

# 'Operation Welcome': Humanitarian Pathway and Admission Applied to the Reception of Venezuelan Migrants in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

María do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*This article discusses 'Operation Welcome', a Brazilian government initiative to receive Venezuelan migrants and refugees, which has been managing emergency humanitarian assistance on the border between Brazil and Venezuela since 2018. The study seeks to analyse the dynamics of the reception of Venezuelan migrants through humanitarian assistance, drawing on the theoretical and methodological approach of anthropology on the border. The militarization of humanitarian action emerges as a hybrid perspective of migration control that is shared with NGOs and international agencies working on Operation Welcome in the context of the border analysed. The text suggests that Operation Welcome, by adopting interoperability as a framework for the actions of its actors, favoured the conditioning of the use of force by the State to the principle of social protection, shedding light on the creation of reception systems that are governed by the principle of guarantee and recognition of rights.*

## Key Words:

*Operation Welcome; humanitarian pathways; interiorization; Venezuela; Brazil*

## 1 Introduction

Contemporary migrations in Latin America are a phenomenon marked by increasing transnationality, plurality, and the growth of forced migrations. The number of asylum seekers in the region has faced a considerable increase over the past decade. Among the causes of the growth in the demand for asylum are situations of serious human rights violations, political instability, violence linked to drug cartels, as well as climatic events. This scenario presents a major challenge for national states that must supply adequate reception and integration policies for large flows of migrants and refugees, as is the case of Venezuelans in the region. The UNHCR refugee agency estimates that more than 7.7 million Venezuelans have left since 2014 (UNHCR, 2024). This represents the largest influx of migrants in Latin America's recent history. According to data from the International Traffic System (STI) provided by OBMIGRA (Migration Observatory), between 2017 and 2024, 1,214,145 Venezuelans entered Brazil. The largest influx of Venezuelans entered the country by land, via the border where the city of Pacaraima is located, in the north of Brazil.

In 2018, the Brazilian government created 'Operation Welcome' regulated by Law No. 13.684/2018, which deals with emergency assistance actions to welcome people in

---

<sup>1</sup> This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) and was accepted for publication on 12/3/2022.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Maria do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves is project coordinator at the Associação Educadora São Carlos (AESC), Brazil.

situations of vulnerability resulting from a migratory flow caused by a humanitarian crisis and established the Federal Emergency Assistance Committee. 'Operation Welcome' promoted a strategy of internalisation (voluntary migration from the border to other Brazilian municipalities) of Venezuelan migrants and refugees with the aim of relieving population pressure in the border region and encouraging a process of labour integration in the country. The humanitarian admission mechanism is coordinated by the Brazilian government and has the broad support of the Brazilian Army, as well as the participation of international organisations and civil society.

The present work, using an ethnographical methodological approach, aims to analyse the political and social dynamics that go with the promotion of humanitarian pathways and admissions sponsored by the Brazilian government applied to the reception of Venezuelan migrants through 'Operation Welcome'.

Taking the case of 'Operation Welcome' and considering the novelty of this initiative in the migratory governance scenario in Brazil, we wonder if the government's strategy of implementing 'Operation Welcome' as a response to the humanitarian crisis on Brazil's border with Venezuela could have established a new rationality in the border control and security system. Our hypothesis is that the actions developed by Operation Welcome, by conditioning the border control system to the dynamics of social protection policies, would have inserted, through the perspective of interoperability, a mechanism for acting in crisis contexts in which the state's power of control and exercise of force could be subordinated to a notion of promoting and recognizing the human rights of migrants.

## 2 Theoretical-Methodological Approach

This article represents an unfolding of the study on borders in Brazil, which began in 2021 in the context of research on migratory dynamics at borders, supported by the Scalabrinians Centre for Migration Studies (CSEM). Throughout the research, the theme of Operation Welcome emerged as an important reality in the context studied and one that could be better explored from the perspective of border studies. In this sense, the theoretical-methodological approach adopted in this study on 'Operation Welcome' follows the perspectives of border anthropology (Silva, 2007). This approach seeks to overcome the idea that ethnicities, nations and borders are isolated units of analysis and seeks to highlight the interactional systems that produce and maintain ethnic and national boundaries to describe the way in which these boundaries gain meaning for the populations that live on or cross the borders (Silva & Baines, 2009). Choosing this perspective of analysis to understand the dynamics inaugurated by 'Operation Welcome' allows us to consider humanitarian care at the border, and its organisation through 'Operation Welcome', as a system that produces and maintains boundaries (ethnic, national, institutional, etc.). From these borders or limits, it is possible to shed light on how the various actors (local population, migrants, government, international organisations, civil society, etc.) whose life stories are marked by the experience of the border, attribute meaning to the processes of humanitarian reception in Brazil. Therefore, by adopting border ethnography, we consider that:

"The complexity of international border situations as an ethnographic field lies in their potential to elucidate global processes that generate diverse phenomena such as the multifaceting of ethnic and national identities; the multiculturalisation of nationality through the presence of migrant and indigenous populations who reproduce their living conditions through multilocal

processes; the multinationalisation of states through the construction of regional economic blocs, etc.” (Silva & Baines, 2009, p. 48)

The case studied, 'Operation Welcome', whose operational base is on the border, points to different phenomena that are intertwined under the aegis of humanitarianism and extend beyond the territory where it takes place. From a political perspective, the border has been increasingly emphasised as a space of dispute, evoking issues of security and sovereignty of the nation-state and its need to impose regulations that strengthen national security. But the border can also be presented as a method, as Mezzadra (2015: 22) states:

“[...] While many scholars interpret the renewed importance and multiplication of borders as a sign of the return of the nation-state and the purely ideological nature of 'globalisation', Border as Method proposes a completely different theoretical 'cut'. [...] the border is not only understood as a strategic place for research and political intervention, but also as an 'epistemic' point of view in relation to real global processes.”

