



# Forced Migration, Fragility and the Food Crisis in Venezuela: the Situation of Venezuelans in Recent Years



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## Introduction

This report explores the impact of hunger and the COVID-19 pandemic on migrations in South America. It relates migration and hunger in the region according to data collected before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, one which has sparked an alarming economic crisis all over the world. This has led to food insecurity in many countries, including the ones in South America and since food insecurity is often appointed as a cause and consequence of migration, this report attempts to study such a relationship. In doing so, it assesses the implications of the pandemic for people's food security, which can be one of the main drivers for people to move and one of the main consequences of forced migration. This report focuses mainly on the situation in Venezuela.

## Historical Background

The coronavirus pandemic has aggravated the problem of hunger in many countries as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has warned that the crisis could add between 83 and 132 million individuals to the number of undernourished people in the world in 2020 (Redacción BBC News Mundo, 2020).

One of the most seriously affected countries is Venezuela where the nutritional value of children under five is already comparable to that of the world's poorest countries (Redacción BBC News Mundo, 2020). According to a study by the World Food Programme (WFP), at least 2.3 million Venezuelans are in a situation of severe food insecurity, with extreme deficiencies in food consumption or extreme loss of livelihoods that could, in turn, lead to deficiencies in food consumption or worse (World Food Program, 2019). As reported by WFP, 7.9% of the Venezuelan population suffers from a lack of consistent access to enough food, with the lack of diversity in diet being the main concern, especially considering that meat, fish, eggs, fruits and vegetables are consumed less than three days a week (World Food Program, 2019).



Picture: Most Venezuelan families do not consume the calories and protein they need. GETTY IMAGES, 2021  
([https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/internacional/bbc/2020/07/17/interna\\_internacional,1167831/coronavirus-pandemia-agrava-fome-e-desespero-na-venezuela.shtml](https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/internacional/bbc/2020/07/17/interna_internacional,1167831/coronavirus-pandemia-agrava-fome-e-desespero-na-venezuela.shtml)).

Unfortunately, this is not a new situation for Venezuelans. Food insecurity in large parts of the population and hunger in the poorest are forming a delicate situation that affects their quality of life, health, and development, compromising the access to food and nutrition of the most vulnerable groups (e.g. children, pregnant women and older adults).

According to studies conducted by *Cáritas Venezuela*, just over half of the households in some of the poorest parishes in the country resort to garbage containers and beg for food. According to the pediatric emergency records of Dr. Manuel Núñez Tovar, in Monagas, many of the children of these poor families are not even able to grow up: 42 infants died in 2018 due to malnutrition, an average of 4.6 deaths per month ("La generación del Hambre", n.d.).

Hunger in Venezuela is wide-spread. The FAO, which in 2013 awarded the government for "halving the percentage and number of hungry or undernourished people in the country before 2015", negatively rated Venezuela in 2017 as the country with the highest increase in undernourishment. In November 2018, the outlook was even bleaker, as the FAO director of statistics assured that the average rate of undernourishment in Venezuela between 2015 and 2017 was 11.7% of the population (3.7 million people). These figures confirm that the number of poorly nourished Venezuelans exceeds the population of Uruguay, which, according to the latest census, does not reach three and a half million inhabitants ("La generación del Hambre", n.d.).

Although the concern of international organizations is recent, malnutrition is not, says Marianella Herrera. Ms. Herrera is a nutritionist at the Center for Development Studies of the Central University of Venezuela, director of *Fundacion Bengoa*, and member of the research team of the Latin American Society of Nutrition ("La generación del Hambre", n.d.). According to her, this crisis has been longer than it seems, having started around 2011/2012:

I remember we did an investigation when the *Mision Mercal* existed in Caracas. We found that there was a close relationship between being obese, buying in *Mercal* and being a member of a home with food insecurity. Obesity is hidden hunger. *Mercal* offered more economical, but nutrient-poor products (...) This crisis began around 2011, 2012. It was a slow-installation food insecurity crisis, so it has been very difficult to convince the world about it. It started with obesity, and then, when the calories ran out, this drastic change occurred ("La generación del Hambre", n.d.).

