



Ezra Millstein / Mercy Corps

ON THE MOVE

Understanding Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Decision-Making: Implications for Responses to Protracted Displacement

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With an estimated 70.8 million people having fled their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or natural disasters, forced displacement has reached previously unrecorded levels. The ongoing political and economic crisis in Venezuela has sparked the latest and largest, second only to that of Syria, refugee and migrant movement worldwide. A staggering 4.7 million people have left Venezuela since 2015, with at least 1.4 million currently in Colombia.

Forced displacement is also increasingly protracted, demanding new ways of responding to the needs of refugees and migrants. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, displacement now lasts an estimated 26 years, on average. Until now, humanitarian actors have primarily focused on responding to the immediate needs of refugees and migrants. However, given these trends, humanitarian aid and policies that impact refugees and migrants must shift towards longer-term strategies. In particular, governments and aid agencies should aim to foster greater self-reliance and better decision-making, which results in optimal choices that support refugees and migrants' wellbeing.

Faced with a unique set of challenges, migrants and refugees must make a number of key decisions,

including where to go; how to get there; how to make a living and support family members; and if and when to return home. While aiming to make choices that will result in the best outcomes for themselves and their families, in reality, migrants and refugees fleeing their country often make decisions leading to suboptimal outcomes even when better alternatives exist. These outcomes, which can include experiencing dangerous journeys and settling in situations of deprivation and vulnerability, beg questions of how people on the move make decisions that affect their wellbeing and how policies and programs can help them make better decisions.

This study answers these questions in the context of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia. Through commonly used behavioral measures and primary data from in-depth interviews with Venezuelans in Colombia, we find that Venezuelan migrants and refugees face a number of obstacles to making optimal decisions. Humanitarian actors can help to overcome these obstacles by incorporating an understanding of migrants and refugees' decision-making into their programs.



Key Findings

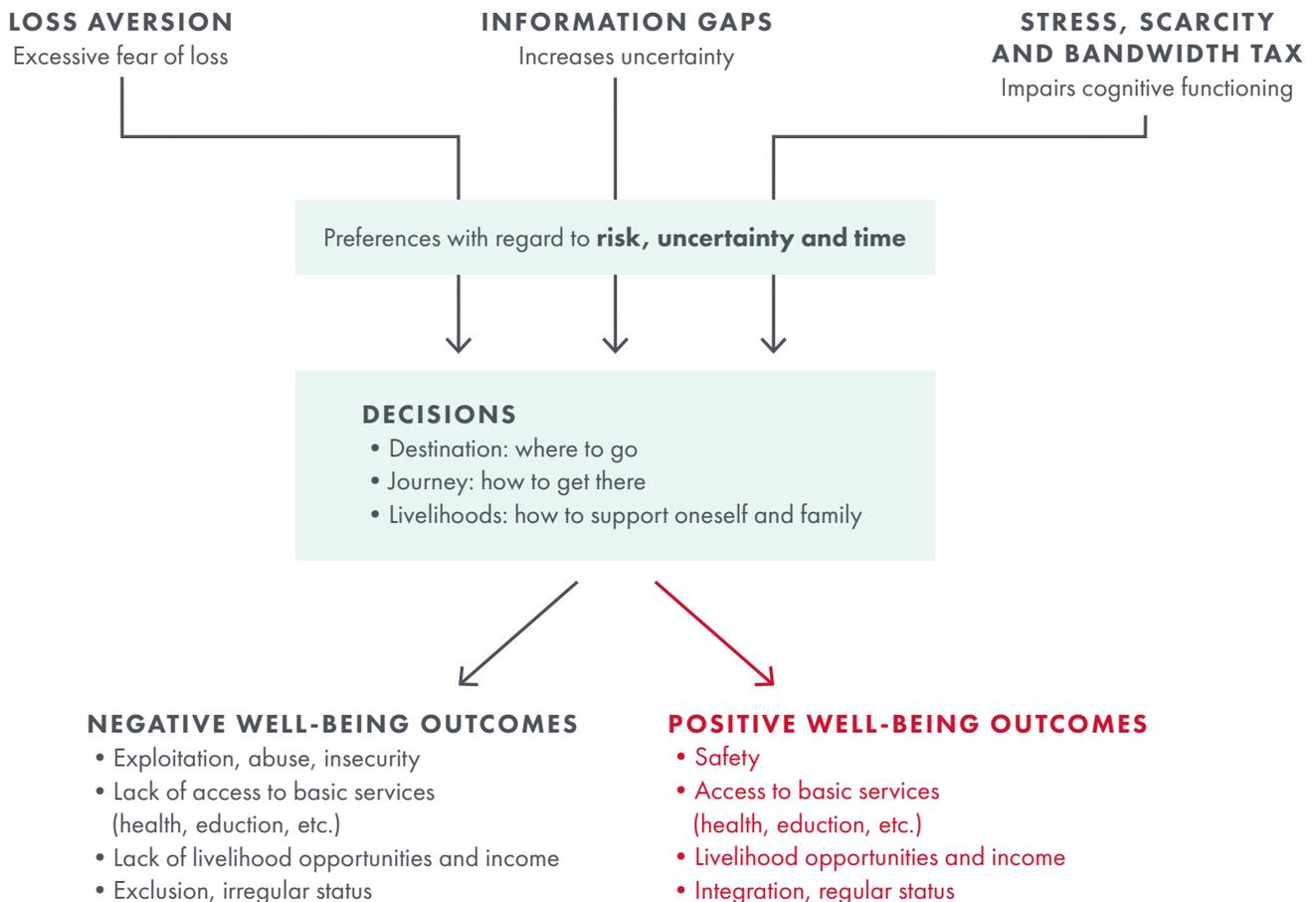
Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Colombia tend to have a low tolerance for risk and uncertainty, leading them to not move onward once they arrive in Colombia. Many refugees and migrants coming from Venezuela have experienced significant losses. As a result, upon arriving in Colombia, they prefer not to move onward to other destinations in Colombia or elsewhere, to avoid more losses. These choices may cause them to choose not to pursue options that would present greater benefits, such as moving to cities with more services and work opportunities.

