

Common messages for the Caribbean R4V Sub-Regional Coordination Platform

Overall Context

The current situation in Venezuela has led to a major outflow of refugees and migrants into neighboring countries and beyond, with over 4.7 million Venezuelans having left their country to date¹ due to serious threats to their lives, security, freedom and other significant protection risks. The displacement of Venezuelan nationals in such a short period of time is the largest population movement in the recent history of Latin America and the Caribbean. This flow comprises both refugees and migrants from Venezuela and returning Guyanese. Venezuelans are leaving their country for a variety of reasons, including insecurity and violence, persecution and threats, lack of access to food, medicine and essential services, as well as loss of livelihoods and lack of effective national protection systems as a result of the current political and socio-economic situation in the country. Specific groups of Venezuelans are particularly vulnerable during displacement, including unaccompanied and separated children, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), or those at risk of GBV, single women, people living with a physical or mental disability, as well as victims of human trafficking.

Inter-Agency Coordination Platform

In April 2018, the United Nations Secretary General tasked the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in accordance with their respective functions and mandates, to establish a Regional Inter-Agency Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela to lead and coordinate the response, including analysis, strategic planning and operational interventions. Within the framework of the Regional Inter-Agency Platform, the Sub-Regional Platform was established for the Caribbean in April 2019, covering Aruba, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, as well as Trinidad and Tobago.

Caribbean Sub-Regional Context

Since 2017, the Caribbean continues to experience increasing numbers of arrivals despite the introduction of restrictions to access territories such as visa requirements and temporary closure of borders with Venezuela in most countries in the region; as of December 2019 a total of 100,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants are estimated to be living in the region. Varying responses to the influx of refugees and migrants from Venezuela have been adopted by States in the Caribbean, taking into consideration their geography, language, legal and socioeconomic background, limited size and absorption capacity. Growing concerns about the number of refugees and migrants from Venezuela arriving in the Caribbean, coupled with the continuing deterioration of the situation in Venezuela, have led to push-backs in the region. This includes cases of non-admission, removals and deportations without granting access to asylum procedures or protection screenings in many instances. Limited or no access of partners to immigration detention facilities also remains a concern.

Arrivals in the Caribbean

The Caribbean region is expected to host an estimated 149,900 refugees and migrants from Venezuela by the end of 2020. 124,000 people out of the 149,900 will be in need of assistance, along with 66,100

¹ Latest information about the number of displaced Venezuelans can be found on the R4V website (r4v.info).

other persons from host communities in countries of the sub-region. New arrivals will be predominant in Caribbean countries that share a land or sea border with Venezuela. Some onward movements among the Caribbean islands may also continue to be seen, thus further increasing risks of human trafficking and smuggling. Boat incidents of Venezuelans trying to reach countries in the Caribbean will continue to occur and likely increase throughout the year with the introduction of visa requirements in four out of the five concerned Caribbean countries².

Key messages

Adoption of simplified mechanisms to regularize the temporary stay of Venezuelans currently residing irregularly in host countries. Requirements of existing migratory pathways are often difficult for Venezuelans to meet and there are no alternative legal pathways that take into consideration the specific situation of people arriving from Venezuela in most countries of the region. Refugees and migrants from Venezuela who are in an irregular migratory situation face greater protection threats and risks and are at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse. Lack of documentation hinders their access to rights and services, including education, healthcare and livelihoods. This situation can increase risks of displaced populations to resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including survival sex and trafficking. Partners recommend States in the sub-region to adopt **simplified mechanisms to regularize the temporary stay of Venezuelans**, such as what has been successfully done in Guyana and other countries in Latin America, or globally (i.e. humanitarian admissions programs, temporary protection regime).

Venezuelans should enjoy the right to apply for asylum without undue barriers and regardless of their migratory status. Access to asylum remains limited across the Caribbean, mainly due to gaps in the regulatory framework, or lack thereof, and the capacity of asylum systems. It is important that countries develop and/or continue to **strengthen their national asylum systems**, improving procedural fairness, timely screening and access to information so that people with a well-founded fear of returning to their country of origin or habitual residence are identified, counselled and provided access to international protection. Asylum-seekers should also have a fair opportunity to appeal against negative decisions. All States that have not yet done so are encouraged to **accede to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees** and other international treaties and agreements that protect the rights of refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants and stateless persons.

Venezuelans seeking asylum should enjoy freedom of movement. The lack of freedom of movement affects every aspect of Venezuelans' lives in host countries, including access to rights and services such as education, livelihoods and health, not to mention that this is in breach of Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights³. Detentions must be justified under legitimate purposes, with access to legal aid, and alternatives to detention should always be considered, especially for minors and persons with specific needs (i.e. elderly, pregnant women, medical needs, mental health conditions).

² Trinidad and Tobago (July 2019), the Dominican Republic (December 2019) and Aruba and Curacao (first half of 2020).

³ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.htm. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36c0.htm.

The international community stands ready to support hosting countries to ensure that refugees and migrants from Venezuela have access to rights and public services in their territories. Venezuelan refugees and migrants have been extended access to some services in most countries of the Caribbean, including public emergency and primary healthcare, as well as formal education. However, language, administrative and financial barriers remain in place and more restrictions exist in terms of access to specialized health care and tertiary education. Partners **commend efforts of Caribbean countries in providing services to Venezuelans** and encourage host Governments to **remove restrictions** that prevent Venezuelans from accessing rights and public services in order to allow them to become self-sufficient and reliant. Partners stand ready to **support the capacity of local service providers** to cope with the increased demand for services with the influx of refugees and migrants, so Venezuelans can have adequate access to essential services alongside host communities. Such access and promotion of refugee and migrants' skills and resilience is in line with the Grand Bargain and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)⁴.

Promote livelihoods and access to formal employment to refugees and migrants. The level of self-reliance of Venezuelan communities varies among the Caribbean as Venezuelans are not allowed to formally work in most countries of the sub-region⁵. Requirements to obtain work permits are often lengthy and cumbersome. Those with work permits often do not find jobs commensurate with their skill-level as host countries do not recognize their academic and professional credentials from Venezuela. Partners encourage countries in the region to **facilitate the issuance of temporary work permits** to Venezuelans and **facilitate recognition of academic and professional credentials of Venezuelans** in order to promote self-reliance and reduce risks of exploitation and abuse. This will also contribute to the host country's development in line with Sustainable Development Goals (i.e. SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth) and uphold the GCR objective of enhancing refugees' self reliance.

Increase outreach, communication and engagement of host Governments, partners, the private sector, host community and other stakeholders with Venezuelans. Refugee and migrant communities offer specific skills to host countries and can become valuable and productive members of society. Partners encourage Governments in the region to **establish consultative bodies with Venezuelan communities** and build partnerships in order to benefit displaced and receiving communities. Partners stand ready to support efforts towards better communication with communities, with a view to ensure accountability to affected populations and improve access to clear and reliable information to Venezuelan communities across the Caribbean.

Promote integration of Venezuelans in host countries and foster peaceful coexistence. The sudden increase in the Venezuelan population in the Caribbean has increased pressure over public resources of host countries, particularly straining already vulnerable host communities. This, coupled with cultural and language barriers, have led to discrimination and xenophobic sentiments in some Caribbean countries. Local integration is impacted by the lack of legal migratory status of the majority of the Venezuelan population, and the consequent lack of access to the right to work. Partners

⁴ *Grand Bargain*, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>. *Global Compact on Refugees*, https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf.

⁵ Except for those that have registered with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago during the government-led two-week registration exercise that took place in June 2019.

encourage stakeholders to foster social cohesion, support receiving and host communities, and implement English-as-a-second language initiatives to promote integration and relationship building amongst Venezuelan and local communities.

Increase prevention and response against GBV and trafficking. Human trafficking networks continue to operate in the sub-region⁶, and GBV remains a concern across the Caribbean⁷. However, survivors of GBV and victims of trafficking, and other persons in circumstances of extreme vulnerability, including unaccompanied and separated children⁸, often lack access to specific protection, legal, psychological, shelter and medical services. Lack of legal status also prevents some Venezuelans to report incidents to the authorities, due to real or perceived fear of arrest, detention and deportation. Partners **encourage host Governments to strengthen their capacities to provide adequate and quality services to survivors of GBV and victims of trafficking** and stand ready to provide capacity building for government officials, including law enforcement and judicial bodies, to address the specific needs of this population. In addition, partners will continue to carry out interventions to prevent and respond to GBV and trafficking such as organization of community-based protection activities and direct assistance, among others.

Emphasize the principles of responsibility-sharing and international solidarity. Partners recognize the need for **increased support to host Governments in the Caribbean** to enhance their reception capacity and public services considering the increased demands these refugee and migratory flows have cast on their territories. Support and cooperation from other States individually, jointly, or through partners and resettlement of refugees to third countries are an example of responsibility sharing and of the relevance of working with partners, which is clearly outlined in the Grand Bargain and the GCR.

Sub-Regional R4V Platform (Caribbean)

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⁶ US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2019.

⁷ See, among others, R4V, *Inter-Agency rapid Gender-Based Violence Assessment Report in Guyana*, April 2019, Guyana; UNHCR, *Findings from Participatory Assessments with Population of Concern in Trinidad and Tobago*, August 2018, Trinidad and Tobago; Comité Coordinador de la Diáspora Venezolana en RD, *Situación Personas Venezolanas en República Dominicana*, May 2018, Dominican Republic.

⁸ E.g. UNICEF, *Migration Flows in Latin America and the Caribbean*, August 2019.