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Social Cohesion in the Context of the Venezuelan Displacement to Colombia

Stéphanie López Villamil

Summary

The Venezuelan displacement crisis has become a defining moment in South-South migration dynamics across Latin America. Since 2015, severe food shortages, medicine scarcity, soaring inflation and widespread human rights violations have driven a massive exodus from Venezuela. By June 2024, the deepening humanitarian and economic collapse under Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian government – in power since 2013 – had forced at least 7.7 million Venezuelans to leave the country. Of these, 6.5 million remain in Latin America and the Caribbean, with nearly 3 million residing in Colombia.

This situation has posed a significant challenge for the Colombian government over the past decade. On the one hand, Colombian institutions were not equipped to manage large numbers of refugees. On the other hand, host communities have had to deal with long-standing structural socioeconomic issues such as poverty and job informality. Additionally, recent US policy shifts and immense aid cuts have further deteriorated the situation in Colombia.

This policy brief focuses on social cohesion dynamics in the Colombian context of the displacement of Venezuelans and Colombian returnees. It shows that negative narratives about Venezuelans have declined over the past ten years. Both communities have learned to live jointly in relative harmony despite the ongoing economic and social challenges they face. This policy brief offers recommendations

for improving social cohesion in host communities that receive displaced Venezuelans in Colombia.

Key policy messages:

- Continue regularisation programmes, ensure equal access to basic services and support socioeconomic and cultural inclusion efforts from governments at the local level for Venezuelans and host communities, especially regarding access to the labour market.
- Engage with local peacebuilding actors, both non-state and state, to develop a shared understanding of violence in Colombia and the State's assistance pathways for affected Venezuelans and their host communities. Many Venezuelans struggle to understand the long-standing Colombian conflict and how the violence permeates society and their host communities.
- Build on the local efforts to tamp down xenophobia and discrimination by women community leaders who have helped address these jointly with Venezuelans and Colombians. Issues of xenophobia and discrimination, particularly towards women and LGBTQ+ persons, harm social cohesion.
- Address negative narratives that are spread mostly through mainstream media, and, in some cases, by local politicians, with fact-checking and positive messages around migration.

Introduction

Social cohesion has been the subject of various conceptualisations that encompass aspects such as a sense of belonging, trust, the common good, shared values, identity and, at its core, the issue of inequality (Leininger et al., 2021). When cohesion is lacking, exclusion and marginalisation arise. In displacement contexts, social cohesion can be affected by increased competition for often scarce resources, rising inequality, changes in group dynamics as well as cultural diversity.

This policy brief offers context-specific findings on social cohesion based on qualitative research conducted both in 2024 with host communities and displaced Venezuelans and in 2025 amid humanitarian funding shortfalls. The Colombian experience is illustrative of broader dynamics observed in other large-scale displacement settings – such as those in Bangladesh, Turkey and Uganda – where protracted crises, limited resources and declining international support challenge social cohesion between host and refugee groups.

Colombia has had a long-standing armed conflict that has resulted in millions of internally displaced persons and hundreds of refugees in neighbouring countries. Additionally, poverty and job informality are among the unresolved socio-economic structural issues negatively affecting social cohesion.

The case of Colombia and the Venezuelan displacement

The economic, political, cultural and other ties between Colombia and Venezuela have a long history (Ramírez & Cadenas G., 1999). These relations have played an important role in the political decisions relating to migration and displacement issues from both sides of the border.

In the early days of the humanitarian crisis, in 2017, the Colombian government adopted the first regularisation programme, which was meant to be temporary and last for two years. It granted Venezuelans access to services such as health

and education, as well as job permits. Then, in 2021, the right-wing government, clearly opposed to the Venezuelan regime, adopted a temporary protection status (TPS) for ten years in response to the protracted displacement situation. The TPS granted Venezuelans equal access to rights, except for political rights. Despite flaws in the asylum system, which has not recognised Venezuelans as refugees, the TPS has allowed them to access the labour market and public services such as health and education.

Venezuelans are mostly hosted in urban areas, both near the border and in major cities. Their integration into host communities has been challenging, partly due to initial discrimination and xenophobia. However, social inclusion has been established around a shared identity and common values.

“We are equal, and we have the same rights and the same duties”

Displaced Venezuelans and their host communities in Colombia share a common identity and values. Moreover, many displaced are familial relatives of Colombians due to the historic displacement from Colombia to Venezuela. Along the border, many possess both nationalities. Sharing the Spanish language and Catholic customs and beliefs creates common ground for inclusion and social cohesion.

Furthermore, displaced Venezuelans have a strong national identity bolstered by their resilience, which has proved to be a driver of social cohesion. Local Venezuelan leaders, jointly with the help of Colombian counterparts, play an important role in assisting their fellow nationals and guiding them through their inclusion processes. It is women, in particular, who play an essential role in fostering social cohesion at the community level. Colombian and Venezuelan women have partnered to tackle their communities’ issues, including gender-based violence, water scarcity and access to healthcare.

