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Social cohesion in the context of the Venezuelan displacement to Colombia

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Social Cohesion in the Context of the Venezuelan Displacement to Colombia

Stephanie López Villamil



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Abbreviations

DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística
ETPV	Temporary protection status for Venezuelan migrants / Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos
FGD	focus group discussion
GBV	gender-based violence
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IDOS	German Institute of Development and Sustainability
IDP	internally displaced person
JAC	Juntas de Acción Comunal
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer +
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PEP	Permiso Especial de Permanencia
PPT	Permiso por Protección Temporal
TPS	temporary protection status

Executive summary

The Colombian government's response to the Venezuelan displacement crisis has largely been lauded for its efforts to support displaced persons by granting legal residency. This comes with challenges, as resources at the local level are strained. These challenges can be understood through the lens of social cohesion, which encompasses aspects such as a sense of belonging, trust, the common good, shared values, identity and, at its core, inequality. When cohesion is lacking, exclusion and marginalisation rise. In contexts of displacement, social cohesion shapes the socioeconomic conditions of host communities and can influence the state's response to the influx of forcibly displaced persons. This Discussion Paper is part of the broader project "Social Cohesion in Displacement Contexts" (IDOS, s.a.), which examines how social cohesion is affected in different contexts of displacement where there is broad demographic, religious and political diversity. Grounded in an understanding of history and national contexts, the project examines the contemporary mechanisms that influence social cohesion in communities hosting displaced persons.

By examining the case of Colombia, this research provides context-specific findings that potentially deepen our understanding of social cohesion in displacement contexts. In a very short period, Colombia has received more than 3 million displaced Venezuelans. The government of Colombia responded to this displacement with open-door policies that included large regularisation programmes. The Colombian context is no stranger to displacement; the country has had a long-standing armed conflict that has resulted in millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and hundreds of refugees in the neighbouring countries of Venezuela and Ecuador. Additionally, despite being considered an upper-middle-income country by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, poverty and job informality are among the unresolved socioeconomic structural issues hindering social cohesion in Colombia.

Moreover, in the South American context, rising xenophobia, the politicisation of migrants and more restrictive migration policies have negatively affected social cohesion. Beyond the myths and xenophobic narratives, what are the factors that influence social cohesion between displaced Venezuelans and host communities in Colombia?

This paper approaches the discussion of social cohesion in displacement contexts for the case of Colombia, focusing on forcibly displaced Venezuelans and Colombian returnees. The study indicates that the negative narratives around Venezuelans have decreased over the past 10 years. Colombians have learnt to live with them in relative harmony, despite the structural economic and social issues affecting the communities. Through a qualitative methodology, the study focused on host communities in three selected cities: Bogotá, Barranquilla and Riohacha.

The analysis of the horizontal dimension of social cohesion at the individual level reveals Venezuelans and Colombians share identities. Indeed, a common language, similar weather and culture are cohesive factors in host communities. The cultural ties allow Venezuelans to feel at home in Riohacha and Barranquilla, and they have either adopted or integrated the Colombian culture into their daily lives. Moreover, Venezuelans and Colombian returnees have taken on leadership roles to support their communities. This is especially apparent in cooperative efforts by Colombian and Venezuelan women to address their common struggles.

Looking to the future of developing greater social cohesion in the context of Venezuelan displacement in Colombia, four main issues were identified:

1) Inequality and class divisions in Colombia are different from those in Venezuela. This was highlighted by many Venezuelan research participants, who struggled to understand where they belonged in this societal structure. Investments in civic education and support with integration at the local level can help Venezuelans and host communities better understand one another's social and economic realities in the present and future.

2) Venezuelans also struggle to understand the long-standing Colombian conflict and how the violence permeates the society and their communities. This violence is fuelled not only by inequality but also by scarce resources. Engaging with local peacebuilding actors can help develop a shared understanding about violence in Colombia for Venezuelans and host communities.

3) Participants recalled issues of xenophobia and discrimination, particularly towards women and LGBTQ+ persons, but noted that this has diminished over time. Policy-makers should build on the local efforts that have helped tamp down xenophobia.

4) It was emphasised in interviews how the media has an important role in spreading xenophobic narratives about migrants harming social cohesion in the communities. These narratives can have a toxic effect on building social cohesion in host communities, and leaders need to push back against these messages.

1 Introduction

South-south migration represents more than one-third of all international migration (Schewel & Debray, 2023). Latin America, once a region of emigration, has become a region of transit and immigration as well. However, there are differences between subregions. In South America, intra-regional migration increased significantly in the first two decades of the 20th century and has seen an increase in extra-continental migration from Africa (Schewel & Debray, 2023).

The Venezuelan displacement crisis marked a turning point in this context. Food scarcity, lack of medicines, increased inflation and growing human rights violations, among other issues, has led to a massive exodus of the Venezuelan population since 2015 before expanding in 2018 (Castro Franco, 2019). By June 2024, the mounting humanitarian and economic crisis under the authoritarian regime of Nicolás Maduro, in power since 2013, had led to at least 7.7 million Venezuelans fleeing the country; 6.5 million remain in Latin America and the Caribbean, and almost 3 million are hosted by Colombia. In July 2024, Maduro was re-elected for the third time, despite alleged claims of fraud, which led to political unrest and massive numbers of arbitrary detentions reported by human rights organisations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2024). Reports by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) assert this may result in another massive displacement in the short term (Vitto, 2024).

This situation has presented a significant challenge for the Colombian government in the past 10 years: On the one hand, Colombian institutions were not equipped to handle large numbers of refugees. On the other hand, the host communities have had to deal with structural socioeconomic issues such as poverty and job informality. Furthermore, Colombia has been affected by a long-standing armed conflict and violence, which has led it to becoming one of the countries with the most internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world, with 5.1 million registered as of 2023 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024). Additionally, the human rights situation in Colombia is still dire. Human Rights Watch reports abuses by armed groups, limited access to justice by victims, violations by public security forces, violence against human rights defenders and other people at risk, and widespread gender-based violence (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The influx of refugees and migrants from neighbouring Venezuela has led to unprecedented economic strains, particularly in border regions, where resources are scarce.

In response to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, in 2021, the Colombian government decided to grant Venezuelans temporary protection status (TPS) (in Spanish: Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos – ETPV) after implementing, successively, other temporary regularisation programmes since 2017. This permit allows them access to services and the labour market, and they can eventually enter the visa regime to receive a permanent residency permit. However, many barriers remain to their socioeconomic inclusion.

The arrival of displaced Venezuelans to Colombia has also had important impacts on Colombian society that have yet to be studied. Colombia had been a country of emigration and, within a few years, became a country of transit and immigration. However, research on social cohesion is scarce and has focused on xenophobia and discrimination rather than on the mechanisms that affect social cohesion from a historical, structural, localised and contextual approach. This paper provides a qualitative approach to host communities receiving displaced Venezuelans and towards an understanding of the mechanisms that trigger or hinder social cohesion in three selected cities: Riohacha, Barranquilla and Bogotá.

The literature review gives us a first glance at social cohesion in Colombia regarding identity, trust and, more generally, topics of discrimination and xenophobia among different localities and settings as well as different population groups. However, the gaps in social cohesion studies vary, and there is scarce data available. Moreover, myths about migration have propagated within host communities from the beginning of the crisis. Phrases such as “They’re stealing our jobs”, “Women come to take our husbands” and “They are criminals” are commonly heard within

these communities (Ordóñez & Arcos, 2019b). From the perspective of some local authorities, Venezuelan migrants pose a threat to security. Beyond the myths and xenophobic narratives, what are the factors that influence social cohesion between displaced Venezuelans and host communities?

This paper approaches the discussion of social cohesion in displacement contexts for the case of Colombia, focusing on forcibly displaced Venezuelans and Colombian returnees. The study indicates that the negative narratives around Venezuelans have decreased over the past 10 years. Colombians have learnt to live with displaced Venezuelans in relative harmony, despite the structural economic and social issues affecting the communities. Through a qualitative methodology, the study focused on host communities in three selected cities: Bogotá, Barranquilla and Riohacha. I carried out five focus group discussions, seven semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews with experts to delve into the mechanisms influencing social cohesion, including the historical and cultural ties between the two countries, the impact of the temporary permits and the narratives.

