

Carolina Jiménez Sandoval: The economic crisis and the lack of democratic guarantees prevent migrants from returning to Venezuela

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

When Carolina Jiménez Sandoval (Acarigua, 1973) began working in migration and refugees, she could have never imagined that her home country would experience one of the worst exoduses ever recorded in the history of Latin America.

With a degree in International Relations from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) and a Ph.D. in International Studies from Waseda University in Japan, Jiménez Sandoval is the President of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a non-governmental organization that “promotes human rights, democracy, and justice in the social and economic spheres in Latin America and the Caribbean.”

Before taking the position of leadership at WOLA, she was Director of Research for the Americas at Amnesty International (AI) and worked as an Officer for the Latin America Program and the International Migration

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Initiative at Open Society Foundations (OSF), where she coordinated the creation of CAMMINA (Alliance for Migration in Central America and Mexico).

Jiménez Sandoval served as the National Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Venezuela between 2008 and 2010 and worked as a Program Manager in the Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights Unit at the Foundation for the Americas, a non-profit organization affiliated with the Organization of American States (OAS).

With her extensive professional and academic background, which includes a Master of Philosophy in International Relations from the University of Cambridge, England, Jiménez Sandoval analyzes the Venezuelan migration crisis and the international community's response to this phenomenon.

–The latest report from the R4V platform indicates that 7.7 million Venezuelans are living as migrants and refugees around the world. Out of that total, 6.5 million are dispersed throughout countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. What impact does this phenomenon have on the development of the region?

A forced migration crisis the size of the Venezuelan one, where over 7.7 million people have had to leave the country, presents significant challenges for the recipient countries, especially for the countries in South America, where 80%-85% of these individuals are concentrated.

However, numerous studies around the world conducted in different historical periods demonstrate that migration is not

only a matter of challenges but also an opportunity for several reasons. First, when a group of people arrives in another location and possesses certain skills, whether due to work experience or completed studies, they bring that knowledge to their new host communities.

Many migrants in different countries around the world are known for being entrepreneurs. For example, if you consider the policies adopted by the government of President Iván Duque in Colombia, aiming to regularize a considerable number of migrants, you'll notice that the Colombian Ministry of Finance conducted a study on what the regularization of many Venezuelans could imply, and the result was an increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country.

However, this kind of economic improvement and increased productivity in a country due to the arrival of many migrants occurs when there are regularization processes and socio-economic integration policies in place. Undocumented individuals often lack access to employment or have very precarious employment opportunities. When socio-economic integration policies are promoted, the children of migrant families can easily attend school and have access to healthcare. When there is a combination of regularization processes and socio-economic integration policies, it is highly likely that migrant individuals can positively contribute to the societies that host them.

–How do you assess the international community's response to the Venezuelan exodus? Every so often, conferences are convened, emphasizing the need to seek funds to assist migrants. However, these initiatives appear to be insufficient in the face of the sheer number of people and the strain

they exert on the healthcare, education, employment, and service systems of host countries.

I believe one of the major concerns surrounding the Venezuelan forced migration crisis is the response regarding the financial commitment that the international cooperation is willing to invest in the care of these individuals.

If one compares the financial data available regarding international cooperation concerning the three major crises of forced human mobility in the world, that is, the Syrian, Ukrainian, and Venezuelan crises, it becomes apparent that Venezuela has already surpassed the Syrian crisis in terms of numbers. However, the international community's investment in addressing the Venezuelan crisis is much lower.

The Brookings Institution, an academic organization that has been publishing reports on this response for several years, notes that the Syrian crisis received around 20.8 billion dollars by 2020, while the Venezuelan crisis has received 1.4 billion dollars. This is a significant gap, which ends up making host countries solely responsible for covering many of the expenses that a State has to incur, especially when receiving refugee populations, without meaningful financial involvement from international cooperation.

We must remember that many of the countries to which Venezuelans arrive have large percentages of poverty, making the integration of migrants and refugees more difficult in these cases.

–In 2021, President Iván Duque's government announced the creation of a Temporary Protection Statute to regularize nearly 2 million Venezuelans in Colombia. Do you believe that governments in the region should imitate policies like

this? What measures could they apply to provide a dignified and respectful treatment to Venezuelan migrants?

In principle, the policy of mass regularization of Venezuelan individuals in Colombia is necessary. Because a country like Colombia, which has received over 2 million people within its territory, needed to provide a legal response to the situation of many individuals who were arriving without the necessary documents to stay regularly.

It has not been a perfect process; migrant rights organizations have been critical of how some of these measures were implemented and have provided very specific recommendations to the Colombian government. One of the main criticisms is that unfortunately, Colombia has not built a good system for accessing the right to asylum because it has focused on these more temporary solutions through migration statutes for a ten-year residence.

Still, it must be said that it is not very common for countries to grant or carry out mass regularization processes, and in that sense, the Colombian case has been praised by various international agencies. We do believe that regularization is an extremely important issue because it is the gateway to accessing rights.

When a migrant and their family are regularized, their access to work, healthcare, education, and the right to decent housing is facilitated because the person has the legal status that allows them to access many rights that are difficult to obtain when they have no form of regularized residence.

Each country establishes its national laws, but we always call on countries to align their national regulations with international human rights standards. Primarily, the legal solutions offered by

countries should have a long-term focus to avoid causing insecurity among many individuals due to the temporary nature of their legal status and to help prevent them from incurring expenses related to renewing their migration status. Additionally, these solutions should prioritize the protection of vulnerable groups and, if possible, aim to provide the highest level of guarantees.

