



Child Protection

and COVID-19

Venezuela Case Study

The impact of COVID-19 on children¹

Children in Venezuela have faced multiple protection risks, even prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic which has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the country and in the region. Political instability, economic contraction, collapse of the health system, lack of access to basic services, scarcity of food and medicine, and crumbling infrastructure – including water and sanitation – are among the overlapping emergencies in the context.² The situation has led 6 million Venezuelans to flee to other countries, primarily in the region.³

In May 2021, World Vision conducted a household survey of internally displaced families reached by its programming⁴ which showed significant and worrying impacts of COVID-19 on children's rights, protection and well-being. The majority (69%) of respondents stated that their income had gone down, either due to job loss, or reduction in hours or wages. In response, families engaged in harmful coping mechanisms, like reducing meals, selling household goods, borrowing from friends and neighbours, using up savings, and relying on government and humanitarian assistance, among other strategies.

A previous survey⁵ noted that the decrease in income was also driving negative coping mechanisms, such as hazardous child labour, child marriage or consensual union⁶, and voluntary separation from parents and caregivers, where the latter make the decision to leave their children with grandparents when they leave the country.⁷ Lack of income, leading to the inability to pay rent, has led to evictions. All these factors have led to an increase in psychosocial distress and tensions within families⁸.

The impacts of COVID-19 on children have included limited food, school dropout, exposure to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, and child labour. One of the biggest impacts has been the closure of schools, some permanently. When schools re-opened, transportation was difficult due to the pandemic shutdowns, and some parents were reluctant for their children to go back to school. There were many remote modalities of alternative learning; however, these were not accessible for all children, particularly those with limited access to internet connections and internet-enabled devices, especially computers. Power outages also impeded access for some children.

There is a lot of need here, a lot of misery, we just survive. Since the quarantine arrived, I have not been able to work well, because there is no transports and they do not call me from the houses to work.

Maria, 45, mother of two, Miranda State, Venezuela



1. This case study was developed by Malia Robinson, International Consultant, Auxiliadora Alvarado, Child Protection and Advocacy Advisor, World Vision Venezuela, and Jose Piñero, Coordinator for Hope Without Borders. It was reviewed by Natalia Korobkova, Humanitarian Advocacy and External Engagement Technical Director, World Vision International.
2. World Vision. (2020) A double-edged sword: Protection risks facing Venezuelan children during the pandemic. World Vision, p. 8.
3. Relief Web data, 18 September, 2021. <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/reliefweb-crisis-figures>. Retrieved 9.15.21
4. World Vision. (2021) High risk-low priority: Why unlocking COVID-19 vaccination access for refugee and internally displaced communities is critical for children. World Vision, p.32
5. World Vision Repotr 2020, op.cit. p.14
6. Redhna. Red por los Derechos Humanos de los niños Informe 2021
7. World Vision Repotr 2020, op.cit. p.14
8. Amnistía Internacional (2021), Salud Mental en Venezuela: Un peso invisible sobre los hombros 2021. [amnistia.org](https://www.amnistia.org); Redhna (2021), Derechos de Papel: Incidentes y Amenazas a la Protección Integral de NNA 2021. Redhna

The impacts of COVID-19 are dire for children on the move. While their situation does vary across countries, lack of access to food, education and healthcare, and increased child protection threats are shared risks. Many have a lengthy stay in quarantine centres upon arrival, depriving their caregivers of opportunities for income generation. Their typically crowded living conditions also present an increased risk of COVID-19 infection, particularly if hygiene and sanitation facilities are absent.

For Venezuelan children who have migrated to another country, lack of documentation can prevent them from accessing healthcare and other services, such as vaccines. In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has had many, varied impacts on children's protection and well-being, particularly in fragile states. Child protection organizations, such as World Vision Venezuela, have had to adapt their programming to meet the enhanced and particular needs of children at this time.

The objectives of World Vision's humanitarian response in Venezuela are:



Partnerships with churches and faith-based organization leaders to promote the well-being and rights of the most vulnerable children in their communities



Spiritual nurture of children to create a supportive environment to enable children to pursue their spiritual development



Water, sanitation and hygiene programming to improve the health of children and their families



Nutrition programming to increase access to food and nutrition options in the context, supporting children's health.



Livelihood support to ensure parents' ability to stay in the country and to provide for their children's needs.



World Vision Venezuela's adaptation and strengthening of child protection programming



One of the main child protection programmes being implemented in Venezuela is our **Channels of Hope** model. Its aim is to support faith leaders and communities to engage with key child protection and well-being issues. It is a facilitative package for interactive workshops, grounded in the faith community's guiding principles and religious texts. In a context like Venezuela, all our child protection programming is through churches and faith-based organizations. It is therefore essential to engage them in reflecting on pertinent child protection concerns and provide support to enable them to take action to protect children in their communities.

