

## Ensuring solidarity with displaced Venezuelans: supporting countries and communities hosting and protecting them – A Joint NGO Statement

This Statement was developed in coordination with NGO Networks and their members, representing a wide range of international and national NGOs active in the Latin America and Caribbean region. It aims to reflect their views on the regional response to the Venezuelan refugee and migration crisis.

Venezuela has faced a complex multidimensional crisis since 2015 which has generated the exit of millions of people in the last 4 years. Recent figures<sup>1</sup> indicate that, since then, over 4.5 million Venezuelans have fled<sup>2</sup> mostly to Colombia (33.36%), Peru (19.18%), Chile (8.2%), Ecuador (7.3%), Brazil (4.7%), Argentina (3.2%), Panama (2.1%) and México (1%). It is projected that by December 2019 the number of displaced population from Venezuela will reach over 5 million people and this trend is likely to continue in the short term<sup>3</sup>.

This situation has presented complex and multidimensional challenges not only for the governments in the region but also for host communities, humanitarian and civil society organizations working to assist and protect affected population. For them, addressing challenges of coordination and cooperation to ensure an effective response based on full respect for humanitarian values and principles is of paramount importance.

### Drivers of the crisis:

Humanitarian needs as well as socio-economic and political deterioration continue to affect the Venezuelan population. More precisely, the right to food of 31.8 million individuals is compromised. 94% of the Venezuelan population is unable to cover the costs of a food basket and basic services due to the economic recession.<sup>4</sup> 82% of the population (28,621,000 people), does not have access to water on a regular basis. When received, the water is frequently not safe or potable. Public health infrastructures are deteriorated and at least 60% of the medical assistance has been lost between 2012 and 2017.<sup>5</sup> Maternal mortality has increased to 65%, according to official figures from 2016.<sup>6</sup> The education system is also in disarray with over 1 million children out of school in Venezuela, raising further the concerns about poverty being transferred to the next generation.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the most affected population are vulnerable groups such as some women, children, older adults and LGBTI communities. Increased vulnerability is caused by several

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<sup>1</sup>R4V, Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, October 2019: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform>

<sup>2</sup> R4V, Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, October 2019.

<sup>3</sup> R4V, Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, October 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Cepaz, Acción Solidaria, Convite, CodeVita, et al., *Complex Humanitarian Emergency in Venezuela, Right to food*, National Report, p.1, December 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> CEPAZ, *Women on the Edge*, Flag ship report, p.18, May 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Camino Democrático, Centro de Formación para la Democracia, EXCUBITUS et al., *Complex Humanitarian Emergency in Venezuela, Right to Education*. National Report, p.1, December 2018.

factors, including dangers associated with the journeys, added risks caused by being undocumented, lack of access to essential services and to safe livelihoods, and the desperation to support family members living with them or back in Venezuela. Venezuelan women and girls are particularly at risk of exploitation, abuse, and gender-based violence.

Human rights organizations<sup>8</sup> and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>9</sup> continue to worry about the situation in Venezuela, highlighting that it requires urgent increased attention from the international and regional community.

### **NGOs call for facilitating principled humanitarian action in Venezuela and the region:**

The crisis will not abate until drivers of the crisis are addressed jointly by governments and the wider international community. In the meantime, humanitarian assistance and protection should always be delivered and provided on the basis of the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, taking into account gender, age, disability, and diversity considerations. This must address the real needs of the people, giving priority to the most urgent cases without adverse distinction based on criteria such as nationality, race, gender, sex, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. Humanitarian action should not take sides in hostilities or controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature; and should be autonomous of political, economic, military or any other objectives.

- While underscoring the need for a comprehensive political solution, NGOs call for clear and concrete commitments from all stakeholders to allow humanitarian actors to provide assistance and protection based on needs and in accordance with well-established humanitarian principles, free from any political instrumentalization. True solidarity with Venezuelans, host countries and communities can only materialize on the basis of principled humanitarian action, properly incorporating a gender, age and diversity perspective, with a differential and intersectional approach.

