

CAMINANTES PILOT STRATEGY

Case Study from the VenEsperanza Consortium

OCTOBER 2022

Executive Summary

This case study presents lessons learned through the VenEsperanza Consortium's Caminantes Pilot strategy in Colombia. The insights gained from this pilot can be leveraged to advance new strategies for improving humanitarian assistance delivery for *caminantes* in the Latin America region as well as inform program design for supporting migrant populations in transit in other emergency contexts.

The VenEsperanza Consortium (funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and led by Mercy Corps with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children (SC), and World Vision (WV) has supported Venezuelan migrants and refugees, Colombian returnees, and vulnerable host community members in Colombia with multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) and complementary nutrition programming since August 2019. VenEsperanza launched a pilot strategy in 2021 to assist the highly vulnerable *caminantes* population.

The word "*caminantes*" refers to migrants who travel primarily on foot from Venezuela to destinations in Colombia and beyond. Due to lack of economic resources, access to communications technology, and safe transportation, *caminantes* experience significant protection risks along the walking routes including physical and sexual violence, illness and injury, robbery, and extortion. VenEsperanza recognized that many *caminantes* households were eligible to receive humanitarian assistance upon arrival to their destination. However, the specific conditions experienced by *caminantes* pose multiple challenges in targeting this group, most notably in establishing initial contact soon after arrival into Colombia and maintaining contact as they travel to their final destination.

The pilot strategy sought to address these issues by:

- 1) Developing efficient and effective approaches to identify and pre-register *caminantes* households with the intention to settle in Colombia early in their journey;
- 2) Leveraging common and accessible technology (i.e., Google Forms, Facebook, and WhatsApp) in order to maintain contact and allow them to self-report arrival at their destination;
- 3) Harmonizing the data management systems used so that VenEsperanza partners are able to coordinate operations across geographic regions.

Utilizing adaptive management principles, VenEsperanza made adjustments to the process in real time throughout the course of the pilot in order to optimize its impact. These adjustments and key lessons learned are discussed in detail in this case study.



Save the Children



Summary of Key Lessons Learned:

Make the Pre-Registration Process Simple, Quick, and Accessible: Changing the language on the survey to be more easily understood and employing survey procedures that limited the potential for null applications was critical in maximizing the impact of the program.

Tailor Targeting Strategies to Respond to Migratory Behavior: Prioritizing continuous analysis of migratory trends and using information derived from this analysis to build unified field targeting and registration strategies based on the evolving dynamics of *caminantes* as a population on the move was critical to strategy. Face-to-face registration allowed the teams to provide psychosocial care, basic food kits, and information about travel safety along the routes in an effort to support the traveling populations.

Leverage Technologies Familiar to the Target Population: VenEsperanza leveraged a simple, but effective combination of social media (Facebook), mass messaging (WhatsApp), and digital workflow tools (Kobo Toolbox and Messagebird Forms) that are linked to a common data management backend system. This system used PHP, Java, and SQL for the queries, which were used to update the databases that stored pre-registration information. The website programming, the chatbox, and the Kobo were all housed in a GitHub repository and were used to coordinate the implementation of the Caminantes Pilot.

Prioritize Robust Communications Strategies: Communication strategies utilized include:

- 1) Offering individuals modestly loaded SIM cards once they enter Colombia.
- 2) Collecting contact information of friends and family at the person's destination in addition to his/her own, ensuring that the field team can verify arrival in the event that he/she lost contact.
- 3) Creating a Facebook group where *caminantes* can find information about the program
- 4) Sending automated Whatsapp messages reminding *caminantes* to report their arrival and update their contact details.

Allow Individuals to Self-Report Arrival at Destination: Structuring communications in order to facilitate pre-registered individuals to easily be able to contact the specific VenEsperanza partner agency enabled VenEsperanza to more effectively and quickly assist *caminantes*, reducing time dedicated to contacting people and redistributing efforts towards surveying potential participants.

Personable Presentation: Partners made various program adjustments to employ a more personalized experience. People interact with a chatbot from WhatsApp that speaks in accessible language, allowing the consortium to collect information from people in a personable and efficient manner. Additionally, each organization created an avatar (María Cortez for Mercy Corps, Ignacio Restrepo Caro for IRC, Santiago Torres Chinchilla for SC, and Wanda Villa for WV) that encourages people to follow the Facebook page.

Facilitate Consistent and Timely Coordination Between Consortium Implementing Partners: Round-table discussions between implementing partners held on a regular basis solidified the foundation of the strategy, helped to promote real time learning and adaptation and built trust between VenEsperanza partners.

Coordinate with Local Agencies and Shelters to Facilitate Effective Targeting: Partnering with other agencies and local service providers to improve the process to identify eligible people increased the number of pre-registrations and expanded VenEsperanza's referral network beyond the consortium's programmatic and geographical scope.

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Glossary

Caminante: Literally translating to “walker,” “caminante” refers to migrants and refugees who journey from Venezuela to Colombia and other destinations primarily on foot.

Cash for Urban Assistance (CUA): a partner consortium that is also funded by USAID/BHA and cooperates with VenEsperanza to offer humanitarian aid to people in need in Colombia.

iMMAP - An international not-for-profit organization that provides information management services to humanitarian and development organizations.

KoBoToolbox - a survey platform to be used for data collection and storage by humanitarian organizations. The VenEsperanza Consortium initially used this product as the survey platform for the first phase of the pilot.

Messagebird - Messagebird is a company that offers communication solutions for a wide range of contexts. The Messagebird platform allowed the Caminantes Pilot team to configure a pre-registration form via SMS and WhatsApp. This product was used in the second phase of the pilot.

Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA): One of many forms of assistance that humanitarian organizations offer to people in crisis.

Trochas - Trails; informal crossings utilized by *caminantes* to cross the Venezuela-Colombia border.

WhatsApp - Internationally available free instant messaging platform.

