Communication, community engagement and migration: Challenges of the crisis in Venezuela

SEPTEMBER 2019

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1. Overview

The Venezuelan migration and refugee crisis, triggered by large numbers of Venezuelans leaving their country, is currently one of the most pressing crises in the world. According to official figures, 4,307,930 people have left the country as of 5 September, 2019.¹ This figure represents the sum of Venezuelan migrants, refugees and asylum seekers reported by host governments. These numbers are increasing in a fluid context where, in Colombia for example, it is estimated that around 5,000 people are arriving from Venezuela each day.² It is widely accepted that there are a significant number of migrants, not registered by any mechanism, that have established themselves irregularly in the host countries, so the actual figures are estimated to be well above 5 million people. It is projected that the number will rise to 5.4 million by the end of the year.

This brief summarises the main conclusions of a mission on communication in humanitarian response that was carried out in July 2019 with the objective of contributing to a review of communication, information, feedback and community engagement mechanisms in the response to the Venezuelan migration crisis.

Through this mission, DAHLIA³ intends to provide a rapid review of the status of communication and the engagement of affected communities in the context of the Venezuelan migration crisis (based on previous experiences of our organisation including the Balkans, Haiti and the Ebola response in DRC). Communicating with migrants and refugees and other persons of concern and integrating the voices of these affected people into the strategy, design and implementation of the response is limited.

Migration crises in recent years represent the paradigm of a new dynamic of humanitarian needs globally (migratory phenomena in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and North America, South America). The fact that many are triggered by armed conflicts or situations of economic precariousness - not always associated with political persecution - challenges the traditional concept of asylum seekers and represents a global trend that is likely to increase due to, among others, the consequences of climate change.

¹ See https://r4v.info/es/situations/platform, consulted August 26, 2019.
² Colombia is the country in the world that has so far received, by a large difference, the largest number of Venezuelan migrants. Many Venezuelans in Colombia who have not registered with the government are still in irregular condition and face multiple difficulties.
³ Development and Humanitarian Learning in Action (DAHLIA).
The importance of communication with communities and engagement, in general in the field of humanitarian aid and in particular in this type of crisis, has been recognised and constitutes an unresolved challenge.\(^4\) Although the importance of developing communication mechanisms with communities (CwC), including information and awareness campaigns and the fight against xenophobia, and feedback and accountability systems, have been identified as important elements of a response,\(^5\) key elements of communication and community engagement are not sufficiently factored into the design of the response plans as a priority. DAHLIA’s mission is to contribute to addressing aspects of CwC in humanitarian crises. Through this rapid review we attempt to provide an independent perspective to the challenges related to the response to the migration crisis in Venezuela and neighbouring countries.


\(^5\) See CDAC: Guía de acción para líderes y trabajadores humanitarios: (buscar referencia web en inglés, no la encuentro, solo veo este documento en portugués, francés y español)

2. Context

In April 2018, the Regional Inter-agency Coordination Platform was formed by UNHCR and IOM at the request of the Secretary General of the United Nations for these agencies to lead and coordinate the response to refugees and migrants from Venezuela. This Regional Platform is at the core of the efforts to coordinate the response to the crisis in the affected countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, involving 41 organisations at the regional level (including 17 UN agencies, 15 NGOs, five donors, two institutions international financial institutions and the Red Cross Movement). The structure is then replicated at national level, with a total of 170 organisations/actors across all countries participating in this platform. Working groups are also established to address issues of protection, assistance and integration. The Platform defines a regional strategy and country-specific support, information management, communication (messaging and reporting), and resource mobilization.

Venezuelan migrants pose a crisis of global dimensions: more than 5 million people have left Venezuela, more than 600,000 residence permits have been granted in Colombia, 426,000 in Peru, 326.00 in Chile, more than 100,000 asylum applications in Brazil; it is estimated that more than 350,000 Venezuelans have established themselves in the USA as a result of this crisis, and a further 320,000 in Spain.
3. Methodology and Approach

DAHLIA undertook a field mission to Colombia and Ecuador in July 2019. Methods included a prior document review and field visits, interviews with key informants in capital cities and border towns, meetings with civil society, migrants, authorities and agencies involved in the response, and observation throughout the route at different transit points. Audiovisual testimonies were also collected in the form of interviews and recordings with significant content to better reflect and disseminate the voices of affected populations and illustrate arguments in the discussion, and ultimately contribute to improving CwC mechanisms and engagement in the response.

