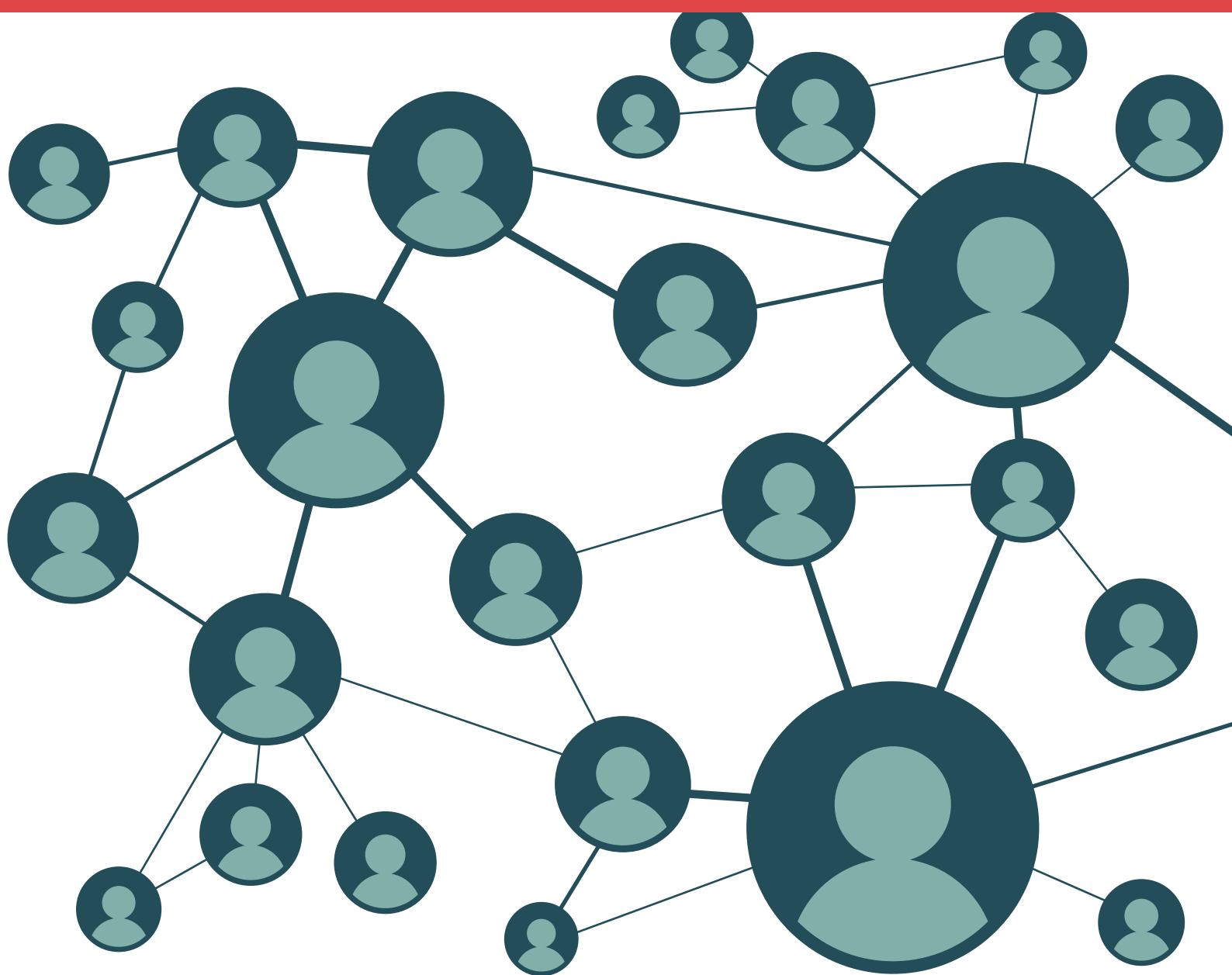# Social media and inclusion in humanitarian response

'*Caminantes*' at the Venezuela–Colombia border

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Introduction

This study seeks to understand the role of social media in humanitarian action in the Venezuelan refugee crisis. In doing so, it focuses specifically on the experiences of Venezuelan *caminantes* – migrants and refugees travelling primarily by foot – as they move across the border from Venezuela to Colombia. Reflecting HPG's wider research focus on inclusion, *caminantes* were selected as a highly vulnerable, socially isolated, mobile population with limited access to humanitarian aid or other support (ACAPS, 2021b). Based on research in other migration and refugee contexts (e.g. Latonero and Kift, 2018; Signpost, n.d.), this choice is informed by the hypothesis that social media could provide specific opportunities for people on the move to better access information or connect with service providers. The study explores how *caminantes* use social media, and how far it supports their inclusion in the humanitarian response in Venezuela. Through conversations with aid actors, it also situates the specific circumstances of the *caminantes* within a wider lens of how social media is being used in the transboundary response more broadly.

