OVERVIEW

The Venezuelan refugee crisis is one of the largest and most underfunded recent crises of displacement. Those displaced by the Venezuelan crisis face hunger, poor sanitary conditions, and lack of access to health care and housing, as well as rising xenophobia across Latin America and the Caribbean. The situation has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased poverty, unemployment, and vulnerability to violence. Religious actors are among the most active in providing immediate direct support, as well as advocating for longer-term solutions.

A June 16 roundtable on “Local Faith Communities Respond to Venezuelan Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean” featured representatives of secular and faith-inspired organizations who explored the challenges and possibilities of faith engagement in the crisis. The various organizations represented on the panel have distinct but often overlapping approaches to supporting people displaced in the crisis. While some focus on immediate needs, like hunger and shelter, others engage in longer-term work, such as job training. A nagging concern is both the loss of educational opportunities for refugee children and youth and widening gaps resulting from digital divides. Notwithstanding the wide range of approaches, those who spoke emphasized “the language of love” as a common theme in faith-inspired refugee work.
Panelists underscored the importance of collaboration in their work, highlighting how interreligious partnerships, as well as cooperation between faith-inspired and secular NGOs, can help to build the capacity needed to respond to the needs of refugees. Further interreligious collaboration and partnerships between faith-inspired and secular NGOs will be important in future action on the Venezuelan refugee crisis.

The broad sponsorship of the event reflected wide concern about the topic. It was co-hosted by the Berkley Center and the G20 Interfaith Forum Association. It was co-sponsored by Fscire; Religions for Peace Latin America and the Caribbean; the Latin American and Caribbean Ecclesial Network on Migration, Displacement, Refuge and Trafficking in Persons; World Faiths Development Dialogue; Islamic Relief USA; the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University; the *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*; the Religion, Law and International Relations Programme at the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture; the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Sustainability at Brunel University London; and the Global Challenges Research Fund.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The large and fast-changing Venezuela crisis has demanded extraordinary responses in the neighboring countries where refugees are located. As the crisis persists during the COVID-19 emergencies, local communities—motivated by compassion and, often, religious faith—continue to provide support even in environments where the refugees meet resentment.
- Local religious communities are often serving as first responders to Venezuelan refugees in need of basic necessities, such as food and shelter. The core motivation is compassion, and such efforts often reflect spontaneous, locally inspired humane responses to people in need.
- The religiosity of Venezuelan refugees often inclines them to trust religious or faith-inspired organizations, which make important contributions by offering emotional and spiritual guidance, as well as material support.
- Various faith-inspired organizations working in Venezuela prioritize refugee needs differently: Some tend toward systemic issues, whereas others seek to meet more immediate needs.
- Interreligious work often plays an integral role in faith-inspired humanitarian service. Cooperation between faith-inspired groups allows them to gain a better understanding of the overall crisis and to coordinate response efforts.
- Further interfaith collaboration—as well as partnerships between faith-inspired and secular organizations—will be important in efforts to respond to the continuing Venezuelan displacement crisis.

**VENEZUELAN DISPLACEMENT BY THE NUMBERS**

To date, 5.4 million Venezuelans have left their homes, of which 4.6 million remain in the Americas. At writing, 143,532 Venezuelans worldwide are recognized as refugees, and there are 793,862 pending
asylum claims. More than 2.5 million have been granted regular stay permits.

**Venezuelan Displacement by Country**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Venezuelan Migrant Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Columbia</td>
<td>1,742,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>1,049,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>457,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>431,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>261,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America and Mexico</td>
<td>252,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Cone</td>
<td>204,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>195,800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](https://www.unhcr.org), June 2021

**FAITH-INSPIRED ACTION ON DISPLACEMENT**

**Rev. Manuel Castillo, First Evangelical Baptist Church of Lima**

Rev. Manuel Castillo has mobilized his congregation to help refugees, and he frames his approach by considering how Jesus would respond to the migrants. His church has leveraged their Ministry of Love, a department responsible for supporting refugees, to provide refugees with three meals a day and to help distribute over 800 food baskets.

“We do believe definitely that as a church, we have to help our community and use the resources that we have as a religious institution to help those around us.” — Rev. Manuel Castillo

These actions have been directed to address what Castillo considers the most critical challenge facing migrants: food insecurity. As a result of the pandemic, many migrants lost their informal work in Peru, where 70% of the economy is in the informal sector, causing them to lose their homes and go hungry.

