

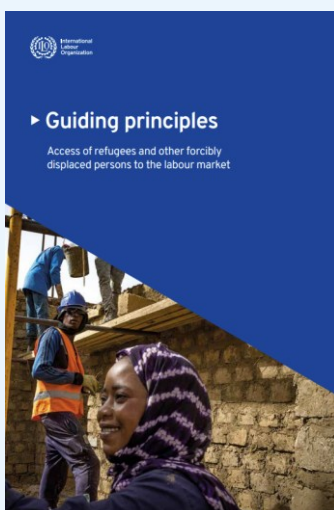
► Labour market inclusion for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

Colombia: Equal rights as a foundation for inclusion and equal opportunity and treatment

July 2026

The ILO Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and Other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market, adopted in 2016 by a tripartite technical meeting, provide a basis for the formulation of policy responses and national tripartite dialogue applicable to responses to forced displacement.

The Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market



The Guiding Principles (GPs) support efforts to improve labour market functioning and ensure the protection of nationals, as well as refugees and other forcibly displaced persons (FDPs), in accessing decent work. The GPs are a set of voluntary, non-binding principles rooted in relevant international labour standards and universal human rights instruments, and inspired by good practices implemented in the field.

The Guiding Principles are structured around six core pillars:

- A. Governance frameworks on access to labour markets;
- B. Economic and employment policies for inclusive labour markets;
- **C. Labour rights and equality of opportunity and treatment;**
- D. Partnership, coordination and coherence;
- E. Voluntary repatriation and reintegration of returnees; and
- F. Additional pathways for labour mobility.

This knowledge product focuses on Section C of the GPs, with a focus on Principles 22 and 23. Using Colombia as a case study, it illustrates how to uphold equality of opportunity and treatment and non-discrimination for refugee and other FDPs on the labour market.

Unpacking the Guiding Principles

What does section C on Labour rights and equality of opportunity mean in practice?

Guiding Principle 22 – Equality policies: Adopt or reinforce national policies to promote equality of opportunity and treatment for all, in particular gender equality, recognizing the specific needs of women, youth and persons with disabilities, with regard to:

- fundamental principles and rights at work, as per the 10 ILO fundamental Conventions;
- working conditions, including reasonable working hours and safety at work, supporting well-being and productivity;
- access to quality public services, especially employment services;
- minimum wages sufficient for a decent living, and the right to social security benefits for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons;
- educate refugees and other forcibly displaced persons about their labour rights and protections, as per relevant laws and policies.

Guiding Principle 23 – Minimum measures to include in equality policies:

- (a) combat and prevent **all forms of** discrimination – especially on the basis of nationality, migration or refugee status, gender, disability, age and other intersecting grounds – in law and in practice; and forced labour and child labour;
- (b) facilitate the **participation in representative organizations**, including in relation to the right to form and join trade unions, participate in collective bargaining mechanisms and to **access justice and judicial remedies** against abusive working conditions;
- (c) adopt legislative measures and **facilitate information, advocacy and awareness campaigns** that **combat xenophobic behaviour** in the workplace and highlight positive contributions;
- (d) ensure that refugees and other forcibly displaced persons in the workplace are **covered under relevant labour laws and regulations**, including on minimum wages, maternity protection, working time, occupational safety and health, and provide information on the rights and obligations of workers, and the means of redress for violations, in a language they understand; and
- (e) provide necessary education and **training for labour inspectorates, public servants and judicial bodies** on refugee law and labour rights, and ensure that **information and training for workers** is provided in a language that workers understand.

Case study: Moving towards equal rights for equal opportunities in Colombia

Key points



Ditraiza Ramírez is a Venezuelan migrant entrepreneur living in Cali, Colombia. In her spare time, she helps migrants learn about their rights to social protection. Cali, Colombia, 16 June 2023. Photo: Mauricio Pulido Bonilla/ILO

Key issue:

- Upholding equality of opportunity and treatment, eliminating discrimination in the labour market, and ensuring that refugees and other forcibly displaced

persons are covered under relevant labour laws, considering diverse circumstances and differing levels of risk exposure, with particular attention to women, youth and persons with disabilities.

Key takeaways:

- By transitioning from temporary permits to 10-year protection status, combined with statutory labour equality and inclusive policies, Colombia provides an example of how to expand access to formal employment, services, and skills, thereby driving productivity gains for both refugee and host communities.
- Colombia demonstrates a rights-based integration model by embedding migrants and refugees, including those in an irregular situation, in national labour laws, public services (SPE/SENA), trade unions, and justice systems, fostering economic contributions and social cohesion amid large-scale influxes.

