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A comparative analysis of the regional
response to large-scale displacement

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The Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS)

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Preface

In the last decade, the world has witnessed two very large human displacement flows, the Syrian and the Venezuelan displacements. The first is largely categorized as a refugee displacement, while the second is considered as human displacement that combines both refugees and migrants. Despite the seemingly different contexts, there are similarities between the two displacements in terms of the cultural identity of Syrian refugees in the Middle East and Venezuelan migrants and refugees in South America. This study provides a comparative perspective of the two displacements, particularly with regards to the regional receptions of these displacements in the neighboring countries, as well as the international reaction.

The findings of the comparative study signal that regionalizing the international order in the field of refugees may result in a fragmented regionally-based system. Additionally, it could lead to regionalizing the international order in all other segments of the international system. The comparative perspective helps confirm and emphasize that we are in one global international system which should be governed by the same norms and the same rules.



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Table of Contents

Preface	ii
Abstract	iv
1. Introduction	3
1.1. Methodology	4
2. Drivers of displacement	6
2.1. Syria	6
2.2. Venezuela	7
2.3. A comparative analysis	8
3. Main destinations: flows and stocks	10
3.1. Syria	10
3.2. Venezuela	11
3.3. A comparative analysis	12
4. Regional response: displacement, reception, and sponsorship	14
4.1. Syria	14
4.1.1. Forced displacement, territory, and security concerns	14
4.1.2. Reception	16
4.1.3. Sponsorship	17
4.2. Venezuela	20
4.2.1. Forced displacement, territory, and security concerns	20
4.2.2. Reception	22
4.2.3. Sponsorship	23
4.3. A comparative analysis	27
5. Conclusions	31
6. Bibliographic references	34



Abstract

Syria and Venezuela are currently the main two countries which have produced the largest numbers of externally displaced persons in the world. In this context, there are several publications that analyze the Syrian and Venezuelan conflicts individually, however, no study comparing the two crises seems to have been produced. By using a case-study comparative approach, the main goal of this exploratory research is to analyze the regional responses to these displacements, and how these responses have impacted refugee and migrant communities, on the one hand, and local communities, on the other. We have identified certain patterns which might also be common to other large-scale displacements and could prove instrumental in better understanding and managing these types of international crises. Large-scale displacements are not the typical economically driven planned-migration projects, but rather forced migration processes. As expected, most of the externally displaced persons resort to neighboring nations as they first escape from their countries of origin. Receiving large numbers of externally displaced persons does not only involve a large price tag, but it also implies a great deal of sacrifice on the part of local hosting communities and national economies. The longer externally displaced populations stay in a hosting community, the more the likelihood for social discontent to grow into full-fledged discrimination and xenophobic sentiments, as local communities begin to develop a sense of competition for the same limited resources. We conclude that, although there is very little in common as to how the Syrian and Venezuelan crises started and developed over time, the way in which their displacement processes unfolded, and the factors present in the crafting of the regional (and international) responses are surprisingly comparable. We hope that by shedding some light into the inner workings of forced displacements *en masse* we could contribute to the knowledge stock on this topic.

Keywords

Syrian refugee crisis, Venezuelan migrant crisis, large-scale displacements, externally displaced persons, regional response.


1. Introduction

In 2000, Bashar al-Assad became the successor to his father's 29-year rule over Syria; his promises of change brought hope for many, while others expected little to no change at all (Khan, 2018). Since then, the country has been experiencing a significant increase in the levels of political, economic, and social instability, with opposition and resistance from various groups, parties, and movements. In 2011, social unrest took hold of the country creating the conditions for the start of a full fledged civil war. As the unsurmountable violence spread from city centers into all regions of the country, people fled to bordering nations looking for protection and means to sustain themselves. In this context, during the first 3 years of the conflict, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees were placed in "temporary" camps in neighboring countries with limited involvement from the international community at large (Ferris & Kirisci, 2016; Tiltnes, Zhang & Pedersen, 2019). This was the case until the refugee and humanitarian crisis incarnated the face—or rather the body—of Alan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian boy who in 2015 made international headlines as he drowned in the Mediterranean Sea along with his mother and brother. This event caught the attention of different international actors, who finally were confronted with the scope and seriousness of the Syrian civil war and its impact on its population and the region. Unfortunately, the global reaction was not as decisive nor as generous as it could—and should—have been (Azad, 2016; Sirkeci, 2017). As the political and military conflict intensified, more people were forced to flee provoking the biggest international displacement of persons since World War II (Sirkeci, 2015). By the mid 2021, it is estimated by UNHCR that some 6.8 million Syrians are spread over 128 countries as a direct consequence of the civil war¹ (UNHCR, 2021).

Meanwhile, when Hugo Chavez became President of Venezuela in 1998, more than 50% of the population lived below the poverty line, the annual inflation rate exceeded 30% and oil prices were in decline (Canache, 2002). With Chavez, the so-called "Bolivarian Revolution" started a comprehensive reform of all government activities and allocation of State resources, specifically those targeting social and economic changes for a more just and egalitarian society (Strønen, 2017). Despite the scandals, allegations of corruption and of misuse of power, the US Department of State acknowledged that the anti-poverty socialist agenda of the Chavez presidency resulted in mass vaccinations and food distribution programs, publicly funded health care and an overall betterment of the education system (Seelke et al, 2021). Unfortunately, since Chavez's death in 2013 the country has been in a downward spiral to present day (Cegarra, 2017). Critical shortages of food and medicine; a hyperinflation estimated at 6500%, making it the world's largest (International Monetary Fund, 2020); social discontent and government oppression (Ausman, 2019); and a massive exodus of people (Freier & Parent, 2019); are some elements that sparked one of the biggest migratory crises in recent history. It is estimated that, by February of 2022, there are 6.04 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants living abroad, out of which almost 5 million have remained in Latin America and the Caribbean² (R4V, 2022).

Several publications tackling the Syrian and Venezuelan crises individually have been identified (Berti, 2015; Chander et al., 2020; Mijares, 2015; Skulte-Ouaiss, 2015; Van

² <https://www.r4v.info/en>



Praag, 2019; World Bank Group, 2019), however, no study comparing the two conflicts seems to have been produced. The apparent lack of comparable elements between these two crises may help explain this void; nevertheless, despite obvious differences (i.a. geographical context, historical processes, culture), a closer look into these conflicts reveals the existence of several commonalities, namely the sociopolitical and economic distress they have provoked; the polarization of the international community; the large-scale displacement; and the humanitarian emergencies they have sparked both within and abroad. At first glance, we believe that a serious and well-balanced comparison of these two crises might render some interesting results.


The main aim of this research is not to compare the Syrian refugee and Venezuelan migrant crises, but rather to compare the regional response to large scale displacement using these two countries—and their respective regions—as case studies. To embark in this project, we will take a closer look into three key areas, namely (1) drivers of displacement, (2) main destinations, and (3) regional response. By addressing these three parts, we hope to determine differences as well as similarities that could inform a comparative analysis placing a special focus on the regional response each nation has received from their neighboring countries. Given the apparent differences in the historical processes that were involved in the making of these conflicts and the lack of geographical proximity or contextual similarities, we are not expecting to find any revealing features with respect to the drivers of displacement or of the main destinations chosen by the displaced populations. However, a comparison of the regional response might allow us to understand how large migration flows are received and sponsored by neighboring countries, what factors are considered in the crafting of a response at different levels (i.a. local, national, regional, international), and how governments and international organizations come together in assisting millions of people in countries that have economic, social, and political pressures of their own.

1.1 Methodology

To conduct a comparative analysis of the regional response to large-scale displacement, of two very dissimilar crises, the method of comparing case studies has been chosen. With this approach, the researcher is to construct two independent cases which could be analyzed with a comparative perspective, establishing and understanding similarities as well as differences among the cases (Lor, 2011). In general, this methodological approach asks for certain considerations to be observed. First, the number of cases to be included cannot be many (Collier, 1993). The construction of each case is not only a complex endeavor but a lengthy one; in this regard, the main goal of this method is clearly to choose depth over quantity. Thus, two to three cases are the optimal number (Ragin & Rubinson, 2007). Second, the object of study must be a large unit of analysis such as a city, a country or a region; smaller units are not conducive to extracting generalizations that can later be compared with other cases (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). Third, the temporal and spatial dimensions must also be considered. Cases must either be contemporary with respect to one another and/or must observe geographical proximity; thus, allowing for the recognition of time and/or space variables when determining causation (Goodrick, 2014).

This contribution complies with the three conditions expressed above, namely the comparison will contemplate two cases, the national and regional scales are the units of analysis, and even though the geographical proximity principle cannot be observed

¹ <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>



when comparing Syria and Venezuela, the time principle can, as both crises are contemporary with one another. Furthermore, other factors, which are not considered in the methodology of case-study comparison, and which are rather unique to these cases, might provide further scientific grounds to justify the comparison of these two countries: they are the largest crises of externally displaced persons in the world; they are both ongoing; there is no clear resolution to any of these conflicts in the near future; and Syria and Venezuela continue to be key geopolitical players—given their oil reserves among other natural resources—with the ability to provoke regional destabilization and disruption in the international markets.

This document is organized into three main chapters titled (1) drivers of displacement, (2) main destinations, and (3) regional response—followed by general conclusions. Each of these chapters will follow a structure in which case-study analysis is provided for each country separately, and then it is followed by a comparative analysis where elements of both crises are confronted against each other. In other words, first each case is constructed independently, and then both cases are analyzed with a comparative perspective. It is important to note that in the end, the goal of this methodological approach is not to test a hypothesis, but rather to come up with one (Lor, 2011). In this sense, the goal of this research is to put forward evidence-based analysis that would suggest how large influxes of externally displaced persons (i.a. refugees, asylum seekers, migrants) are received and sponsored by neighboring countries, and how governments, international organizations, and civil society join forces in crafting a multilevel response (i.a. local, national, regional, international) to these flows.




