Laidlaw Scholars Research and Leadership Programme – 2025 Cohort

Summer 1 Research Paper

Integration and Aid: The support of non-profits 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)

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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.

1. Introduction

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. Sampling

I used purposive sampling to select participants who have direct experience working with Venezuelan migrant families through Sueños y Huellas foundation in Colombia, as well as staff from the Mexican foundation Centro Infantil de Los Angeles. This method allowed me to focus on individuals most knowledgeable about the support services and challenges faced by migrants, ensuring rich, relevant data. I included various roles (e.g., program managers, social workers, psychologists, director of education). Sampling continued until data saturation is reached—when new interviews no longer provide fresh insights. This approach ensured that the sample is targeted and relevant to the research questions while remaining manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Participants took part in one interview lasting up to 30 minutes. The interview focused on their experiences supporting Venezuelan migrant families. Participation was voluntary, and scheduling was flexible to fit their availability.

This is a small-scale, **qualitative** study aiming for depth rather than breadth. I interviewed approximately 6–8 staff members from social enterprises or grassroots organizations in Colombia and 1–2 staff members from a foundation in Mexico (as a comparison). This size was appropriate for a thematic analysis, allowing for rich, detailed insight into the lived experiences and practices of those supporting displaced Venezuelan families. The sample was manageable within the project's time and resource constraints, while still enabling meaningful comparisons and reflection.

3. Methodology

3.1 Primary Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants: Staff from social enterprises and grassroots charities working with Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, and staff from a comparable foundation in Mexico.

Purpose: To explore participants' insights on the challenges faced by displaced families, the design and impact of support initiatives, and reflections on what makes interventions effective.

Format: Interviews will be conducted in person where possible, or via Zoom/Google Meet if remote. Interviews will follow the same set of questions while also allowing natural conversation as to not provide too rigid of a framework.
Language: Spanish (translated following)

3.2 Secondary Method: Field Observations

Settings: In Colombia and Mexico, where access is available to observe day-to-day operations in relevant foundations or organizations.
Focus: Informal observation of practices, routines, and interactions that illustrate how social enterprises engage with displaced or marginalized communities.
Documentation: Observational notes will be taken, with attention to ethical boundaries and confidentiality.

4. 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.

5. Findings

5.1. Sueños y Huellas (Medellín, Colombia)

5.1.1. Organizational Profile

The Sueños y Huellas Foundation in Medellín illustrates how grassroots organizations play a central role in aiding migrants and low-income families in Latin America. The foundation operates three main programs: "*Ninez en familia"* – childcare and education of 229 children between 5-12 who live in *Inquillinatos* en 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 "C*asa embera*" – supporting the indigenous Embera community in Medellin, who have had to leave the Choco region of Colombia due to an internal conflict. SyH provides aid through education, sanitation, medical assistance and finance.

According to Olga, a psychologist and program coordinator, most of the families that arrive at the foundation are composed of single mothers without stable employment. Their children typically live in *inquilinatos* - shared, overcrowded lodging where exposure to violence, criminality, and social instability is common. Cindy, an educator at the foundation, added that many families migrate frequently, creating instability that prevents children from developing roots or accessing consistent education. This reflects the findings of Appe, Araque, and Telch (2025), who argue that *"local nonprofits respond to migration crises... in geographies where public goods and services by government are limited, leaving nonprofits often as primary service providers."* (Appe, et al., 2025)

5.1.2. Challenges Faced by Families and Children

Educational deprivation is one of the most pressing challenges. Cindy explained that children often enter the foundation having missed years of formal schooling, with some

lacking even basic literacy skills. While Ham et al. note that "*All Venezuelan children, regardless of their migrant status, are permitted to enrol in basic education (up to 11th grade)"* (Ham, et al., 2022)*,* this fails to reflect the reality of these Venezuelan children, and thus displays a failure of social protection by the state which must be filled by other organizations and support.

Moreover, Olga explained that socialisation is equally challenging: children who grew up in violent or unstable homes struggle to trust others and must learn alternative, non-violent forms of communication. Olga defined success in her role as when a child feels safe enough to "speak and express themselves openly," directly indicating a key role of the foundation as the development of healthy socialisation and expression.

Nutrition and health also emerge as barriers. Cindy noted that many children had only eaten rice regularly before entering the foundation, requiring them to adjust to balanced meals and consistent mealtimes. Such basic needs illustrate the severity of deprivation Venezuelan families face. Clearly, the success of the government response described by Ham et al. is directly opposite to the lived reality of these migrants. While While these scholars argue that "*in terms of broader social protection, Venezuelans are officially covered by basic services such as education and health*" (Ham, et al., 2022), in practice, bureaucratic and material barriers obstruct this.

