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Colombians *Returning* from Venezuela: The Role of Social Networks and Cross-Border Mobilities in their Business Ventures

Colombianos *en retorno* desde Venezuela: el rol de las redes sociales y de las movilidades transfronterizas en sus emprendimientos

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the entrepreneurship and reintegration of Colombians who migrated to Venezuela around 2000 and were arbitrarily deported to Colombia in 2015 by the Venezuelan government. It asks to what extent their cross-border spatial mobilities and social networks help develop their microenterprises and how the geopolitical context influences their socioeconomic reintegration. The methodology includes multi-sited ethnographic observation, biographical interviews, mental maps, and participatory *Minga* workshops carried out with 18 individuals. It is concluded that, despite their remarkable resilience, these individuals and their business ventures face constant precarity due to a lack of state support, prevalent geopolitical conflicts, a weak local economy, and the trauma of deportation. At the same time, in an attempt to improve their socioeconomic reintegration, returning migrants deploy cross-border mobility strategies to take advantage of the opportunities offered by different localities in Colombia and Venezuela.

Keywords: 1. forced return, 2. entrepreneurship, 3. borders, 4. deportation, 5. Colombia.

RESUMEN

Se estudia el emprendimiento y la reintegración de personas colombianas que migraron a Venezuela hacia el año 2000 y fueron deportadas arbitrariamente a Colombia en 2015 por el gobierno venezolano. Se investiga hasta qué punto sus movilidades espaciales transfronterizas y sus redes sociales contribuyen al avance de sus microemprendimientos, y cómo el contexto geopolítico influye en su reintegración socioeconómica. La metodología comprende la observación etnográfica multisituada, las entrevistas biográficas, los mapas mentales y los talleres participativos *Minga* realizados con 18 individuos. Se concluye que, pese a su notable resiliencia, las personas en retorno y sus emprendimientos se enfrentan a una precariedad constante debido a la falta de apoyo estatal, los conflictos geopolíticos prevalentes, la débil economía local y el trauma de la deportación. Así mismo, buscando mejorar su reintegración socioeconómica, los migrantes que retornan efectúan estrategias de movilidad transfronteriza para aprovechar las oportunidades ofrecidas por diferentes lugares en Colombia y Venezuela.

Palabras clave: 1. retorno forzado, 2. emprendimiento, 3. fronteras, 4. deportación, 5. Colombia.

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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial activity by returnee migrants offers great potential for facilitating their reintegration in their country of origin and generating local employment. These migrants are considered agents of development (Sinatti, 2019) as it is assumed they will invest savings and expertise gained outside the country to set up small and medium-sized enterprises (McCormick & Wahba, 2001). However, new businesses are often plagued by high rates of dissolution, highlighting the importance of long-term sustainability. Returnees form a heterogeneous group (Cassarino, 2004) and it is not yet understood why only some are able to maintain their business ventures over the long term and achieve socioeconomic progress.

This paper seeks to gain insight into this phenomenon by exploring the limitations and opportunities faced by Colombians returning from Venezuela as they attempt to build a sustainable business venture. The study employs a feminist geopolitical approach (Massaro & Williams, 2013) to study the cases of individuals with a history of repeated forced mobilities, beginning with internal displacement within Colombia and continuing with their emigration to Venezuela and subsequent final deportation back to Colombia by the Venezuelan government. Multi-sited ethnographic observation, biographical interviews, mental maps, and participatory *Minga* workshops are implemented (Riaño, 2015), and the different reintegration situations of 18 returnees are examined.

Returnee reintegration is examined from a transnational, or more precisely from a cross-border perspective, which is rarely used. In this respect, Cavalcanti and Parella (2013) assert that "a transnational approach shows us how return practices are immersed in a dynamic of circularity and transnational relations that bind the societies of origin and settlement" (p. 15), which applies to the study of Colombian migrants who have lived in Venezuela. Furthermore, the resources gained by migrants abroad—international contacts, education, capital, knowledge of other cultures and potential opportunities—make them apt to identify new niches in the market and create more business ventures than entrepreneurs with no experience of migration (Drori et al., 2009). However, very little is known about the extent to which returning migrants' mobilities and social networks go beyond national borders, the geopolitics that enhances or hinders them, and how important transnational resources are for migrant reintegration (Cortés & Oso, 2017).

In addition, except for a few studies (Aliaga et al., 2017; Botina, 2020; Cavalcanti & Parella, 2013; Cortés & Oso, 2017; Riaño, 2013), little is known about migrant return to Latin American countries. Most publications focus on Europe (King & Christou, 2014), Africa (Sinatti, 2019), and Asia (Ley & Kobayashi, 2005). Similarly, few studies explore the reintegration of individuals with return mobilities between two countries in the Global South (Tapia Ladino, 2015), as is the case of migrants moving between Colombia and Venezuela.

Moreover, research on return and entrepreneurship is scant and reintegration has not been a focus of study. Rather, studies have explored the likelihood of a returnee becoming an entrepreneur (Démurger & Xu, 2011), how local social capital affects business formation (Zhongdong, 2002), and how such businesses contribute to economic diversification (Murphy, 2000). These studies

have come under criticism for downplaying social and human indicators in favor of economic ones, for disregarding returnees' desires for reintegration, and for focusing solely on surveys and statistical models (Sinatti, 2019). Moreover, they offer an analysis centered on individual economic performance and not on underlying conditions like state politics and geopolitics. Few studies examine returnees' survival strategies (Cassarino, 2004) and incorporate economic, social, geographical, and gender factors in an analysis of reintegration (Riaño, 2013). To help address these research gaps, this paper asks the following questions: a) to what extent can returnees successfully reintegrate by creating small enterprises?; b) what type of limitations and opportunities do they encounter as they mobilize their skills and resources to create sustainable businesses?; c) what is the role played by social networks and spatial mobilities between countries: are they an opportunity or a limitation?; and d) what geopolitical dynamics enhance or hinder their social networks and cross-border mobilities?