2. Drivers of displacement

2.1. Syria

Many experts place the beginning of the Syrian conflict as aligned with the so-called Arab Spring or Arab Uprisings (Sirkeci, 2015), while others understand that the Bashar al-Assad's regime—as a continuation to his father ruling—is in fact the source of the problem (Davis, 2015). The Syrian Civil War was undoubtedly influenced by the rounds of social protests that took place in Tunisia and Egypt in late 2010 and early 2011, in which case it would not be incorrect to assume that such protests served as a catalytic to the Syrian conflict. However, the other argument also holds some weight given that these protests would not have sparked such a strong reaction by the Syrian people (despite the levels of oppression and discontent), if not for the incommensurate response by al-Assad forces against the protests that were taking place in the country. The brutal response by the regime against the youth was the last drop Syrian people could take to demand change at any cost (Ferris & Kirisci, 2016). Thus, the Arab Uprisings was the catalyst for some demands to surface, but it was the brutal way in which the regime reacted to those protests what sparked a widespread anti-government movement, which was the driving force behind the civil revolution that began in late 2011.

The full-fledged civil war, however, was possible only through the presence of opposing internal and external forces that provided material and logistical support needed to fight against the government and to lead a sectarian fight against other factions in the country. The result has been a multilateral and multifaceted war that has left an estimated 225,000 people killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 2015), over five and a half million refugees and more than six million of internally displaced persons in 2021 (UNHCR, 2020a). Given the complexity of this war, some researchers have categorized all actors involved in 4 groupings, namely “the regime, the opposition rebels, foreign powers, and Islamic jihadists” (Khan & Kahn, 2017, p. 592). The Syrian Army and his supporters, mostly members from the National Defence Forces amount to approximately 500,000 strong, while the opposition is comprised mostly of anti-government rebels including the Free Syrian Army and The Army of Conquest. The opposition has counted with the support of the United States and various European nations, which have called for Bashar al-Assad to step down, hoping to have the Syrian nation transition into a Western-like society through different Western-led democratization processes.

The opposition is also supported in various degrees and in different capacities by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar; each with its own agenda and motivations. On the other hand, Russia, Iran and, to a lesser extent, China have supported the regime by providing financial and military assistance. Other forces, rather radical in their views and their approaches have also entered the conflict, including the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Fateh al-Sham (previously known as the Al-Nusra Front). These jihadists groups are motivated by sectarian pursuits that ultimately look to gain more territorial control by means of local destabilization. In fact, all of these countries, with perhaps the exception of Russia and China, are committed to a sectarian cause whether it is in support of Shia, Sunni or Kurdish interests. Russia and China have played an important role in this conflict, the former by providing material—money and military equipment—and logistical support, and the latter by providing diplomatic support in the UN Security Council—vetoing resolutions that call for action against the al-Assad regime (Khan & Khan, 2017, p. 599).




Finally, it is important to note that along with the sectarian violence which has extended throughout Syria, there are other systemic causes that have been present in the country well before the uprisings began; all of which have contributed to the great magnitude of Syrian internally and externally displaced persons. Some of those structural factors were and are great un- and underemployment and income inequality rates, on the one side, and systematic suppression of minorities and opposition movements, through very violent means, on the other side (Yazgan, Utku & Sirkeci, 2015, p. 183). Therefore, the complexity of this crisis is not to be underestimated as it continues to be a multifactorial and a multipolar conflict.

2.2. Venezuela

When Hugo Chavez assumed power in 1998, Venezuela was internationally recognized as one of ‘the richest countries in Latin America’ and a ‘very stable democracy’; these labels, however, failed to mention that Venezuela also suffered from some of the highest inequality rates in the Americas—an already chronically unequal part of the world mainly due to colonial and postcolonial factors still present in the region—and a democracy that was based on the systematic exclusion of the majority of the population from the political sphere (Brading, 2014). Being one of the richest countries in Latin America while having one of the highest rates of social inequality and systemic poverty in the continent, was nothing short of a recipe for the few to control and exploit the many. Thus, the apparent stability that the country lived for decades was as unjust as it was unsustainable; in this sense, a social revolution was only an outcome to be expected. It is in this context in which Hugo Chavez appeared as a public figure with a populist personality that literally shook the political structure of the country in ways unimaginable.

Hugo Chavez did in fact reconfigure the entire Venezuelan society in an honest intent to solve many of the disparities that existed in the country and that had been normalized and institutionalized as part of the socialscape of the nation. Chavez’s vision sought to bring an end to the structural causes of poverty, underdevelopment, and socioeconomic inequality by re-engineering the economic and political framework of the country (Muntaner et al, 2013).). The twofold strategy aimed at gaining back control over means of production, especially of natural resources and strategic industries, and redistributing state’s resources in a fair fashion (Arconada et al., 2017). All these changes effectively meant a paradigmatic shift in the ways in which the state would conduct itself in relation to the public and the private sectors which, according to Chavez himself, was to be understood as ‘Socialism of the XXI Century’. This proposal became, in fact, the economic-political cornerstone of the first years of the Bolivarian Revolution (Bassil Boueiri, 2019).

Chavez’s agenda included a comprehensive reform of all government activities and allocation of State resources, which proved successful as a way of implementing “Keynesian economic policies without confronting the pillars of capitalism” (Van Der Velden, 2009, p. 25). Despite domestic and international resistance and multiple attempts to boycott the Bolivarian Revolution, the anti-poverty socialist agenda resulted in mass vaccinations and food distribution programs, publicly funded health care and an overall betterment of the education system (Bassil Boueiri, 2019; Muntaner et al., 2013), which was a drastic change from anything lived in the country in previous administrations. Nevertheless, the fact that Chavez framed his intentions as part of a socialist agenda worried many of his followers—and especially non-followers—who thought the country would eventually turn into a Cuban-like nation.



Despite the negative forecasts surrounding Chavez's presidency, Venezuela started experiencing an oil-based economic bonanza that resulted in more public spending in social programs, which translated into more popular support for the Chavista Movement (Carey & Horiuchi, 2017; Torres Galarza, 2018). Real social unrest and public clashes only started happening when the business class and oligarchs resorted to price speculation and illegal hoarding provoking strategic shortages of food and medicines in multiple occasions. Some authors believe that these practices amount to an economic war the goal of which was to delegitimize the ideological framework of the ruling party:


Economic warfare is an instrument of political confrontation that seeks to disrupt the functioning of the economy to make a country ungovernable, to destabilize the daily lives of citizens by denying or hindering [access to] food, basic goods and services, and ultimately to bring about a change in political rule (Crimson King, 2014), thus delegitimizing its ideological model as "failed". (Bassil Boueiri, 2019, pp. 89-90)

Chaos in the supply chain has proven to be a very successful weapon; over time, it has provoked a socioeconomic crisis which has resulted in the highest hyperinflation rates of any nation in the world, rising levels of violence and crime, mass migration, and social unrest (Arconada et al., 2017; Bull & Rosales, 2020a). To make matters worse, the key international players such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom continue to impose economic sanctions on Venezuela and, more recently, have resorted to other mechanisms to defund the country. All of these issues have eroded much of the popular support for the revolution (Hetland, 2017) and have brought the country to the brink of collapse, which partly explains both the generalized discontent inside the country and the decision to migrate of millions of people in the last few years.

2.3. A comparative analysis

Syria and Venezuela are protagonists of the world's greatest displacement crises of the 21st century. These conflicts are in fact so large that they have the potential to be disruptive and destabilizing forces in their respective regions as well as in the international arena. An influx, whether sudden or gradual, of hundreds of thousands of people effectively puts extraordinary pressures in receiving countries, usually contributing—and in some cases provoking—local communities to fall into extreme poverty and despair as the need for goods and services grow and resources become increasingly more limited. In recent years, we have learned that neighboring countries usually serve as buffer zones often incurring into unintended social, political, and economic crises as they struggle to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to autochthonous and foreign populations at once. This is to say that the reception of hundreds of thousands of people in a very short period is a great disrupting force to receiving nations.

Although both crises are politically motivated, the main difference between the Syrian and Venezuelan crises is the nature in which political differences permeated different levels of society. The Syrian crisis, despite the sectarian nature of certain regions and sectors of society, did not originate from any clash between ethnic groups, but rather because of the exacerbated levels of oppression and repression the government exhibited against its own population. The unjustified violence against the group of adolescents who wrote some "anti-government" graffiti on city walls was the catalytic force behind great social discontent that needed to look for a scape valve in order to release some of the build-up pressure. The reckless response of the




al-Assad military forces ignited social tensions which developed into a full-fledged civil war. The Venezuelan case is drastically different in the sense that there is no one single event that sparked the crisis, but rather a gradual increase in the levels of social discontent. Most of the dissatisfaction was not necessarily linked to any ideological driven agenda, but because of the drastic shortages of essential goods and basic services throughout the country. The increasing lack of items of the basic food basket in the shelves and the compromised health system gave rise to different waves of street violence, political protests—anti-government and pro-government groups, and a large exodus of mostly un- and underemployed active population. Thus, these conflicts diverge in the fact that the Syrian crisis is a refugee producing phenomenon while the Venezuelan crisis is essentially a migrant producing one.

The main difference between the Syrian and Venezuelan crises is closely related to the main drivers of displacement of these two conflicts, which is one that may also help explain the disparity in the international involvement in each of these cases. Bashar al-Assad was condemned by the international community for serious allegations of having used chemical warfare against its own people in three different occasions between 2012 and 2018 (Ferris & Kirisci, 2016). The chemical agents varied from chlorine and sulfur mustard to sarin. This hateful and erratic behavior against the Syrian population by the Syrian government was denounced multiple times and constituted the main point of international condemnation against the regime. On the other hand, the Venezuelan crisis does not exhibit any of the atrocities stated before nor is there an event that clearly marks the main reason why many decided to flee the country. In many ways, the Venezuelan case “defies the conventional understanding of what drives people to leave their country en masse” (Van Praag, 2019, parr. 3), which is probably why there has been a rather thin response to this large-scale displacement—especially when compared to the Syrian case.

On the other hand, despite the root causes being radically different between the Syrian and Venezuelan displacement crises, there are several points that these cases seem to have in common. First, all the neighboring countries that experienced a large influx of displaced persons are undergoing their own socioeconomic—and in some cases political—crises. In fact, every country surrounding Syria, apart from Israel, which is classified as a high-income country, is considered as a developing economy (World Bank, 2020); just as all countries surrounding Venezuela are (ibid). Also, both Syria and Venezuela have had historical territorial disputes with neighboring countries which could give rise to contentious forms of engagement when they are asked to lend a helping hand; however, aside from some sporadic local rivalries, most neighboring towns seem not to be clinging to historical differences when receiving refugee and migrant communities in their land.

