

A Humanitarian Crisis: Assisting Venezuelan Migrants and Vulnerable Colombians

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Introduction

Latin America is experiencing an unprecedented exodus of migrants and refugees from Venezuela, precipitated by the country's humanitarian, economic, and social crisis. This situation presents extraordinary challenges—and potential opportunities—for the hosting countries. After Ukraine, migration from Venezuela is the second largest active displacement crisis in the world.¹ According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, Colombia and Venezuela are two of the top five neglected displacement crises in the world.^{2*} These findings are based on three criteria: lack of international political will, lack of media attention, and lack of humanitarian funding.³

As of August 2023, an estimated 7.7 million people have fled Venezuela.^{4,5} According to the United Nations' High Commissioner Office for Refugees (UNHCR), migrants from Venezuela are considered a refugee-like population in need of international protection. In the past seven years, Colombia has become the world's largest recipient of Venezuelan migrants, and the second largest host of a refugee-like population, outnumbered only by Türkiye.¹ Based on recent estimates, there are 2.9 million Venezuelan migrants living in Colombia.⁴ Colombia has the longest land border with Venezuela (see Figure 1), and between 2015 and 2022, the migrant population in Colombia grew 16 times.¹



Figure 1: Map of Colombia (USAID, 2023)⁶

Today, migrants from Venezuela in Colombia represent 5 percent of the total population. The impacts of the crisis are geographically concentrated. Approximately 7 departments in Colombia (out of 32 departments, plus Bogotá) host 70 percent of all migrants from Venezuela.^{1,4} The 2023 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan identified more than 5.4 million people in Colombia affected by the crisis in Venezuela, including Venezuelan migrants and refugees, Colombian returnees, and host community members, who need humanitarian assistance.⁶

Colombia is facing a complex humanitarian situation, which is exacerbated by increased conflict and violence from non-state armed groups and narco-trafficking, extreme weather events, a mixed migration crisis, economic shocks, and residual effects from the COVID-19 pandemic.^{6,7} The United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has estimated that the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in the food security sector is 7.1 million persons in 2023. This number includes refugees and migrants as well as Colombian host communities and persons affected by international conflict.⁸ Approximately 1.3 million migrants are food insecure in Colombia, equivalent to 52 percent of the migrant population.⁷ The 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan for Colombia identified 7.7 million people who require humanitarian assistance, particularly for food security and nutrition, health, protection, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)** assistance, due to conflict and the related displacement crisis, natural disasters and migration in the country.⁶

Colombia's Response to the Venezuelan Migrant Crisis

Overview

The government of Colombia's response to Venezuelan migration can be characterized in three broad phases. Phase 1 was a short-term humanitarian response to receive Colombian returnees from Venezuela and a wave of Venezuelan migrants (2015-2017). Phase 2 consisted of a more coordinated, medium-term response to allow Venezuelan migrants access to basic social services (2018-2021).¹ Phase 3 is an ongoing long-term response centered on mass regularization, paired with social and economic integration (2021-present).¹ The next section focuses on a brief description of Phase 3.

Phase 3: Including Basic Health Services, Food, and Nutrition

The third phase of the government of Colombia's response to Venezuelan migration, which focused on long-term integration of Venezuelans in Colombia, and began in March 2021. A major component of the plan was the creation of Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelan Migrants (Estatuto de Protección Temporal para Migrantes Venezolanos, ETPV), a process implemented through 2023. The Temporary Protection Status (TPS) accelerates registration and regularization of migrants and allows them to transition from an emergency and transitory migratory regime to a legal pathway toward regularization and long-term integration. By granting a permit of stay and work for up to 10 years, the TPS grants and expands access to basic services, and eases labor market pressures.¹ As of early November 2023, the Colombian government granted nearly 2 million resident permits for a temporary period of 10 years to improve the livelihoods of migrants and enable their integration into Colombian society.⁸

Phase 3 consists of three dimensions. The first dimension covers basic needs, to cover a minimum standard of living in Colombia. It includes access to basic health services: decent housing with access to essential services; childcare, and preschool to secondary education. This first dimension also includes the restoration of human rights for children; a monetary income to fund daily nutrition and meals; and the possibility of accessing social programs to overcome conditions of vulnerability. The focus of the second dimension is economic integration, which includes facilitating access to the labor market.¹