Issues potentially harming social cohesion

The integration of displaced Venezuelans into Colombian communities has revealed a series of structural and social challenges that threaten social cohesion. Inequality and social stratification present a significant obstacle. Colombia's rigid class divisions contrast with what Venezuelans consider more egalitarian social structures. Many displaced Venezuelans struggle to understand where they fit within this stratified system, which determines access to social programmes, public service costs and even residential classification.

Contextual violence and insecurity also affect social relations. Many Venezuelans find it difficult to comprehend Colombia's long-standing armed conflict and the way violence permeates social life. In areas with weak state presence, non-state armed groups and illicit economies continue to dominate, leading to insecurity and fear. Displaced families are particularly exposed to these dynamics, facing daily risks such as forced recruitment of youth or community-level disputes.

Discrimination and xenophobia remain persistent, though they have evolved. Some participants reported a gradual reduction in xenophobia, noting that Venezuelan migration has become "normalised" and Venezuelans are increasingly seen as part of the community. However, others emphasised that subtle forms of discrimination continue, particularly towards women and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Mainstream media narratives also play a critical role in shaping perceptions. Participants highlighted the negative portrayal of Venezuelan migrants in the press, often linking them to crime or insecurity. These narratives reinforce prejudice and hinder social cohesion, suggesting the need for more responsible media engagement and communication strategies that emphasise migrants' contributions to Colombian society.

Trust in institutions is another central issue. Venezuelans' previous experiences with authoritarian governance have fostered deep distrust towards

state institutions. Upon arrival in Colombia, this mistrust initially extended to Colombian authorities. However, the implementation of the TPS contributed to improving perceptions of institutions like Migración Colombia, the migration authority. Collaboration between civil society organisations and government agencies in registering migrants has built greater confidence. Nevertheless, overall mistrust remains high towards law enforcement, particularly the police, which is also the case for the host population.

Finally, politicisation at the local level has emerged as a growing challenge. Some local leaders and political actors exploit migration issues, framing displaced populations as a source of insecurity or economic burden. This dynamic weakens trust further and reinforces exclusionary attitudes towards displaced Venezuelans.

Conclusion

Over time, social cohesion between displaced Venezuelans and host communities has improved at the community level. A key factor has been the regularisation process, which allowed the closing of gaps in accessing rights and services for the displaced Venezuelans. Further, local leaders, in particular women, have continuously worked to foster dialogue and collaboration within communities, due to their need to confront similar difficulties, which influences social cohesion positively.

However, challenges remain in the host communities. In essence, in Colombian host communities, social cohesion is affected by external factors rather than internal ones. External and structural socioeconomic factors, such as high inequality and class division negatively affect social cohesion. Poverty, drug trafficking, a lack of job opportunities as well as competition over scarce resources are drivers of community conflicts. Also, local politicians and the media have played a negative role in social cohesion. The funding cuts from international donors and the backlash of some of the migration policies in Colombia could harm social cohesion in host communities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the research findings as well as feedback rounds with displaced and host communities.

For the Colombian government:

- The continuation of regularisation programmes should be prioritised to grant displaced Venezuelans access to their rights and services alongside pedagogic efforts to recognise the TPS in both the public and private sectors. The Colombian government should make its asylum system more efficient to ensure that Venezuelans receive adequate protection.
- Equal access to rights and services should be improved to foster greater trust among communities towards local authorities and institutions. To bolster social cohesion, ensuring that the communities' basic needs are met is a crucial step. In this regard, in communities where the state's services are not provided either for host or displaced communities, more efforts should be made by having mobile units.
- To increase trust in institutions and to improve an understanding of their rights, awareness campaigns to inform Venezuelans on education, healthcare, justice and social protection systems in Colombia are needed.
- Colombia's long-standing armed conflict is misunderstood by many displaced Venezuelans who themselves are victims of armed groups. The communities should be informed about the violent situation in selected regions and about their rights.
- Refugees and migrants should be included in the decision-making processes alongside existing spaces for citizen participation to improve the effectiveness of the response from stakeholders working on social cohesion.

For international (donor) agencies:

- Trust and better communication are pivotal for social cohesion in the context of displacement. To improve communication behaviour by migration authorities, training in multiculturalism and migrants' and refugees' rights should be introduced. Further, communication workshops with front desk personnel and guards about the rights of Venezuelans are needed.
- Despite existing humanitarian needs, more efforts should be made to move from assistance, that is, cash-based assistance programmes, to self-sustained development. Creating empowerment systems that are sustainable over time is key to not harming the displaced communities.
- Agencies can foster collaborative dialogue among community leaders to resolve community challenges.

For the host and displaced communities:

- To improve communication between communities and mitigate conflicts, implement workshops on community pedagogy and mutual respect; create community spaces for communication and resolution of community conflicts.
- To reduce discrimination and xenophobia, promote cultural spaces related to music, sports and cuisine, where both communities can exchange their traditions and cultures.

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