RETURN MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY AND FEMINIST GEOPOLITICS

A conceptualization of return migration as the movement of migrants from the country to which they migrated to their place of origin as the final stage of the migration process has been the subject of criticism (Ley & Kobayashi, 2005). Based on previous work (Riaño, 2013), it is argued that combining the theoretical perspectives of transnational migration (Glick Schiller et al., 1992) and spatial mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006) can provide a deeper understanding of return and reintegration. While the transnational perspective postulates that reintegration processes cover only the country of origin and the country of destination, the spatial mobility perspective explores individual movement between different countries and points in time and how people, objects, and money circulate across transnational spaces. The mobility perspective is particularly well suited to understanding the diversity of return movements, as it is conceptually broader than the traditional migration perspective and makes fewer assumptions about the duration and purpose of transnational movements. It is also more inclusive because it considers all material and immaterial flows involved in spatial movements, including people, goods, money, and ideas.

In addition, reintegration is often studied from a nation-State perspective that neglects the fact that returning migrants' lives do not revolve solely around their countries of origin but may be linked to several countries. Some authors posit that reintegration should be viewed from a transnational perspective that interweaves relationship dynamics, practices, and experiences in the societies of origin and settlement (Cavalcanti & Parella, 2013; Cortés & Oso, 2017). In line with previous empirical findings (Riaño, 2013), this article argues that social networks and spatial mobilities across national borders are essential for building reintegration and a post-return sense of belonging. Particular emphasis is placed on the notion of "return" in border areas given that, as proposed by Contreras et al. (2017), a desire to leverage the benefits offered by two bordering countries gives rise to distinctive, little-known forms of social bonds and cross-border mobilities. It is against this backdrop that this research focuses not on transnational mobilities but rather the

concept of *cross-border mobilities*, which is geographically more accurate in a study of the Colombia-Venezuela border.

Moreover, it is proposed that a feminist geopolitical perspective is especially well suited to understanding return in border contexts. Simply defined, geopolitics refers to struggles for territorial control by various actors. A feminist conceptualization calls into question the macro scales of analysis of geopolitical power, emphasizing the importance of small, everyday practices in the construction of the national and international (Massaro & Williams, 2013). Instead of focusing solely on the state and supranational power, this perspective examines struggles for power, territory, and security by those who use their agency in everyday spaces to recreate international orders. This agency on the part of returnees has received little attention.

Based on feminist geopolitics, successful reintegration is defined as the process by which returnees encounter the necessary conditions to put their abilities and resources to use to meet their basic living needs. This definition integrates the principles of *sustainable livelihoods* as well as the *existential* and *human rights* approaches. Sustainable livelihoods are defined as income-generating activities that sustainably meet food, housing, water, energy, transportation, healthcare, and education requirements (Chambers & Conway, 1992). Drawing from the concept of sense of place (Tuan, 1977), we also discuss the existential dimensions of reintegration—that is, psychological well-being and the sense of rootedness to one or more social spaces. Lastly, in keeping with a human rights approach (Asamblea General de la ONU, 1948), we also consider security needs—that is, feeling free from harm, persecution, and threat. This is particularly important for this study, given the commonplace nature of human rights abuses and forced displacement at the border between Colombia and Venezuela.

RETURN POLICY IN COLOMBIA

Policy to support the integration of returning migrants envisions that their entrepreneurial initiatives will contribute to national development, but does not reflect an interest in strengthening these initiatives despite conditions of high vulnerability. National government support plays a pivotal role in return processes from countries in the Global South, as occurs with migration flows from Venezuela to Colombia.

To protect the safety of returnees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees requires that returns be safe, dignified, and protected, such that they are sustainable (ACNUR, 2011). In the case of migrants who are forced to return, as is the case in this study, deportation increases their vulnerability and insecurity, adding to the impact that forced returnees may feel at having been uprooted. It would, therefore, be the responsibility of the Colombian government to ensure the safety of returnees, especially those who find themselves in a refugee-like situation. In this respect, Law 2136 of 2021 provides that returnees should enjoy the human rights enshrined in the Constitution and in international agreements in force in Colombia, and that priority should be given to assisting and supporting them and their inclusion in public policymaking. The Colombian government should therefore play a key role in the successful reintegration of returnees.

In Colombia there are institutions like the Support and Comprehensive Reparation Unit for Victims (UARIV), which serves victims of the internal armed conflict, guiding the actions of the state and society to provide support and comprehensive reparation. However, the Victims' Law (Law 1448 of 2011) does not include direct action to support enterprise among the displaced population or assist returnee victims as it focuses primarily on measures aimed at ensuring reparation, justice, and truth. In 2012, Colombia enacted Law 1565 (also known as the Return Law), which includes a category on productive return. This law enables returnees to benefit from a scheme aimed at developing business ventures and receive advice and access to loans. However, the results of this study suggest there remain cracks in this policy area. The same is true of the Fondo Emprender (Entrepreneurship Fund) offered by the National Training Service (SENA), which does not guarantee financing for all returnees, given the complexity of the requirements and of the business-plan viability assessment (Cabrera & López, 2020). Moreover, this policy is intended for returnees with higher education and a capacity for technological innovation, thus excluding the subjects of this study.

The initiative for a productive return is led by the Colombia Nos Une (Colombia Unites Us) program, run by the Directorate of Migration and Consular Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Cancillería) in coordination with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). However, it has been noted by Cabrera and López (2020) that "this intervention by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is problematic because the focus of this department is on foreign and migratory policy, not the development and support of business ventures" (p. 115). The authors argue that this complicates interinstitutional coordination due to the lack of a systematic record of challenges and best practices, or a system that provides an understanding of the roles of different actors with an offer of services. Lastly, the interviews conducted as part of this research show that a total of 1 200 individuals displaced in 2015 from San Antonio (Venezuela) to Cúcuta (Colombia) were registered in the Registro Único de Retornados (Single Registry of Returnees). However, although they have participated in several meetings with government authorities, as of 2022 they have yet to receive any support from the Colombian government for their reintegration.

METHODOLOGY

Research Methods, Participants, and Locations

The fieldwork in the border area was conducted by Yvonne Riaño from 2019 to 2022. Access was facilitated by Felipe Aliaga, who has years of experience in the study area with the community organization Asociación Deredez-Víctimas de la Frontera.[3] In addition, Riaño gained access to other returnees through PROINTEGRA, a program funded by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) for the economic integration of internally displaced persons and deportees in Norte de Santander. Riaño also attended numerous meetings with officials from the

[3] Association founded by Ana Teresa Castillo, a victim of deportation from Venezuela, to provide assistance both to Colombians deported from Venezuela and to Venezuelan migrants in Colombia.

