

# LABOR MARKET ACCESS AND INTEGRATION

## A KEY ELEMENT OF DURABLE SOLUTIONS FOR VENEZUELANAS

January 2019

Over **3 million Venezuelans** are estimated to have fled their country, and approximately 1.174.743 million of them are estimated to be present in Colombia. The arrival of such large numbers of Venezuelans in Colombia has presented a number of challenges for the host country, from meeting immediate, basic needs to determining appropriate legal status for those who wish to stay. One additional key element is ensuring the right of Venezuelans to **work legally and free from discrimination in Colombia**, as employees or entrepreneurs.

### The importance of ensuring effective work rights for Venezuelans

Ensuring Venezuelans' effective right to work is essential. If Venezuelans can work legally, they will be able to provide for themselves and thus will reduce the need for direct humanitarian assistance. Beyond that, they will contribute to the Colombian economy, though paying taxes; they will generate greater levels of demand and increased economic activity, thus generating additional employment for Colombians; and increased economic integration tends to be correlated with increased social integration and reduced

levels of xenophobia. Legal formal employment also reduces the need to work for lower wages (including below the minimum wage), and thus alleviates downward pressure on wages for Colombians. These dynamics are reflected in the findings of numerous studies that have been carried out in many different countries where UNHCR works, which show that refugees and migrants generally represent a net benefit to the host country, contributing more money over

time than they cost the host country. Additionally, if Venezuelans are able to access the labor market legally, this will **reduce incentives for them to work illegally** or in illicit activities: already there has been evidence that Venezuelans who have been barred from working legally in Colombia have undertaken illicit work, such as joining illegal armed groups, harvesting coca and engaging in sex work. This also presents protection risks, as many Venezuelans may find themselves involuntarily engaging in illicit activities, and thus be subject to child labor, forced labor and/or trafficking.

## KEY FIGURES

**1,174,743 million**

Venezuelans are estimated to be in Colombia, of which a significant proportion are in need of international protection.

**582,312**

Venezuelans with Special Stay Permit (known by the Spanish acronym PEP) that have the right to work. Many face discrimination, xenophobia and exploitation.

**UNHCR works with the Colombian government, civil society and private companies to promote decent work for Venezuelans.**



UNHCR and its anti-xenophobia campaign Somos Panas Colombia during an event of the General Labor Confederation. UNHCR/Lerner,M

## UNHCR Response

UNHCR works with partners to promote Venezuelans' access to decent work.

**Establishing new alliances with actors that have not traditionally been UNHCR partners, including the Ministry of Labor, vocational training and employment agencies; employer and industry associations; trade unions; and UN agencies such as ILO and IOM.**

- UNHCR now participates in policy fora such as the government's Sub-Commission on Labor Migration Management, to promote labor market inclusion of Venezuelans in the drafting of public policy instruments.
- Companies interested in recruiting Venezuelans are referred to the Public Employment Agency (APE). UNHCR links the companies with APE, which in turn provides a short list of candidates for the companies' consideration.
- Job Fairs for Venezuelans are being organized in collaboration with APE, the national vocational training agency SENA, and municipal economic development agencies.
- UNHCR is working with CGT, one of the largest trade union federations in Colombia to disseminate anti-xenophobia messages to their 700,000 members. The activity started with the presentation of the campaign to some 1,500 local leaders who were present at the CGT's national congress in September 2018.

**Reaching out to the private sector to promote employment of Venezuelans.**

- UNHCR Colombia has established a working relationship with the company WeWork, as part of WeWork's commitment to recruit 1,500 refugees globally.
- Discussions are underway with companies in a range of industries, including fast food, call centers and consumer products.

**Awareness-raising on Venezuelans' rights to work**

- Together with the Ministry of Labor, UNHCR is developing a "Roadmap to Employment" that will be disseminated to Venezuelans in Colombia through the website and social networks, and via the network of local associations of Venezuelans.
- A "Roadmap to Hiring Venezuelans" will be similarly disseminated to companies, including via business breakfast presentations

**Incorporating workplace themes in UNHCR's anti-xenophobia campaign**

- UNHCR is developing videos and other tools for its anti-xenophobia campaign Somos Panas Colombia, to combat workplace-based discrimination and xenophobia.

## Scale of the problem and existing challenges

- The Colombian government has introduced a Special Stay Permit (known by the Spanish acronym PEP), a protection-oriented arrangement that allows regular stay and rights to work, education and healthcare. The Colombian government initially provided the PEP to 181,492 Venezuelans, but recently has granted it to an additional of 119.208 Venezuelans who registered with the Colombian government up to December 2018. Additionally there are some 72.352 Venezuelan that have the foreigner ID card (cédula de extranjería).
- Over 582,312 Venezuelans therefore have the legal right to work in Colombia, but there are challenges in realizing this right. Xenophobia remains strong, with some Colombians believing that Venezuelans are economic migrants that have come to take Colombian jobs. Also, many employers do not understand the rights conferred by the PEP: it is a new document, and one that many employers are unfamiliar with, and so many are concerned that hiring Venezuelans could lead to problems. Qualified Venezuelans also have a hard time getting their diplomas, professional qualifications and experience recognized. Many Venezuelans also do not understand their rights, and find themselves in a vulnerable position in which they are subject to discrimination and exploitation in the workplace. Government agencies that assist job-seekers (through vocational training, certification of prior work experience and job-matching) are not well-known and many Venezuelans believe they cannot access these services.



Colombian-Venezuelan family getting registered at the municipality of Suan, Atlántico, in order to access their rights as Colombians, such as the right to work. UNHCR/Rolón, M.



Representatives of UNHCR, We Work, Government and Venezuelan organisations discussing about the challenges of labor market access. UNHCR/Castañeda, R.

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