The Syrian and Venezuelan crises present a high risk of becoming protracted conflicts and is yet another point in common which that generates a series of complexities and difficulties for all parties involved. Externally displaced persons are often perceived as a menacing presence and a burden, capable of crippling local and even national economies in hosting countries. Over time their presence seems to foment deep seated resentments and scapegoating practices which can eventually turn into violent episodes or even xenophobic attacks against these populations. Interestingly, the perpetuity of displacement can act as an important driver for diasporic community formation which in itself may hinder return—and ultimately may result in communities staying rather permanently in a territory. This phenomenon has a double-hinged self-perpetrating mechanism where migrants who do not return cannot help rebuild the



social fabric and restore levels of normalcy in their country of origin, and because there is no normalcy back at home, migrants do not return. This vicious circle of course has a direct impact on the crafting of durable solutions and policy creation.

The Syrian and Venezuelan crises are not only multifactorial but also multipolar; they have received their share of foreign support as well as of foreign intervention. Russia and to a lesser extent China have become important actors in Syria and in Venezuela, providing both material, logistical, and diplomatic support to both states. This suggests the importance of these countries in the geopolitical cartographies of power where “the West” is confronted with “the East” whether to maintain the current state of play or to generate the so-called “New World Order”. Assertion of more control over the international energy sector and the outsourcing military protection and security apparatuses seems to be at the core of the creation of new strategic alliances; after all, these are two oil giants capable of tilting the balance of power in the global arena through energy manipulation.


3. Main destinations: flows and stocks

3.1. Syria

The Syrian refugee crisis has produced the largest number of displaced persons of any one country in the world. The official count states that there are over seven million internally displaced persons, and over six million people find themselves spread throughout 128 nations (UNHCR, 2021). All in all, the main destination countries for Syrian refugees and asylum seekers are Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt; with the first three countries holding the greatest numbers of Syrian refugee and asylum seekers. In its latest figures, UNHCR estimates that by mid 2021 there are 6.8M Syrian refugees around the world with 5.5M officially registered as refugees.

According to the Regional Strategic Overview 2021-2022, drafted by the Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Regional Bureau for Middle East and North Africa of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 3,635,410 registered Syrian refugees in Turkey; 879,529 in Lebanon; 661,997 in Jordan; 241,738 in Iraq; and 130,187 in Egypt. These numbers reflect only the number of Syrians registered as refugees, which means that in real terms there are many more Syrian people living in those countries, as some estimates show: Lebanon (1.5M), Jordan (1.3M), and Egypt (500K) (UNHCR, 2021). Unfortunately, despite the financial and logistical assistance that has been allocated to help Syrian refugees, all of the neighboring countries listed above have great problems of their own and can barely attend to the needs of their own citizens; Lebanon being the most extreme case. In fact, the 2020 annual Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees shows that 89% of the total Syrian population in Lebanon cannot afford the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (UNDP/UNHCR, 2020).

Knowing about the chronic precarity of the living conditions of millions of Syrian refugees is key in understanding the dimensions of suffering and sacrifice that Syrians have undergone over the past decade and continue to endure today. Official data indicates that there are 3.2 million Syrian refugees “in need of some support to ensure having food on their tables” (UNDP/UNHCR, 2020, p. 5). Lack of food is an indicator of extreme poverty, and it represents grave consequences for the survival and development of entire communities whose dire needs are not being met to fulfill the most basic of necessities for survival. Unfortunately, this situation becomes more




delicate each year during the winter months when the lack of decent living conditions brings great precarity, adding to the increase of malnutrition, sicknesses, and deaths. The global pandemic has also come to add new levels of complexity to an already dreadful situation. COVID-19 has put a heavy strain on countries as many economic sectors had to close in order to control the spread of the infection; this resulted in a large-scale destruction of jobs and the loss of livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of families in the region regardless of whether their economic activity was linked to the formal or informal sectors. As it would be expected, this restructuring of the economic activity at the national and local levels has served as a contributing factor to the significant increase of poverty in the region which has not only exacerbated the socio-economic disparities but also has made it more difficult—if not impossible—for refugees and migrants to access public services such as food programs, health care, and education. The alarming levels of food insecurity might explain why the UNDP/ UNHCR Regional Strategic Overview Report (2020) estimates that there are 579,031 Syrian refugees in need of resettlement (p. 7); this data provides an opportunity to understand the great dimension of need that host communities and refugees are facing as a direct result of the pandemic.

3.2. Venezuela

To better understand the main destinations Venezuelans have resorted to, it is important to bear in mind a few points. First, the Venezuelan exodus is not motivated by political persecution, but rather because of economic and social destabilization, poverty, and lack of some goods and services in the country. Second, despite mistakes made by the Bolivarian Revolution, in general, and by the Maduro presidency, in particular, this movement still holds strong popular support from different sectors of society, especially among the working class. Third, many blame the sanctions and economic blockade that has been imposed on Venezuela by the United States, Canada, and Europe for the economic collapse of the country; thus, exonerating the government for the socioeconomic downfall. Fourth, the several coup d'état attempts—among other mechanisms of large-scale sabotage—that the United States has organized with the help of some neighboring countries have legitimized the main official narrative of Venezuela being under attack for its oil, among other natural resources. Fifth, the country is doing very little—if anything at all—to stop nationals from fleeing the country. Thus, under the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, Venezuelans abroad are not refugees but migrants, which under international law, governments are not obliged to provide protection nor assistance.

As of December 2021, this crisis has produced approximately 6.05M Venezuelan migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; out of which the majority has been hosted by neighboring countries such as Colombia (1.84M), Peru (1.29M), Ecuador (509K), Chile (448K), and Brazil (261K) (UNHCR/IOM, 2021). It is estimated that no less than five million Venezuelans have been received by Latin American and Caribbean countries, amounting to around 83%. Other important destination countries are the United States and Spain, together hosting almost 900K Venezuelans, 465K and 415K, respectively (RMRP 2022)³. Along with these numbers, the R4V 2022 report affirms that there is 1.87M Venezuelans engaged in pendular migration movements and about 600K are in transit. Of the entire Venezuelan population abroad (6.05M), 67.3% are adults, of



which 32.4% are men and 34.9% are women. The underage population amounts to 32.7%, of which 16.0% are men and 16.7% are women. This indicates that there is no real gender gap in these flows and that roughly 3 out of every 10 Venezuelans are children or adolescents.


Colombia is by far the largest receiver of Venezuelans, and the most important transit point to second destinations. In general, from the very beginning of the mass influx of Venezuelans into Colombia, there has been a well-organized response by the Colombian government (i.a. registration processes, humanitarian assistance, logistical support, local integration initiatives) which has been instrumental for the survival and well-being of millions of people in need (references). In part, this can be explained due to the historical affinity between the two countries as Venezuelans welcomed Colombians who were fleeing atrocious violence from an extremely complex conflict of guerrilla warfare. Several decades of cross border relations have undoubtedly strengthened the fraternal ties between these two nations. Other neighboring countries have also come predictable destinations, especially given the wide range of aspects they share, including similar colonial and postcolonial histories, culture, language, religion, and similar present-day struggles.

It is important to note that the United States and Europe should not be understood as new destinations, long ties between these regions have materialized in residency permits and dual nationalities over many decades. A significant percentage of Venezuela's wealthiest families have traditionally run businesses between the United States and their home country (i.a. international banking, energy, imports and exports, mining) resulting in the transnationalization of livelihoods and habitual places of residence. The European case is more historical than conjunctural; however, it usually involves families—like the North American case—that control a lot of the means of production and/or are latifundistas. These families continue to recognize their European origin and pass their nationality by blood—*jus sanguinis*—to younger generations; therefore, as bearers of European passports, they can move whether temporarily or permanently to the old continent.

3.3. A comparative analysis

The numbers of externally displaced Syrians and Venezuelans are both staggering; in fact, they are the result of record-breaking crises. With 6.8M Syrian refugees around the world, this has become the greatest displacement crisis since World War II, and Venezuela constitutes the greatest peacetime crisis in recent history now exhibiting 6.05M migrants. These numbers speak of the catastrophic proportion of these crises, and to make matters worse, in the Syrian case the numbers double when the internally displaced population is included (6.7M). As shocking as these figures are, this data fails to convey an equally important dimension of these large-scale displacements which is the sacrifice, struggle, and suffering that lies behind every number. In the end, it is impossible to have a sound notion of how these crises have affected civilian populations of all ages, needs, and conditions.

Most Syrians and Venezuelans resorted to international destinations that observed a geographical proximity with their country of origin. As it would be expected, most Syrians and Venezuelans fled primarily to neighboring countries which were accessible by land; while others, traveled to farther destinations by air. These options are of course subject to material conditions that must be present at the time of traveling, which may include the possession of a passport, entry visas, money to pay for transportation tickets, etc. Not surprisingly, the nations with the greatest numbers of Syrian refugees



and migrants are Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, while for Venezuela are Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. In this sense, Syrians resorted to nations that share land borders with their country, but Venezuelans did not—with the exception of Colombia. As explained before, countries such as Peru and Ecuador share with Venezuela distinctive historical and sociocultural aspects, and they all have Spanish as a common language, while Brazil and Guyana do not exhibit these similarities.

Interestingly, both the Syrian and Venezuelan externally displaced persons agglomerate in a few countries primarily: Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan for the Syrian case, and Colombia and Peru for the Colombian one. This phenomenon suggests that there is a gravitational force present in the dispersal of people. Whether because the allocation of resources is logistically easier and groups of people can get more help quicker if they stick together or because networks grow in strength even when created abroad on a temporary basis, the fact of the matter is that one to three countries are chosen by displaced persons to inhabit as a collective. In this line, the main host country does exhibit a geographical proximity, which suggests that externally displaced persons flee to the closest possible point to 'home'. This phenomenon may have multiple explanations: an economic one—accessible by land; an emotional one—hoping the conflict will come to an end momentarily; and a logistical one—easy to return from.

Finally, according to UNHCR only about 5% of Syrian refugees live in camps (UNHCR, 2021), the majority, therefore, lives in rural and urban areas. The Colombian case follows the same pattern. Although there are some camps that were built for the reception of Venezuelans in South America, they serve as temporary shelters for people that seek urgent help (i.a. food, medicine, medical treatment) or are transiting from one place to another. In general, most—if not all—Venezuelans live in urban and rural areas where there are more livelihood opportunities. As difficult as life in encampment is, the likelihood to find a stable source of food, health care attention, and education programs for the young, is more probable than finding those services in host communities. In fact, in order to deter irregular migration many countries have resorted to only giving such services to their own citizens, regular migrants, and expats. This effectively means that the levels of precarity and vulnerability of displaced Syrians and Venezuelans are extreme.

