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PLAY AND STORYTELLING AMONG VENEZUELAN MIGRANT CHILDREN

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UNVEILING WORLDS: CENTERING CHILD VOICES IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS CASE STUDY SERIES

Young children from birth to 8 years old have a lot to contribute to how humanitarian programs are designed and the policies guiding them. Yet these programs and policies are often top-down and fail to consider children's perspectives, despite commitments stated in the humanitarian Grand Bargain to prioritize the participation of affected communities (Boyden 1994; Wessells 2021; IASC 2023). At the same time, humanitarian aid across all sectors is being slashed, adding challenges to the already limited 2-3% of annual humanitarian funding for young children's programs (Moving Minds Alliance 2020; United Nations 2025). Evidence has been emerging about the participation of affected people to inform humanitarian practices and policies, but this has not yet included young children, and it is not at the level close to achieving the Grand Bargain commitments (IASC 2023). The humanitarian community needs more evidence to move from rhetoric to reality.

To help address this gap and move the humanitarian space forward, the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution partnered with researchers and non-profit organizations to understand "How can participatory research approaches be used to actively engage and elevate children's voices in designing early childhood programs and policies in humanitarian contexts? How does centering young children's voices in designing programs and policies expand humanitarian response?" To answer these questions, we examined three child participatory arts-based research approaches: drawing, photography, play and storytelling accompanied by conversations with children. These case studies span three humanitarian situations: the refugee crisis in Bangladesh, internal displacement due to earthquakes in Türkiye, and migration in Colombia. Through these case studies, we aim to help humanitarian practitioners and policymakers think differently about young children's abilities, integrate their voices into future humanitarian program designs and policies, and contribute to fulfilling one of the many Grand Bargain commitments.

In this third case study, play and storytelling gave Venezuelan migrant children a meaningful voice—surfacing their lived experiences to inform humanitarian practice and policy. Qualita-

tive research uncovered shared threads across children and caregivers: the reasons they left Venezuela, the hardships of the journey, and the realities of building a new life in Colombia. Participation itself was generative: through play and storytelling, children developed resilience and strengthened their psychosocial well-being. Funding constraints during implementation and research limited how widely children's stories could be disseminated—narrowing the initiative's reach within the broader humanitarian architecture and the Colombian government. Nevertheless, La Otra Juventud (now La Parlante) and the International Rescue Committee continue bringing the lessons of this approach to key humanitarian, government, and donor stakeholders in Colombia. Crucially, the methodology is low-cost and replicable across migration and humanitarian contexts.

WHY ARE CHILDREN'S VOICES IMPORTANT IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS?

Leveraging children's voices to inform practices and policies that improve their lives is not a new concept. Children, particularly adolescents, have been involved in activities to inform decisions about their lives in humanitarian and non-humanitarian contexts before (Checkoway and Gutiérrez 2006; Blakeslee and Walker 2018; Apollo and Mbah 2022; Plush et al. 2018). Children's abilities to express themselves—even if not using direct verbal language—and sharing their stories with others is not only possible, but fundamental, particularly in humanitarian settings. The 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's right to be heard in matters affecting them (UN General Assembly 1989), a principle that has gained recognition as essential in crisis response and recovery. Research has found that encouraging children to articulate their experiences contributes to their psychological healing and increases their sense of agency after trauma (Hart et al. 2004; Denov and Shevell 2019). Allowing children to participate in humanitarian work by soliciting their lived perspective also makes humanitarian intervention more relevant to children's needs (Larkins et al. 2014). While it is often not feasible to engage children in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or crisis when speed and efficiency are essential, given the protracted

nature of crises, there are often opportunities to bring in children's perspectives once acute response has passed.

Moreover, storytelling and creative expression provide avenues for children to communicate beyond traditional linguistic or cultural barriers, especially when mainstream forms of participation are inaccessible (Mitchell et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2018). In contexts of displacement or conflict, these practices not only validate children's experiences but also challenge deficit-based narratives that portray them solely as passive victims, instead recognizing their insights, resilience, and potential to shape their own futures (Erdemir 2022; Sorensen 2022; Tomsic and Zbaracki 2020).

Yet in most humanitarian contexts (and non-humanitarian contexts), children's voices, especially those of young children, are not typically considered in programming, policy, or funding decisions (Alier 2024; Wessells 2021). While young children, who are still developing their oral and written communication skills, may not be able to express themselves in the same way as older children and adults, there is evidence of their expressive abilities through free and imaginative play, drama, art, dance, photography, and more (Blaisdell et al. 2018; Allmark et al. 2017; Wall and Robinson 2022).

