



Executive summary

# Social protection responses to forced displacement in Colombia

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## About this publication

The overall aim of this project is to better understand access to social protection and humanitarian assistance for displaced populations, and to explore mechanisms for linking social protection programmes and humanitarian assistance. By providing clearer guidance about when, how and why different linkages might be considered, the project aims to develop the theory, evidence base and operational guidance on how social protection systems and humanitarian systems can work together to meet the needs of people affected by displacement crises, including the displaced and also vulnerable households in host communities. The research is grounded in three country contexts with a total of six study sites presenting different contexts of displacement and humanitarian response: Greece (Athens and Ioannina), Colombia (Bogotá and Cúcuta) and Cameroon (Far North and East). The project is led by ODI, in close collaboration with the Centre for Applied Social Sciences Research and Training (CASS-RT) in Cameroon, the Alberto Lleras Camargo School of Government at the University of Los Andes in Colombia, and the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE) in Greece. This work is part of the programme ‘Building the evidence on protracted forced displacement: a multi-stakeholder partnership’. The programme is funded by UK Aid from the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). It is managed by the World Bank Group and was established in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The scope of the programme is to expand the global knowledge on forced displacement by funding quality research and disseminating results for the use of practitioners and policy-makers. This work does not necessarily reflect the views of FCDO, the World Bank Group or UNHCR.

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# Key messages

- Assistance programmes for host and displaced communities in Colombia are largely run by government rather than international agencies. Many internally displaced households in our sample received transfers, in part reflecting their preferential access to state assistance under the 2011 Victims' Law. Venezuelans' access was patchier and primarily linked to Covid-19.
- Although limited in size relative to national provision, the international response to internal displacement has linked closely with government systems. The international response to the Venezuelan influx is increasingly linked with the government's response, but in a somewhat ad hoc manner.
- Where linking of national and international systems has occurred, it has been driven by the urgency, magnitude, and long-term horizon of the displacement crises, and the government's political will, strong and accepted coordination role and progressive overall policies towards the IDP and Venezuelan populations. Sub-national government participation and the Covid-19 crisis also played catalysing roles.
- Assistance to displaced populations helps them meet their basic needs, but improved programme design that better addresses long-term needs and promotes longer-term economic agency is required. Current provision is not seen as a sufficient source of financial stability to plan for the future or overcome socio-economic vulnerabilities.
- Social cohesion is strongly influenced by assistance provision. While assistance for displaced populations strengthens their relations with the state, government support to Venezuelans can damage community relations, where it appears to divert public resources away from vulnerable citizens. International funding for the Venezuelan response is key, both to ensure fair-sharing of the displacement burden and to enable the government to realise its progressive displacement response while addressing pressing internal demands and inequalities.



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# Executive summary

Recent years have seen growing interest in the use of national social protection systems as a crisis response mechanism in forced displacement contexts. Yet there is only nascent research to date on linking assistance for displaced populations with government social protection, and on the impacts of differing forms of alignment or integration of humanitarian and social protection systems. Colombia offers an interesting case to study these research questions, since it combines a long history and established response to internal displacement with a more recent international influx, hosting over 1.7 million Venezuelans fleeing political and economic turmoil since 2014.

To explore the social protection and humanitarian response to these IDP and Venezuelan populations, our research combined a 1,500-household survey with in-depth interviews and focus groups with Venezuelans, IDPs and host community members in low-income neighbourhoods in Bogotá and Cúcuta, alongside 24 key informant interviews with government, civil society, and international agencies. While not nationally representative, the data provide important insights in relation to vulnerable host and displaced populations in Colombia's largest metropolis (Bogotá) and in one of the cities on the Venezuelan border most acutely affected by the recent displacement crisis (Cúcuta).

## What is the current state of access to social protection and humanitarian assistance for displaced populations?

In our sample from low-income neighbourhoods, 76% of IDPs had benefited from at least one cash or in-kind transfer in the past year, compared to 62% of host households and around half (48%)

of Venezuelans. The bulk of assistance comes from the Colombian government; among those receiving transfers, 78% of Venezuelans, 94% of IDPs and 93% of host population households report receiving government programmes.

