

Global Issues

COVID-19, Migrant Labour and Inclusion in South America

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant labour and inclusion in South America has been severe. Migrants play a critical role in labour markets across the region, but their largely informal employment left them especially vulnerable as governments sought to fight COVID-19 in a context of institutional precariousness, lack of reliable information and uncertainty about which measures to implement. Mandatory lockdowns and widespread border closures severely limited human mobility and exacerbated barriers to migrants' socio-economic integration. Three key factors contributed to migrant vulnerability and exclusion in this context – first, the stark increase in voluntary and forced mobility across the region in the past twenty years, which already posed a serious challenge to states before the onset of the pandemic; second, the lack of permanent and sustainable migrant regularisation in most countries (Cerrutti, 2022); and third, the lack of effective mechanisms to remedy migrants' socio-economic and labour precarity (Brauckmeyer, Padrón and Licheri, 2022).

Regarding changing mobility patterns, in the twenty-first century South America has transformed from being predominantly a migrant-sending region to one characterised by growing intraregional labour migration (Acosta, 2018; Donato et al., 2010; Cerrutti, 2022). The migrant stock of South Americans residing within the region increased from around 2 million migrants in 1990 to 4.5 million in 2015 – due partly to the commodity boom and outstanding economic growth rates across the region, and partly to the passing of remarkably progressive immigration laws. At the same time, in the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic the region was confronted with the largest forced migration in its history, driven by the humanitarian and political crises in Venezuela. As of August 2022, more than 5.22 million Venezuelan nationals were displaced across the region, with most either residing and/or working in the region informally. Colombia and Peru rank as the top two receiving countries in the region, with more than 2.5 and 1.3 million Venezuelan citizens respectively officially registered in those countries (R4V, 2022).

With a view to migrant regularisation, before the onset of the Venezuelan displacement crisis in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, intraregional migrants largely took advantage of bilateral and multilateral residence agreements. In the cases of Mercosur¹ and the Andean Community,² such treaties establish that citizens of member states of the same bloc may reside and work legally in the same conditions as nationals for up to two years (Acosta and Brumat, 2020; Comunidad Andina, 2021). However, with Venezuelan forced displacement and since the suspension of Venezuela from Mercosur late in 2016, states across the region implemented ad hoc policies that offered only limited regular residence status, despite their obligation to protect

¹ Mercado Común del Sur, or Southern Common Market. Full members include Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Although Venezuela is a full member, it has been suspended since 1 December 2016. Associate member countries include Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru and Suriname.

² Andean Community (Spanish: Comunidad Andina, CAN) is a free trade area with the objective of creating a customs union comprising Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

Venezuelans as refugees under the Cartagena Declaration of 1984 (Freier and Fernández Rodríguez, 2021; Freier, Berganza and Blouin, 2022). The implementation of access restrictions on Venezuelans in countries such as Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru since 2018 already led to the establishment of irregular migratory routes. Although available data suggests that pandemic-era border closures and travel restrictions led to a drop in intraregional migratory flows, such restrictions, which lasted until early 2022 in some cases, further solidified irregular channels of entry and increased the reach of migrant smugglers and people traffickers (Freier, 2021).

Regarding labour precarity, the employment of intraregional migrant workers has been characterised by jobs in small-scale establishments, and by weak labour relations and deficient levels of socio-labour protection in a range of different sectors, such as agriculture, construction, domestic work and services (ILO, 2003). Here it is crucial to consider that even when migrants have legal status, most have very limited opportunities to access the formal labour market as about 60 per cent of total employment in the region is informal. Although Venezuelans tend to be exceptionally highly skilled – in 2020 about half of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru had completed tertiary education – close to 90 per cent of them were working informally or in the informal sector and less than 3 per cent had been able to validate their degrees (Brauckmeyer et al., 2022; Freier, Kvietok and Castro Padrón, 2022). In Peru, the contract tenures of Venezuelans was five times lower than that of Peruvians, and they earned approximately one-third less than nationals in 2019 (World Bank, 2019).

