

**Touching our hearts**

It's our hope that you will be touched, encouraged and challenged as the reality of being a refugee is shared by these courageous people.

Recently Wayne Johnson - Tearfund's CEO, Kevin Schular - Tearfund's Board Chair, and Andrea Sherk, - Tearfund's Donor Relations Coordinator spent a week with Venezuelan refugees in Colombia. These are some of the stories we heard.

**Background**

Over the past 5 years, Venezuelans have seen their quality of life deteriorate to previously unthinkable levels. In this once wealthy nation, today, almost 90% of the population lives in poverty. The root cause is inflation. "Our money has turned into monopoly money."

Hyperinflation has made the cost of food skyrocket. Hunger is wide-spread, and deaths from malnutrition are on the rise. One of the most popular items in the shops now is chicken skin, "we used to give them away for pets," said one butcher, shaking his head. "Now people seek them out."

As a result, millions of Venezuelan families are fleeing their country to escape starvation, violence, and disease.

- Venezuela's inflation rate has skyrocketed 53,000,000% since 2016
- 9 out of 10 people are trapped in starvation
- 64% of people have lost 25 lbs, on average, due to malnutrition
- 70% of Venezuela's hospitals have no water or electricity
- 5.3 million people fled Venezuela by the end of 2019

In 2017, Venezuelans began crossing the border looking for food and supplies as life in Venezuela was getting harder and harder. Businesses totally collapsed. Unemployment exceeded 80%. At this time, most people would cross the border by car or bus, buy food and supplies and then return home, as they did not expect to have to leave their country.

Most recently, people have had to walk as they cannot afford buses. Once they reach the Colombian border, refugees walk across mountainous terrain 700 km to Bogota, the capital and gateway to the rest of South America, or 500 km to Barranquilla, on the northern coast.



*Following Jesus where the need is greatest*

It is an arduous journey. People carry a backpack, a suitcase in one hand, and a child in the other. Everything else was left behind. They come with nothing, only a hope that they can start a new life. For the majority, they leave behind a middle-class background - Steady jobs, education, a house with 3 bedrooms and a car. They move into squatter communities of scrap wood, dirt floors, plastic sheeting, and very limited job opportunities.

Many people used Colombia as a channel to get to Peru and Ecuador, but now there is very little further movement as other countries have closed their borders to Venezuelan refugees.

***Tearfund reaching out on your behalf***

Tearfund Latin America has been leading a small Church mobilization program in Colombia for over 20 years. With this onslaught of refugees from Venezuela, we had to change and respond. Thankfully we were able to respond through churches using proven methodologies, lessons and tools that were adapted from our experiences in South Sudan, with Syrian refugees, and in responding to earthquakes and cyclones. We reach out to the most vulnerable - single mothers and their children, child-headed households, households that include people with disabilities, and the elderly.



Strategically we decided to concentrate efforts on the north coast on one of the two main refugee highways into Colombia, centered in Barranquilla, a large city of 1.2 million people.

Based on interaction with local Pastors, church members, community leaders and refugees the first phase included:

Feeding 600 malnourished children daily through 2020. This includes:

1. 3 large church-based community kitchens, each serving 200 children daily
2. These 3 churches are supported by 11 neighbourhood churches who provide volunteers to help run the 3 kitchens
3. Counselling is provided on a daily basis to parents and youth at these 3 facilities through the local churches

The Second Phase was to start in April, but has been sidetracked by Colombia's Covid-19 lockdown. It will start later this summer. This was to include:

1. Training for over 1500 Church leaders in community mobilization to support Venezuelan refugees
2. Facilitating referral activities for Venezuelan families to other social service organizations offering legal, medical, dental, pre- and post-natal care, vaccinations, education, job assistance training, obtaining government status and other services. Counselling services will be provided especially in the area of grief and trauma counselling and for victims of sexual assault and harassment.



*Following Jesus where the need is greatest*

**Stories from the Barrios****Luz Helena's story –**

The Pastor led us to Luz Helena's home in La Ceiba, a Venezuelan refugee barrio (community) outside Barranquilla. She was welcomed with a hug and smiles. For Luz Helena and her family, this was their first Colombian friend.

Luz Helena (45) left Venezuela 2 years ago and travelled from Caracas, (approx. 1100km). The economy had collapsed and they could stay no longer. Their whole family had been involved in tourism. But there was no work. In fact, her two grandchildren aged seven at the time had never been to school for a single day. The Venezuelan school system was non-existent.

