

May 26, 2020

Dear colleagues,

In light of the upcoming International Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean on May 26th 2020, the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) would like to take this opportunity to thank you for raising awareness around the magnitude of this situation and mobilising funding to address the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants while providing continuing support to host countries.

The Caribbean region hosts in absolute terms a small number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants; however, these refugees and migrants represent a significant addition to host populations. Trinidad and Tobago hosts some 40,000¹ Venezuelan refugees and migrants, representing 3% of the country's population. In the Dutch Caribbean, the proportions are even more surprising with Aruba hosting some 16,000,² representing about 15% of its population, and Curacao some 26,000³ corresponding to over 16% of its population. Guyana is also seeing the number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants steadily increase due to the extenuating circumstances which force Venezuelans to cross the border in search of economic opportunities. To date, it is estimated that 36,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants live in Guyana which is equivalent to 5% of its population.⁴ The movement of persons across borders and the challenges they face once they have arrived in the Caribbean has only been exacerbated with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through our engagement with partners, PADF has identified three areas which require urgent support from the donor community in order to respond to the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the Caribbean. These areas are protection, economic integration and participation, and the inclusion of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the national recovery plans for COVID-19.

Protection:

- Host countries require support in registration of Venezuelans refugees and migrants. Registration is crucial at this point in order to understand the migration patterns and needs of Venezuelan migrants and allow us to provide a coordinated and effective response to migrant needs. The provision of documentation to Venezuelan refugees and migrants is also important as it will allow them to access services (e.g. healthcare and state-funded social assistance programmes) and participate actively and without fear of recrimination in their host communities.
- Host countries should be supported by donors and multi-lateral organisations to establish, upgrade and/or strengthen required asylum systems to respect the minimum international protection standards for all Venezuelan persons seeking this form of protection in the Caribbean.
- Women and girls are and remain extremely vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking in all its forms. In the Caribbean, where sex tourism is prevalent, this represents a significant risk for Venezuelan women and girls. States' mechanisms for tackling human trafficking and SGBV need to be reviewed and reinforced to address the specific challenges presented by both perpetrators and victims/survivors.

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2019/3/5c9251644/venezuelan-youth-build-self-confidence-reach-sky-trinidad-tobago.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/13/venezuelan-migrants-caribbean-islands>

³ <https://www.iss.nl/sites/corporate/files/2019-10/research-brief-venezuela-2.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/guyana/troubled-waters-along-guyana-venezuela-border>

- Given the circumstances under which some children are forced to migrate, functioning and comprehensive child protection mechanisms are needed, especially as it pertains to unaccompanied and separated minors are imperative.
- Refugees and migrants should be supported in accessing educational opportunities, especially for school-aged children, in the public-school system. They should also be allowed to access continuous professional training and certification in order to access local employment opportunities. Many adult refugees and migrants have educational qualifications which can be useful when coupled with the appropriate professional and vocational training.

Economic Integration and Participation:

Venezuelan refugees and migrants work in the informal economy. As such, their earnings are comparatively small and irregular compared to formal employment. As such, Venezuelans are liable to suffer the effects of the COVID-19 induced economic downturn even more acutely. Furthermore, as participants in the informal sector, they are also susceptible to labour exploitation, with little or no recourse to the justice system in Caribbean countries, as these systems are not only complex but must be navigated in a foreign language.

Caribbean countries should be encouraged and supported by donors, multi-lateral organisations, and civil society organisations to adapt their workforce development programmes to include the many skills and advantages that Venezuelan refugees and migrants bring to the table as many have tertiary level qualifications and diverse professional skills. This could be advantageous for Caribbean countries, traditionally dependent on the fossil fuel energy and tourism sectors, which have been particularly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inclusion of Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in National Recovery Plans for COVID-19:

The inclusion of refugees and migrants in the workforce for the post-COVID-19 economic recovery effort can be used to support economic development initiatives in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national development aspirations. OECD studies have shown that migrants contribute extensively to the economies of their host countries often playing a vital role to fill important niches in fast growing and innovative sectors as well as in declining sectors within the economy. They supplement the stock of human capital in host countries and contribute significantly to labour market flexibility and robustness. Given Caribbean countries need to diversify and disaster-proof their economies, donors should promote and invest in host countries that capitalize on opportunities to support refugees and migrants' socio-economic integration while recognising and guaranteeing their rights to international protection.

We thank you for your continuing support in this crisis. Together we can provide protection and find sustainable solutions for Venezuelan refugees and migrants arriving in the Caribbean while we support the social and economic development of the region.

Kind regards,

Carolina Brea
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