Mobilization, however, does not occur in isolation. Castillo is a member of the Interreligious Committee for Refugees and Migrants in Peru and has worked with UN officials and other organizations, such as Actions Against Hunger, in providing humanitarian resources to these refugees. While the pandemic continues to exacerbate the refugee crisis, Castillo remains committed to assisting and supporting refugees, and he identifies his main priority as helping refugees and immigrants in Lima and Peru to become self-sustaining.

**Carmen Carcelen, Casa de Acogida Juncal**

Carmen Carcelen, a Catholic living on the border between Colombia and Ecuador, views her large home as a blessing to be shared. Responding to both her faith and the crisis, she opened her home to the refugees who pass through en route to Chile. She seeks to meet the material needs of the refugees, providing them food and housing. Carcelen described these actions as enabling her to know God more deeply.
“God gave me a large house and a big family. I had plates, I had a kitchen, I had saucepans, and I wanted to help. So, it hasn’t been that hard to take the steps that I have taken. I want to keep helping out, and to do so in a selfless way.” — Carmen Carcelen

Sabrina Lustgarten, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)

HIAS, an international organization with Jewish roots, has implemented water, sanitation, and cash assistance programs in Venezuela, Columbia, and northern Central America. Many of their 44 offices in the region are in remote areas, and each office coordinates closely with local authorities, faith-inspired community organizations, networks of religious leaders, and refugees. This bureaucratic approach enables HIAS to address systemic issues in the region like immigration documentation, poverty, unemployment, xenophobia, and child vulnerability.

The number of people without legal status increased dramatically last year, so HIAS has prioritized increasing access to documentation for refugees. The COVID-19 emergency has coincided not only with a decrease in legal documentation but also with an increase in poverty, unemployment, and vulnerability to violence. HIAS works with local groups to provide financial aid and offers support for survivors of gender-based violence.

HIAS is also working to provide access to specialized services to the large population of minors who have left Venezuela, with estimates suggesting 20,000 minors left between 2015 and 2019. A persistent lack of data on how the pandemic and resulting changes to the labor market have impacted migrant minors is a significant obstacle to effective action.

In 2021, HIAS has so far reached 219,000 refugees but considers its work unfinished, insisting that faith communities continue to work together to increase visibility, funding, and political support on systemic issues which imperil the lives of refugees.

Christina Tobias-Nahi, Islamic Relief USA

Islamic Relief USA does not have a large footprint in Latin America, but they are an ally and partner in other ways. It has provided technical and financial support to partners on the ground, while also leveraging its advocacy channels in Washington, DC.

Illustrating the power of interfaith collaboration, they have worked to provide funding for food and shelter programs sponsored by Catholic Relief Services in Peru and Ecuador. The organization has also worked with HIAS in Ecuador to provide cash assistance, skills training, and entrepreneurial funding. The collaboration between Muslim and Jewish organizations is a good example of how different religions can successfully cooperate to meet humanitarian needs effectively.

An assistance model, developed by Islamic Relief USA, could help to guide humanitarian work on the Venezuelan refugee crisis. Based on criteria determined by migrants, the model sets benchmarks for refugee integration into their host society:
(1) at least one family member has a source of income;
(2) the family has adequate shelter;
(3) the family has access to three meals a day;
(4) the family members are becoming active participants in society.

When a family unit reaches all four benchmarks, they graduate from the program. This sort of model can be a helpful tool to measure the progress made on refugee integration.

**Martin Coria, Church World Service**

Church World Service (CWS), a network of American Protestant churches that assists migrants and refugees, conducted research on the role of faith-inspired organizations in responding to the displacement crisis, conducting interviews with over 150 churches that have provided assistance to Venezuelan refugees.

The research indicates that local churches are often the first line of support for refugees in terms of material assistance: shelter, food, child care, health care, and emotional support. Churches tend to have access to significant funding and demonstrate great creativity in responding to crises. The ingenuity of the local organizers has allowed religious organizations to have a strong impact and make good use of their funds, even across denominational or religious differences.

“To talk about local faith communities that provide support for the migrant and refugees is to talk about faith in action.” — Martin Coria

**Elvy Monzant, Red CLAMOR (Latin American and Caribbean Ecclesial Network of Migration, Displacement, Shelter and Trafficking in Persons)**

Red CLAMOR connects organizations of the Catholic Church working in migration, refugee displacement, and human trafficking. It assists over 600 Church projects in 153 cities across Latin America that serve displaced persons through dining halls, first aid clinics, and similar initiatives. Drawing inspiration from Pope Francis’ call for interfaith unity, the organization celebrates efforts that bring together diverse groups of faith-inspired institutions in promoting practical humanitarian efforts.