Part I: Introduction

In 2020 the VenEsperanza Consortium launched a pilot initiative to reach the highly vulnerable *caminantes* population, who travel primarily on foot from Venezuela to destinations in Colombia and beyond. These individuals are a challenging group to target, in large part because most travel with little to no access to communication technology or the internet. Despite these obstacles, VenEsperanza developed innovative measures to identify *caminantes* and maintain contact with them during their travels with the objective of connecting eligible households to cash assistance once settled in a final destination in Colombia. The pilot was carried out in collaboration with iMMAP, an international nonprofit organization that provides information management services, as well as operational and strategic support to humanitarian agencies. The Caminantes Pilot began its second phase in February of 2021 and has enabled VenEsperanza to engage with mobile populations until they reach their final destination and are eligible for program enrollment. Given its success, the Caminantes Pilot will be incorporated into the greater VenEsperanza program.

This case study presents the lessons learned from VenEsperanza's Caminantes Pilot in order to inform and advance new strategies for improving humanitarian assistance for migrants who are on the move in the Latin American region. The case study can also inform humanitarian actors seeking to provide assistance to vulnerable migrant populations in other contexts.

Context

Since 2014, more than six million Venezuelans have been displaced from their country due to economic and political instability, with over 1.84 million currently residing in Colombia. The thousands of Venezuelans who continue to migrate every day are motivated to leave for a variety of reasons: they lack access to food, medicine and essential social services, they are threatened by armed groups, they fear being targeted because of their political affiliation, and they suffer insecurity, violence, and loss of income. However, many migrants, refugees, and Colombian returnees continue to experience challenges in Colombia, including earning insufficient income to provide for basic needs such as food and shelter. The World Food Programme reported in January 2022 that 64% of Venezuelans in Colombia continue to experience moderate to severe food insecurity in direct connection to ongoing challenges in securing formal work.¹

iMMAP
iMMAP is an international not-for-profit organization that provides information management services to humanitarian and development organizations, enabling partners to make informed decisions that ultimately provide high-quality targeted assistance to the world's most vulnerable populations.

iMMAP aims to support humanitarian actors to solve operational and strategic challenges. Their previous efforts have facilitated informed and effective emergency preparedness, humanitarian response, and development aid activities by enabling evidence-based decision-making for organizations including UN agencies, humanitarian cluster/sector leads, NGOs, and government operations.²

¹ World Food Programme Remote Assessment, 2021

file:///C:/Users/nadia/Downloads/WFP_Remote_Assessment_Migrants_August2020212005102021.pdf

² Adapted from [Who We Are | iMMAP](#)

VenEsperanza Consortium

The VenEsperanza Consortium was established in response to this crisis. The consortium is represented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children, and World Vision, with Mercy Corps as lead. VenEsperanza has been working in Colombia since August 2019 to deliver humanitarian Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA) and complementary nutrition programming to improve access to basic needs for Venezuelan migrants and refugees, Colombian returnees, and vulnerable host community members.

VenEsperanza delivers six monthly MPCA transfers to eligible participant households. Participation is determined through a common intake survey that measures household eligibility. During its first phase of implementation³ VenEsperanza delivered over \$60 million in MPCA (regular and emergency) to more than 419,000 participants in 10 departments across Colombia and provided complementary nutrition programming impacting nearly 100,000 individuals. VenEsperanza has also assisted thousands of Venezuelan participants in the process of legalizing their status in Colombia through the Government of Colombia's (GoC) Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Venezolanos (ETPV) policy, which offers eligible Venezuelans the ability to reside, work, and access social benefits in Colombia for 10 years.



“Many people have left Venezuela, sometimes you walk and see beautiful houses empty, there is no one, ” ”

— Jeremía, a Caminante

Defining “Caminantes”

Caminantes (or “walkers” in English) are migrants and refugees who journey from Venezuela to Colombia and other destinations primarily on foot. *Caminantes* have extremely limited economic resources and travel on foot most often because they cannot afford transportation expenses. These migrants experience significant barriers in accessing food, communications technology, latrines, clean water, shelter, and healthcare along the walking routes. They also face high protection risks like extortion, exploitation, recruitment into criminal and armed groups, robbery, and physical and sexual violence. Many individuals cross the Venezuela-Colombia border via *trochas* (informal crossings) because they lack valid documentation required to pass through formal border crossings. The transitory nature of this population complicates their ability to access humanitarian assistance.

Part II: The Caminantes Pilot

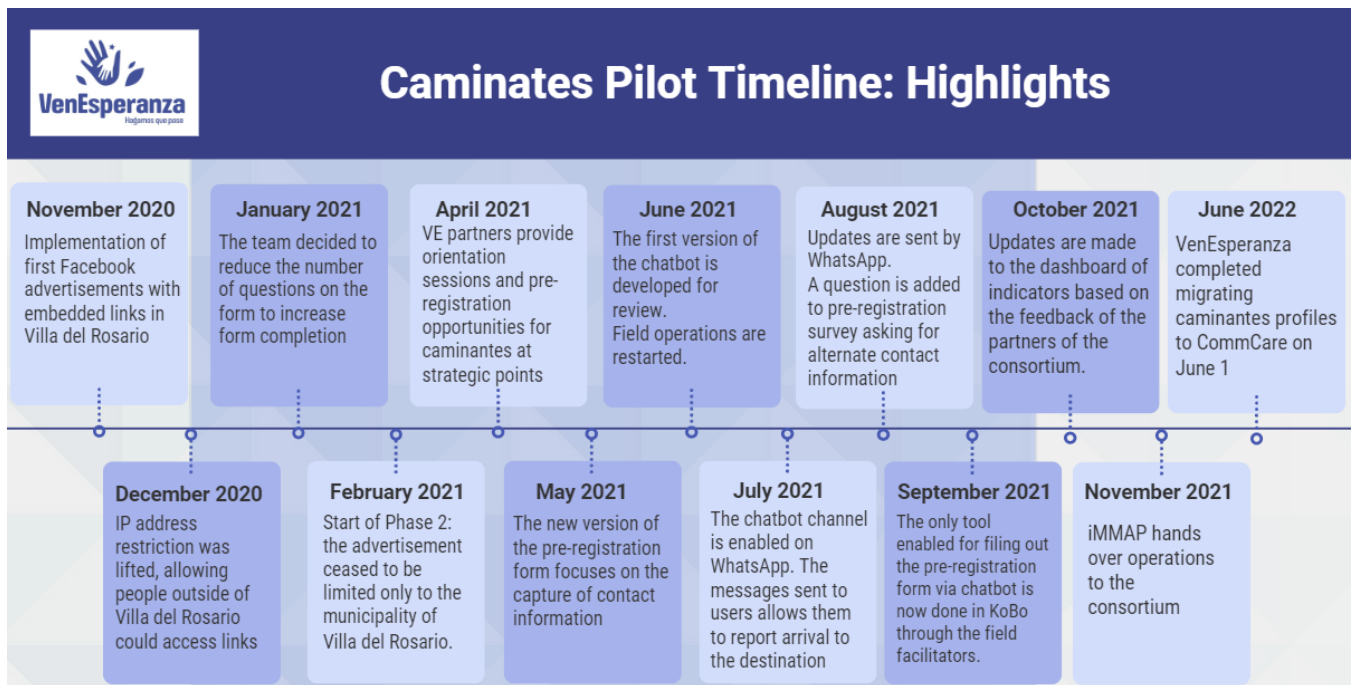
VenEsperanza developed the Caminantes Pilot strategy to better connect *caminantes* households to humanitarian assistance in Colombia. The pilot was one of the first efforts in the country to focus on this population and how to address their unique needs and vulnerabilities. Although *caminantes*' conditions are often urgent when they reach the Colombian border, VenEsperanza reserves direct cash transfers for beneficiaries that occupy a steady living arrangement in order to protect them from increased protection risks. *Caminantes* are a group that are often targeted by human trafficking, robberies, and armed groups that tend to operate in the border regions between Venezuela and Colombia. VenEsperanza's position is that the high protection risks that *caminantes* face while in transit can be exacerbated if these already