Social cohesion is defined as

the vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society and the state, which hold society together. Social cohesion is characterized by a set of attitudes and manifestations that include trust, an inclusive identity, and cooperation for the common good. It is the glue that holds society together. (Chan, To, & Chan, 2006, p. 290)

The concept and measurement were developed by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) (Leininger et al., 2021): According to their conceptualisation, social cohesion consists of three attributes – cooperation for the common good, trust and an inclusive identity – and does so on two dimensions (Figure 1). Focusing on two dimensions within each attribute is important because social cohesion refers to both the relations between members of society (horizontal dimension) and members of a community and the state (vertical dimension). The paper analyses the attributes of social cohesion within these two dimensions.

Figure 1: Constitutive elements of social cohesion



Source: Leininger et al. (2021, p. 4)

Additionally, the understanding of social cohesion from a forced displacement approach implies that three dimensions need to be considered. These are contact between displaced persons and host communities, the context in which this contact takes place and the role of the state (Myers, Sacks, Tellez, & Wibbels, 2024). It is critical to analyse the socioeconomic conditions of the host communities and consider the state's response to the arrival of forcibly displaced persons in order to understand the context. For instance, poor economic conditions and anti-refugee rhetoric from elites can hinder social cohesion. Some factors of this understanding are included in the analysis, namely context and the state's response (see Section 2).

Regarding the role of the state, when compared to other regions, Latin American societies show lower levels of political trust. This can constitute a threat to the legitimacy of democratic institutions and a possible obstacle to economic growth. According to a newly developed Latin American Distrust Index (LADI), Colombia's index score was 97.08 in 2018, while in Venezuela it was 117.91, showing a high level of mistrust in the institutions due to economic inequalities and uncertainties (Parra Saiani, Ivaldi, Ciacchi, & Di Stefano, 2024). Certainly, political mistrust has become a common trend in Latin America and is linked to socioeconomic and ethno-racial inequalities. Granados and Sánchez find that, at the level of individual interactions, wealth affects political trust differently: For instance, structural discrimination is experienced by traditionally racialised groups and impacts their political attitudes (Granados & Sánchez, 2024).

Considering these factors, this case study examines social cohesion among displaced Venezuelans in Colombia, where the level of institutional mistrust is high. In this context, I explore the historical relationship between Venezuela and Colombia – including diplomatic tensions that have resulted in border closures – and the two countries' significant commercial and cultural ties in addition to their shared language (Allen, Ruiz, & Vargas-Silva, 2024). Furthermore, I analyse the role of the Colombian government in receiving displaced Venezuelans and implementing integration policies, as well as the socioeconomic conditions of host communities regarding employment opportunities and poverty rates. Firstly, I examine the context of the Venezuelan displacement to Colombia, emphasising the socioeconomic conditions of host communities and the state's approach to welcoming Venezuelans. Secondly, I outline the methodology before presenting the results and discussion. With regard to the horizontal dimension of social cohesion, I analyse shared identities and cultural ties as well as the resilience and leadership of displaced communities. I then focus on inequality and class divisions, potential sources of conflict, xenophobia, and discrimination as well as the role of media. With regard to the vertical dimension, I focus on institutional mistrust and the politicisation of migration.

2 The context of Venezuelan forced displacement and social cohesion in host communities

For this paper, it is pivotal to address the relationship between the two countries before diving into the context of forced displacement from Venezuela to Colombia. There is a long history detailing their economic, political, cultural and other ties (Ramírez & Cadenas G., 1999). Colombia and Venezuela's economic interdependence and the Colombian emigration to Venezuela due to the long-standing armed conflict (Carreño, 2012; Ramírez & Cadenas G., 2011) have been the focus of their complex diplomatic relations (Ramírez, 2010). These relations have also played an important role in the political decisions relating to migration and displacement issues from both sides of the border. The "Chavismo", also called the New Socialism of the 21st Century, has remained in power in Venezuela for 25 years, despite the paradox of being a regime that is based on the military but maintains the structure of a formal democracy (Patiño Villa & Almarío García, 2020). President Hugo Chavez took power in 1999 and was re-elected until he passed in 2013. His successor, Maduro, has remained in power

since. Meanwhile, the government of Colombia has had to deal with its neighbour's authoritarian regime and has been particularly affected economically by border closures and socially due to massive displacement.

2.1 Venezuelan forced displacement to Colombia

Before the Venezuelan displacement reached the proportions it has today, Colombians seeking refuge and fleeing the long-standing armed conflict were received in the 1980s in Venezuela, which was the host country for more than 700,000 Colombians as of 2011 (Ordóñez & Arcos, 2019a). For a long time, Colombians sought to be recognised and protected in neighbouring Venezuela. However, only 2.6 per cent were recognised as refugees, and 200,000 remained unprotected before the Venezuelan displacement crisis emerged (Carreño, 2014).

August 2015 was a turning point for relations between Venezuela and Colombia. President Maduro decided to deport thousands of Colombians living in border regions. Colombia shares a border of 2,219 kilometres with Venezuela. In a matter of a few weeks, more than 24,000 Colombians were forcibly returned to Colombia; they and their predominantly bi-national families had lived in Venezuela for around 30 years, fleeing the internal conflict in Colombia that lasted for decades, but the Colombian government was not prepared for their return (López Villamil, 2020).

In 2018, the situation of displacement at the border changed and Venezuelans began crossing into Colombia. When the number of displaced Venezuelans had already reached more than 3 million people, López-Maya referred to the situation as the “collapse of Venezuela” (Maya, 2018). The humanitarian situation in Venezuela worsened. Human rights violations arose, with protests being shut down violently and with massive detentions. It created the largest displacement the Latin American region has ever seen, with more than 7.7 million Venezuelans being forced to flee, with the risk of another massive exodus in the months after the elections. Despite allegations of fraud in the July 2024 election, Maduro was re-elected for his third term.

Indeed, Venezuela's situation is dire. The lack of access to health services and medicines, food scarcity and increasing levels of corruption have added to the humanitarian crisis (Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos, 2018). Most of the displaced have been received by neighbouring Colombia, which hosts almost 3 million, followed by Peru (1.5 million) and Chile (500,000). To understand the root causes of the Venezuelan exodus, Gouveia proposes a more historical approach that begins in the 1970s and 1980s with the economic and petroleum crises. This argument embeds the causes in Venezuela's rentier-extractivist mode of accumulation, which is still in place (Gouveia, 2022).

The displacement of Venezuelans is dynamic, though. Many have recently decided to flee to North America because of weak states, weak inclusion policies and rising levels of xenophobia in the countries that once hosted them. More than 328,000 Venezuelans put their lives at risk crossing the Darien Gap in 2023; in 2024, there were more than 238,000 crossings – according to the government of Panamá – of which 158,682 were Venezuelan (Servicio Nacional de Migración, 2023).

There were 2,811,570 Venezuelans in Colombia as of October 2024, according to official data from Migración Colombia, the migration authority (Migración Colombia, 2025). Of these, 1,935,808 had a regular migration status and 458,766 had not received formal recognition of their migratory status and retained irregular migration status: 51.8 per cent were women, and most of the migrants were between 5 and 39 years old. Five cities had received most of the Venezuelans: Bogotá, Medellín, Cúcuta, Barranquilla and Cali (Table 1). For the locations chosen for the fieldwork of this study, the city of Riohacha ranked 12th for containing the largest number of Venezuelans in terms of percentage of the population (26 per cent) as of 2021. For Bogotá, the percentage is 7.88 per cent, and for Barranquilla it is 11.31 per cent.