5.1.3. Impact of the Foundation

The work of Sueños y Huellas has had a profound impact on the lives of migrant families. Olga and Cindy both highlighted that the foundation provides a safe and stable environment for children living in the unsafe *inquilinatos*. Lulu, a social worker, described this as one of the foundation's most important achievements: offering children a secure place to grow and families the possibility of finding stable employment.

Educationally, Cindy emphasised that with the foundation's support, young women who once believed higher education was unattainable have entered universities in subjects such as psychology, accounting, and law. She noted that fifty alumni are currently studying at

university and a further one hundred are in school with direct support from the foundation. These successes illustrate how community-based initiatives can open life trajectories previously unimaginable for vulnerable youth. Such outcomes confirm Cecchini and Martínez's claim that in many cases "*[social and community organizations can] be instrumental in making up for the shortcomings of the other three major stakeholders (State, market and families)"* (Cecchini & Martínez, 2012).

5.1.4. Barriers and Limitations

Despite its successes, the foundation faces major challenges. The most pressing is economic insecurity. Lulu explained that the organization constantly worries about sustaining donations, while Cindy noted that changing priorities from international funders often force programs to contract or adapt. This financial precarity mirrors Roth's (2019) finding that local organizations frequently depend on *"innovations [including]…. redirecting resources"* to survive (Roth, 2019). Lulu noted that previous program "*ABC*", which educated 10 disabled adolescents who were unable to attend school, had to stop functioning due to a loss of funding. Equally, the program with young woman which previously ran continuous classes, has recently had stopped its intake of new participants due to a loss of funding.

Staff also described the emotional burden of their work. Cindy reflected on the difficulty of watching young women, despite initial progress, relapse into cycles of prostitution or street life due to overwhelming social and familial pressures. Nonetheless, she stressed that the foundation maintains an open-door policy, ensuring those who leave can return for support, embodying the ethos of *acompañamiento* described by Appe et al. (Appe, et al., 2025).

Institutional barriers compound these difficulties. Cindy critiqued Colombian government systems as more focused on financial management than genuine social support, which often leaves migrant families facing bureaucratic exclusion. This contrasts with the ideology labelled by the UN's document of Inclusive Social Protection in Latin America, which argues that *"primary responsibility for ensuring economic social and cultural rights lies with the state"* (Cecchini & Martínez, 2012).

Anti-immigrant sentiment was described by staff as less overt hostility and more of an "internal burden" on Colombian society: a sense that migration intensifies the already heavy

weight of poverty and inequality experienced by locals. Yet, I personally spoke to a child who had just returned from school where he had been told by his professor that “you don’t know anything because you are Venezuelan”.

5.1.5. Future Vision

Looking to the future, staff outlined ambitious plans to reduce dependency on donations by adopting social enterprise models. The ideal scenario for SyH would be opening a restaurant that could employ parents while simultaneously supporting its programs. This restaurant would provide students with vocational training and equally grant the foundation a means of financial sustainability aside from donations. These aspirations reflect Roth’s observation that “*local organizations are seeking innovative ways to build capacity to meet the emerging needs of Venezuelans*” (Roth, 2019). SyH demonstrates the possibility for community-driven organizations to build resilient structures to support vulnerable families beyond the limits of government policy or traditional charity models. The universal issue that is faced, however, is whether it is ultimately possible to create these sustainable models through initial funding.

5.2. Personal Findings and Reflections in Sueños y Huellas

In addition to the interviews conducted for this research, my long-term relationship with the Sueños y Huellas Foundation allowed me to observe dynamics that extend beyond the formal scope of this study. Having previously volunteered with the foundation and remained in contact with some families, I noted that support can diminish once children graduate from the foundation. One family I spoke to described a lack of ongoing assistance after their

children left the foundation, leaving them to navigate education without the possibility for structured accompaniment. It is impossible for SyH to currently provide continual support for all children older than 12 who have graduated from the foundation, unfortunately given a lack of resources.

Another challenge I observed first-hand was the difficulty of supporting children of different ages within the same educational setting. Staff and volunteers often worked with groups where literacy levels and academic needs varied widely. This made it demanding to provide the individualised attention that each child required, particularly when older children with significant educational gaps were learning alongside much younger peers. The strain of balancing these diverse needs highlighted the practical limitations faced by grassroots organizations, even when their ethos and intentions are strong.

These reflections underscore the challenges grassroots organizations face in balancing immediate needs with longterm support. They also highlight the importance of alumni engagement, as well as differentiated educational strategies, areas that could be further explored by both practitioners and researchers.

