

Reunião de Altos Funcionários - ACNUR. 15 de dezembro, 2021, 9h30-10h45

Discurso para o Sr. SASC. **Spotlight Session 1:** The role of the GCR in the medium to long-term response to the COVID-19

PANEL 2: Looking forwards

- Let me thank the organizers for inviting Brazil to share our experience in this spotlight session. As everyone else, I wanted to be in Geneva today and to be able to greet you all in person. The fact that I am not is an eloquent demonstration of the complexity of the situation we are still facing.
- The covid-19 pandemic represented an extremely harsh blow for all the world. It has taken a dramatic toll in Brazil, as you know, and it has had of course a devastating impact for refugees and other vulnerable groups. It has affected all, but it has greatly exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.
- In Brazil, we were already facing an unprecedented challenge when the pandemic hit. Brazil hosts more than **287 thousand Venezuelan refugees and migrants**, a fraction of some **6 million people** who had to leave the country, seeking better living conditions and protection mostly within the region.
- Facing a crisis within a crisis, our response relied on two aspects, both crucial elements of the Global Compact for Refugees and both, in our view, essential for the longer-term recovery: the first one is **partnerships**. With the support of international organizations and civil society, key facilities such as shelters were adapted to follow preventive measures. A field hospital has been deployed at the border region, which benefited Venezuelans and Brazilian alike. And, most importantly, support from various actors, including at the local level, allowed for the interiorization strategy to continue, even during the worst phase of the pandemic.
- The interiorization process, as some of you may know, is the government-led effort to voluntarily relocate Venezuelan migrants and refugees to **more than 770 cities in Brazil**, ensuring better integration

perspectives and helping alleviate the pressure on public services at the border. The strategy has already benefited more than **64 thousand** Venezuelans. Partnerships and very close coordination with organizations such as IOM and UNHCR, civil society, local authorities, and the private sector are essential for this strategy to work.

- A recent research carried out by UNHCR, UNFPA and Brazilian universities, focused on the interiorization strategy during the pandemic, found out that prevailing **unemployment rates** among relocated Venezuelans are significantly lower if compared to the Venezuelans who are still in the border region (**17%**, compared to **30%**). In terms of **education**, **67%** of the children in relocated families are enrolled in schools, a rate that drops to **41%** among those at the border. An in terms of **income**, the advantages of interiorization are even more apparent, as relocated families tend to earn on average **120% more** than those staying at the border region.
- Similar dynamics are identifiable when it comes to access to services in general. Many challenges still remain, and they relate closely to gender inequalities and the situation of vulnerable groups, aspects which are very much at the center of the discussions on how to further improve the strategy.
- The other fundamental aspect is **inclusion** – and more specifically the access to social benefits. Access to social protection by Venezuelans refugees and migrants in Brazil has expanded throughout the country since the pandemic started. Enrolments of Venezuelans in **Federal Single Registry (Cadastro Único)**, which is essential for accessing several social benefits and cash-transfers, went from **49 thousand** in January 2020 to **105 thousand** in October 2021.
- The number of Venezuelans currently enrolled in our main cash-transfer program, the Bolsa Família (which has recently been expanded and renamed as “Auxílio Brasil”), is currently at **54 thousand**. This number went from **19 thousand to 48 thousand in a single month, from March to April 2020**. This clearly shows how fast the system responded to the needs and how vital a role cash-transfers played at that time.

- On the other hand, we also face challenges in terms of inclusion. Apart from the most obvious barrier, which in the case of Brasil is the language, Venezuelan children face congestion and mismatch of age and grade attainment, and occupational downgrading is one of the main difficulties for working age Venezuelans to access the formal labor market. Much remains to be done in generating policies that can help bridge those gaps, and continued support is key to advance towards more sustainable pathways to integration.
- Finally, let me highlight that all migrants and refugees in Brazil, regardless of their status, are included in the national vaccination plan for Covid-19, which is advancing very fast, with **62% of the population fully vaccinated**. In fact, Venezuelan indigenous groups were among the very first populations to receive the Covid-19 vaccines in Brazil, and special campaigns have been designed to reach migrants and refugees in areas of concern, such as the border with Venezuela.
- To conclude, inclusion proved once again to be the answer and the way ahead. And without sound, durable, committed partnerships, this level of support to refugees and to their host communities will not be sustainable. Looking forward, I believe that advancing in these two dimensions, and in bringing benefits to refugees and host communities, should be the fundamental focus of our efforts. Thank you very much.

PERGUNTAS:

1. *Did social cash assistance mitigate mid- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on the livelihoods and self-reliance of refugees and others of concern? What were the key takeaways?*

Yes, cash assistance, as I said, was one fundamental lifeline for this population. Let me stress that Venezuelans could also access the emergency cash-transfer program established during the pandemic, which is the largest such program in the history of Brazil in terms of the resources and beneficiaries. It represented a fundamental lifeline for more than 25% of the Brazilian population during the worst of the pandemic. Even more so for refugees and migrants.

It is also worth mentioning that during the pandemic refugees and migrants who were formally employed were also benefitted by government measures to support companies in keeping jobs, both through the suspension of employment contracts with salaries been paid by public funds, and by reduction of working hours without salary reduction.

In this connection, I think the key takeaways are that existing social assistance mechanisms were essential, coupled with emergency measures, and this safety cushion will play a fundamental role in bringing local integration back on track in this new scenario of slow recovery. Also, the rapid access to registries and benefits is essential, and for that we counted on the support by several actors such as IOM, UNHCR and civil society to help make information available to the concerned population.

2. Question 2: Can you tell us how the alignment and complementarity between Government social assistance and humanitarian cash assistance improved the response to the pandemic? What are the key factors for success and what are the lessons for future?

Humanitarian cash assistance plays a complementary but very important role in providing economic assistance for refugees. Cash-based interventions from humanitarian actors often focus on vulnerable groups, including elders, single women heads of family, people with disabilities or in serious medical conditions, or victims of sexual or gender-based violence. This plays a key, bridging role, for example when beneficiaries still have to wait for accessing official social assistance or income generating initiatives.

It is also key as a way to support government or civil society specific projects, covering aspects such as transportation to access vocational trainings or support to shelter-exit strategies. In the interiorization strategy, together with the vital transportation support and assistance by IOM, UNHCR cash-based interventions have been helping the employment-based modality, addressing basic needs of the beneficiaries during the first month in the destination city while the first salaries have not yet been paid.

I believe the key factors here, again, are durable partnerships, on the basis of sound needs assessment, an flexibility to advance on new modalities of complementarity as the situation evolves.