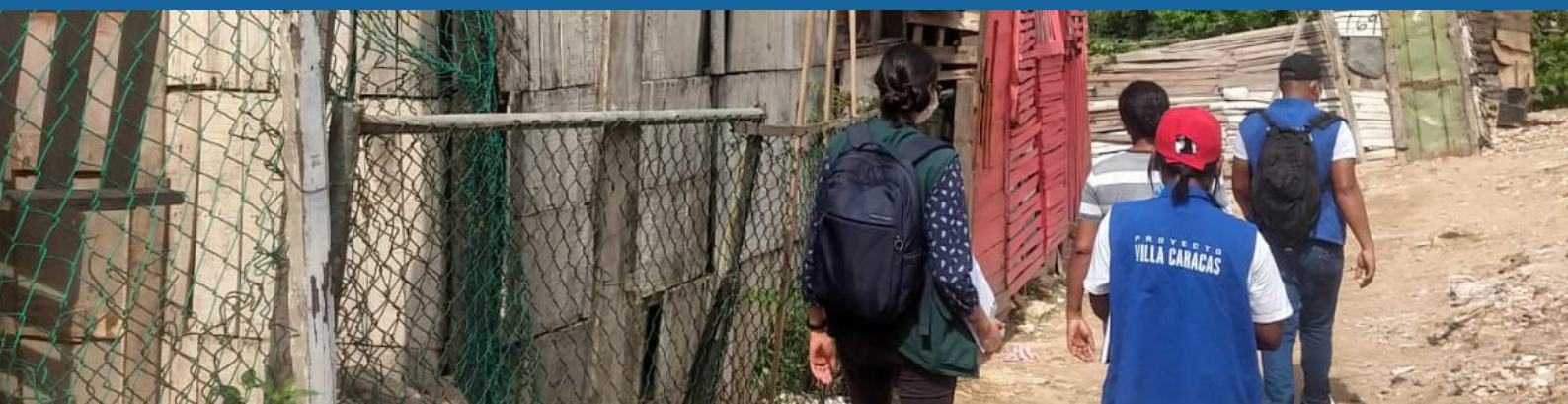


# The role of community leaders in the regularization process of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia

## *Qualitative Series: Mechanisms that strengthen integration*

**Nicol Lesmes Guerrero**, *Qualitative Research Analyst, Innovations for Poverty Action*  
**Ana Maria Rojas**, *Policy Manager, Innovations for Poverty Action*



## Executive Summary

- Colombia is the main destination of Venezuelan migrants. In 2021, the Colombian government decided to regularize their immigration status through the Temporary Statute of Protection for Venezuelans (ETPV in Spanish).
- The regularization process has three steps: i) an identification and characterization of the migrant in the government's online Venezuelan Migrant Single Registry (RUMV in Spanish); ii) a face-to-face biometric registration; and iii) the issuance and delivery of the Temporary Protection Permit (PPT in Spanish).
- Finding and characterizing Venezuelan migrants is a major challenge. They are a population in constant movement, frequently lack access to the internet and mass media, and often distrust government authorities and other actors.
- Despite these challenges, the Colombian government has carried out the regularization process at a speed that is unique in the world.
- Innovations for Poverty Action Colombia identified that community leaders have played a fundamental role in the regularization process. Their role has been so important that the regularization process seems to have advanced more quickly in those areas where the leaders have a stronger presence.
- Among the main tasks of community leaders are collecting, disseminating information, and providing technical assistance with the regularization process.
- Leaders have been able to take advantage of various communication channels depending on the circumstances of each community and capitalize on other programs and resources for the well-being of migrants.

\* We want to extend our gratitude to all the community leaders who carry out care and orientation roles for Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees. Thank you for your support in conducting this study and for allowing us to access your communities.

### SAMPLE

7 municipalities

### TIMELINE

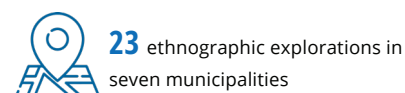
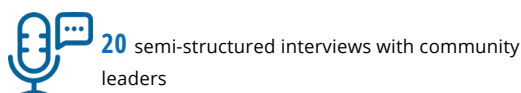
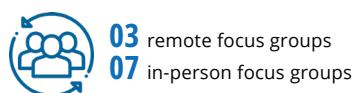
2021-2022

### STUDY TYPE

Qualitative Research

### IPA STAFF

Ana Maria Serrano, Ana Maria Rojas, Laura Vargas, Alejandra Rivera, Nicol Lesmes Guerrero, Kevin Mojica, Jacobo Morales, Yoelis Quevedo.