4. Regional response: displacement, reception, and sponsorship

4.1. Syria

4.1.1. Forced displacement, territory, and security concerns

Any meaningful analysis of the regional response to the Syrian refugee and asylum seeker crisis should take into consideration the security situation of the region as the backdrop in which the rapid and ever-growing influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons took place. After the Arab Uprisings, the Middle East did not only become the host of multifactorial and multipolar conflicts, with rapidly changing scenarios at the local, national, and international scales, and conflicting loyalties; but the so-called ‘Western democracies’ saw a window of opportunity to help push regime change in more than one country. This combination of internal and external factors gave way to a series of sociopolitical processes which had the potential to spill over and destabilize other nations.


Even though the Syrian conflict has resulted in a heavy loss of life, estimated in over 350,000 according to the United Nations⁴ and 606,000 according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights⁵, perhaps the most significant security threat this conflict has created for the region is the rise of the Islamic State—also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh. According to the Wilson Center⁶, at its height this Islamist group managed to control “about a third of Syria and 40 percent of Iraq”. By the end of 2017, the Islamic State had lost most of the territorial control it once had, and it continues to succumb to new attacks; however, this extremist group has proven it possesses the ability to regroup and produce terrorist cells even when debilitated.

A decade later, official forces have taken control of most of the Syrian territory, border towns continue to be very porous and emerging powers seek to contest border controls and limits (Skulte-Ouaiss, 2015, p. 15). To make matters worse, sectarian conflicts still remain active on the ground, especially in the Northwest of the country; situation which continues to threaten the levels of security and stability within the country—affecting not only the life within the Syrian territory but also the decision-making processes of possible returns. Moreover, the economic deterioration by means of “loss of livelihoods and assets and destruction or damage of shelters, coupled with rising inflation and the depreciation of the Syrian pound to the dollar” (UNRWA, 2019, p. 7) experienced in the country and exacerbated with the imposition of sanctions by the so-called ‘international community’ has hindered most attempts of economic recovery and social stabilization; situation which also helps explain why many Syrians are still very hesitant to return.

⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101162>

⁵ https://www.syriahr.com/en/217360/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_Ff3Wv4YeBIK00RpV09kjbLpUp5ZgsID5d0yYF-CAK12w-1634143916-0-gqNtZGzNAfujcnBszQj9

⁶ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>



The legal status of the Syrian refugees and displaced nationals in the region is at best unclear. Unfortunately, many of the Arab nations hosting large numbers of refugees, except for Egypt, are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. While some scholars see that the lack of adherence to the International Refugee Convention and its Protocol does not leave the region in the dark with respect to giving protection and legal recognition to refugees and asylum seekers as there are other domestic and regional instruments⁷, others do see in this gap a conscious effort not to commit to the protection of legal rights and the implementation of basic measures for their subsistence while being abroad⁸. Be it as it may, the existence of other instruments does provide the normative conditions for neighboring nations to recognize externally displaced Syrians as refugees and asylum seekers, which would lead to the provision of legal rights and assistance.

UNHCR and UNRWA⁹ have played an important role in supporting governments provide legal help and humanitarian assistance to large amounts of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers; situation which has translated in the funneling of resources and logistical support to local governments by these international organizations. In order to conduct refugee status determination (RSD) procedures, both of these UN agencies use the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol definition of refugee, which itself strongly informs the practice in the region; this Convention states that a refugee “is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNGA, 1951).

Whatever the refugee definition a national government chooses to adopt, all of Syria’s neighboring countries have adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), which oblige them to comply with at least four fundamental principles, namely the responsibility to grant temporary protection and assistance free of discrimination, penalization, and refoulment. Likewise, there should be a provision that allows refugees and asylum seekers access to documentation, education, healthcare, and work; and minors should be treated more favorably, including their de facto recognition as refugees and the immediate launch of protections and assistance that come with this acknowledgment. In the following, we will explore how countries with the largest amounts of displaced Syrians have received, sponsored, or helped resettle Syrian refugees and asylum seekers.

⁷ Such as The Arab Charter on Human Rights of 2004

⁸ The first group claims as valid the historical reasons why Arab nations opposed the idea of becoming signatories to the Convention did not and could not approve of the international approach to (mis)handling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In part, this regional conflict of systematic abuse and dispossession—allowed and assisted by some powerful actors—was too atrocious a backdrop for Arab nations to approve and support any internationally binding agreement regarding refugees and asylum seekers

⁹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) attend to Syrian internally and externally displaced persons and Palestine refugees displaced in and from Syria, respectively.


4.1.2. Reception

As we have stated before, the Syrian conflict starts in late 2011; by April 2013, a UNHCR report (31) states that 1.3 million Syrians were living in neighboring countries, “stretching the capacity of governments to accommodate new arrivals” (UNHCR, 2013, p. 1). The distribution of externally displaced Syrians in 2013 was Jordan (440K), Lebanon (424K), Turkey (291K), Iraq (132K), and Egypt (50K); these figures reflected a total amount of refugees of 1,349,356 out of which 1,104,653 had been already registered and 244,703 were waiting for their RSD. According to the same report, almost half of the refugee population was under the age of 18 (48%), and 77% of the flows was comprised of women and children (idem, p. 2). These demographics, of course, represented new challenges to local governments and international organizations alike. Underage populations often present a set of vulnerabilities which challenge authorities as they aim to protect minors from failing to attend school, falling victim to child trafficking networks (i.a. child sexual exploitation, child marriages, and child labor), getting separated from their parents, and/or being forced to move as unaccompanied children.

In 2013, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) supported the governments of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt in attending to the various needs the incoming fluxes of refugees had. Specific actions ranged from the opening of new camps and health clinics to developing programs in coordination with local authorities and other international organizations. Likewise, UNRWA provided cash assistance to Palestine refugees who fled Syria and were located in Lebanon and Jordan, countries which are not within the area of operation of the Agency but received large amounts of Palestine refugees as a result of the Syrian conflict. All in all, the regional response was articulated with the help of these and other international actors who did not only deliver economic aid, but also logistical support to government personnel as well as to refugees to help mitigate the heavy stress these populations were putting on local communities—within countries which had their own problems in providing resources for their own citizens.

When comparing the official data published in the Regional Strategic Overview 2021–2022 with the data provided by the above-mentioned report of 2013, certain key trends come to light that are worth analyzing. First, the registered number of Syrian refugees in November 2020 was 5,580,518. This means that in seven years and seven months the number of registered refugees increased by 505%, an average yearly growth of no less than six hundred thousand people. This number, of course, does not include those who could not be registered by the competent authorities, nor does it reflect the number of Syrians who fled but did not survive the journey. Second, in the region Turkey became the host country with the highest number of Syrian refugees (3.6M), followed by Lebanon (879K), Jordan (661K), Iraq (241K), and Egypt (130K). The variation in receiving countries between 2013 and 2020 might be related to the socioeconomic and political instability that many of these countries have been experiencing for the past decade. Unfortunately, many of the internal problems have not gotten better, but actually have gotten worse, like it is the case of Lebanon, which has contributed to the intraregional dispersal of people.

Other conditions have also changed in the seven-year span which did not necessarily include the effects of the global pandemic on the Syrian refugee population in the region. About 45% of externally displaced Syrians are below the age of 18 and about 44% are female. This data shows that almost half of the Syrian refugee population continues to be comprised of children and adolescents, while the gender disparity




has now shifted from women (in 2013) to men (in 2020). With respect to the economic conditions of the Syrian refugee population and the affected host communities, this 2020 report states that “2.1 million of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, as well as 1.1 million persons from affected host communities in Jordan and Lebanon are in need of some sort of support to ensure having food on their tables” (UNHCR, 2020, p. 5). Needless to say, the current socioeconomic conditions have significantly deteriorated due to the government restrictions and lockdowns that national and local governments have had to implement in the context of the global pandemic. In places such as Lebanon, for example, the day-to-day conditions are so precarious that it is feared that about 89% of the Syrian population in the country cannot afford the survival minimum expenditure basket—as compared to 55% at the end of 2019 (UNHCR, 2020).

4.1.3. Sponsorship

Even though postcolonial territorial reconfigurations in the Middle East and the Near East caused many diplomatic and armed conflicts, the long historic relations between Syria and its neighbors proved to be stronger than the more recent disputes they have faced as part of their nation-state building processes. In this context, when the Syrian conflict worsened in 2013 and many more people left Syria and entered neighboring countries, local communities continued to welcome those in need, in solidarity to their situation. However, the economic precarity of many of these local communities was felt immediately in the form of lack of resources, and later in the form of resentment towards the large influx of refugees who were competing for the same resources (i.a. jobs, social services, government assistance). Unfortunately, this conflicting sentiment has become a trend in most of the receiving countries, and according to some reports, it has now become a contentious political issue with the potential to tilt electoral landscapes. In the following, we will take a closer look at the sponsoring mechanisms implemented for the Syrian refugee populations in the region, by exploring the response articulated by each of the most important neighboring countries and its evolution over the years.

Turkey is hosting by far the greatest number of Syrians refugees and Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) in the world. Currently, the country is managing 3.6M Syrian refugees and PRS under temporary protection, in addition to approximately 320,000 international protection applicants and status holders. Out of this large stock, about 98% of those who are under temporary protection live in urban and rural areas, with less than 2% residing in Temporary Accommodation Centers. (UNHCR, 2020). During the first years of this conflict, the Turkish government was providing assistance to the incoming refugee populations despite the stress that this action was putting on its own economy. However, as the numbers began to change and Turkey became the number one recipient of Syrian refugees, this economic sacrifice was too great to bear, and the country contemplated closing its borders to new incoming fluxes of refugees; decision which would put new pressures on transit countries and could potentially drive new fluxes into the European space. Not surprisingly, the “international community” started supporting Turkey in meeting the demands that a growing number of refugees were imposing on the local communities. The economic and logistical help pouring into Syria allowed for some temporary measures, such as the construction or expansion of certain camps, to become more robust if not more permanent, as the response to new needs started materializing with more lasting solutions.

