Background Notes - Integration

September 2020

Context

Integration is defined as “the two-way process of mutual adaptation between [refugees and] migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby [refugees and] migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community”\(^1\). Integration allows the host community to benefit from refugees and migrants’ skills, expertise, and knowledge as they become self-reliant and contribute positively to the receiving country. The process has positive repercussions on peaceful coexistence between the host society and refugees and migrants, both as individuals and as groups.

Refugees and migrants’ legal status and access to rights and social services often promotes or hinders integration, a process that cannot occur in isolation. It intersects with several areas, including employment, labour equal opportunities, non-discrimination, social cohesion, public health, education, stay-permits, nationality security, as well as the protection of human rights.

In recent years, a rising number of Venezuelans fleeing life-threatening violence and persecution owing to political and economic factors in Venezuela, have sought protection in the Caribbean. At the beginning of 2020, the population of Venezuelan refugees and migrants was 113,500: 17,000 had reportedly settled in Aruba, 16,500 in Curaçao, 34,000 in Dominican Republic, 22,000 in Guyana, and 24,000 in Trinidad and Tobago.\(^2\)

Due to their irregular status and the lack of alternative legal pathways to regularization, perspectives for integration for Venezuelans in the Caribbean sub-region are very limited. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the context even more adverse for integration, putting an additional strain on Venezuelans.\(^3\) Very often, social security and welfare schemes do not include refugees and migrants, especially those undocumented and, depending on the Caribbean country, access to education and healthcare is challenging or non-existent. Coupled with the economic downturn, many refugees and migrants are left with very few resources to meet their basic needs, and more individuals have become dependent on the already limited humanitarian assistance.

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1. [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf)
Situation, Needs and Challenges- Sub-regional Overview

The sudden increase of the population of Venezuelans in the Caribbean has undoubtedly raised questions about growing pressure over public resources of host countries, where locals have expressed concern that the influx is straining already vulnerable host communities’ labour markets and limited resources. In Aruba and Curaçao in particular, two of the world’s largest hosting countries of refugees and migrants per capita, there are raising concerns over absorption capacity. Coupled with cultural and language barriers, this has led to several cases of intolerance and xenophobia in most Caribbean R4V countries. Prevalent opinions stigmatizing Venezuelans as squatters and criminals have instilled negative sentiment, making the integration of Venezuelans in host countries and the fostering of peaceful co-existence in local Caribbean communities that receive them, a key issue.

Furthermore, the lack of regular migratory status of many Venezuelans and of regularization pathways consequently affects access to basic rights such as formal accredited education, formal labor markets and financial systems exposing Venezuelans to possible abuse and exploitation and hindering any opportunity of integration.

Even in the countries where official access is granted for public primary and secondary schooling, there are frequently administrative, financial, language and cultural barriers to education, and limited opportunities to access tertiary education throughout the region. There have also been occasional reports of xenophobia and bullying in schools. All these factors present challenges to integration, making this a key area of intervention for R4V partners across the Caribbean sub-region, namely in Aruba, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago.

PEOPLE IN NEED (PIN) VS TARGETED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>People Targeted</th>
<th>People in Need</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aruba</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>18000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curacao</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>60000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>27800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyana</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>35000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad &amp; Tobago</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>34500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2020 RMRP

Aruba

Promoting integration of Venezuelans in the Aruban society continues to be a main priority for RMRP partners in 2020. Nevertheless, integration of Venezuelans in Aruba is limited by the lack of documentation and sporadic cases of xenophobic acts, including denigrating comments against Venezuelan women made in the public space, bullying in schools and discriminatory attitudes by other Latin American communities.

Lack of documentation prevents most Venezuelans in Aruba from accessing formal employment and livelihood opportunities. For Venezuelans registered with the government, access to work permits is a challenging and tedious process. This often deters them from applying. While xenophobia is not a widespread phenomenon on the island, the unanticipated and sudden increase in the Venezuelan population without the development of

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4 See local press Trinidad & Tobago story: [http://guardian.co.tt/news/migrant-squatting-prostitution-worry-mps-6.2.854327.b676bf5d5c](http://guardian.co.tt/news/migrant-squatting-prostitution-worry-mps-6.2.854327.b676bf5d5c)
social cohesion programmes, and the perceived “threat” that refugees and migrants pose as competition in the labor market, exposes them to xenophobic acts.

