

Humanitarian Aid in Venezuela: From Welfare to Capacity Building

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Humanitarian aid in Venezuela is far from over; in fact, it is projected to remain necessary for at least the next five years, and is contingent on potential shifts in the country's political and economic model. The country faces severe challenges stemming from a multifaceted crisis spanning political, economic, and social dimensions. Worsened by corruption and mismanagement, the situation has led to profound inequality, widespread poverty, and a lack of access to basic services, affecting the lives of millions of Venezuelans. This article examines these challenges and proposes comprehensive approaches to shift from short-term aid to long-term capacity building, aiming to deliver sustainable solutions for the affected communities.

When you start working with vulnerable communities and humanitarian projects, the first thing they tell you is: "Don't get attached; learn to leave your emotions at the door." But how does one simply detach and shelve their humanity? How can you avoid being moved when you see the babies you support in nutrition

programs growing up, or the relieved faces of their mothers? How can you not smile, witnessing progress in patients involved in health or water projects? How can you not feel joy when children in schools get to be children again?

However, just as there is light, there is also darkness, because that is the duality of the humanitarian world. How can you not feel outraged when regime officials threaten you or take credit for a project that is not theirs? How can you not be frightened when you are stopped at a checkpoint carrying humanitarian supplies and be filled with terror as they attempt to extort you? How can you not cry when one of the beneficiaries you worked with dies, or you find out overnight that they are no longer in the country, have decided to migrate, or have become involved in illicit activities? How can you not feel overwhelmed when you see childhood vanish from the eyes of the children?

This is the duality we experience today in Venezuela and what I have witnessed over the past seven years. Working in these contexts exposes you to a constant emotional rollercoaster. The joys and achievements are immensely rewarding, but the sadness and injustices can be devastating.

I have always believed that when someone emigrates, they become an ambassador for their country, even if it is not a responsibility they choose. I know many who left fleeing, traumatized by the situation, with open wounds, and who just wanted to disappear. But I, as a student at Oxford University, could not afford to miss the opportunity to raise awareness and speak out about what was happening in Venezuela.

I had been working for years in politics and the humanitarian sector, but I always struggled with the fundamental question: What exactly is happening in Venezuela? That was the very same question I was asked no fewer than 50 times during the first week of my postgraduate studies.

In those moments, your brain starts working at full speed. How do you piece together the puzzle? Where do I begin? With Chávez's rise to power in '98? But Chávez was a consequence, not a cause. Do I go further back? Do I talk about the 1999 Constituent Assembly, the Arias Cárdenas vs. Chávez election, April 11, Carmona Estanga, Chávez's return, the oil strike, the 2006 presidential race between Maduro and Rosales, the shutdown of RCTV, the constitutional reform and the student movement, Capriles vs. Chávez, the death of the "comandante supremo," Capriles vs. Maduro, the 2014 protests, the 2015 National Assembly elections, the Supreme Court boycott in 2016 and 2017, the student protests in 2017, the bleak political outlook of 2018 with a contested presidential election and the blackout, the protests, the 2019 interim government?

How do you sum up, in that moment, 21 years of history to explain the complex humanitarian emergency? More than once I've been told: "Ah, I thought it was because of the sanctions," or "Damn... I didn't know that was happening in Venezuela."

In a world simultaneously affected by crises and humanitarian emergencies triggered by major conflicts —such as the war in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Syria, and the Taliban offensive in Afghanistan— which can be summed up in a single sentence, Venezuela's situation continues to worsen. The convergence of these global crises makes it increasingly difficult

to carry out projects to address the humanitarian emergency unfolding in Venezuela.

Media attention and the focus of humanitarian organizations are spread across multiple fronts, which significantly reduces the level of targeted support for Venezuela. This reality calls for greater creativity and perseverance in seeking viable solutions to meet the critical needs of the Venezuelan population.

