

## Article

# Venezuelan Migration, COVID-19 and Food (in)Security in Urban Areas of Ecuador

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**Abstract:** The forced migration of nearly 6 million Venezuelans is a global issue that is transforming urban contexts, particularly in Latin America. Ecuador is the third main recipient country of displaced Venezuelans. The lack of State migration policies and the deteriorating economic situation throughout the region have had significant impacts on migrants. While food security and migration have been studied extensively in Latin America, their intersection remains under-explored. Through a systematic review and focus group research, this exploratory study analyzes the food security conditions of Venezuelans in Ecuador and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the levels of food insecurity using an intersectional approach. Quantitative, systematic review results demonstrate that demands for food assistance outweighed the planning and provisions supplied by both state and non-state actors. Focus groups results support the findings from the systematic review and demonstrate that in the medium-sized port cities of Manta and Machala, food demands during the pandemic lockdown measures were met through the direct food supply and resilience strategies, including the securing of personal loans and bartering. In contrast, in the cities of Quito and Huaquillas, strict enforcement of COVID-19 lockdown measures, reduced access to work and systematic food access and increased reliance on food assistance from non-governmental actors. This study also found that the impacts of food (in)security in the context of COVID-19 disproportionately affected women in all cities, as they offered their food rations to meet the needs of their children, grandchildren, or other dependents.

**Keywords:** food security; migration; COVID-19; urbanization; gender; displacement; Venezuelan migrants; asylum seekers; Ecuador; Latin America; intersectionality; Huaquillas; Quito; Manta; Machala; Portoviejo; resilience



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Context of the Venezuelan Migratory Crisis and Food Security in Latin America and Ecuador

The multidimensional crisis affecting Venezuela over the last decade has led to a complex humanitarian emergency characterized by serious human rights violations, widespread violence, the collapse of public services, the increase in informal working conditions, and deteriorating public health services [1]. The consequences of this crisis have resulted in a massive and continuous exodus. Two critical stages of Venezuelan migration in the region have taken place from 2014 to 2015, and 2017-to present [2]. Official estimates indicate that as of May 2022, more than 6 million migrants, and asylum seekers from Venezuela have been displaced, of which, approximately 5 million are currently in Latin American and Caribbean countries [3].

Lack of food security in Venezuela is widely considered one of the main drivers of emigration; it is a determining factor in the deterioration of indicators associated with social structures, family life, and well-being. Landaeta-Jimenez, Sifontes, and Cuenca, for example, found that 94% of Venezuelans did not have sufficient income to cover the costs of basic food baskets. According to the study, 61.9% of the adults surveyed ate two (or fewer) meals per day and had gone to bed without eating in the last three months [4].

Food insecurity, however, is not only a driver of migration. It also impacts local contexts of reception countries, marked by deep economic crises and deterioration in the quality of life of host communities across Latin America. In the case of Ecuador, poverty levels on a national scale are at 32.2% and extreme poverty at 14.7% of the total population [5]. Ecuador is the third largest recipient country of displaced Venezuelans, with approximately 513,903 Venezuelan residents [6]. According to a recent UNHCR (2021) study, 73% of Venezuelan migrants in the region are irregular-status migrants; consequently, 90% are engaged in informal activities or are unemployed [7].

A pre-pandemic study conducted by the World Bank indicated that approximately one-third of host and migrant urban households in Ecuador were affected by poverty, chronic malnutrition, child labor, or teenage pregnancies. Households with only one of these risks were more frequently found to be moderately poor (67.1% and 63.4% for host and migrant communities, respectively). As these risks converge, the probability of poverty and extreme poverty increases [8].

These conditions were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when the borders closed from 2020–2022. Levels of vulnerability thus increased for migrants, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, adolescents, LGBTIQ+ persons, as well as older adults [9]. Migrants from Venezuela face the convergence of multiple risks, earning below the poverty line with an average monthly per capita household income of less than USD 84.71 [5].

In the labor sphere, Céleri [10] found that 70% of migrants in Ecuador do not have labor contracts or social security benefits. Within this context, the employment situation of women is uncertain, characterized by working hours that are longer than those regulated by the government, and multiple jobs with low levels of remuneration and/or payments (mainly food). Lacking access to childcare, many adult migrants of childbearing age are, accompanied to work by their children. This coexists, in addition, to the performance of caregiving roles, increased risks of health conditions in women, and exploitative working conditions, which are close to those of slavery [9,11].