The network aims to bring down both the tangible walls, such as physical barriers and visa quotas, and intangible walls, such as xenophobia, that divide people and deny migrants their rights. Especially as host countries portray migrants as violent criminals or economic drains, protecting refugee rights requires a synergy between migrants, faith-inspired organizations, and local communities.

Red CLAMOR pushes for dialogue toward political and cultural integration that changes how society and law interact with migrants. This process necessitates casting the displaced as active protagonists in the effort to have their rights recognized, rather than as passive recipients of aid. Rather than being the voice of the voiceless, Red CLAMOR is actively amplifying the voice of the voiceless.
Azza Karam, Religions for Peace International

Azza Karam argued that faith-inspired organizations offer values that complement the secular logic of international relief. These organizations “speak the language of love” supported by a “theology of love,” and their religious compassion is an important contribution to meeting the human needs of refugees.

Service to refugees can be said to manifest divine mercy in the eyes of the religious. Such mercy transcends religious particularity: When religious organizations work together ecumenically, the value they add increases even more.

Karam understands crises—the Venezuelan crisis and others—as opportunities of faith: Crises offer ways to practice faith by serving millions of people in need. While appreciating existing interfaith collaboration, Karam thinks that much more could be done ecumenically. In order to create a truly multi-faith response, relatively well-off religious organizations should give financial support to local religious initiatives tackling various crises.

“[This crisis and many others are actually opportunities to serve the mission of faith and belief that is held dear to these organizations. It is very rare we hear of a crisis as being an opportunity of faith.” — Azza Karam

SECULAR ORGANIZATIONS AND REFUGEE RESPONSE

Diego Beltrand, International Organization for Migration

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) notes how the pandemic has devastated a region already under crisis. Many refugees lost their jobs and access to food and social services, resulting in over 3,000 deaths.

Xenophobia and discrimination exacerbate the economic problems, but interreligious cooperation works to combat these prejudices. IOM has signed a memorandum of understanding with Religions for Peace to address the prejudices faced by the refugees, recognizing the fundamental role religious communities and faith-inspired organizations play in supporting migrants through both policy advocacy and material support.

Collaboration, especially with the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform (R4V Program), has yielded tremendous fruit. The R4V Program put together a platform of 140 organizations from 17 different countries from across Latin America and the Caribbean to respond to the Venezuelan crisis. This platform was established to identify the needs of millions of people and provide them with resources and social services, including education, shelter, sanitation, transportation, and nutrition, among others. IOM collaboration with HIAS has also worked to prevent human trafficking.
Federico Agusti, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Federico Agusti is a representative of UNHCR in Peru, where the organization works collaboratively with local faith-inspired organizations. Agusti highlighted the positive contributions religious organizations make by offering housing, guidance, education, and information. Information is one of the most crucial services faith-inspired organizations can offer, since people typically trust religious organizations more than they do other groups.

UNHCR is closely working with the Interreligious Council for Refugees and Migrants in Peru—an association of more than 50 faith-inspired organizations of various religious traditions, including Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam—to help refugees find housing, provide them with food and other basic necessities, and assist them in integrating into their new communities.

The organization is also working with faith-inspired organizations to prevent discrimination against refugees and to combat xenophobia. For example, UNHCR launched a campaign called My Cause is Your Cause, which includes all members of the Interreligious Council for Refugees and Migrants in Peru. The campaign has organized many (virtual) intercultural fairs to celebrate Christmas and other holidays. This is just one example where the various members of the interreligious council put aside their religious differences in favor of working together on relief efforts.

QUESTIONS AND EXCHANGE

Education

The vulnerability of forced migrants and the far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted education for millions of Venezuelan children. A recent monitoring effort revealed that of the total population of Venezuelan youth displaced in Peru, only 63% were enrolled in school. Of this 63%, it is estimated that half do not have access to reliable internet or digital devices.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated virtual education, this gap in access to technology has resulted in unequal access to education. UNHCR, in conjunction with local faith communities, is working to provide phones and tablets to families in need—especially those with multiple children who must divide their digital resources. Furthermore, UNHCR is establishing internet-connected community spaces where children and adults can reliably access the internet.

Despite these initiatives, virtual education is an imperfect substitute for in-person learning, and displaced children are at the greatest disadvantage—especially as the poverty rate among foreigners in Peru has risen from 18% to 90% over the last two months. Other resources, such as dedicated teachers and volunteers who can reinforce knowledge gained virtually, are necessary to ensure refugee students do not fall further behind.