The gap in young children's voice in programming, policy, and funding decisions is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. A young child has a different perspective on the world from adults due to various factors, including their smaller physical size, stage of development, the culture of the environment in which they live, and more. These differences affect the types and intensities of risk they face in humanitarian emergencies. Further, children see the world differently from adults. Research in Kenya revealed that children consistently did not like screaming and sounds of their parents fighting—which could have included physical and psychological violence—while their parents never identified these things as issues (Kostelny et al. 2013). While parents and caregivers can share perspectives on behalf of the child, they cannot see the world from a child's eyes. They often bring their own lenses and biases.

While donors and humanitarian program implementers, mainly at the global level, emphasize the importance of valuing lived experiences and perspectives, this has not yet translated into concrete actions that consider children's voices in humanitarian programming or policies (Hirono and Nurdin 2024; Rogoff et al. 2018). Where such listening and elevation have occurred, especially in global forums, it has often been extractive and tokenistic, with significant adult molding and shaping. Young children's authentic voices and narratives are essential to bring about changes in humanitarian services that focus on their learning and development, protection, and health. They also matter when humanitarian aid agencies conduct needs assessments, request funds, and consider policies that affect entire camps or displaced communities.

BACKGROUND: ACCESSING CHILDREN'S VOICES THROUGH PLAY AND STORYTELLING

Play is one way that children make sense of their world and express that meaning to others. According to Paul Harris, an expert in early development of cognition, emotion, and imagination, "children's pretend play is infused with their understanding of reality" and "children deploy their imagination to think about aspects of reality which are ordinarily hidden from view" (Anderson 2022). There is also evidence that play, including emotional expression, imagination, and fantasy, along with sharing difficult experiences, can foster healing from traumatic experiences (Rubinstein and Lahad 2023).

Play and storytelling are closely intertwined in early childhood. When children engage in pretend play, they are narrating—assigning roles, sequencing events, and working out causal logic about how the world and the people in it behave. Storytelling is, in many ways, play expressed through language. Research has shown that narrative play serves a dual function: It allows children to process emotional experiences while building cognitive and linguistic capacities, including sequencing, perspective-taking, and causal reasoning (Nicolopoulou et al. 2015). For children from marginalized communities, or those whose cultural contexts are underrepresented in educational settings, being able to tell their own stories—rather than only receive others'—carries weight. Narrative is not simply a record of experience; it is one of the primary ways children construct a sense of who they are (Bamberg 2011).

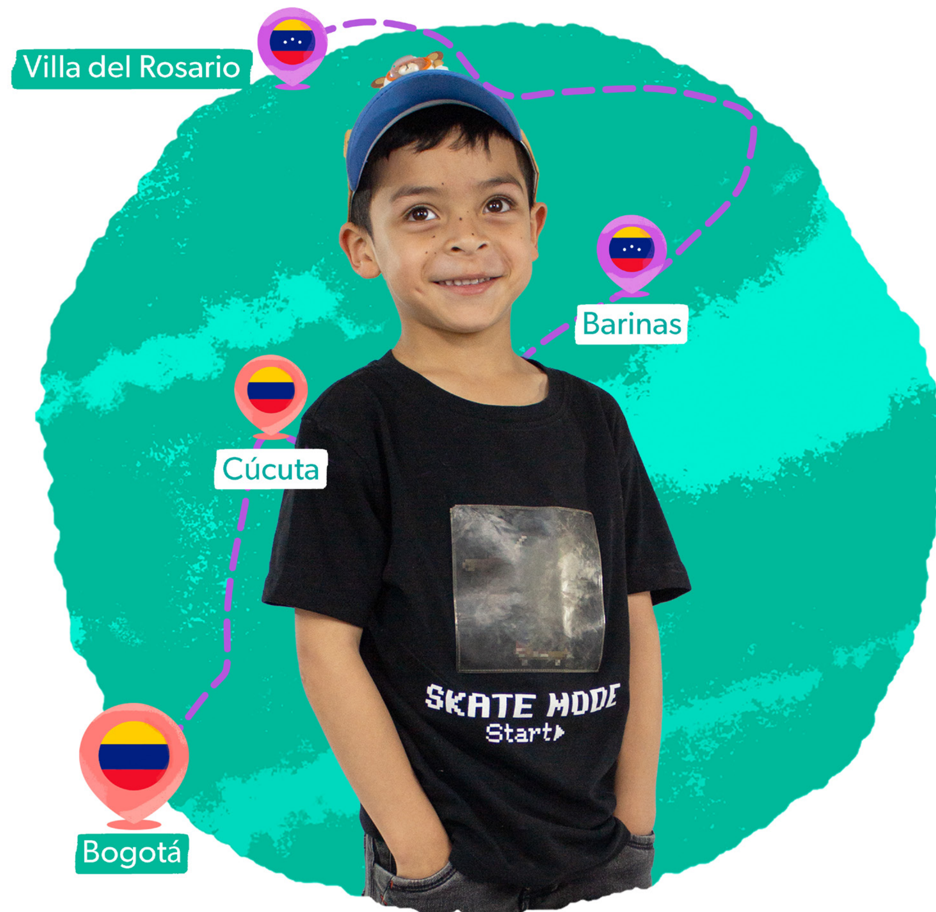
For children navigating migration and displacement, play and storytelling take on an additional dimension. Research on storytelling-based programs with immigrant and refugee children has found that children's stories consistently return to three themes—family, friends, and their home—and that these themes function as protective factors against psychological distress while supporting adjustment to life in a new country (Rousseau and Heusch 2000).