Table 1: Number of Venezuelans per city and percentage of the total population

Ranking of cities according to Venezuelan population	City	Number of Venezuelans	Percentage of the total population of the city*
1	Bogotá D.C.	590,637	7.88%
2	Medellín	238,126	9.70%
3	Cúcuta	214,146	29.33%
4	Barranquilla	138,497	11.31%
5	Cali	129,113	5.77%
12	Riohacha	46,765	26.39%

* Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE, 2025)

Source: Migración Colombia (2024)

2.2 Colombian government's approach to welcoming Venezuelans

In the early days of the humanitarian crisis under the Juan Manuel Santos administration in 2017, the Colombian government adopted the first temporary special permits (PEP – Permiso Especial de Permanencia) for Venezuelans, giving them the permission to stay for two years. From 2015 to 2018, the government had an official discourse of offering generosity towards Venezuelans based on the long-standing relationship with the neighbouring country (Palma-Gutiérrez, 2021). In 2021, under Iván Duque's administration, the government adopted the ETPV, which provides temporary protection status for 10 years due to the protracted situation. Venezuelan holders of a PPT – Permiso por Protección Temporal, the temporary permit allowing them to access services and the labour market – can be issued a visa if they fulfil the requirements. In September 2024, a new permit was announced – the PEP tutor – for parents or legal tutors of minors holding a PPT and a special visa. Since then, no other special permits have been issued, despite the need for the newly arrived Venezuelan population to be protected.

Moreover, the Colombian government has more than 63,000 asylum applications that have been filed but remain unresolved, in part due to the lack of capacity of the refugee system. There were 1,376 Venezuelan nationals recognised as refugees from 2017 to 31 March 2024, of which 606 were refugee status holders and 770 were granted status through relationships to the holders.¹ This means fewer than 0.04 per cent of the Venezuelan population had received refugee status, despite Colombia being a signatory of the 1949 Geneva Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. Indeed, Colombia has prioritised regularisation processes at the expense of refugee protection (Pelacani & Moreno, 2023).

Besides the lack of protection, there are still socioeconomic inclusion barriers. Despite holding a PPT, Venezuelans – especially women – face many obstacles related to labour market access (Woldemikael, López Villamil, Uribe, & Daly, 2022), access to health, social protection (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021) and issues regarding education (Rodríguez-Lizarralde, López-Villamil, & Barrera-García, 2022). This adds to the unwelcoming attitudes towards displaced Venezuelans in some regions due to the xenophobic discourses of local authorities that are widespread on social media (El Barómetro, 2024).

1 Response to a public information request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 2024.

Regarding inclusion policies, in 2018 the government issued the first public policy for Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees – the Conpes 3950 document (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2024) – which was in effect until 2021, but there was a lack of the necessary financial resources to respond to the crisis. In July 2022, the government adopted a new 10-year policy, the Conpes 4100 document, which provided a larger budget for implementing 80 policy actions. A new left-wing government was inaugurated in August 2022 after decades of right-centred governments, and the Venezuelan migrant integration issue has been removed from the public agenda, making way for a focus on the diplomatic relationship with the Venezuelan government and the means to re-establish it. This has led to a backlash against the implementation of these policies and a lack of protection for newcomers (Guerrero Blé, 2023).

3 Methodology

The research seeks to better comprehend which factors impact social cohesion in communities hosting forcibly displaced Venezuelans while exploring migration policies, historical narratives and the role of different actors at the local and national levels. In this regard, regional dynamics play an important role. This is a qualitative study about social cohesion in the displacement context of the Colombia case, which is part of the broader project “Social Cohesion in Displacement Contexts”. The project examines the contemporary mechanisms that influence social cohesion in communities hosting displaced people in selected countries. The IDOS Research Ethics Committee approved the fieldwork on 6 June 2024.

I carried out semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and interviews with key informants in both host and displaced communities in three cities in Colombia: Bogotá, Barranquilla and Riohacha. The interviews shed light on the different attributes of social cohesion in the context of displacement: inclusive identity, social trust, institutional trust, cooperation for the common good and the role of the different actors in social cohesion.

3.1 Research questions

The study is based on six research sub-questions that feed into the general research question highlighted previously. These guided the study towards delving into the two dimensions of social cohesion.

1. *What are the mechanisms influencing social cohesion in hosting communities in Colombia?*

These mechanisms are embedded in a socioeconomic context that must be analysed to understand the societal dynamics within communities in the research sites selected. They can be related to informal and formal arrangements.

2. *What are the impacts on social cohesion and what are the aspects stabilising it?*

In displacement contexts, a massive arrival of displaced persons to a municipality or region can affect social cohesion. I seek to understand which aspects stabilise social cohesion in vulnerable and marginalised host communities where there is a high presence of displaced persons.

3. *What role do historical narratives, governance traditions, regional dynamics as well as temporary migration policies play in laying the ground for social cohesion between Colombian hosts and displaced Venezuelans?*

I explore the role of historical narratives in the strong context of interdependence between Venezuela and Colombia, both at the economic and political levels. Bearing in mind that, in terms of the political system, Venezuela's democratic tradition was halted in 1999. I look at the role of the temporary policies adopted by the Colombian government on social cohesion in different urban settings, from the capital, Bogotá, to the borderland city of Riohacha.

4. *What are the dominant factors harming and/or improving social cohesion between host and refugee communities?*

I delve into the factors that negatively and/or positively affect social cohesion between host communities and displaced Venezuelan communities, including the role that institutional actors play, the context and the contact between the communities.

5. *Which actors are important to consider in the field of social cohesion in Colombia?*

For the research, I considered national and local institutions, social media, community leaders and Venezuelan leaders. These appeared to be the most significant actors from the literature review.

6. *What should local, national and international actors do to strengthen social cohesion in Colombia?*

In a displacement context that is highly influenced by international actors – including international development agencies, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, and a growing number of refugee and migrant-led organisations – recommendations to improve social cohesion within host communities must be addressed by all the stakeholders involved in assisting the displaced Venezuelans. I drafted some recommendations based on findings from the fieldwork.

3.2 Case selection and research sites

For the fieldwork, I considered various issues. First, I looked at the difference between border cities with a high percentage of displaced Venezuelan people and weak institutions, and larger cities with a stronger presence of the state. This allowed me to compare other municipalities with the capital city, Bogotá, which is where power and resources are concentrated in Colombia. I also considered the different locations of the communities. The interviewees either worked or lived in vulnerable and sometimes marginalised communities.

The fieldwork was conducted in three cities: Barranquilla, Bogotá and Riohacha. In each city, we partnered with local and refugee-led organisations to facilitate contact with communities. In Barranquilla, we partnered with Agencia Cultural 7-80, a migrant-led organisation working on cultural projects. Barranquilla, the city to have received the fourth-highest number of Venezuelans (138,497), has been characterised by its inclusive policies since the beginning of the displacement crisis.

In Bogotá, we partnered with Fundación Refugiados Unidos, an organisation that works on providing legal access to rights and services. It is funded and led by refugee women in order to help provide access to community leaders from different neighbourhoods. Bogotá, as the capital city, has received more than 589,000 forcibly displaced Venezuelans and has implemented

various projects and programmes, integrating them into existing policies while creating local migration policy.

Riohacha is situated in the northern part of the country, just one hour from Maicao, which is an entry point at the border with Venezuela. It is a city where Indigenous communities – the Wayuu, who are nationals of both Colombia and Venezuela – Venezuelans and Colombian returnees come together. Riohacha is home to 46,817 Venezuelans. We partnered with Asociación Salto Angel, which is funded by Venezuelan women and working on economic and social inclusion by providing access to women community leaders, and with Fundación Brisas del Norte, which is funded by a Colombian returnee who empowers local communities living in settlements to help them create governance structures.

3.3 Data collection

I used a community and gender-based approach to select participants. The participants were invited in partnership with the four refugee and migrant-led organisations. The discussions took place in their organisations or in the communities where they work and/or live. The data from fieldwork was collected between 10 June and 26 July 2024. I organised five (5) focus group discussions (FGDs) with community leaders for a total of twenty-four (24) people, and seven (7) semi-structured interviews with key informants in both host and displaced communities. One of the FGDs in Riohacha was held in a settlement with eleven (11) women – members of recently created committees for the governance of their community.

For the sample, gender was a critical characteristic, since most of the interviewees and participants were female, and many of them being community leaders. The nationalities of the participants were considered for the sample. It was finally composed of Venezuelans and bi-nationals: people who are both Venezuelan and Colombian nationals, which is quite common, particularly in the borderlands. Six participants were Colombian.