4. Assessment

The massive arrival of Venezuelan migrants to Colombia and other countries neighbouring Venezuela is a consequence of a humanitarian crisis that is not well characterised or understood, given that there is a lack of information regarding what is happening in Venezuela, the concrete causes of the humanitarian crisis in the country, the effects in terms of the level of impact on the population's access to basic needs and the triggers of migration. The responses of the interviewed migrants have shown that information, often inaccurate, rumours and informal communication mechanisms through social networks have contributed significantly to enhancing the phenomenon of migration.

The political conditions have also contributed to the explosion of the migration crisis: the instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid to Venezuela and the policies of the Venezuelan authorities regarding population control and discriminatory access to basic services, have enhanced migration dynamics as a collective response to an unsustainable situation. The reasons for this migration are not only related to low purchasing power, inflation or insecurity but also to the violation of access to fundamental rights such as political participation, freedom of expression or access to health or food.

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6 After the proposal by the US, Colombia and Brazil, under the auspices of the Lima Group, to promote a humanitarian caravan in Venezuela, the NGO Coordinator for Development and the Institute for Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Action called on the States and humanitarian actors to guarantee “the impartiality, independence and neutrality” of humanitarian aid in Venezuela so that it is not “instrumentalised”.
4.1. Increasing Vulnerability

The Venezuelan migration crisis has gone through several phases since its inception, with different types of migrant populations both inside and outside of Latin America. Initially, most of those leaving the country were highly-educated professionals and entrepreneurs. However, the characteristics of migrants have progressively changed, from a predominantly middle-class strata to what is now a migrant population belonging to a disadvantaged social stratum with fewer resources.

Current Venezuelan emigration can be considered forced because it is related to situations of violence, personal threats and socio-economic pressures that force the population to seek another destination. This has increased migration not only to developed countries but also exponentially to Latin American countries. This is facilitated by the existence of permeable borders, advanced migration regulation in some countries and a concept of asylum rights in the region that is consolidated in the Cartagena Declaration of 1984, which incorporates the situation of migrants from Venezuela into the traditional concept of refugee, bringing together cases of economic vulnerability and political persecution.

The most vulnerable migrants who travel on foot through Colombia to other destinations farther from the border are called “caminantes” or walkers. They cross countries and borders, exposing themselves to extreme conditions along the way. On the eastern border of Colombia, they pass through an area controlled by armed groups. They are exposed to situations of exploitation, with cases of recruitment of Venezuelan children and adolescents by these groups, as well as reported situations of trafficking that are difficult to verify or control. Although assistance agencies have identified this phenomenon of walkers, it does not appear that communication mechanisms have been able to adapt to changing information needs.

Aspects of people smuggling and human trafficking are added to the problems of protection of Venezuelan migrants. They have been identified by aid agencies but monitoring and reporting mechanisms seem inadequate to address them. In particular, this problem is chronic in border regions and it seems that the flow of Venezuelans has altered the usual market conditions in human trafficking. Throughout our mission we failed to identify a specific approach to address the problem, including a lack of adequate information, feedback and reporting channels. The “caminantes” represent a specific form of vulnerability, and increasingly more families with young children are making their way on foot. There are 77 points of attention in Colombia for walkers (including NGOs, government, churches, private, etc.). Aid agencies have developed some limited alternatives to enable transportation in cases of special needs, but the informal flow and lack of genuine control limits the effectiveness of the available measures, which are in any case minimal, strategically weak and poorly financed. As a result, irregular coverage occurs, with a lack of permanent presence on the ground and the absence of an integrated response.

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7 UNHCR estimates that by mid-2019 there are 351,114 Venezuelans in the United States and 323,575 in Spain, which places them as the third and fourth country with the greatest reception of Venezuelans in the world.