1. Profile of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

Colombia hosts the largest population of migrants and refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean, with approximately 2.8 million people from Venezuela in need of international protection¹ (out of a total of 6.95 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees in the region – see the knowledge product on the Regional socio-economic integration strategy (ERISE/+ERISE)),² reflecting a mixed movement context with diverse circumstances and protection needs. Close to one third are children, more than half are women and around two thirds are of working age.³ In addition, there are 7.1 million internally displaced people,⁴ and an increasing number of returnees – there were close to one million Colombian and dual national returnees in July 2024.⁵

2. Major developments: Towards inclusive access to labour markets

In less than a decade, Colombia has become host to approximately 2.8 million Venezuelans. This rapid and large-scale inflow has required Colombia to adapt its institutional capacity quickly to manage mixed movements, open access to public goods and services and extend rights to newly arrived populations. Starting from a historical context with limited experience as an immigration country, institutions have progressively expanded mandates, tools and coordination mechanisms to respond, and have favoured the extension of rights and services to migrants and refugees.

Colombia's approach to hosting Venezuelans migrants and refugees has evolved from an initial focus on emergency humanitarian assistance to a more structured strategy for socio-economic integration. Initially, in 2017 the *Permiso*

¹ In this knowledge brief, the term “refugees and other forcibly displaced persons” (FDPs) refers primarily to Venezuelan refugees, while “migrants” is used when referring to broader mixed-movement dynamics in line with national usage. For brevity, the term “migrant and refugee workers” is used to denote all FDPs engaged in, or seeking access to, the labour market.

² See UNHCR, [Colombia Factsheet 2026](#).

³ Based on data collected under the Population Registration and Management Ecosystem (PRIMES) until 31 March 2025, see: UNHCR Individuals registered in PRIMES 2018-2025 (1st quarter), available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/117951>.

⁴ See UNHCR, [Colombia Factsheet 2026](#).

⁵ UNHCR, [Operational Update, January-June 2024](#).

*Especial de Permanencia (PEP)*⁶ was issued – a two-year temporary permit for work, health, and education access, along with measures supporting access to public employment services, recognition of prior learning and entrepreneurship support.⁷ In 2021, the *Estatuto de Protección Temporal (ETPV)*⁸ was introduced, providing a 10-year protection status explicitly linking regular migration to labour market and public service access. By 2026, close to 70 per cent had regularized their migratory status through the ETPV.⁹ In addition, under the most recent regularization measure, *the PEP Tutor*, parents, legal representatives, and custodians of more than 300,000 Venezuelan children and adolescents are able to regularize their status and obtain the right to work and access to services.¹⁰

The Ministry of Labour plays a central steering role in this rights-based integration model, leading design and implementation of labour migration and equality policies, and coordinating with other entities to for policy coherence. In 2025, the labour law reform¹¹ and the establishment of the Labour Migration Committee¹² further reinforced equality of opportunity and treatment between national and migrant and refugee workers.¹³

The 2025 labour law reform (Article 37) guarantees migrant and refugee workers – regardless of status – the same labour and social security rights as nationals, with regularization foreseen upon employment contract signing, building on constitutional prohibitions against discrimination by nationality, gender, age, ethnicity, or disability (Article 13 of the Constitution). Pre-reform Constitutional Court rulings affirmed fundamental labour rights under the ETPV regime for migrant and refugee workers in an irregular situation, ordering owed wages and contributions in cases like the unlawful dismissal of a pregnant Venezuelan worker,¹⁴ thereby upholding article 25 of the Constitution mandating that “every individual is entitled to a job under dignified and equitable conditions”. The labour law reform further upholds protections against violence, harassment, and discrimination (Article 18) while providing special protection to women and youth under 18 (Article 4 (9)).

Anti-discrimination and protection measures are also comprehensive. A ban on child labour¹⁵ is enforced through a specialized inspectorate unit, the Elite Group against Child Labour.¹⁶ In addition, strengthening of the capacities of Territorial Committees for the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons is foreseen,¹⁷ and the Labour Migration Committee is mandated to develop action plans to identify and assist victims of forced labour and trafficking.¹⁸ Migrants and refugees enjoy the right to join and form trade unions,¹⁹ including leadership access,²⁰ as demonstrated by the *Unión de Trabajadores de Plataformas Digitales (UNIDAPP)*, a national union of app-based delivery workers formed from a riders’ movement in 2018–2020 – where Venezuelans comprise 70 per cent of members and over half of board seats.²¹

Inclusion is further supported through access to information and targeted services. Within the Public Employment Service (SPE) network, employment service providers and private employment agencies play a central role in reducing unemployment and informality by matching labour demand and supply, for both Colombian nationals and migrant and refugee workers. By offering counselling, job-matching, intermediation services and referrals to training, they help connect employers with suitably skilled workers and support migrant and refugee workers in transitioning from

⁶ See [Resolution 5797/2017 \(Migración Colombia\)](#) creating the temporary stay regime (PEP).

