



Integration and Aid:

The impact of non-profits on migrants & low-income families in Latin America

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Research Background

In Colombia, longstanding social and economic inequalities have been compounded in recent years by one of the largest influxes of migrants in Latin America. Over 2.8 million Venezuelans have crossed the border due to political instability, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises in their home country (UNHCR, 2025). This mass migration has placed significant pressure on Colombian infrastructure, especially in urban areas, where displaced families face challenges accessing housing, education, employment, and healthcare. Furthermore, these migration pressures intersect with Colombia's history of displacement linked to armed conflict.

In Mexico, persistent social and economic divides continue to leave many low-income families and children in poorer regions without reliable access to education, healthcare, and social services

Aim

This research aimed to examine the extent to which foundations can effectively support vulnerable populations in Latin America. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research worked in collaboration with two non-profits, *Sueños y Huellas (SyH)*, in Medellín, Colombia and *Centro Infantil de Los Angeles (CILA)* San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

A primary goal of this research is to raise awareness of both the social issues faced by vulnerable populations and the critical role and struggles of these institutions in addressing them.

Key Findings

Interviews with staff members at SyH and CILA provided these findings:

1

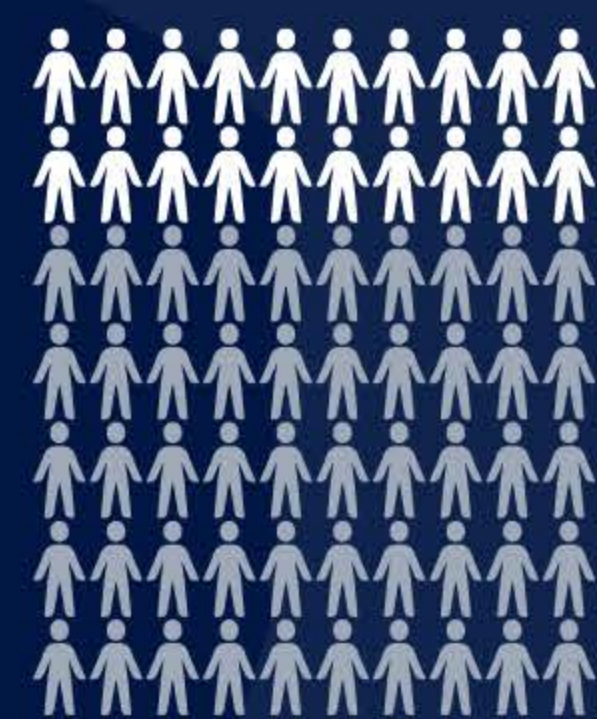
Indispensable role grassroots organizations play in supporting migrant and low-income families in Latin America: Both SyH in Colombia and CILA in Mexico provide essential services that state systems frequently fail to deliver, including education, nutrition, psychological support, and safe environments. Their interventions extend beyond immediate relief, creating long-term opportunities for children and empowering families to build more stable futures.

2

Fragility: Dependence on unstable donor funding, compounded by limited government collaboration, creates ongoing uncertainty. In SyH, this has meant several programs have had to downsize or close down entirely. They hope to be able to form a sustainable model of funding through a restaurant, which would employ parents, provide financial security away from donations and function as a space for workplace experience for adolescents. At CILA, the director stressed that they only had seven months of funding remaining. This financial precarity mirrors scholars findings that local organizations frequently depend on "creative" "innovations [including]... redirecting resources" to survive (Roth, 2019).

3

Limited capacity, high demand: Both organizations face greater demand than they can meet. At CILA, around seventy families apply each year, but only twenty children can be admitted. At SyH, limited resources meant staff often worked with groups of mixed ages and abilities, stretching limited resources.



Acceptance vs Rejection of applicants at CILA every year.

4

Providing pathways to opportunity: At Sueños y Huellas, staff described how over a hundred young women who had previously faced drugs, sex work, and poverty are now studying law, psychology, and accounting thanks to its educational program. CILA has been formally recognised for special achievement by the Secretary of Education - a commendation only given out to 3 schools in a city of 120000. It prides itself on academic excellence with students' results in standardized tests which are beyond compelling. Together, these programs show how grassroots organizations create real pathways to opportunity that extend far beyond immediate relief.

5

Success defined in deeply relational terms: The impact of these foundations is not linear or easily quantifiable - it is subtle, relational, and often visible only in the everyday moments. At both foundations, staff described success within their roles in relational and deeply personal rather than statistical terms. The psychologist at SyH defined success as when a child feels safe enough to "speak and express themselves openly"; while the educator highlighted the visible impact on educational futures for girls who previously had never been able to access secondary learning. At CILA, the director specifically quantified "smiles of the children" as defining success. What was evident in both foundations was the intrinsic value of support, care and love - thus defining their work not just as a job, but as a philosophy of serving others.

Methodology

Primary Method: Semi-structured interviews, 30 minutes in length with staff members who had direct experience working with vulnerable families.

Secondary Method: Field Observations working as a volunteer

Services of NGOs



Nutrition



Safe Spaces



Education



Psychological Support



Enabling parents to work



Emergency relief

Conclusion

Grassroots initiatives are not simply temporary stopgaps but essential actors in inclusive social protection. They provide education, nutrition, and psychological care to families who are formally entitled to services but excluded in practice due to poverty, discrimination, or bureaucratic barriers. We must recognise these organisations as government partners rather than substitutes, and thus ensure that future systems of care are collaborative and sustainable (Cecchini & Martinez 2012).

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