In our study, the territories on the border (the cities of Pacaraima and Boa Vista), where the operational base of 'Operation Welcome' was established, were the favoured places for the research fieldwork. Ethnographic data was collected in three different periods. In 2021, our first field stage in Roraima, we were faced with the context of the border closure due to the COVID-19 SARS pandemic health crisis.<sup>3</sup> During this period, I spent 25 days in Roraima, alternating fieldwork in the cities of Boa Vista and Pacaraima. During my stay, I conducted open-ended and semi-structured interviews with representatives of the civil society network and with migrants assisted by 'Operation Welcome'. I also carried out participant observation in emergency humanitarian actions promoted by civil society institutions, such as food distribution and triage for shelters in Pacaraima. Additionally, I visited spontaneous occupations (spaces on the periphery of the cities of Pacaraima and Boa Vista) occupied by migrants and refugees who had been unable to find accommodation in government shelters. In 2023, I carried out another period of field research, where I was in contact with some of the leaders I had met in the first stage, as well as getting to know other initiatives for the care of migrants that had developed during this period. On this occasion I was able to visit one of the shelters coordinated by 'Operation Welcome' in Boa Vista and learn about the health care services being provided by the army in the Pacaraima and Boa Vista shelters. In Pacaraima, it was possible to cross the border and visit the Venezuelan city of Santa Helena. In 2024, I contacted reserve military personnel who had been actively involved in coordinating the shelter operation, but not all of them agreed to record an in-depth interview. Over the three years of research, 27 interviews were conducted, including migrants, NGO coordinators, and government agents.

### 3 'Operation Welcome': Context

The main border of entry for Venezuelan immigrants is in the north of Brazil, in the state of Roraima. The state is in the region called the Brazilian Legal Amazon. The Legal Amazon is a large territorial area defined in 1953 with a view to regional planning and development. It corresponds to about 60% of the Brazilian territory and is home to twenty-

---

<sup>3</sup> In relation to the experiences of immigrants and refugees in Pacaraima, during this period there was a worsening of the condition of vulnerability. The pandemic has worsened the precarious conditions of migrants because of restrictions on movement, especially affecting their family dynamics (Gonçalves, 2024).

one million inhabitants (about 12% of the national population), most of whom (70%) live in urban areas. The Legal Amazon includes the states of Northern Brazil (Amazonas, Acre, Amapá, Rondônia, Roraima, Tocantins, and Pará), as well as Mato Grosso and part of Maranhão. According to Carvalho & Domingues (2016), during the twentieth century, the region was the target of developmental policies that resulted in economic growth and deforestation. The Brazilian government, in the 1960s, built roads and encouraged colonization to integrate the Amazon into the national economy. However, development was limited, and the exploitation of natural resources occurred in a disorderly and predatory manner, leading to high rates of deforestation (Carvalho & Domingues, 2016). Roraima is also one of the states where there is a strong presence of indigenous communities. According to the 2022 Demographic Census on indigenous territories in Brazil, the state of Roraima occupies fifth place in the national ranking. The state has 718 indigenous territories, representing 8.38% of the national total. Most of these localities (96%) are in rural areas, while only four percent are in urban areas (IBGE, 2024).

The city of Pacaraima is located on Brazil's border with Venezuela, where regular entry control procedures are carried out. The city was one of the municipalities most impacted by the mass migration of Venezuelans who began to seek Brazil as an alternative to other routes (especially to Colombia). Venezuelan migration to Roraima had been taking place since 2010, but the accelerated growth of these flows was seen from 2016 onwards, starting with the Warao indigenous group from the Amaruco Delta region. In December 2016, the Federal Police tried to deport 455 indigenous people from Boa Vista to Venezuela. However, the interference of several human rights organisations succeeded in suspending the deportation. According to Moreira et al. (2020), this event highlighted the Venezuelan flight, giving visibility to Roraima, and making it one of the focal points of media and government attention on the issue of the evolving migratory 'crisis' on the border.

According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Statistics (IBGE), the municipality of Pacaraima has grown significantly in terms of its resident population over the last decade. The population, which was around 10,448 in 2010, rose to 19,305 in 2022. This growth is partly due to the intensification of migratory flows from Venezuela, as well as the humanitarian response that followed, making the city an important logistical support point for government institutions, humanitarian organisations and NGOs.

'Operation Welcome' was created by a provisional measure (820/2018) as an initiative to address the humanitarian crisis that had built up in the north of the country with the exponential growth in the entry of Venezuelan migrants. The provisional measure was converted into Law No. 13,684, of June 21, 2018, establishing emergency assistance measures for the reception of people in vulnerable situations due to migratory flows caused by humanitarian crises. The purpose of this legislation was to provide emergency assistance to people vulnerable due to humanitarian crises that cause disorderly migratory flows. Social protection measures, understood in the law as a set of public policies to prevent and remedy situations of social vulnerability and personal risk, included health care, access to education, promotion of professional qualification, guarantee of human rights, infrastructure, sanitation, public safety, border control, organization, and mobility. This same law established the Federal Committee for Emergency Assistance<sup>4</sup>,

---

<sup>4</sup> The Committee is chaired by the Civil House of the Presidency of the Republic and coordinates the intersectoral work of 'Operation Welcome'.

which began to coordinate the actions of 'Operation Welcome'. The committee was established with Decree No. 10,917, of December 29, 2021, and its main objectives are: to articulate actions and projects with the support of the federal, state, and local governments; establish guidelines and priority actions for emergency assistance; supervise the planning and execution of joint actions; propose measures to ensure the necessary resources for the development of emergency assistance actions; establish partnerships with public agencies, private entities, specialists and international organizations; monitor and evaluate the execution of emergency assistance, and prepare semi-annual reports of its activities. 'Operation Welcome' was structured in three areas of activity: border control, institutional reception, and internalization strategy.

