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Colombia: Hosting Refugees

Colombia: Hosting Venezuelan Refugees Using Agriculture

Venezuela is in crisis. Economic collapse, food and medicine shortages, and political corruption have prompted more than six million people to leave the country since 2014 (Venezuelan Humanitarian and Refugee Crisis). The highest concentration of Venezuelan migrants is in Colombia. Over 1.8 million Venezuelans have migrated to Colombia in this time period (World Bank Group). According to the article “Colombia Venezuelan Refugees,” roughly 40% of Venezuelan households in Colombia reported having no source of employment income, and 60% reported that they were only able to eat two meals a day (Vick, Karl). But Venezuelans aren’t the only ones suffering from this mass migration; Colombians are too. The massive amount of refugees migrating to the country has placed a strain on Colombia’s services and infrastructure. Hospitals are overflowing, the Colombian government has been impacted financially, and Colombian officials and border communities have been under constant pressure. However, if Colombia can properly manage this migration crisis, the short-term costs could lead to long-term economic benefits.

The living conditions for Venezuelans have deteriorated severely since the beginning of the crisis, and have only become worse due to Covid 19. Extreme poverty amongst Venezuelan refugees rose from 10 percent in 2014 to 85 percent in 2018 (Corugedo, Emilio Fernandez, and Jaime Guajardo). Many refugees can no longer afford housing, and thus they are exposed to high levels of violence. Refugees in urban areas are often homeless or housed in informal and/or overcrowded shelters. These facilities often lack proper access to basic sanitation, leading to the spread of disease and increased protection risks (*ACAPS*). According to a report done by Refugees International and Center for Global Development, Venezuelan women face a double disadvantage due to the discrimination they experience due to both their gender and their nationality. Considering Venezuelan women make up 52 percent of the total Venezuelan working-age population, Colombia could benefit greatly from lowering barriers for Venezuelan women (Guerrero Ble, Martha, et al).

The mass migration has put immediate pressure on Colombians labor markets to absorb the refugees, which could displace some local workers, and increase informality. Venezuelans have also changed the dynamic of violence in Colombia. Colombians are facing an increased level of insecurity, violence, and crime.

Although some of these problems might seem insurmountable, if handled effectively, they could eventually have a positive impact. Migration can be good for the economy. Venezuela’s migration can potentially raise GDP growth in receiving countries by 0.1 to 0.3 percent points from 2017 to 2030 (Corugedo, Emilio Fernandez, and Jaime Guajardo). The arrival of immigrants means Colombia could potentially receive cheaper labor provided that Colombia supports refugees in job search. This means that the migration could have a positive economic impact in the long-run. Additionally, Colombia has an aging population. 9.23 percent of the population is over the age of sixty (*El Espectador*). The arrival of young Venezuelans and Venezuelans with families in Colombia means the overall population is becoming younger. And if Colombia is able to provide education and healthcare to the work-force, it will facilitate self-reliance which will be beneficial to the Colombian economy.

Uganda faces similar problems, but they have handled their refugee crisis effectively. Uganda is a pioneer in integrating refugees and giving them full rights. If Colombia is able to implement the same strategies that Uganda has implemented, then Colombia can better manage their refugee crisis. Uganda hosts an

estimated 1.7 million refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan alone and has also received refugees from Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda and several other countries. These refugees make up 3.7 percent of Uganda's total population (Christophersen, Eirik). Uganda and Colombia are comparable in population, geographical size, and the proportion of refugees. This makes Uganda an appropriate guide on how to manage the refugee problem in Colombia.

Uganda focuses on fostering self-reliance among refugees. One way they are able to promote self-reliance is by encouraging a livelihood that allows the refugees to subsist. The primary livelihood of refugees in Uganda is farming. Uganda has a reported 6,900,000 hectares of arable land. This is comparable to Colombia's 6,021,000 hectares of arable land (Colombia - Arable Land [Hectares] 2022 Data 2023 Forecast 1961-2018 Historical). Both Colombia and Uganda have fertile farming land as well. With Colombia's diverse geography, the country is able to produce a variety of agricultural products.

According to a study conducted in the Kyaka II Settlement in Southwestern Uganda that studied the livelihoods of refugees in the settlement, fifty-five out of the seventy participants directly engaged in agriculture, and the remaining participants were engaged in agricultural produce and other businesses. The study also reported that 83% of refugees in rural and urban settlements rely on agriculture to subsist (Awidi, Salome Joy, and Kofi Quan-Baffour). By working in agriculture, they are able to generate both food and income. If this method was implemented in Colombia, refugees would also have a source of food and income, and therefore become self-reliant. Self-reliance would give refugees in Colombia the ability to either both move into less crowded housing and thus improve sanitation and reduce the spread of Covid 19 and other diseases.

To execute this plan, the government would need to free-up land to accommodate new refugees. In the Kyaka II Settlement in Southwestern Uganda, refugees were expected to give up their previously owned land to be reallocated to new arrivals. This approach facilitates resilience and self-reliance because the refugees had to learn more advanced methods of agriculture in order to grow crops on a smaller plot of land. Colombia could also utilize this method. Uganda also adopted the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) where refugees have access to land and social services. This model could also give Colombia the framework to offer land to the Venezuelan refugees, which would allow them to perform agriculture on those plots of land. Additionally, it would grant refugees access to health services, education, the justice system, and to the labor market.

In conclusion, the refugee crisis in Colombia is having both a detrimental effect on the Colombian economy and the refugees themselves. Many Venezuelan refugees in Colombia also don't have access to food, shelter, or income. Since Uganda has handled a similar crisis, we can use Uganda's methods as a framework to solve the crisis in Colombia. The refugee crisis in Colombia can be solved by giving refugees a means to subsist through agriculture. If Colombia is able to provide land for Venezuelan refugees, they will be able to do agriculture as their livelihood; this plan facilitates income generation and food security.

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