



## UN Volunteers contribute to an inclusive future in Colombia

In Latin America, poverty, armed conflicts and the lack of access to essential services are obstacles to social equality. When it comes to the lives of displaced people, especially children, the vulnerabilities are even higher. On International Social Justice Day, we recognize the importance of volunteerism as a means of inclusion, empowerment and equality for displaced people.

In the region, more than 4.8 million Venezuelans have left the country towards other territories like Peru, where 57 percent live in overcrowded spaces ([World Bank, 2020](#)). On a similar note, more than 600 thousand children in Guatemala need protection, while 800 thousand people need help for water, sanitation and hygiene in El Salvador ([Relief web, 2021](#)).

According to [the UN High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#), 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2020. In Colombia, the leading host country for Venezuelan migrants and refugees, the situation worsens due to the internal armed conflict.

"According to preliminary estimates, 6.9 million people living in rural areas are under the control or influence of non-state armed groups," Julian Watkinson, a UN Volunteer serving as Humanitarian Affairs Officer for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Colombia comments.

Leonardo Martínez, a UN Volunteer serving as Protection, Childhood and Humanitarian Action Specialist with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Colombia, points that "the dynamics of recruitment and use of children and adolescents not only affect the nationals but the migrant population as well."

Then how can UN Volunteers contribute to the affected people? Given his previous experience as a psychologist, Leonardo recognizes the importance of emotional health care during the humanitarian response. "Many of the issues our country and region have are emotional wounds. If they don't heal, then it's the children who suffer the consequences, replicating those violent behaviours in their adulthood," says Leonardo.

For the solutions to be sustainable and representative, it is also crucial to include the voices of the affected people. "We must work together with the migrant people and the host communities because their interaction can build a good relationship and diminish the risk of xenophobia. Besides, the participation of children and adolescents is fundamental as their ways of seeing the world are related to the wishes of change they want for their territories, lives and families," explains Leonardo.

“With our humanitarian response, we can contribute to diminishing the vulnerability of the population towards the armed groups, which is usually caused by inequity and the lack of economic opportunities in hard-to-reach territories," -- Julian Watkinson, UN Volunteer Humanitarian Affairs Officer with UNOCHA, Colombia

Lastly, humanitarian assistance requires collective efforts, and the links between Non-Governmental Organizations, the Government and Civil Society is the key. "UN Volunteers act as a bridge to generate more resilience and cooperation that strengthen the communities in the face of a violent situation," Julian comments.

Currently, 372 UN Volunteers with UNOCHA and UNICEF serve as bridges between local actors. Their multidisciplinary perspectives on humanitarian assistance and the spirit of volunteerism bring a more inclusive and equal future for displaced people in the region.

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## Latin America and the Caribbean

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