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The University of Dublin



Laidlaw Scholars Research and Leadership Programme – 2025 Cohort

Summer 1 Reflective Report on Research Project, Leadership and Personal Development

Integration and Aid: The support of charitable organizations on migrants and low-income families in Latin America

A comparative and qualitative study produced in collaboration with Centro Infantil de los Ángeles (Mexico) and Sueños y Huellas (Colombia)

Joshua Tickner-Bellau

Supervisors: Dr. Catherine Leen and Dr. Rachel Hoare

Table des matières

Abstract	3
1. Research Background and Literature Review	4
2. Research Methodology	5
3. Research Ethics	6
4. Findings and Discussion	7
5. Reflections	10
5.1 Alterations to my proposal.....	10
5.2 Next steps	10
5.3 Achievements and challenges	11
5.4 My perspective as a researcher	11
5.5 Leadership	12
5.6 Comparison with PDP goals.....	12
Acknowledgements	13
Bibliography	14



Abstract

This research aimed to examine the extent to which foundations can effectively support vulnerable populations in Latin America, using a qualitative, case study approach. Primary data was gathered through interviews with staff; secondary data through field observations, grounding the study in my own first-hand experience of working in these organizations. Primary research sampled the staff at **Sueños y Huellas (SyH)** in Medellín, Colombia, with comparative context provided from secondary research at **Centro Infantil de Los Angeles (CILA)**, in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Findings indicate that these organizations provide essential services, including education, nutrition, psychological support, and safe environments, compensating for limited government provision. Staff testimonies cemented the importance of care and love in their work. Despite their positive impact, organizations face recurrent challenges with unstable funding and limited government support highlighted by staff testimony. 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. The study highlights the significance, resilience and innovation of local, trust-based intervention by non-state actors, offering lessons for policy and practice in contexts of displacement and poverty. This research demonstrates the importance of supporting and valuing grassroots social initiatives as essential partners in inclusive social protection.



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1. Research Background and Literature Review

Having spent several summers working in foundations across Latin America with vulnerable and low-income families and children, I decided to base my research project on how charitable organizations can support vulnerable populations. I flew to Colombia and Mexico to work in NGOs, conducting interviews with staff members to inform my research.

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 long history of inequality and internal displacement linked to armed conflict (Jacobsen & Howe, 2008) (Quintero, Santa, & Vanegas, 2018) (Ferrández, 2020). 7 million people are noted to have been displaced due to internal conflict (UNHCR, 2025). Social enterprises and grassroots charities have emerged as key actors in addressing needs, offering locally driven, community-based support that fills gaps left by governmental systems (Roth, 2019) (Appe, Araque, & Telch, 2025). (Ham, et al., 2022)

In Mexico, inequality has declined in recent years, yet 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 (Pandiella & Maravalle, 2024). Non-profits play a crucial role in addressing these state limitations, providing locally tailored support to vulnerable populations who are often marginalized by systemic inequalities (Salamon & Toepler, 2015).



2. Research Methodology

This was a small-scale, qualitative study aiming for depth rather than breadth.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, using purposive sampling to select participants who had direct experience working with vulnerable families. The research included a range of roles, from program managers to social workers, psychologists, legal advocates, and organization direction. These methods allowed the research to focus on individuals most knowledgeable about the support services and challenges faced by migrants, ensuring rich, relevant data. I interviewed 5 staff members from SyH in Colombia and 1 staff member from CILA. The sample size was manageable within the project's time and resource constraints, while still enabling meaningful comparisons and reflection. Participants took part in one interview lasting up to 30 minutes, in Spanish. The interview focused on their experiences supporting vulnerable communities. Participation was voluntary, and scheduling was flexible as to fit their availability. I later translated and wrote up the interviews within my findings.

My secondary method of data collection was field observations, where I used my own experience working as a volunteer within these foundations to provide reflections on their day-to-day operations. This allowed me to ground the study further, adding another secondhand source of lived experience.



3. Research Ethics

I took all the necessary steps to maintain ethical research, consulting my research supervisors to guide me, given that, as an undergraduate student I had not conducted research in this manner prior to this. I produced informed consent forms and participation information leaflets, alongside coordinating with foundation directors to provide transparency. Only participants who had read, understood and signed an informed consent form were interviewed. While this research does not involve children as participants, I was volunteering at a foundation that works with vulnerable children. No identifiable information about children was collected, recorded or included in the research. All observations were based on personal experience in the settings.



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4. Findings and Discussion

SyH operates three main programs: “*Niñez en familia*” – childcare and education of 229 children between 5-12 who live in *Inquillinatos* in Medellín while they are not at school, thereby allowing their parents to work while providing educational support, food and security. The majority of the community within *Inquillinatos* is comprised of Venezuelan immigrants. Secondly “*Una mano en el camino*” – support of 118 young women between 16-24 to attend university and find work. These women have completed programs rehabilitating them from drugs and sex work. Thirdly “*Casa embera*” – supporting the indigenous Embera community in Medellín, who have had to leave the Choco region of Colombia due to an internal conflict. Centro Infantil de Los Ángeles (CILA) in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico provides an instructive comparison to the work of Sueños y Huellas in Medellín, Colombia. It is a non-profit organization functioning as a preschool and nursery for children between 2 months to 6 years.