Retorno Productivo (Productive Return) program run by Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where sadly she was unable to obtain statistical information on returnees in Colombia receiving support from the program.

The main research method employed was biographical interviewing, based on life stories highlighting key events that have shaped returnees' motivations, experiences, and mobility trajectories, as well as their current and future needs and aspirations. This biographical approach is especially well suited to capturing the temporal and spatial dimensions of returnee reintegration.

In addition to biographical interviewing, Yvonne Riaño also conducted multi-sited ethnographic observations and participatory *Minga*[4] workshops (Riaño, 2015, Photograph 1), and employed the method of mental maps (Figure 1). The multi-sited ethnographic observations (Marcus, 1995) were conducted in three places: 1) La Parada (Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta, Colombia); 2) the *trocha*[5] (illegal crossing) between Colombia and Venezuela, through the Táchira River; and 3) San Antonio de Táchira, Venezuela (Map 1). At the time of the fieldwork, the Simón Bolívar International Bridge that connects Colombia with Venezuela was closed, forcing returning migrants across the dangerous *trocha* and increasing their level of vulnerability. The participatory *Minga* workshops consist in creating spaces of mutual learning where academics and non-academics jointly produce knowledge on the topic of study, in an interactive process in which research participants recount their own histories of mobility and then the group discusses each individual story. By taking part in this analysis of stories and reintegration strategies, all the participants are able to expand their personal and scientific knowledge. This promotes learning and empowerment. In addition, the mental maps provide a graphic representation of individuals' subjective perceptions (Gregory et al., 2009). This method was used to capture the interviewees' desires for the future of their small business ventures.

[4] From the Quechua *mink'a*, meaning community work performed free of charge. In this case, the *Minga* methodology, created by Yvonne Riaño (2015), refers to work in which researchers and research participants work together to jointly create scientific knowledge.

[5] Improvised path through the Táchira River and entangled undergrowth, used for the mobility of people and illegal transportation of goods between Colombia and Venezuela, especially when authorized border crossings were closed (August 2015-September 2023). However, some people continue to use the *trochas*, which are mostly controlled by illegal armed groups who charge fees to let people cross, and which have been the scene of murders, robberies, kidnappings, and rapes. The *trochas* are used by migrants who lack the identity documents required by border officials, those who seek to cross the border more quickly without waiting in line at immigration checkpoints, those who refuse to pay the high fees extorted by Venezuelan guards, and even those concealing a criminal record from the police or soldiers (EFE, 2023).

Map 1. Multi-Sited Fieldwork Locations in the Border Area Between Cúcuta and its Metropolitan Area (Colombia) and San Antonio del Táchira (Venezuela)

Source: Prepared and labeled by Yvonne Riaño based on the Google map (n.d.)

Photograph 1. Participatory *Minga* Workshop Where Returning Women Create Mental Maps About Their Reintegration Dreams

Source: Photograph by Yvonne Riaño (2019).

Figure 1. Mental Map by Susana Salgado[6]

Source: Susana Salgado (personal communication, August 17, 2019).[7]

Relevant case studies were selected based on maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990). This qualitative research strategy does not seek to establish descriptive statistical trends, but rather gain an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that enable or impede reintegration. This form of sampling is considered a valuable strategy as it enables the selection of participants across a broad spectrum of dimensions, facilitating an analysis of the research question from different angles and also generating new knowledge by way of comparison and contrast (Patton, 1990). It also makes it possible to include the dimensions of gender, migration experience, place of residence, cross-border spatial practices, and type of business venture.

The study sample was made up of 18 Colombians (14 female and 4 male) interviewed in 2019 and 2020. Most (14) have received only basic education (elementary and lower secondary education) and only four have secondary education and vocational or professional training. An *entrepreneur* is considered to be any individual who moves goods, money, people, and services through physical and/or virtual spaces to earn income, make a profit and/or pursue a social objective. The study focuses on *subsistence entrepreneurs* (individuals who create little value for themselves and others, and are sometimes referred to as self-employed) and *social entrepreneurs* (those who create value in terms of social benefits) (Ahmad & Seymour, 2008). The microenterprises (with no employees) were created by the research participants themselves and are, for the most part, informal. We use the term *informal* to describe business activities "that are not intrinsically illegal but which escape legal regulation in the production and trading processes" (Portes & Sassen-Koob, 1987, p. 31). This study includes microenterprises in economic sectors as

[6] All names used in this paper have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[7] Translation of Figure 1: My dream is to have my own home and business to give my children a better future and put them through college so they can be honorable, professionally qualified individuals. My business. Supermarket SASA.

diverse as transportation, food, handicrafts, cleaning, hairdressing, manicuring, and social support for Colombians displaced by the armed conflict and deportees, as well as Venezuelan immigrants. Because many of these businesses transport and sell goods or provide services both in Colombia and in Venezuela, they are described as *cross-border businesses*.

Table 1 shows the two types of forced return experienced by the research participants: a) violent physical deportation; and b) departure due to fear of deportation.

Table 1. Types of Forced Return Experience

Types	Women	Men	Total
Violent physical deportation. The Venezuelan government forces Colombians out of the country through physical force by police, by damaging their houses and destroying many people's Venezuelan identity documents.	10	2	12
Departure due to fear of deportation. Colombians fleeing Venezuela for fear of violent deportation.	4	2	6
Total	14	4	18

Source: Own elaboration based on interviews by Yvonne Riaño.

Table 2 presents the three types of return mobility identified among returnees as they attempt to move freely across the border and earn a livelihood. Returnees in the first group, *moored return*, live in Cúcuta (Colombia) and their day-to-day movements revolve around this city, although occasionally they return to Venezuela to sell their products and visit their families. The second group, *periodic return*, live in La Parada and return frequently to the Venezuelan city of San Antonio to visit their properties or family, and/or undertake social work. Those in the third group, *daily return*, sleep in San Antonio (Venezuela) but travel daily to the Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta (Colombia).