### **Call for measures to increase assistance, protection and durable solutions**

Given the dire circumstances and vulnerabilities experienced by Venezuelans in their home country as well as during displacement in the region, it is paramount to scale up and coordinate measures to provide assistance, protection and durable solutions, commensurate with the needs of both displaced and host communities. This is a shared responsibility, calling for contributions from a wide range of actors from the region and beyond.

Civil society is present in the most remote and inaccessible areas, with deep roots and strong connections with the local population, delivering protection and assistance related to Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and WASH Projects, all across Venezuela and host countries. Despite ongoing severe restrictions and difficulties, CSOs continue to provide indispensable basic services to communities in need, and to defend their Human Rights, freedom of speech, and environment. In host countries,

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<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, *Venezuela, why a United Nations inquiry is needed*, 24 August 2019: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr53/0912/2019/en/>

<sup>9</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human rights situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela Report*, A/HRC/41/18, 5 July 2019: <https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights-situation>

CSOs provide safe spaces with emergency aid, mobile units with health services, legal and education services with a particular focus on girls, while encouraging integration and solidarity between the host and displaced communities.

This work needs to be sustained. Such activities are critical to ensuring an effective and sustainable response addressing all challenges raised by the crisis. It is particularly crucial to work through and strengthen the capacity of local organizations.

- Supporting the call for increased international solidarity with hosting countries and communities, NGOs call for solidarity to extend to their own operations to ensure continued contributions on the ground as long as conditions require.

In addition, NGOs recommend that :

- Open border policies, including access to family reunification, should be maintained in the region, with improved bilateral coordination and articulation allowing for regular stays. NGOs are concerned by some policies still conditioning entry into a territory to the provision of documentation nearly impossible for most Venezuelans to possess (passports, special visas, or legal documents from the Venezuelan government). Closed borders may encourage people to take irregular migration routes and push people towards smugglers, human traffickers and forced recruitment of armed actors.<sup>10</sup> The *non-refoulement* principle should be respected as the primordial expression of solidarity and responsibility-sharing.
- In particular, given their international protection needs, countries should use the wider 1984 Cartagena Declaration definition of a refugee and applicable Inter-American standards when determining the status of Venezuelans on their territory. In this perspective, international cooperation must contribute to improving asylum systems in countries hosting this population, so that cases are addressed and answered in a timely and quality manner.
- The right to a nationality at birth for children born within their territory should be guaranteed through legislation and strategies preventing and eradicating statelessness, ensuring immediate birth registration, and recognizing the validity of expired legal identity documents. Provisional documents should be replaced with more permanent ones, taking into account that it is a crisis that will not be overcome in the short term. Around 1.1 million children uprooted from Venezuela, will require protection and access to basic services in the region in 2019, a number that is expected to grow in 2020.
- Support should be provided to host countries with technical and financial resources to improve their entry and processing systems, so that they can humanely manage migration flows. It is necessary to prioritize information management, data production and improve financing so as to raise awareness and ensure this crisis receives the attention it deserves from the international community.
- An open data policy, respecting data protection standards, is fundamental to ensure NGOs and other actors can carry out an effective and agile response. A mapping of available services and a better communication system between humanitarian actors

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<sup>10</sup> Relevant to the situation in Colombia-Venezuela border where illegal armed groups are located.

are also fundamental to avoid duplications in the response and guarantee that displaced Venezuelans and host communities can access the services they need. Access to data is also recognized as a human right on the part of affected communities, as part of their wider right to information and can help mitigate risks associated with displacement.