Background

It is unusual for a country that has not experienced major conflict or disaster to find itself going in reverse: reductions in life expectancy and the provision of basic services; increased maternal and infant mortality and malnutrition; and the reappearance of endemic diseases previously eradicated. Gripped by a prolonged economic and political crisis, estimates indicate that Venezuela's gross domestic product (GDP) has shrunk by close to 80% since 2013 (Guerra, 2021; Gratius and Puente, 2020). By May 2021, Venezuela was in its 41st month of hyperinflation. International reserves have been falling for six years, leaving the country struggling to service its debts.

The recession has significantly eroded living standards. Average life expectancy has fallen by 2.7 years since 2015 (UCAB, 2020). With 79% of people living in extreme poverty as of 2019 (ibid.), food insecurity is on the increase: Venezuela's undernourishment rate rose from 8.4% in 2004–2006 to 27.4% in 2018–2020 (FAO et al., 2021). In late 2019, The World Food Programme estimated that almost one-third of Venezuelans were food-insecure and in need of assistance (WFP, 2020). The quality and availability of public services have also declined substantially. The country's health and education systems have been eroded by years of underfunding and staff shortages (OCHA, 2019; Page et al., 2019), while water shortages and power cuts are common (OCHA, 2019). Many of these issues have been substantially exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (OCHA, 2021).

An authoritarian drift has accompanied the collapse of the economy, a phenomenon that Margarita López Maya describes as 'sultanism':

> Society is subject to personal and unequal relations with power. The administrative apparatus does not serve the people but the authorities. The citizenship status of the population has been eclipsed. It is closer to a relationship of vassalage (López, 2020: 190).

Amid widespread human rights violations – including extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture (UN Human Rights Council, 2020) – and protests, the deepening political crisis has had an especially chilling effect on media and civil society. The government closed the private television station RCTV in 2007, since when radio and television stations – all of which operate under government licences – have been very cautious with news content in order to avoid antagonising the authorities. Over the past six years, 106 newspapers have closed, leaving only 20 still in operation (González, 2019). Reporters Without Borders ranked Venezuela 148th out of 180 countries evaluated for its 2020 Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2021), while Freedom House's most recent Freedom on the Net report rated the country as 'not free' and ranked it 56th out of 65 countries evaluated (Freedom House, 2021).

Clampdowns on freedom of expression have been accompanied by harassment of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations. NGO staff are regularly detained by the authorities and their headquarters raided. Between January and March 2021, there were reports of 183 such incidents against NGOs (CDJ, 2021). These dynamics have substantially reduced the humanitarian space for organisations seeking to provide assistance to crisis-affected populations. In January 2021, for example, the United Nations (UN) suspended cash transfer programmes following arrests of staff of organisations implementing the Humanitarian Response Plan in the country (Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General, 2021). As a consequence of the political hostility and bureaucratic restrictions aid groups face, humanitarian analysis group ACAPS rated humanitarian access constraints in the country as 'very high' in its most recent Humanitarian Access Overview (ACAPS, 2021a).

Deteriorating living conditions inside Venezuela have triggered migration on a massive scale, both internally and to neighbouring countries. As of May 2021, the number of refugees and migrants leaving Venezuela had reached approximately 5.6 million, 4.6 million of whom are in Latin America and the Caribbean (Quito Process, 2021). With Venezuela's borders closed to vehicles since 2015 and to pedestrian traffic since 2019, most movement in and out of the country has been via potentially dangerous irregular routes.[1] Escalating needs associated with the crisis have resulted in a growing presence of humanitarian actors working in neighbouring countries to support displaced Venezuelans. In 2019, an international humanitarian coordination architecture was established within Venezuela itself, led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

The Venezuelan authorities have repeatedly downplayed or denied the crisis. In relation to migration, President Nicolás Maduro stated in January 2021 that, 'of the wave of migrants who left … the National Institute of Statistics estimates that this could reach 600,000 Venezuelans' (France 24, 2021). This has led to significant gaps in aid provision across the country in general, and for refugees and migrants attempting to leave the country in particular. Although various social organisations have provided assistance, these efforts are not systematic, and the support

1   The Colombian border was also closed in March 2020 with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

points of large humanitarian organisations are generally at the border. People trying to leave Venezuela can travel hundreds of kilometres with substantial unmet needs for drinking water, shelter, food and information.