'Operation Welcome' created a different flow of migratory regularisation for Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers. Regarding the legal aspects of migratory regularisation, the Brazilian government has established different regimes to cater for the profiles of Venezuelan migrants, in a context of mass migration that has been ongoing since 2018. In this sense, nationals of Venezuela, but also of Guyana and Suriname, are eligible to apply for a two year temporary residence permit in Brazil. The residence provides the identification document (CRNM – Cartão de Registro Nacional Migratório). After the end of this period, the migrant can apply for an indefinite residence visa. With a residence permit, migrants can have equal and free access to services, programmes and social benefits. They can also travel between Venezuela and Brazil if they have a valid passport. It is important to note that there are differences in this process when it comes to indigenous populations. Venezuela's indigenous peoples can present any document from their country of origin with a photo as a substitute for an identity card or passport, but they are not eligible for the interiorisation strategy.

Although a considerable proportion of Venezuelan migrants migrate for economic reasons and use the possibility of residing in Brazil, there is a portion of this population that seeks refuge in the country. Between 2015 and 2023, Venezuelans accounted for 61% of asylum seekers in Brazil. Brazil's refugee law guarantees access to social policies and entry into the formal labour market. Refugee applicants have access to all the services offered by 'Operation Welcome', differing only in the type of regulatory process.

### **3.1 The Militarization of Humanitarian Action**

According to the IBGE, Brazil has a border strip 15,000 km long, 150 km wide and a total area of 1.4 million km<sup>2</sup>. This extensive border strip covers 11 states and 588 municipalities, of which 432 are entirely within the strip and 156 partially. Two-thirds of the entire length of the border strip is in the north of the country. In this context, the realities of the border towns located in the Legal Amazon were very little known until the crisis that took hold in Roraima with the mass migration of Venezuelans. It is interesting to note that during the same period in 2021 that I was in Pacaraima, I also went to Bomfim, a city located on the border between Brazil and Guyana. Despite being 335 km apart, these cities have very different migration realities. We observed that in Bomfim there were few Venezuelans living in the municipality, and the city was practically empty because of the closure of the border due to the Covid-19 health crisis. The streets were practically deserted, and the city maintained a peaceful appearance, typical of rural regions of Brazil. In Bomfim, there was no overt presence of state control of the border, except for the Federal Police customs post with minimal staff. The contrast between these realities, directly linked to migration dynamics, is striking. At the same time, the

government had already been concerned about the fragility of the state's presence on some borders, whether in terms of addressing the issue of territorial security (combating illegal extraction, human, arms and drug trafficking), or due to the lack of infrastructure to deal with mass migration phenomena.

In the case of Pacaraima, we observed that the economic and social dynamics that were characteristic of the territory before the outbreak of the humanitarian crisis continued to be noticeable, and were being mobilized in parallel with the new reality brought about by migration.

On our second field trip, in 2023, we travelled with a taxi company from Boa Vista to Pacaraima. When we reached the border, we took another taxi to Santa Elena do Uraien, in Venezuelan territory. We observed that there was an intense activity of trade in small goods and services facilitated by taxis that circulated between one side of the border and the other. In addition, the mining activity moved informal workers who often crossed the border. On the way back from Pacaraima to Boa Vista, we travelled with one of these workers who was returning after a period of work in the (illegal) mining in the region. Mining in the region, in addition to the environmental impact on the vegetation with deforestation, had generated serious risks to the health of Indigenous populations in Roraima<sup>5</sup>, the impact of its use in the mercury extraction process (Ramos, 2020).

It is worth remembering that in 2010, other small cities in the state of Acre, also in the northern region of the country, became the scene of another major humanitarian crisis linked to the massive migration of Haitians. The cities of Basiléia, Epitaciolandia (on the border with Bolivia) and Assis Brazil (located in the Brazil-Bolivia-Peru tri-border) were heavily impacted by this migratory flow, which served as a warning sign about the weaknesses surrounding the lack of structures, services and local management capable of meeting the demands of receiving large migratory flows in that region. According to an interlocutor of our study, who is currently a member of the Brazilian Army reserve and took an active part in the beginning of the establishment of 'Operation Welcome' on the border, the experience of logistical execution of the operation came, in large part, from an action that became known as 'Operation Amazonlog 17'. This operation was conducted in November 2017 by the Brazilian Army, in partnership with troops from Peru and Colombia, with a focus on training in humanitarian organization and serving communities in the border regions of the three countries (Brazil, Peru, and Colombia). The operation involved the participation of representatives from eighteen countries, as observers, several national institutions, and a force of around 1,200 military personnel. According to the interviewee training activities, such as supplies, health, maintenance, and transportation, inspired the logistical organization of the actions to receive Venezuelan migrants that would be implemented in 2018 in the context of the shelter operation (Interview, Porto Alegre, 2024).

Pacaraima is situated 215 km from the capital, Boa Vista, with stretches of road that are very precarious for vehicle traffic. There is a heavy daily flow of migrants moving between the two cities, as well as of personnel linked to humanitarian agencies and civil society

---

<sup>5</sup> The health crisis in the Yanomami Indigenous Land has gained national prominence due to the advance of illegal mining, which has resulted in severe cases of malnutrition and malaria among children and adults. The Bolsonaro government has encouraged mining on protected lands, dismantling inspection agencies and changing public policies to facilitate economic exploitation of the Amazon. On this aspect, see Barreto Filho (2020).

organizations that have settled on the border. The transport is conducted by taxi companies that make this journey for the value of about 20 euros per way. These stations only start the trip with the full number of passengers in the car (from five to seven) and the drivers are organized by cooperatives whose posts have been established close to each other on the main access road to the border post,

It is observed that, in addition to the migrants who enter Brazil and are welcomed in the flow of the Operation Welcome, there is an intense dynamic of movement of people between Pacaraima and Santa Elena, as well as from Pacaraima to Boa Vista. Pacaraima has a small bus station, which in 2021 had a reduced number of trips. There were only two hotels available that charged an average of 10 euros per night and offered modest conditions. The first impact we observed when we walked around the city was the number of people who were homeless. At that time, there was a decision by the federal government that the regulatory processes for the entry of Venezuelans across the border could only be conducted in Pacaraima. It was not possible to enter the country and continue traveling to Boa Vista to do the regularization procedures in the capital. In this context, there were about ten thousand people wandering around the small town. The shelter organized by 'Operation Welcome', as well as the shelters coordinated by civil society organizations, could not accommodate the number of people who continued to arrive. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), between 2018 and 2024, 681,536 Venezuelans entered the Pacaraima border. Of these, 102,903 have applied for asylum and 221,607 have applied for temporary residence in the country. To be served at the identification post, the migrants underwent a brief screening and received a numbered form that indicated their place in the service queue. This wait could take weeks. Most people crowded around the screening post, along the main access road to the border.