- International cooperation should be increased to provide a humanitarian response that meets the needs of those affected, both within Venezuela and in transit and host countries, including access to food, housing, education and health. States should particularly act in a coordinated manner to make documentation requirements more flexible for the Venezuelan population, and efforts should also be made to ensure recognition of educational titles and professional credentials as well as integration into the labor market for Venezuelans abroad. This requires ensuring that the police and judiciary are trained on the labor rights of refugees and migrants, reducing the cost of registration for professional titles and assessing livelihood policies to ensure that they do not impose overly onerous and restrictive taxes on refugees and migrants. It is also crucial to have a gender focus, mitigating the proliferation of risks of sexual abuse and exploitation in the crisis context.
- NGOs highly recommend to strengthen the clusters system in countries of the region to ensure a good coordination between humanitarian actors and an efficient humanitarian response. This includes improving exchange about practices and information, taking into account local capacities. Stronger accountability measures also are required to ensure transparency in how budgets are being used and implemented. The creation of NGO fora will also help to jointly address operational challenges and coordination issues; civil society should not be excluded from the dialogues and formulations of proposals that may generate solutions to the crisis.
- NGOs call on all stakeholders to recognize that hate speech and discrimination affect Venezuelans seeking safety and support throughout the region. Xenophobic tendencies, that have a highly gendered dimension, are in clear contradiction with international solidarity and responsibility-sharing, hampering efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and protection. Appropriate measures to prevent and respond to those tendencies and build welcoming societies should be developed. Host countries should generate campaigns to build welcoming societies and a culture of fraternity, acknowledging the positive contributions migrant and refugee population can bring.

### **Concrete expressions of solidarity with displaced Venezuelans, host countries and communities are urgently needed**

NGOs consulted in developing this Statement fully support the objectives of this conference. We hope this gathering will send a strong political message of support to countries hosting Venezuelans and raise awareness of this crisis so as to reinforce the commitment of the international community to assist and respond to this massive outflow of Venezuelans.

- NGOs emphasize the call for greater international technical and financial cooperation and commit to supporting the momentum towards next year's International Pledging Conference.

- NGOs will remain engaged and advocate so that the pledging conference brings true additionally through new – rather than repackaged – pledges, including unearmarked and multiyear funding. The pledging conference should also clarify in advance the follow-up mechanism to ensure pledges are transparently allocated and monitored, so that progress made can be evaluated and the momentum of solidarity maintained.
- NGOs also highlight that affected populations, host countries and communities need support now and into the future. There is a sense of urgency that requires immediate concrete commitments and actions that should utilize a triple nexus approach, by simultaneously addressing urgent needs, development and social cohesion needs.
- Since solidarity cannot wait, NGOs call on all stakeholders to make use of this conference and other important milestones in the coming months to show tangible expressions of solidarity and set in motion a mechanism that will result in a successful multi-stakeholder International Pledging Conference in 2020.
- The December Global Refugee Forum is one of those major milestones, an exceptional opportunity for Member States and other stakeholders to announce preliminary contributions and exchange good practices in support of the humanitarian response in the region:
  - The private sector could play a decisive role in the economic integration of displaced populations , thus also facilitating social integration.
  - All types of NGOs should cooperate to ensure their competencies and practices are shared for a better response to the crisis, ensuring transparent management of funding and respect for codes of conduct.
  - NGOs recognize the increased financing multilateral development banks have provided to support longer term needs of displaced populations and host states and urge bilateral donors to contribute to these funds.
  - Donors should leverage their funding to incentivize improved and standardized policies across the region to support displaced populations and host communities across protection, documentation and regularization of status, ensuring access to education, healthcare, and work.

In conclusion, it is important to avoid unilateral responses and to maximize coordinated and co-owned actions and responses among governments in the region. Interventions should also be developed in consultation with civil society organizations working with the Venezuelan population. For example, States involved in the Quito Process should allow for a meaningful participation of civil society organizations, allowing them to share problems they witness in the field and make suggestions for possible solutions.

This statement is endorsed by the NGOs listed on the following web page: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/ngo-statement-ensuring-solidarity-displaced-venezuelans>