Table 2: Attributes of focus group discussion participants

FGD #	City	Number of participants	Male	Female	Colombian	Venezuelan
1	Bogotá	4	1	3	0	4
2	Riohacha	3	1	2	1	2
3	Riohacha	11	0	11	1	10
4	Barranquilla	4	2	2	1	3
5	Barranquilla	2	0	2	0	2
	TOTAL	24	4	20	3	21

Table 3: Attributes of interviewees

City	Number of interviewees	Male	Female	Colombian	Venezuelan
Bogotá	2	0	2	1	1
Riohacha	4	0	4	2	2
Barranquilla	1	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	7	1	6	3	4

Source: Author

The results were compared with four (4) key informant interviews with experts and media workers working with displaced Venezuelans.

4 Findings and analysis

4.1 Horizontal dimension (individual): “We are equal, and we have the same rights and the same duties”

4.1.1 Shared identities

In general, Venezuelans have a good relationship with Colombians in their communities due to shared values such as solidarity and empathy. Most of the Venezuelan participants in the research had Colombian friends and colleagues, and some even highlighted the help they received from other Colombians when they arrived, despite a hostile environment towards Venezuelans:

A Colombian lady, she was like a bridge to make me know other people. She has a beauty salon, and she offered me work in her house, and through her, I met a lot of other good people and others who were not good. (Interviewee 1)

Family ties also play an important role in social cohesion. One interviewee told me the story of her marriage in Colombia to her husband. Her husband had Colombian parents and they both lived in Venezuela, but due to the circumstances, they decided to move to Colombia and get married. She said she did not organise a single thing for her marriage. She had the solidarity of his family and friends, so she had always felt welcome in Colombia.

Indeed, Venezuelans share family members who are also Colombian nationals. On the one hand, many Colombians have children who were born in Venezuela, have been naturalised and are nationals of both countries. On the other hand, Venezuelans living in Colombia have children who are eligible for Colombian citizenship.² Another representative group are Colombian returnees, who once were also refugees in Venezuela. To emphasise the importance of family bonds, a returnee shared how his family found refuge in Venezuela after being forcibly displaced in Colombia:

Venezuela was a country that received my family in the worst moments of that forced displacement. My mother went to Venezuela looking for better opportunities, and I believe that there she got what Colombia could not give her at that time, such as protection, allowing her to live peacefully and safely. (Participant 14)

Another Colombian returnee affirmed, “I had the opportunity to be accepted in Venezuela and I also accept Venezuelans, I treat them with respect because they are human beings who also deserve opportunities” (Interviewee 3). She lived for several years in Venezuela. A Venezuelan participant in an FGD told us he had assisted Colombians in Venezuela for more than 16 years, and he is now a community leader assisting his fellow nationals in Bogotá. Indeed, both communities share solidarity and empathy. The displacement to Venezuela in the 1980s and 1990s fuels some of these shared values: Having a lived experience of displacement results in empathy.

2 Nationality by birth is given only to those who reside lawfully in the country. However, in the context of the Venezuelan displacement, the Colombian government adopted Law 1997 in 2019, which provides an exception for Venezuelan parents to register their children as Colombians if they are born in Colombia (Global Compact on Refugees, s.a.-a).

For those Venezuelans who arrived in 2017 and 2018, Colombia felt like home. Even if the situation in Venezuela improved, they told me that they were not planning to go anywhere. One participant told me: “The children are already studying and everyone has a job; we do not lack anything, but to return to Venezuela now is to start from scratch and go backward, right?” (Participant 21). Another Venezuelan underlined:

I have already created some kind of roots where I have arrived, and I have always believed that where one is planted, the important thing is to flourish with that learning. I feel that I have put down some roots in Colombia, some roots in Barranquilla and that my vocation of permanence is strong. (Interviewee 5)

This sense of feeling at home is, for some Venezuelans, key to their inclusion. Shared values, cultural ties and even similar weather in Barranquilla and Riohacha provide a positive scenario for improving social cohesion with host communities. The Venezuelan identity prevails over regional, political, religious or gender identities.

4.1.2 Cultural ties: “feeling at home”

One main difference between the Venezuelan displacement to Colombia compared to other major displacements in the world is the shared Spanish language, shared Catholic religious beliefs, and historical and cultural ties. One common topic raised when Colombians and Venezuelans are asked about their culture is whether the “*arepa*” is Colombian or Venezuelan – this is described by a Venezuelan woman as “the eternal conflict”. *Arepa* is a typical corn-based food offered in more than 100 different varieties in both countries; both nationalities claim it is theirs. Even if this might be anecdotal, communities gather around a shared language and some common food culture. A participant told me:

My best friend is Colombian and, for example, yesterday I went to her house [...] she told me, I have something from your country that you like, I made you *cachapa* [a type of *arepa*]. I mean, for me, that is something very nice because people accept your culture, people even let your culture in. (Participant 19)

Locally, similarities are stronger once we get closer to the border with Venezuela. Riohacha, which is located one hour from the border with Venezuela, is part of La Guajira, where the Indigenous Wayuu have their ancestral land. Being close to the border means sharing families, so there are fewer differences with Colombians. Traditionally, this region has had a circular migration and buoyant informal commerce. Venezuelans and Colombians used to cross the border mainly for trade purposes. However, ever since the situation in Venezuela deteriorated, Venezuelans and Colombians who once lived in or were displaced in Venezuela crossed the border to settle in cities such as Riohacha. A returnee told me:

I also find many similarities in the city as a cultural Maracaibo and the climate and culture as we are at the border. So, we have shared a lot there in Maracaibo, we met many Colombians, and many are now here in La Guajira. (Participant 12)

At the border between Venezuela and Colombia, the identities of those living in the border region are not defined by the official border set up by Colombia and Venezuela. From his ethnographic research, Price discusses the complexities of identities in La Guajira, a region in the north of Colombia where there are no strong national identities but multiple identities that intersect (Price, 2023).

In Barranquilla, there is also a sense that forcibly displaced Venezuelans feel more at home because of the weather and similarities to some of the cities in Venezuela, such as Maracaibo. Both cities have high temperatures, are close to the Caribbean Sea and share cultural ties. During the FGDs and interviews, many recalled that it was easier to live in Barranquilla because

of its weather and the culture of the “*costeño*” – which is the name for those in Colombia who have been born and settled on the Caribbean coast. An interviewee who arrived in Barranquilla in 2018 told me,

I always say that I look for similarities in Barranquilla, the city, and the environment. It is very similar; we share many things with at least where I live, which is also on the coast, so I feel that the climate was not such a big change in relating with people, I feel that in Barranquilla. I have found people who have become like family to me. (Interviewee 5)

A Venezuelan woman participating in an FGD also told us: “The ‘*maracucho*’ [person from Maracaibo] is very loud and speaks very loudly and sometimes very fast, he is not understood, that is the same way as the ‘*costeño*’. So, I feel that there is not much difference” (Participant 15). For her, people from these two cities have many things in common, including their personalities.

Barranquilla is well-known for its Carnival, which takes place every year in February and where hundreds of people gather to celebrate the cultural variety and folklore of the Colombian Caribbean region. In the Carnival, there are usually representations of typical characters of the city and the country. Participants in an FGD recalled that, a few years ago, Venezuelan women were portrayed as being coffee sellers in the streets. Despite being invited to participate in the Carnival, the participant withdrew from the group, saying, “That person doesn’t represent me”, underlining that it was not a cultural expression but rather a “mockery” of his nationality. He said the situation has improved in recent years, notably when, one or two years ago, the Queen of the Carnival, in her choreography, paid tribute to Yolanda Moreno, a very famous ballet dancer from Venezuela. He now participates in the Carnival. Another participant stated that he takes part in the Carnival because it is the way he feels part of the city:

I am a fan of the Carnival of Barranquilla, I love to dress up, I love to appropriate, so to speak, to use that term, of the Barranquilla culture because it is a way for me to feel that I am part of something, and I think that is the most difficult thing for a person when he is not from a country to feel part of something [...] I am part of this city, that I am part of this society, and for me, it has been like that refuge, to be able to feel part of this city to speed up a little more the processes of integration. (Interviewee 5)

The cultural appropriation of this tradition shows how deep cultural values can be shared between the two countries and have a positive effect on social cohesion, creating a group identity. In Bogotá, there are differences concerning the weather and the culture. Bogotá does not have high temperatures, and being the capital city, it is home to people from all around the country. Even if identity does not play a different role in these three cities, in Riohacha and Barranquilla it is salient that, because of the proximity, the weather and the accent, Venezuelans feel more at home.