With the outbreak of the pandemic, unemployment across the region increased significantly in sectors such as domestic work (71 per cent unemployment), retail and restaurants (59 per cent), and hospitality and tourism (54 per cent) (ILO, 2003). In this context, the employment of Venezuelan migrants and refugees living in socio-economic and legal precarity was substantially threatened, as this group was among the first to be laid off or to have their salaries reduced or suspended. As a result of job losses, many saw themselves without the ability to support themselves and send remittances to their families in their home countries (Koechlin, 2020). Being largely excluded from national emergency subsistence schemes, the drop in income led many labour migrants and refugees to take up highly precarious and undervalued jobs that heightened their exposure to the virus. The pandemic especially exacerbated migrant women's employment precarity, which was already negatively affected by pre-existing structural gender gaps in the region's labour markets; many took on jobs that they had been unwilling to do previously, such as street vending, household work and prostitution (Vásques, Castro and Licheri, 2020; Freier, Kvietok and Castro Padrón, 2022). At the same time, the pandemic led to an increase in demand for workers providing essential health services (nurses, doctors, other health care roles), as well as in retail and logistics; there were also efforts at integration of healthcare professionals (Zambrano-Barragán et al., 2021).

In the context of limited efforts and capacities of states to promote comprehensive immigration and integration policies, the role of civil society and workers' unions arguably is key. For this purpose, we take a closer look at the cases of Argentina and Peru. Southern Cone countries³ have a higher rate of union membership than Andean countries. In Argentina, the unionisation rate was 28 per cent in 2018, reflecting a long tradition of highly politicised union activism (Tomada, Schleser and Maito, 2018). Although the country has a formal, salaried working class, and the main trade union organisations were consolidated in the mid-twentieth century, it is

³ The Southern Cone is a geographical and cultural subregion composed of the southernmost areas of South America. It consists of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, and sometimes Paraguay and Brazil's four southern states.

important to keep in mind that this unionisation rate largely reflects formal employment; the rate is very low in informal sectors (Tomada et al., 2018). In Peru, unionisation weakened since the 1980s due to the effects of economic crises and neo-liberal policies, reaching 5.2 per cent of total wage earners (formal and informal) in 2019 (Yépez, 1986). Thus the ability of Peruvian workers to bargain collectively and lobby for their interests is limited (Trabajodigno, 2019). Nevertheless, trade associations and organisations (representing stevedores, motorcycle taxi drivers, track drivers and informal workers) exert a certain level of influence and pressure through – sometimes violent – strikes and road blockages.

Regarding the inclusion and protection of Venezuelan workers, in Argentina both national and international civil society organisations and the Argentine Commission for Refugees and Migrants provide essential support for recent migrants and pressure the authorities to improve their inclusion (González Levaggi and Freier, 2018). Venezuelan migrant organisations, such as the Asociación de Venezolanos en Argentina (ASOVEN), have also become increasingly influential, focusing on the labour integration of the migrants and refugees and generating communication networks between civil society organisations and the Venezuelan community (González Levaggi and Freier, 2018). In Peru – not least due to the much weaker role of civil society organisations overall – the involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been much more limited, although the Venezuelan Union (an association of Venezuelans that helps compatriots in need), religious organisations and some NGOs try to tackle poverty alleviation, education and child welfare. In the adverse context of the pandemic, the activism of the human mobility working group operating under the National Human Rights Coordinator enabled temporary residence holders and asylum seekers to access SERVICER, the system that allowed Peruvians and foreign health professionals to be employed in the fight against the pandemic. More recently another Venezuelan migrant organisation, Venactiva, signed agreements with the Peruvian union centrals Autónoma de Trabajadores del Perú (CATP) and the Confederación Unitaria de Trabajadores del Perú (CUT). Overall, high levels of informality, the fear of deportation and growing xenophobia limit union activism of Venezuelan workers in the region, especially in countries such as Peru where protest often results in violence and open confrontation with the police or military.

The experience of labour migrants in South America during the COVID-19 pandemic allows for a number of policy recommendations. First, and most broadly, there is a need for legal means of mobility and sustainable regularisation programmes to empower Venezuelan migrants and refugees to stand up for their rights and potentially to unionise (Freier, Kviatok and Castro Padrón, 2022). Second, states should facilitate the validation of each other's university degrees to facilitate the integration of skilled labour into the formal labour market and allow them to fulfil their socio-economic potential. Third, from both a public health and security perspective, there is a need for comprehensive socio-economic assistance schemes in emergency situations, so that migrants and refugees can compensate for the loss of income and are not disproportionately exposed to infection or pushed towards illicit activities to ensure their survival (Davalos, 2021). Fourth, from a public health perspective, there is a general need for inclusive vaccination schemes that include migrants and refugees, and particularly children, in national immunisation campaigns (UNICEF, 2021). Lastly, on the regional level, the issuance of a valid health or vaccination passport should be re-established (Toledo-Leyva, 2021).

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