CONTEXT OF THE VENEZUELAN MIGRANT CRISIS

Since 2015, political and socioeconomic turmoil in Venezuela has led to the largest external displacement crisis in Latin America. According to the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), an estimated 7.9 million Venezuelans had left the country as of early 2026, 6.9 million of which still reside in Latin America (Humanitarian Action 2025, R4V 2026). Importantly, over 2.8 million of them are in Colombia (R4V 2026).

Despite the Colombian government establishing a 10-year Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelan migrants which affords them legal status to live in Colombia and obtain identification documents, health care, education, formal employment, financial inclusion and more, many Venezuelan migrants still live in poverty and struggle to gain access to these services (R4V 2024). Key informants we interviewed in Colombia said part of this is due to the significant influx of migrants and limited capacity of the Colombian government to support them all. A Venezuelan migrant parent said, “We cannot work because we cannot get the necessary documents and so there is no work” (La Otra Juventud Foundation and ChildArise 2024). Other participant families mentioned that they had to go through long bureaucratic processes to access services for their children and families (La Otra Juventud Foundation and ChildArise 2024).

A United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and R4V needs assessment indicated that half of the Venezuelan migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean cannot afford three meals a day and lack access to adequate housing. Many—especially those in transit—struggle to access basic services such as food, shelter, and protection. Those who have settled in Colombia still face challenges to integration, including insufficient access to education and health care, inadequate housing, unemployment, limited basic services, and discrimination (R4V 2024). Reports indicate that children, who represent approximately one-quarter of all migrants, face many challenges both on their migration journeys and upon arrival in Colombia, including hunger, homelessness, violence, discrimination, child labor, family separation, and a lack of access to health care and other essential services (Marcus et al. 2023; Migración Colombia 2024). As of late 2025, the situation has not changed drastically for Venezuelan migrants (Ruiz 2025).



RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

This qualitative study explored Venezuelan migrant children's (ages 3-12) perspectives through the Sueños en Ruta (English translation: Dreams en Route) project in Colombia, using participatory methods of play and storytelling, complemented by key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus groups with parents/caregivers and adult facilitators (including NGO staff implementing programs).

Two play and storytelling approaches were used:

1. Using an imagined character to tell their story: Facilitators asked participating children (sometimes with their families) to imagine and design an imaginary character and tell their migration stories from the character's perspective. The concept was that children would create their own version of a character named Recollister, who collects the stories and experiences of migrant children. Each child created a unique Recollister using clay, paint, popsicle sticks, and other craft materials, then described the character's journey—a retelling of their own—leaving home and traveling from Venezuela to Colombia.

FIGURE 1

Versiones infantiles de Recollister

From left to right: Adriel, age 6; Isabella, age 7; Luis, age 12

2. Imagining an object to help other migrant children: Children brainstormed with each other and their families about challenges they faced during migration and what could have helped them. Then they constructed objects using basic materials (cardboard, paint, markers, tape, etc.) designed to help other migrant children face similar challenges.

These methods are grounded in recognition that children are competent social actors whose perspectives are best accessed through developmentally appropriate approaches rather than adult-oriented interview techniques (Punch 2002; Clark and Moss 2011). Play-based and narrative methods are particularly valuable in migration contexts, where children may lack vocabulary or emotional readiness to articulate complex experiences, or where power dynamics may inhibit expression (Veale 2005; Rousseau and Heusch 2000). Given migrant populations' vulnerability and potential trauma exposure, these creative methods offer less intrusive pathways for children to share experiences at their own pace (Akthar and Lovell 2019).

Sessions were photographed and video recorded to capture non-verbal communication, imaginative play, and meaning-making in action (Einarsdóttir 2007). Children also dictated or wrote accompanying narratives—in letters, poems, and other forms—about their characters and objects. Together, these methods reflect the understanding that children communicate through multiple symbolic systems (Clark and Moss 2011; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008).