In recent assessments, social media has been specifically highlighted by Venezuelans leaving the country as a prominent communications tool and source of information (R4V, 2019), reflecting similar trends in displacements from (previously) middle-income countries such as Syria (Culbertson et al., 2019). However, it is important to note that the rapid growth in internet and mobile phone use in Venezuela since the mid-2000s has stalled since the onset of the current crisis, with many indicators actively in reverse. Mobile phone subscriptions have dropped by more than half, from a high point of almost 31 million in 2013 to around 13.5 million in 2019 (World Bank, n.d. a), while the percentage of the population with access to the internet has remained stagnant since 2015 after two decades of steady growth (World Bank, n.d. b). Connection quality is also a problem: Venezuela currently ranks 140th out of 180 countries for broadband internet speed, and 136th for mobile internet (Ookla, 2021).

Methodology

Venezuela and Colombia share a border of 2,219km. This research focused on four areas in the State of Táchira in Venezuela that lie across the border from the Department of Norte de Santander in Colombia, namely Boca de Grita, La Fría, San Antonio, and Ureña. We also conducted interviews at bus stations in San Cristóbal and La Fría. We interviewed 21 people (8 women and 13 men) in transit, mainly on foot, from Venezuela to Colombia between February and March 2021. In addition, we interviewed 17 activists or workers from humanitarian organisations, both in Venezuela and on the Colombian side of the border (see Table 1).

Table 1   List of interviewees

Interviewee type	Number of interviews
Venezuela	
Refugees and migrants	21
Staff at larger organisations	3
Staff at smaller organisations	6
Colombia	
Staff at larger organisations	4
Staff at smaller organisations	4

Caminantes were interviewed in person, while interviews with humanitarian actors mainly took place via videoconference. In all cases, participants gave informed consent and those involved strictly followed biosafety protocols. Where resources allowed, we conducted as many interviews as possible until data saturation was reached. We collected data from three sources: primary interviews, field observations and photographs. Interview questions for *caminantes* focused on their experience of the crisis, how they were accessing information, and their engagement with social media specifically. Questions for humanitarian actors focused on how they were using social media in their work, as well as the barriers and facilitators for using it.

Caminantes on the run: 'no time for social media'

The transit population interviewed for this research came from 12 of Venezuela's 23 states. They travelled by different means along their journey: paid public transport, splitting the cost of private cars or buses, and long journeys on foot. Several reported spending 15 days or more on the road. Some travelled in groups of families, friends or acquaintances formed during the journey; a few travelled alone.

Drivers and experiences of displacement

When explaining why they had left Venezuela, *caminantes* pointed to the economy, being unemployed and not having enough money. In many cases, they struggled to verbalise the problems they faced, or how they related to the various dimensions of the crisis. Although the pandemic slowed migration out of Venezuela and triggered a wave of returns, many came back to find the situation more difficult than when they had first left. As a result, although formal border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia remained closed, migrants began leaving again, including two of our interviewees. As one explained:

> I'm here because I'm planning to migrate again; I already went, I came, and I'm going to leave again. I left last year because of the pandemic, but here the situation is tough with work: the situation in the country, so we're going to try to emigrate again to other countries. We're going to Colombia and from there we'll see what the road has in store for us.

Some interviewees reported having lived comfortably prior to the crisis, owning businesses, working as senior staff in a mayor's office and in one case teaching at secondary level for more than 20 years. One interviewee said: 'I had two fast food businesses; due to circumstances, I could not continue with it'. Younger *caminantes* reported struggling to find work and securing the minimum means for survival, and made direct reference to lack of food. As one mother explained:

> **Interviewee:** Oh, well, look, the situation for me, really! For example, my son had been drinking a bottle without milk for two weeks.

> **Interviewer:** What did you drink, a bottle of water?