The third dimension, social integration, normally occurs when the needs of survival and economic stabilization have been met. Through social integration, migrants become part of the social fabric of the host country and consider the needs of the nation as their own. In this way,

social integration contributes to the nation through citizen and economic participation, among others, within a framework of respect for the regulations on security and coexistence.¹

Food Security Assessment of Migrants and Host Communities in Colombia (June 2022 – August 2022)

Between June and August 2022, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) carried out an emergency food security assessment for migrant populations and host communities in Colombia. The assessment was conducted in 13 departments and 45 municipalities in areas characterized by high numbers of Venezuelan migrants. Overall, 7,097 surveys were conducted with households and travel groups, with representative samples for five population groups: 1) *Venezuelan migrants with intention to settle*, 2) *host communities*, 3) *Colombian returnees*, 4) *migrants in transit*, and 5) *pendular migrants*.⁹

Venezuelan migrants with intention to settle “are migrants who are interested in staying in the country legally,” *host communities* “are part of the Colombian population that lives in sectors where there is a large number of migrants,” and *Colombian returnees* “are Colombians who have left the country and, after a time abroad, returned to national territory.” *Migrants in transit* “are traveling through Colombia and their final destination is another country” and *pendular migrants* “are migrants who carry out permanent activities between two countries, in this case Venezuela and Colombia.”⁹ See Table 1 for the national distribution of the migrant population.

The results showed that all five population groups were suffering from high levels of food insecurity, particularly among *migrants in transit* (73%), and *pendular migrants* (73%),

followed by *Colombian returnees* (54%), *Venezuelan refugees with intention to settle* (52%), and *host communities* (43%). In terms of food consumption, *migrants in transit and pendular migrants* reported significant gaps in food access (poor or borderline food consumption, 55% and 38% respectively), indicating their diets are poor both in terms of quantity and quality. The high level of food insecurity is directly related to their socioeconomic vulnerability as many households (~ 70%) had incomes below the national poverty line, limiting their ability to cover basic needs. One in four (25%) migrant households resorted to emergency coping strategies to meet their basic food needs such as begging or participating in risky activities.⁹

Table 1: National Distribution of the Migrant Population in Colombia⁹

Department	With Intention to settle	Host communities	Colombian returnees
Antioquia	15.9%	14%	14%
Arauca	3.3%	3.1%	3.1%
Atlántico	7.8%	7.1%	7.1%
Bogotá D.C	20.2%	23.0%	23.0%
Bolívar	4.2%	5%	5%
Cesar	3.9%	4.8%	4.8%
Cundinamarca	6.9%	7.0%	7.0%
La Guajira	6.8%	7.2%	7.2%
Magdalena	3.7%	4.1%	4.1%
Nariño	1.0%	1.4%	1.4%
Norte de Santander	12.5%	10.5%	10.5%
Santander	5.3%	5.1%	5.1%
Valle del Cauca	9.3%	8.7%	8.7%

Food insecurity levels among *migrants* were highest in the border departments of La Guajira, Cesar, Norte de Santander, Arauca, and Nariño (see Figure 2 for these Colombian departments). Here, rates of poverty and unemployment are high as these are areas where armed conflict can restrict movement and exacerbate vulnerabilities. A comparison of survey results between 2019 and 2022 showed that food insecurity levels in these 5 different border departments increased. For *host communities*, there was a significant increase in food insecurity that more than doubled between 2019 and 2022 (from 27% to 60%), in these 5 border departments.⁹

This assessment also found high levels of anemia in children under five years old. The most common causes of anemia include nutrition deficiencies, particularly iron deficiency, and infectious diseases. The reported levels of anemia ranged from 44% for *migrants with intention to settle* and 55% for *migrants in transit*, who are traveling through Colombia and their destination is another country. These percentages are substantially higher than those reported in 2015, which found that 24.7% of children under five years old had anemia. Only 24.4% of children aged 6-23 months had a minimum acceptable diet*** in comparison with 36.5% reported in 2015. Less than half (42.5%) of children aged 0-5 months were exclusively breastfed, and only 59.7% of children were continuously breastfed. However, these percentages are higher than the national averages of 36.1% and 31.6%, respectively as reported in the 2015 Encuesta Nacional de la Situación Nutricional (National Nutrition Situation Survey) (ENSIN).⁹

Based on these findings, it was recommended that emergency assistance be extended to satisfy food and other essential needs of the five population groups studied. It was also recommended that food assistance incorporate a nutritional aspect to guarantee that the most vulnerable groups, particularly children under five years old and pregnant and breastfeeding