Despite the large flow of people, there was no ostensible presence of security forces in the area. Oliveira (50 years old), a retired lieutenant colonel who coordinated activities in Pacaraima during one of the periods in 2019, reported that one of the characteristics of the army's presence was the fact that the military remained unarmed. The exception was the army police who supported the safety of migrants and aid workers, particularly inside the shelter. "It was a different operation from that of Brazil in Haiti. We were in Brazilian territory and as the first line in the arrival of migrants to the place. It was an unarmed operation" (Interview, Porto Alegre, 2024). The connection made by Oliveira between the participation of the Brazilian armed forces in the Peace Mission in Haiti (2004 to 2017) and unarmed humanitarian action on the border indicates that the experience of humanitarian action comprises a broad spectrum in which personal experiences come into play, as well as the narratives elaborated collectively around the exercise of control and the use of force by state actors.

The militarization of humanitarian actions promoted by 'Operation Welcome' adds a new element to the complex dynamics that the Brazilian State maintains with military organizations at various times and historical contexts in the country.<sup>6</sup> The issue of border securitization has been widely debated in academia, especially about the dynamics that

---

<sup>6</sup> We do not intend here to analyse this history or to evaluate the military presence in the historical context of action in the Brazilian Amazon region. There is an extensive and rich literature that has focused on these aspects (Castro, 2006). Our intention is to bring at this point some of the perspectives of military action in the context of "Operation Welcome", with a focus on humanitarian action on the border.

are established between humanitarian reception processes combined with systems of control and even exclusion and/or expulsion of migrants at the borders (Feldman-Bianco, 2015, Domenech, 2015). In this sense, studies have emerged that problematize Brazil's option to place the army as a humanitarian arm for the organization of Venezuelan migrations (Rego & Paiva, 2021). In the case analysed, it is observed that the military presence in the context of the humanitarian response on the border in Pacaraima takes on a hybrid aspect, that is, the control of the border is not exercised in an ostensive way but takes on a shared and diffuse form. The presence of the unarmed army tying up the logistical part, the structure and the ordering of circulation spaces exerts a symbolic power. At the same time, the exercise of overt force is carried out by the security forces that circulate through the spaces (Army Police, Federal Police, civil and local military and special forces such as FICCO).<sup>7</sup> In March 2021, for example, FICCO raided a women's and children's shelter with the determination of the local prosecutor's office to deport the people housed in that space for violating the social distancing guideline imposed by health law in the context of COVID-19. This action took place in a way that was unrelated to the guidelines of humanitarian care based on social protection determined by 'Operation Welcome'.

### 3.2 Border Control

Control is also exercised by the international humanitarian agencies and civil society organizations themselves, which start to establish flows that are applied to daily processes, such as access to documentation, food, lodging and shelter, entry and exit of spaces. An interesting fact brought up in the interviews is the role of control assumed by the local society itself. Local groups of residents, pressured by the number of people who began to stay temporarily in the city, began to harass not only the migrants, but also state agents, such as the army, who, in that context, were exercising a humanitarian function and not that of repression of the migrants who arrived. According to our interlocutor Oliveira, there was a situation in which a local group held a public demonstration against the presence of migrants calling for the closure of the border for the entry of new migrants and refugees. The group moved from the city centre, passing in front of the shelter where the migrants were, to the border and temporarily prevented the movement of people and cars as a form of protest. Through the loudspeaker of the sound car, which accompanied the demonstration, they accused the army personnel who worked in the shelter of being "the army of Venezuelans" (Interview Oliveira, Porto Alegre, 2024).

The tensions with the local population were described by Ana, coordinator of a shelter for women in Pacaraima, as a "pressure cooker". During our stay in 2021 in Pacaraima, a hostile climate towards migrants was observed on the part of local merchants who complained about the dirty sidewalks. Many people did not have access to bathrooms, nor to shelter, remaining on the sidewalks, which made it difficult, according to them, for customers to circulate and access the establishments, generating economic losses. In 2023, the scenario was a little different. There were still many people on the streets and a large flow of people. However, the establishment of migrants as residents in the city, many of whom are small business owners, helped to reduce tensions. Many Venezuelans who remain in Pacaraima have been absorbed as a workforce by NGOs. Others, like Carlos, have set up small businesses. Carlos is part of a cooperative, supported by the

---

<sup>7</sup> FICCO is the acronym that identifies the Integrated Forces to Combat Organized Crime. In 2023, Federal Ordinance No. 427/2023 expanded these forces to other contexts in the national territory.



NGO CARITAS, that has set up the bakery “Padaria San Jose” and has become a meeting and information point for newly arrived Venezuelans.

In the field visits and interviews, it was observed that there is a strong interdependence between the actors involved locally with the actions of the Operation Welcome, even though the conceptual perspectives are different. For one of the service members interviewed, he defines interoperability as the great perspective brought about in the implementation of ‘Operation Welcome’ that allowed the creation of a complex humanitarian support network (Interview, Porto Alegre, 2024). For Oliveira, none of the state and civilian actors present at the border could have the capacity alone to provide a minimum response to the humanitarian crisis on the border. For NGOs, the ability to conduct actions that complement each other around the objective of welcoming is linked to the capacity for networking. For international organizations, such as UNHCR the theme of interagency cooperation and public and private partnerships encompasses this notion of joint action. In this sense, we observed from this study that the ways in which institutional actors adhered to the process of joint humanitarian action are deeply affected by the institutional culture and the narratives that are elaborated around the role they play in the humanitarian context.