> **Interviewee:** Cream of rice, because the little I could get over there, I would take a dollar and that would go to pure cream of rice and sugar; and it would make my heart go pitter-patter, just to see him eat that; the food too; over there, food was very difficult.

Linked to the limited availability of coordinated aid and support within Venezuela, interviewees reported receiving little or no assistance during their journey across the country, instead depending largely on the charity and solidarity of others:

> Suddenly, for cooking, they lend us their kitchens and ... they see that we are good people, with the way we treat them. They collaborate with us to let us sleep ... lodging. We have been lucky; and yes, it has been hard. The road is hard, but you have to reach the goal, you know?

On the Colombian side, humanitarian agencies have set up tents and shelters on the border. However, with formal border crossings still closed at the time of the research, *caminantes* reported having to rely on irregular routes that exposed them to the threat of violence and extortion by security officials and criminals. They also risk being killed on the trail by rising rivers or being caught up in confrontations between armed gangs.

It is worth noting the sense of abandonment experienced by interviewees during their long journeys. They flee in a hurry; one said that he had always wanted to get to know the part of the country they were passing through, but 'not like this, in this condition: so hurried, so embarrassed'. Amid their hunger and disillusionment, *caminantes* were driven by a palpable sense of fear and a compelling need to leave – not so much migrants as people on the run:

> I come alone; in fact, you can see that I only bring one backpack because I can't bring much luggage because of the issue of the *trochas* [illegal crossings controlled by irregular groups]; all that stuff that you have to pay for each suitcase you carry and so on.

> The idea is to work. It doesn't matter; with my age I have to do something. I can't stay stuck [in Venezuela] because there is work there [in Colombia], which is what we need and want, but to eat, to support ourselves, to buy medicine, which we don't have.

Although they may make alliances with each other and receive solidarity and support along the way, for many interviewees, God is their main companion and refuge during their journey:

> In whatever [means of transport], we go to Bogotá and nobody, nobody is waiting for us there: [we are] in the hands of God.

Social media and access to information

Challenging assumptions that refugees and migrants on the move in middle-income contexts are likely to depend on social media and mobile devices for information, the majority of *caminantes* did not use the internet regularly because they had no means to do so. Of the 21 people interviewed, only five had smartphones, while another two had access to one in the group they were travelling with. Several reported previously owning a phone, but had sold it to pay for travel or buy food, or could not afford to replace their phone once it was damaged. Others reported relying on a landline for internet access back at home:

> No. I don't have a phone right now.

> To be honest, I ran out of money and had to sell the phone along the way.

> I used the telephone, I had a CANTV line [landline, state telecom] and with that Wifi.

> We had a telephone, but we had to sell it one day for food.

The small number who do use the internet do so primarily to communicate with family members or to watch films, with very few using social media for any purpose. However, even where people do have phones, weak and unreliable network connectivity remains a major obstacle.

This lack of access to the internet and social media reflects wider limitations on *caminantes*' ability to find information. Interviewees openly acknowledged being uninformed: they had not watched television, and they had had no access to news, sometimes for years: as one of our interviewees explained, he could not afford to repair his television set. News often comes via word of mouth: a neighbour who has a radio or a television and relays information in their own way, with their own interpretation and summary, but also with the filter imposed by government restrictions on the media:

> I like to see and know what is going on. So, I go a lot to a lady who likes to listen to the news. She is an old lady and I go there all the time and I tell her: 'tell me, how is it going over there?' She is the one who tells me. She'll say things like: 'Well, you have to look out for the kids, there are people out there kidnapping kids'.

> Most of the time there is no electricity, and [on] the little television set that is there on the farm what you see is TVES and Venezolana de Televisión, and we know that these media are manipulated by this government.

As a consequence, most *caminantes* were unaware of the information and support that national, regional or international NGOs could provide. Only one of the 21 interviewees reported using social media to obtain information on migration processes, while another tried unsuccessfully to

establish contact with an organisation providing relief. Reflecting a widespread lack of familiarity with the role of humanitarian organisations in a country that was until recently classed as upper-middle income, some assumed that interviewers asking questions about humanitarian NGOs were referring to businesses like e-commerce platforms they were familiar with.

Similarly, many interviewees had little access to information or social networks on the other side of the border, reflected in the often vaguely defined plans many had for what they would do once they had crossed into Colombia:

> We're going to Bogotá, I think it's Bogotá? [Turns and asks.] Hey, where are we going? [At the group's indication, he says] To Bogotá.