Figure 2: Departments in Colombia⁹ (Barranquilla is a city in the Department of Atlántico)

women can access a nutritious diet. Finally, additional socio-economic strategies should be implemented to facilitate the integration of migrants and host communities through capacity development, trainings, links to the labor market, and other types of support to assist in the development of new skills and create a stable income. These strategies should be directed towards groups that face the greatest barriers including women, minority ethnic groups (e.g., Indigenous persons, Afro-Colombians) and persons with the lowest income levels.⁹

The 2022 Colombian Quality of Life National Survey: Food Insecurity Experience Scale

In 2022, the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES Scale) was included in the Colombian Quality of Life Survey for the first time. Here, it was reported that 28.1 percent of Colombians were experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2022, with a higher rate of moderate or severe food insecurity reported among Venezuelan migrants (44.7 percent) versus non migrants (27.5 percent).¹⁰ The FIES scale included questions ranging from having experienced uncertainty in the ability to obtain food, through a decrease in the quality, quantity, and variety of food through skipping meals to running out of food, or spending an entire day or more without eating.^{10,11} The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity also differed considerably by department or region of the country. The following Colombian departments reported a prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity greater than 40 percent: La Guajira (59.7 percent), Sucre (47.0 percent), Atlantico (46.1 percent), Magdalena (45.3 percent), Choco (43.2 percent) and Cesar (41.1 percent).¹⁰ See Figure 2 for a map with locations of these Colombian departments.

According to the 2022 FIES results, the highest prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity was for Indigenous people (46.3%), followed by households whose head is a person who recognizes themselves as black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal or Palenquera (40.7%).^{10,11} Improving food security is one of the Colombian government's priorities as well as advancing the peace process.⁷ The 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and Colombia's then largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) includes implementation of rural reforms, such as land redistribution and support for food production for individuals affected by the conflict.¹¹ Achieving the commitments in the 2016 Peace Agreement will help bring security and stability to Colombia, strengthen the protection of human rights, and enhance economic development and equality in both rural and urban areas.¹²⁻¹⁴

Humanitarian Efforts in Colombia

The following sections of the article describe several ongoing humanitarian efforts being conducted by international organizations (including the UN and non-governmental organizations [NGOs]) in conjunction with the Colombian government to assist Venezuelan migrants and vulnerable Colombians. These efforts include: 1) The *ADN Dignidad Program*, 2) addressing food insecurity and the broader humanitarian crisis in La Guajira and 3) Colombia's World Food Programme (WFP) Country Strategy.

Cash Transfers: The ADN Dignidad Project

Both Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees face vulnerabilities and unstable living conditions in Colombia. And while cash transfers are well-known as an effective development

intervention, few evaluations had focused on their effectiveness in emergency situations related to migration, especially at scale throughout Colombia.¹⁵

A large scale, three-year project led by *Action Against Hunger* and its partners provided cash assistance to more than 256,000 migrants, refugees, and returned and host community members in Colombia, allowing them to access basic goods and services and to address key vulnerabilities. The evaluation of the *ADN Dignidad* project is the largest humanitarian cash transfer impact assessment in the region to date. It examined the program's impact on a sample of more than 3,190 households in **Barranquilla** (a city located in the department of **Atlántico**), **Bogotá**, and **Nariño**, Colombia.¹⁵ See Figure 2.

ADN Dignidad—whose name is based on the organizations involved (A for Action Against Hunger, D for the Danish Refugee Council, and N for the Norwegian Refugee Council) — receives support from the US Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA).¹¹ Participants in the *ADN Dignidad** project received cash transfers of approximately \$100 USD per household each month for six months in Barranquilla, Bogotá, and Nariño, Colombia. By including both migrants from Venezuela and Colombian returnees, the project was designed to reduce negative socioeconomic impacts caused by migration.^{15,16} The evaluation's results showed statistically significant effects on program participants, who, when compared to their peers, reported a higher level of satisfaction with their life. Participants reported that 62% percent of the monetary assistance was used for food, 24% for housing, and 12% for other basic needs and household supplies.^{15,16} Program participants also:

- improved their food security,

- were 15% more likely to have a stable monthly income,
- were 26% more likely to save money, and
- 21% less likely to have debt.^{15,16}