Besides that, the rate of poverty in the country has not decreased. Oscar Meza, who is an economist and

director of the Centro de Documentación de Análisis Social (CENDAS), says:

The food basket of August, annualized between August 2017 and August 2018, showed an inflation of 57,9 per cent. For the first time, this country is facing a problem of hyperinflation. For 21 years, between 1951 and 1971, Venezuela had an annual inflation of 1.5%. At this moment, we have a daily inflation of 2.4. ("La generación del Hambre", n.d.).

Moreover, the minimum wage decreased from covering 53% of the food basket to 46% between 2008 and the end of 2013. The estimation of the government differs from this assessment as it states that, according to the cost of the food basket published by the INE (Statistics National Institute), the minimum wage could cover 91 and 89%, respectively. On the other hand, the CENDAS noted that the coverage of the food basket was only 28% in 2014 and that at the end of 2017, the minimum wage could only cover 2% of the food basket ("La generación del Hambre", n.d.).

## Migration in Numbers

During the past five years, nearly 6 million Venezuelans have left the country to escape the political crisis and seek opportunities elsewhere, concentrating mostly in South America (R4V, 2021). Border states, such as Brazil and Colombia, are currently receiving an exponential influx of migrants (Buschschlüter, B. V., 2021). Other places like Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina are also part of the Venezuelan migration route (R4V, 2021).

Since March 2020, the South American population has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving people homeless and food insecure (UNHCR, 2021). The Joint UNHCR-IOM Special Representative for Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Eduardo Stein, recently stated that:

The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated the already delicate living conditions of refugees and migrants from Venezuela. In addition to serious health impacts, the health crisis has caused economic disruptions and exacerbated protection risks (UNHCR, 2021)

With an approximate population of 48 million people, Colombia is currently the most affected state by the Venezuelan crisis in South America. As reported by BBC News, Colombia has hosted nearly 2 million Venezuelans since 2016 (Buschschlüter, B. V., 2021). Given this situation, the Colombian government has recently implemented a Temporary Statute of Protection for Migrants to aid 1.7 million Venezuelans and provide them with conditions that could meet their human dignity and security (Colombia, 2021). Such a project was applauded by the United Nations Secretary-General in February (United Nations, 2021).

It is undeniable that Colombia also suffers from internal migration because of the increase in armed conflicts between law enforcement and armed groups. In total, more than 5 million Colombians have been displaced in the Country (INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT MONITORING CENTRE, 2020). Colombia has one of the longest armed conflicts in the world with the presence of armed groups such as Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) during the span of almost six decades (Borba, G., 2021).

Since the agreement between the Colombian government and the armed groups came into effect, the country has been facing obstacles to implement public policies in rural areas, areas which are almost inaccessible and heavily armed (WORLD POLITICS REVIEW, 2020). As a result, the internally forced migrants are facing food insecurity and lack of basic resources.



Picture: AFP, 2021 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57070813>).

On another hand, since 2017, Brazil has been facing an exponential increase of 900% Venezuelan migrants, which is more than 600,000 people, of whom 44% stayed in Brazil, and 36% went to other countries (UNODC, 2021; R4V and OIM, 2021). The Brazilian government, for example, emitted more than 335,000 Natural Persons Registers<sup>1</sup> to Venezuelan migrants (R4V and OIM, 2021).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has documented the role of the Brazilian government's project of internalization that consolidates as the main public policy to provide dignity and protection to migrants (ACNUR Brasil, 2021). This strategy seeks to voluntarily transfer migrants to other parts of the country, thus, improving their quality of life by providing financial, housing, educational stability (ACNUR Brasil, 2021).

In addition to the Venezuelan migrants, between 2010 and 2017, Brazil, alongside Chile, was also situated along the route of more than 93,000 Haitian migrants (Moura, S. M., 2021). The exodus was triggered by the earthquake that almost devastated Haiti. At the same time, Brazil wanted to find cheap labour to build the infrastructure for the World Cup and the Olympics (Moura, S. M., 2021). Haiti continues to suffer from political and economic instability and, recently, the exodus has increased exponentially after the death of the former president, Jovenel Moïse (Torrado, S. L. A., 2021).