> I hope to make it to Medellín. I have relatives in Colombia who might be waiting for me.

> Looking for an improvement; I'm going to Colombia, looking for work. Well, I think that right now in Colombia, maybe I will find all those benefits; maybe I will get a job and I could buy a phone – I will learn.

For these Venezuelans, who have sold their goods to eat and to feed their families, the challenges they perceive are basic and immediate, for example that their mobile phone will be stolen. In the end, what they want to preserve is their life, the only asset they have left. When survival is what matters, there is no time for social media. As one interviewee explained, when asked about social media: 'Well, no, I don't care now'. He went on to say that his priority was to: 'Survive, that's it'.

How humanitarian actors use social media

In contrast to the almost non-existent access to social media among *caminantes* interviewed at the border, humanitarian organisations in both Venezuela and Colombia reported using it for a variety of functions: as part of their efforts to support crisis-affected people; as part of visibility and public outreach efforts; and to facilitate communication within and between organisations. However, patterns of usage in each country resemble two different worlds: while Colombia has seen a flourishing of efforts to expand and learn from the use of social media as a programming tool, the political and economic environment in Venezuela means that many organisations are forced to maintain a low profile on social media, with many of its potential benefits remaining largely untapped.

Venezuela: keeping a low profile

How are different organisations using social media?

Reflecting the findings above, humanitarian workers interviewed in Venezuela recognised that many people in transit and those affected by the humanitarian emergency do not have communication devices or are hindered from using them effectively by limited access to electricity and network coverage, especially outside urban areas. As a consequence, they felt that access to information through social media was not particularly relevant to their work. Despite this, humanitarians in Venezuela mentioned various uses of social media, primarily providing visibility to donors and informing and raising awareness among the general population. Interviewees at larger humanitarian organisations reported using social media feeds focused on public outreach, using approaches that had been developed based on the experiences of teams in other countries. They also reported exploring the use of social media to communicate with and receive feedback from beneficiaries, using Twitter accounts and simple SMS and WhatsApp services for complaints and feedback. In general, they reported that this aspect of their work on social media was new and small-scale.

Most of the small NGOs interviewed in Venezuela are active on Facebook and Instagram. This depends on the familiarity of some of their members, generally the younger ones, with one or the other platform. Two out of the seven NGOs interviewed did not have their own social media channels, even though they use WhatsApp to communicate with each other and with their peers. Interviewees highlighted how social media was being used in more informal or organic ways. Organisations and humanitarian activists regularly refer cases to each other via WhatsApp and personal contact chains. One worker explained that, via social media, he has been contacted for advice by relatives of young people who are thinking of leaving the country.

Challenges and lessons

Beyond questions of relevance, humanitarians reported significant problems with digital infrastructure as a major obstacle to deploying social media as part of their operations. Internet connectivity was a significant issue, as one explained:

> We have encountered obstacles, of course the internet. Many times, we would like to broadcast a day live, but we can't, because the internet is terrible … The main challenge in terms of the use of social media is the internet.

Electricity rationing proved a similar challenge for both large and small operators. These issues were compounded by limitations related to the regulatory framework governing telecommunications:

> The infrastructure … that we have in Venezuela is more challenging, because also, due to the same context, there are fewer providers. There are limits, for example, on the messages that can be sent on a mobile phone line … there is a limit on the number of text messages that can be sent per line.

Another major difference between aid workers in Venezuela and their colleagues in Colombia is the fear of government reprisal. For some, this justifies not using social media at all. As several explained, highlighting humanitarian issues or human rights abuses could present an uncomfortable 'window to reality' to government authorities that have repeatedly downplayed the severity of the crisis. In this environment, even drawing attention to unmet humanitarian needs can put organisations at risk:

> As I was saying, so as not to hurt sensitivities, you know? We try to keep a low profile ... One always tries to handle these issues ... with a lot of discretion; so as not to offend the sensibilities of any [official] or the State.

> [We use it] in a very cautious way. We have to be very cautious with what is published because the idea is that the information is not used against us. We know what is happening in Venezuela with the persecution of NGOs.

Even large humanitarian organisations indicate that social media in Venezuela is very sensitive and report implicit risks in this form of communication. One highlighted the significant challenge of engaging on a public platform with no form of mediation, where conversations could easily spin out of control in a highly polarised political climate:

> A small phrase or a small word can lead to a debate that is sometimes fruitful and other times, well, not so fruitful ... I think there is more risk of a communication crisis than in other countries, for example.