According to certain accounts, the Turkish citizenry has grown tired of the Syrian




presence in the country, despite the sympathy for the Syrian struggle that still persists almost nationwide (Cagaptay, 2019). The deterioration of the economic conditions due to the global pandemic (e.g. job destruction, economic contraction, supply chain disruptions), especially those that directly affect the informal sector, such as lockdowns and restrictions, hit this part of the world particularly hard, which might have been perceived as yet another factor which could be blamed on the stress that millions of Syrians have put on the Turkish economy. To make matters worse, during the second semester of 2021, the applied macroeconomic policies proved catastrophic for the Turkish economy, resulting in a steep increase in the inflation rate, reaching 36.08% in December 2021,¹⁰ its highest points since September 2002. All of these socioeconomic factors are now contributing to the sharp increase in the anti-Syrian—and Arab—refugee sentiment in Istanbul, as well as in other parts of the country (Cagaptay, 2019).

Lebanon is the second country with the highest number of Syrian refugees in the world, and the first country hosting the highest number of displaced persons per capita in the world. This record is all the more important when it is taken into account that this country has been dealing—concomitantly to the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees—with great political instability and socioeconomic crises of staggering proportions. The government of Lebanon estimates that there are around 1.5 million Syrians out of which almost 880,000 have been registered as refugees with UNHCR (2021), along with some 257,000 PRS. Thus, Lebanon is effectively dealing not only with a significant domestic crisis but also with an international refugee crisis happening at once in its territory.

Several factors have weakened the Lebanese economy in the last decade, which have had a direct impact on the refugee communities; some of those factors include the internal political violence, border tensions with Syria, the Beirut port explosion of 2020, and the ongoing global pandemic. All these factors combined have caused great damage to an already vulnerable economy and have resulted in the impoverishment of a big sector of society; some reports estimate that “approximately 23.2 per cent of Lebanese have been plunged into extreme poverty [and] some 91 per cent of displaced Syrians are living on less than \$ 2.90 per day” (UNHCR, 2021, p. 26). This level of food insecurity unfortunately has only gotten worse in recent months as the pandemic continues hitting developing economies hard, the supply chain disruptions allow for price speculation, and job destruction continues being a pattern observed in the nation as thousands of businesses continue to close.

Jordan hosts approximately 1.3 million Syrians, out of which 661,997 are registered with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2021); Jordan is officially the second largest refugee hosting country in the world per capita. Several thousands of PRS have also moved to Jordan despite the non-admission policy for PRS the government announced in 2013. Needless to say, the prohibition did not stop refugees and asylum seekers from venturing into Jordan, but it forced them to do so by using irregular channels and informal routes. Once in Jordan, both Syrian refugees and PRS received assistance from local governments regardless of their migratory status in the country. Fortunately, the heavy stress put by the large influx of refugees on the country’s infrastructure has been in part mitigated by the international community.

¹⁰ <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/inflation-cpi>




The protection and the humanitarian assistance refugees enjoyed in Jordan deteriorated over time and took a sharp decline with the advent of the global pandemic. Even though Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, there is domestic legislation that allowed for the protection and assistance of refugees within its territory. Thus, Jordan has been supporting refugee populations meet their needs in the country, despite occasional frictions and problems that have been reported for quite some time between local communities and refugees. Unfortunately, the impact of the global pandemic and the global supply chain disruptions have been catastrophic for an economy both vulnerable and increasingly more dependent on food imports. In short, these incoming pressures have exacerbated existing structural problems which have significantly crippled the country's vulnerable infrastructure resulting in "heavy increases in unemployment, food insecurity, risk of eviction, GBV, and a decline in access to education and health services" (UNHCR, 2021, p. 28).

According to the Regional Strategic Overview 2021-2022, "only 2% of refugee households [in Jordan] can meet their essential food needs without any negative coping strategies, which include cutting down on meals, pulling children out of school, early marriage and sending family members to beg" (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (RRRP), 2020, p. 28). This means that many socioeconomic strategies have had to be put in place by refugee families in order to cope with this crisis. To tackle the precarization of the living conditions (i.a. food security, livelihoods), the Jordanian government is promoting a resiliency plan (Jordan Response Plan 2020-2022) designed to assist families and local communities address their most pressing vulnerabilities while resorting to the creation of more sustainable solutions (i.a. economic recovery, job creation, strengthening of institutional capacities).

Iraq is an interesting case because it is both a refugee sending and a refugee receiving country. According to the report cited above, despite the political crisis and economic instability, "the overall protection environment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) remains largely favourable. Local authorities and host communities remained welcoming and accommodating towards the refugee population" (RRRP, 2020, p. 30). Nevertheless, the same report claims that the absence of an effective legal framework is hindering the access to certain rights and benefits such as the acquisition of long-term residency in the country. However, the most pressing difficulties are not of legal nature, but rather economic. Both the deeply divided political background and the effects of the global pandemic in the local economies have severely impacted refugees and nationals alike. There has been a massive wave of job destruction along with an inevitable defunding of social services and protection programs. To face the lamentable backdrop of the current crisis, local authorities have been working with international donors in order to help alleviate some of the incredible harsh conditions people are living with. In this sense, certain social protection schemes have been put in place, looking to generate livelihoods opportunities which would provide daily cash-compensation to workers.

Finally, Egypt is officially hosting 258,862 refugees and asylum seekers from 58 different nationalities, including 130,187 Syrians as of December 2020 (references). Officially this means that a little over 50% of the refugee population registered in Egypt are from Syria, however, the real number of Syrian in the country is known to be much higher. It is worth noting that even though Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, the country has transferred most refugee management responsibilities to UNHCR, including RSD procedures and allocation of resources. While this kind of "benign neglect" may be synonymous with objectivity and independence, in practice



it also means that Egypt is not committing itself to giving refugee, asylum seekers, and migrants (RASM) any official documentation which may give them the chance to regularize their status in the country, obtain work permits, and/or eventually become Egyptian residents.¹¹

Unfortunately, the Global Pandemic has impacted Egypt tremendously as the international tourism industry came to a halt and its recovery continues to face many hurdles and uncertainty. The rapid decrease in the number of visitors has affected the country in many ways, including a drastic decline in revenues in the hospitality sector which itself directly affects the country at the micro (informal sector) and macro levels (foreign currency). According to the Central Bank of Egypt, pre-pandemic data shows that the tourism sector contributed to 12.57% of the national GDP in 2019, while only amounting to 3.8% in 2020.¹² To fight the negative impact of Covid-19 on the refugee population, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan will continue to provide cash¹³ as a means for refugees to pay for their rent and utilities bills, buy food, and cover essential needs. The goal is to help families cope with the economic crisis so that they do not have to resort to more precarious measures such as stopping their children's education, reducing their number of meals, or falling into more extreme conditions such as begging, homelessness, child marriage or child labor (UNHCR, 2021, p. 33). As part of this plan, financial assistance has been given to almost 300 separated and unaccompanied children, approximately 2,500 students have been added to the system via an education grant, and some 2,500 gender-based violence survivors have been fully supported.

4.2. Venezuela


4.2.1. Forced displacement, territory, and security concerns

Venezuela sits on the biggest oil reserves in the planet, and it is home to large mineral deposits, including rare earth mines, which effectively makes it one of the richest countries in the world. Unfortunately, after Hugo Chavez's death in 2013, the country has been unable to turn this comparative advantage into wealth generation with which to fund the social programs that were designed by the Bolivarian Revolution to take millions of Venezuelans out of poverty and extreme poverty. In fact, the opposite is true, since Maduro became president, the country has been experiencing an unprecedented multilevel crisis. To make matters worse the current destabilization that Venezuela is undergoing is not only a direct result to failed economic policies or domestic sociopolitical disagreements, but it is also due to the actions of powerful international actors whose attempts to undermine and overthrow Maduro's presidency have hindered the economy tremendously, and it is one of the main reasons why Venezuela's economic recovery has not been possible (Kourliandskky, 2019).

As discussed before, the changes introduced by the Bolivarian Revolution were unpopular—and some would say: unacceptable—among many of the members of the business class in the country who were accustomed to having large margins, big profits, and very little government oversight (Mijares, 2015). The attempt to change this culture felt as nothing short of a declaration of war, which effectively started an organized boycott against the socialist government. This, of course, did not hurt the government

¹² <https://tradingeconomics.com/egypt/tourism-revenues>

¹³ This is a protection tool known as Cash-Based Interventions (CBI)



as much as it hurt the people, although in the long run, it proved catastrophic for the Revolution. Their tactics (i.e. distribution sabotage which led to food and medicine shortages, price speculation, job destruction) drove thousands of Venezuelans out of the country, which started the largest peacetime migratory crisis in recent history.


The perpetuation of the macro economic crisis in Venezuela does not only owe to the failed economic policies carried out by the Chavez and Maduro's presidencies, but also to the active involvement of the so-called international community. In fact, the United States and the United Kingdom, among other key players, have either frozen or taken some of Venezuela's most strategic international assets. For this, a rather uninventive, but truly atrocious stratagem was formulated and implemented in 2019, when Juan Guaido proclaimed himself president of Venezuela. The orchestration saw Washington recognizing Guaido as the rightful leader of Venezuela only a few hours after the fact, and almost immediately other nations followed.

The outcome of having two "declared" Presidents of Venezuela—one via a democratic process, although not accepted by an important sector of the "international community" and one via self-proclamation—has followed a larger script of depriving the country from important international assets, which has proven to be detrimental to the current Venezuelan economy, but more significantly for the future of the country. Two actions are worth mentioning of the many that have happened in the open, while others are to be expected to be happening in private. First, Citgo Petroleum Corporation which is an oil refiner, transporter and marketer of transportation fuels, lubricants, petrochemicals and other industrial products, with a net income in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually, is a state-owned company, property of the Government of Venezuela. Coincidentally, since Guaido's appearance in the international arena as the President of Venezuela, the Trump presidency authorized Guaido to manage the company preventing its revenue from reaching Venezuela, but rather foments the opposition and its interests. Unfortunately for the people of Venezuela, but regrettably and not surprisingly, according to Bloomberg¹⁴, Venezuela is at the brink of losing Citgo to creditors for an outstanding debt of over seven billion dollars. This would not only help cripple the Venezuelan economy which has based most of its industries in oil-based products but would further decapitalize the country of its assets.