## Introduction: Venezuelan Migration in Colombia

In the last decade, more than 6 million Venezuelans have left their country. Around 1.85 million are currently in Colombia (GIFMM, 2021). The challenges to socioeconomically integrating this population into the country are innumerable. On February 8, 2021, the Colombian government decided to regularize their immigration status in Colombia and characterize them through the Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Venezolanos (ETPV).

According to Migración Colombia data, in less than a year, more than 1.74 million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia completed the pre-registration process (RUMV) and more than one million completed the biometric registration, necessary steps for the regularization process. The scale and speed of this regularization process are unique in the world, particularly considering that certain social groups, such as irregular migrants, are difficult to reach and characterize. For example, a study conducted by researchers at Yale University found that the population of undocumented migrants living in the United States may be double what is estimated in the decade census (Fazel-Zarandi et al., 2018). In Colombia, some of the main barriers to characterizing and regularizing the Venezuelan migrant population have been continuous geographic mobility, high levels of socioeconomic vulnerability, precarious access to the Internet and mobile devices, mistrust of the institutions in charge of the process of regularization, fear of arrest or deportation, among others<sup>1</sup>.

This policy note highlights the role of community leaders and the means they used in the regularization process.

*"I have done the 'word-of-mouth', person to person, to everyone I know [Venezuelans], where I know there are. [...] Because we [the leaders] work without borders." (Elderly woman, focus group participant in Soledad, 2021)*

## What does the regularization process consist of?

- 1. Pre-registration:** Identification and virtual characterization of the migrant in the Registro Único de Migrantes Venezolanos (RUMV), also known as pre-registration<sup>2</sup>. It is carried out on the webpage of Migración Colombia, section "Visibles".
- 2. Face-to-face biometric registration:** *Migración Colombia's* identity verification process of applicants by collecting biometric data: fingerprints, photographs, and signature digitization.
- 3. Permiso por Protección Temporal (PPT):** Identification and regularization document that grants the owner access to civil rights (but the right to vote), services, and integration opportunities for ten years.

## Methodology of the study

Innovations for Poverty Action Colombia conducted qualitative research to characterize the Venezuelan population with irregular status in Colombia and identify the barriers they face during the PPT application and issuance process. The research was carried out during September, October, and November 2021 in the departments of Atlántico and Magdalena, in the municipalities of Santa Marta, Ciénaga, Fundación, Barranquilla, Soledad, Sabanalarga, and Baranoa. These places were selected, according to data from the DANE census (2018), due to the number of Venezuelan migrants they host in their territory and their high levels of vulnerability. We collected information through focus groups, interviews, and ethnographic explorations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To delve into some of these barriers refer to the policy note: "Characterization of regional barriers to the request and issuance of the Permiso por Protección Temporal (PPT). 2022. Innovations for Poverty Action.

<sup>2</sup> Pre-registration requires proof of entry into the country (prueba sumaria) before the entry into force of the Statute (January 1, 2021) for undocumented migrants.

<sup>3</sup> The Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA), is an agile response qualitative tool for the diagnosis or evaluation of social programs. Unlike classic ethnographies that involve extensive time in the field, such as months or years, ethnographic explorations are carried out in a short period of time and seek to inform decision makers in a timely manner (Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger, 2020).

- » **Focus groups:** We held three remote and seven in-person focus groups with representatives of migrant organizations, local authorities, and the Venezuelan population residing in the prioritized municipalities.
- » **Semi-structured interviews:** We conducted twenty semi-structured interviews, mainly with community leaders who offer orientation to Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees.
- » **Ethnographic explorations:** We conducted twenty-three ethnographic explorations in multiple poor neighborhoods of the seven selected municipalities.