Both prompt regularization with measures ensuring a stay that isn't solely temporary and integration measures are two steps that can empower a migrant family to feel more capable of remaining in a country with dignity.

–It is understood that the massive exodus of Venezuelans originates from the complex humanitarian emergency caused by the Chavista regime. In what way can the international community contribute to addressing the root causes of this phenomenon?

Every crisis of forced migration has its causes. In many of the countries known as sources of migrant and refugee populations, the causes are related to wars, whether they are external aggression, such as the case of Ukraine, or internal civil wars, as in the case of Syria. In this sense, the Venezuelan case is particularly different. It is a country that ranks among the top three in terms of the largest number of people leaving its territory in times of peace, with peace understood as the absence of war.

The complex humanitarian emergency, combined with a more widespread human rights crisis, are the roots of this Venezuelan crisis. We believe it is important for there to be a proper financing process for humanitarian measures that can be taken within Venezuela to mitigate the humanitarian emergency.

Many United Nations agencies, as well as other international organizations, are working on food, education, and health programs within Venezuela to prevent people from having to emigrate and to enable them to study, feed themselves, and access healthcare within the country.

It is also important to consider how the international community can respond to the political crisis and promote a democratic and peaceful transition. This requires the government in power to enact economic changes and ensure the respect and protection of Venezuelans' human rights, enabling them to pursue their life goals within their communities of origin and ultimately preventing forced migration.

–In line with the ruling party's discourse, business sectors, such as Fedecámaras, and opposition politicians, led by the governor of Zulia state, Manuel Rosales, argue that the economic sanctions imposed by the United States have impoverished Venezuelans. To help alleviate the root causes of migration, do you believe that President Joe Biden's administration should lift sanctions without waiting for Nicolás Maduro's regime to make progress in terms of political openness and democratization?

Venezuelan civil society has been very clear in documenting and expressing that the complex humanitarian emergency that many Venezuelans are currently experiencing predates the economic sanctions, primarily imposed by the United States government.

Before the imposition of sanctions, there were already serious health and nutrition indicators' deterioration and a significant economic crisis, which continues to affect the country. However,

the sanctions did exacerbate an existing crisis and emergency. I believe that the Biden administration has made it clear that they are open to providing sanctions relief, but they expect the Maduro government to offer certain guarantees in return, related to elections or human rights improvements, ultimately working toward a democratic and peaceful transition in Venezuela.

It's challenging for the Biden administration to lift sanctions unilaterally without seeing substantial concessions from the Maduro government that promote democracy and human rights in Venezuela.

–The Chavista regime denies the extent of the exodus, claiming it's all part of an international campaign to discredit and ultimately overthrow Nicolás Maduro. How does this stance affect the response that should be provided to Venezuelan migration?

The Maduro government not only denies the existence of a forced global migration crisis but also denies the human rights crisis, the economic debacle, or at least its root causes, it denies the existence of political prisoners, denies the significant impact on the Orinoco Mining Arc. The denial of the exodus is just one more on its long list of reality denials, and I think that, in the case of forced migration, it is impossible to hide the truth.

It is very difficult to tell the mayors of Bogotá, Lima, or Houston, where a significant number of Venezuelans are living, that the Venezuelan forced migration crisis is a lie. Reality surpasses any official denial discourse. Therefore, I don't think the response is affected by the denial of something impossible to conceal.

I believe the response is affected because international cooperation has other priorities, and Ukraine, a very brutal war launched by Russia against a European country, has shifted the world's attention to address that crisis.

But even before Ukraine, the response from the international community was not as active and significant as we would have liked, and I believe it has a lot to do with the fact that most Venezuelans are not migrating to European countries, although there is a substantial number of Venezuelans in Spain. Probably many countries that are important in international cooperation do not feel the same impact as countries like Peru and Colombia, which have a large number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees.

–There is a political discourse that sells the idea that Venezuelans abroad are practically living with their suitcases packed, waiting for the situation to improve so they can return immediately. Is this sensible? Wouldn't it be better to facilitate these migrants and refugees in establishing themselves in their host countries, having everything they need to grow and develop without constantly looking back?

In some significant host countries like Colombia, studies are conducted to determine both the needs and aspirations of migrant populations. One finding from these studies is the presence of a high degree of what's called a "vocation for permanence," meaning that many migrants who have relocated to these countries do not feel they can return to Venezuela and are gradually building their own life projects in the host countries.

That being said, it should also be noted that in many of these countries, there is a lot of job precarity. As a result, a person with

a technical or university degree may not be able to advance their career in the host country, and therefore, they might still have the idea or hope of returning to Venezuela where they could practice their profession or apply their skills.

However, there is also an understanding within the diaspora that the country is still experiencing a severe economic crisis and remains a place lacking democratic guarantees. This makes it difficult to consider return as a viable option, at least for the vast majority.

Obviously, there will always be cases of individuals and families who decide that returning to the country is the best option for various reasons, but in general, there are very few well-documented figures on return, and that is a significant problem we face. The Venezuelan government sometimes boasts about many people returning, but when you try to find statistics, they are rather lacking. It is very difficult to conduct studies or make comparative analyses, but from the limited information available, what we see is that if you compare the number of people abroad with the possible number of returnees, the number of returnees is tremendously marginal compared to the vast number of people who are abroad.

While every person should probably have the right to aspire to return to their country of origin, in the Venezuelan case, this is quite unfeasible because the push factors that forced a person or a family to leave their community of origin still exist.