Table 2. Types of Return Mobility

Types	Current place of residence	Cross-border mobilities
Moored return	Cúcuta, Colombia	Perform everyday activities in Cúcuta and *occasionally* return to Venezuela to sell products and visit family.
Periodic return	La Parada, Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta, on the border with San Antonio (Venezuela)	Sleep, work and/or study in La Parada, but *frequently return to San Antonio* to check on their houses, visit relatives or undertake social work.
Daily return	San Antonio (Venezuela), on the border with La Parada (Colombia)	Sleep in San Antonio, but *return to Cúcuta and its metropolitan area every day* to work, shop, study, or receive healthcare and other services.

Source: Own elaboration based on interviews by Yvonne Riaño.

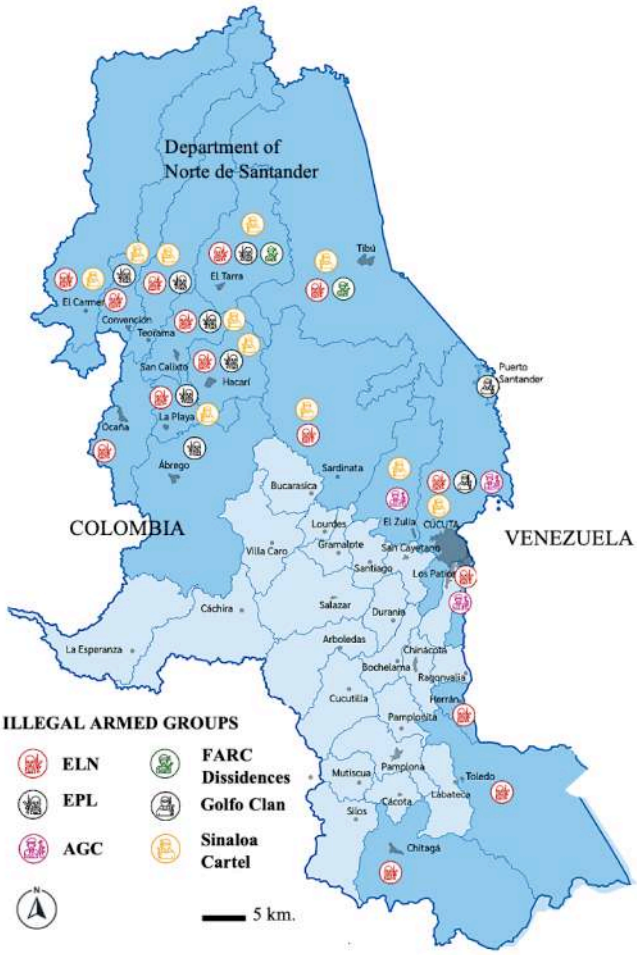
GEOPOLITICS, FORCED MOBILITIES, AND RETURN

The research participants were born in rural areas of the department of Norte de Santander, in northeastern Colombia, a long way from the country's political center (Bogotá is over 700 km away) and on the border with Venezuela. They grew up in poverty, without drinking water or basic sanitation, and with limited education opportunities. The Colombian government's inability to respond to the social needs of the department (Torres, 2015) and guarantee citizens' personal security, as well as the dynamics of local and international geopolitics, have shaped the forced mobilities of the inhabitants of this area.

The department of Norte de Santander, home to the Catatumbo region, is one of the largest cocaine production enclaves in Colombia (Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito [UNODC] y Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos [SIMCI], 2023). Illegal armed groups, including guerrilla fighters and paramilitaries,[8] have vied for control of the territory for decades, as can be seen in Map 2 (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo [PNUD], 2019). The guerrilla presence dates back to the 1970s and was consolidated in the 1990s with the expansion of coca cultivation, which also coincided with the paramilitary incursion in the area. Fighting between guerrillas and paramilitary groups have forced much of the rural population to leave their homes and seek new livelihoods elsewhere. The paramilitaries have committed horrific massacres of civilians, seemingly with the assistance of public security forces. This explains why many inhabitants of Norte de Santander are wary of and reject any police or military presence in the area (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica [CNMH], 2015a; Fundación Ideas para la Paz [FIP], 2020). Moreover, guerrilla fighters and paramilitaries have also infiltrated low-income neighborhoods in Cúcuta, the capital of Norte de Santander, wreaking terror on the civilian population. This territorial dispute left villages destroyed and displaced over 34 000 people between 1997 and 2004 (CNMH, 2015b), and 115 626 between 2008 and 2018 (PNUD, 2019), which is nationally one of the highest rates of population expulsion due to armed violence. The aspiration of returnees today, like many inhabitants of Norte de Santander, is to be able to move freely around the area without being held by any group operating outside the law (FIP, 2020).

[8] Colombian paramilitaries belong to an organization whose structure, tactics, training, and operation are similar to those of a professional army, but are not part of the official armed forces of a country and act illegally and criminally.

Map 2. Presence of Illegal Armed Actors Vying for Territorial Control in Norte de Santander



ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS ACTIVE IN THE DEPARTMENT OF NORTE DE SANTANDER

Source: PNUD (2019, p. 13), adapted by Yvonne Riaño (legend, north arrow, kilometers, geographic, and administrative names).

The context of violence in Norte de Santander has meant that most participants in this study have experienced human rights abuse and forced displacement. Table 3 reveals that two thirds of participants are victims of internal displacement by guerrilla and paramilitary groups. In addition, they have all faced deportation, whether by physical force or psychological pressure. Almost half of the women have been raped by armed groups or family members and have suffered domestic violence. These traumatic life experiences result in a context of increased vulnerability for the reintegration of returnees, in particular women.

Table 3. Types of Forced Displacement and Human Rights Abuses Experienced by Returnees

Type	Number of individuals
Internal displacement within Colombia (Norte de Santander)	11 (8 women and 3 men)
Deportation by physical violence or departure due to fear	18 (14 women and 4 men)
Rape (by armed groups or family members) and domestic abuse	6 (women)

Source: Own elaboration based on interviews by Yvonne Riaño.