³ From September 2019 to September 2022.

vulnerable populations are given large sums of money to carry through the rest of their journey. Additionally, offering direct cash transfers to an actively migrating population would make follow-up M&E processes more difficult to complete. Considering these dynamics, *caminantes* become eligible to enroll in humanitarian programming only once settled in a service region in Colombia. This practice reduces many risks that migrants might otherwise face while traveling with large quantities of money like theft and diversion.

The strategy has two main objectives: 1) identifying and pre-registering *caminantes* who have recently arrived in Colombia from Venezuela into a common database; and 2) establishing and maintaining contact with the pre-registered individuals during their journeys so that, upon arrival at a final destination in Colombia, VenEsperanza partners can administer the program’s intake survey and enroll eligible households in its MPCA programming. This method of pre-registration and follow up to complete full enrollment once a household is settled in a destination location seeks to not add unwarranted protection risks to already disadvantaged beneficiaries and protect resources from unintended diversion. Furthermore, verifying that participants have reached their destination allows the consortium to assist households that are located within VenEsperanza areas of operation; individuals whose destinations are not within those areas of operation are referred to other agencies for assistance. The Program Flow Chart in Annex 2 provides greater detail, Since the launch of the pilot until Sep of 2022, 6,006 *caminantes* pre-registered with VenEsperanza upon arrival in Colombia, 2,423 reported reaching their destination, and 1,640 took the eligibility survey.

Timeline



Phase I: November 2020 - January 2021

	iMMAP	Joint	VenEsperanza
Separation of responsibilities	Designed all technological tools for collecting and distributing information, using input from the Consortium Coordination team.	Created a server and language for the database so as to conform with the privacy and licensing requirements of both organizations.	Supplied personnel to support participant engagement and follow-up.
	Transferred information generated from surveys to VenEsperanza partners.	Pre-registrations completed online (iMMAP) and in person (partners).	Verify eligibility of participant profiles collected during surveying.
	Executed locating functions, including identifying destination cities, online surveys and arrivals.		Contacting registered participants in Villa del Rosario, Norte de Santander.

The first phase of the pilot began in November of 2020 with implementation via Facebook advertisements done by World Vision staff in Villa del Rosario, Norte de Santander. These ads aimed to reach Venezuelan families and were designed so that users were directed to a pre-registration form that would prompt them to enter basic information and validate their identity. The program team was then able to connect with the potential participants by phone or in person to complete an eligibility survey that would determine if they were a good fit for the VenEsperanza program. This first phase of the pilot ran through February 2021 and received 13,803 pre-registrations, 43% of which came from Villa del Rosario.

In this phase, a four-step process was designed to easily reach families migrating into Colombia from Venezuela:

1. The advertisements posted on Facebook explained the kind of assistance that was being offered and included basic program information without giving false expectations of guaranteed registration in the program. For the pilot, a series of images and an animated gif were created to determine whether one type of image was more successful in reaching the target population.
2. Once the user clicked on the link associated with the advertisement, they were redirected to a pre-registration form where they were prompted to enter information such as: personal data, geographic location, family members, and biometric information (optional). The user was then prompted to upload or take a photo of their identification document and a “selfie.”
3. Databases were created to store the processed pre-registration forms; at this time, iMMAP generated a dashboard to easily monitor how many potential participants VenEsperanza would receive. On a weekly basis, World Vision validated the information of potential program participants.
4. World Vision contacted the potential participants to complete the eligibility survey and updated the final database of participants for the VenEsperanza program.⁴

Pilot advancements, results, and feedback was reviewed by key members from World Vision, iMMAP and VenEsperanza’s teams regularly (on a weekly or biweekly basis). Modifications were made to the process after the team realized successes from the experimental first phase of the pilot, and sought to encourage

⁴[Annex 7 World Vision & iMMAP Pilot Summary](#)

more individuals to complete the pre-registration form. In January 2021, the pre-registration form was shortened from eight questions to four given that only 75% of individuals that followed the link completed the form. The modifications from the first phase of the pilot saw an overall increase from the initial 25.1 daily completed forms to 107.7 daily completed forms.

