LABOR MARKET ACCESS AND INTEGRATION
A KEY ELEMENT OF DURABLE SOLUTIONS FOR VENEZUELANs

December 2018

Over 3 million Venezuelans are estimated to have fled their country, and approximately 1 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 is crucial for the host country. Beyond the immediate need for direct humanitarian assistance, ensuring legal and paid work for those who wish to stay removes one of the main challenges for the host country, and is a key element in integration. By providing this opportunity, the need for direct humanitarian assistance is reduced, and the economy benefits from the contributions of these individuals.

Ensuring 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. This is crucial for the host country as it reduces the need for direct humanitarian assistance, while providing an economic boost to the Colombian economy.

Venezuelans 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.

KEY FIGURES

1,032,016
Venezuelans are in Colombia, from which a significant proportion are in need of international protection.

624,654
Venezuelans have the right to work. Many face discrimination, xenophobia and exploitation.

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.

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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 some 180,000 Venezuelans, but recently has granted it to an additional 442,000 Venezuelans who registered with the Colombian government from April to June 2018.

- Over 620,000 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.

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