Venezuelan migrants and refugees lack reliable information about destinations and means of traveling. Most Venezuelans refugees and migrants learn about migrating primarily from family and friends, who may not have access to the most accurate or up-to-date information. In particular, reliable information about where people can access services

and opportunities is in short supply. Humanitarian actors may help reduce the uncertainty surrounding key decisions refugees and migrants must make by providing this information on an ongoing basis.

Because greater stress and scarcity can lead to impaired decision-making, Venezuelans may be more prone to make impulsive and risky decisions while in Venezuela, including undertaking dangerous journeys via irregular routes controlled by armed groups. Despite the challenges Venezuelans face in Colombia, interviewees indicated that they were, in general, much less stressed in Colombia than they were in Venezuela, partly due to the assistance they receive in Colombia. As a result, stress and scarcity seem to have a greater impact on the first-order migration decision to leave Venezuela than on second-order decisions for onward travel once in Colombia.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



Program and Policy Recommendations

To focus humanitarian assistance on reducing impaired decision-making, aid actors, governments and donors should:

Continue basic cash assistance: Cash can reduce stress in contexts of underdevelopment. It is critical to continue providing cash assistance to refugees and distressed migrants from Venezuela. Doing so can help minimize impulsive and risky decision-making focused only on immediate, short-term needs.

Provide lump sums, rather than small tranches of cash, to alleviate capital constraints: Lump sum cash transfers are more likely to be invested in livelihood assets and onward migration to areas with greater opportunities. Smaller tranches, on the other hand, tend to go towards immediate consumption needs. In Colombia, while both the government and humanitarian organizations provide cash assistance to Venezuelans, the amounts dispersed by each program may be too small to be invested in livelihood strategies, as they are intended for lifesaving purposes. With larger cash tranches—in addition to livelihood activities—humanitarian actors could work with Venezuelans in Colombia, and provide them with support to invest in micro businesses or pursue onward migration to other areas where there are opportunities and greater access to services.

Provide decision-counseling: Humanitarian actors should provide counseling services to Venezuelans in Colombia in order to help migrants and refugees weigh various options and make optimal decisions. The simple act of having to justify one's decision or lay out the reasons to another person (e.g. a caseworker) may be a good way to ensure that the decisions are sound. Rather than dictate what decisions should be, the aim would be to ensure that choices reflect what refugees and migrants actually aspire for, with the proviso that they are not putting themselves in unnecessary risk.

Deliver timely, accurate information: Humanitarian actors are well-positioned to help provide refugees and migrants information, such as alternatives for where they may go, how to travel, what is required to work, as well as, about their rights. The timing and delivery of information is important for its uptake. People tend to respond better to information when it is delivered at salient points, and regularly (rather than just once). Given high digital literacy and mobile phone usage among Venezuelans in Colombia, this information could be provided online (via social media) or through mobile phone applications.

CONTACT

BEZA TESFAYE
Senior Researcher | Research and Learning
btesfaye@mercycorps.org

HUGH APRILE
Country Director | Colombia
haprile@mercycorps.org



45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842

mercycorps.org