Updates Between Phase I and Phase II:

- The partnership between iMMAP and World Vision expanded to include all consortium members: IRC, Save the Children and Mercy Corps.
- Advertisements for the pilot conducted by World Vision in Villa del Rosario were scaled up to include other towns in the region.
- The pilot was scaled up to include orientation sessions conducted at strategic points along the Colombia-Venezuela border: namely, in the departments Arauca, La Guajira, Norte de Santander, and Santander.
- The pre-registration form was shortened from eight questions to four questions to increase the number of completed forms.
- The survey format was adapted such that it could be self-administered on tablets that did not require internet access to record the data.
- Self-reporting tools were eliminated as they contributed to the volume of null cases (cases that did not include sufficient personal and/or contact information) quality of the databases.
- Pre-registrations could only be performed using Kobo.
- The implementation of a chatbot and web form with the option to send PQRS (i.e., questions, complaints and suggestions) enabled a communication channel by the *caminantes* that also allowed the consortium to identify aspects of the pilot that required adaptations or improvements based on feedback from the target population.

Phase II: February 2021 - December 2021

In April 2021, field teams from each VenEsperanza partner began offering pre-registration opportunities for *caminantes* at strategic points along popular walking routes near the Colombia-Venezuela border, mostly in the departments of Arauca, La Guajira, Norte de Santander, and Santander utilizing the shorter survey.

Program Expansion: During this second phase, VenEsperanza partners also opened registration points in key shelters and travel routes along the *caminantes*' path to register all travelers headed towards Colombia.

In July 2021, VenEsperanza launched a Facebook page, Web Form, and WhatsApp bot to increase accessibility, further streamline the pre-registration process, and allow for self-registration outside of in-person touchpoints. These centralized digital tools also allowed *caminantes* to update their contact information and self-report arrival at their destination, thus improving the ability of VenEsperanza to reach them with information about its programming.

Prior to this adaptation, VenEsperanza partners called and messaged people in the database to establish whether or not they had arrived at their final destination. This process required substantial team bandwidth and often did not yield strong results as many individuals change their mobile phone number, cannot afford

to purchase credits for their mobile line, and/or sell their devices to provide for basic needs. The switch to self-reporting and the addition of WhatsApp, Facebook, and Google Forms to the toolbox significantly decreased demands on field teams to conduct outreach and expanded the number of platforms *caminantes* can use to report arrival and engage with the consortium. Those who reach out to inform VenEsperanza of their arrival are contacted to take the eligibility survey and begin the enrollment process.

Despite the initial successes that the pilot experienced in increasing access to humanitarian assistance for *caminantes* households, challenges regarding data collection, survey error, and communication channels became evident throughout the course of the pilot. In September 2021 VenEsperanza stopped using self-reporting tools because they generated a large number of null cases (cases lacking information). This negatively impacted the quality of the data and the team's ability to contact pre-registrants. Since September 2021, pre-registrations are made exclusively through Kobo.

For purposes of feedback monitoring, the pilot team added an option to send PQRS - Questions, Complaints and Suggestions (for the initials in Spanish)—to the chatBot and web form, opening a communication channel for the *caminantes* that allows the consortium to monitor how the pilot is working and what are the aspects of improvement identified by the target population. VenEsperanza partners continue to devise new strategies to increase the number of *caminantes* identified for pre-registration and to close the gap between the number of *caminantes* who pre-register and the number who take the eligibility survey to enroll in the program.

Updates following Phase II:

- Caminantes pre-registration processes and applicant profiles were all migrated to CommCare, eliminating the need to export and integrate this information from Kobo.
- The consortium hired a focal point to help manage communications with *caminantes* for all partners and the overall programming strategy for work with *caminantes*.

Part III: Impactful Features

The difficulties in identifying and maintaining contact with *caminantes* prompted the consortium to develop innovative strategies to address these challenges. The following discussion presents key aspects of the pilot strategy and adaptations made over the course of implementation to close the gap between the number of people identified during pre-registration and the number of individuals who ultimately take VenEsperanza's eligibility survey.

1. Coordination

Much of the success of the pilot—and of the VenEsperanza program as a whole—can be attributed to the high level of coordination between consortium members as well as the geographic and programmatic scale of VenEsperanza's operations. VenEsperanza pioneered coordinated attention for the *caminantes* population in Colombia, and each partner organization contributed staff member time and effort to the implementation of the pilot strategy. The consortium formed a committee that met weekly during the pilot to

coordinate operations, share experiences from their field offices, and provide feedback on necessary program adaptations.

In order to reach as many *caminantes* as possible, consortium partners stationed teams of two or three field staff at designated strategic arrival points along the Colombia-Venezuela border. Save the Children's staff members were responsible for pre-registration booths in La Guajira and Arauca; while IRC and World Vision worked to identify *caminantes* in Villa de Rosario in the department of Norte de Santander. World Vision also carried out pre-registration activities in Santander. The VenEsperanza pre-registration survey collects information regarding a person's contact details and final destination, so that the individual can be reached upon arrival; this process also allows the field teams for each implementing partner to establish contact with the pre-registered individual during their journey and to verify their arrival.

Partners operating in areas with high settlement rates (e.g., Save the Children in Bogotá D.C., IRC in Cundinamarca, and Mercy Corps in Antioquia) also worked on the other side of the equation – assigning team members to conduct outreach efforts to reach *caminantes* who reported arrival in those departments. The centralized database and coordinated use of common technology to facilitate contact with *caminantes* upon arrival allowed teams to collaborate across geographies in order to enhance assistance delivery to this population.

1) Challenges

Preventing Duplication

In line with directives from the Government of Colombia and USAID, VenEsperanza and all major cash actors in Colombia agree to not provide duplicate cash assistance to individuals. Registering and providing assistance to *caminantes* while controlling for duplicate participation in cash programming was challenging at the beginning of the pilot. Partners operate in various departments across Colombia and, in some cases, have coverage that overlaps with collaborators both internal and external to the consortium. Additionally, people have obvious incentives to apply to as many organizations as possible, as many times as it might take to receive assistance. Duplicates were detected as a result of:

- 1) intentional attempts of participants to survey/enroll with multiple organizations;
- 2) field teams' vigorous surveying efforts;
- 3) traveling a path that intercepts the operational areas of two or more partners; and/or
- 4) people making initial contact with one organization while settling in another partner's service area.