1. Brazilian individual registry identification.

As for the Republic of Chile, the State houses more than 1,4 million foreigners, 30,7% of whom are Venezuelans (Torrado, S. L. A., 2021). Even so, Chile is currently the 85th State in the world by percentage of immigration once immigrants represent 4,92% of the population (DatosMacro, 2020). Most of them are women, with a total of 52,87% (DatosMacro, 2020).



Picture: Members of the Mendoza Landinez family wait in line to apply for the status of refugee, outside the Peruvian immigration offices, in Tumbes, Peru. Luis Robayo/AFP/Getty Images, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2018/aug/3>).

Seen before as a great country to live in and with a stable economy, nowadays, immigrants have a hard time obtaining permanent visas and integrating the society (Torrado, S. L. A., 2021). The sociologist María Emilia Tijoux expressed that:

There are people who are leaving because the country generates fear [...]. Chilean society in general negatively evaluates migrants. [...] The Haitian community was especially punished and subjected to all kinds of abuse. [...] know that they must resist a national and racist way of being (Torrado, S. L. A., 2021).

Carlos Figueroa from Serviço Jesuíta para os Migrantes, an international organization that provides assistance to migrants, states that:

We were talking to organizations in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America. Reports by the Government of Panama indicate that 76% of the Haitian population that arrives in Panamanian territory comes from Chile. It's a fact (Torrado, S. L. A., 2021).

Unfortunately, this situation is affecting the dignity and protection of immigrants, subjecting them to precarious jobs or a new exodus. Furthermore, in April, the UN warned Chile about breaches of human rights due to the collective expulsion of immigrants (UN, 2021). The mass expulsion of immigrants only exacerbates the current humanitarian crisis, providing instability and lack of security, thereby revealing the need to evaluate the reception of immigrants on a case-by-case basis (UN, 2021).

There is no denying that South America suffers from forced migration. In 2020, there were a total of 17 million emigrants and 10 million immigrants (Migration Data Portal, 2020). The current problems are not only the exodus, but also the internalisation in the countries. As documented by R4V, the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants coordinated by IOM and UNHCR, 92% of Venezuelan migrants are evicted or at risk of eviction due to the inability to pay rent (R4V, 2021). In South America, this research by R4V was mainly conducted in Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador.

Political instability, labour opportunity, security issues, and a negative economic situation are the main factors contributing to the current exodus in South America. Especially with the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase of food insecurity, the migratory flow in the region will definitely increase in the following years.

## Social Impact of Forced Migration

Most of the literature studying migration focuses on the socioeconomic impact on developing countries, usually the origin of flows, and developed countries, the destination of migrants. Thus, analyses of migrations occurring between two or more developing countries are rare, even though these are the countries that receive most of the forced migrations originating in other developing countries. In general, both the country of origin and the country of destination are characterised by the social impacts of forced migration, making the issue a subject of international cooperation. The State of destination is affected by transformations in the labour market, education and health systems, and the rates related to housing and hunger. In the country of origin, the impacts involve the separation of families and its effect on children and the loss of human capacity due to the exodus of qualified professionals (Betts, 2014; Blyde et al., 2020).

All these transformations affect, first and foremost, displaced individuals, who find themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation as they have to face linguistic and cultural differences, xenophobia, insertion in the labour market, access to housing, education, and health services, among others. South American countries have developed a broad legislative apparatus to guarantee and protect the rights of migrants and refugees that includes the 1951 United Nations Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration (Silva, 2021). Still, South American migrants face various obstacles when integrating into a foreign society and in securing their rights.

Concerning access to work, for example, most migrants enter the labour market of their destination country through low-paid economic activities, even when they have a higher level of schooling and training than the local population. In Chile, for example, migrants have, on average, one year more schooling than natives, yet they tend to work in intensive and low-skilled jobs (Contreras & Gallardo, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, migrants accept jobs below their potential because they need a quick source of income, which represents a loss of opportunity for the host countries and, on the other hand, negatively affects the self-esteem of these migrants. Moreover, since migrants usually occupy positions in the informal labour market, they end up being competitors of individuals who are part of lower social classes in the destination country, which affects the income and employment dynamics of an already vulnerable population, deepening inequalities (Blyde et al., 2020).