Figure 3. A family displaced by conflict walks through a settlement. (Action Against Hunger)¹⁵

“This rigorous evaluation shows that an infusion of cash at a time of vulnerability can have positive, lasting impacts in improving food and economic security and preventing people from having to turn to damaging, desperate measures.” Carlos Alviar, Chief of the Party of the *ADN Dignidad* project, added that timely humanitarian interventions such as this one may also prevent further migration. “As we improve economic recovery, we’re also hoping to reduce the need to migrate again,” he said. “For migrant populations coming to Colombia [for example, from

Venezuela], they don't need to look for another life in the North, such as moving to the United States and going through the struggles and risks that many endure.”¹⁵

Three months after the cash assistance ended, program participants still had higher incomes than their peers. Those who did not participate in the program reported an average income of \$73 USD, while the income of program participants increased by 15% (\$84 USD) after receiving the cash assistance. They were also more likely to invest in activities and resources to advance their livelihoods.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Cash assistance has helped to meet the needs of the participants and create opportunities for their communities. Juan, a Colombian living in Nariño, Colombia, a host community for migrants and returnees, explained that he always dreamed of managing his own farm. “I was able to invest and now I am harvesting tomatoes,” he said. “I also give work to my neighbors. This has allowed me to eat and pay the people who support me in the field.” “There are very few evaluations and evidence on the impact of humanitarian cash transfer assistance programs in Latin America and the Caribbean,” said John Orlando, Action Against Hunger’s Country Director for Colombia. “The study closes knowledge gaps for the country and the continent and allows us to define humanitarian responses, especially for vulnerable and migrant populations.”¹⁵

Most recently, the *ADN Dignidad* project has expanded its reach to an additional 150,000 new participants located in urban and semi-urban areas of Colombia with cash transfers as well as nutrition and protection services through October 2023. The project is also promoting socio-economic integration of the migrant population by providing participants with skill-building opportunities and opportunities to increase their employability and entrepreneurship as well as providing access to financial services.¹⁵

Addressing Food Insecurity and the Humanitarian Crisis in La Guajira

Crisis Impact Overview

La Guajira is the Colombian department with the high food insecurity prevalence (59.7%). As of August 2023, 621,900 people were experiencing food insecurity in La Guajira, Colombia, 298,800 (48%) of them who were in the Alta Guajira region. Most of the affected population belongs to indigenous communities, which compromise 72% of the region's population.¹⁷ The most affected groups are indigenous communities, refugees and migrants, women, and children. In 2022, a lack of economic resources resulted in 59.7% (623,000 people) of the department's households reducing the quantity and quality of their meals, while 17.5% (183,000 people) had at least one person in a household going without food for at least one day. Drivers of the humanitarian crisis in La Guajira are climate change and geographic vulnerability as well as food inflation.¹⁷

Aggravating factors include the Venezuelan crisis, economic vulnerability, and presence of non-state armed groups whose activities include massacres, extortion, and kidnapping, which restrict the mobility of citizens, and disrupt the already difficult economic situation. The Alta Guajira region borders the Venezuelan state of Zulia, and it serves as an entry and transit point for migrants. Of the 2.9 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees living in Colombia, 33.5% entered through the department of La Guajira. La Pista, in the Maicao municipality, is the biggest migrant settlement in the country (see Figure 4). Venezuelan migrants and refugees living in this region have high levels of acute food insecurity because of high poverty and unemployment rates and conflict-related mobility constraints.¹⁷

Several of the municipalities (Maicao, Manaure, and Uribia) affected by persistent food insecurity are in Alta Guajira. Persistent food insecurity in La Guajira leads to numerous negative health outcomes including infectious diseases, poor oral health, and chronic diseases, such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and mental health problems.¹⁷ This region is home to the Wayúu people, the largest indigenous community in Colombia, who also live in neighboring Venezuela. La Guajira experiences high rates of poverty, unemployment and labor informality that are correlated with low- and unstable-income sources, which decrease people's resilience against food insecurity.¹⁷

La Guajira has the highest monetary poverty rate in the country (43% in total, 65% in rural areas). Poverty rates are even higher in the Alta Guajira region: 92% in Uribia, 87% in Manaure, and 60% in Maicao. (See Figure 4). Women in this region are more likely to experience poverty than men.¹⁷ Practices such as child marriages involving underage girls from indigenous communities and older men contribute to women's and girls' economic vulnerability.¹⁷ As of August 2023, 76% of severe and acute malnutrition cases in La Guajira were among children from indigenous communities. Childbearing women are also particularly vulnerable. As of July 2023, the maternal death mortality in La Guajira is nearly double the national average with 92.9 deaths per 100,000 persons compared to 43.5 for the country.¹⁷