This is the first challenge in explaining the complex humanitarian emergency in Venezuela —an emergency officially recognized for seven years now, and one that will not change without the political will to overhaul the existing model. Each year, more aid is needed, yet fewer funds are available. This problem can be broken down into three main aspects: resource mobilization, program closures, and program focus.

When it comes to resource mobilization, attracting sufficient funding to meet growing needs is becoming increasingly difficult. Additionally, when international organizations decide to abruptly shut down projects in Venezuela —regardless of their good intentions— they often end up generating greater dependency. Prolonged projects, without a systemic change in Venezuela, result in fragmented solutions. The negative impact of their departure is often worse than when they first arrived, as they fail to build the capacities communities need to address their own needs. Moreover, many people are left unemployed, losing their competitive incomes overnight.

The focus of the programs also plays a crucial role. Many times, programs are not designed to strengthen local capacities but instead concentrate on immediate assistance, which perpetuates

dependency rather than promoting self-sufficiency. Therefore, to effectively address the humanitarian emergency in Venezuela, it is essential not only to increase resource mobilization but also to design programs that prioritize building community capacities and ensure an orderly and sustainable transition when project closures are necessary.

The complex humanitarian emergency in Venezuela has many dimensions, and in this piece, I will attempt to shed light on both the external and internal challenges, as well as what we can do to stop fostering dependency and start building capacities.

Currently, scarcity —such as that seen in 2019— is no longer what defines this complex humanitarian emergency; rather, it is now inequality, precariousness, and poverty. Since 2019, with the arrival of humanitarian aid, conditions have continued to worsen, although without such aid, we would be in a far worse situation. Venezuela is facing one of the most devastating humanitarian emergencies in the world, the result of a complex mix of political, economic, and social factors. Unlike many humanitarian crises triggered by natural disasters or armed conflicts, the crisis in Venezuela is largely man-made, the outcome of years of economic mismanagement, political turmoil, and systemic corruption.

But what does the complex humanitarian emergency look like in July 2024 in terms of numbers? The best overview is provided by the following article, “Hunger, healthcare, and schools: Reasons to leave Venezuela (along with a Maduro poll win),” published in *The New Humanitarian* in June 2024:

“The 28.8 million people who remain in Venezuela are faced with soaring prices due to inflation rates that were

until recently among the highest in the world, and a monthly minimum wage frozen at less than \$4. A de facto dollarisation has failed to boost the economy, and the lack of basic services —once limited to the regions and rural areas— is now affecting the capital, Caracas, as well. Since 2015, GDP has fallen by 80% and the minimum wage by 95%. Susana Raffalli, a nutritionist who specialises in food security management, humanitarian emergencies, and disaster risk, said 60-80% of people in poor areas have resorted to negative coping strategies, such as selling belongings to buy food.

The collapse of the healthcare system has been one of the most obvious and drastic aspects of Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. According to the NGO Convite, medicine shortages in general reached 28.4%. In its latest survey, Médicos por la Salud, a network of doctors who monitor and document the health crisis, found that four in ten operating rooms nationwide no longer function. Shortages of surgical supplies were at 74%, and of emergency supplies at 37%. Nearly 20 million people now face severe water restrictions, and 86% of the population is exposed to water deemed unsuitable for human consumption, putting them at risk of diarrhoea and other diseases. In 2023, blackouts affected nearly 62% of the population, compared to 25.9% in 2022, bringing activities to a standstill and sometimes putting lives at risk in hospitals.

Education has taken a big hit too. Reports show that dilapidated infrastructure, the lack of teachers and of public transportation —combined with the shortcomings

of the school meals programme— are driving many students away. The impoverishment of families due to high inflation is also forcing children to drop out of school to work. In 2023, 40% of students between the ages of three and 17 attended school irregularly.