The COVID-19 situation has highlighted more frequent instances of maltreatment of Venezuelans by locals especially where many are being ‘indirectly evicted’ from their homes even in strenuous times, because they cannot afford to pay rent. The negative impact of COVID-19 restrictions on Aruba’s tourism-dependent economy has made integration more challenging for Venezuelans and has led a significant number of individuals to enquire about support in returning to their country of origin.5

Curaçao

The Curaçaoan government estimates that approximately 10,000 documented Venezuelan migrants and refugees may have overstayed their short to long-term residency permits;6 this includes the 4,000 regularized Venezuelans registered at the civil registry as of July 2019. There are further estimates where more than 6,000 possibly undocumented Venezuelans arrived through irregular entry channels into the country.7 Since the borders closed due to COVID-19 preventative measures, Curaçao has seen a large decrease in overall entries. 8

Venezuelans in Curaçao suffer the effects of segregation and exclusion in the country. Most work in the informal sector, putting them at risk of socio-economic insecurity, maltreatment and exploitation. Unregistered Venezuelans cannot access formal, public institutions and social safety nets. Lack of recognition of their diplomas also prevents them from accessing the job market in Curaçao. This is combined with a lack of knowledge of local languages such as Dutch and Papiamento, which often creates barriers to integration for these migrants and refugees. Xenophobia emerging from the host community towards Venezuelan newcomers has been observed since the beginning of the Venezuelan crisis and the inpouring into Curaçao; the main reason for the tension being the competitive job market on the island.

The impacts of COVID-19 have brought the difficult circumstances of this population to the forefront, with documented cases of landlords forcefully evicting Venezuelan tenants, who are unable to keep up with rental payments. By the end of June into the start of July 2020 Curaçao experienced civil unrest due to lay-offs at the Isla Oil refinery (Refinería Isla PDVSA) and waste collection company.9 The threats to livelihoods set off a series of actions ranging from protests, to arson and looting. These actions highlight the difficult circumstances of both the Venezuelan and host communities who are trying to find other livelihood options in Curaçao.

Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic, the landscape for integration of Venezuelans into local society differs slightly from other sub-regional Caribbean countries, as language does not present itself as an obstacle and Dominican labour laws do not restrict the possibility of hiring foreign workers who hold regular migratory status; there is even an interest by some employers to hire Venezuelan nationals but irregular immigration status is a limitation for hiring and is the case for the majority of Venezuelans on the island. Venezuelans have access to primary public healthcare and basic education systems in the country. A recent R4V study on livelihoods of Venezuelans in the Dominican Republic and the ILO’s 2020 research ‘Promoción de Medios de Vida para personas Venezolanas en Republica Dominicana’10 demonstrate that although many Venezuelans arrive to the Dominican Republic with strong educational backgrounds and professional experience, most are not able to access formal employment

5 See link to DIMAS Website: https://www.dimasaruba.aw/en/
7 IOM National Platform, Curaçao, 2019, Internal Report
8 IOM National Platform, Curaçao Internal Report, May, 2020
due to their irregular status in the country, which impacts their ability to meet their basic needs and exposes them to increased risk of labor exploitation.

Alternatively, some Venezuelans have started small businesses, although many lack the seed capital to open businesses and face hindrances in accessing loans, another obstacle to potential entrepreneurial activities and facilitating the local integration of Venezuelans. Separately, Venezuelans also encounter barriers to pursue tertiary education and validate their university diplomas in the Dominican Republic. These impediments create significant repercussions on prospects for local integration related to financial inclusion and social cohesion.

The process for accessing residence or work visas is complex, and begins, in accordance with the provisions of immigration and labour legislation, at the Dominican Republic consulate in the country of origin. This, in the case of Venezuelans who are already in the Dominican Republic increases the cost of the process: the cost of airfare, penalties for late stay and even costs to accelerate procedures in Venezuela. The return of Venezuelans to their country also bears significant risk because there is no guarantee that their visas will be approved, not to mention the risk of persecution that some may face. Dominican Republic employers have little incentive to hire Venezuelans, as the cost for securing work permits is high, and there is no guarantee that a worker will remain within their employ once registered, nor is there any certainty of how long the regularization process could take. Cases of employers breaching their obligations and taking advantage of unregistered Venezuelan workers have been documented, even though the Dominican Labour Code (Law 16-92) guarantees the protection of all workers in national territory, regardless of nationality or immigration status.