To prevent duplicate enrollment during the period when VenEsperanza maintained an open survey line, IMMAP and VenEsperanza had to verify the incomplete records or records with different contact information. The Consortium coordination team also cross-verified this list of applicants to the list of current and previous program beneficiaries. Finally, each partners' point team cross-checked with other internal cash programs to ensure that potential participant households were not current or previous recipients of cash assistance.

2) Responses

Applicant Identification

VenEsperanza uses a data management system called CommCare that houses all data collected by the consortium. CommCare generates a unique identifier (UI) code for each person focalized by the program, generating the code from a person's key information (i.e. their sex, birthday, and first and last name). This UI allows for automatic deduplication among consortium members internal to VenEsperanza, as well as with

the Danish Refugee Council, Action Against Hunger, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, who—acting collectively as the Consortium Cash for Urban Assistance (CUA)— have a data sharing agreement with VenEsperanza.

Initially, *caminantes* pre-registration used a coding method distinct from the UI. However, in scaling the pilot up to a strategy, VenEsperanza will homogenize the *caminantes* pre-registrant identification process with that of the program's regular MPCA applicants, (i.e. using UI codes). By using an updated survey form, CommCare will automatically generate UIs for each *caminante* registrant henceforth. All pre-registration activities will be administered by VenEsperanza field staff from mobile CommCare applications that will seamlessly integrate *caminantes* case management into VenEsperanza processes, including the deduplication processes both internal and external to the consortium. VenEsperanza completed migrating *caminantes* profiles to CommCare on June 1, 2022.

Beneficiary Attention

Partners are assigned cases based on the pre-registrant's declared destination across the 10 VenEsperanza service departments.⁵ All people pre-registered are called by the specific partner who maintains contact, confirming the pre-registrant's arrival at their destination. After reaching their final destination, each partner applies the eligibility survey and continues servicing the individual if they are eligible for programming.

The VenEsperanza M&E team assigns consortium partners the *caminantes* cases based off of their arrival destination in CommCare. There, case management procedures like arrival reports and updates in contact information are done on a weekly basis.

2. Identification & Targeting Efforts

Both in-person and digital pre-registration efforts allowed VenEsperanza to identify *caminantes* households upon arrival in Colombia. For the first phase of the pilot in 2020, the survey was built in Google Forms as the initial tool for understanding the socioeconomic situation, needs, and concerns of *caminantes* households. Tablets were set up at pre-registration booths so applicants could fill out digitized pre-registration forms themselves, which were created in Google Forms and Chatbot. However, in September 2021 the consortium made the decision to conduct pre-registrations solely with the assistance of VenEsperanza field team members. Currently, pre-registrations are done in CommCare, while the Chatbot and online web form are used for reporting arrival at a destination city and allowing individuals to update their personal data.

1) Challenges

The original pre-registration survey prompted respondents to share information regarding household income, source of income, food consumption, coping strategies and other basic information. It quickly became clear that the survey process was too cumbersome and some *caminantes* preferred to keep walking without completing pre-registration. The self-reporting aspect of the pilot also created challenges and drawbacks that needed mitigation. Travelers often did not fill out forms completely or correctly, generating null cases that the M&E team were required to screen on the back end of the process, consuming significant staff time and resources. While the system allowed an increased number of travelers to complete

⁵ In Antioquia, where IRC and Mercy Corps operate, referrals received from pre-registrations are allocated equally. For Norte de Santander, the destination municipality is considered as an additional criterion, so pre-registrants traveling to Cúcuta are assigned to IRC and those directed to other municipalities of the department are assigned to World Vision.

pre-registration forms, many applicants were, in the end, deemed ineligible for program enrollment as they were neither a migrant in transit nor a refugee.

2) Response

In response to this feedback, the team improved the survey for the second phase of the pilot by making it shorter and adjusting the language to be less technical so that it is easier to complete.

In a subsequent progression, the consortium designed a feature where the form can be filled out offline in Kobo Toolbox to resolve connectivity issues. The responses were fed into VenEsperanza's database in the cloud once connectivity was restored. Additionally, the IRC, SC, and WV teams assigned staff to conduct the surveys, while limiting access to the registration forms so that only field teams could fill out the forms. This helped to reduce the number of invalid registrations, or non-refugee or non-caminante registrations, and to improve the quality of registration data.

Currently, field teams have access to CommCare Mobile, which lets them enter information directly into CommCare while working in the field. This also cut out additional data migration efforts that were necessary to transfer information from Kobo into CommCare, leaving only input from the chatbot and Messagebird to be integrated into the system.

3. Communications

One of the greatest challenges VenEsperanza partners faced in the course of the pilot was reconnecting with *caminantes* once they reached their destination, despite recording their contact information during the pre-registration process. During their journey, *caminantes* experience a variety of barriers to communications access – many do not have a Colombian SIM card at the time of pre-registration; lack the ability to pay for a plan or phone credit; and some resort to selling their phones for extra cash to provide for basic needs. To address these issues, VenEsperanza conducted focus groups to better understand *caminantes'* needs and experiences and subsequently expanded its use of communications tools beyond primary reliance on mobile phone lines.

Facebook

The idea to create a Facebook group came from feedback acquired from the focus groups: respondents indicated they were familiar with and frequently used Facebook and other messaging platforms like WhatsApp. The focus groups also made it clear that if individuals lost access to their mobile phone line or device, they would use Facebook to contact relatives or friends at their final destination. With these behaviors in mind, VenEsperanza created a closed Facebook group as an alternative way to keep in contact with *caminantes*, as well as to distribute information about the route conditions and locations for service points run by other aid organizations. The group was private and closely monitored in order to prevent misinformation. VenEsperanza used Facebook ads to build awareness about VenEsperanza among the target audience in strategic areas and direct potentially eligible Facebook users to the bot-led pre-registration portal for the *caminantes* database.

WhatsApp and Messagebird

VenEsperanza also leveraged WhatsApp and a platform known as Messagebird to contact and pre-register *caminantes*. As a widely-used messenger app, WhatsApp offered an effective modality to contact large numbers of *caminantes* with information about the program through mass messaging and the bot function,

while protecting the *caminantes*' anonymity. The Messagebird platform allowed the Caminantes Pilot team to configure a pre-registration form which operated using binary or predetermined response buttons. This feature was critical in limiting data collection error in applicant surveys. The Messagebird platform facilitates text pre-registration with its intuitive and user-friendly interface. Allowing the form creator to modify or restrict the types answers for each question aided implementers by minimizing the potential for data entry error in applications. Examples of outreach materials are included in Annex 3.