At present, the interviewees live transnational lives between Cúcuta and its metropolitan area (Colombia) and San Antonio del Táchira (Venezuela). Cúcuta is connected to San Antonio by the 300-meter-long Simón Bolívar International Bridge, which crosses the Táchira River (Map 1). The two cities are separated by a border that many inhabitants see as an imaginary line. Relations between the two cities are the product of constant cross-border movement of people, goods, and capital, resulting in strong socioeconomic and emotional ties. Additionally, in recent years, the Simón Bolívar Bridge has been the point of arrival for thousands of Venezuelans fleeing their country's economic and political crisis and seeking better opportunities in Colombia and other parts of South America.

The interviewees emigrated to Venezuela in the first years of the 21st century, disillusioned by the lack of employment and high cost of living in Colombia, and the insecurity in rural and urban areas of Norte de Santander, but also drawn by the job opportunities offered by the high price of oil in Venezuela and by the social policies of the Hugo Chávez administration. Given the challenging situation in Colombia and the factors that led them to move, it is difficult to establish a categorical difference between forced and voluntary emigration; the line between the two is blurred.

International geopolitics has shaped the experiences and mobilities of these individuals in Venezuela. Initially, their hard work was rewarded with a good standard of living: they were able to set up a business and obtain housing, while benefiting from the low cost of living in Venezuela. The Chávez administration's *laissez-faire* policy toward Colombians traveling to and from Venezuela for business, residency or tourism and/or to visit family also worked in their favor. However, on August 19, 2015, the new president Nicolás Maduro ordered the closure of the official crossing between the two countries at the Simón Bolívar Bridge, following a supposed attack on members of the Venezuelan armed forces by Colombian paramilitary groups. This escalated into a persecution of Colombians living in the border area. Accused of collaborating with paramilitary groups, some 2 000 Colombians were deported, and over 22 000 more subsequently fled the country for fear of being expelled (Cosoy, 2015). Their compatriots' houses in San Antonio were later damaged by the armed forces and their occupants ousted and sent to Colombia. Many Colombians escaped through the *trocha* and Táchira River. Some deportees stayed in the Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta, while others waited in temporary camps until the situation calmed down and then they returned to San Antonio to repair their homes (El Tiempo, 2020).

Yolanda, one of the women deported shared her experience:

> Because we were Colombian, they said we were paramilitaries. And when Colombians' houses were marked with the letter T, that meant they were to be knocked down, and the letter D meant it was in good condition and shouldn't be knocked down [...] It was awful, because you could see everybody crying over their homes, the houses knocked down, the refrigerators, their things under the roof [...] We got out what we could through the *trocha* (Y. Buitrago, personal communication, June 17, 2021).

It could well be said that Colombians' experience of returning to their country has become one long trauma. While in Venezuela they had achieved personal security and economic stability and put down roots in a way they had been unable to in Colombia, on being deported they once again became victims of violence and injustice, compounded by the Colombian government's subsequent failure to provide the necessary support for their reintegration. The returnees' response to this is to use the cross-border space as a source of opportunities. The geographical proximity between Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio (Venezuela) allows them to enjoy the advantages of both locations: while San Antonio faces a shortage of food, work and education opportunities, the Colombians living there have their own homes and/or take advantage of the low cost of electricity, water, and gas, which are cheaper than in Colombia. At the same time, they return to their home country daily through the *trocha* to carry out business, purchase provisions and medicine, and avail themselves of better healthcare and education opportunities (Photograph 2). These strategies enable a socioeconomic reintegration that simultaneously involves both Colombia and Venezuela. Sadly, these mobilities constitute a real danger as they are controlled by illegal armed groups who threaten and extort passers-by. To escape this danger, the returnees say that their dream is to settle in Colombia, but the high cost of living and the lack of government support makes this impossible. This leads to the conclusion that they are in a never-ending return process.

These results call into question the conceptions of *migrant* and *return* as presented in classic studies on migration, which assume that individuals live in either their country of destination or their country of origin. This study shows that participants live simultaneously in both, as part of their daily life takes place in Venezuela, and the other part in Colombia. This renews the discussion outlined in the first chapter: the paradigm of spatial mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006) is considered more appropriate to capture contemporary migration and return dynamics. A suggestion is made, therefore, for a new perspective that is not solely focused on being *here* or *there*, or on the *beginning* or *end* of the cycle of migration, but rather explores how returning migrants engage in transnational spatial mobility strategies to leverage the advantages afforded by different places in different countries. In this spirit, it is suggested to use the category of *returning person* rather than returned person, to reflect the open-ended, dynamic nature of return. In addition, the results serve to illustrate the theoretical argument, put forward by this research, that return is not the end of a cycle of migration but a dynamic process comprising a series of multidirectional movements between different places at different times in life.

Photograph 2. Informal Mobilities of People, Goods, and Capital Across the *Trocha* Between Colombia and Venezuela

Source: Photograph by Yvonne Riaño (2022).

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS VENTURES IN THE REINTEGRATION OF RETURNING MIGRANTS

This section proceeds to examine the role of business ventures in the reintegration of returning migrants, beginning with the question of whether these ventures are set up by choice or out of necessity. Although many participants in this study dream of having a well-established small or medium-sized enterprise, most find themselves compelled to start informal business ventures due to the widespread unemployment in Cúcuta and the lack of state support, as explained by Yoana, a female returnee:

> The saddest thing is to be in good health and not have a job, because you go downtown to look for work and there isn't any, because my husband and son have been there, and if you don't have any political connections, you can't get a job. That's what Cúcuta is like. If you've got connections, you've got a job (Y. Fuentes, personal communication, June 20, 2021).

Cúcuta and its metropolitan area had an average unemployment rate of 16% between 2016 and 2020, which is considerably higher than in Colombia's major cities (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística [DANE], 2022). As a consequence of this lack of job opportunities, the percentage of self-employed workers is the highest in the country (64%). Cúcuta also ranks as the city with the second-highest rate of informal employment in Colombia (66%) (DANE, 2022). This situation is worsened by the influx of thousands of Venezuelans seeking job opportunities. It is also interesting to examine the way returnees view their business ventures. The mental maps show

that in every single case, the interviewees see their businesses not just as a means to earn money but as a way to help their families—in other words, a moral duty.