4.1.3 Resilience and leadership of displaced communities

Identity comes from being Venezuelan in the first place. When I asked participants what it means for them to be Venezuelan, pride and nationalism were the first answers. There is also the sense of being strong, persevering and resilient. One participant defined himself as follows:

For me, being Venezuelan is to be very persevering, to be very resilient, and I am very constant to adapt to the different changes, because if you ask me and you see my story, I come from being a journalist, but I have also washed cars, but I have also worked as a waiter, but I have also sold in the streets, but I have also defended the rights of other migrants, and today I also lead an organisation to defend those migrants so that they do not go through the same situations that I went through. (Interviewee 5)

“Resilience” is a word that comes up constantly among Venezuelan participants. For one of them, “Resilience is perseverance, it is never to give up because I know many people who, like me, have found it very difficult to come to do things that we never thought of doing in our lives” (Interviewee 5). Some interviewees said they had a diploma but came to work in other areas, selling coffee and washing cars, and their resilience comes from learning. The interviewee cited said it never meant a “disgrace” for him to work on this type of job, despite holding a bachelor’s degree in communications. Resilience is about “the power to adapt to unimaginable scenarios with the sole purpose of subsistence and also to subsist and live together” (Interviewee 5). It is then resilience that allows them to coexist peacefully, despite many having had to “start from zero” when they arrived in Colombia.

Additionally, strong leadership skills develop from assisting others and the newly arrived as well as helping them to understand the Colombian system and society. Women have proved to be leaders and a cohesive factor in several communities. For most of the female participants, nationality was not raised when speaking about gender-based violence (GBV) in their communities and how they face this issue together: “What we also have is an approach within the community of what female empowerment is to raise many voices. The community suffered a lot from marital violence and demonstrated that women can be very strong, that we are brave” (Interviewee 2). Community leadership is appreciated whether it comes from the host community or the displaced persons. An interviewee articulated her relationship with the community, emphasising that Venezuelans and Colombians are very similar, saying “We are one.” She stressed that

most of the people who approach me are Colombian, and they say that for them it is incredible that a person who comes from another country here is the one who is at the forefront of the community fighting for the rights of others. (Interviewee 2)

During an FGD in a settlement in Riohacha, this was emphasised by all the women who participated. They have put in place informal mechanisms in their community to address issues such as water scarcity and lack of aqueducts. With the help of Fundación Brisas del Norte, they have set up subcommittees for each one of their issues, and they are all led by women. They said they have learnt to coexist peacefully. One woman said to another during the FGD, “Neighbour, I am your family.” Union and love came up in our conversation a couple of times. There is still a long way to go in analysing the effects of gender norms in displacement contexts (Brück, Hanmer, Klugman, & Arango, 2024) and its implications for social cohesion.

Despite their strong resilience, there are also displaced persons who arrive with several traumas and damages that need to be treated. Whether these are due to the humanitarian crisis back in Venezuela or their experiences crossing the border on foot, the toll on their emotional well-being has been high. Malnutrition, GBV and other extreme situations that Venezuelans have been through are carried with them on their journeys before being brought to communities affected by inequality and poverty. Even if they had different lives and projects in Venezuela, there is an inclusive identity that emerges from their resilience and expands to the host communities in the form of leadership that addresses, in some cases, the same issues for both populations.

4.2 Horizontal dimension (social): relations between social groups

The literature review suggests there are two types of research and information available about social cohesion in communities hosting forcibly displaced Venezuelans in Colombia. These are quantitative and qualitative studies based on a range of methodologies, including ethnographies (Price, 2023). These studies target different populations, including students, adolescents, women and Indigenous peoples (Aliaga, Baracaldo, Pinto, & Gissi, 2018; Bellino & Ortiz-

Guerrero, 2023; Lebow, Moreno Medina, Coral, & Mousa, 2024; Woldemikael et al., 2022; Zhou, Rojas, & Peters, 2024). These groups are also sometimes analysed from the perspective of the rural/urban divide as well as poverty levels (Lebow, Moreno Medina, & Coral, 2020), which is more interesting. I focus on the policy preferences of Colombians and the effects of inclusion policies in shaping the differences between people who live in border regions and those who live in the inner cities, as well as the role of social media in the narratives about migrants and migration. I include all of this information in the analysis of the findings.

4.2.1 Inequality and class divisions in host communities

Poverty, inequality and a lack of opportunities can prevent social cohesion. One participant highlighted when speaking about Colombia: “The country has its own problems. Well, there is a very big inequality, and it is very marked, and the opportunities are not so many. I didn’t understand it” (Interviewee 6). According to her, in Venezuela, she had more opportunities, for instance, to access higher education, and she thought it was very expensive in Colombia.

Displacement can be experienced differently depending on the person’s socioeconomic status in Venezuela. Participants agreed that class plays a more important role in Colombia – marginalisation and social class divisions are different.

In Venezuela, although there are rich and not so rich and poor, the social class is not felt as it is felt here. Moreover, Colombia is the only country that has that so marked and has the *estratos* [Colombian social stratification system]. It is the only country in the world, isn’t it? (Participant 22)

Another participant explained to me that in Venezuela, they did not pay for the water and rent; they were owners, but the displacement experience has been useful to teach their kids that not everything is free. There had been high incomes in Venezuela due to the oil boom, and during the Chavez government there were installed social policies, the “*Misiones*”, which were aimed at reducing exclusion. These policies were highly dependent on the prices of oil and did not impact the basic needs of Venezuelans. Instead, they were short-term solutions which helped them afford houses, cars and other benefits (Castro Herrera, 2016). One common phrase heard when Venezuelans arrived in Colombia was that they wanted everything for free. This has its roots in the social policies adopted by Venezuela and, at the same time, contradicts the fact that they fled the regime. Some of the interviewees had nostalgia that once there was a better Venezuela.

An examination of the policy preferences of Colombians in response to the forced displacement from Venezuela reveals that they prefer more open policy options regarding access to the labour market and public health care. At the same time, they support restrictions on the number of Venezuelans (Allen et al., 2024). The study also analyses the responses of Colombians with higher levels of humanitarianism, concluding they prefer less restrictive policies. Using threat-benefit theory to analyse the attitudes of Colombian informal workers towards Venezuelans shows that they are ambivalent about them (Alizadeh Afrouzi, 2024). Negative perceptions are predominant and are associated with realistic economic and physical threats, including to the labour market, public services, housing, security and conjugal relationships. There are also symbolic threats to societal cohesion and modernity, and there are symbolic benefits related to humanitarian and cultural diversity, contributions to lifestyles, and an attitude of empathy and understanding. All of these perceptions continue to evolve in both positive and negative directions over the long term.

In terms of a comparison with IDPs, Venezuelans and host communities in Colombia, a study about social protection responses to forced displacement concludes that social cohesion is influenced by the provision of assistance (Ham et al., 2022). The authors affirm, “While assistance for displaced populations strengthens their relations with the state, government

support to Venezuelans can damage community relations, where it appears to divert public resources away from vulnerable citizens” (Ham et al., 2022). According to the study, the horizontal dimension of social cohesion shows that, in low-income areas, there was tension related to Venezuelans regarding the provision of resources from the government.

Another argument expressed by Colombians when Venezuelans arrived in 2018 was that they were stealing their jobs. On the side of Venezuelans, many people in the research study mentioned that they were abused and paid less than they deserved, most of the time less than the minimum wage. One interviewee, for example, declared she was paid only around USD 6 per day for working in a bakery.³ Additionally, one interviewee explained that in her community, most had attained different levels of education, but their qualifications were not valued. She said that most must do the work for a lower wage out of necessity (Interviewee 3). Indeed, validating diplomas is a long and expensive process in Colombia, which prevents Venezuelans from accessing decent jobs (Graham et al., 2020). More generally, in Riohacha, there is a lack of state services, capacities at the local level are weak and there is a high poverty index, which makes economic inclusion difficult for Venezuelans who are struggling to find job opportunities (Guerrero-Blé & López Villamil, 2022).