1) Challenge

Despite efforts to maintain a ubiquitous and accessible presence across commonly used platforms, *caminantes* often lost contact with field teams during their travels for a number of reasons: they sell their valuable items including their phones when necessary during their travels, they lose valuable items in robberies, and they alter their travel destinations.

WhatsApp also has the ability to sync the tools used to maintain contact and register the *caminantes* without sharing any identifiable information. However, the team quickly realized that *caminantes* were sharing links to the Messagebird form and Whatsapp bot with other people in Colombia, subsequently overloading the platform with many ineligible registrants.

2) Response

Due to the frequent inability of teams to reach *caminantes* registered in the database, VenEsperanza implemented a simple, yet effective adjustment in the pre-registration and contact update processes – requesting a second, **alternative contact** (typically a family member or friend who they plan to meet at their final destination) in case VenEsperanza cannot reach the individual registered in the database. This increased the frequency of making contact with *caminantes* who reported their arrival, but were unreachable upon calling. In addition to requesting the names of alternative contacts, the team also made revisions to the WhatsApp bot so that individuals could update their contact information on file. The chatbot, Facebook group, and periodic SMS messaging system were also implemented as a response to this challenge; these modalities allowed the team to remind *caminantes* to report their arrival and update contact information as needed.

To limit the number of ineligible applications, VenEsperanza chatbot prompted individuals to answer additional screening questions to ensure they meet basic requirements for the program prior to registering them in the database.

Part IV: Experiences

A long way to win the game



Photo: A moment in the domino game between Jeremía y Jhon. Víctor Linares / VenEsperanza.

The domino pieces hit the table, causing a long-emptied water bottle to wobble. It is almost 2 in the afternoon, the sun starts to set while a couple of teens, Jeremía and Jhon, angrily drop the pieces over and over again, marking the character. It is one of the few ways to kill time in this accommodation in La Donjuana, about 50 kilometers from the border, a refuge that offers accommodation, food, and services provided by various NGOs to people who arrive in Colombia on foot from Venezuela. The two young men are brothers-in-law and they walked 8 days ago from Caracas with their wives, one of them five months pregnant. They crossed the border a day earlier at a “trocha,” an unofficial crossing controlled by criminal gangs that are known to extort money from *caminantes* for letting them cross the border. Now they wait for the bus to arrive to continue their trip to Ecuador (using a ticket paid for by an NGO), where a friend who promised them a better paid job is waiting for them. “Boss, for me to earn 45 dollars a week to spend 25 on the ticket and 20 on food, it's hard,” says Jeremía, who worked as a barber in his country.



Photo: Jeremía and Jhon play dominoes inside of La Donjuana Shelter. Víctor Linares/VenEsperanza.

"Many people have left Venezuela, sometimes you walk and see beautiful houses empty, there is no one," explains Jeremía. The South American country continues to experience a deep economic crisis. A situation that affects those who are more vulnerable and also sentences young people like Jeremía and Jhon to search for a future that, at the moment, they cannot find in their home. Colombia is the country where most Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees live. There are almost two million migrants/refugees in Colombia, according to figures from the Colombian government. In addition, four years ago, many of them began arriving on foot, having faced extortion from criminal gangs on the border, violence, and forced recruitment by guerrillas while they suffered extreme temperatures and injuries from long hours on the road. Travelers from this group— often forced to migrate on foot for a lack of resources— are referred to as *"caminantes,"* which is Spanish for *"walkers."* An estimated 162,000 *caminantes* traveled through Colombia in 2021, according to the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V).

Jeremía and Jhon recognize that the situation has improved a bit in their country and they are already **"paying in green"** they say, referring to US dollars. The value of Venezuelan currency has fallen so low that those who are able have started using the American dollar for both stability and simplicity. Even still, the men complain that they barely get paid \$7 USD a day and the working conditions are very harsh. Both agree that the hardest thing so far was the journey itself. **"Yesterday we walked about 8 hours to get here,"** he explains. And he adds that he didn't like what he saw in Cúcuta, the first big Colombian city that *caminantes* reach after crossing the border. **"There is a lot of vice, I don't like that crazy atmosphere like that".** He acknowledges that there are people who helped them along the way, offering him a place to sleep, although there are others who looked at them and **"turned the other way".**

It is difficult to profile *caminantes* because the context is very dynamic, and it is not easy to collect reliable information. According to a non-representative survey from the REACH initiative, 69% of the *caminantes* left Venezuela after losing their job or income-generating activity. Jeremía and Jhon belong to the 42% of people between the ages of 18 and 59 years old, as well as to the 73% that migrate in groups.

It seems that Jhon is winning this game of dominoes. At the same time his cat, a honey-colored miniature that followed them along the way, climbs up and down his lap demanding attention. Now the plan is to get to Ecuador, and start working in a shrimp fish farm, where they hope to earn 300 USD a month. ***"The important thing is to get there and start working, so that they see that you like to work."*** Jeremía says that the idea is to spend a few months working to save enough to return to Venezuela as others have done, he continues, and start over. Who knows if both men will manage to win this game on the road and achieve a more dignified life. ***"The goal is to buy my house, my car and stay with my family in Venezuela with my barbershop business. There you can have your business and live peacefully"***.



Photo: Jeremía (left) y Jhon (right) at the entrance of La Donjuana Shelter. Víctor Linares / VenEsperanza

Part V: Lessons Learned

The lessons presented below feature both successful and challenging aspects from the pilot.

Prioritize Robust Communications Strategies

The main objective of the pilot was to maintain contact with *caminantes* through their travels, ultimately enrolling eligible households into MPCA programming. To do this, the team developed communication strategies that helped migrants communicate, such as offering Colombian SIM cards to travelers once they entered the country. Other communication strategies involved keeping direct contact with the residents at the traveler's destination. Gathering the contact information of family members in addition to the traveler's information provided an additional avenue to verify that travelers had reached their intended destinations.