8 Crossing Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. A census conducted in July 2018 by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs determined that Venezuelan walkers who leave the border on foot walk an average of 16 hours per day, generally for 13 days.
4.2. Response and Information Strategies

The current response platform suffers from a lack of strategic articulation, and has been fundamentally reactive until now, according to the majority of opinions gathered. The lack of characterisation of the phenomenon at the source, and the poor articulation of contextual conditions, have contributed to this strategic fragility. At the time of the mission (July 2019), the need to articulate a transition strategy towards the stabilisation of the migrant population was frequently expressed by the people interviewed. The establishment of centres in the form of isolated refugee camps in areas of influx (Maicao) for temporary stays of vulnerable families, without further housing options or administrative alternatives after their stay, does not seem to be a step in the right direction.

Migrants interviewed have stated in a generalised way that they do not have adequate information and lack clear communication mechanisms

Migrants interviewed explained that when leaving Venezuela, they had very little information about the conditions on the route (logistics, risks, dangerous areas, weather conditions, etc.), nor of the legal and administrative issues faced. Organisations interviewed, including associations of lawyers and hostel coordinators between Cúcuta and Bucaramanga, denounced the increase in deportations of migrants along the route, something that contravenes Colombian immigration regulations, without having received adequate information.

Most walkers lack cellular connectivity but can access social media platforms if a connection is provided. It should be noted that the Red Cross has established wireless connection points and facilitation of computer terminals for walkers to be able to communicate along the route, and that installation of Wi-Fi antennas in the shelters is common. All this contributes to the communicability of migrants with each other and with their starting and arrival points, but it has not provided an opportunity for communication with aid agencies or been used as a feedback mechanism.

There has been a significant effort by the agencies involved in the response to provide information through leaflets, social networks and digital platforms. Several initiatives for web platforms and mobile phone applications are under development to provide information to migrants. Most are in a phase of technical development, content writing or testing to adapt navigation and content to the intended users. However, the vast majority of migrants interviewed during this mission lacked a mobile phone and weren’t aware of the existence of apps or websites related to their situation. They seemed to be more accustomed to connecting, when they can, to personal Facebook pages where practical information about the route is shared informally and directly. However, local associations stress that some of these Facebook reference pages for migrants publish, on occasion, deliberately false information and spread rumours that may affect the decision-making of migrants.
4.3. Communication with Communities

The strategic weakness of the response also affects the communication mechanisms, the circulation of information, and explains the absence of feedback mechanisms and the low participation of the affected communities. Being a reactive and assistance-focused response, it does not seem to have taken into account these elements of what is considered an adequate humanitarian response. Literal quote from an interview:

*CwC: “There is a whole world to go. There are initiatives (such as the NRC IPI APP) but at the moment they are like firefighters who act on an emergency basis”.*

The elements of communication with communities have not been integrated in the architecture of the humanitarian response as yet. There are working groups that have been launched recently that will possibly boost this aspect, although at the time of the review they seemed focused on harmonising messages. There are numerous initiatives by agencies involved in the response in the form of surveys or discussion groups to obtain information on migrants and their needs, but they do not appear to have been systematically integrated into response mechanisms. Feedback mechanisms are limited to very few complaints boxes, not actually managed, and some telephone numbers of different agencies and institutions are provided to migrants in leaflets and information posts. Two way communication and feedback loops were still lacking in this response.

There is no free hotline to channel demands or complaints from migrants or their supporters. There are several phone numbers available from various agencies or institutions to channel complaints or specific requests (from WFP notably), but they are poorly understood and require payment to make the call. WFP seems to be in the process of unifying its service telephone numbers in Ecuador (currently there is provincial coverage), but capacity and financing issues are delaying it. In any case, the fragmentation of call-in mechanisms hinders their usefulness. Cash transfer programs have developed the most feedback mechanisms, but they are limited to the specific program.

There is an initiative to involve communication professionals with anchorage in the community to establish CwC mechanisms in the North Santander region of Colombia, through channels to be developed by the newspaper La Opinión and a technical assistance group of journalists and communicators. This may be a step in the right direction, although we must take into account the limitations indicated in terms of poor access of migrants to digital platforms and the lack of harmonisation of the information available in a context that will require continuous updates.