## Barriers to contacting the migrant population

The Colombian government, with the support of civil society, non-governmental, and multilateral organizations, and the donor community, developed several communications and contact strategies to circulate information regarding the ETPV, especially “through social networks, as well as through the development of socialization days in spaces of attention to the refugee and migrant population” (GIFMM, 2021). Despite these efforts, we found several barriers that hinder the effective communication with Venezuelan migrants in the regularization process in Colombia, which are documented below.

### LACK OF ACCESS TO INTERNET AND MOBILE DEVICES

Lack of connectivity and access to mobile devices, especially in intermediate and basic municipalities<sup>4</sup>, is an obstacle to using mass media and social media to contact Venezuelan migrants, particularly those

*“There is a social media campaign to inform Venezuelans. Through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, mainly through Facebook, to carry out the intervention. But... many migrants don't have access to smart mobile devices, and if they do not have access to these, they have even less access to the internet. So, obviously the information is incomplete or does not reach them.” (Young man, focus group participant in Ciénaga, 2021)*

### MISTRUST

Another barrier to establishing effective communication with this population is mistrust, often associated with fear of arrest or deportation. This phenomenon is usually associated with personal

*“I walked through Barranquilla's downtown until I got to the government's office. When I arrived, the security guard looked at me and said: ‘Oh, you're Venezuelan.’ I told him: ‘yes, I came here with my ID’ and he said: ‘and your passport?’ I told him: ‘No, I don't have a passport.’ The security guard: ‘ah, that is, you are irregular, we can take you into custody.’ It was the first thing he said to me, [...] so I started crying. Yes! I began to cry like a girl because it scared me, the world collapsed on me.” (Adult woman, focus group participant in Soledad, 2021)*

Experiences like this create mistrust between people, in the community, and towards state institutions, which results in an aversion to providing or sharing information that identifies them, even with the

*“Their fear is that by giving personal information they will be arrested, located and targeted in the places they live. In other words, they are afraid of being deported.” (Adult woman, focus group participant in Santa Marta, 2021)*

## Main Findings

- » **Leaders fulfill the functions of collecting, filtering, and disseminating information within migrant communities**, echoing the government and national, and international organizations' efforts to improve migrants' welfare.



<sup>4</sup>According to the National Planning Department (DNP), municipalities in Colombia are classified into 3 groups: large, intermediate, and basic. This classification considers its population, current income, and geographical location.



*"We as leaders have to take that time to guide our community, help them based on information because they receive false information and disperse it and then nobody wants to do anything because of the myths that this information creates. So, I think we still have room to continue supporting these people, and to give them well-founded information so they are confident in what they are doing. [...] And be very patient and really inform them." (Adult woman, community leader, focus group participant in Barranquilla, 2021)*

- » **Leaders devised and promoted various practices within their communities to facilitate the regularization process.** Among the practices identified were: (i) carrying out censuses and population characterization to understand migrants' conditions upon arrival to the host community and their most immediate needs; (ii) providing "door to door" information about the ETPV; (iii) organizing community sessions to assist pre-registration to the RUMV, among others. For example:

*"The other day I had a lot of trouble because many people don't know how to open an email. I put my daughter on a phone to open everyone's emails, and for those who did have the email and everything else, [...] my partner collected their information and uploaded it to the webpage. [...] I find solutions for families. I tell them: 'Listen, I'll wait for you tomorrow at my house. For what? We are going to pre-register you!'" (Adult woman, focus group participant in Barranquilla, 2021)*

- » **In the municipalities where the leaders are more organized and trained, the RUMV registration process advanced more quickly and expeditiously.** This is the case of Barranquilla and Soledad, where the leaders organized, in partnership with donor organizations and local authorities, extramural days of orientation and assisted RUMV pre-registration in their communities. As a result, most of the migrants belonging to these host communities have already completed the biometric registration phase and are waiting for their PPT.
- » **Most of those who play the role of leaders are adult women, mothers, either Venezuelan or Colombian returnees.** For most of them, staying at home to perform caregiving tasks while the men seek economic opportunities became an opportunity to build support networks that promote self-management and community self-organization. Their work has faced multiple challenges to build and strengthen these networks:

*"I am a female community leader. I am a returning migrant and have been working as a community leader for 3 years. I was one of the founders of my neighborhood and have led a very beautiful battle; the impact has been very positive. Thanks to the commitment that we have put into it, I now have many foundations that take care of us, that support us. [...] We have been generating very positive strategies, a very positive social impact within the community; there was also the problem of lack of motivation, the stigmatization that 'will I do it or not do it', but it is not wanting to do it, we need to do it." (Adult woman, focus group participant in Barranquilla, 2021)*

- » **Leaders capitalize on existing programs and support networks to promote the well-being of the migrant population.** Some examples include fundraising, participating and promoting early childhood care and attention campaigns, vaccination campaigns against COVID-19; organizing labor market access, and prevention of domestic violence trainings, among others.