In its 2023 yearly report, HumVenezuela reported that 20.1 million people required humanitarian assistance and protection —400,000 more than in 2022. During the first half of last year, only 14% of the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) was funded, making it the second most underfunded globally. The level of response improved during the second half, allowing 52.9% of the HRP to be funded. International aid groups, such as the Pan American Health Organization, USAID, the World Food Programme, and a number of other UN agencies, among others, operate in Venezuela. But they face constant interference and harassment from the government. The assistance provided isn't nearly enough to meet the needs.

Last October, UN Secretary-General António Guterres gave the green light for the UN to start administering a trust fund worth an estimated \$3 billion to address emergency needs in Venezuela. The funding would come from Venezuela's frozen assets abroad. The trust fund, however, was tied to political negotiations between Maduro's government and the opposition. On 17 October, the same day the authorisation to create the trust fund was made public, Maduro and the opposition signed an agreement in Barbados, paving the way for free elections to take place this year and prompting the US to ease Venezuela's oil sanctions. But as the opposition gained

strength, Maduro started disregarding the Barbados accord, the US reinstated the sanctions, and the trust fund has been left in limbo. At the time of publication, only 9.5% of Venezuela's HRP for 2024 had been funded.”¹

More than seven million Venezuelans have fled the country, creating a significant refugee crisis in neighboring nations, especially Colombia, Peru, and Brazil. These people have left behind their homes, families, and lives in search of safety and a better quality of life. The ongoing power struggle between Nicolás Maduro's government and opposition forces has led to international sanctions and worsened the economic situation. Political uncertainty leaves citizens in a despairing limbo. Reports of extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, and widespread repression of dissent have been documented by international human rights organizations. Oppression and fear are a daily reality for many Venezuelans.

The 2024 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan provides a critical overview of the situation of Venezuelan migrants and refugees in need, as well as the state of funding allocated to assist them. More than 8.89 million Venezuelans require urgent humanitarian assistance, and a goal has been established to assist 2.93 million people. As of April 30, 2024, 326,800 people had been reached –representing only 11.1% of the target population to be assisted outside Venezuela.

1 Gabriela Mesones Rojo, Iván Reyes, *Hunger, healthcare, and schools: Reasons to leave Venezuela as Maduro looks to poll win*, The New Humanitarian, June 25, 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2024/06/25/hunger-healthcare-schools-reasons-leave-venezuela-maduro-poll-win>

International funding and assistance have been crucial, although per capita donations and total funds received since 2014 have been insufficient to cover the basic needs of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Compared to other humanitarian crises, there is a significant disparity in resource allocation. In a 2021 presentation by David Smolansky, the following figures were highlighted: Syrian refugees have received an average of \$5,000 per capita, South Sudanese refugees around \$3,000 per capita, while Venezuelan refugees significantly less, averaging under \$150 per capita. These figures underscore the urgency and necessity of increasing international efforts to provide adequate support to the displaced Venezuelan population.

To put everything in perspective, according to the Financial Tracking Service of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), it was estimated that \$32.92 billion was raised globally for humanitarian aid in 2024. Of that amount, only \$192.8 million was allocated to Venezuela, representing just 1.71% of the total, an insufficient percentage given the most severe humanitarian crisis in the region.² Additionally, the same UN financial tracking service reported that for 2024, Venezuela required \$617 million in funds for humanitarian assistance. However, only \$193 million was raised, which is just 27.4% of what was needed.³ In practical terms, this means that

2 “Crisis and Emergency Response”, United Nations, <https://fts.unocha.org/home/2024/countries>

3 “Snapshot of Total Humanitarian Funding,” Financial Tracking Service, OCHA, <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrljoiNGE3NGU5OWItNWlWYy00NGJILWI5ZTUtNGJhYzBiYWVhNjlmliwidCI6IjBmOWUzNWlWLTU0NGYtNGY2MC1iZGNjLTVIYTQxNmU2ZGM3MCI6ImMiOj9&pageName=ReportSection41093ce46c53210880ac>

nly about 3 out of every 10 people who needed humanitarian aid actually received support.