⁷ National Council of Economic and Social Policy (2018): [Strategy for Addressing Migration from Venezuela \(CONPES 3950\)](#), Actions 12 and 13.

⁸ See [Decree 216/2021](#) creating the Temporary Protection Status (ETPV).

⁹ See [Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios \(GIFMM\), Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela \(R4V\), Colombia – Venezuela’s Refugee and Migrant Response Plan \(RMRP\)](#)

¹⁰ See [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, Decree No. 1209](#) from 2024.

¹¹ [Congress of Colombia, Law 2466/2025](#) promulgating a Labour Law reform.

¹² [Ministry of Labour, Resolution 1889/2025](#) establishing the Technical Committee on Labour Migration.

¹³ The Labour Migration Committee (Chaired by the Ministry of Labour) operates on the basis of an agreed plan of action and provides a forum for inter-institutional coordination and tripartite dialogue on labour migration. In addition, the Subcommittee on Tripartite Social Dialogue on Labour Migration Management of the Standing Committee on the Coordination of Wage and Employment Policy (decision No. 0425 of 2013) offers a standing space to discuss labour migration issues with social partners, align policies and follow up on implementation.

¹⁴ Constitutional Court, Sentencia T-449, 2021.

¹⁵ See Article 35 of the Child and Adolescence Code.

¹⁶ Grupo Elite contra el Trabajo Infantil (Elite Group against Child Labour) and a case identification tool tested, see: UNODC: [Trafficking in persons for forced labor purposes in the spotlight of Colombian authorities: Case identification tool designed with the support of UNODC is successfully tested](#).

¹⁷ See National Council of Economic and Social Policy (2018), CONPES 3950, and National Council of Economic and Social Policy (2022): [Strategy for the Integration of the Venezuelan Migrant Population as a Development Factor for the Country \(CONPES 4100\)](#).

¹⁸ See Resolution 1889/2025 (Ministry of Labour) establishing the Technical Committee on Labour Migration, Article 3 (7).

¹⁹ [Codigo Sustantivo del Trabajo \(Labour Code\), Diario Oficial. AÑO LXXXVIII. N. 27622. 7, JUNIO, 1951](#), PÁG. 1.

²⁰ Under the ruling of the Constitutional Court, Sentencia C-311/07 it was stated that migrant workers should have access to leadership positions in trade unions after a reasonable period of residence.

²¹ See ILO (2024): [Research Brief - Decent Work for displaced people: Lessons from the experiences of Venezuelan migrant and refugee workers in Colombia and Brazil](#).

informal to formal employment. More specifically, under the Public Employment Service (SPE) network of providers, there are dedicated information portals for Venezuelans, including '*Empléate sin Fronteras*',²² providing tailored information to Venezuelans workers (as well as referrals) and to employers interested in hiring them. In addition, the *Empleo Sin Barreras*²³ platform supports people facing labour market barriers, including migrants and refugees, by offering registration, orientation, preselection, referral to vacancies, and support to reduce barriers to formal employment. Further, a brochure published in 2024 under the leadership of the Ministry of Labour provides information on migrant and refugee workers' labour rights.²⁴

3. Outcomes and key lessons

Colombia's progressive regularization and equality policies have enhanced economic integration of Venezuelans by expanding access to formal employment, social security, education, health care, and financial access on par with nationals – particularly benefiting women and youth who were typically previously unemployed or in low-skilled jobs.²⁵ These measures reduce vulnerability and advance inclusion, with evidence that long-term productivity gains from skills utilization most likely outweigh short-term public spending costs.²⁶

Despite some social tensions, attitudes remain nuanced: most Colombians support migrants' and refugees' access to education and healthcare, recognise their positive economic contributions, and do not favour stricter restrictions. Evidence suggests that positive, direct interactions between Venezuelans and host communities helps reduce tensions and contributes to greater social cohesion. Continued advocacy on equality is needed to support solidarity and counter any rises in xenophobia.²⁷

These experiences point to several key lessons:

- **First**, sustained commitment through evolving legislative frameworks – shifting from humanitarian assistance to development-oriented equality – supports labour market access and rights protection through coherent, cross-sectoral national policies.
- **Second**, holistic governance and multi-stakeholder coordination across ministries and between national and regional levels foster policy coherence, embedding migrants and refugees in public services and upholding equality of opportunity and treatment.
- **Third**, robust enforcement through labour inspections, trade union rights, and collective bargaining helps uphold labour rights, including minimum wages and occupational safety and health, while advocacy campaigns strengthen social cohesion and counter discrimination and xenophobia.
- **Fourth**, regional coordination platforms like the state-led Quito Process and the R4V (the UN-led Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela) – which adopted the Socio-economic integration strategy – enable harmonized policy standards, resource mobilization, and knowledge sharing, reinforcing national efforts for equitable labour market access and rights protection across host countries.