2. More than half of all migrant workers in Chile are employed in the retail, hotel and restaurant, and domestic work sectors (Contreras & Gallardo, 2020). In Roraima, the Brazilian region that receives most of the Venezuelan migrants, displaced populations work as street vendors, construction workers, domestic service providers, and as farm laborers (IPEA, 2021).

When it comes to education, the educational systems in destination countries are often not prepared to receive migrants who do not speak their native language. In Brazil, state schools offer places for migrants in both elementary and high schools, requiring the presentation of school transcripts from those who wish to enter the school system. In the case of young adults who want to enter Brazilian higher education, recognition of the high school certificate is required. However, "the staff work overload and the lack of technical-administrative employees prevent the creation of an accessible and fast equivalence program for the revalidation of foreign diplomas" (IPEA, 2021). Thus, the difficulty in obtaining the equivalence of certificates is an obstacle for migrants to gain access to higher education in Brazil (IPEA, 2021; Silva, 2021).

Furthermore, there is no assistance program that provides support for migrant students, which negatively impacts the learning process, as reflected in the school performance indicators in the region. Finally, another impact observed in the sector is the overload of the education system, as schools end up operating with more students than their capacity allows (IPEA, 2021; Silva, 2021). On the other hand, the government of Colombia has implemented several initiatives to facilitate the integration of Venezuelan immigrants into public schools, including the simplification of diploma equivalence processes through the application of standardized tests. In addition, since 2018, the Colombian government has allowed Venezuelan children to attend public schools regardless of their immigration or housing status, criteria previously analysed for entry into the education system (Namen et. al, 2020)

In the health sector, forced migration flows cause an exponential increase in the demand for health services in the destination country, overloading systems that are sometimes already precarious and experiencing difficulties in serving the local population, such as the case in the state of Roraima, Brazil (Silva, 2021). According to a 2017 report by Human Rights Watch, the region faces a shortage of beds, the high cost of treating migrants, and shortages of essential medical supplies, basic medicines, and equipment (IPEA, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Besides, one of the consequences of migratory flows is the risk of spreading infectious diseases, as the health status of migrants depends on factors such as the epidemiological profile of their countries of origin, the conditions of the migration process, and the living conditions in the receiving countries. In the case of Venezuelan migrants, the collapse of the Venezuelan health system, the precarious travel conditions during the migration period, and the context of vulnerability in which they arrive at destination countries aggravate the risk of contamination, increasing the demand for medical services (Blyde et al., 2020).

Other difficulties faced by migrants in destination countries include the lack of incentive for their integration, which results in the isolation of displaced populations. Consequently, the individuals have minimal social, cultural, and economic contact with the local community, resulting in a cycle of marginalisation. Furthermore, they also face challenges in accessing adequate housing since most migrants occupy low-skilled, low-income jobs and are prevented from renting property. In Brazil, Operation Acolhida<sup>3</sup> was created to provide humanitarian assistance to Venezuelan immigrants arriving in the border state of Roraima, and, among several social functions, it was responsible for the creation of shelters to accommodate the displaced individuals, benefiting more than 37,000 immigrants since its creation. Still, due to the physical limitations of the shelters, many Venezuelans end up living on the streets in situations of extreme vulnerability, without access to basic sanitation, which exposes them to health-related risks (IPEA, 2021; Silva, 2021).



Picture: Venezuelan immigrants in one of the shelters created by Operation Acolhida in Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil. César Muñoz Acebes/Human Rights Watch, 2017 (<https://www.aporrea.org/internacionales/n315125.html>)

3. Subordinated to the federal government, the Operation counts on the partnership of state and municipal governments, as well as international organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and helps immigrants to have access to health, housing, work, besides guaranteeing basic rights. Despite being well-structured, the Operation still faces obstacles such as limited qualified human resources, language differences, bureaucratic public processes, and high operating costs, among others (Silva, 2021).

Moreover, family separation caused by forced migration has various effects, such as reducing the emotional and psychological support that children need for their full development, which results in fewer study hours and a reduced likelihood of attending school. Nevertheless, in the absence of parents, children may be forced to work prematurely or encouraged to leave school to seek a better quality of life through migration. In addition, the emigration of skilled professionals can impact the scientific and technological development of a country in the long run, as they lose a portion of the population responsible for producing and transferring knowledge to the community through research (Blyde et al., 2020).