The differences in total donations for humanitarian crises since 2014 are notable. Syria has received billions of dollars in international assistance, South Sudan has also received a considerable amount of donations, while Venezuela has received much less in comparison, highlighting a disparity in the international response.

Increasing cooperation with international organizations such as the UN, WHO, and regional institutions can improve the effectiveness of aid delivery. The Venezuelan diaspora, which remains deeply connected to the country, can play a vital role by providing remittances, advocacy, and technical expertise. Investments in agriculture can help reduce dependence on imports and improve food security. International partnerships can help rebuild Venezuela's healthcare infrastructure, supply essential medicines, and train healthcare workers.

To effectively address the crisis, it is crucial that capacity building be accompanied by a significant increase in funding. Only then will it be possible to meet the basic needs of the population and make progress toward recovery. The ongoing power struggle and lack of political consensus hinder the implementation and sustainability of humanitarian aid programs. Widespread corruption within the government and public institutions obstructs the efficient use of aid resources. High levels of crime and violence, including risks to humanitarian workers, further complicate the delivery of assistance. Economic sanctions limit the country's ability to import essential goods and finance humanitarian efforts. Years of neglect have led to the deterioration

of critical infrastructure, including roads, utilities, and public services, making the logistics of aid delivery more challenging.

In the relief effort following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the international response was swift, with coordinated efforts among numerous NGOs and significant financial contributions. In the eradication of smallpox, the WHO led a global vaccination campaign that successfully eliminated the disease in 1980. These examples demonstrate that coordination and collaboration between international organizations, governments, and NGOs are crucial to the success of humanitarian operations.

The 2010 Haiti earthquake demonstrated how poor coordination and inadequate infrastructure resulted in the inefficient use of resources. The 2011 famine in Somalia highlighted the importance of early warning systems and timely response. Both examples underscore the need for effective coordination, accountability, and the building of local capacity to ensure that aid reaches those who need it.

The situation in Venezuela is a tragedy that demands urgent attention and a multifaceted approach. To address the crisis and move toward recovery, it is essential to consider several key aspects that, taken together, can help alleviate the humanitarian emergency and lay the groundwork for a more stable and prosperous future. While it is clear that a change in the governing model would facilitate this transition, humanitarian aid will remain crucial. With a more capable and committed government, the implementation of humanitarian assistance would be easier, more effective, and broader in scope, shifting from immediate relief projects to those focused on capacity-building.

Needed Comprehensive Approach

Addressing the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela requires a combination of political resolution, economic stabilization, and social support. Political resolution is essential to restore governance and trust in institutions. This entails facilitating an inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders, fostering an environment where human rights are respected and democratic norms are reinstated. Economic stabilization involves implementing policies to halt hyperinflation, encourage foreign investment, and restructure the national debt. Social support should focus on improving Venezuelans' quality of life by ensuring access to food, medicine, and education.

Strengthening Local Capacity

Empowering local NGOs and civil society organizations can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of aid efforts. These entities, being more connected to local communities, have a better understanding of specific needs and can provide more suitable and timely solutions. Strengthening their capacity involves providing training, financial resources, and logistical support. In addition, fostering collaboration between local and international NGOs is crucial to ensure a coordinated and efficient response. Building networks and strategic alliances can maximize the impact of interventions and ensure that aid reaches those who need it most.

Although NGOs and international organizations play a crucial role in providing assistance, their essential task is to equip communities with the capabilities needed so that, once projects end, they can remain sustainable and self-sufficient. Communities need to develop the tools and skills that allow them to rely on themselves. This not only ensures the long-term continuity of

projects but also promotes local development and resilience in the face of future challenges.

Providing targeted training in key areas such as project management, financial administration, and agricultural or commercial techniques is essential. Likewise, supplying financial resources, such as microcredits or seed funds, enables communities to initiate and sustain economically viable activities. Logistical support, including access to technology and basic infrastructure, also plays a decisive role in the success of these efforts.

