both national and local governments.

As a whole, the environments in which refugee and migrant children spend their lives do not favor their development because they cannot guarantee children's protection, participation, or ability to learn and play. On the contrary, migration leads to toxic stress in children which, in turn, affects their health and growth, cognitive development, and mental health.

IMPLICATIONS

Two types of recommendations come out of the study: strategic recommendations for governments and multilateral and civil-society organizations; and pedagogical recommendations for organizations designing and implementing educational strategies for refugee and migrant families as well as affected children and families in host communities. We hope these recommendations provide a resource for every organization involved in the response to the migration crisis.

Strategic Recommendations

- Contribute to the family modality of early childhood care and education, recognizing that this modality can strengthen bonds between refugee and migrant children and their families and across refugee and migrant families, as well as build social connections within host communities.
- Strengthen the work of the organizations within the Mixed Migration Flow Interagency Group¹—which acts as a coordinating agency between multilateral and civil society

¹ *Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos*; acronym in Spanish: GIFMM.

organizations— to align with the principles of the government’s Early Childhood Development Policy “from 0 to Always” (Política de Estado para el Desarrollo Integral de Primera Infancia de Cero a Siempre) and the National Childhood and Adolescence Policy, 2018-2030 (Política Nacional de Infancia y Adolescencia 2018-2030). Doing so will enhance technical and operational coordination with government agencies across sectors and establish comprehensive service routes for different life trajectories.

- Foster greater alignment between the strategies and actions of the GIFMM membership and those of the Colombian government, especially at the sub-national level, in order to guarantee that emergency services successfully make the transition to a sustainable offering local governments can absorb once foreign aid resources end.
- Strengthen dialogue and coordination between the Colombian government and the GIFMM through the existing technical task forces in the National Family Wellbeing System (Sistema Nacional de Bienestar Familiar). This will allow issues relevant to refugee and migrant children to be integrated into existing institutions and prevent fragmentation when providing a response to the needs of this population.
- Coordinate the monitoring systems of the Colombian government and the GIFMM’s to better support the design and implementation of humanitarian response and stabilization programs to guarantee children’s rights and support their holistic development.
- Bolster institutional capacities and human talent with regard to, among other issues, planning and evaluation,

as well as the impact of migration on young children and families.

- Incorporate capacity development processes and ongoing support to formal and non-formal educators to strengthen learning spaces and projects with a focus on developing resilience and a positive identity. It is also fundamental to provide psychosocial support to those directly involved in caring for the migrant population, to prevent possible effects that undermine their mental health and the quality of the services they provide.
- Document and evaluate response and stabilization strategies so these have a demonstrative effect; then move on to scaling successful approaches.

Pedagogical Recommendations

- In order to promote appropriate environments for children’s development it is essential to go beyond merely conducting discrete activities. Instead, transition to creating experiences, not just for children, but with children and their caregivers. These experiences are to be approached through children’s natural languages, their impulses and potentials: play, curiosity, exploration and creativity.
- To strengthen children’s resilience abilities, we recommend developing a pedagogical approach directed at positively transforming children’s and families’ mental, physical and emotional states. It is critical to strengthen emotional management as well as emotional recognition in others, support participation based on the acknowledgement of their own needs and initiatives, develop problem-solving skills, highlight their

own narratives of reality, and build emotional support mechanisms.

- To generate conditions that strengthen identity development in children and families, we recommend creating means of participation for children and their caregivers; promoting actions for understanding uniqueness while avoiding labels; adopting a differential focus; and reinforcing identity through traditional cultural resources.

This study (available in Spanish) consists of five chapters: the introduction; methodological design; situation analysis of refugee and migrant children based on findings from three case studies in Bogotá, Norte de Santander (Cúcuta and Villa del Rosario) and La Guajira (Riohacha and Maicao); a description of the institutional context for the response to the migration crisis; and the consultant group's conclusions and recommendations.