The study allows us to suggest that control over entries, exits, transits and stays at the border is exercised through a set of mechanisms. Legal instruments for regularization and recognition of migratory status, means of travel from Pacaraima to Boa Vista or to other locations in Brazil, pre-defined flows of transit and stay in shelters, are some of the ways in which we verify the exercise of border control in its hybrid form, that is, partly exercised by civilian actors. In this sense, the militarization of the operational logistics of humanitarian action cannot be seen as an isolated unit of analysis, but as part of a complex system that extends beyond the territory where emergency humanitarian care is based.

#### **4 “Hogar de Paso”: Transits between Streets and Shelters**

The theme of accommodation upon arrival at the border emerges as one of the crucial points in the experiences of migrants and refugees inserted in the flow of ‘Operation Welcome’. Difficulties in relation to housing are one of the great challenges in the process of welcoming migrants and in other contexts and realities of the country. According to the IOM report (2024b) one in five dwellings is characterized by overcrowded conditions, with the highest rates in Amazonas (29%) and Roraima (34%). The majority (65%) of the homes surveyed lack at least one household essential, such as kitchen appliances, beds, cleaning supplies, and appliances. “These inadequate living conditions, together with the threat of eviction, affect access to livelihoods, services and basic needs, impacting well-being and quality of life” (IOM, 2024b: 121). Regarding the specific situation of the border, the report indicates that in May 2024, about 1,634 people in Pacaraima and 924 in Boa Vista lived in informal settlements, while 200 people lived on the streets of Boa Vista, with limited access to water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure, facing various health and protection risks. Recent data from the population census expose the weaknesses of access to shelter and housing for the Venezuelan migrant population. Roraima concentrates 30.4% of all Venezuelan migrants in Brazil living in shelters, halfway houses, or welfare centres. According to the IBGE, there are 7,331 people living in these structures in Roraima. One of the ways to mitigate precarious conditions, especially access to work and housing in the context of the border, has been the strategy of relocation. Spontaneous

settlements, the way the government identifies self-organized housing spaces by migrants, have become an alternative form to homelessness. In 2021 we found Mr. Jesus in Pacaraima. He came to Brazil in 2014 as a missionary for a Pentecostal church. When the economic and social situation worsened in Venezuela, he decided to move with his family to Roraima. The massive arrival of conationals motivated him to organize a settlement to welcome people who were homeless. The houses were precariously built with scraps of cardboard and wood. According to him, around 420 people have already passed through there. Jesus, named the place "*Vila Esperança*" and says that he has received support from NGOs and the government with basic items and food.

Palma, a Venezuelan who migrated to Brazil in 2019 and settled in Pacaraima, emotionally recounted her experience of living on the streets of Pacaraima until she found shelter in a space organized by an NGO. Her trip to Brazil lasted a month. She faced many difficulties along the way, paying bribes at checkpoints in Venezuela to be able to continue her journey. She arrived in Pacaraima with nothing, went hungry, and, in two months on the streets, developed survival strategies. Considering these experiences, Palma states that "when we pass through here, we are no longer the same" (Interview, Pacaraima, 2021). The harsh experience of being on the streets is shared by thousands of Venezuelans who have passed through Pacaraima and Boa Vista due to the collapse of the local social protection system. The experience of the street was what motivated Palma to stay in the Pacaraima and link up with the NGO that welcomed her to help give shelter to other people who arrive in the same conditions in which she arrived. Some of the migrants who arrive in the country manage to have their request for reception in federally run emergency shelters met, but there is a good margin that, for a variety of reasons, ends up having to be subjected to harsh situations on the street, or submit to extremely precarious housing. Currently, there are seven shelters for Venezuelans in Roraima, five in Boa Vista and two in Pacaraima, with a capacity for more than nine thousand people. One of the shelters in Pacaraima is exclusively for the Warao indigenous people. Ana recalls that the initial intention of the institution she coordinates was to provide support and guidance to pregnant women arriving in Brazil. But the reality of homeless women and children pressured her group to create a shelter for this group.

Hernan, who arrived in Brazil in 2020, despite his engineering background and the assets he had in Venezuela, spent three months sleeping on the streets of Pacaraima until he found shelter. According to him, Pacaraima is a "hogar de paso" (place of passage). People stay in the city waiting for migratory regularization, work, or inclusion in the relocation process. In fact, one of the initiatives linked to Operation Welcome was the promotion of a network of transit houses spread across the country with the purpose of welcoming Venezuelan migrants during the transit process to their destination in the context of the interiorization strategy. The transit homes are part of the federal government's relocation strategy, within the context of 'Operation Welcome'. The flow is coordinated by a subcommittee, linked to the coordination of the Ministry of Social Development, and the homes are managed by civil society. These homes are transit spaces, offering temporary shelter in the transit process between Boa Vista and the chosen destination. Between 2018 and 2024, according to data from the Commission, 143,062 Venezuelans benefited

from the program.<sup>8</sup> The majority (87%) of those relocated by the program travelled in family groups.

In Hernan's case, the experience on the street motivated him to engage as a collaborator in the NGO that promotes a project that provides bathrooms, laundry, showers for the personal cleanliness of people who are still on the streets. Access to minimum survival conditions was described by him as small processes of restitution of one's own condition of dignity. "To have dignity. Being on the street, but having a place to take a shower, brush your teeth, use the toilet" (Interview Hernan, Pacaraima, 2021). He reports that Venezuelan migrants do not use the service exclusively, since they also serve Brazilians in vulnerable situations.

#### 4.1 Interiorization Strategy

Migrants have the option to move to various municipalities in search of new life opportunities and socio-economic inclusion through the interiorization strategy, which is also coordinated by the MDS, with the support of the IOM. The relocation strategy aims to provide support to Venezuelan migrants and refugees by providing temporary shelter and promoting integration in other Brazilian municipalities. According to the Committee that coordinates this activity, the relocation strategy has four modalities of access:

- a. **Institutional:** Leaving shelters in Roraima for shelters in one of the destination cities (government or civil society partner)
- b. **Family Reunification:** Migrants who wish to reunite with their family members who regularly reside in other regions of the country, are willing and able to offer support and housing.
- c. **Social Reunion:** Migrants who wish to meet with individuals with whom they have a bond of friendship or affection, or family members whose relationship cannot be proven through documentation. Recipients must be able to provide for the support and housing of those they take in.