The lack of accountability of the mobilised funds is a factor that has been mentioned on numerous occasions as an aspect that affects the credibility of the response. Both the civil society organisations of the receiving countries and the migrants themselves demand this accountability, as stated in our interviews.
4.4. Misinformation and Rumors

As is the case in many migration crises, misinformation and rumours are very common in the current situation. This phenomenon that develops spontaneously by word of mouth, or in a more subtle or deliberate way via social networks, mostly affects the most vulnerable people. Misinformation and rumours also affect the host population and can dangerously accentuate xenophobia and stigmatisation. During our mission we did not find consolidated or developing systems to capture, analyse and address the rumours.

Along the route there are information posts for migrants. However, the lack of harmonisation of the messages, the multiplicity of assistance mechanisms (shelters supported by different entities, the variety of information posts by UNHCR, Red Cross, IOM, NGOs or the Government of the country) and the unidirectionality of information have affected the credibility, acceptance and usefulness of it by migrants. Many actors interviewed stressed that information and communication efforts were developed with a focus on the visibility of the organisation involved and through passive information, with the CwC component either not sufficiently explicit, or absent. In addition, as mentioned above, the lack of resources and weak planning means information and direct help posts (at the borders and on the route) have limited hours of service.

The host population, especially Venezuelans who had previously settled in Colombia and Ecuador years ago, has played an important role - not always well-recognised by international humanitarian actors - to facilitate aid to migrants, both in the phenomenon of the "caminantes" and in the case of informal settlements. Neither these migrant associations nor representatives of civil society participate in any coordination mechanism or AAP in the established coordination platform. This aspect is striking for people interviewed with humanitarian experience. The coordination platform, led by UNHCR and IOM, does not fully incorporate this support network into its coordination mechanisms. At best, it provides support to these volunteers in the form of assistance to be distributed to the migrants. There is a lack of follow-up and feedback on community support devices. This situation means that some hostels managed by Colombians and Venezuelans already established in the country - as is the case with some visited between Pamplona and the Berlin Paramo - are considering closing due to lack of inclusion at the most global level of the response.

4.5. Xenophobia

The migrant population of this latest phase tends to establish themselves in informal slums ("invasiones") and to compete for access to marginal resources (street sales), which some times causes conflicts with the local population that are also in a situation of precariousness. Stigmatisation and xenophobia are explicit concerns recognised by the aid system, and there are numerous campaigns in this regard from leading agencies and from more specific work in some programs. It is considered that the community-based approach and the work integrating the host communities and migrants is the only method that can produce results, as attempted with initiatives of the Red Cross (plays), UNICEF (C4D and education) and ADRA (local radio), although the stigmatisation that is channelled through the media is difficult to counteract. The aporophobia component (fear or rejection of the poor) appears to be relevant in the identified mechanisms of social rejection of Venezuelan migrants.
Initiatives from a community approach developed by local associations in Colombia and Ecuador to fight xenophobia should be more integrated into a global strategy to fight against this growing phenomenon. Very appropriate institutional campaigns, such as "Somos Pana" or "Somos Valientes", should be able to rely more on community resources that already exist. It is also necessary to work thoroughly and systematically on the issue of rumours and misinformation that poison the situation and cause poles of violence, as was the case in Ibarra (Ecuador). This work should include a tracking of these phenomena to deal with them and the articulation of a strategy that includes the media and local public actors. The issues of people smuggling and human trafficking are added to the problems of protection of Venezuelan migrants. They have been identified by aid agencies but monitoring and reporting mechanisms seem inadequate to address them. In particular, this problem is chronic in border regions and it seems that the flow of Venezuelans has altered the usual market conditions in human trafficking. A more specific approach to address the problem is missed, including adequate information, feedback and reporting channels.

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9 In January 2019, a video of a man stabbing his pregnant ex-girlfriend was posted on social media. According to the Minister of the Interior of Ecuador, it was "macho violence". However, social networks and many media organisations reported it was a passport problem. The man was Venezuelan and that caused a week rarefied by violence and xenophobia throughout Ecuador.
4.6. Coordination

The coordination of the response is constituted as a regional platform that is parallel to the established humanitarian architecture and is replicated in each country. The lead agencies (UNHCR and IOM) are both implementers, and coordination at a decentralized level is carried out with subsidiary (subcontracted) agencies, so coordination mechanisms are weak. Actors interviewed in the field regret that the organisations leading the coordination are "competing" with them to access funds. This possible “conflict of interest” can affect the exchange of information and the implementation of common strategies.