Division of Labor

Local religious communities often serve as first responders to refugees in need of basic necessities and protection. The
Religiosity of refugees often inclines them to trust religious communities, which offer food and shelter, as well as emotional and spiritual guidance. Smaller religious communities that are well-embedded in the local community often have the capacity to address immediate needs, especially as they are less inhibited by bureaucracy.

While local religious communities offer the first wave of support, faith-inspired organizations and interreligious organizations work to resolve systemic issues. They work on regularizing the legal status of migrants and combating unemployment and poverty through public policy, integration, and development programs.

Cooperation between different religious communities helps to support a better macro-level understanding of the crisis, as well as strategy to meet the diverse needs of migrants and refugees. Collaboration between the local and the bureaucratic levels highlights the teamwork necessary to address the displacement crisis in Venezuela.

**Rising Xenophobia**

Xenophobia and ethnic discrimination pose serious threats to refugees, and increasing populist and nationalist sentiment exacerbate these challenges. Prejudiced ideologies and policies imperil refugees on a number of fronts. Tougher border policies make entrance into other states increasingly dangerous and incentivize illegal crossings. Similar policies make acquiring appropriate legal documentation more difficult for displaced persons, precluding access to necessary services like unemployment benefits and health care.

Religious communities work against these trends by emphasizing neighbor love. They represent an important ally for secular refugee organizations, like UNHCR, in combatting exclusionary policies. Interfaith work also demonstrates how prejudice can be overcome and provides a model for cooperation across ideological divides.

**CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS**

Faith-inspired organizations and local faith communities have made up the front line of service to displaced persons from Venezuela, offering material, emotional, and spiritual support. These organizations are strengthened by their basis in religion and ought to be recognized and supported by the broader international relief community. Interreligious cooperation is a tool to increase the effectiveness and impact of global aid by drawing on the strengths and perspectives of the world’s religious communities.

The upcoming G20 Interfaith Forum in September 2021 will provide a space for interfaith dialogue, as well as a springboard for future material collaboration, to directly support international relief efforts in the Venezuelan displacement crisis.
EVENT PARTICIPANTS

**Federico Agusti** is the representative in Peru of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

**Diego Beltrand** is the director general’s special envoy for the regional response to the Venezuela situation at the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

**Carmen Carcelén** is the coordinator of Casa de Acogida Juncal, a shelter for Venezuelans based out of her home in El Juncal, Ecuador.

**Rev. Manuel Castillo** is the pastor of the First Evangelical Baptist Church of Lima and a member of the Interreligious Committee for Refugees and Migrants in Peru.

**Martin Coria** is regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean at Church World Service (CWS).

**Dr. Azza Karam** is secretary general of Religions for Peace International and professor of religion and development at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**Sabrina Lustgarten** is the executive vice president of HIAS, a Jewish humanitarian organization that provides services to refugees and asylum seekers of all faiths.

**Katherine Marshall** is a senior fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and a professor of the practice of development, conflict, and religion in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

**Elvy Monzant** is the executive secretary of Red CLAMOR, a Latin American and Caribbean ecclesial network that confronts migration, displacement, refuge, and trafficking in persons.

**Elias Szczytnicki** serves as the secretary general of the Latin American and Caribbean Council of Religious Leaders and the director of the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Office of Religions for Peace.

**Christina Tobias-Nahi** serves as the director of communications and public affairs at Islamic Relief USA.
About this Brief

This event summary highlights contributions to a virtual meeting on “Local Faith Communities Respond to Venezuelan Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean,” held on June 16, 2021. The event featured representatives of faith-based and secular NGOs, who reflected on the Venezuelan displacement crisis.

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University seeks a more just and peaceful world by deepening knowledge and solving problems at the intersection of religion and global affairs through research, teaching, and engaging multiple publics. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a comprehensive examination of religion and norms is critical to address complex global challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

The G20 Interfaith Forum has convened annually since 2014 in the G20 host country. There have thus been meetings in Australia, Turkey, China, Germany, Argentina, Japan, and Saudi Arabia. Italy will host the September 2021 forum. The G20 Interfaith Forum offers a platform where networks of religiously linked institutions and initiatives engage on global agendas. Since 2017, Berkley Center Senior Fellow Katherine Marshall has served on the G20 Interfaith Association Advisory Council and contributed to the recommendations and policy briefs developed by the G20 Interfaith Forum.

For additional event content, see https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/events.