Make Registration Simple, Quick, and Accessible

VenEsperanza continuously adapted its *caminantes* pre-registration form to address applicant concerns. In these revisions the form was shortened and included less technical language, as well as to allow for offline completion to adapt to unstable internet signals. The result is a registration form that is fast and easy; that can be completed offline; and that preserves data quality by minimizing the margin for human error, and eliminates steps in data consolidation. VenEsperanza found that these adjustments increased the likelihood of *caminantes* completing the pre-registration process and provided the consortium with more accurate contact information. Through implementation, VenEsperanza found—due to the high volume of null cases generated from self-surveying—that it was more beneficial to have staff directly survey participants as opposed to having an open survey link. Integration of the pre-registration process into VenEsperanza's information system was crucial to the success of the pilot as it facilitated follow-up and allowed for more robust indicator monitoring.

Tailor Targeting Strategies to Migratory Behavior

The main objective of the strategy is to ensure that field teams can successfully register migrating/transient populations without duplication. This was achieved by building unified field targeting and registration strategies based on the evolving dynamics of *caminantes* as a population on the move. Face-to-face registration strategies allowed the consortium teams to provide psychosocial care and key messages in an effort to support travelers. The team provided information and key messages that included information about shelters or potential hazards that *caminantes* may encounter along the route. In general, team members give awareness talks and hand out booklets which describe how *caminantes* can protect themselves and their valuables on their journey. The "Safe Routes" booklet created by the GIFMM contains maps that indicate the best route to follow according to the traveler's destination.⁶ Psychological first aid is also provided through complementary programming when the field team determines that it is necessary following a crisis situation. Consortium partner Save the Children provides a basic food kit that will last for roughly three days, as well as a pair of shoes when available.

⁶ The Interagency Group on Mixed Migratory Flows (GIFMM) is co-led by IOM and UNHCR in response to the growing number of refugees, migrants, and returnees in Colombia, coordinating the needs of these populations in conjunction with the host populations <https://www.r4v.info/en>

Leverage Common Technologies that are Familiar to the Target Population

Utilizing technology platforms familiar to and most utilized by the majority of the target population improved both outcomes and the quality of participant experience. VenEsperanza leveraged a simple, but effective combination of social media (Facebook), mass messaging (WhatsApp and Messagebird), and digital workflow tools (Google Forms and Kobo Toolbox) that were linked to a common data management backend system to coordinate implementation of the *caminantes* pilot. Facebook and WhatsApp spread messages quickly and effectively due to their accessible nature and high usage rates among *caminantes*. Setting up bots on these platforms proved an effective way to automate the pre-registration process and allowed teams to issue program-wide updates with directions and information to the target audience.

Allow Individuals to Self-Report Arrival at Destination

Shifting both messaging and system functions to allow individuals to contact VenEsperanza when they reach their final destination saved significant time and resources. With this streamlined modification, less time was spent attempting to contact migrants and was instead diverted to surveying potential participants.

Facilitate Consistent and Timely Coordination Between Implementing Partners

Routine round-table discussions solidified the foundation of the strategy and built trust between VenEsperanza partners. Each partner should feel comfortable discussing experiences from the field and providing feedback on which aspects to modify if necessary. Fluid and constant coordination between partners enabled modifications to the pilot to be implemented quickly and effectively.

Coordinate with Local Agencies and Shelters to Facilitate Effective Targeting

Partners leveraged and developed relationships with other humanitarian agencies and service providers (especially local agencies) with the aim of improving the identification process for recently arrived *caminantes*. This strategy increased the number of individuals pre-registered in the database and raised the likelihood of connecting them to humanitarian assistance upon arrival at their destination in Colombia. These relationships also facilitated the expansion of VenEsperanza's referral network for services and assistance beyond its program and geographical scopes.

Part VI: Scaling up the Pilot

The success of VenEsperanza's *caminantes* pilot and the continued vulnerability of this population have motivated VenEsperanza to embed an ongoing *caminantes* strategy into its program delivery approach. The *Caminantes* Pilot will serve as a complementary safeguarding strategy that assists an especially vulnerable population, ensuring that organizations maintain contact with migrants until they are eligible to receive VenEsperanza's assistance.

Integrating the strategy into VenEsperanza includes increasing visibility for the lessons outlined in this study; creating and strengthening alliances with other organizations to refer cases and expand VenEsperanza assistance to new departments; and augmenting the processes for monitoring and evaluation, including following up with key indicators.

The main objective in expanding the *Caminantes* Pilot is to expand the number of individuals that can be enrolled in VenEsperanza programming. Further, we intend to fully integrate the successful strategies outlined in this study into the VenEsperanza monitoring system. Most notably we aim to integrate the database specifically designed for the pilot into the larger VenEsperanza database that leverages Unique

IDs for participants. The specific indicators to facilitate more robust monitoring for the *caminantes* strategies include: *

#	Indicator
1	% of <i>caminantes</i> households that completed eligibility survey
2	% of <i>caminantes</i> households surveyed, who are eligible for MPCA
3	Number of <i>caminantes</i> (persons) who are beneficiaries of VenEsperanza
4	Number of registered <i>caminantes</i> households
5	Number of <i>caminantes</i> (persons) registered per point of contact