Guyana

Venezuela continues to experience a significant outflow of Venezuelans to neighbouring Guyana, with whom they share a land border. The open-door policy of the Government of Guyana and its willingness to assist displaced Venezuelans, which is unprecedented in the sub-region, have been commendable. Venezuelans in Guyana have access to life-saving medical care, free of charge at public health facilities, and Venezuelan youth attend local schools. Indigenous refugees and migrants from Venezuela have found haven in Guyanese Warao indigenous communities. However, the large influx of Venezuelans has put a strain on the capacity and available resources. The Government also allowed the issuance of temporary, three-month stay permits which allow refugees and migrants to regularize their presence in the country, however this permit does not grant them the right to work legally. These measures have helped to provide temporary protection for these refugees and migrants in Guyana, however, more remains to be done in paving a pathway for their contribution and integration into the local Guyanese communities.

The lack of work permits for Venezuelans, forcing many into the informal labour sector, is among the main issues preventing integration, and putting them at risk of exploitation while keeping them in a precarious socioeconomic situation. The impacts of COVID-19 and subsequent closure of businesses has also seen rising trends of Venezuelan sex workers moving to mining areas in search of livelihood opportunities. Moreover, the lack of recognition of degrees and certificates from Venezuela also prevents Venezuelans from accessing formal jobs that corresponds to their skills. While the co-existence between Venezuelan population and the host community in Guyana remains generally peaceful, some xenophobic acts are reported intermittently.

Trinidad & Tobago

As the influx of Venezuelan refugees and migrants continues to grow, the twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago is faced with numerous challenges and dilemmas to integration. The primary challenge to the progression of effective policy and integration efforts lies in misconceptions surrounding Venezuelan refugees and migrants. From a local perspective, there are concerns regarding limited capacity in the nation’s job market and the state’s economic capacity to cater for the needs for a large refugee and migrant population. Government officials have even argued that Trinidad and Tobago’s status as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) limits its capacity to host refugees and migrants. This, combined with xenophobia, perception and stigma of

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Venezuelans’ links to criminal activity, creates difficult grounds for promoting integration with the host society. There is an overall lack of trust between Venezuelans and locals.

While the registration exercise conducted by the authorities in 2019 was a positive and promising step toward promoting integration for some 16,500 adult and 2,500 child Venezuelans already living in the country, those who came after the registration exercise, or who were unable to register, continue to struggle to access basic services and livelihoods.

Lack of documentation prevents Venezuelans from accessing the formal labor market, causing many of them to work informally in precarious conditions and putting them at risk of exploitation. Lack of documentation also prevents Venezuelans from accessing financial services, including bank accounts and loans. Language is another obstacle preventing their integration into the host community. In fact, workers who speak English have a higher chance of securing work opportunities in both the formal and informal markets. Since June 2019, after the government-led registration process, Venezuelans wanting to enter Trinidad & Tobago regularly were required to apply for a visa, in their country of origin.

Other barriers to integration are that Venezuelan youth and children have no access to formal, public education and certification, preventing them from social and cultural inclusion and limiting potential opportunities for professional development for the future. Further, xenophobia and discrimination against refugees and migrants in general, including in the workplace continue to be noted in the media and public opinion.

Achievements

Promote livelihoods, access to work, recognition of diplomas, vocational training, and language courses

To ensure a long-term and cohesive approach to integrating Venezuelan refugees and migrants, response actions have been conducted in collaboration with the private sector, government institutions, and civil society organizations. Throughout the subregion, R4V partners have promoted advocacy with national authorities on easier access to work permits and visas for those already employed and the easing of procedures for formalizing employment arrangements; matters which are core to the integration efforts. Accreditation of Venezuelan diplomas and professional skills have also featured as key discussion points, and partners focused efforts on assisting Venezuelans who can access the labor market to review their skills and find appropriate jobs. In particular, Trinidad & Tobago has placed emphasis on the development of skills training in sectors where there is a labour shortage and in alignment with the country’s development needs. In Guyana, partners supported traditional livelihood activities such as hammock weaving for 70 Guyanese and Venezuelan Warao women and 12 Venezuelan refugees and migrants received business development online courses. In Aruba, 34 refugees and migrants were enrolled in vocational training and assisted to launch a community business dedicated to the production and selling of Venezuelan food.

Additionally, appealing agencies, in consultation with government authorities, continue to work on the improvement of access to education and are providing language and cultural support, as well as psycho-social support. Most Caribbean RMRP partners supported second language courses to increase individuals’ marketability and ensure safety on the job to create pathways to integration of Venezuelans. In Guyana, for instance, R4V partners have supported classes of English as a Second Language for 279 Venezuelan adults not
attending formal educational institutions and 47 refugees and migrant children received English Second language lessons out of school. In Curaçao, Venezuelan children attending school were provided with after school Dutch and Papiamentu classes.