SyH provides aid through developmental and academic education, nutritional support, psychological care, and safe spaces that allow children and families to regain stability in contexts of displacement and poverty. Most of the families that arrive at the foundation are composed of single mothers without stable employment. Their children typically live in *Inquillinatos* - shared, overcrowded lodging where exposure to violence, criminality, and social instability is common. An educator documented that children often enter the foundation having missed years of formal schooling. Similarly, CILA provides developmental and academic education to children from families who are also primarily single-parent and extremely low income. Both foundations’ success within education reflects Appe et al’s reflection that “programs with academic accompaniment...have served hundreds of...youth to close [learning] gap[s].” (Appe, Araque, & Telch, 2025)

At both foundations, staff described success within their roles in relational and deeply personal rather than statistical terms. The psychologist at SyH defined success in her role 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 and legal representative indicated success simply through the visible transformation fo children’s lives, and underlined the impact of visible “smiles of the children”.

My findings highlighted the 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 in practice, 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. These perspectives revealed that in grassroots contexts, impact is not linear or easily quantifiable - it is fragile, relational, and often visible only in the everyday moments. 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.

The findings also reveal the fragility of such organizations. Dependence on unstable donor funding, compounded by limited government collaboration, creates ongoing uncertainty. In SyH, this has meant several programs have had to downsize, alter in form, 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 Roth’s finding that local organizations frequently depend on “creative” “innovations [including]... redirecting resources” to survive (Roth, 2019).

Moreover, interviews revealed the emotional burdens faced by staff as they navigate the daily realities of children and families living under conditions of deep vulnerability. Yet, despite these challenges, both organizations demonstrate impressive resilience, and a commitment to dignified accompaniment, sustaining hope through education, care, and innovation.

By comparing two distinct contexts—displaced Venezuelan families in Colombia and impoverished or migrant families in Mexico—this study shows that grassroots responses are



marked by both commonalities and local specificities. The shared emphasis on dignity, trust, and long-term relational support suggests that grassroots initiatives are not simply temporary stopgaps but essential actors in inclusive social protection. As Cecchini and Martínez argue, “any comprehensive protection system must take into account their [non state actors]” (Cecchini & Martínez, 2012), recognizing these organizations as government partners rather than substitutes, and thus ensuring that future systems of care are collaborative and sustainable.



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5. Reflections

5.1 Alterations to my proposal

My original proposal focused on solely Venezuelan migrants. While I believed this to be helpful, I later decided that a comparison, through visiting another foundation would allow a more holistic examination of the impact of foundations in Latin America. This gave the research greater depth, highlighting both common challenges across Latin America and the specific realities of each context. Another difference was scale: I originally planned a larger number of interviews, but practical constraints meant I worked with a smaller sample. Despite this, the strength of qualitative research was displayed through the depth of the interviews I did conduct.

Overall, the project stayed true to the spirit of my proposal - exploring the role of grassroots organizations in supporting displaced families - but evolved into a broader, more comparative, and more reflective study than I had first imagined.

5.2 Next steps

Limitations of this study include its small scale and focus on staff perspectives. While this approach provides insights into organizational practices and challenges, future research could expand to include the voices of families and children themselves or undertake comparative analysis across a broader range of organizations in Latin America.



5.3 Achievements and challenges

One of the main achievements was successfully carrying out fieldwork in two different Latin American contexts. Coordinating with SyH in Colombia and CILA in Mexico was difficult, yet it allowed me to collect first-hand insights from staff, while also grounding the research in lived realities rather than just literature. A dual challenge and achievement was that all interviews were conducted in Spanish, which not only expanded my linguistic confidence but deepened the authenticity of the data. Finally, through a comparative approach, I was able to draw out shared patterns and differences, strengthening the scope of my findings. Finally, balancing my time as a volunteer and as a researcher proved complex, and hearing about the hardships faced by families and staff was emotionally challenging.

5.4 My perspective as a researcher

I now strongly recognize how much I naturally value trust and relationships in research, often prioritizing rapport with participants, which both enriched the data and highlighted my relational approach as a researcher. The project taught me the strength of small-scale, qualitative research: even with limited numbers, significant insight can be gleaned. Having never undertaken this type of research before, I became more sensitive to ethics, aware of how important it is to protect the dignity of vulnerable groups and represent their voices carefully.



5.5 Leadership

I learned that my leadership is rooted in collaboration and empathy. In both foundations, effective leadership meant stepping back; listening to staff, respecting their expertise, and supporting their initiatives rather than directing them. This experience reinforced that leadership is about service and partnership, not control. I also became more aware of my tendency to overextend myself, and thus cut down the number of interviews I intended on completing to allow myself to properly translate, analyze and utilize the data provided. Finally, working in cross-cultural settings showed me the importance of emotional intelligence and humility, reminding me that leadership requires creating spaces of trust where others can thrive.

5.6 Comparison with PDP goals

My PDP focused on developing skills in public speaking, networking, and handling conflict under pressure. In practice, the research gave me less chance to work on these directly, since the emphasis was on fieldwork and relationship-building with staff. What I did gain instead was experience in cross-cultural communication and in translating academic research into accessible language—areas that were not central in my PDP but proved just as valuable. Overall, the summer aligned with my broader values of empathy and inclusion, but it also reminded me that development doesn't always follow the path planned. I achieved progress in unexpected areas while identifying gaps, like formal public speaking, that I will need to return to.



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