Analysis drew on multiple modes of data: children's stories, the characters and objects they created, and imaginative play captured on video and in photographs. Written and dictated narratives were coded for patterns in how children described and made meaning of their migration experiences. The physical artifacts children made—the Recollister characters and invented objects—were analyzed for what their symbolic choices revealed about those experiences (Thomson 2008). Across all modes, analysis centered children's own frameworks of meaning rather than imposing adult interpretive categories (Hart 2008; Woodhead and Faulkner 2008). Interpretive claims were held tentatively, grounded in children's own words and what their creations expressed.

RESULTS: MIGRANT CHILDREN'S STORIES

Children and their families spoke broadly about their reasons for leaving Venezuela and two stages of the journey: traveling from Venezuela to Colombia and then settling—even if temporarily—in Bogotá or Medellín. Results are organized around these stages of the migration journey, as each carries distinct policy and programming implications.

Leaving Venezuela in search of better opportunities

Children's stories and interviews with family members indicated that difficult economic and political conditions were the primary reasons for leaving Venezuela. One father said that families faced a stark choice: "die of hunger or leave the country so your family can eat." A mother described struggling to access food and explained that obtaining it required political alignment with the government—she had to present her identity card to receive food. Some children cited education as an additional factor. Nata, 9, noted that her school in Venezuela was open only two to three days per week, and that her parents wanted better educational opportunities for her.

For many children, the departure was abrupt. Luis, now 11, was around 6 years old when his mother left with him and his sister. He said he was surprised and did not understand what was happening—one day, his mother simply appeared in the living room with packed bags. In some cases, a parent left first to establish conditions before returning for the rest of the family. Jimena, 10, recalled that her father (quoted above) left on his birthday, made it to Colombia, and then went back for his children—their family's first separation.

Some families anticipated a temporary stay of a year or two before returning to Venezuela and tended to settle in Bogotá. Others knew they could not or did not want to return, and planned to continue through the Darién Gap toward Panama, Mexico, and ultimately the United States; these families often used Medellín as a transit point. Some families went south past Cali into South America, the dominant direction of Venezuelan migration since 2014 (UNHCR, n.d.). At the time of this research, migration flows had shifted northward, with more families either planning to remain in Colombia or aiming to reach the United States via the Darién Gap.

Themes emerging from the Venezuela-to-Colombia journey

The journey from Venezuela to Colombia took place primarily by bus, boat, tractor-trailer, informal vehicles, and on foot. Two sisters repeatedly asked their mother as they walked, "Mom, are we there yet?" Each time, she answered: "There's still a long way to go." For Jimena, 10, the walk was equally relentless—though she kept moving by holding onto the dream that awaited her in Colombia.

Five themes emerged from children's imagined creations and their versions of Recollister: (1) Food, water, and health; (2) documents; (3) physical safety and security; (4) separation from family and friends; and (5) yearning for home and routines. Together, they paint a picture of childhood migration as an experience defined not just by physical hardship, but by loss—of safety, of belonging, and of the familiar rhythms of home.

1. BASICS: FOOD, WATER, AND HEALTH

Children reported significant hardship from inconsistent access to food and water during the journey. Combined with prolonged travel along steep, winding roads, these conditions contributed to nausea and vomiting.

Yoemily, 7, invented a bus that travels in a straight line, has air conditioning, and is never over-crowded. She explained that her actual bus had been so hot and crowded that she had eaten and drunk very little; the winding roads left her nauseated and deeply stressed. Antonella, 6, and her grandmother designed a magic cup that was always full of water—a direct response to the extreme thirst Antonella experienced on her journey. Luis, 11, developed a child transporter: a box attached to balloons that delivered food, water, and toys to children during the journey.

FIGURE 2

Creations of Antonella and her grandmother

From left to right: Antonella and her grandmother drawing her object; Antonella's magic cup of water

2. DOCUMENTS

Many children and family members described the difficulties of traveling without legal documentation. The lack of regular migration papers forced many families to risk crossing the border illegally. Leslie, 9, said her family repeatedly tried to obtain passports but kept encountering obstacles. Her mother eventually made the decision to cross illegally, feeling she had no other option. Though they obtained a permit to cross, once inside Colombia they needed additional documentation to remain—which they did not have—causing the family considerable stress and fear.

Children and families described being forced through jungles and unofficial routes when they lacked documentation for approved border crossings. Along these paths, they frequently encountered individuals demanding money to pass. Some witnessed Venezuelans being captured, kidnapped, separated from family members, or subjected to sexual violence—risks corroborated by International Rescue Committee (IRC) Colombia staff and documented in news reporting (Otis 2021).

Leslie, 9, invented a document machine that would generate whatever paperwork was re-

quired—to cross borders, enter a country, or access services—and deliver it directly to migrant families.