5.3. Centro Infantil de Los Ángeles (San Miguel de Allende, Mexico)

5.3.1. Organizational Profile

The Centro Infantil de Los Ángeles (CILA) in San Miguel de Allende provides an instructive comparison to the work of Sueños y Huellas in Medellín. It is a non-profit organization functioning as a preschool and nursery for children between 2 months to 6 years. Patricio

Palacios, the legal representative and general director, has been committed to the foundation for sixteen years.

Palacios described her motivation as stemming from the profound sadness of witnessing the conditions of local children, many of whom come from impoverished families without stable access to food, utilities, or education. Palacios explained that the foundation receives around seventy applications each year but, due to limited resources, is able to accept only about twenty. Selection criteria prioritise children of single parents and those whose families earn less than 1,000 pesos weekly, many of whom also lack electricity and running water.

5.3.2. Challenges Faced by Families and Children

The challenges children face upon entering the foundation are both developmental and educational. Palacios highlighted that many struggle with basic habits—such as toilet training or healthy eating practices. As in Medellín, food insecurity emerges as a major barrier, with children arriving malnourished and unaccustomed to regular, balanced meals. Educational deprivation is also widespread: many applicants have little to no access to early learning opportunities, limiting their long-term prospects. Such patterns mirror the situations of the children at SyH. The involvement of many Guatemalan migrant families, who often intended to migrate onwards to the United States but remain stranded in Mexico, further situates CILA as an organization providing aid to migrants. Alike to Suenos y Huellas, and furthermore as Appe, Araque, and Telch (2025) observe in Colombia, grassroots nonprofits act as stabilising anchors for families caught in conditions of uncertainty and transience.

5.3.3. Education and Impact

Education is the central pillar of CILA's mission. Palacios underlined that maintaining children's access to schooling not only broadens their futures but also enables parents—particularly single mothers—to work during the day. In this sense, education serves both as a means of empowerment for children and a practical form of economic support for families. CILA boasts a powerful reputation in its local community, as one of the highest achieving schools in the city, even to the point of being recognized for special achievement

specifically by the Secretary of Education. This mirrors Appe et Al.'s reflection in Colombia that *"programs with academic accompaniment…have served hundreds of…youth to close [learning] gap[s]."* (Appe, et al., 2025)

Palacios defines success not through numbers but through the visible transformation of children's lives, describing "the smiles of the little ones" and the possibility of a better future as the true markers of achievement. This perspective resonates with Olga's reflections in Medellín, who defined success as the moment children felt safe enough to express their needs openly, suggesting that for grassroots leaders, success is relational and emotional, rather than measurable by statistics.

5.3.4. Bureaucracy and Limitations

Palacios noted that the foundation has only seven months of operational funds secured, after losing major donors during the COVID-19 pandemic. This fragility reflects Roth's observation that grassroots organizations are often forced to redirect resources, depend on unstable funding, and rely on volunteer labour to survive (Roth, 2019).

CILA also faces significant bureaucratic obstacles. Palacios expressed frustration at the absence of government support, noting that the public sector provides little assistance in ensuring continuity of services. Some staff members, faced with this lack of institutional backing, have even considered moving into public-sector roles to obtain greater job security. These realities underscore the systemic neglect of grassroots initiatives by state structures; just as in Colombia, where Venezuelan families encounter administrative exclusion, low-income families at CILA experience the consequences of governmental inaction, leaving NGOs as the primary guarantors of children's wellbeing. The result is that organizations like CILA must operate in conditions of constant uncertainty, their long-term plans constrained by fragile donor streams and absent state collaboration.

5.3.5. Future Vision

Palacios hopes to simply maintain and expand the foundation's operations so that more lives can be "rescued" from cycles of poverty and exclusion. The vision is modest yet deeply significant: to continue providing education, nutritional support, and psychological

accompaniment. Her words mirror the aspirations expressed by staff at SyH; both cases highlighting the resilience, yet uncertainty embedded within grassroots organizations across Latin America.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the indispensable role grassroots organizations play in supporting migrant and low-income families in Latin America. Both Sueños y Huellas 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.

The findings also reveal the fragility of such organizations. Dependence on unstable donor funding, compounded by limited government collaboration, creates ongoing uncertainty. Staff face emotional burdens 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.

Limitations of this study include its small scale and focus on staff perspectives. While this approach provides rich 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. Nevertheless, this project contributes to a deeper understanding of how community-driven responses can foster resilience, inclusion, and hope in contexts of displacement and poverty.

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