Second, the United Kingdom has prevented the Maduro Presidency from having access to the gold reserves it holds in the Bank of England which belongs to Venezuela. In a recent court ruling of July 2021, the British Government asserts that only Juan Guaido may have access to the large gold reserves that amount to almost two billion dollars.¹⁵ This effective blow to the Maduro Presidency is based, yet again, solely on the existence of a figure of a self-proclaimed President and may have a double-hinged strategy: on the one hand, to debilitate the Venezuelan Government, and on the other, to liquidate Venezuela's assets abroad. Be it as it may, both assets are worth billions of dollars, and may soon disappear in the hands of the Venezuelan opposition and the direct involvement of the United States and the United Kingdom. This type of pressure comes at a time in which Venezuela is struggling to provide diesel to its own population which is the driving force behind the country's transportation system. A crippling transportation system has the capacity to disrupt social life at every level

¹⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-05/creditors-close-in-on-citgo-the-last-asset-guaido-has-left>

¹⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/europe-business-health-venezuela-coronavirus-pandemic-cc49bb0740185516fe7dd3db9da33f67>



imaginable. With elections in the horizon but no clear idea as to when this tragic turn of events might end, it is hard to predict whether these mechanisms are weakening Maduro's presidency or might be having the opposite effect.

Given the complexity of the mass displacement of Venezuelans and in line with wanting to give this crisis a more proper response, in April 2018, the United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, directed UNHCR and IOM to join of forces and craft a comprehensive response plan to tackle the most pressing needs of this growing population.¹⁶ This action suggests the acknowledgment by the UN that the composition of this mass displacement is of mixed flows, namely refugees and asylum seekers, on the one hand (UNHCR's mandate), and forced migrants, among other categories, on the other hand (IOM's mandate).

4.2.2. Reception

Latin America, as a region, has been developing its refugee protection normative commitments for the past two hundred years (Fischel de Andrade, 2014, in Jubilit, Espinoza & Mezzanotti, 2021). In fact, since the fights for independence from Spain, France, and Portugal, the entire region has been coping with processes of exile, which later became even more pronounced during the military dictatorships of the 20th century. During this time, several instruments were conceived, signed, and ratified—both international and regional—including the 1951 Convention and its Protocol (1967), the American Convention of Human Rights (1969), the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (1984), and more recently the Global Compact on Refugees (2018). However, there are many challenges that the region is still facing with respect to the implementation of such agreements while coping with sociopolitical and economic problems at the local and regional levels. In this light, not only is the region dealing with the Venezuelan crisis but also with other important sources of displacement, namely Haiti, Colombia, and several Central American countries.


More specifically, Venezuela has strong historical connections with all its neighbors; first as the cradle of independence in South America¹⁸ and more recently as a host country to many political exiles from many South American countries during the military dictatorships and also to those escaping violence from the guerrilla war from neighboring Colombia. In this sense, many Latin American countries have close ties to Venezuela—if no historical debts—given the solidarity Venezuelans had shown time and again with other neighboring countries as it displayed political stability and a vibrant economy—at least for some. This might help explain why there has been—at least informally—an open-door policy from many South American countries towards Venezuelans. Other factors might also be contributing to this behavior, including the prospect of promoting knowledge transfer opportunities given the high levels of education displayed by many Venezuelans, which could have a positive impact on receiving nations through development and acquisition of skills and competences.

Under the international refugee regime, the Venezuelan displacement crisis cannot be categorized as a purely refugee producing conflict; however, according to the

¹⁶ This gave rise the formation of an interinstitutional response articulated under the umbrella of R4V (Response for Venezuela)

¹⁷ Haiti—particularly after the devastating earthquake of 2010, Colombia—after the peace agreement negotiations of 2016, and several Central American countries, which have sparked caravans moving North through Mexico looking to reach the United States.

¹⁸ Simon Bolivar, a Venezuelan by birth, was the main leader of independence against the Spanish Crown.



Cartagena Declaration, some people affected by this conflict could be considered refugees, which opens an important dimension to the obligations of the neighboring countries to Venezuela since they are all signatories to this instrument. In line with this argument, Van Praag (2019) affirms that:

Because of developments inside the country, the UNHCR has called on the international community to recognize Venezuelans as a group as refugees, based on the wider criteria outlined in the Cartagena Declaration of 1984. The majority of Latin American states have signed the declaration, which extends protection to “persons who have fled their country because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.”¹⁹ (*Parr. IV*)

The opposing ideological forces in Venezuela, the rising levels of poverty, and the hyperinflation that the country has been dealing with for the last seven years, are all factors which have contributed to the detriment of the public order and have driven large sectors of society to desperation as they continue to face food insecurity, violence, and shortages of strategic supplies needed to lead a normal productive life, including fuel, electricity, potable water, food, and medicine. This is evidence that the conditions in the country are not suitable for families with young children or elderly members, or people whose lives are in danger for politically motivated violence or persecution.


4.2.3. Sponsorship

According to UNHCR/IOM, most of the challenges that Venezuelans face in the Americas fall in the categories of integration (6.3M), protection (5.6M), health (5.1M), food security (5.0M), shelter (4.1M), education (3.0M), nutrition (1.1M), and humanitarian transportation (118K)²⁰ (R4V 2021). In this context, most, if not all, of the countries currently hosting Venezuelans in the Americas are actively receiving logistical and financial assistance to target these sectorial needs both within national borders and in the region. The fact that development differentials in the Americas are so pronounced, makes it very difficult to expect that a single response could work across the region. As expressed earlier in this paper, it is crucial to bear in mind that many local communities in Latin America have been dealing with grave social and economic problems prior to the Venezuelan crisis and COVID-19 has also worsen many of the macro structural factors that produce poverty, exclusion, and other precarities in the region. This is why, a multifaceted and a multilayered response has been more or less crafted with country specific considerations in mind, some of which will be explored in this chapter. In the following, we will take a closer look at the sponsoring mechanisms implemented for the Venezuelan migrant populations in the region, by exploring the response articulated by each of the most important neighboring countries and its evolution over the years.

Colombia is by far the country that has received and hosted the greatest numbers of Venezuelan refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. Deep historical ties connect people from both sides of the border which explains why both common citizens and local authorities have been more than accommodating to the incoming flows

¹⁹ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/understanding-the-venezuelan-refugee-crisis>

²⁰ These numbers represent the amounts of people in need (Note from the report: Figures for refugees and migrant in-transit to other countries are not included in the totals as they can be -by definition- recipients of services in more than one country).




of Venezuelans; despite the harsh rhetoric that fuels clashes between the two governments. A clear example of the generosity of Colombia towards the Venezuelan population in its territory is the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants (ETPV, by its acronym in Spanish), with which more than 900,000 irregular Venezuelan migrants have been granted regular status in the country. This measure has provided beneficiaries with the ability to work and receive protection and assistance—in the form of having access to several social services (World Vision, 2021).

A recent situation report states that there are 73 organizations in Colombia that are working together in bringing protection and assistance to Venezuelans and host communities in need (World Vision, 2021). This combined action is designed to meet the needs of the population with regular migratory status—whether refugees, asylum seekers and/or migrants—in the country in terms of at least 5 sections, namely protection, food security, wash, education, and livelihoods. The Regional Response has activated several actions including electronic cash payments which are given unconditionally to beneficiary families for different purposes, including food vouchers which have been delivered to vulnerable families. The main purpose of this initiative is to help families palliate the harsh conditions in which they find themselves and, at the same time help them thrive in becoming self-sufficient and achieve more local integration. This is, of course, a short-term solution with the potential to become a more lasting one, especially as some families may seek the possibility of settling down in Colombia thanks to the process of regularization which gives individuals the legal backing to stay in the country for at least 10 years.

The global pandemic put a lot of pressure on migrant and refugee hosting communities as local resources became scarcer due to the lockdowns and different government restrictions that were implemented to control the health crisis. These measures especially impacted sectors of society that depend on the informal economy to sustain themselves, such as excluded local communities, migrants, and refugees who do not possess the credentials to work formally in the country. Nationwide, the socioeconomic stability has also been affected by natural disasters, armed violence, and political conflicts; all of which have contributed to an important increase of the levels of discrimination and xenophobia as some narratives blame foreigners as being the source of domestic problems. Considering this, incidents of violence against Venezuelan migrants in the form of robberies, physical violence, and threats, have increased in recent years (UNHCR 2022, p. 108); other forms of violence, such as extortions and hijackings by human trafficking organized criminal networks, have also been reported (UNHCR, 2020).

All in all, the process of regularization suggests a commendable effort on the part of the Colombian government. The recent process of regularization of almost one million Venezuelans is a decisive step forward in providing the conditions for a long-term integration in the country; but, of course, this will likely take time and effort from all actors involved. In the meantime, the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the affected populations, namely Venezuelans and host communities, will continue to be the key action of the more comprehensive response plan that has been articulated by the United Nations, the Colombian government, and civil society in the country. This assistance has been designed to promote access to essential goods and services such as temporary shelter solutions, food, WASH services, education, and access to Covid-19 vaccinations. Other support such as humanitarian transportation, attention points for migrants in transit and people with special needs, and protection from organized criminal networks, will continue to be provided.




Peru is currently hosting about 1.3M Venezuelans, which means that it is the second country with the highest number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees in the world. Although Peru is not a next-door neighbor to Venezuela, its economy and social stability have turned the country into a desirable destination for many displaced migrants and refugees. However, only recently has Peru observed a sharp increment in the presence of Venezuelans in its territory, going from 2,351 in 2015 to over a million in 2021. Partly, Peru's unwillingness to display an open-door policy towards migrants and refugees may help explain this situation. As part of the regional response, the Peruvian government "has demonstrated its commitment to supporting the refugee and migrant population from Venezuela, including by providing two alternative regularization processes: the Temporary Permanence Permit Card and the Humanitarian Residency Permit, directed towards asylum-seekers" (R4V, 2021, p. 151). This has effectively extended the protection and assistance that refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants need, and, in any case, opens the possibility for all of them to work and stay legally in the country.

Sadly, a 2021 report on the needs of refugees and local communities in Peru, conducted by the R4V National Inter-Agency Coordination Platform shows that the impact of Covid lockdowns and traveling restrictions have greatly affected Venezuelans and hosting communities, who are now in dire need of assistance. This information proves that the regularization programs have not been enough to palliate the socioeconomic struggles of these populations, and that more needs to be done by the international community to help provide essential goods and services to these people. The report demonstrates that the lack of documentation and access to information has been a key factor in preventing Venezuelans from reaching out for help (i.a. food programs, health care services, education). The precarization of the living conditions of thousands of migrants has contributed to food, sanitation, and housing insecurity, which has affected almost 70% of the surveyed population. Given the above, to avoid a full-fledged humanitarian catastrophe at least three immediate actions must be taken to help the affected populations, namely (1) provide protection and humanitarian assistance, (2) advance in the regularization processes, and (3) support local integration (R4V, 2021).