3. PHYSICAL SAFETY AND SECURITY

Fear for physical safety was a central theme in both children's and parents' accounts. Luis, 11, described how, while his family walked from Venezuela to Colombia, his mother fell into a river and nearly drowned before other travelers pulled her to safety. In his version of Recollister, Luis granted the character the power to teleport people and rescue them from dangerous situations.

Isabella, 7, created a rainbow-colored bird that appears after each storm, seeks out migrant children, and shields them from harm. Luis, 11, invented a machine that transports migrants—especially children—from the border to a safe place, supplying them with food and water along the way. Ana Victoria, 8, made a magic ball that grants children's wishes, particularly those related to overcoming obstacles and feeling safe on the journey. Josmaily, 12, created houses to place along the route, explaining that she and her family had often slept outside—on streets or among sharp cacti—and that the houses would protect families from the elements.

FIGURE 3

Ana Victoria's magic ball that helps migrant children overcome all obstacles and keeps them safe

Parents described crossing rivers and mountains and spoke of particular fear at border crossings, where the presence of strangers posed risks to their children. One mother described walking in front while her husband walked behind, with their children always holding hands between them. She witnessed families become separated at the crossing.

IRC Colombia staff noted that border crossings had been especially dangerous prior to the 2022 agreement between the Colombian and Venezuelan governments that reopened official crossing points (Moleiro 2022). That agreement allowed people to migrate through sanctioned crossings rather than dense jungle routes, where risks of physical and sexual abuse were significantly higher (Otis 2021). Staff also described widespread misinformation spread by individuals seeking to exploit migrants financially.

4. SEPARATION FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Separation from loved ones emerged as a major theme across children's stories. Jimena, 10, described in both her poem and her storytelling how her father's initial departure—and later, leaving her grandparents behind—had weighed on her. Her grandparents were unable to make the journey, and though the family attempted video calls, Jimena said these were not enough to maintain the connection she needed.

Other children mourned the pets they had been forced to leave in Venezuela. Wilberson, 11, felt this loss acutely. He crafted a magic door that he could open to see his dog back in Venezuela. These separations—from people and from animals—shadowed both the journey and the transition into life in Colombia.

The poem captures what many children expressed in different ways: a grief for what was left behind that did not diminish with distance.

Recuerdo cuando bañarme con el agua
Que cae en el salto del angel
Descalza subir por la montaña
Y recorren caminos siempre hacia adelante
Mis pies me piden un descanso
A veces no comprendo este viaje
La noche es un camino que calla
El canto de todos los troupiales

Tambor de mi corazón
Palpita con el viento

Mi ruta y mi camino
Detrás de nuevos sueños
Hoy te extraño, tierra de mis abuelos
Hoy te extraño, algún día volveré

I remember bathing in the water
That fall in Angel Falls.
Climbing up the mountain barefoot
Always navigating routes ahead
My feet ask me for a stop
At times I do not understand the trip
The night is a road that silences
the song of all the (Venezuelan) Orioles

The drum of my heart
Beats with the wind

My route and my path
Behind new dreams
Today I miss you, the land of my grandparents
I miss you today, I'll come back someday

5. YEARNING FOR HOME AND ROUTINES

Yearning for home and familiar routines ran through the children's inventions and narratives. Randy, 7, created a time-traveling car that could take him back to Venezuela before the family left. Jimena, 10, captured this grief in her poem—her longing for "the land of my grandparents" expressing what many children felt but struggled to say directly. Matias, 6, recreated his village of Villa de Rosario

in miniature—a small house, trees, and a river—and through his Recollister narrated a story of a boy told by his mother that they had to leave immediately. The boy felt sad but did as his mother said, departing quickly with his parents and grandparents. Matias spoke at length about how much he missed Villa de Rosario. Many children also expressed longing for Venezuelan fruits, foods, and the everyday patterns of a life that had been interrupted.

Themes of their stay in Bogotá or Medellín

Once children and families arrived at their destination—whether permanent or temporary—in Bogotá or Medellín, two themes dominated their imagined creations, their versions of Recollister, and their stories: the challenge of integrating into Colombian society and the work of rebuilding resilience and psychosocial well-being.

1. INTEGRATING INTO COLOMBIAN SOCIETY

Discrimination, a weak sense of belonging, and fragile social connections emerged as persistent barriers to integration. The Colombian government has taken significant steps to support Venezuelan families: In 2021, it adopted a 10-year Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelan migrants (Poveda-Clavijo and Mena 2024), a major step toward social and economic inclusion. TPS brought concrete benefits—legal status, the right to work, and access to health, nutrition, housing, employment, and education services. Colombia has also established 11 one-stop “Integrate” centers in Bogotá, Medellín, Riohacha, Bucaramanga, Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cartagena, Cúcuta, and Cali, which have supported thousands of migrants in settling and helped foster social cohesion between Venezuelan and Colombian communities (Caracol 2023). However, the influx of migrants has exceeded the Colombian government’s capacity to support all who have arrived.