Promoting collaboration between local and international NGOs is crucial to ensure a coordinated and efficient response. The creation of networks and strategic alliances allows for the sharing of knowledge, resources, and experiences, maximizing the impact of interventions. Working together not only enhances operational efficiency but also strengthens the social and economic fabric of communities, ensuring that aid reaches those who need it most and that implemented solutions are lasting and adapted to local realities.

Including Psychological Support for Humanitarian Workers

Working on the ground with vulnerable communities inevitably creates deep emotional bonds. Humanitarian workers often face traumatic and heartbreaking situations that can affect their emotional and mental well-being. It is essential to establish humanitarian protocols that include psychological support for all field staff. This support can encompass regular therapy sessions, support groups, and training in coping skills. Providing these resources is crucial for humanitarian workers to manage difficult

situations and maintain their mental health, which in turn enables them to continue their work effectively and sustainably.

Psychological support not only helps workers stay healthy and effective in their roles but also ensures they can continue providing high-quality assistance to the communities they serve. It is crucial to recognize that the mental health of humanitarian workers is fundamental to the success of any humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian protocols must include mental health and well-being components for all personnel, guaranteeing they have the necessary resources to cope with the difficult situations they face and a safe space to vent and support each other when needed. Workers who are emotionally healthy perform their duties more effectively, improving the quality of aid delivered. Moreover, a work environment that promotes mental well-being can reduce staff turnover, ensuring that communities receive assistance from experienced and committed professionals.

Leveraging Technology

Utilizing technology for efficient aid distribution, monitoring, and communication can significantly enhance the transparency and reach of humanitarian programs. Digital platforms facilitate resource management, tracking of community needs, and impact evaluations of interventions. Mobile applications and real-time data systems facilitate rapid identification of the most affected areas, improving coordination in delivering assistance. Furthermore, technology strengthens communication among the diverse stakeholders involved in humanitarian response, ensuring critical information is shared promptly and effectively.

Promoting Dialogue

Encouraging dialogue among the government, opposition, and the international community is crucial to creating a conducive environment for recovery and growth. This dialogue must be inclusive and grounded in mutual respect, aiming for consensual solutions that benefit all Venezuelans. International mediation can play a key role in facilitating these conversations and ensuring they remain constructive. Fostering open dialogue helps de-escalate tensions, build trust, and pave the way for implementing necessary reforms. Moreover, effective dialogue can attract the support and collaboration of the international community, which is essential for the country's economic and social recovery.

Working in the humanitarian field in Venezuela is an emotional roller coaster. Seeing a child smile again, a baby grow healthy, or a patient improve fills us with hope and reminds us why we are here. But we also face fear, sadness, and injustice, which wear us down and break our hearts.

Venezuela is a country of contrasts, where good and bad walk hand in hand. We become ambassadors of our land, carrying its history and pain to every corner of the world. With our experiences, we try to build bridges of understanding and solidarity, dreaming of the day when questions about our country are no longer filled with confusion, but with admiration for our resilience and the change we have built.

The crisis in Venezuela is complex and multifaceted, but with a comprehensive approach that combines political resolution, economic stabilization, and social support, it is possible to alleviate the suffering of the Venezuelan people. Strengthening

local capacity, providing psychological support to humanitarian workers, leveraging technology, and fostering dialogue are crucial steps toward advancing a more stable and prosperous future. The international community must redouble its efforts, demonstrating solidarity and humanity, to help Venezuela overcome this crisis and rebuild a country where its citizens can live with dignity and hope.

The history of Venezuela is complicated, and each of us carries a part of that story. By sharing our experiences, we help the world understand the magnitude of our struggle and the strength of our hope. Because despite everything, we continue to believe in a better future. We still have a long way to go, many obstacles to overcome, and many hearts to heal. But every step we take, every small victory, brings us a little closer to that dream of seeing Venezuela reborn. And although it can sometimes be exhausting and overwhelming, as long as we have strength, we will keep moving forward, convinced that together we can build a tomorrow full of light and hope for everyone.