

Panama City, May 25, 2020

Government representatives
Representatives of the European Union
Representatives of the Member States of the United Nations
Representatives of the United Nations Agencies

Ref. International Donors Conference in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean

Dear Sir or Madam,

The undersigned organizations are writing in regards to the "Donors Conference in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the countries of the region," to be virtually held next Tuesday May 26, 2020, convened by the Government of Spain and the European Union, with the support of UNHCR and IOM. This conference represents an important opportunity given the urgency of **increasing the financing of the response to the Venezuelan crisis with a sustainable, planned and appropriate allocation of funding**. We reiterate our will to work together in the unprecedented context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nowadays, more than five million Venezuelan refugees and migrants have left their country, of which 35% are children and adolescents (R4V). Additionally, the migrants' profile has changed in recent months, with an increase of women moving alone or accompanied by minors. People on the move have been exposed to a higher degree of vulnerability due to the migratory restrictions implemented by countries in the region. Access to neighbouring territories is limited and there are increasing barriers to the access to basic services, as well as violations of fundamental rights, such as protection against all forms of violence, family reunification, identity, education, housing, health and employment rights, among others.

In addition to this situation, **the COVID-19 pandemic represents a crisis within another crisis**, which generates new problems and exacerbates the pre-existing need to guarantee rights and access to basic services, as well as the vulnerability of the entire refugee and migrant population. According to the WHO, in Latin America and the Caribbean there have been more than 580 thousand cases and 32 thousand deaths due to COVID-19. The health systems of the countries hosting more than a half of the Venezuelan migrants - Peru, Colombia and Ecuador - are fragile and overwhelmed and do not guarantee full access to health services for migrants. We are concerned that containment and response measures, such as mobility restrictions, increase the risks for refugees, migrants and displaced people. We are also worried for the insufficient response and attention to the thousands of Venezuelan returnees, who have been forced again to take a dangerous journey, exposing themselves to the infection and returning to a country with few guarantees, due to their desperate conditions in the territories where they were trying to build a better life.

We recall that, due to strict immigration measures and difficulties in obtaining documentation within their country of origin, most of the migrants are in an irregular situation. Therefore, they are highly exposed to lose their jobs, to be illegally evicted -without having the means to report-

to suffer from the mental health impact of the situation or to be delayed access to social protection schemes and health services, among other situations. The number of people returned to Venezuela is surpassing the capacity of authorities in the country, which entails risks of contracting the infection and getting sick, as well as imminent protection risks (mainly for girls, adolescents, and women). Moreover, it entails challenges for the access to basic services and for the guarantee of fundamental rights. The Right to Health of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic must be guaranteed. Every migrant or refugee should have a decent and safe place to comply with mandatory social isolation or quarantine measures, access to personal protection equipment and to medical testing and health attention when necessary.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed **pre-existing structural gaps in care and protection for migrants and refugees and host communities, in all countries**. These deficiencies are not only related to problems such as endemic violence, the privatization of health or inequalities, including those based on gender, but also to regulatory frameworks and restrictive public migration policies. Very few countries have adopted specific measures to give response to the needs of refugee, migrant and displaced populations, in equal conditions to those provided to host communities. For example, prevention and care actions are failing to respond to the double impact on women and girls - already exposed to specific risks such as sexual exploitation and trafficking, and now, in quarantine, suffer additional risks of gender-based violence. Furthermore, even though 55% of COVID-19 cases are men, women are more exposed to contract the virus since they are in the front line due to their traditionally assigned role as "caretakers". This adds to the structural gaps of health systems for victims of sexual and gender-based violence, and to increased exposure to other risks derived from the impact of the pandemic. On the other hand, the need of providing a comprehensive response to the migration crisis persists, taking into account the multiple vulnerabilities of refugee, migrant and displaced populations, taking into account that children and adolescents, the elderly, people with HIV, indigenous populations, etc. are among the most vulnerable. This should be accompanied by the strengthening of protection systems, with a long-term focus to avoid a further setback in human rights protection in the region.