Some families in this study had not obtained TPS, which limited their access to services and employment. Many lived in temporary housing, paying rent by the day, in very small spaces with little room for children to play. One residence had a sign in the hallway reading: “Children are not allowed to play in the hallways for security reasons.”

Economic hardships were widespread. While many families had left Venezuela seeking better opportunities, some found their professional credentials were not recognized in Colombia (Guerrero Ble 2023). Some participating families were attempting to start small businesses. IRC Colombia staff noted that some families—including children—had turned to sex work and other dangerous activities in cities like Bogotá due to insufficient economic opportunities. Several children described the stress of watching their parents work as day laborers every day, including evenings and weekends. One girl said it was painful to see her father always exhausted and with no time left for her.

Discrimination was a recurring experience, particularly within the education system. Leslie, 9, whose family has decided to remain in Bogotá, described what integration felt like: “It was difficult because many girls would say, ‘No, she’s from Venezuela; don’t go near her.’” Jimena,

10, recounted being told: "Why are you here? Leave. Go back to your country. Don't come near us." In those moments, Jimena said, she felt she was being treated like garbage.

2. MAGIC AND IMAGINATION AS PATHWAYS TO RESILIENCE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

In situations of crisis—including forced migration—resilience and psychosocial well-being are critical to a child's ability to survive and ultimately thrive. For young children, imagination and magic can serve as vehicles for building that resilience: ways of processing fear, asserting agency, and envisioning protection when real-world safety is uncertain (Malchiodi 2020; Harris 2016).

Magic was a recurring presence throughout the children's creations—in superpowers, enchanted objects, and heroic figures, each one a way of imagining safety into being. Nata, 9, created a magic wand; Yoemily, 7, a magic ball to help resolve problems; Waleska, 6, magical wings to carry her away from danger. Jimena, 10, invented a Wish Fulfiller—like a 3D printer for wishes—that could conjure an umbrella if it rained during the journey. Jhakareth, 11, created a wish-granting elf who helped a family find land to grow vegetables. Isabella, 7, invented a superhero called Rainbow Queen, who could carry children anywhere and shield them from harm, appearing after every storm to seek out migrant children and protect them from danger. Sara Victoria, 7, created the Dazzling Queen—a superhero who cares for children and heals their wounds.

In creating these protectors—a Rainbow Queen, a Wish Fulfiller, an elf who grants wishes—the children were not simply expressing fear. They were actively imagining their way toward safety.

Recollister fighting the evil Drin

Adriel, 6, recounted his migration experience by creating a story of a superhero and a villain. The superhero was his version of Recollister (collector of stories) and the villain was "Drin." Recollister and his family stopped at a lake while on their journey. They enjoyed the lake, but then Drin came from the sky and tried to turn to lake into fire. Recollister fought Drin and used magic lightening bolts to stop Drin.

Despite the hardships they described, the children also expressed hope, pride, joy, and a sense of connection that came from participating in the project. The resilience and psychosocial well-being they developed through the process enabled them to continue dreaming of the future. The following section explores how participation in the research itself was therapeutic.

PARTICIPATING IN THE RESEARCH AND PROJECT WERE THERAPEUTIC

Beyond the many themes that emerged from the research, the children and their parents/caregivers also mentioned how participating in the research and project was therapeutic. Participation helped the children experience hopes and dreams, pride and joy, connection with other migrant children, and a sense of agency.

Despite challenges on their journeys and in adapting to life in Colombia, the Venezuelan children had not lost hope and continued dreaming of a positive future. Many expressed dreams like any other child, such as being teachers, doctors, veterinarians, and soccer players. These themes are not unlike the experiences of young children in other humanitarian contexts, though the migration journey can have some additional or different stressors, especially for those that continue a migration journey for a long period of time.

Young children, especially, experience threats to their psychological safety when they cannot follow their normal routines, when they can't play with friends, and when they are separated from loved ones. Yet many of these children had at least one parent with them, which is a critical factor that can counteract threats to psychological safety (Hennefield and Markson 2022; Shah 2023). Literature shows that optimism among children (3-6 years-old), as revealed by them sharing their dreams, may shape how they face their own challenges and setbacks and can also counteract psychological safety threats (Hennefield and Markson 2022). During a public event in Bogota, three girls aged 9-10 expressed happiness for being in the project because they were able to meet and make friends (La Otra Juventud Foundation and ChildArise 2024).