Along with geographic vulnerability to climate hazards and weather extremes, northern Colombia is also susceptible to El Niño effects, which bring dry conditions. El Niño started in June 2023, and it is forecasted to last until March 2024. Lower than average rains in the first semester of 2023 prompted the Colombian Government to declare an emergency in La Guajira,

which was later declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court on October 2, 2023. Only emergency decrees related to water availability were allowed to continue until July 2024.¹⁷ The El Niño season will likely increase the number of people experiencing food insecurity in the region. Indigenous communities in La Guajira, especially the Wayúu people, are at particular risk of food insecurity, with 67% already experiencing food insecurity and 32% susceptible to experiencing food insecurity. Figure 4 shows the 141,700 anticipated increase in people experiencing food insecurity due to El Niño in each of Alta Guajira’s municipalities.¹⁷

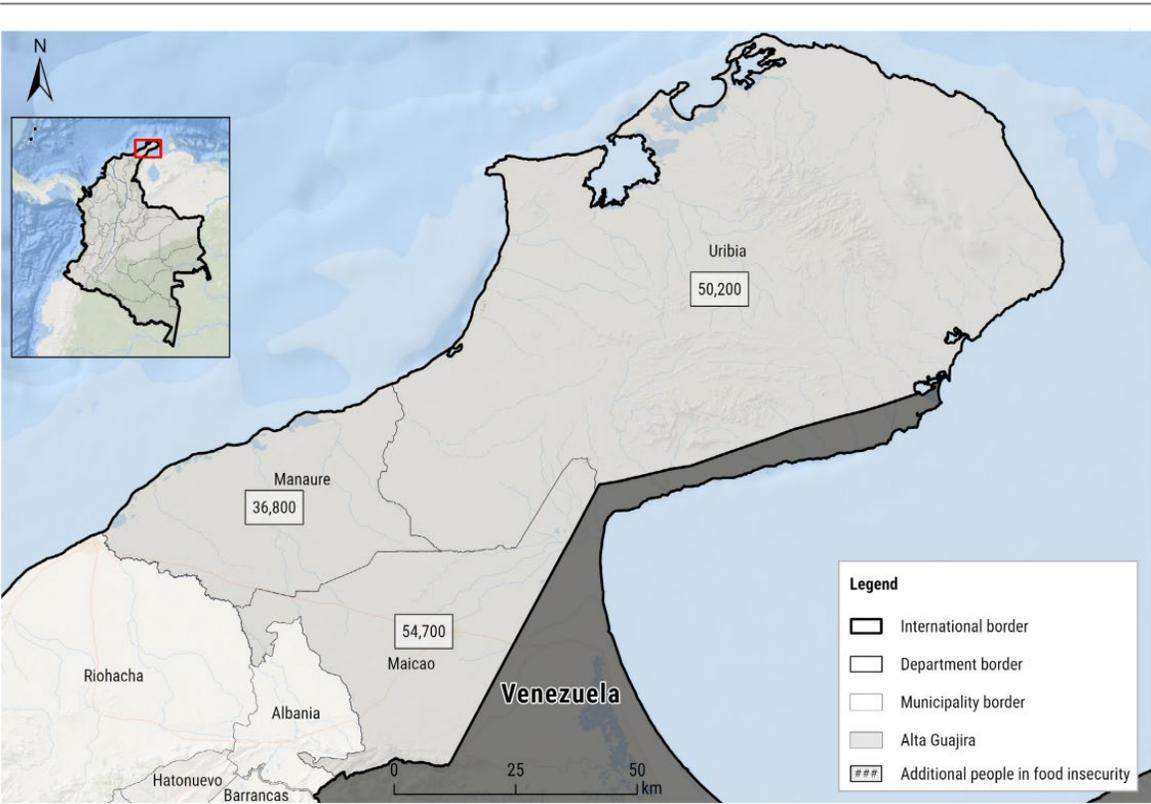


Figure 4: Anticipated Increase in Food Insecurity in the Alta Guajira Region¹⁷

Operational Updates – Humanitarian Aid Organizations and Government Response

Humanitarian aid organizations delivering food security aid have a strong presence in La Guajira, including the Alta Guajira region. However, this humanitarian aid may be insufficient given the magnitude of the crisis. This humanitarian assistance includes a variety of interventions including cash-based transfers, capacity-building, projects for food production, data collection and food supplements. The UN WFP is the organization that has reached the most people in La Guajira in 2023, followed by UNICEF, and Save the Children. The humanitarian response plan required 47.6 million US dollars to address Colombia's food security and 14.3 million US dollars for all sectors of humanitarian assistance in La Guajira.¹⁷