Government cash transfers were the dominant assistance modality for Colombian households, while for Venezuelans there was a more even cash/in-kind split. For both host and Venezuelan households, *Ingreso Solidario* was the main cash transfer received by a large margin, highlighting the role of the Covid-19 pandemic in expanding coverage to un- or under-served groups (*Ingreso Solidario* targeted households not previously in receipt of any cash transfers to support them during the pandemic). Although still not a majority, IDPs were far more likely than host and Venezuelan households to have been benefiting from routine cash transfer schemes that pre-dated the pandemic, particularly *Familias en Acción* (which covered 35% of IDP households in our sample). This relatively high coverage rate of IDPs in part reflects their special entitlements to State assistance under the 2011 Victims' Law and related policy framework.

In-kind or mixed-modality assistance was received by at least a quarter of IDPs and Venezuelans, and one-sixth of host households, almost always initiated within the previous year and predominantly from government. In the case of IDPs, only around 4% reported benefiting over the past year from the government's *Atención Humanitaria* for victims of the conflict (with slightly higher but still low coverage for those displaced within the past year and therefore eligible for the most intensive components of that scheme).

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We do not find evidence of notably greater barriers to access for IDPs relative to host recipients, although IDPs did report delays in the initial process to register their displacement status. Venezuelans found it easier to access in-kind assistance than citizens, and those already in the social registry (SISBÉN) appear to have had no more difficulties overall accessing cash transfers than IDPs or hosts. However, Venezuelans were more likely to cite lack of access to technology as a challenge for accessing cash transfers, and were also far more likely to struggle with SISBÉN registration, principally due to lack of documentation.

### To what extent and in what ways has humanitarian assistance linked with social protection in different displacement contexts?

In response to **internal displacement**, there is a comprehensive legal and operational framework in place for the Colombian government to assist IDPs, meaning provision is primarily nationally led with relatively limited international programming. The latter is principally focused on the emergency response to new displacement and is largely integrated with government systems, following government-established policies and using joint coordination mechanisms and administrative systems.

In the **Venezuelan response**, the government still provides most services and support. After some initial fragmentation, the growing international response is increasingly aligning or even fully integrating with government systems, with joint coordination mechanisms, nationally led legal frameworks, and even some instances of fully integrated financing (where international funds are channelled through government systems to support Venezuelans). Where international actors deliver their own programmes, cash transfer

values must align with national schemes, and eligibility criteria, targeting and referral systems are also sometimes linked.

While this suggests a relatively high – and growing – degree of integration, there is still a sense that many of the links between humanitarian agencies and government social protection in the Venezuelan response have been ad hoc and not yet consolidated into a larger migration policy framework. This may also explain Venezuelans' own perceptions that programming is fragmented, with unclear access routes and eligibility requirements between different schemes.

### What factors and processes led to the adoption of these approaches?

The government's political will to develop an effective joint response to the Venezuelan influx was driven by the urgency and magnitude of the crisis, alongside other likely influences, such as the recognition among policy-makers of the economic benefits of well-regulated migration, the long history of mobility and complex political relations between the two countries, and cultural ties and language similarities between the displaced and host populations.

For international agencies, closer links with government systems were driven by a recognition of the need to maximise limited resources as well as avoid duplication supporting populations that would likely remain displaced on a protracted basis. National laws and policies promoting IDPs and Venezuelans' access to broad socio-economic rights (coordinated by a clear government focal point) created a conducive collaboration environment and provides a defined role for humanitarian assistance, at least on paper (with aid required in the immediate aftermath of

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displacement, but not indefinitely, since displaced populations in theory have access to services and opportunities to rebuild their lives effectively).

Alongside the direct interests and concerns of international and national agencies, two other factors appear to have had a central role in influencing system linkages: (i) sub-national governments and their planning processes, which determine the local use of social protection systems to assist displaced populations; and (ii) the Covid-19 crisis, which triggered unprecedented levels of international-national cooperation to mitigate the pandemic's dire socio-economic impacts on both host and displaced populations amidst challenging lockdown measures.

What have been the benefits and drawbacks of these approaches for different stakeholders, and what is perceived to have driven these impacts?

*Our study considered outcomes of the assistance model for displacement-affected populations (relating predominantly to government programming, given the limited number of households receiving non-governmental assistance in our sample):*

For most **basic needs and wellbeing measures**, Venezuelans fare much worse than IDPs and the vulnerable host population in our survey. While we are generally unable to detect a significant association between social assistance receipt and basic needs measures (due in part to data limitations), we do detect statistically significant effects along certain dimensions. Moreover, in both the quantitative and qualitative research, displaced populations repeatedly highlight the vital importance of assistance for helping to

meet needs, whether for daily food and shelter (Venezuelans) or for more wide-ranging basic needs such as education and healthcare (IDPs).