The cross-border nature of most of the business ventures examined here lies in the fact that they make use of a geographical proximity to the border, spatial knowledge of the area, daily round trips, and cross-border contacts to move around, or arrange for others to cross national borders, to sell food and handicrafts or provide transportation, cleaning, hairdressing or manicure services. Sadly, these ventures cannot be scaled up; instead, they constitute merely a means of subsistence.

Few people can receive any support in the form of financing and education from international organizations. Exceptions are the Scalabrini International Migration Network (a community of missionaries that support migrants, refugees, and displaced persons) and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ). Those that do receive this international assistance enjoy better business prospects, but are reliant on future support.

But to what extent are returnees able to successfully reintegrate through their business ventures? This study defines successful reintegration as the process by which a society provides the right conditions for returnees to use their skills and resources to meet their fundamental, existential, and security needs. The empirical results show that despite their remarkable capacity for resilience, commitment, creativity, skills, and family support, most research participants struggle to reintegrate with their business ventures. Concerning the *satisfaction of their fundamental needs*, the empirical data reveal four types of life situation faced by returnees:

1. Barely satisfying fundamental needs. Individuals who, in theory, should benefit from their international migration experience and job skills, but do not have the support of the Colombian government or international agencies, and only limited support from family.

2. Satisfying fundamental needs, but with an uncertain future. Those who leverage their international migration experience, job skills, and social contacts, and receive financial support from family, but do not have any credit support and only limited access to the education provided by the SENA, the government agency responsible for delivering this service in Colombia. This makes for an uncertain future for their business ventures.

3. Satisfying fundamental needs with potential for expansion but an uncertain future. Individuals who derive benefits from their international migration experience, their work skills, social contacts, economic support from their families (to support and care for children, for housing, a survivor's pension), some economic support from international organizations (loans, business financing), and training from the SENA. However, they are unable to sell their properties in Venezuela as they lack a residency permit or title deeds and in Colombia are unable to receive credit for their business ventures. They face an uncertain future.

4. Satisfying fundamental needs with business expansion, but an uncertain future. This situation includes Colombians who leverage their migration experience and job skills, were able to sell their house in Venezuela because they lived far from the border, had social contacts and financial support from their families in Colombia (for example, bread-making machinery),

obtained loans from international organizations to purchase raw materials, and have vocational or professional training and were, therefore, able to access the advanced training offered by the SENA. Nonetheless, their future as entrepreneurs remains uncertain due to the socioeconomic instability and insecurity rife in Norte de Santander.

As for returnees' *existential needs*, support from their families is essential in forging a sense of belonging. On top of this, many returnees struggle to settle in Colombian society and the area where they live and/or are active. This is due to the fact they face three different situations. Firstly, some of those living in Cúcuta struggle to belong and to make progress with their businesses because they have difficulty overcoming the trauma of deportation, as one woman explained:

> I think the first hurdle I have to get over is to do away with the fear by working on myself. I'm trying to overcome the fear and gain in confidence. I think what's stopping me—and even my husband, too—is the feeling of insecurity, which is like a feeling inside me I can't get past (Raquel Urriola, personal communication, August 15, 2019).

Secondly, some of those who live in San Antonio (Venezuela) but return to Colombia daily to fulfill their fundamental needs struggle to belong; they do not have a home in Colombia and fear being forced out of their homes in Venezuela, as in the past. As they become more afraid of crossing the dangerous *trocha* with every passing day, they have a deep desire to live in Colombia, as explained by Rocío Calderón:

> I've been telling my partner we should come to live here [in Colombia] because I don't want to be over there [in Venezuela] any longer [...] recently I was crossing the *trocha* with my little girl when a shooting broke out and I was scared stiff for her and everything [...] Now the guerrillas are in the *trocha* and the other day the Colombian police moved in, so I'm scared a stray bullet will land near us… Yesterday it was the Venezuelan police that moved in and there was a long exchange of shots, so it's no life there [in Venezuela] [...] But it's difficult [to settle in Colombia] because I'm still trying to get a job, but I can't find stable work because I have to look after my children [...] and here [in Colombia] life is difficult because [unlike in Venezuela] there's rent and bills to pay. But yes, I do want to move over here [to Colombia] (personal communication, August 20, 2019).

The third situation is that many returning migrants experience so many challenges in returning to Colombia that it becomes difficult for them to forge a sense of belonging in society. However, they have a remarkably strong spirit of resilience and persist in their struggle to achieve the reintegration they so yearn for, as described by Zoila Caicedo:

> I knew it would be tough in Colombia, because of the rent payments. Previously, I had my own house; it's not the same as living in a small bedroom now. But I know all this is a struggle we have to get through, a mountain we need to tear down. We must have faith (personal communication, August 23, 2019).

Lastly, *security needs* are fulfilled when individuals feel free from harm, persecution, and threat. Clearly, the security needs of returnees who cross the *trocha* every day are not easily met, as they run a constant, daily risk of extortion and death, as described by Yolanda:

> One day I was crossing the *trocha* with my kids. There was a shootout. We bolted out of there; the *maleteros* [porters][9] protected us [...] yes, they told us where to go [...] into the bush [...] but that's our life [...] we live by the hand of God (Y. Buitrago, personal communication, June 25, 2020).

Those who live in La Parada, on the Colombian side of the border, also experienced great insecurity due to COVID-19 restrictions on cross-border mobility, which caused dire poverty among Colombians and Venezuelans. This is illustrated by the testimony of a local community leader, and it is likely that the experience of other returnees living in other neighborhoods of Cúcuta was similar to hers:

> Here we don't step out the house anymore. There are many thieves. They steal whatever they can find. Yesterday I emptied the kitchen. I only left the refrigerator and the stove, because they're taking things, pots, to sell them for 2 000 or 3 000 pesos [USD 0.75] (Alejandra Cardona, personal communication, June 15, 2020).

In conclusion, the empirical results show that the concept of successful reinsertion does not apply to most of the interviewees, as they are unable to adequately meet their fundamental, existential, and security needs. In keeping with Riaño (2013), it can be concluded that Colombian returnees face high levels of dependence on family and international support—as well as dangerous cross-border mobilities—in order to survive, given the weak governance and lack of effective reintegration policies in Colombia.