In KIIs and focus group discussions, children expressed joy, happiness and pride in their involvement with the project. Nata, age 9 said, "I felt very grateful for the space I was given. By sharing my story, I realized how strong we can be...The most meaningful thing for me was sharing my story with others and discovering so many emotions."

Jimena, age 10 said:

> I felt good sharing my story. I remembered many things I had forgotten. It brought back memories, like about my family that stayed behind in Venezuela and a lot of things that I don't remember well because I came here when I was

> very little. But this made me remember them...The most meaningful thing for me was feeling good with the other kids since we all come from the same country, even though we're from different places…we all share the same culture. I felt good seeing myself and knowing I wasn't left out or forgotten.

This commentary contributes to ongoing dialogue about memory and migration. Memory plays a crucial role in contexts of migration by providing continuity to one's original sense of place as well as one's individual and social identity (Creet and Kitzmann 2011). The ability to recall memories can contribute to the development of self-identity and facilitate adapting to the current, existing world and guiding the future (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). Like other children who participated in the Dreams en Route project, Jimena's experience gave her an opportunity to revisit memories that may have gone forgotten. Doing this in a community of other children who had similar experiences was also empowering for the participants.

Many of the children asserted that they want others to hear their stories, saying: "I want voices of migrant children to be heard around the world" and "I want this to help people who don't feel comfortable being in another country to feel safe." Jimena, age 10, who wrote a song during this initiative, said, "…I'd like the voices of all migrant children to be heard around the world. And my dream is for the project's song to be known in many places." In interviews, parents mentioned how much the project meant to their children and to their whole families because finally someone could hear their voices and learn about their stories. A staff member of PALCO, a Venezuelan-migrant-led NGO supporting implementation, said the project gave children a space to speak freely and safely, to be heard, and to activate their dreams. The children were able to "frame their story as one of strength and turn toward the future."

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICYMAKERS AND HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Despite meaningful policy commitments—including Colombia's 10-year Temporary Protected Status (TPS), reopened border crossings, and one-stop integration centers—critical gaps remain. Humanitarian funding for Venezuelan migrants stands at just 17% of the response plan (OCHA 2024) and donor fatigue has caused resources specifically targeting young children to contract further (Guerrero Ble 2023). The following recommendations draw directly from what children and families experienced and expressed. Some require new investment; others can be implemented within existing budgets and structures.

Recommendations for the journey

Based on children's perspectives, humanitarian agencies—in partnership with local government and Colombian organizations such as churches and community groups—can take three actions to better support Venezuelan migrant families on the move.

1. ENSURE ACCESS TO FOOD, WATER, AND HEALTH SUPPORT ALONG THE JOURNEY

The need for basics was the most consistent theme across children's creations. While there is no single route for migrants traveling from border areas to towns and cities, main corridors exist and are known to humanitarian actors. Agencies and Colombian organizations—including churches and community groups already present along these routes—can identify key points and establish stations providing food, water, and basic health support.

2. FACILITATE SAFE PASSAGE

Children's creations—magic buses, child transporters, protective birds—consistently imagined safe, trusted ways to travel when none existed. KIIs with humanitarian partners confirm the fear is well-founded: Migrants are routinely exploited by individuals offering paid transportation, only to find themselves overcharged

or abandoned. Nonprofits, in partnership with local organizations, can establish free, vetted transportation options along known migration corridors—giving families a trusted alternative and reducing their exposure to exploitation.

3. SUPPORT MIGRANTS IN OBTAINING DOCUMENTS

Children were acutely aware of the challenges of traveling without legal documents—a concern that surfaced repeatedly in their stories and created objects. The document machine Leslie imagined (see above) points to a real and addressable gap. Humanitarian agencies and legal aid organizations should establish pro bono documentation support stations at key border areas to help migrant families complete TPS applications, obtain identity documents, access school enrollment paperwork, and navigate health registration—removing the bureaucratic barriers that children like Leslie identified as among the most frightening parts of the journey.

Recommendations for resettlement in Colombia

Although Nicolás Maduro's capture has brought political change, conditions in Venezuela remain deeply uncertain. Most Venezuelans still live below the poverty line, and without meaningful economic improvement, large-scale return is unlikely in the near term. At the same time, many families in this study have rebuilt stability in Colombia and may choose to stay (Chaves-González 2026). For both groups, sustained investment in integration is not just a humanitarian obligation—it is a practical one. The Colombian government, at national and local levels and in collaboration with key agencies and civil society organizations, has a critical role to play. The following four recommendations draw directly from children's and families' experiences of life in Colombia.