In the month of May 2020 at an event hosted by the National Immigration Institute, R4V partners launched a joint market assessment on livelihoods for the Venezuelan population in the Dominican Republic. The study highlighted the skills and expertise that Venezuelan refugees and migrants bring to the Dominican Republic, underscoring the fact that they are an added resource to the country’s national strategy.

Reduce xenophobia and promote co-existence and sensitization

Other principal objectives of RMRP partners for the integration sector in the first half of 2020, focused on the promotion of social cohesion activities and curbing of xenophobia and discrimination through advocacy efforts. The development of awareness, sensitization and anti-discrimination campaigns geared at combatting xenophobia were complemented. To promote social cohesion in Trinidad and Tobago, anti-xenophobic messages were posted through the United Nations Information Center in the Caribbean on Facebook and Twitter reaching 5,624 people. In the Dominican Republic, partners launched the communication campaign titled “Bajo el mismo sol” (“Under the Same Sun”) that reached, more than 175,000 Venezuelans and host community members. Additionally, free medical attention was provided to both Venezuelans and Dominicans during medical brigades. In Aruba, R4V partners established a counter-xenophobia working group in March 2020, with the objectives of discussing integration issues and of advocating for co-existence. Separately, with the aim of supporting the process towards socioeconomic and cultural integration, 21 Venezuelans in Guyana participated in two projects centered on the production of face masks and traditional hammocks with the aim of generating income for participants, ultimately strengthening their self-reliance and improving their quality of life. Additionally, one partner teamed up with a local NGO to provide business development training to 12 Venezuelans, who after successful completion of the course will receive in-kind grants to start their own businesses.13

Socioeconomic integration

RMRP partners further ensured that Venezuelans benefitted from Cash-Based Interventions (CBI), financial inclusion and income-generating activities. The added pressures of COVID-19 saw R4V partners attempting to ramp up efforts and work with local foodbanks, local parishes and national donors to supply basic needs such as food and hygiene products to Venezuelans in need. Such was apparent in Aruba, the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago. In an attempt to cope with the COVID-19 context, partners established support hotlines and moved many services such as registration, psycho-social support, information awareness and educational programs to online modalities.

Cultural integration

During the month of June, some positive steps in advocating for the integration of the Venezuelan population took place and were met with excellent responses. All Caribbean countries engaged in a series of festivals to mark World Refugee Day 2020. Some celebrations included music concerts, art expositions, bilingual story telling activities and screenings of films, with the purpose of promoting commonalities, nudging changes in perspectives and ultimately fostering integration through social activities.

Social integration fairs were hosted in the Dominican Republic. Separately, thanks to a joint initiative by R4V and the Office of National Immigration, a video clip featuring Dominican singer Xiomara Fortuna, in Spanish and Haitian Creole, was released on social media on May 13. The song *Sácale Lo Pie* is an Afro Caribbean tune that promotes stay at home measures and solidarity during the pandemic.

Way Forward

Though the perception throughout the Caribbean sub-region is that the Venezuelan crisis is likely to provoke economic difficulties in host countries, numerous studies show that the presence and subsequent integration of Venezuelan refugees can increase the economic health of their host countries and can be seen as an economic opportunity. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Venezuela’s influx has the potential to raise GDP growth in receiving countries, if accompanied by the effective policies.\(^14\) Similarly, in the Caribbean, economies can benefit from the contributions of refugees and migrants once they are effectively integrated into the domestic labour market. Some refugees and migrants have different skill sets from native workers and might therefore be able to seek distinct job opportunities if resources were allocated to identify these skills and pair them with the needs in the local labor market. Therefore, refugees and migrants have the capacity to fill gaps in the labour market otherwise neglected by native workers.

Based on these assumptions, and with the objective of including Venezuelans into the fabric of host societies, R4V partners continue to advocate for their regularization and documentation. These efforts are complemented by other priority areas of intervention, such as labour market assessments, mapping of skills among the Venezuelan community, dissemination of information on how to sponsor job permits, sensitization on labour rights and against labour exploitation, and ensuring that the response to integration needs is development-oriented with a view towards maintaining stability.

Among these areas of intervention, livelihoods and income generation remain promising, given the high education and skillsets of refugees and migrants. Thus, livelihood initiatives should include integration efforts such as facilitating cost effective remittance transfer and linking the diaspora to development initiatives, offering second language courses, organizing job-fairs, and training and strengthening national employment agencies. By providing the right conditions, these efforts can help refugees and migrants to thrive and contribute to their host community in a meaningful way, bringing mutual adaptation and promoting a peaceful co-existence.\(^15\)