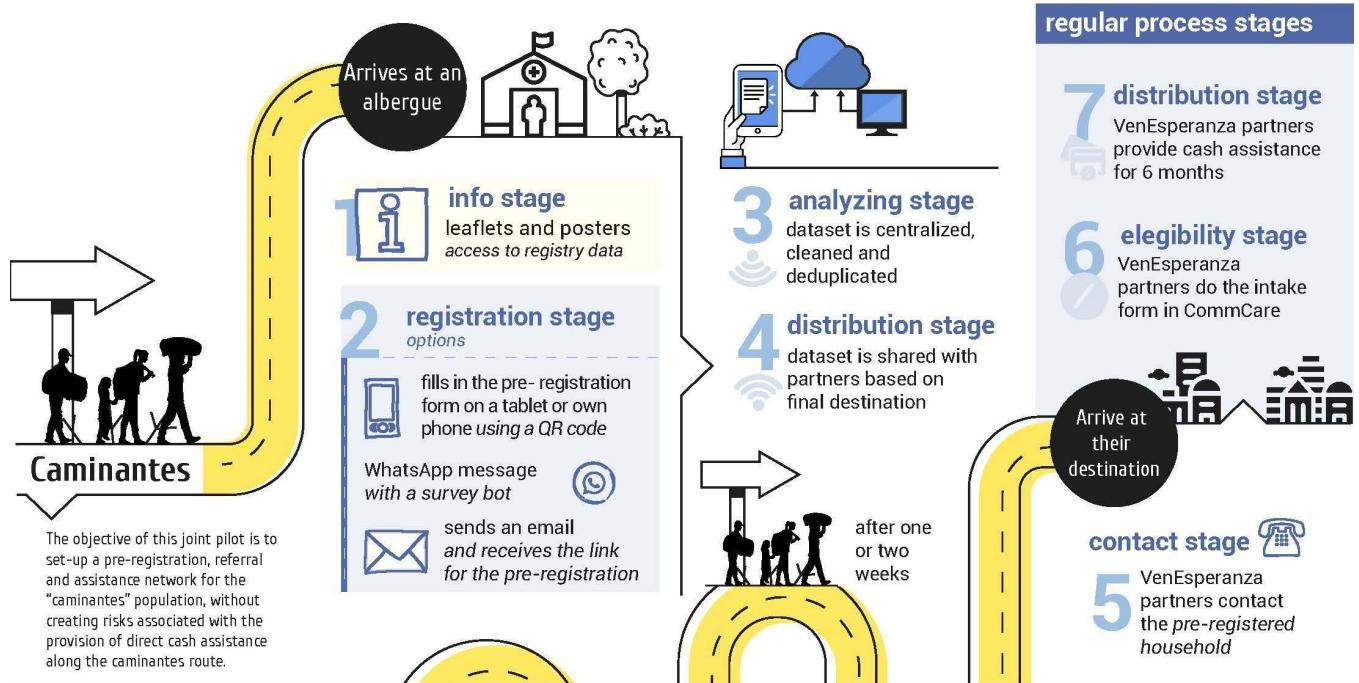
Coordinating these new monitoring indicators and guidelines and updating the messaging and sharing across all consortium partner communications teams are also planned for the scale-up of the pilot.

Annex 1: Detailed Program Timeline

November 2020	The pilot begins via Facebook ads to reach Venezuelan families in Villa del Rosario.
December 2020	The IP address geolocation restriction is lifted. This restriction made it so that only people utilizing internet connections physically located in Villa del Rosario could access the form. Removing this restriction increases the number of daily registrations from 25.1 to 43.2.
January 2021	The team decides to reduce the number of questions on the form from 8 to 4, given that only 75% of people finished filling out the form.
February 2021	Start of Phase 2: the advertisement is able to be shared outside of Villa del Rosario. Adaptations increased the number of daily registrations from 43.2 to 107.7.
April 2021	Teams from all partners begin conducting pre-registrations at strategic points along popular walking routes, mostly in Arauca, La Guajira, Norte de Santander, and Santander.
May 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VenEsperanza Caminantes Facebook group is created with new communications pieces to share. • A shorter version of the pre-registration form is created that focuses on the capture of contact information.
June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first version of the WhatsApp chatbot is developed for review and testing by the consortium. • Facilitators in the field are trained on new information capture tools. • Field operations move forward in Bochalema and Los Patios, Norte de Santander.
July 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The chatbot channel is enabled and socialized with consortium partners. • The message sent automatically to users is adjusted to encourage the arrival report at the destination. • Algorithms are developed in statistical programs to generate the compilation of shared databases for members and feed the analysis of indicators.
August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first version of the scoreboard is developed. • The program starts sending automated WhatsApp messages to caminantes who completed the pre-registration survey. • The pre-registration forms are updated to request the telephone number of an additional contact located at the caminantes' destination location. • A survey is carried out in the Facebook group to better understand the knowledge and use of the virtual assistant through the chatbot.
September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updates are made to the dashboard of indicators based on feedback from consortium partners. • The option to self-complete the pre-registration form through the chatbot and web form is eliminated. • A new option is added to the chatbot that allows caminantes to submit their questions, complaints or suggestions.
October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updates are made to the dashboard of indicators based on feedback. • An instructional video is published in the Facebook group to explain to caminantes how to report their arrival once they reach their destination. • The user and technical manuals for the chatbot and the website are elaborated. • The results of the pilot project are analyzed to evaluate the possibility of integrating it as part of the permanent program strategy.
November 2021	VenEsperanza closes its agreement with iMMAP



Caminantes- registration, referral and response strategy



Save the Children



Annex 2: Program Flow Chart

Annex 3: Social Media Outreach Materials

¿Cómo reportar tu llegada por medio de WhatsApp?

1. Guarda el número de Esperanza +57 321 468 46 88
2. Envía un mensaje a Esperanza por WhatsApp
3. Acepta los términos y condiciones
4. Elige el trámite: "informar tu llegada al destino"
5. Responde las preguntas de tus datos personales
6. Espera la llamada del equipo de #VenEsperanza

#VenEsperanza

Actualiza tus datos de contacto

1. Guarda el número de Esperanza +57 321 468 46 88
2. Envía un mensaje a Esperanza por WhatsApp
3. Acepta los términos y condiciones
4. Elige el trámite: "Actualizar datos de contacto"
5. Responde las preguntas de tus datos personales

Recuerda que debes mantener tus datos actualizados para seguir recibiendo notificaciones e información.

#VenEsperanza



Estos son nuestros canales oficiales donde podremos darte más información.

Comité Internacional de Rescate	Mercy Corps	Save the Children	World Vision
www.rescue.org	305 734 2879	01 8000 187 669	www.livision.aficapioint.com
tuopinioncuanta@rescue.org	preguntas@mercycorps.org	cuantanos@savethechildren.org	(+57) 313 735 7263
	artcompcion@wvi.org		



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ABOUT MERCY CORPS

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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