Some international organizations are hesitant to work with faith leaders. This is due to a lack of understanding about how to work with churches and how to work across different religions. However, based on our success delivering World Vision's Channels of Hope model across multiple contexts, our child protection team is keen to demonstrate that it is possible to effectively engage faith leaders and communities in humanitarian child protection efforts and see sustainable positive impacts.

The Channels of Hope model was originally designed for face-to-face training. In the context of the pandemic, where such in-person trainings were often not allowed, we had to adapt the materials for a virtual training process. **World Vision Venezuela was the first country programme to**

move the certification process for the Channels of Hope model to a virtual format. Thirty-five participants from 20 churches attended sessions over Zoom for 12 hours a week over three weeks. Three facilitators worked on adapting the methodology and systematized the approach.

There was initially a concern that, when delivered this way, the training might be too impersonal. This was important because the model "is not about increasing knowledge about child protection [but] is about changing...the mind and the heart regarding child protection." We learned, though, that remote training is possible, even with the connectivity problems in the country. People were participating on their cell phones; in some cases, multiple people would gather around one cell phone in their house or church. Participants were engaged, and by the end of the three weeks, only two out of the 35 participants did not complete the whole certification process. And beyond certification, we have already seen the changes sought through virtual monitoring .

While the virtual platform was effective, its reach was nevertheless quite limited. Many people did not have adequate connectivity to participate, for example. Face-to-face trainings would have been ideal, but even without the COVID-19 precautions, their cost would far exceed the programme's current budget which was able to support the virtual platform.

9. For more information: <https://www.wvi.org/church-and-interfaith-engagement/channels-hope-child-protection>

10. Interview with World Vision Venezuela child protection and advocacy staff on 8.24.2021

11. World Vision, 2021, Channels of Hope Report. World Vision.

World Vision Venezuela's partners' adaptation and strengthening of their programme approaches and World Vision Venezuela's role in supporting this process

All of World Vision Venezuela's and partners have implemented the following approaches:

CHANNELS OF HOPE

Partners who participated in the Channels of Hope certification were very enthusiastic and appreciative of the opportunity. One partner interviewed shared that the programme has helped churches and faith-based organizations be more structured and organized in terms of addressing child protection issues and referring cases.

Partners have reported how much they feel the programme has changed them, challenging their attitudes and feelings about child protection, and giving them tools to prevent and respond to violence. They say it has affirmed their role as child protection advocates, strengthening their sense of social responsibility to prevent and respond to violence against children. They also shared that they see this work as going beyond the training; they also believe it is their role to assign responsibilities and form action committees within the church.

One female participant from a partner faith-based organization who completed the certification trained others in her church. At the church they provided meals as part of their COVID-19 Response. Three members of the church whom she trained successfully used their training to identify a child who was being physically abused and responded to the case, despite the sensitivities of bringing attention to abuse in the community. Based on their training, they knew they had to report the case to the police when their efforts to follow up on the case did not change the perpetrator's behaviour.

The faith-based organization also realized that there was an interconnection between nutrition and child protection; critically, **the Channels of Hope training helped those providing nutrition to be aware that some of the children in receipt of meals were experiencing abuse.**¹² Any identified cases were referred for specialized child protection support.



HOPE WITHOUT BORDERS

Hope Without Borders is a network of faith leaders and faith-based organizations that is World Vision's primary partner in Venezuela. The network does outreach work, which includes communication on COVID-19 prevention and child protection in general. Messages for communities are shared on WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Because of poor internet connectivity in some communities, the network has also been using radio to share these messages.

Radio is used to facilitate games for children which they can do whilst listening to the radio in their churches. Activities and messages focusing on the spiritual nurture of children are also shared on the radio. Children come to the churches to listen to the radio and partake in a meal, as most of the churches provide food. Besides the activities, radio connects children to important messages, like the importance of wearing a face mask during the pandemic, for example and about their protection.

Our Hope Without Borders Coordinator and Operations Coordinator have been monitoring the churches in the network with regards their adherence to COVID-19 safety precautions. They send out a Google form approximately every two months to learn what measures churches were taking to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during their activities, including child protection prevention messages. Happily, the churches reported taking stringent measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including sharing messaging for COVID-19 prevention and an increased awareness of child protection.

12. Interview with partner staff on 8.24.2021

Examples of how World Vision Venezuela's child protection programming adapted or changed its relationship with formal child protection systems



Channels of Hope has shown participants their role in working with the formal child protection system.

Referring to the child abuse case identified during the provision of church meals, described above, the church members knew that they had to report the family member to the formal system to address the legal aspects of the case. But they also perceived themselves to have an accompanying role in the process, working on transformative justice which is in the Channels of Hope curriculum.