4. Actionable steps: Roadmap based on experience from Colombia

- **Establish legislative equality foundation:** Colombia's equality rights framework evolved from labour market access and social security rights to full statutory parity through the labour law reform, ensuring migration status does not lead to discrimination.
- **Operationalise through public services:** Universal access to the Public Employment Service (SPE) and the National Training Service (SENA), plus targeted tools like "*Empléate sin Fronteras*" portal and the Ministry of Labour's *COLabora* platform for employment guidance.

²² See: <https://prosperidadsocial.gov.co/sgsp/empleatesinfronteras/>.

²³ See: Unidad Administrativa Especial del Servicio Público de Empleo, "*Empleo sin barreras*".

²⁴ ILO (2024): *Cartilla informativa, Las personas refugiadas y migrantes trabajadoras tienen derechos en Colombia*.

²⁵ García-Suaza, Andres; Mondragón-Mayo, Angie; Sarango-Iturralde, Alexander (2025): *From Exodus to Employment: Labor Market Transitions and the Role of Work Permits in Colombia*, GLO Discussion Paper, No. 1606, Global Labor Organization (GLO), Essen, which highlights that skilled Venezuelans are likely to face deskilling, transitioning to occupations requiring lower qualification levels.

²⁶ See for example, UNDP (2022), Sebastian Bitar: *Migration in Colombia and Public Policy Responses*; IADB (2023), Miguel Benítez-Rueda: *The Productivity Effects of Forced Migration: Evidence from Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia*.

²⁷ See: MPI (2025): *Why Colombians' Unease about Venezuelan Immigration Has Not Led to New Restrictions*; and UNDP (2022), Sebastian Bitar: *Migration in Colombia and Public Policy Responses*.

- **Guarantee access to trade unions and justice:** Venezuelans can form and join trade unions without nationality restrictions and access labour justice via an online portal of the Ministry of Labour or labour courts.
- **Coordinate via governance mechanisms:** The newly established Technical Committee on Labour Migration fosters inter-institutional coordination and creates spaces for tripartite consultation to strengthen labour rights, equality of opportunity and treatment, and non-discrimination.

5. Way forward

While a comprehensive rights-based policy framework is in place, the remaining challenge lies in strengthening monitoring and enforcement. Despite regularization efforts, over 75 per cent of Venezuelans are estimated to be working informally (vs. 60 per cent of nationals), facing delays in credential recognition, discrimination, weak labour law enforcement, and low social security coverage.²⁸ In addition, there is evidence that in regions with larger numbers of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, low-skilled national workers can face job displacement to the informal economy.²⁹ Migrant and refugee children risk child labour and exploitation while working in street vending and mining,³⁰ while women face occupational downgrading, gender-based violence, and harassment.³¹

To address these persistent barriers, the way forward should strengthen enforcement against child labour and forced labour and trafficking through labour inspections and targeted awareness campaigns – alongside gender-responsive measures for skills recognition and the prevention of violence and harassment. Tripartite mechanisms such as the Labour Migration Committee can enhance coordination, contribute to combatting xenophobia through awareness-raising campaigns, and monitor community tensions from job competition – ensuring inclusive growth benefits both migrants/refugees and host communities, while upholding labour rights and equality of opportunity and treatment. Streamlined regularization, improved data on informality, and expanded pathways to formal employment are key to sustaining integration and equality amid shifting public perceptions.

Contact details

International Labour Organization

Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Labour Migration Branch (MIGRANT)

ilo.org/labourmigration
T: +41 22 799 6111
E: migrant@ilo.org

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²⁸ See: ILO (2024) : Research Brief: [Decent Work for displaced people: Lessons from the experiences of Venezuelan migrant and refugee workers in Colombia and Brazil](#); and Fundacion ANDI (2025): [Informe: Inclusion laboral y socioeconomica de la poblacion migrante en Colombia – Avances y pendientes](#).

²⁹ IADB (2023), Miguel Benítez-Rueda: The Productivity Effects of Forced Migration: Evidence from Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia.

³⁰ See USDOL, Bureau of International Labour Affairs (2023): [Colombia – Significant Advancement](#).

³¹ See ILO (2024): [Mujeres refugiadas y migrantes de Venezuela en Colombia: ¿quiénes son y qué barreras enfrentan para su integración socioeconómica?](#); and Dejusticia (2022): [Ser migrante y trabajar en Colombia : Como va la inclusion laboral de las provenientes de Venezuela?](#)