1. INCREASE FAMILY REUNIFICATION EFFORTS

Children regularly described the pain of separation—from parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, and even pets. Jimena, 10, captured in both her poem and her storytelling the weight of leaving her grandparents behind in Venezuela, noting that even video calls were not enough to maintain the connection she needed. Family reunification efforts are typically most robust at the onset of a crisis, but as the Venezuelan crisis has become protracted, this focus has diminished (R4V 2025). Policymakers and humanitarian actors must resist that pattern. Concretely, this means maintaining dedicated family tracing and reunification capacity within the humanitarian Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan, creating accessible registration mechanisms for families separated at border crossings, and supporting digital communication access so that children like Jimena can stay connected to those left behind.

2. SUPPORT INTEGRATION INTO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Children described two compounding barriers to education: exclusion and discrimination. Close to 40% of Venezuelan migrant children remain out of school (Calaycay 2023), and those who do attend frequently face hostility from peers. Jimena and Leslie's experiences, described above, are not incidental—they reflect a school environment that requires structured intervention. The Ministry of Education should prioritize two actions: first, guaranteeing access to education for all Venezuelan children regardless of TPS status, closing a gap that currently leaves the most vulnerable children out entirely, and second, implementing dedicated anti-discrimination training for teachers and school staff—going beyond general inclusion guidance to address the specific dynamics migrant children face. Humanitarian practitioners can support this through technical assistance and professional development programming.

3. EXPAND MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Children described significant psychosocial distress—anxiety about safety, grief over separation, and the cumulative stress of economic precarity. Although Venezuelan families registered for TPS are nominally entitled to Colombia's Universal Health Coverage (UHC) system, meaningful access to mental health services remains limited for both Venezuelan migrants and Colombians (Bowser et al. 2025). Policymakers should prioritize mental health within and beyond the UHC system—an investment that serves the broader Colombian population as well. Humanitarian organizations can strengthen this by integrating psychosocial support (PSS) into school-based programs, so children receive support in the same setting where discrimination and exclusion occur, and by ensuring PSS is available to children regardless of TPS registration status.

4. SUPPORT ECONOMIC STABILITY AND PATHWAYS TO INCLUSION

Children described the toll of economic precarity on their families—parents working exhausting hours with no time remaining for them. Addressing this requires more than humanitarian assistance alone; it requires structural economic inclusion. The Colombian government should expand pathways to formal employment for Venezuelan migrants, including broadening sectoral work permits, establishing mechanisms to recognize professional credentials earned in Venezuela, and—for families who have built stable lives in Colombia—creating a clear pathway to permanent residency. This is both a humanitarian and an economic case: IOM data shows Venezuelan migrants contributed approximately $529 million—around 2% of total tax revenues—to Colombia's economy in 2022 (IOM 2024a; IOM 2024b), making expanded inclusion a practical benefit for Colombia as well. Humanitarian organizations can complement government action by connecting families to livelihood programming and legal support for labor rights.

CONCLUSION

Funding for young children in humanitarian settings remains critically limited. As of 2020, only 2–3% of all annual humanitarian funding reached programs serving young children (Moving Minds Alliance 2020)—and recent cuts have put even those resources in jeopardy (Ferguson 2025). At the same time, the humanitarian community remains far from meeting its Grand Bargain commitments for the active participation of affected people (IASC 2023). In this context, knowing what children need—in their own words and through their own creations—is not a luxury. It is a precondition for using scarce resources well and moving the humanitarian community from rhetoric to reality.

What this research revealed could not have come from adults alone. Venezuelan migrant children described—through magic cups that never ran dry, document machines that conjured paperwork at the border, and rainbow-colored protectors that appeared after every storm—the precise gaps that humanitarian systems have failed to fill: unreliable access to food and water along migration routes, the terror of traveling without legal documents, the fear of strangers at border crossings, and the quiet grief of leaving grandparents, pets, and familiar rhythms behind. Their creations were not fantasy. They were evidence.

The methodology that made this possible is low cost and replicable. Play and storytelling-based approaches require no specialized infrastructure and can be adapted across migration and humanitarian contexts by local organizations already present in communities. La Otra Juventud (now La Parlante) and the IRC continue to bring these lessons to humanitarian, government, and donor stakeholders in Colombia—proof that the approach outlasts any single research cycle. What is needed now is the will to institutionalize it: to treat participatory research with young children not as a one-off project, but as a standard input into needs assessments, program design, and funding decisions, and to resource the local organizations that make it possible.

The children who participated in this research did not ask to be spoken for. Nata said that sharing her story made her realize “how strong we can be.” Jimena said she wanted the voices of all migrant children to be heard around the world. They were not passive subjects of a humanitarian crisis—they were its sharpest analysts. Ensuring that future humanitarian responses treat them as such is not only the right thing to do. It is, as this research shows, the more effective thing to do.

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