One of the main challenges faced by returning migrants is the lack of effective economic support from the Colombian government, despite their numerous vulnerabilities, as explained by Valeria Barrera:

> And, well, here in Colombia, even though I'm Colombian, I receive no help. The government doesn't help at all [...] not as an internally displaced person, nor as a returnee, nor as a victim of sexual violence, nor as a single mother (personal communication, June 18, 2021).

But the problem is not the lack of institutions or legislation in Colombia to protect those who have been displaced or deported or, in the case of this study, returnees, but the inability to access support from governmental institutions. None of the participants in this study was able to obtain assistance from programs meant to support entrepreneurship or productive return (as provided by Law 1565 of 2012). Programs to provide support through financing, like the Entrepreneurship Fund offered by the SENA, require that "business plans submitted include innovative, technology-based

[9] Also known as *caleteros* or *carrucheros*, these people charge a fee for carrying goods, usually on their backs, through the border from Colombia to Venezuela, over the bridge or through the *trocha*.

components as a competitive factor to remain sustainable during their execution" (SENA, 2017, p. 3). Clearly, this approach is not well suited to the individuals studied in this paper. In addition, they are unable to access loans from Colombian banks as they lost their personal savings, devalued as a result of hyperinflation in Venezuela.

Another challenge is the lack of information, decried by many returnees along with difficulties accessing the Internet. While the SENA does appear to be effective, providing training for several of the interviewees in business management and handicraft production techniques, many of those interviewed lack the secondary education required by the SENA for many training programs. In addition, the Entrepreneurship Fund is intended for "fellow Colombians certified by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as productive-return returnees, who have completed ninety (90) hours of SENA training in courses in a similar field to the project" (SENA, 2017, p. 3). The interviewees maintain that they have neither the time nor the financial resources to complete secondary education or the 90 hours of training, given that they need to work to survive.

Meanwhile, the scientific argument that returning migrants' financial capital offers a substantial resource for their business ventures overlooks the fact that not all migrants return from wealthy, stable countries, or can use their savings and properties abroad to set up businesses in their countries of origin. The economic collapse and hyperinflation in Venezuela devalued their money. Additionally, the deportation process caused Colombians to lose the bulk of their assets in the country.

Finally, gender challenges pose several burdens for women, who must juggle childcare and paid work with the traumas caused by displacement, deportation, daily uncertainty, rape by armed groups, and domestic abuse. To cap it all, COVID-19 made survival especially difficult for the women in this research, as many informal businesses operate on the streets, which was prohibited in 2021.

THE ROLE OF MOBILITIES AND CROSS-BORDER NETWORKS FOR RETURNEES' BUSINESS PROJECTS

Lastly, we offer a brief overview of the life stories of two cross-border entrepreneurs, Edison Valbuena and Sofía Ballesteros, who describe their cross-border mobilities, the opportunities and limitations they face, and the role of spatial mobilities and cross-border networks for their ventures.

Edison Valbuena

Edison Valbuena is a 38-year-old Colombian who grew up in a rural area controlled by the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In 1992, his family was displaced when armed right-wing paramilitaries accused them of cooperating with the FARC. The family fled to Cúcuta (Colombia), where they learned to sew jeans and t-shirts and commuted daily to San Antonio (Venezuela) to work in his cousin's garment factory.

In 2007, they emigrated to San Antonio, set up a business manufacturing jeans and t-shirts that they sold in Colombia and Venezuela, and got a house in a settlement near the border. When they were deported in 2015, Edison and his family escaped to Cúcuta, but returned to San Antonio six months later. In 2022, despite having the sewing machines, Edison's family was still unable to restart their textile manufacturing business because they lacked the money to purchase the raw material and Edison was denied a loan in Colombia for lack of collateral or a guarantor.

Lacking support from the Colombian government, Edison put his garment manufacturing business on hold. He decided to use his body, experience crossing the border, and business and family networks to become a *maletero* (a "porter" through the border). Today, Edison's business activities are part of a complex transnational, informal economy on the border between Colombia and Venezuela.

Edison Valbuena's story illustrates his skills and resources, as well as the challenges he faces: he knows transnational circulation routes and has sewing machines, a home in Venezuela, and local and cross-border business networks, but lacks investment capital. His cross-border spatial mobilities and networks are the key to his survival. Edison's experience epitomizes someone with great potential who is unable to develop his business for lack of financial capital. Thus, selling his personal mobility allows him to convert spatial mobility into financial resources, albeit at great risk to his life. His mobilities are at once empowered and hindered by the geopolitics of border and conflict management.

Sofía Ballesteros

Sofía Ballesteros is a 46-year-old who left home at the age of 15, got married, and had three children. In 1993, she moved to Venezuela to get away from her violent husband and the threat of illegal armed groups. She and her children emigrated to Venezuela where they sold earrings—that they made themselves—at street markets in various towns. They settled in Guanare (430 kilometers from Cúcuta), where her mother and sister also lived.

Sofía obtained a food stall permit to sell coffee and bakery products at the Guanare bus station. She also sold Colombian products at weekend markets. She returned to Cúcuta every month to visit her new husband and buy stock. Initially, she was able to save some money and bring it to Colombia. But as the Venezuelan bolívar plummeted and the cost of living rose, it became a struggle for Sofía to survive. In 2015, she watched as the Venezuelan government threw Colombians out of their homes and deported them. Stricken with fear, she and her mother left everything—including their home—and returned to Colombia.

They traveled to San Antonio and reached the border, where they were discovered by Venezuelan guards who threatened to imprison them. They paid *maleteros* to carry their few belongings back to Colombia and guide them through the *trocha*. On arriving in Cúcuta, Sofía stayed at her husband's humble home and set up a store. The Jesuit Refugee Service, an international organization that helps victims of forced displacement, helped her by providing food and training in business management and handicraft production. Now she sells her products to her

neighbors in Cúcuta and to customers in Guanare, Venezuela, delivering them herself to a bus driver in San Antonio (at the border), who then transports them to Guanare.