Ecuador has also received large numbers of Venezuelan migrants and refugees some of which have arrived in the country to stay while others are in transit to Chile or Peru. Today, there are over half a million Venezuelans who are facing all kinds of difficulties including, but not limited to, lack of access to food (87%), unemployment and lack of livelihood opportunities (65%), inability to secure an accommodation or a shelter (53%), and problems in accessing health services (R4V, 2021). As it is often the case, migrants and asylum seekers have great difficulties trying to provide for themselves and their family groups when they are undocumented and in fear of being detained and/or deported by the local authorities. In fact, most Venezuelan families in the country are living under the poverty line which is set at 84 US dollars per month. This is why, a process of regularization or effective RSD procedures are key in promoting—or otherwise obstructing—migrant integration.

During previous administrations, Ecuador used to be known as a country which looked to institute a global citizenship policy, thus providing the conditions for migrants to enter and stay safely in the nation. The new government of Ecuador is yet to produce a process of regularization that would give Venezuelans a temporary residency or a work permit, which would allow Venezuelans to lead a more normal life and, above all, promote their self-reliance and empowerment. There is news that the Ecuadorian




Government will start a process of regularization for the Venezuelan population in the country, although it has convened with donor countries that the plan will not contemplate the implementation of long-term solutions—such as naturalization—but rather short-term measures that would promote social, economic, and cultural integration.²¹

Chile is hosting around half a million Venezuelans, along with other nationalities that are either living there or using the country as a transit point to gradually move North towards the United States. Because of its sustained social and economic stability, Chile is one of the most desirable destinations in Latin America. However, for Venezuelans it is not easily accessible as it is thousands of kilometers away and, by land, many countries would have to be crossed in order to reach it as a final destination. International border-crossing has proven to be particularly difficult during the pandemic since all the countries in the region officially closed their borders, making it ever more difficult for Venezuelans to reach Chile. Nevertheless, despite the dangerous routes that had to be taken to enter Chile and the many dangers present throughout the entire journey, many Venezuelans did manage to enter Chile, mostly irregularly—73% of the entire stock is in irregular situation—through its northern borders (R4V, 2021).

Irregular migrants and asylum seekers are much more vulnerable to falling victim to organized criminal networks and petty crime, the former using exploitative practices and the latter theft and intimidation. Many cases of minor and more serious crimes have been reported against Venezuelans, including hate speech, discrimination, and xenophobia (R4V, 2021). Sadly, the country has been dealing with other Latin American migrant communities for years, which apparently has taken a toll on the native population, turning it increasingly more unwelcoming towards foreigners. For the Venezuelan community, this has materialized in having restricted access to protection and assistance. In this context, 13% of Venezuelans live under the poverty line and many continue to see their living conditions deteriorate. Given the above, the R4V in Chile has designed an intervention that will prioritize protection and assistance to Venezuelans in the border areas with Bolivia and Peru, and access to healthcare services, education, and livelihood opportunities will be ensured to all Venezuelans regardless of their migratory status in the country (R4V, 2021).

As with all the previous countries, Brazil has been dealing with incredible pressures to handle the socioeconomic crisis that Covid-19 exacerbated, and which has greatly affected local communities throughout the country. It is no secret that the global pandemic has affected different sectors of society in different ways; for a few, it has been greatly beneficial as they have seen their businesses grow, while for many it has increased the levels of poverty and systemic exclusion. Brazil has been hit particularly hard by the public health crisis initiated by the pandemic, which has forced authorities to lockdown entire towns and cities; not only bringing mobility to a halt, but also restricting all commercial activity especially linked to the informal sector. This, of course, has translated in job destruction, which has effectively meant the loss of livelihood opportunities for Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

²¹ https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/venezuela-migración_ecuador-anunciará-este-mes-su-plan-de-regularización-de-mi-grantes-venezolanos/47250254



In fact, “according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), Brazil ended the year 2020 with around 13 million unemployed” (World Vision, 2021 p. 14).


Despite the deep economic crisis and the various levels of discrimination and xenophobia that Venezuelans have also experienced in Brazil, the country “continues to receive and host a very sizable refugee and migrant population from Venezuela: as of March 2021, 144,996 Venezuelans had been granted temporary residence and 79,133 were seeking asylum as well as 46,923 refugees” (R4V, 2021, p. 69). Unfortunately, access to documentation continues to be a challenge, and more efforts are needed to regularize asylum seekers as well as new arrivals. As expressed before, lack of documentation leads to precariousness and vulnerability, including homelessness and malnutrition, as it is the case for hundreds, if not thousands of Venezuelans in Brazil.²² Furthermore, depending on the region in which Venezuelans find themselves in Brazil, their situation may be even more precarious, in Roraima State for example there are around 6,000 migrants and refugees living on the streets or in overcrowded settlements with limited or no access to WASH services (IOM, 2021).

Given the precarity in which thousands of Venezuelans live in Brazil, the R4V has been working on relocating affected populations to other places in Brazil where they would have more favorable conditions. Even though this action has affected approximately 60,000 people, this is only a portion of Venezuelans; newcomers, for example, continue to enter the territory through the bordering states of Roraima, Amazonas, and Para, where they face economic hardship, multilevel violence, and discrimination. Other pressing problems have also been reported such as “family separation, violation of fundamental rights, particularly affecting unaccompanied, separated, indigenous, and homeless children” (R4V, 2021, p. 79.). To make matters worse, due to the deterioration of the conditions in Venezuela, the number of refugees and migrants in Brazil is expected to reach a total of 335,000 by the end of 2022, which will undoubtedly confront the authorities with more logistical and financial challenges to bringing adequate protection and assistance to the Venezuelan population in the country.

4.3. A comparative analysis

A closer look to the Syrian refugee and Venezuelan migrant crises reveals that there are several points worth exploring as to how the regional responses to these large-scale displacements compare. First, the fundamental drivers of these large-scale displacements have played a decisive role not only with respect to the articulation of the regional response but also to the international funding received. Second, the macro-level conditions of each host country—and of the region itself—continue to determine the way in which these populations are received and sponsored. Third, the discrepancy between the international funding each crisis receives exposes donors’ priorities and geopolitical implications. Fourth, insufficient funding has led to the materialization of challenges and risks of unimaginable proportions. Fifth, the intergenerational trauma experienced by the affected populations will be felt for decades both at the micro (individuals and families) and macro (locally and regionally) levels; despite some mechanisms which have been put in place in order to palliate its impact in host communities and the affected persons themselves. Sixth, neither crisis seems to have a clear solution in the near future.

²² Approximately 2,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants were in situation of homelessness as of October 2021 (IOM, September 2021, p. 69); and as of March 2021, 103 children in shelters were diagnosed with acute malnutrition and 262 with chronic malnutrition (UNICEF, 2021).




The Syrian refugee crisis started and developed as an armed conflict which eventually became a multipolar full-fledged civil war. The causes of displacement were clearly associated with the bellicose nature of this crisis which demanded an immediate regional and international response. Given the levels of insecurity, political persecution, and civilian casualties, externally displaced Syrians received the recognition of refugees by its neighboring countries and international organizations. This, however, was not the Venezuelan case. Since most Venezuelans migrated because of the rapidly deteriorating socioeconomic conditions which developed into great scarcity of essential goods and services, and the destruction of livelihood opportunities, they were not to be recognized as refugees; except for those who actually left fearing for their lives. Therefore, in a classical way—that is according to the international refugee regime—most externally displaced Venezuelans are not refugees, but rather a collective who could no longer stay in their country of origin to guarantee their survival. This set the stage for two very different responses to be crafted.

Arguably, the international recognition of the Syrian conflict as a refugee producing crisis and the Venezuelan conflict as a migrant producing crisis has determined *grosso modo* the financing mechanisms, which in part may help explain why the former is receiving significantly more resources and attention than the latter. However, some authors would argue that the allocation of resources has nothing to do with the legal status of these externally displaced persons, but rather with the disparity in the numbers of affected persons. Other authors affirm that the discrepancy in the levels of financialization to help host countries provide protection and assistance to these affected populations does not hold any relationship with the numbers, but rather to ideological and geopolitical underpinnings. Be it as it may, understanding the factors involved in the crafting of this difference may shed some light into the aspects that mobilize the international community response to large-scale displacement.

The regional situation in which the Syrian crisis is inserted, namely the Arab Uprisings and the resiliency of authoritarianisms (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011 in Skulte-Ouaiss, 2015), is an important key factor to understand the political and security backdrop of Syria's neighboring countries and their strategies for coping with the incoming flows of refugees. In short, all the countries in the region were—and some still are—dealing with very delicate political tensions which could threaten the political systems. This, of course, is less than a favorable background with which to receive hundreds of thousands of refugees.

However, once in their territories, authorities have to attend to their needs in accordance with international law and humanitarian imperative. After all, it is important to contain political uprisings from spilling over other territories, and a way to do just that is to control the way in which refugee and migrant populations affect local communities. The Venezuelan crisis did not start nor developed in similar circumstances, nevertheless the socioeconomic crisis that many of Venezuela's neighboring countries were dealing with—and most of them still are—produced very similar outcomes to the Syrian regional context.

Syrian and Venezuelan refugees and migrants have encountered great deals of violence both from above (institutional) and from below (community-based). Violence is, of course, closely related to lack of protection whether from foreign or domestic elements; in this sense, many local governments have failed to provide adequate protection to the Syrian and Venezuelan populations as violence and open aggression has significantly increased towards foreigners in many points in the Middle



East and South America. Not only is the sense of competing for the same resources, but actually the precarization of the living conditions that have resulted from Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions which have put new stresses on local communities and directly affect the way in which local populations interact with refugee and migrant groups. Furthermore, some politicians have been demonizing foreigners—in countries such as Turkey and Brazil, among others—scapegoating them as being sources of sociopolitical and economic destabilization; practice which is detrimental to the well-being of these vulnerable communities as it is likely to exacerbate the levels of violence and aggression experienced by communities.