There are several studies on the effects of Venezuelans on the labour market. I emphasise three studies that show the effects of Venezuelan displacement on the labour market and the impact of providing work permits. Lebow shows there is little or no effect on the wages of Colombians due to the arrival of Venezuelans, but notes that this varies in larger cities with higher rates of job informality (Lebow, 2022). When addressing the gender issue, Pedrazzi and Peñaloza-Pacheco found that the labour force participation rate of high-skilled women with children was affected positively, whereas for lower-skilled women, it was negatively affected because of the disproportionate amount of competition (Pedrazzi & Peñaloza-Pacheco, 2023). Regarding the impact of work permits, they have expanded employment prospects for those who were previously unemployed, but the authors suggest that there is a need to implement programmes for younger workers to match migrants to appropriate jobs in the labour market (García-Suaza, Mondragón-Mayo, & Sarango-Iturralde, 2024).

Moreover, a study analysing rural and urban areas finds that there is a large and positive level of trust towards immigrants in larger urban, educated and productive regions (Lebow et al., 2020). Regarding this divide, another study finds that the effects of migrant arrivals are more positive in more rural locations. This divide is reduced over time as the amount of meaningful contact increases (Lebow et al., 2024).

4.2.2 Potential sources of conflict: violence and resource scarcity

Venezuelans arrived in host communities that were already experiencing conflict due to poverty, drug trafficking, drug abuse, violence (particularly GBV) and a lack of state services. The myth about “becoming Venezuela” has been present in public opinion. It is related to the “fear of losing the privileges of the middle class if we reach a situation similar to that of Venezuela, which is a myth, but it is a myth that is constant”, according to one expert. The role that the middle class of Colombia plays in reproducing this type of discourse is key to understanding the possible lack of social cohesion among host communities that have received Venezuelans. There is the middle class, and then there are the vulnerable populations that activate mechanisms of resistance due to the lack of state services.

Difficulties concerning social cohesion also arise from the fact that Colombia has had a long-standing armed conflict and problems related to drug trafficking. This is particularly visible in the context of Riohacha, where non-state agents have built parallel powers based on the use of

3 The minimum wage in Colombia was around USD 300 per month for 2024.

force and violence (Trejos Rosero & Luquetta Cediell, 2014). Colombia has high levels of violence, and that can be difficult for Venezuelans to understand, according to a participant. She remarked that Venezuelans are often targeted as being the causes of violence and stresses:

I have not yet robbed anyone or anything like that, but it is difficult for people to understand it, to understand that we did not come to this country to increase the violence, that the violence was already there, only that there are people who joined that because it was part of the possibilities they saw to survive, but that in the end, we all come to survive, just as many Colombians have done. [...] And you say a lot of things have happened and we were next door and we didn't find out. I mean, I, for example, understood about two years ago because it was almost all about mafia and drug novels. I saw them, but I didn't understand. I mean [...] it was very strange until I came, and I heard from the people too, who have been displaced, who were violent to social leaders and social defenders. (Interviewee 6)

In Colombia, both human rights violations and normalised violence are exacerbated by conflicts arising from resource scarcity. Rivalries often emerge due to unequal access to state resources. This situation is prevalent even among Venezuelan-led organisations competing for public funds, driven by the fear that the presence of others may jeopardise the achievements that Colombian organisations have made. An interviewee recalled that there have also been conflicts related to humanitarian aid:

They said that everything was for Venezuelans many times. At least here we had the example of a neighbourhood of a colleague where a foundation came to open a soccer team in the community, and they said that they only wanted migrant children. And then the other people from the community felt offended because the [Colombian] children also wanted to play, they are children, and they don't know. So, I think that I have also felt like a little bit of an error that some organisations have made. (Interviewee 2)

She said that this has changed over time because the community leaders have insisted on bringing aid to all the vulnerable people in their communities and not only focusing on Venezuelans. Another interviewee said Colombians share many of the needs of the Venezuelans, and therefore aid must include them both. This example is quite common among vulnerable communities, and it was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when there was a competition for humanitarian aid within the host communities (López Villamil, 2022).

A hyperconcentration of Venezuelans in some areas can generate more conflicts than in areas where there is a lower concentration. For instance, there are conflicts because of overcrowding in some neighbourhoods. In Bogotá, participants in the FGD declared that sometimes more than 20 people were living in one flat. One of them shared:

If there is domestic violence or there is consumption of psychotropic substances, there's a problem. Then, of course, I already made all the neighbours upset, they call the police saying that there is a knife, that there is blood, that there is broken glass. (Participant 21)

Micro-trafficking, GBV, marginalisation and resource scarcity can significantly undermine social cohesion in host communities. These issues, which often precede the arrival of displaced populations, negatively impact both the displaced Venezuelans and the host communities. The lack of state services in some host communities is often filled by non-state actors, leading to increased violence and heightened competition over limited resources, which further exacerbates conflict.

4.2.3 Xenophobia and discrimination

With regard to a violent environment, the participants mentioned that there is discrimination and xenophobia, and many shared their own stories related to the topic. They stated that it comes from both women and men. However, they recognised that the situation has improved from when they moved to Colombia in 2015 or 2018. One issue discussed in FGDs and interviews was the discrimination against Venezuelan women who are labelled with stereotypes.

Many Venezuelan women in Riohacha said they were called “*Placas Blancas*”, which translates to “white plates”. This term is a reference to car plates from Venezuela, which are white and were smuggled into Colombia in the 2000s, whereas Colombian plates are mainly yellow. The term is a discriminatory way of labelling Venezuelan women who come to Colombia, suggesting that they are there to “steal husbands and work as prostitutes”. One Colombian woman who lived for more than eight years in Venezuela recalled hearing from a man, “Here comes the white plate”. Another man explained to him that she was Colombian but lived in Venezuela, so he should not call her that. She then told him not to mess with her. Another Venezuelan woman remembered not knowing the meaning of that expression and was hurt when she found out they were called that.

Moreover, both women and LGBTQ+ persons have suffered from discrimination. One interviewee from Riohacha recalled being hired by a woman to sell juices in front of a hospital and telling her to come to work with less clothing on. She answered, “I came here to sell cheese *arepas*; I didn’t come to sell my body” (Interviewee 1). She emphasised that there are ways to earn money decently. According to one expert interviewed, there is a hyper-sexualisation of Venezuelan women that has sometimes led to GBV, including sexual violence and trafficking in persons. These issues are also encountered by LGBTQ+ persons who additionally face discrimination due to their nationality. A community leader pointed out:

The path of migration is not easy, and it is not the same for everyone. For some, it is more bearable, for others, it is more difficult. For LGBTQ+ people, it is twice as difficult because, in addition, they face discrimination for being from another country. Discrimination for being a diverse person is not the same as being a gay LGBTQ+ migrant, non-binary or trans person. (Interviewee 5)

In the FGDs in Bogotá, participants mentioned they would not rent apartments to Venezuelans or “*costeños*”. Some Venezuelans have a strategy for blending into Colombian society; an interviewee revealed to me:

When I arrived in Barranquilla, my partner who received me, or my friend who was going to receive me here, she gave me some tips and recommendations on how to pass myself off as a Colombian in order to close those gaps that could discriminate against me, that could lead me to a job, that could even use me in the sense that if they notice your accent they can charge you more in the ticket, and so on. I thank her for that. (Interviewee 5)

He then recalled that nowadays, seeing/hearing a migrant, a Venezuelan, has been normalised.

4.2.4 The role of media and social media in the narratives

Regarding the role of media, some participants agreed that the amount of discrimination had diminished, although they were still reading negative news about Venezuelans, particularly in the local media. As one interviewee told me: “Sometimes it’s hard to read comments in the press that say that it’s good that they should all go away, that they are all murderers, and you are faced with the reality that they sell” (Interviewee 5). Another participant added:

I see a newscast that is constantly talking bad about Venezuelans. It only shows the bad things. Obviously, this will feed me and attract me to a Venezuelan, but it will not be the best thing, so I feel that it has decreased a little. Obviously, there is still a lot of work to do; there is still a long way to go. I still feel that there is a lot to work to do on social cohesion and integration. (Participant 19)

According to a journalist I interviewed, Venezuelans were targeted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the xenophobia was exacerbated. In this context, many Venezuelans wanted to return to their country but, since the borders were closed, they were stranded, and some were living in the streets in different cities. This provoked people to target Venezuelans as the ones who were spreading the virus. A study found that politicians did not link the migrants to the spread of COVID-19 (Zhou et al., 2024). This could mean that public opinion differed at the time from the narratives of the politicians.