On other occasions, a customer from Venezuela comes to Cúcuta to buy her handicrafts, which he later sells on at a street stall in Venezuela. Business is intermittent for Sofía, but private and public celebrations offer good opportunities to sell festive decorations. Her dream is "to have a large store with a wide range of goods" (S. Ballesteros, personal communication, June 10, 2021). Sadly, Sofía lacks financial capital, display windows, and larger premises. Loan applications made to Colombian institutions have been unsuccessful.

Sofía's experience shows how informal street trade networks have developed transnationally, and illustrates the difficulties faced by traders. Her story also throws light on the types of resources returning migrants have at their disposal: knowledge of transnational circulation and business knowledge, her husband's home in Cúcuta, and the helpful support of international NGOs in learning craftsmanship. She is able to survive, at a micro scale and with uncertain prospects for the future. Her story also shows how cross-border mobilities and networks are an asset for her business. Should relations improve between Venezuela and Colombia, she will be able to travel around more easily, which would benefit her business greatly.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research addresses some unresolved questions in the literature on return, based on multi-sited ethnographic observation conducted in the border area between Colombia and Venezuela, biographical interviews, participatory *Minga* workshops (Riaño, 2015), and mental maps with 18 Colombian returnees. The study suggests a new approach whereby return is conceptualized as going beyond the notions of being in a *country of destination* or a *country of origin*, or at the *beginning* or *end* of a cycle of migration, instead exploring the cross-border mobility strategies employed by returning migrants to take advantage of the benefits offered by different places in different countries.

We propose four dimensions to conceptualize return processes: 1) *cross-border mobilities*, examining not just individual mobilities across national borders, but also the mobilities of people's property, money, and ideas; 2) *temporality*, exploring the different points in time that make up return processes; 3) *intentions*, which focuses not just on physical return but on the intention to return to other places for various reasons; 4) the *geographical* dimension, which focuses on geographic locations, because transnational mobilities do not simply connect abstract countries, but rather specific localities.

We also argue that return experiences are *heterogeneous* in that they are understood as a continuum of situations ranging from forced to chosen mobilities. We identify two forms of forced mobility: *violent deportation* and *departure due to fear* of deportation. We also note two forms of voluntary mobility: *free will with some constraints* and *total free will*. In addition, we identify three types of return mobility: *moored return*, *periodic return*, and *daily return*.

The analysis of returning migrants' ability to reintegrate successfully with their business ventures found that, despite their remarkable resilience, commitment, creativity, personal skills, and family support, the vast majority face constant precarity. The geographical context of their return is key to understanding this situation. Territorial struggles between illegal armed groups, the absence of support from the Colombian government, the uncertainty caused by continual closures of the international border, a weak economy in Cúcuta and its metropolitan area, and the trauma of deportation all create a highly vulnerable context for their business ventures.

The principles of international organizations and Colombian law dictate that return should be safe and dignified. However, the participants in this study have been unable to recover from the vulnerability and deprivation caused by their deportation by the Venezuelan government. In Colombia there are institutions and laws aimed at providing reparation for victims of the internal armed conflict, such as the individuals in this study, but governing provisions do not include direct action to support enterprise among displaced persons or returnee victims. Law 1565 of 2012 (the Return Law) and the Entrepreneurship Fund offered by the SENA state that returnees should receive business advice and financing, yet none of the participants in our research has received any support. The guidance and credit support provided by the Entrepreneurship Fund is intended for businesses with innovative, technology-based components, which is clearly not well suited to the microentrepreneurs studied in this paper. In addition, applicants must complete the equivalent of a secondary education program or a minimum of 90 hours training. Sadly, the interviewees have neither the time nor the money to meet these requirements: they must work steadily in order to survive. Although the participants in this study are not highly educated and do not offer technological innovations, they are extremely resilient and have substantial business experience, which enables them to build livelihoods for their families, contribute to social inclusion, and create job opportunities in the border area.

The argument that financial capital gained by migrants abroad is a substantial resource for their business ventures and for national development needs to be critically reassessed (Riaño, 2022), especially in the context of the disruptive geopolitical situation between Colombia and Venezuela. Not all countries receiving return migrants offer adequate conditions for them to make use of financial capital gained in other countries. Additionally, not all migrants return from wealthy, stable nations. Gender challenges also place a special burden on women, who juggle childcare and paid work while dealing with the traumas of internal displacement, deportation, daily uncertainty, rape, and domestic abuse.

Furthermore, the spatial location of returnees can be a challenge or an opportunity. Those returning to major cities, where there are greater business opportunities, have advantages over those living in peripheral cities with weak economies, like Cúcuta. It is important to go beyond purely optimistic discourse on return and development, and conduct a differential analysis of who is, and who is not, able to use resources gained abroad, and why or why not—and then devise *differential* socioeconomic reintegration policies (Cabrera & López, 2020) to take into account returnees who are poorly educated, live in a state of vulnerability, and move between countries in

the Global South like Colombia and Venezuela. Support from national and regional governments with microcredits during the start-up, development, and consolidation phases is essential to ensure long-term sustainable reintegration. In addition, support for microenterprises must address the issue of housing, which is crucial for subsistence entrepreneurs, who are unable to afford two rental payments and use housing for both residential and business purposes. To address the gender issue, providing support for child care and education is key to alleviating the burden of women entrepreneurs and enabling them to progress. It is also essential to introduce follow-up mechanisms (Botina, 2020) while ensuring the dissemination of information, interinstitutional coordination between government actors, and international cooperation (Cabrera & López, 2020).

Employing a feminist geopolitical approach has proven useful in understanding how international and local geopolitics shape reintegration processes. The agency of the participants in this study plays a key role in recreating international borders as they deploy informal cross-border mobility strategies to overcome the immobilities imposed by the Venezuelan government, illegal armed groups, and COVID-19. These strategies are key to their reintegration and beneficial for their businesses, but come at great risk to their lives due to extortion by illegal armed groups.

Family is instrumental in ensuring businesses survive in a context of cross-border geopolitical conflict and socioeconomic precarity. Equally, development agencies like the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and international non-governmental organizations play a key role in the geopolitics of displacement, supporting returnees by providing personal security, education, and financing for their business ventures. Lastly, serious attention must be paid to the issue of brutal migrant deportation policies and practices in South-South contexts, as in the case of Venezuela and Colombia.

Translation: Joshua Parker.

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