In 2020, the social impacts of forced migration were aggravated by the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, since measures to restrict international transit, such as the closing of land and air borders, became necessary. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were most affected by these measures due to the worsening of border tensions and the concentration of these individuals at checkpoints, living in conditions of social insecurity. In addition, the vulnerability of migrants has been accentuated by the downturn in economic activity, overburdened health care systems, the interruption of work activities, and the consequent inability to earn an income. Hence, many of these individuals face hunger, since few are included in national social protection and food insecurity systems due to a lack of document regularisation. According to the WFP, approximately 500,000 Venezuelan immigrants live in food insecurity in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru (Brígido & Uebel, 2020; Correa & da Costa, 2020; FAO & WFP, 2020).

There have also been many Venezuelan migrants living in other South American countries who decided to return to their country because of the pandemic, seeking to reunite with family members they had left behind. They ended up being exposed to the risk of contagion or being detained by the border authorities, given the movement restrictions imposed by the governments. According to migration authorities in Colombia, at least 76,000 Venezuelans have returned to Venezuela since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Venezuelan government has set quotas for a maximum number of returns, leaving several individuals in situations of insecurity and vulnerability at the borders (Correa & da Costa, 2020; FAO & WFP, 2020).

A study<sup>4</sup> conducted by the NGO Visão Mundial ("World Vision", in English) has shown that one in three Venezuelan immigrant children go hungry. According to the survey, a third of the children and adolescents interviewed are separated from either parent, while a quarter is far from both parents. Even though this problem already existed before the pandemic, it has been exacerbated by the closing of borders, which prevents family reunification. Over 80% reported that access to food was reduced after the pandemic began, 60% said they stopped going to school during this period, and 34% said they had no

4. The study interviewed 363 Venezuelan children and adolescents in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. More than half (57.6%) were under 11 years old, 32.8% were between 11 and 15 years old, and 9.6% were between 16 and 18 years old (Mantovani, 2020).

access to health services. On average, 25%<sup>5</sup> of these children live in informal settlements, such as slums, tenements, or vacant lots. The sum of these factors makes these children profoundly vulnerable (Mantovani, 2020).

In sum, the health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, when combined with the migration crisis witnessed in South America in recent years, has resulted in the aggravation of the vulnerabilities of migrants and refugees in the region. In this way, the hampered access to rights such as health, housing, education, and security becomes even more complicated, exposing the practical consequences of the slow bureaucratic processes of document regularization and the lack of concrete mechanisms to execute social protection policies for these populations. In this sense, the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 highlighted the lack of preparedness of South American states to deal with already vulnerable displaced populations in contexts of new crises, and their ineffectiveness in implementing measures that included the protection of these individuals in the context of restricted mobility.

5. In Brazil, the rate rises to 75% (Mantovani, 2020).

## Concluding Remarks

Food security has been a cause and consequence of migration. The relationship between hunger and migration has been a current debate in migration literature, which found that food insecurity is one of the dimensions influencing migration (FAO, 2016; Black et al., 2011). As made clear in this report, such a relationship is evidenced in South America. There is a historical background when it comes to hunger that encourages people from certain countries in the region to seek other lands in order to feed themselves and the ones who rely on them. Although it is necessary to affirm that hunger is not the only factor that has caused migration flows in South America to increase, it has become a bigger problem in the last two pandemic years. When compared to 2019, Latin America and the Caribbean is expected to register a 269% rise in the number of people facing severe food insecurity (WFP, 2020).

In this report, it is possible to conclude that the situation of hunger and the COVID-19 pandemic altogether faced by countries in South America seem to have caused more forced migration in the region and to have worsened food security for migrants. As detailed above, the numbers of both migration flows and hunger have increased during the last two years, especially when considering the population from Venezuela. Given the backdrop of the global pandemic, increasing levels of hunger in developing countries and hunger-caused migration are expected to increase. However, the latest data from countries such as Venezuela is too alarming as it illustrates that such an increase is also affecting a number of neighbouring countries that do not meet the needs of their own population, and consequently neglect the needs of recent migrants who suffered from hunger in their origin country and may suffer from hunger in the destination country as well. This topic shall be a priority for the South American countries in the next years to come.

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