DANE (2024) reports that 28.6 per cent of Venezuelans felt discriminated against. Of these, 61.7 per cent felt it was because of their migratory situation, and 29.2 per cent because of their ethnic origin, colour or language. There were 47.8 per cent who felt discriminated against in the streets or public spaces, 40 per cent who felt this while looking for a job and 27.1 per cent while working their job. Only 12.2 per cent felt discriminated against in their neighbourhoods. For instance, a report from 2024 analyses the regional politics and discourses from local authorities that were related to Venezuelans and insecurity issues, which are then reported on by the media (El Barómetro, 2024).

Despite the solidarity discourse from the national government, the media produced contradictory messages regarding Venezuelans, portraying them as a threat to public health and security (Ordóñez & Arcos, 2019b). This is more intense in border cities such as Cúcuta and Riohacha, where local newspapers portray Venezuelans negatively:

A problem group that exacerbates conflicts in the regions they reach (Norte de Santander and La Guajira). They [media] narrate them from violence, illness, territorial possession – of border crossings and public places. They are represented as a failure to follow established norms and values, in short, as undesirable subjects that trigger territorial and social conflicts. (Castellanos-Díaz & Prada-Penagos, 2020, p. 924)

This portrayal lacks the contextual analysis of displacement and harms the protection and inclusion of Venezuelans, according to the author. Not only the mainstream media but also social media have influenced perceptions about Venezuelans: Information digitisation and social media virtual platforms have contributed to a widespread discourse of discrimination and xenophobia and even incited violence against Venezuelans (Cabrera, 2021).

Narratives around migration can be xenophobic but also integrative. El Barómetro (s.a.), an NGO that monitors and analyses data from social media, published a report on the narratives about migration in the media in Colombia (El Barómetro, 2024). Its findings are that the media portray Venezuelans as criminals and associate them with insecurity; they repeat stereotypes associated with women and the xenophobic discourses of public figures; they legitimise the violence against migrants; and they have narratives that can encourage competition for resources. However, they also highlight that there are integrative narratives concerning political measures and the need to guarantee the human rights of Venezuelans. This is associated with news about human rights violations, trafficking in persons and violence or threats towards migrants.

Colombia has had positive, humanitarian narratives towards Venezuelans, and it has experienced very little unrest compared to other countries in Latin America. These narratives are based on the two countries' shared history and cultural ties. However, these narratives have limits. There are negative attitudes about increased migration, and this is not aligned with the narrative of "brothers and sisters" (Hussein & Nye, 2024).

4.3 Vertical dimension: “We are not in Venezuela; the system is completely different”

4.3.1 Institutional mistrust

How do displaced Venezuelan communities perceive Colombian institutions? Generally, Venezuelans have difficulty understanding Colombian institutions and tend to mistrust them due to their experiences with an authoritarian government. Many describe the bureaucracy as functioning differently from what they are accustomed to, which complicates their ability to navigate the new systems. An FGD participant who assists migrants and is a community leader emphasised that he must always tell them: “We are not in Venezuela, the system is completely different [...] the whole educational system is different, the labour system is different, the health system is totally different.” When asked about the level of trust in the institutions, it is key to understand the Venezuelan context and how institutions worked (or not). An interviewee pointed out:

We migrated from a very complex situation in relation to trust in the institutional framework, that is, I believe that trust in the institutional framework in Venezuela was zero or null or very, very, very little. Then when you arrive in a country where you also have to carry out institutional processes, the trust is not the same because you come with that [...] to break or to make that lapse of trust is not easy. (Interviewee 5)

They come from a failed state, which fails to provide basic services such as health and education. Plus, they know corruption, particularly in the National Guard of Venezuela, and some say in Colombia the police take advantage of them (FGD participants). A community leader alleged: “There is a lot of violence or cases of police violence in the case of trans women, so these tensions are evidenced when it comes to generating institutional trust” (Interviewee 5). He added:

As LGBTI people we have always distrusted the institutions and the police because of the same structural discrimination we have experienced. Trusting the institutions is not something that comes very easily to us, so when we take that step of trust and inside, for example, our pronouns are not respected, we are not treated with respect, then that fractures that trust. (Interviewee 5)

Besides the police, one of the first institutions Venezuelans must communicate with is Migración Colombia, the migration authority. Some said that at the beginning, it was difficult for them to approach Migración Colombia because they thought they were going to be deported. Indeed, when the government started to implement the first registration in 2018 via the Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos (RAMV), there was mistrust among the displaced Venezuelans with an irregular migration status. They thought that if they registered, they were going to be deported as well. Regarding visas, they said that the requirements are not flexible for the path Venezuelans have to take to receive temporary and permanent residency. In Colombia, visa costs are expensive. One interviewee recalled being denied her visa because of the lack of flexibility of the officer from Migración Colombia (Interviewee 6). In an FGD in Barranquilla, Venezuelans felt their integration difficulties were not related to discrimination but rather to a lack of documentation⁴ or having a “*cedula de extranjería*”, which is an identification document for foreigners that is different from the PPT and not commonly accepted by authorities.

4 Venezuelans often lack adequate requirements such as a valid passport and an apostille because of the lack of consular attention in more than eight countries, including Colombia, until 2022, when relations were restored.

An exploratory study of the Inter-American Development Bank published in 2021 suggests Venezuelan migrants felt more supported by Colombian institutions than Colombian society in the city of Bogotá, the capital, and they were grateful to be included in the social programmes (Namen, Rodríguez, Nicolás, & Bejarano, 2021). In another study in Barranquilla concerning support for migration in host communities, a survey concluded that the levels of trust in institutions, community satisfaction and support for migration are interrelated, and when one factor improves, it is probable that the other will improve, too (Botello, Palacio, Frydenlund, Llinás, & Padilla, 2024).

A sector that Venezuelans highlight in public services is health care. “It seems to me that the health system here, despite all the things that happen in it, works quite well, and the times that I have really needed the health system to support me, it has worked perfectly,” said Interviewee 6. Two participants in Bogotá underlined that the treatment depends on the hospital or even the person, so there are mixed experiences with the public health care system.

When asked about access to education, an FGD participant shared her experience of enrolling her children at school. She said that in Barranquilla, they shut the doors to her and her children, but when she arrived in Bogotá – she had lived for four months in Barranquilla before – she was surprised they opened the doors for their children in the first school she tried, and they even helped her to enrol them close to her home.

They [at the school] asked me: “How many children do you have that are not studying? No, ma’am, come one more time, you don’t even have to go there [to another school], come one more time, and we will transfer your kids here” [...]. Since I have been here, there were too many doors that just opened for me. (Participant 24)

Her experience proves there is a lot of discretionary power among civil servants on how they treat Venezuelans, and that affects how they perceive the institutions and whether they trust them or not. This can also vary from one city to another.

The institutional “abandonment” very quickly forged the creation of migrant and refugee-led organisations. These organisations play an important role in responding to Venezuelan needs when the state fails to assist. For instance, a leader from the LGBTQ+ community recalled, “What we experience is how we can help others in these attention routes, in how to activate these routes so that the path is more bearable” (Interviewee 5). Venezuelans often turn to local leaders or organisations they trust for information about accessing their rights and services, rather than relying on the state. It is also worth noting that the level of trust in institutions tends to be low, especially for those in irregular migratory situations. One expert indicated that the TPS has helped restore some of this trust since, in many cases, migration authorities collaborated with these organisations. Furthermore, Integration Centres have been established in some cities, providing Venezuelans a place to seek guidance about their rights and available services (Global Compact on Refugees, s.a.-b).