We recall that **the undersigned organizations are present in almost all the countries of the Latin American and Caribbean region and we represent 80% of the members of the R4V Regional Platform**. For decades, we have implemented humanitarian assistance programs for displaced migrants and victims of armed conflicts in the region, both in border and hard-to-reach areas, as well as within Venezuela, thus having a close relationship with both migrants and host communities. Daily interaction with the most affected populations, allows us to better understand the root causes of the crisis, as well as the existing mechanisms to provide support and improve their living conditions. Our experience allows us to have a strategic vision consistent with the Venezuelan context in terms of actions and priorities to be implemented in a coordinated way in order to strengthen the response at the regional, national and local level. The important contributions of national and local civil society must be recognized by the international donor community, as well as by host governments. We deeply regret that our contributions and knowledge, as well as the voices of those who we help, are overshadowed **by not having a substantial participation in collaborative and decision-making spaces**. Thus, **we reiterate our request to be considered as active and influential participants in decision-making spaces in a fair and equivalent way to other actors, to**

express our concerns and proposals. The Venezuelan crisis in the region requires a coordinated response at all levels, involving affected populations, girls and boys included, with long-term alliances and offering support to strengthen basic services and national systems from the local level, ensuring an inclusive, substantial, equitable and multiannual response, with full respect of humanitarian principles.

The signatory organizations urge donor countries, the European Union and the United Nations system to:

- **Significantly increase financing for the response to the Venezuelan crisis**, in a sustainable, planned, and timely manner, fully funding the Regional Response Plan for refugees and migrants from Venezuela updated on May 12, from an intersectional perspective.
- Ensure the allocation of resources **in a cost-efficient way, in line with localisation and respecting the humanitarian principles**. Donors and the United Nations Agencies must ensure quick and transparent allocation of resources to frontline organizations, especially local NGOs with presence on the field and positioned to increase their response to serve the most vulnerable populations.
- **Prioritize support to the sectors with the most urgent needs** such as protection, health -including sexual and reproductive health-, food security, livelihoods, education, prevention and response to gender-based violence and psychosocial support, among others, with a cross-gender and age focus.
- Ensure **active, substantial and binding participation of the civil society organisations** in coordination and decision-making spaces.
- **Improve coordination among local, national and regional actors**, to promote comprehensive, multi-sectoral, multi-country, multiannual response, focusing on both the urgent, medium and long-term needs of the migrant and refugee population as well as the host communities.
- Guarantee the principle of *non-refoulement* to protect migrant and refugee populations from repatriations to places where their fundamental rights are at risk. At the same time, ensure regular migrants are not forced to remain in host countries in the case they wish to return voluntarily.
- Promote that, **in the context of the pandemic, the governments of the region a) protect all the inhabitants of their territory, without discrimination** based on the immigration status; b) guarantee access to health services, prevention and control measures for the disease; c) ensure access to protection and social assistance programs for migrants; and d) avoid stigmatization, xenophobic attitudes and gender-based violence.
- While responding to the dramatic situation of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the region, it is necessary not to neglect the needs of the Venezuelan population within the country, as part of a comprehensive response to the Venezuelan crisis, within and outside the country.

As civil society organizations, we reiterate our commitment with the response to the crisis of mixed migratory flows from Venezuela, and with the respect of human rights and humanitarian principles. We remain available to contribute to the response with our support, experience and knowledge, with the aim of working together for the well-being and integrity of

the most affected people. We are confident that we can continue to support each other from an equitable and transparent structure.

Sincerely,

CSO Coalition for the Defense of the Rights of Refugee, Migrant and Displaced Populations in LAC (LAC RMD Coalition), formed by Care, HIAS, IPPF / RHO, NRC, Plan Internacional, Oxfam, Save the Children, International World Vision, and as observers International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) together with:

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