

Social protection and the Venezuelan migration in Latin America and the Caribbean in the context of COVID-19

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), UNICEF—Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean and World Food Programme (WFP)

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an enormous challenge for all countries due to its public health consequences and socio-economic effects on families. In this difficult context, the Latin America and the Caribbean region is facing the largest displacement in its recent history, with approximately 4.2 million Venezuelans now living in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Panama and Trinidad and Tobago. This migrant¹ population faces various risks, whether linked to the migration process or their migratory status, or others that were aggravated by the health emergency. Their extreme vulnerability to the socioeconomic impacts of the measures adopted in response to COVID-19, given their overrepresentation in the informal sector of the economy, coupled with their low inclusion in social protection mechanisms, profoundly jeopardises their welfare and compromises public health as well as the overall well-being of local populations. Although virtually all countries have adopted at least one social protection measure in response to the pandemic, as of October 2020 there were few instances of government programmes that include the Venezuelan population.

A report developed by the IPC-IG, UNICEF LACRO and WFP (2021) presents an analysis of the inclusion of the Venezuelan migrant population in social protection as part of the response to the pandemic emergency in nine countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The document assesses the specific risks and vulnerabilities inherent to the migrant condition, highlights the main national and international normative frameworks that recognise their rights and analyses the effective access of migrants to social protection systems both prior to the pandemic and during the COVID-19 emergency.

The review highlighted key factors such as prior inclusion in regular programmes, legal or documentation barriers and political economy components common to the different contexts. Overall, the analysis notes that regular migration status is an essential condition for access to rights and especially to social protection. All of these factors influence the inclusion or exclusion of the migrant population in the social protection response to the pandemic.

One of the main strategies in response to COVID-19 consists of the creation of temporary cash transfer programmes that reached populations traditionally excluded from social protection (for example, informal or economically vulnerable self-employed workers). In the nine countries studied, the inclusion of the migrant population in this type of programme varied, with some countries,

such as Ecuador or Peru, explicitly excluding migrants (both regular and undocumented). Even in countries which covered migrants in their response options, as in Argentina and Colombia, additional requirements, such as a minimum period of residence or being registered in the social registry of beneficiaries, led to the exclusion of many Venezuelan families.

In contrast, Brazil has allowed the migrant population to access emergency social protection programmes through the Emergency Grant (*Auxílio Emergencial*). The current crisis also demonstrated the potential complementary role of humanitarian assistance and international cooperation with national social protection systems, as well as the importance of harmonising criteria and assistance mechanisms (as seen in the cases of Colombia and Guyana).

The response also recognised the migratory measures adopted to facilitate the regularisation and documentation of the migrant population, which is a key condition for access to social protection programmes and a gateway to the realisation of other rights. In the face of restrictions on movement and even full confinement, host countries offered protection mechanisms, alternatives for the provision of migration services, extension of permits and residency, and elimination of fees.

Finally, to move towards a medium- and long-term solution, countries must continue to develop strategies for the integration of the migrant population into their social protection systems. These should be built on broad political and social consensus and, given the limited nature of fiscal space, taking into account the gaps in care and protection still faced by the countries' own populations. The report thus aims to contribute to the literature with recent information about access of the Venezuelan migrant population to the main social protection programmes of host countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to inform the decision-making process of the actors working in the field of social protection.

Reference:

IPC-IG, UNICEF LACRO and WFP. 2021. *Social protection and Venezuelan migration in Latin America and the Caribbean in the context of COVID-19*. Research Report No. 58. Brasília and Panama City: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund—Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, and World Food Programme (WFP).

Note:

1. The term 'migrants' comprises regular migrants, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in transit.