Related to these concerns, humanitarian staff reported that one valuable use of social media was as a tool to maintain humanitarian space through engaging with the general population on what is and what is not humanitarian aid. In the context of political attacks on NGO activities, they felt this was especially important given the profound lack of public knowledge around humanitarian principles and activities in what was, until a few years ago, an upper-middle-income country with little tradition of emigration.

Looking to the future, interviewees at both large and small NGOs recognised the potential of social media to support greater outreach, communication and feedback with and from migrants. Some discussed specific plans to set up connection points (digital kiosks or hotspots) for migrants in border areas. Aggressive and unpredictable quarantine measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have provided an added sense of urgency. However, for many actors the benefits of social media will, for the foreseeable future, remain largely unrealised, blocked by the challenges of the context.

Colombia: learning how to communicate

How are different organisations using social media?

Among Colombian NGOs and humanitarian organisations, we observed both greater diversity and intensity in the use of social media. The purposes range from seeking visibility with donors to using social media as a tool in their work. NGOs and humanitarian organisations in Colombia use a variety of resources, including websites, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, but primarily WhatsApp groups. Some have call centres or digital kiosks (or connection points) for migrants, displaced people and refugees. In some cases, direct communication is preferred if information is sensitive.

As in Venezuela, the scale of NGOs' operations was an important factor in determining how they use social media. Small NGOs reported using Facebook and Instagram, and relying on the proficiency of their staff, usually younger staff, with these platforms. While they recognised the positive potential of social media, they also faced problems posting regularly due to competing priorities. They also reported having limited time and resources to invest in networks, and even seemed to resent the resources of larger organisations:

> You have an NGO that has a lot of money and it doesn't cost anything for a publication that reaches many more people. Suddenly, small NGOs like us don't have that facility to pay for a publication.

For many small NGOs, one of the main uses of social media was to make themselves visible to donors, journalists and the media, as a way of increasing support. In some cases, they recognised that this helped them demonstrate to donors that they were accountable for the support they received:

> Well, look, the networks have a utilitarian purpose; in other words, we basically use the Instagram network, because the donor wants to see where the donation is going. So, Instagram serves us as a visualiser that things have been delivered and that is basically what we are doing with networks: to show what the destination of what they donate is.

By contrast, large humanitarian organisations have complex IT and communication platforms. They do highly professionalised and multidisciplinary work, with different levels and products, to communicate with the target population and report on their activities. Two communication programmes stand out from our interviews: one carried out by a Colombian media outlet and the other by an international humanitarian organisation. These platforms have WhatsApp groups, a website, Facebook and Twitter, and produce multi-level and multimedia information on human mobility.

Organisations in Colombia have specifically focused on meeting the changing needs of refugees and migrants through the stages of the migration process. Here, they distinguish between different types of migrants: those arriving in Colombia and other countries, generally without devices, and those returning to Venezuela, who are more likely to have them. For people in transit, the focus is often on supporting communication with their families – here, members of small NGOs in both countries lend

their own equipment directly to migrants to allow them to make calls home. Some described how they had enabled families to locate *caminantes* by viewing photos on their organisation's Facebook page or group. Larger organisations placed an additional focus on exploring alternatives to support people's communication once they arrive in Colombia; they also develop programmes and products to provide information, via digital means, to returning migrants who have mobile phones.

Challenges and lessons

Interviews in Colombia identified a number of challenges affecting their ability to work effectively on social media. Some of these were related to language – for example, organisations were having to learn to move away from the jargon and technical language favoured by humanitarians. Identifying the differences between Venezuelan and Colombian idioms was also important. Other challenges related to the open nature of many exchanges on social media: here, it was often hard to determine whether people trying to communicate via organisations' Facebook or Twitter pages were actually part of their target population. Similarly, some interviewees reported struggling to manage expectations about what their organisations could do when faced with the wide variety of requests and feedback they were receiving online, and were concerned about being overwhelmed with demands for attention. Some also reported that their staff fear being replaced by automated processes. Finally, they also identified problems linked to the rise of fake news, privacy concerns and the use of data by large platforms. They reported disinformation, the misappropriation of humanitarian organisations' logos and pages and falsified content as a major problem:

> This mitigation of scams and misinformation in the communities, the [Temporary Protection Statute that Colombia has begun to grant to Venezuelans] has not even been implemented yet, and there are already people who have reported being swindled with false censuses.