Together they decided to leave Venezuela. They left their comfortable life and nice home. There was no future. Together with her 2 adult daughters, her son-in-law and 2 grandchildren, Luz Helena started the journey.

Most of the journey was travelled by bus, but there were parts that they were forced to walk. Passing through guerilla territory was very risky. They settled in a squatter camp in the outskirts of Barranquilla on land that was formerly a toxic chemical factory site.

They built a small 2 floor house of 380 square feet that was unstable and unsafe, but it was theirs, for the moment. Her son-in-law got a job as a taxi driver, and she was working in the tourist industry, but because of the coronavirus, she was no longer working.

Her grand-daughters still have no paperwork as refugees and have not been to a Colombian school yet, even though they are now 9. As a result they cannot read.

Luz Helena was so thrilled to have her grandchildren participate in the feeding program and hopes that the church will connect her with resources to teach her grandchildren to read.

Most of the families in their neighbourhood of about 200 people are also Venezuelan refugees. The Church is the only service agency actively helping them out.

**Giselle's story**

Around the corner from Luz Helena lived Giselle, a pregnant mom, her 4-year old, and husband. The humble one-room was all they could find. A row house facing a toxic chemical dump, where the sewers overflowed in the rain, and seeped through the soil. Fences don't keep out the toxic material.

One year ago, Giselle, her husband and baby girl named Camilla were forced to leave Venezuela because life was too difficult in Venezuela. There was no food or medicine available.

Giselle is pregnant with her second daughter, due in June 2020. She dreams of returning to Venezuela. What keeps her and her family going is the hope that one day they will return home.

Thankfully Tearfund has given her access to pre- and post natal care for her child, but living near the dump is a concern.



**The Ceiba Church in Barranquilla (Ceiba is a type of tree)**

Around the corner from Luz Helena and Giselle’s home is an amazing place. Seven days a week a normal church is transformed.

This church houses one of 3 feeding program sites in the Barranquilla area. They provide food for over 200 children daily. The church invites families that are living in the local slums to the church and to send their children for nutritious meals.

The feeding program is staffed by Colombian and Venezuelan volunteers who provide meals from 11am-1pm daily. This well-run program, operating a commercial grade kitchen, gives mothers something to do, a place to learn some marketable skills and tools to facilitate integrating into life in Colombia.

The church also provides counselling for women so they can be supported emotionally. Since people have lost everything, and experienced sexual violence, they need to be reminded of the hope that is found in Christ.

La Ceiba has become these new refugee’s home.

**Los Angeles – a community on the side of an unstable slope.**

The Los Angeles barrio had been condemned 5 years ago. Built on an earthquake fault, cracks appeared in the soil. When the rains came houses started to crack and then slide down the hill. All the Colombians were relocated elsewhere. Their houses were falling down. Today Los Angeles is home to over 1,000 Venezuelan refugee families.



**Elianiy the Pharmacist**

Elianiy is 23 years old and has two children. Her youngest child (Angelo) has epilepsy and because they were unable to get food or medicine in Venezuela, they were forced to leave Caracas in 2018. Before the crisis, life was good. Elianiy had a job in a pharmacy and they had a nice house. She is motivated to keep going as she needs to provide for her children, but they can’t believe this is their life now. They built a dirt floored house from wood scraps and plastic.

Her husband has had difficulty finding work. Without documentation, it is very difficult.



Formerly a licenced engineer, to gain a little income, he tries to collect bottles, cans - any recycling he can scavenge, in order to make a few pesos at a collection site.

Since attending the feeding program, Eliainy has noticed that her children are gaining weight. She no longer worries about what her children's next meal will be, and is extremely grateful to the church for running the program. She also attends the church now and her husband is an eager volunteer.

### Oasis Food Program (2nd feeding site in Barranquilla)

Just 2 blocks from the Oasis Barrio is a Venezuelan refugee community named after a church. As refugees started to flock to the area it was the church that came alongside. Pastora Gabriella led the way.

**Pastora Gabriella** said that the most influential thing about their work is not just providing meals to children. Of course, decreasing the prevalence of malnutrition in children is important, but her goal is to restore a feeling of hope to the refugees. She explained, "Only Jesus can satisfy the emotional and spiritual needs of people, and the church has the task of pointing people towards Him... Jesus calls us to love our neighbours – we have no choice if we say we follow Jesus."

"We learned that sexual abuse is high among the refugees and there is a high risk of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) for women and children. Many babies are born with HIV/AIDS and infections like syphilis. Teafund trained us how to respond. The church is using their emotional support groups/trauma healing groups to help women. Their curriculum teaches them how God provides, how He intervenes and how He cares for the hurting".