4.3.2 Politicisation of migration

At the local level, community boards known as Juntas de Acción Comunal (JAC) play an important role in fostering social cohesion. These boards are community-led and have governance structures aimed at addressing the needs of their communities. They are also commonly politicised spaces where local politics play an important role. The relationship of the host communities with the displaced persons is related and sometimes depends on these boards. One participant declared:

There is a clash between leaders, and that does not allow the processes or the community to advance because one wants to be or to have a stronger voice than the other, perhaps also because they belong to different political parties. The JAC

sometimes becomes the biggest obstacle that they can have because if the president of the JAC does not approve it, then it doesn't happen, then that generates factors of enmity, bad coexistence in the community. (Participant 16)

Moreover, there is a politicisation of migration issues by local authorities, and Venezuelans are made the scapegoats for insecurity and criminality. Some political campaigns are based on fear and use migration as a tool, stating Venezuelans are the enemy that the people have in common. For instance, in 2021, an episode related to xenophobic comments targeting Venezuelans as criminals by the Mayor of Bogotá again exacerbated xenophobia in public opinion. The negative narratives coming from politicians have an impact on public opinion. Over time, the mayor changed her speech and called them "*Nuevos Bogotanos*", or new citizens, with a narrative of inclusion. Before her administration ended, she approved a new local migration policy. Despite these negative peaks in some political discourses at the local level, in the interviews and the FGDs, no one directly mentioned any local politician regarding xenophobia or discrimination.

5 Conclusion

Over time, social cohesion has improved at the community level between displaced Venezuelans and host communities. The situation in 2018, when most of the Venezuelan population arrived, was different from the later situation after most of them had received regular migratory status. The regularisation processes that have rapidly been implemented by the Colombian government since 2017 has allowed the closing of gaps in accessing rights and services for displaced Venezuelans. However, challenges remain in the host communities because of structural issues such as poverty, inequality and job informality, which add to a context of violence and conflict.

From a horizontal perspective and at the individual level, I found a common identity and shared values of displaced Venezuelans and host communities. This was particularly salient in Riohacha and Barranquilla. In these cities, Venezuelans feel at home because of the similar weather and culture. Moreover, many of the displaced have relatives in Colombia because of the historic forced displacement from Venezuela to Colombia. Host communities receive Colombian returnees and displaced Venezuelans who now have had children born in Colombia. At the border with Venezuela, many have both nationalities and share the Spanish language and religious customs and beliefs. This creates a common basis for inclusion and social cohesion.

Furthermore, displaced Venezuelans have a strong national identity bolstered by their resilience. Some have engaged as leaders in assisting their fellow nationals and guiding them through their inclusion processes with the help of Colombians. Gender plays a very important role in social cohesion, since many of these leaders are women who have partnered with other vulnerable women to tackle their community's issues. This includes issues such as GBV, water scarcity and access to health care – issues that are addressed in intergroup cooperation.

The vertical dimension of the model proves to be more intricate. Venezuelans' prior interactions with their national institutions and authorities are complex. Having lived under an authoritarian government, they distrust institutions and authorities, and some express their fear because they had to flee from this system. As a failed state, Venezuela does not provide its citizens with the appropriate access to rights and services, which has resulted in high levels of mistrust of anything related to the state.

Their relationship with Colombian authorities and institutions is mixed. At the national level, initially, the fear of deportation was more pronounced, but the implementation of TPS – despite some obstacles – has been successful in improving the level of trust in, for instance, Migración

Colombia. Organisations have worked closely with the migration authority to register Venezuelans in the ETPV, which helped build this trust. This has not been the same with the police, for the level of mistrust of them is still high. Regarding health care, Venezuelans recognise the huge differences between the system they had in their country and the one in Colombia. They praise having access to health care and medicines without having to pay large amounts of money. That was not the case in Venezuela, where there is a lack of medical supplies and proper infrastructure. Similarly, for access to education, they believe that, despite some exceptions of xenophobic school heads, their children have been able to go to school without major bureaucratic barriers.

In host communities, the politicisation of migration has sometimes undermined social cohesion at the local level. This is especially evident at the community level, where political structures such as the JAC are dominated by a small number of traditional leaders. These leaders are often influenced by political interests and political parties that are resistant to the presence of displaced Venezuelans. This does not prevent them from raising their voices in these spaces and agreeing on some issues. Other community leaders seek dialogue and consensus because they are aware that, ultimately, they will have to go to the JAC.

The arrival of displaced Venezuelans occurs in a context of high inequality and class divisions that negatively affect social cohesion. Poverty, drug trafficking and a lack of job opportunities are drivers of community conflicts as well as access to scarce resources, even if these come from international donors. The lack of state services in some regions is particularly salient, resulting in replacement by non-state actors involved in illegal businesses. The displaced community must confront daily conflicts in the host communities. For example, they must confront the often-forced recruitment of younger people by unlawful groups, including drug traffickers. Moreover, Venezuelans did not know about the scale of the armed conflict and the high levels of violence in Colombia, which is shocking to them.

As in most displacement contexts, at the beginning, there was more resistance to the arrival of the displaced Venezuelans. Common myths and stereotypes about them were rapidly spread. Xenophobia and discrimination in the workplace and daily life were part of the equation when they arrived in Colombia. The media spread negative narratives, such as blaming the new arrivals for criminalisation and increasing levels of insecurity, but these incidents have decreased over time.

To sum up, how can we intervene to improve social cohesion when both communities are affected by structural issues, including poverty? Ensuring that their basic needs are met is a crucial step towards enhancing social cohesion in displacement contexts. In addition to these socioeconomic challenges, Colombia also faces a long-standing conflict that should not be overlooked when examining the factors that either promote or hinder social cohesion. Displaced Venezuelans and host communities coexist in this environment, where the role of the state can negatively impact social cohesion due to its lack of presence in border areas. Yet, more studies need to consider these issues concerning the differences between border regions, capital cities and rural areas with an intersectional perspective.

6 Recommendations

These findings suggest that social cohesion is affected by external factors rather than internal ones within host communities and among displaced Venezuelans in Colombia. Within communities, solidarity and the need to confront similar difficulties influence social cohesion positively. However, external and structural socioeconomic factors such as poverty, conflict or politicians can affect it negatively. Even if the situation is different in each of the cities where the research was carried out, some of these issues could be addressed to improve social cohesion in host communities at different levels.

Improved access to rights and services

Colombia has been recognised internationally for its open-door policy towards Venezuelans. The continuation of regularisation programmes should be prioritised to grant displaced Venezuelans access to their rights and services. Additionally, the Colombian government should enhance its refugee policy to ensure that Venezuelans receive adequate protection.

Equality is fundamental for social cohesion in host communities. With that in mind, the national government should improve access to education, particularly higher education, where there is an opportunity for development for younger displaced persons. Equal access to health care, justice and social protection programmes is also key to improving social cohesion. Therefore, in marginalised communities where state services are absent, more effort should be made to ensure this access for both the host and displaced communities. For instance, some municipalities have implemented the *Centros Integrate*, whereby the displaced can access services. But in these communities, there are limited resources to access the centre. Improving access to rights and services could create more trust among communities for the local authorities and institutions providing the services. This is all the more critical in light of the fact that the TPS is a 10-year programme with the possibility of being naturalised – these processes will play out over a decade at least.

Trust and better communication

Trust and better communication are pivotal for social cohesion in the context of displacement. The lack of information has proved to be a reason for the level of mistrust in the institutions. Some activities could be implemented by authorities and international actors on the ground to improve communication. First, training migration authorities in multiculturalism as well as migrant and refugee rights may prevent discrimination and xenophobia. Including information on how to handle migration and protection issues in the training of the police and the military could improve the degree of trust in the police. Communication workshops should be held with community-facing administrators and guards about the rights of Venezuelans. This would particularly improve Venezuelans' access to health services.

Second, within communities, raising awareness and informing Venezuelans about education, health care, justice and social protection systems in Colombia could improve their understanding of these issues and reduce their fears of going to the authorities or accessing their rights.

Third, at the community level, implementing workshops on community pedagogy, mutual respect and creating community spaces for communication and resolution of community conflicts may improve communication and mitigate conflicts. Engaging in these activities with neighbourhood leaders could improve social cohesion. Along the same line, promoting cultural spaces related to music, sports and cuisine in the host communities or designing campaigns with recognised Venezuelan figures such as football players and musicians for national media may contribute towards fighting discrimination and xenophobia. These activities should consider young people, who are frequently neglected and at risk of being forcibly recruited by illegal groups.

Participation

Including refugees and migrants in the decision-making processes alongside existing spaces for citizen participation may improve the effectiveness of the responses from international cooperation agencies and other stakeholders working to improve social cohesion in host communities. They should all include migrant and refugee-led organisations in their responses. For instance, hiring Venezuelans for assistance and care regarding migration issues – especially in cases of GBV, which require a differential approach – could improve communications.

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