It should be noted that coordination roundtables (mesas de coordinación) have been established with local institutions at some border points (Riohacha, Cúcuta, Ipiales) that may be the basis for a better integration of institutional mechanisms with those of international aid. It is striking that, at the time of the mission, these roundtables were still in a preliminary phase of mutual understanding without having articulated joint action plans or analysis and response mechanisms, even in a context such as Colombia where the local coordination teams (ELC) are already established within the framework of the humanitarian response to forced displacement.

The characterisation of flows, identification of needs, transition strategies, etc. require instruments and mechanisms that must be developed by the platform at regional, national and local level. This entails a complex process that slows an appropriate strategic approach. The need to develop these instruments and mechanisms clashes with the existence of a consolidated acquis in the humanitarian communities of some of the recipient countries, notably in Colombia and Ecuador, where the country’s humanitarian teams have mechanisms and experience in humanitarian response, yet they are not integrated properly in the response platform to this migration crisis.

The imminent launch of a humanitarian plan for Venezuela, and the deployment of a decentralised humanitarian presence in the country (in San Cristóbal, Maracaibo, Caracas and Guyana), could represent a substantial change in the management of information and communication from the place of origin of the phenomenon, and contribute to a better strategy in the response.
In this sense, the need to integrate the issues related to “armed conflict”, “forced displacement” and “return of Colombians in Venezuela” with those of “migrants” is repeatedly invoked in Colombia. This mix between the variables of "armed conflict" and "migrants" occurs, in fact, at many levels and requires a specific communication strategy and the need to share analysis and response instruments. It is important to also take this dimension into account in a possible communication strategy.

A series of distortions of migratory flows, such as the pendular component of them in some border areas, the confluence with illegal activities (armed groups or drug cultivation) and opportunistic behaviours (cases of migrants who travel the routes as a form of life taking advantage of available assistance) are mentioned and known by the migrant support community. However, they are poorly characterized and there are no known measures to alleviate them.

5. Challenges Ahead

This response is often described as assistance based and non-strategic, ignoring the principles of accountability to affected populations and community engagement. The following have been identified as key challenges to be addressed.

- The Venezuelan migration crisis presents a challenge to the usual paradigms of humanitarian response given its regional nature, the political conditions that affect it and the characteristics of the population on the move.

- It is necessary to strengthen communication mechanisms with communities from the moment the phenomenon occurs at origin to the places of transit and destination, with a strong strategic focus. For this, it is necessary to deepen the consolidated experience in these aspects in the humanitarian architecture that arises from the reform of the 2005 system and the “IASC Transformative Agenda” of 2011. The Venezuelan crisis is an opportunity to build new experiences and instruments on the basis of what has been learned so far by the humanitarian community.

- The phenomenon of Venezuelan caminantes poses specific challenges in terms of communication, feedback and accountability. As we say, Venezuelan walkers will continue to walk, with or without humanitarian aid, but the duty is to provide communication and assistance mechanisms so that they can do so in an informed, safe and dignified manner.
• The established coordination structure hinders the mobilisation of funds and accountability. The platform led by UNHCR and IOM is not consistent with the already consolidated humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the different countries; it fails to sufficiently integrate existing tools and IASC guidance and working groups established at global and national levels. Notably, for our purpose, it ignores the advances in CwC/communication and community engagement and AAP that form part of the learning of the humanitarian community in recent years.

• The response so far has been unanimously qualified as assistance oriented and not strategic, ignoring the progressive elements that have tried to adapt humanitarian aid to a more coherent approach with the principles of accountability to affected populations (AAP) and their participation (CwC). In the words of one of the interviewees: “A crisis of the 21st century with a response of the 20th century”. It should be noted that this statement highlights the lack of incorporation of the post-2005 humanitarian evolution, with the reform of the system and the extension to the inclusion of the IASC and its areas of work globally and specifically in each crisis (transformative agenda).

• The imminent launch of an appeal for a humanitarian response for Venezuela, and the deployment of a decentralised humanitarian presence in that country (in San Cristóbal, Maracaibo, Caracas and Guyana), can represent a substantial change in the management of information and communication from the place of origin of the phenomenon, and contribute to a better strategy in the response. However, it will be important to establish coordination and information mechanisms between the agencies in Venezuela and those of the regional platform.