

Funding, credibility and visibility: supporting forced migration research in the Global South

Rossmary D Márquez-Lameda

Academics in the Global South who are conducting research on the Venezuelan displacement crisis confront a number of challenges relating to funding, credibility and visibility. Interviewees reflect on how to tackle these challenges in light of realities on the ground.

This article draws on ten in-depth interviews conducted with academics based in Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Peru and the Dominican Republic who are currently conducting research related to the Venezuelan displacement crisis.¹ All interviews were conducted remotely, in Spanish, in January and February 2022. I interviewed two types of researchers: those with a long-standing academic trajectory and training in forced migration research, and others who found themselves researching the experiences of migrants and refugees indirectly, given their areas of expertise such as sexual and reproductive health and infectious diseases, without being ‘migration researchers’. Regardless of the type of research all of these academics conducted (whether theoretical or applied), they often worked collaboratively with other institutions, either nationally or regionally. Some worked with academic institutions in the Global North.

Key issues that emerged from these interviews were the lack of funding, as well as challenges related to academic credibility and visibility, that arose

as a result of the researchers being based in or from the Global South.

Funding: different realities

Those interviewed highlighted the failure of funding agencies in the North to acknowledge the realities and challenges inherent in conducting research on forced migration in the context of the Venezuelan crisis. According to one researcher from Colombia: “Seeing the reality from the outside is very different to living it”. This researcher shared his experience of an international funding call on health-care access for Venezuelans in Colombia. Based on his work with Venezuelan migrants and his preliminary research, he had proposed to undertake qualitative research to understand the topic of xenophobia as a barrier to health-care access. However, the funding agencies wanted metrics that included the number of doctors, number of beds in a hospital, and so on. “Why would we care about the number of beds and doctors,” said the researcher, “if we know the migrants will mostly be turned away at the door and not even make it inside the



People crossing the Colombia-Venezuela border (Credit: Arturo Harker Roa)

hospital?" In this case, the researcher and his team did not proceed with this proposal as they considered the quantitative approach requested by the funding agency to overlook important factors related to prejudice and discrimination in health-care provision.

A researcher from the Dominican Republic voiced concerns about funding calls that had requirements that were too costly or not feasible in countries with limited resources: "Sometimes you read these funding announcements and you think they were written for the North". In this case, the researcher approached the programme officer and requested, successfully, for the announcement to be changed. Funding calls that do not give these researchers the flexibility and freedom to approach issues concerning Venezuelan displacement in ways that capture realities on the ground limit the researchers' possibility to conduct appropriate and meaningful research.

Another researcher, from Chile, highlighted the need for funding opportunities to acknowledge cultural and social diversity in the Global South: diversity that generates different ways of knowing and perceiving reality. She

raised the issue of how funding agencies in the Global North conceptualise and use terms that might not conform to their use in the Global South. More specifically, she mentioned how the terms 'cultural competence' in the North and 'intercultural' in the South are used and expected to be assessed. "For the South to create a checklist is unacceptable. This is what the North does with the concept of cultural competence."

Some of the interview participants mentioned the bureaucratic challenges inherent in applying for funding and their limited institutional capacity to do so: "It could take several weeks or months for our institutions to process some of the required paperwork for a grant proposal. By the time we had the documents and the institutional approvals, the deadline had already passed", said a researcher from Colombia. Others similarly reported limited human resources and capacity within their institutions to write and put together research proposals that required a quick turnaround. Even when they win funding, they find that academic institutions in their region have not necessarily adapted to the specific needs and characteristics of Venezuelan migrants, which

presents challenges to recruiting interview subjects and implementing research projects. For example, as one interviewee in Colombia explained, research institutions might require the migrants to have legal identity documents before the universities are able to process incentives and reimbursements for costs (such as food and transport) associated with their participation in a study.

Academic credibility and visibility

The issue of academic credibility also came up in conversations about barriers to funding. “To get a grant from a large funding agency, I know I need a prestigious university to back me”, said a researcher from Colombia. This requirement to be connected to a university from the North and, often, to have a university in the North as the main institution on a grant application is problematic. It limits the possibility of researchers and institutions in the South to establish themselves as credible entities conducting research on forced migration – in short, to become visible. The question of credibility and visibility was common in my conversations with local academics and made me wonder: in the context of the Venezuelan crisis, who in the Global South is perceived and conceptualised as a credible researcher in forced migration? Which researchers are invited to join humanitarian fora and why are others left out?

The interviews highlighted how different types of researchers were viewed as a key factor affecting the question of credibility and visibility. Established migration researchers approached studying Venezuelan displacement more theoretically, focusing on the migratory processes and policies in the region.

Applied researchers, however, researched migrant and refugee experiences indirectly, addressing pressing questions concerning broader socio-economic realities in the host countries. For the applied researchers, the Venezuelan migration phenomenon did not need to be conceptualised theoretically but generated questions that needed to be answered – answers that could support communities that were suffering and

help governments understand how to address the displacement situation.

This dichotomy was not always clear-cut; there is substantial interdisciplinary and multi-method work taking place in the region and in the field of forced migration studies. However, there seems to be an issue that researchers conducting valuable but more empirical work on Venezuelan displacement, who interact directly with migrants and refugees, are less likely to be seen as credible authorities in the field of forced migration despite the unique perspectives they bring to the table. A researcher who has done extensive research on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) in the refugee camps in northern Brazil said that, although his work is known and seen as credible in the field of SRH, his team does not get invited to participate in humanitarian discussions.

Addressing the challenges

A number of recommendations to foster collaboration and increase access to funding opportunities emerged from the interviews.

Research networks within countries or regions could help foster collaborations and discussions on issues pertaining to forced migration. They could help connect academics conducting similar research, encourage interdisciplinary work and even provide opportunities for training. Given the increasing number of researchers starting to work with migrant and refugee communities, training sessions could include ethical discussions and strategies to conduct projects with these communities. Long-term funding is needed to enable such research networks to be sustainable.

Seed funding, given in order to cover the launch of a new project, should be provided to initiatives led by researchers in the Global South; funding levels could be increased over time based on performance.

Context-sensitive funding announcements would give researchers the independence and flexibility to address a research problem using conceptual frameworks

and methodological approaches that reflect the realities on the ground. Funding agencies should also be open to researching negotiating with funding agencies to allow different approaches not originally included in funding announcements.

Funding, credibility and visibility are interrelated concepts that should be understood within the geographical context of these researchers and the uniqueness of the Venezuelan displacement situation. As long as funding agencies continue to impose certain ways of knowing and thinking, research will not reflect reality. As long as researchers

need a university from the Global North to back them so they can get a grant, these researchers will not become visible. And as long as applied researchers are not considered to be authorities on forced migration, their unique perspectives will be overlooked.

Rossmary D Márquez-Lamedada

Rossmarydmarquez@gmail.com

@Marquez_Lamedada

Doctoral Candidate, School of Public Health,
Indiana University Bloomington

1. Although all the academics were located and working in these countries, not all of them were originally from these countries. Two researchers are from France and one researcher is from Argentina.