According to data provided by the MDS, in the period from April 2018 to December 2024, the strategy internalized 144,494 Venezuelans, 11% of whom were institutional, 16.8% through job vacancies, 17.8% through family reunions, and 47.5% through social gatherings. The main destinations in Brazil were the southern states of the country (Santa Catarina, Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul, and São Paulo). The issue of the labour market insertion of Venezuelan migrants, through Operation Welcome, is a process that includes, in addition to the challenges of state coordination at all levels of governance, raising awareness among employers about good practices for the inclusion of migrant workers, as well as a monitoring system to avoid situations of labour exploitation.

Although the legislation is clear about the rights of migrants and refugees welcomed by 'Operation Welcome', the challenge in accessing housing reported by several of the research interlocutors indicates the importance of strengthening social policies at the local level and supporting the forms of self-organization of migrant collectives. In the context of our study, it was observed that the gaps regarding the right to housing were, in part, covered by civil society initiatives and, above all, by an extensive network of solidarity among the migrants themselves. In the solidarities, we see a wide range of forms of

---

<sup>8</sup> Currently there are 11 houses in the municipalities of Boa Vista, RR; Brasília, DF; Belo Horizonte, MG; Campo Grande, MS; Curitiba, PR; Cuiabá, MT; Porto Velho, RO; Conde, PB; Florianópolis, SC; and Fortaleza, CE.

belonging mobilized, linked to ethnic identities, regional origin, gender, social class, religious beliefs and political-ideological tendencies.

## 4.2 Socio-economic Integrations Challenges

One of the initiatives of the internalization strategy linked to 'Operation Welcome' is the "Vaga de Emprego Sinalizada" (VES). This initiative relocates migrants and refugees who have been identified for a job opportunity by Brazilian companies from all regions of the country. 'Operation Welcome' supports the selected migrants to travel to the municipality where they will be hired. The companies' backgrounds are checked to prevent situations of labour exploitation. They also receive social support from the company, UN agencies and partner civil society organizations for up to three months.

Work, development and integration are social constructions subject to changes in the way they are understood and, at the same time, are mechanisms of social transformation that mobilize society in general. Every day, hundreds of migrants transit between borders and states in the country, and, in the case analysed here, in search of better living conditions and/or fleeing situations that put their lives at risk. Regardless of their migratory status, their nationality, or the ways in which they are categorized by profiles, they are all bearers of a migratory project that considers insertion into the world of work as a fundamental means for their success. At the same time, in the case studied, we observed that Venezuelan migration and the humanitarian attention that has formed around this flow, has brought positive impacts to the local reality, especially in the economic, social, and cultural fields. Operation Welcome, by receiving resources injected by the Federal Government and UN Agencies, heated up the local economy of Roraima, especially in Pacaraima and Boa Vista. The operation generated direct and indirect jobs, hiring labour for construction, food, security and other services. The demand for local services such as internet, transport and housing stimulated the local economy. Local companies have adapted to meet the logistical needs of the reception operation and the network of institutions that have been set up around humanitarian assistance. The immigrants' skills were improved, facilitating relocation and providing qualified workers for other regions of Brazil.

In 2020, the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) published a report in which it analysed the economy of Roraima and the flow of Venezuelan migrations, aiming to make this connection between economic development and the need to promote public policies aimed at the integration of migrants more evident. The report describes as a "humanitarian economy" the heating up of the local economy linked to investment in actions to welcome Venezuelan migrants. Regarding socioeconomic integration, the report states that migratory flows bring people of working age and with secondary and higher education levels, increasing the supply of labour force without additional training costs. However, the report states that an economic structure is needed that identifies the skills of these refugees and immigrants to properly allocate them in the labour market, as well as monitoring when this insertion occurs through the relocation strategy.

When we analyse the strategies of 'Operation Welcome' and the complexities involved in the establishment of a humanitarian reception space in the border context, a question that arises is to what extent transit or reception societies (in the case analysed, municipalities and states) are ready to invest in these migration projects and integrate migrants as an effective part of a broader process of national and regional development.

Integration, given its complexity, comprises more than the initial reception, since it requires, among other things, coordinated, planned, and continuous efforts on the part of all levels of government.

Many of the challenges faced by migrants' socio-economic integration initiatives arise from the lack of a more comprehensive and articulated approach to inclusion initiatives. When Venezuelan migrants left their country, they did so based on a personal and/or family migratory project that includes the search for migratory regularization in Brazil and access to the world of work to break the cycle of vulnerability that accompanied them, improve living conditions and return to professional development. Insecurity, violence, precariousness of displacement, slowness and bureaucratization of migratory regularization procedures; lack of affirmative policies for socioeconomic inclusion that facilitate and encourage access to formal work; non-recognition of skills and validation of qualifications that enable entry into qualified jobs; lack of adequate attention to the growing flow of migrant women who encounter numerous barriers to insertion in the labour market (such as lack of childcare, gender violence, and discrimination): These are all frequent obstacles to the process of socioeconomic integration of migrants in the region that are not limited to emergency action at the border.

The informal and precarious insertion of migrants in the labour market persists in the border region. This type of insertion makes migrants more vulnerable to exploitation and dependent on the public security system. In Brazil, violence against migrants in the region has been reinforced by structural racism, xenophobia, and the politicization of the migratory phenomenon during election periods. This scenario causes great damage to local, national, and even regional development.

## 5 Conclusions

Contemporary migrations are a phenomenon that reflects the period of profound social transformations on a global scale that we are experiencing. These variations include climate change, the advent of innovative technologies such as AIs, new economic and political scenarios, the intensification of conflicts and violent scenarios, among others. In addition to these objective factors, it is possible to say that migrations also incorporate new ways of understanding identities and belongings that are no longer exhausted in territorialized national identities. The way in which subjects come to understand themselves in the globalized world incorporates the ways in which they connect to other people, cultures, ideologies, lifestyles, and territories. In this context, border cities, such as the one analysed here, offer a promising space for research when the perspectives and narratives that the actors who live there and/or transit there build about belonging are incorporated into the studies. It is about how human beings are redefining their experience of belonging to a changing world, in which the experience of building proximity occurs at the same time as seeking one's own survival through movement (spontaneous or forced) between countries and borders.