This meant they did not see jail as the end of the process, but instead felt they have a responsibility to provide education and spiritual support to a jailed family member.¹³

Impacts of COVID-19 on child marriage

Like many countries in the region, child marriage is illegal in Venezuela, and therefore not recognized as a legal union. However, sometimes children can get married with their father's permission when they reach the age of 16. But this does not usually happen. What happens, instead, is a consensual early union. These are unions in which pregnant girls live with the adult who impregnated them.

World Vision Venezuela's partners have seen an increase in the rates of child and adolescent pregnancy during the pandemic. One reason cited for this is that girls and women are exchanging sex for food or gas to cook food, for instance, due to the dire economic situation. So, it is sexual exploitation that is on the rise which, in turn, can lead to an increase in unplanned pregnancies.

World Vision Venezuela's Efforts to Address Child Marriage

Our partners state that prior to participating in Channels of Hope they knew that child and adolescent pregnancy was a reality, but now they know that must make their churches a safe place and address this issue through prevention interventions. This will take time, as our child protection programme is only just short of a year old, and this is a huge and sensitive topic.



A next step in our programming will be to study child and adolescent pregnancy, including undertaking an analysis of its relationship with child abandonment and conducting a behaviour change analysis. This information will then be used to develop programming interventions that aim to reduce child and adolescent pregnancies.

13. In this same interview it was pointed out that in most places the formal system does not exist and the case cited might be considered an exception.

Effective coordination and networking during the COVID-19 Response

World Vision Venezuela is a member of both the national Child Protection and Gender-based Violence Areas of Responsibility (AoR) coordination mechanisms. We are implementing an ADAPT¹⁴ study in the country and working to engage the two AoRs to collaborate in the study.

Our staff state that members of the Child Protection AoR are technically very strong, conduct a lot of capacity-building activities and schedule many relevant meetings. There is a focus on sharing different organizations' activities and the AoR has developed impact indicators which are seen as good. This positions the AoR as a strong partner to support on World Vision Venezuela's ADAPT study. However, there are a few areas that could be strengthened. It was noted that most of the member organizations are development organizations and there has not been a real transition yet to humanitarian responses that directly address children's needs in emergency settings. Another area that could be strengthened is collaboration across the organizations. Each member may be doing their own trainings, for example, instead of jointly planning activities.

A final role that the Child Protection AoR could explore further is that of advocacy with the government. It is very difficult for individual organizations to speak out about protection issues; there is a real fear of being closed down. It would therefore be helpful if the coordination mechanisms could explore the kinds of advocacy that are possible, given their status, and engage in collaborative advocacy initiatives with member organizations without highlighting individual organizations' involvement.

Protecting Venezuelan children beyond the national borders

World Vision is responding to the Venezuelan crisis by implementing programs in Venezuela and in the six countries that receive the most refugees. In 2019, the organization launched the Venezuela Crisis Response Plan called "Hope without Borders." As of October 2021, more than 834,000 people have been reached by the response in Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.¹⁵

World Vision has provided food and multipurpose cash assistance, clean water, housing, health services and hygiene items to the most vulnerable populations. Much of our response has also focused on providing protection services, including psychosocial support for children and vulnerable adults. World Vision is an active partner of R4V (Response for Venezuelans) regional platform, where our organisation co-leads together with UNICEF, the Child Protection sector.

Ahead of the 2020 and 2021 International Donors' Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants World Vision launched its policy reports "Migration and COVID-19: Venezuelan children between a rock and a hard place" and "A Double-Edged Sword: Protection Risks Facing Venezuelan Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic". Side events to present the findings of the reports to the donor community were held together in partnership UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, Inter-american bank and CEPAL.



14. Analysis, Design, and Planning Tool (ADAPT) is a context analysis toolkit designed to help with root cause analysis of issues of child abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence. It also focuses on identifying and mapping the formal and informal systems that are in place to protect children. It then guides the process of strategizing relevant interventions.

15. <https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/venezuela-crisis-response-situation-report-september-2021>

Bridging the gap between development and humanitarian approaches in the COVID-19 Response

World Vision Venezuela's COVID-19 Response is our first programming in the country so there was no prior development programming. We are committed to remaining in the country and moving into recovery programming, with a focus on nutrition, child protection, economic recovery and livelihoods, and continued COVID-19 prevention.

Promising practice in the government's response

World Vision Venezuela is committed to collaborating with the government, other humanitarian actors and civil society to improve prevention and response to COVID-19 and its negative impact on violence against children.

Advocacy is done through the humanitarian architecture, especially in terms of humanitarian access and legal registration for INGOs so that the latter can provide essential services for populations in need, such as livelihoods support, reactivation of the cash programming and protection. We are continuously advocating for humanitarian space to be available.