In short, it is obvious that an adequate regional response needs resources with which to materialize protection and assistance programs for both affected populations and hosting communities alike. Without a generous budget at the disposal of the authorities and civil society, the presence of externally displaced persons acts like a ticking clock waiting for clashes and organized violence to appear. In this sense, the drastic difference in the financing of the Syrian and Venezuelan crises²³ begs the question: why is the former crisis more generously financed than the latter?²⁴ As the world saw the desperate measures taken by hundreds of Syrian refugees who threw themselves in the Mediterranean, many of them with their children²⁵, and in some cases with their entire families, Europe either needed to finance this crisis so that it does not reach its borders, as the possibility of having to host thousands of Syrian refugees as quickly materializing. As a result, Turkey agreed to work as a buffer zone to halt the extraordinary numbers of Syrian refugees who were moving west. The number of Venezuelans abroad would effectively trigger a similar reaction from the United States if it were not for the great distance that separates the two lands. Therefore, the Venezuelan crisis continues to go incredibly underfunded and negligible attention is given to it by the international community.


As seen above, the under financialization of these crises comes with a great price, which unfortunately is being paid by the affected populations and the local hosting communities. The global pandemic has played an important role in the deterioration of the living conditions of different sectors of society, impacting particularly hard those sectors that make a living in the informal economy. Thus, restrictions and lockdowns have effectively halted the economic activity of millions of people in great need, which has translated into a visible increase in the levels of extreme poverty, discrimination, and xenophobia on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, local governments have a hard time having to justify investment in the protection and assistance of foreign populations in their country when they do not have enough to meet the essential needs of a growing number of their own nationals.

The under financialization of these crises has generated extreme vulnerabilities for refugees and migrants as well as for local communities which range from food insecurity and malnutrition to homelessness and death. In this context, some families and individuals have had to resort to extreme measures such as child marriages,

²³ US\$ 5.83B for the Syrian crisis and US\$ 1.79B for the Venezuelan crisis—as per the budget appeals for 2021 (UNHCR, December 2020; RMRP, 2022).

²⁴ First, it is important to note that none of these crises is adequately financed, however, the difference between the two is quite significant. Second, the answer might not be popular, but it seems to hold true, especially as we see a steady increase in the securitization of the European space and the externalization of its borders.

²⁵ As the case of Alan Kurdi who was mentioned in the introduction.



prostitution, and organ selling, in order to survive. Organized human trafficking rings have also benefited from these crises as they recruit desperate children, adolescents, and adults, to be exploited for sexual work, servitude, drug smuggling, and organ removal. Moreover, the current health crisis has been especially detrimental to those individuals or families who migrated but left loved ones behind; their inability to earn a decent living has prevented them from having the means to send remittances home which puts a heavy burden to their very precarious position: where they can neither meet their own needs nor the needs of the ones they migrated for in the first place.

Family separation is a phenomenon that the two crises share, and which proves to be detrimental to the social fabric of these countries. There are, in fact, thousands of families who have been separated, which also includes separated children, and unaccompanied minors. This shared experience by thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people will undoubtedly leave an intergenerational trauma which will be hard to overcome. It is not only the footprint of forced displacement on vast numbers of children, but also their lack of access to education, a home, medical services, nutritious meals, among many other developmental needs that are not being met which should worry governments and international organizations. Likewise, many of those who stayed behind in these crises are also dealing with some of the same problems as their governments continue to cope with deep economic and social crises, which only become worse by the battery of sanctions imposed on them by the so-called international community.

Despite the very distinct drivers of displacement of the Syrian and Venezuelan conflicts, these crises have developed over time displaying very similar features. Local integration is becoming increasingly more difficult as local communities begin—and in some cases continue—to discriminate against refugee and migrant communities. As many communities fall into a deep recession, in part because of the negative impact of the measures taken by local authorities to fight the global pandemic, many politicians have resorted to scapegoating foreigners as the main cause of the scarcity of resources many are experiencing, including job destruction and a sharp decline in the delivery of social services. Since voluntary return is not really a viable option neither for Syrians nor for Venezuelans at this point, resettlement or remigration seem to be the only plausible options left. Resettlement to a different part of the host country has been practiced by some states, such as Brazil and Turkey, and remigration is taking place ad hoc when refugee and migrant communities either gather enough resources to move to a more optimal place or when they have to run for their lives. Finally, another common feature these displacements share is the lack of a clear resolution of the conflicts that constitute the drivers of displacement in the first place; evidently, this being the case, Syrian and Venezuelan communities abroad are unlikely to return which not only perpetrates the crises but also the recovery of the countries of origin.


5. Conclusions

The general objective of this contribution has been to compare the regional responses to the two largest displacement crises in the world, namely the Syrian and Venezuelan conflicts. Together, these crises have produced well over 12 million refugees and migrants many of whom are now, in the context of the global pandemic, living in conditions of extreme poverty in neighboring countries. More specifically, we thought that by comparing these crises we could identify certain patterns that might be common to other large-scale displacements, adding to the knowledge stock on the topic. In parallel, pattern recognition of displacement processes en masse could prove instrumental in better managing these types of crises as we would know more about how large-scale displacements start and develop over time, and what factors have the greatest impact on affected populations—refugees and migrants—and local hosting communities alike. In the end, the intention of this exploratory research, therefore, was not to compare these crises per se, but rather the factors present in the crafting of the regional responses to these displacements, and how these factors impact refugee and migrant communities on the ground.

Large-scale displacements are not the typical economically driven planned migration projects, but rather forced migration processes. In most cases, they happen in response to shock factors which are well beyond people's control. In other words, when individuals, families or entire communities flee en masse is usually because of the drastic deterioration of the conditions that used to hold the social fabric together. Whether it be war, famine, or other life-threatening situations, when large groups are forced to migrate, there are usually very serious reasons motivating the impromptu exodus. In the case of the Syrian conflict, it was social unrest that quickly escalated to a civil war that initiated the largest current displacement of persons in the world, while the Venezuelan case was mostly driven by socioeconomic instability which brought scarcity in the provision of essential goods and services in the country. Therefore, there is very little in common as to how these two crises started; however, the way in which their displacement processes developed is surprisingly comparable.

As it is to be expected, the large numbers of externally displaced persons that the Syrian and Venezuelan crises produced resorted to neighboring nations as they first escaped from their countries of origin. This pattern, of course, does not include national elites who usually have the means to migrate both regularly and irregularly to countries of their preference while they craft a strategy to either stay abroad or return once the crisis has been resolved. Resorting to neighboring countries is not always an easy or a safe decision, but more often than not is the only alternative popular classes have. Historical differences or even recent territorial disputes seem to occupy a rather negligent position in the reception mechanisms that get activated by bordering communities when they see refugee and migrant populations arriving from conflict zones. This suggests that in times of crisis, neighboring communities truly make themselves available to protect and assist people in need.

Receiving large numbers of externally displaced persons does not only involve a large price tag, but it also implies a great deal of sacrifice on the part of local hosting communities and national economies. To make matters worse, the global pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the living conditions of Syrian refugees and Venezuelan migrants, as well as of local communities on either side of the Atlantic. As governments ordered lockdowns and other restrictions in order to control the health crisis, many of the livelihood opportunities individuals and families were clinging to disappeared.



This had a devastating effect on all parties involved and brought yet other layers of precarities and vulnerabilities to millions who fell to levels of extreme poverty and misery. Countries that were already struggling with having to assist large numbers of externally displaced persons had to effectively cut their aid to also cater to their own citizens in desperate need of aid. Death, malnourishment, illiteracy, exploitation, abuses, violence, are but some of the effects with which a multigenerational population is currently dealing with in both crises.

The longer externally displaced populations stay in a host country, the greater the likelihood for social discontent to grow into full-fledged discrimination and xenophobic sentiments. This has been especially true having the global pandemic as a backdrop and has resulted in a clear repetitive pattern where refugee and migrant communities—not lockdown measures or the disruption of the global supply chain—become synonymous with scarcity and depletion of local resources. There are clear examples of hosting communities turning violent against Syrians and Venezuelans, especially in countries like Turkey and Lebanon, and Brazil and Chile, respectively. This is why, a well-articulated response must include enough funding to help local communities and national governments palliate the economic strain associated with having a large presence of externally displaced persons in their territory. Failure to do so may give rise to serious societal problems such as rising anti-refugee and anti-migrant rhetoric and the intensification of nationalistic sentiments.

In an era where many authors were questioning the relevance of the national scale, the Syrian and Venezuelan conflicts, and the regional response to them prove that nation-states continue to be the units that organize social life and manage migration within their borders. Based on the evidence brought forward by this research, we see that the so-called regional response materializes at a national level, where factors such as historical ties, cultural affinities, and local socioeconomic aspects, play a more relevant role in the provision of protection and the delivery of assistance, than the articulation of an intraregional plan of action. However, since most neighboring countries to Syria and Venezuela are undergoing their own social, economic, and, in some cases, political crises, the monetary and logistical assistance of large donors and international organizations is crucial in making sure these externally displaced populations have the means for survive. In this regard, it is plausible to refer to a regional—if not an international—response, which, unfortunately seems to be conditioned by geopolitical factors rather than humanitarian ones. This would explain the pronounced discrepancy between the financing of these crises.

Even though both Syria and Venezuela are large oil producers with the capacity to upset international energy markets and have produced over six million externally displaced persons, the Syrian crisis is receiving 325% more in assistance than the Venezuelan crisis. Although there must be several reasons that may explain this difference, we believe that Syria's proximity to Europe, and Venezuela's distance from the United States is the main cause behind this disparity. For years, Europe has not only been closing itself to foreigners, but it has also advanced in its externalization of borders making it ever more difficult for refugee and migrant populations to reach its space. In this line, the growing number of Syrian refugees reaching "fortress Europe" prompted a response which effectively turned Turkey into a buffer zone in exchange for certain promises which included the possibility for Turkey to become part of the European Union. Venezuelans, on the other hand, do not exhibit the same geopolitical context, which may help explain the negligent response that the international community has articulated for their displacement.




Finally, there is not enough evidence to suggest that any one government is resorting to hot pushbacks or forced returns—or at least not in any significant numbers. This gives individuals and families the ability to stay abroad while the conditions in their countries of origin change and it becomes safe to return voluntarily. After all, lending a helping hand to these populations is not only the right legal route to follow but it is also a humanitarian imperative. The many millions of Syrian refugees and Venezuelan migrants are without a doubt a testament to the human spirit: their willingness to risk, fight and suffer for the hope of a better future is truly remarkable and speaks volumes about love and resiliency as driving forces with which to face sacrifice and thrive even in the darkest of times.

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