One of the perspectives that emerged from this study was the notion of interoperability between the various actors who began to act in an articulated manner around humanitarian reception strategies and processes. This perspective does not, for example, invalidate the right to exercise the use of force to guarantee national security and sovereignty, but defines a place with limits (borders) within which the exercise of force can be used. This could be a key to reading the role, for example, of militarization in border

territories where there is an established humanitarian crisis. Our study suggests that the interoperability that governs and articulates the relationships and fields of action of the multiple actors involved in humanitarian care on the Pacaraima border brings another rationality to the process, since it subordinates migratory controls of entry through the border to social protection, organized in a network, as an important part of humanitarian action.

In this context, human mobility can interpose new paradigms that integrate the right to mobility as a prerogative of establishing safe passage. We observed, amid the complex dynamics that were established through 'Operation Welcome', that migration is a 'transnational-cultural' phenomenon, with varied factors. This makes it essential to engage proactively in its governance at all levels, as well as in permanent dialogue with civil society, which plays an important role in the humanitarian assistance process We observed, amid the complex dynamics that were established through 'Operation Welcome', that migration is a 'transnational-cultural' phenomenon, with varied factors. This makes it essential to engage proactively in its governance at all levels, as well as in permanent dialogue with civil society, which plays an important role in the humanitarian assistance process.

In this context, we observe that humanitarian reception initiatives, as in the case of 'Operation Welcome', consistently require a path of connection with the perspectives of sustainable development that include migrants and are based on the concrete commitment to include people in mobility as an effective part of development strategies. The promotion of safe, orderly and regular migration as a principle of governance can be a reality in the region if there is, together with national initiatives, permanent dialogue between states, addressing situations that are relevant to each country and region and that consider not only these migratory flows as a problem, but that seek approaches that bring to light the opportunities that migration creates. We have seen that in the Brazilian case, relocation can only be more effective if there is dialogue, especially between the local levels of government, since this is the level where the objective conditions for the reception and integration of migrants and refugees are established and in which a promising performance of civil society is observed.

Legislation alone is not capable of creating positive integration processes. Cooperation, promoted and fostered by international humanitarian care agencies, has the great challenge of including planned and inclusive migration policies from the local level. The inclusion of local actors could be useful to ensure the inclusion of historically and socially excluded populations, as is the case of Brazilian Indigenous communities in Roraima and Venezuelan Warao migrants. Local involvement favours the development of consensus and the fight against discriminatory and xenophobic narratives. The indigenous populations involved in the migratory flows from Venezuela have remained on the sidelines of inclusion initiatives. In terms of access to housing, for example, we have observed that the few actions taken in relation to the Warao indigenous people have been to place these communities in exclusive shelters, for which there are no other alternatives that respect the specificities of their lifestyle. When we look at the reality of the Warao in other contexts in Brazil, we can see the deep stigmatization that these groups suffer, which leads them to constantly move between temporary spaces. The indigenous issue is undoubtedly one of the great challenges of humanitarian care. Contrary to what we have observed in terms of the development of local economies in the territories where the

structures of Operation Welcome have been installed, the same cannot be said for the Brazilian indigenous communities present in much of the border region.

We have found that the right of movement between Brazil and Venezuela for regular migrants ensures the maintenance of family networks, as well as preventing situations of smuggling and human trafficking in the border region. However, the guarantees of regular and safe transit offered by 'Operation Welcome' are limited to mobility (entry and exit) between the Brazilian border and Venezuela. They do not extend to migration from Brazil to other countries in the region. As such, it is a humanitarian corridor that does not apply to migrants who use Brazil as a transit territory to other countries.

There are deficiencies in the process of accompanying migrants taken in by 'Operation Welcome', especially about follow-up after labour integration and housing. Although the flow between 'Operation Welcome' and the companies offering work is structured, integration and the right to access public policies guaranteed by law are the responsibility of the local governments in the cities of destination. In this sense, labour inclusion does not guarantee a full welcome. At the same time, the model that has been developed for humanitarian reception through Welcome Operation, which is based on the notion of structuring a humanitarian corridor for the regular entry into Brazil of migrants and refugees from Venezuela, can shed light on the question of new humanitarian corridor strategies that allow lives to be safeguarded in the context of fleeing degrading conditions and/or violence.

The establishment of local, national, and regional mechanisms for the participation of civil society in the construction of policies to respond to emergency situations can favour migration governance processes in general. Civil society is a plural, capillary, and highly active actor, which conducts in an expressive diversified way actions that are in constructive interaction with the migration governance efforts of governments at all levels. In the case of 'Operation Welcome', civil society extends through groups with different profiles and that are present in the execution of the simplest actions, such as food delivery, to the most complex ones, which include providing halfway houses, and guidance on migratory regularization. Civil society represents an important asset for states in the process of producing knowledge about the migratory phenomenon, including in the production of data. Much of the information collected and processed by international organizations, such as IOM, at the Pacaraima border relies on the partnership and presence of NGOs in these territories. NGOs have also contributed to the establishment of actions to welcome, accompaniment and integration of Venezuelans (Portuguese workshops, access to information, promotion of cultural activities, etc.), contributing in a decisive way to the order, security, and regularization of these flows. We observed among the migrants interviewed that many of them, like Palma and Hernan, found in civil society institutions a privileged space to exercise their protagonism. Migrants, through associations, act to promote paths of local integration, respect and safeguard human rights, fight discrimination and xenophobia, investing in spaces to promote culture, entrepreneurship, among others.

This regulation represented a significant step forward in terms of action in emergencies and humanitarian reception in Brazil. As it provided for the expansion of important policies in emergency contexts, such as social protection, health care, human rights, mobility, protection of the rights of women, children, adolescents, the elderly, people with

disabilities, the indigenous population, affected traditional communities, and other vulnerable social groups.