In addition to humanitarian organizations, national and local government authorities have been allocating resources to focus on La Guajira's humanitarian crisis. The Ministry of Agriculture has signed an agreement with Wayuu communities to promote food production projects. Under this agreement, the Ministry of Agriculture will provide technical assistance to the communities in developing business plans for agricultural crop production. The Ministry of Housing has also committed resources to improving La Guajira's WASH infrastructure. This program consists of an agreement to build a water provision system in Uribia, and an agreement with WaterAid to rehabilitate WASH infrastructure used by the Wayuu. Lack of access to WASH services contributes to the incidence of waterborne diseases, which is one of the main drivers of malnutrition, worsening food insecurity. The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare has distributed drinking water to more than 54,000 children in the department, including the Alta Guajira region.¹⁷

World Food Programme (WFP) Country Strategy: Colombia

In July 2023, the WFP in Colombia has distributed 672 million tons of food assistance, provided 2.71 million cash-based transfers, and assisted 309,749 people.⁷ More specifically, The WFP has assisted 309,749 vulnerable Colombians and migrants with various interventions including:

- 134,000 *migrants with the intention to settle, Colombian returnees and host communities* received assistance in 14 departments. Nearly 23,000 *in-transit migrants and Colombian returnees* received hot meals while 16,000 received ready-to-eat food rations in nine departments.
- WFP assisted 60,700 people affected by conflict and climate-related events in 10 departments, one third of them in the **Chocó** department - mostly Indigenous (22 percent) and Afro-descendant people (42 percent). See Figure 2 for the location of **Chocó**.
- WFP assisted 4,900 people affected by conflict and climate events through early recovery activities in Amazonas, Arauca, Caquetá, and Cauca (78 percent Indigenous people).⁷ See Figure 2.

The WFP's Country Strategic Plan for Colombia 2021-2024 is aligned with the Colombian government's priorities on food security, humanitarian response, recovery development, and capacity-strengthening to achieve the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), including the UN SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and UN SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).⁷ This Strategic Plan includes numerous food and nutrition-related components such as 1) giving technical assistance and support for school feeding; 2) providing food and nutrition assistance, including strengthening the social protection system, and 3) providing food assistance through

conditional transfers and asset building to ensure the transition from humanitarian assistance towards self-sustainability and development.⁷

Conclusion

The migrant crisis in Colombia is complex and involves five different affected population groups: 1) *Venezuelan migrants with intention to settle*, 2) *host communities*, 3) *Colombian returnees*, 4) *migrants in transit*, and 5) *pendular migrants*. Increased funding for emergency humanitarian food and nutrition assistance is necessary to address current and future food security crises involving these five groups, especially in high-risk regions of the country.

Enhanced efforts to enroll migrants and refugees into existing health services are needed as well as enhanced socio-economic integration and capacity building efforts. National systems to collect and analyze data should be strengthened to improve public policy. Finally, the ongoing violence and armed conflict in Colombia must be addressed through enhanced security and peace efforts.

Footnotes:

*According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, the top five most neglected displacement crises in the world, in rank order, are: 1) Burkina Faso, 2) DR Congo, 3) Colombia, 4) Sudan and 5) Venezuela.^{2,3}

**According to the World Health Organization (WHO), safe drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene, or WASH, are crucial to human health and well-being. Safe WASH is not only a prerequisite to health, but contributes to livelihoods, school attendance and dignity and helps to create resilient communities living in healthy environments. Drinking unsafe water impairs health through illnesses such as diarrhea, and untreated excreta contaminates groundwaters and surface waters used for drinking-water, irrigation, bathing, and household purposes. For more information, see: https://www.who.int/health-topics/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash#tab=tab_1

***Minimal Acceptable Diet or (MAD) measures breastfeeding and complementary feeding and includes minimum dietary diversity and minimum meal frequency.⁹

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