In relation to **longer-term economic agency**, all groups, but especially IDPs, rated their financial situation poorly and steady employment was low for all. Venezuelans have the worst access to financial services, and both Venezuelans and IDPs have fewer assets than hosts. While assistance receipt was associated with increased access to bank accounts, current provision is perceived to have limited effect on displaced populations' broader economic agency, as it does not allow them to plan for the future or feel economically secure (in the case of IDPs, this was partly due to the long delays in accessing the lump-sum compensation that could significantly improve their living conditions).

**'Horizontal' social cohesion** outcomes (host-displaced relations) showed clear tensions, particularly in relation to Venezuelans. Only around a third of hosts and IDPs agreed that Venezuelans and Colombians get along well; 68% of Venezuelans agreed with that statement, but Venezuelans were also significantly more likely than IDPs to report having experienced harassment or discrimination (although also more likely to report having received host support). While our survey did not detect a significant association between assistance receipt and horizontal cohesion measures, the impacts of assistance on community relations were frequently highlighted in the qualitative research. This showed strong host support for assistance provision to IDPs, as vulnerable conflict victims; however, many IDP and host households in the low-income areas studied expressed concerns that the government should not provide further resources to Venezuelans until all vulnerable

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citizens are covered (this referred to government provision specifically, rather than internationally financed programmes).

In relation to **‘vertical social cohesion’** (trust between people and institutions), Venezuelans report significantly higher trust in government and UN agencies than host and IDP households. Assistance receipt was strongly associated with greater trust in government and international agencies.

*Our study also looked at the perceived benefits and drawbacks for other stakeholders:*

For **government** stakeholders, perceived benefits of improved linkages between humanitarian assistance and social protection include reduced duplication, improved targeting of recipients, expansion of coverage and services, increased institutional capacity and opening up of additional resources.

For **international organisations**, better linked assistance models were likewise deemed advantageous in optimising limited resources, expanding overall coverage, securing a better long-term approach to support the growing displaced population, and facilitating identification of gaps in programming, unmet needs and opportunities for improved provision.

Despite these benefits, integrating international and government assistance more closely was also associated with various **challenges**, notably the logistical and operational difficulties of secure and responsible data-sharing; fears that government commitments to displaced populations may be undermined by budgetary pressures; and social tensions that may result from apparent increases

in government provision for Venezuelans, if it is perceived to come at the expense of support for vulnerable citizens.

What are the insights for linking social protection and humanitarian assistance in different displacement contexts?

**Linking international assistance with government social protection** will not always be appropriate, but it is far more feasible when there is a consolidated, long-term vision in place to comprehensively address the displaced population’s needs, with a clear framework outlining different actors’ roles. International agencies can prepare to collaborate with social protection by harmonising their own activities, articulating their offer to strengthen government systems, and engaging government agencies in small-scale joint programming. Care must be taken to ensure that alignment with government transfers, eligibility criteria or administrative systems does not undermine the protection of vulnerable populations or the adequacy and accessibility of support for them, particularly those who are undocumented or fearful of registering as displaced.

The research also offers lessons for **ensuring that the government social protection system is better able to support displaced populations**. These include practical adjustments to tweak programme design and administration for displaced populations. They also include more fundamental shifts, to move from narrow, short-term assistance models to more medium- to long-term measures that promote access to decent work and financial security in practice, and that ‘level the playing field’ for displaced children and youth, so that the inequalities their parents face are not perpetuated over time.



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The government's new 'Temporary Protection Status for Venezuelans' decree provides a unique opportunity to develop this longer-term vision in Colombia, with more coherent and comprehensive programming in response to the Venezuelan influx. However, while the broad policy landscape and vision is encouraging, robust action must be taken to convert rights on paper into real opportunities in practice. Furthermore, this course of action must be charted in a manner that is sensitive to social tensions and does not – and is not perceived to – come at the expense of support for vulnerable citizens.

International financing has a key role to play here, since it can enable the government to realise its progressive long-term vision for Venezuelans, without jeopardising much-needed ongoing attention both to continued internal displacement and to pressing socio-economic inequalities among citizens, which have only been heightened by the pandemic. **While the government has adopted strong, nationally led displacement responses, this does not remove the need for the international community to share the burden of one of the largest – and, currently, most underfunded – displacement crises of modern times, through adequate, responsive, and long-term financing.**