Pastora Gabriella further explained, "Many refugee women – I guess approximately 40% - have prostituted themselves at one point in time out of desperation for income and providing food for their children. That is real love for a child. **Through the feeding program you have made possible, women are freed from prostitution because their children's next meal is secure.**"

This feeding site is housed in a church that has been equipped with a new kitchen in order to accommodate the program. This program provides good, healthy meals to children daily. Venezuelan and Colombian volunteers run the program together.

Pastora Gabriella is there every day. Motivating volunteers, and engaging her congregation to serve the Venezuelan refugees – all time with a smile on her face.

### Trusting in Him: Yufriedy's Story

It was just one year ago. Yufreidy and her husband couldn't do it anymore. They had lost their jobs, he as an oil engineer and she as an event planner. They tried to sell stuff in the streets, but inflation was so high that the earnings from what they sold in the morning were worthless in the evening.

Yufreidy said, "Life in Venezuela before the crisis was good. We had stable jobs, a home, our children were happy in school. Life was easy." But then life just fell apart. There was no hope.

They wanted better for their children (7 & 4) so they left their house behind and walked and bussed to Barranquilla in search of refuge. Today they have made their two room wooden shack with dirt floors as comfortable as they can, having been forced to move a few times as people come and claim rights to the land they are on. They pray that they will not have to move again.



The Oasis feeding program at the Church provides their 2 children meals every day. This has lightened their financial burden a bit and has given them hope that they will be able to build a life in Colombia. Pastora Gabriella at the Church has been a respite in times of overwhelming trauma.

The only thing left from Venezuela is Yufreidy's engagement ring. Through tears she expressed how hard it was to leave home and everything else. Her mother was unable to travel with them so she is still in Venezuela. They miss her dearly.

**“This is hard, but God will make a way for us to go home. For now, we trust in Him.”**

### Jose and the Long Walk

Jose and his wife left Venezuela 3 years ago, traveling over 650 kilometres to Santa Lucia, Colombia. They had to walk most of the journey in the places they were unable to hitch a ride from others.

Jose said that they usually began walking in the coolness of the night at 1am. Then they walked as many hours as they could and would rest in the late morning or early afternoon, wherever they could find shelter.

He is desperate to find work, but it is hard to find. He misses his adult daughter who he left in Venezuela.

You could see the pain in his eyes. This is a man who is deeply saddened by the loss.



### Diana's Pain

Diana stood proudly in the doorway to her mud block house she had built. It was on a flood plain, condemned by Colombian authorities, but the only place where she could build a new home. It was hers.

The only problem – she and her neighbours didn't know who owned the land and that their houses stood on.

Diana left Venezuela 2 years ago with her 2 small children, her sister and brother-in-law, and their 2 children.

The journey was challenging. Walking for miles and miles after crossing the border because they did not have any money for a bus. She had to carry her children, one in each arm.



Before the crisis happened, Diana worked and studied in Venezuela. Though her family did not have much in Venezuela, they were able to make ends meet.

Life has been challenging for Diana. She has two children from a man that was very abusive towards her. She is not with him anymore, but she said that she still gets headaches from all the physical abuse she endured. She is a survivor of Sexual and Gender Based Violence, and carries the weight of his actions everyday.

Diana never thought she would find anyone willing to listen to her pain and help her recover. She found that place of safety and healing at the local church. While her kids were in the feeding program, she was introduced to a Biblically-based trauma healing group.

Looking at us, quietly she asked the Pastor, “were these the people that helped me and my kids?” As tears flowed, her Pastor said, “...some of them..”. Thank you.

**Venezuelan Refugees and Covid-19**

As March came to a close, Colombia responded to the spread of Covid-19. First it was a restriction to meeting in groups of 50, then 12, then 2. The implications for our programs was dire.

For those living in poverty, lack of food, access to medical care and basic soap is a huge challenge.

Tearfund’s feeding program serving 600 per day came to a halt. But the need was still there. So we modified our programs. With local government official’s approval, we started to do weekly food distributions to the families we serve. We bought soap in bulk and our staff and volunteers became Covid-19 prevention trainers in the community.

We hope we will be able to start again with the full program in the summer.

As I look back on our trip, one photo sticks out. Rosa, Tearfund Latin America’s leader stopping in a poor barrio to pray for two women in deep pain.

Today she’s not allowed to go into the barrios. Will you pray with her?



A weeks food supplies delivered to refugees in the barrios



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