> We already have problems with impersonation, even sites on Facebook that are starting to offer services as an intermediation ... When there have been some incidents that we have been able to detect they are reported to Facebook.

However, among large and small organisations in Colombia, the greatest concern is how to communicate properly:

> It has also been a challenge to find new ways of communicating ... by having diverse language[s] and having many components of information and content developed around the same theme.

NGOs reported a growing awareness of the need to work collectively or in partnership to share knowledge and develop more coherent and effective messaging and content. Efforts at collaboration were common among both smaller and larger NGOs, although less systematic among the smaller ones. Organisations reported that social media itself also had the potential to play a facilitating role in strengthening partnerships. They described how using WhatsApp

in particular had made it possible to work more horizontally in mixed teams from different organisations. This stood in contrast to the more rigid style of vertical communication up and down chains of command that still characterised many inter-agency discussions.

Overall, Colombian NGOs and humanitarian organisations widely recognised the impact that social media has had in broadening their communication base. They therefore aim to increase channels, replicate and refine strategies and train their teams. However, larger organisations in particular reflected on the need to better incorporate their efforts at developing communication protocols on social media, with a strengthened focus on 'old media' such as radio. They saw social media as a complementary part of wider communications efforts – efforts in which they felt it was important to incorporate their target populations as content creators as well as consumers. Here, interviewees reported plans to do hybrid 'new–old media' communications campaigns, such as audio soap operas via WhatsApp to raise awareness about gender-based violence.

In the context of Covid-19, restrictions on face-to-face support led to an increase in initiatives on digital communication channels such as call centres, connection points (digital kiosks or hotspots), WhatsApp groups and a gradual increase in the use of social media. However, organisation staff emphasised the continued importance of face-to-face service provision, and had in many cases worked hard to maintain a physical presence at key service points throughout the pandemic.

Conclusion

The testimonies of *caminantes* interviewed for this study highlight the significant limitations of social media as a tool for inclusion among populations on the move in Venezuela and Colombia. It is important to note that *caminantes* are an acutely vulnerable population (ACAPS, 2021b), and their experience is not necessarily reflective of other people affected by the crisis in Venezuela. Indeed, other evidence has demonstrated cases elsewhere in the country where networking across social media has proved a vital way for people to link up with sources of support in the face of collapsing state service provision (Schulman, 2018; HRW, 2016).

It is especially striking that, for many *caminantes* – even those who were previously well-off – years of economic hardship and the experience of displacement itself have driven them back across the 'digital divide'. Although some of our interviewees indicated that they were familiar with social media, particularly Facebook, this is one of the first things they gave up as their living conditions became more precarious. This challenges the idea that people move steadily forward into more connected lives as their encounters with new digital technologies proliferate. It also sounds a note of caution against assumptions that people displaced from middle-income settings are likely to be more connected. While many people affected by conflict in Syria and elsewhere were able to flee

with some of their assets intact, using their phones as digital lifelines on their journeys (UNHCR, 2016), this option was not available to interviewees in this study, for whom the erosion of their resources and livelihoods to almost nothing was itself part of the motivation to flee.

Ultimately, *caminantes* at the border in Venezuela are caught in a double exclusion. First, they are on the wrong side of a deep digital divide, limiting their access to information and cutting them off from social networks. Dependent mostly on word of mouth for the limited information they do receive, social media is largely irrelevant to them. Second, and more profoundly, they are situated at the edge of the 'outer circle' of inclusion (Barbelet and Wake, 2020), profoundly affected by the impacts of Venezuela's crisis but largely invisible to an under-resourced and heavily constrained aid response. At the same time, they are ignored by or actively excluded from what little government support does exist, which often demands political loyalty in exchange for services.

The study also highlights the major role played by political conditions in determining the space for humanitarian organisations to use social media as a programming tool. In Colombia, a permissive environment has allowed experimentation to flourish, along with the growing realisation that successful mobilisation of social media as a communications tool requires collaboration and collective effort. However, the atmosphere of political suppression in Venezuela – which extends its reach as much into the digital sphere as elsewhere – means that many organisations have to be extremely careful how they deploy social media, if they do so at all. Here, small acts of solidarity, such as lending devices to contact loved ones, may have more impact than a Twitter feed or Facebook page.

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