The analysis shows that, compared to the humanitarian admission initiatives applied to other national groups in the country, and in the region, the humanitarian reception model of 'Operation Welcome' on the one hand has gaps. At the same time, the model that has been developed from humanitarian reception based on regular humanitarian routes for entry and stay, can be exemplary for the emergence of humanitarian corridors that allow the safeguarding of lives in the context of escape from degrading living conditions and/or structural violence.

## References

- Almeida, R., Gama, H., & Paiva, L. (2022). A securitização do humanitarismo: percepções sobre a interiorização de imigrantes venezuelanos no Brasil. *Informalidade e Proteção dos Trabalhadores Imigrantes: Navegando pelo Humanitarismo, Securitização e Dignidade*. 1st ed. São Paulo: *Expressão Popular*, 1, 13-24. <https://sinaitsp.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Livro-Informalidade-e-Proteção-dos-Trabalhadores-Imigrantes-completo.pdf#page=13>
- Barretto Filho, H.T. (2020). Bolsonaro, Meio Ambiente, Povos e Terras Indígenas e de Comunidades Tradicionais: uma visada a partir da Amazônia. *Cadernos De Campo (São Paulo - 1991)*, 29(2), e178663. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9133.v29i2pe178663>
- Carvalho, T.S., & Domingues, E.P. (2016). Projeção de um cenário econômico e de desmatamento para a Amazônia Legal brasileira entre 2006 e 2030. *Nova Economia*, 26(2), 585-621. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-6351/2665>
- Castro, C. (Ed.). (2006). *Amazônia e defesa nacional*. 1a ed Brasil: FGV Editora.
- Corrales, J., Allen, A., Arias, L., Rodríguez, M., & Seymour, L. (2019). Welcoming Venezuelans: A scorecard of responses from Latin American and Caribbean countries to the Venezuelan migration crisis. *American Quarterly*. [https://www.americasquarterly.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/VenezuelanMigration\\_AmherstCaseStudies.pdf](https://www.americasquarterly.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/VenezuelanMigration_AmherstCaseStudies.pdf)
- de Oliveira, M.G.A.G. (2018). Use of the Brazilian military component in the face of Venezuela's migration crisis. *Military Review*, 1. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2019/Alberto-Brazil-Venezuela-print/>
- Domenech, E. (2015). O controle da imigração " indesejável": expulsão e expulsabilidade na América do Sul. *Ciência e Cultura*, 67(2), 25-29. [http://cienciaecultura.bvs.br/scielo.php?pid=S0009-67252015000200010&script=sci\\_arttext&tlng=en](http://cienciaecultura.bvs.br/scielo.php?pid=S0009-67252015000200010&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en)
- Feldman-Bianco, B. (2015). Apresentação: deslocamentos, desigualdades e violência do estado. *Ciência e Cultura*, 67(2), 20-24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21800/2317-66602015000200009>
- Gois, P., & Falchi, G. (2017). The third way. Humanitarian corridors in peacetime as a (local) civil society response to a EU's common failure. *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, 25, 59-75. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880005105>
- dos Santos Gonçalves, M.D.C. (2024). Venezuelan migrant families during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In: N. Weimann, & R. Lutz (Eds.), *Family dynamics, gender, and social inequality during COVID-19: Analysing long-term effects* (pp. 83-94). Springer Nature Switzerland. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51237-7\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51237-7_7)
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (2024). *Censo Demográfico 2022: localidades indígenas : resultados do universo/IBGE*. <https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/index.php/biblioteca-catalogo?view=detalhes&id=2102157>
- International Organization for Migration (2024a). Painel de monitoramento do fluxo Veneuelano em Pacaraima, RR. <https://brazil.iom.int/pt-br/dados-e-informacoes>
- International Organization for Migration (2024b). RMNA 2024. Análisis de las Necesidades de Refugiados y Migrantes. <https://www.r4v.info/es/rmna2024>



- Junger da Silva, G., Cavalcanti, L., Lemos, Silva S., & de Oliveira, A. (2024). Observatório das Migrações Internacionais; Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública/ Departamento das Migrações. Brasília, DF: *OBMigra*. <https://portaldeimigracao.mj.gov.br/pt/observatorio/1715-obmigra>
- Lira, J. R., Ramos, M., Almeida, T., & Rodrigues, F. (2019). Migração, mobilidade e refúgio de venezuelanos no Brasil: o caso do município de Pacaraima (RR). *Papers do NAEA*, 1(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.18542/papersnaea.v28i2.8112>
- Mezzadra, S. (2015). Multiplicação das Fronteiras das Práticas de Mobilidade. *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar Da Mobilidade Humana*, 23(44), 11–30. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880004402>
- Morozzo Della Rocca, P. (2017). Os assim chamados "corredores humanitários" e o possível papel da sociedade civil nas políticas de refúgio e migração regular. *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, 25, 47-57. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880005104>
- Moreira, E.S., Repetto, M., & Teixeira, S. (2020) Diálogos Críticos Sobre Sociedade E Estado: Reflexões Desde o Projeto de Cooperação Acadêmica na Amazônia, Boa Vista: Editora da UFRR / Campos dos Goytacazes: *EDUENF*.
- Ramos, A. R. A., Oliveira, K. A. de., & Rodrigues, F. dos S. (2020). Mercury-based mining in Yanomami indigenous lands and accountabilities. *Ambiente & Sociedade*, 23, e03262. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-4422asoc20180326r2vu2020L5AO>
- Rego de Paiva, A., & de Paiva Gonçalves, G. (2021). Operação Acolhida: Entre a Militarização e a Assistência Social. *Revista Brasileira De História & Ciências Sociais*, 13(26), 164-181. <https://doi.org/10.14295/rbhcs.v13i26.12552>
- Silva, C. T. da., & Baines, S. G. (2007). Nacionalidade e etnicidade em fronteiras. *Horizontes Antropológicos*, 13(27), 341–346. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-71832007000100017>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2024). *Venezuela situation. Factsheet*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/venezuela-situation-factsheet-9356>