These actions, initiatives, and efforts in favor of regularization and socioeconomic integration have legitimized them before the migrant and the returning migrant population.

- » **Venezuelan migrants, both regular and irregular, trust their community leaders,** either to receive and give information about their immigration status or to find out about existing migrant-targeted programs and aid.

*"A few months ago, there was a situation with Migración Colombia in the neighborhood. What happened? They arrived without notifying the community leaders so that we could socialize it with the people. What happened? When they entered in such a way the people immediately reacted hiding, not going out of their houses. Because there was simply no socialization with us [leaders] before." (Adult woman, community leader, focus group participant in Santa Marta, 2021)*

- » **The leaders have identified and leveraged various communication channels, depending on the needs and the different connectivity levels of the communities.** For example, given the lack of connectivity in intermediate and basic municipalities, especially in rural areas, the 'word-of-mouth' within the community has become the most effective alternative to lack of internet and mobile devices and isolation problems Venezuelan migrants face. This strategy is complemented using traditional media such as loudspeakers and local radio.

*“That is why I said that Migración Colombia must work hand in hand with community leaders, directly with people, because it must be clear that there are many people who in the 21st century, in 2021, still do not have a smartphone to communicate on WhatsApp, they do not have a phone to communicate on Facebook. So, the most direct and safest [means] would be directly with people, ‘word-of-mouth.” (Adult woman, focus group participant on Santa Marta, 2021)*

*“I think that if the information is suddenly given to the right people, that is, to the leaders as such, we take care of replicating any information as it is, as it's given to us. There is no loss that suddenly there is going to be a broken phone. Because as community leaders we have already formed groups within the neighborhood with the entire community; there information is given to them. [...] Aside from sharing information in the groups, we always must go out to the streets: ‘neighbors’ with the megaphone, ‘listen, don't forget that we have a meeting.’ The migrant population is a little more attentive when one says that there is a meeting or there is a brigade. [...] In my neighborhood I lead the word-of-mouth”. (Adult woman, focus group participant on Santa Marta, 2021)*

In urban areas, the Venezuelan population mostly uses WhatsApp and Facebook to communicate.

- » **Community leaders have been able to take advantage of these two-way channels. On one hand, it allows them to receive information and stay connected** with other key actors; an aspect that enables them to continue expanding their support networks. On the other hand, it enables them to disseminate the information they receive to the migrant population, thus strengthening the efforts of the government and other national and international organizations to improve the conditions of this population.

## Conclusions

The qualitative evidence collected in this study underlines the importance of understanding the dynamics of migrant networks and the role of community leaders to design and implement programs and policies that promote Venezuelan migrants' regularization and socioeconomic integration. In this case, the substantial knowledge of the leaders about their community and their ability to involve and integrate its different members seem to have effectively promoted the process of regularization of the Venezuelan migrant population.

Actions or programs that promote the emergence of new leadership and the strengthening of existing ones can benefit the Venezuelan migrant population. One example is the training sessions organized by the Center for Comprehensive Attention to Migrants in Barranquilla and by migrant organizations. There, the leaders regularly participate in different activities that seek to strengthen and enhance their skills on various topics, including resilience, self-management, and community self-organization. As a result, many leaders have been able to connect with other support networks and get help for their communities from local and cooperative organizations.

Finally, we highlight the leading role that women have played within their communities. They enable and promote the creation, strengthening, and maintenance of support networks for migrants and social capital. Making these achievements visible and advancing their training and active participation as agents of change has the potential not only to further the socioeconomic integration of the Venezuelan migrant population in Colombia but also to promote their empowerment and reduce their vulnerability (FIP and KAS, 2021).





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