Within migrant populations, other vulnerable persons, including individuals who identify as LGBTIQ+ and persons with disabilities, are systematically excluded from access to basic goods and services, as well as from the labor market, citizenship rights, and support networks. In a survey by the NGO, *Diálogo Diverso* [12], only 11% of LGBTIQ+ respondents registered some form of informal income, 89% stated that they did not have stable subsistence mechanisms in place, and 8% engaged in sex work on the streets or in nightclubs.

Depictions and perceptions of migrants and refugees from the Global South have led to the widespread dissemination of stereotypes, resulting in different forms of violence, including symbolic violence, which reproduces and normalizes unequal power relations and discrimination [13]. Expressions of xenophobia and discrimination toward displaced Venezuelans are factors that inhibit the possibilities of socioeconomic integration by weakening the social fabric that permits a diverse coexistence and the processing of conflicts with host communities. Several studies suggest that levels of discrimination and xenophobia toward the Venezuelan population may exceed 60% [7,9,11,12].

### *1.2. The Multidimensional Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ecuador*

The COVID-19 pandemic had complex, multidimensional and intersectional impacts, affecting food security, income, access to education, and healthcare in Ecuador. By the end of 2020, the country registered more than 250,000 COVID-19 cases and nearly 14,000 registered cumulative deaths, which are significant figures for a country with a relatively small population of 17 million inhabitants [14].

Estimates from UNICEF's ENCOVID-EC survey (2021) indicate that in 2021, 8 out of 10 households with children and adolescents had significantly reduced incomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, 48% of households reported moderate or severe levels of food insecurity, particularly affecting rural and low-income households with children [15].

The food insecurity crisis was particularly severe for migrant and indigenous populations in cities. Indigenous populations in Quito and Guayaquil, for example, returned in large numbers to their communities, in the Sierra and Amazon regions of Ecuador, due to the lack of work and mechanisms of subsistence, including State support [16]<sup>1</sup>. Venezuelan migrants in cities also faced the lack of mechanisms of subsistence and State support to meet food security needs but faced challenges in return to home communities amid border closures and lockdown restrictions [9].

Food security was especially impacted by economic factors. In 2020, the economic growth projection for the country remained at  $-11\%$  and levels of poverty (extreme poverty) increased from 43% to 48.5% in households with children, and extreme poverty increased from 19.8% to 25.9% because of job loss or the reduction in income [17]. COVID-19 had a direct impact on the increased levels of food insecurity, hunger and poverty and malnutrition [18].

The abrupt drop in income also led to an increase in multidimensional poverty levels, as well as in child labor and school dropout rates due to the scarcity of resources and the technological gap, excluding some communities from accessing remote schooling [19].

Overall health services, including sexual health and social protection services, were another area impacted by pandemic, having a direct impact on maternal death, obstetric emergencies, and child and adolescent pregnancies. There was an increase in pregnancies among girls under 12 years of age and adolescents, during the lockdown, with increased levels of gender-based violence against girls and women, forced to stay longer in the same spaces with their aggressor [20].

While complexities of the pandemic extended to the migrant population, available social protection systems did not. The various forms of local government assistance (i.e., vouchers and food aid), for example were not designed to support migrants and their families. As a result, migrants who found themselves without jobs or social protection became dependent on support from non-governmental actors.

With these social problems, the situation for migrants deteriorated with the closure of borders between 2020 and 2022<sup>2</sup>. The land border closures contributed to the rapid proliferation of unofficial entry points and human trafficking at the border, increasing the risks and vulnerabilities of migrants, particularly women and girls [21]. In addition, many families that were migrating to other countries were unexpectedly stranded in Ecuador, generating a rupture in their life plans and projects. This scenario significantly impacted the food insecurity of displaced Venezuelans and their stories of survival in the face of adverse situations, pushing families of Venezuelan origin to their limits, in terms of their subsistence capacities.

These structural conditions, including the lack of state responses in relation to migration and food security negatively impact the perceptions and well-being of migrants and refugees, as well as the possibility of their integration into the host communities. Studies on the effects of COVID-19 measures on migrants [22,23] highlight the role of non-state actors in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Vera Espinoza et al. [24] argue, for example, that the responses to COVID-19 in Latin America from institutional actors beyond the State are resulting in new configurations of actors.

In the case of Ecuador, during the COVID-19 pandemic international organizations led the response to food security situations, making up for the absence of the State in terms of social protection, particularly in urban areas. Alvarez et al. [25] conducted a survey from July to August 2020 of 729 migrants in 13 provinces; 96% were Venezuelan. Of the participants surveyed in Quito, 76.1% had suffered from food shortages during the health emergency. However, none of the existing studies on migration (or migration and COVID-19) specifically consider the issue of food security.

The dearth of academic studies on the food security of Venezuelan migrants during the pandemic, highlights the need to investigate the relationship between intersectional factors impacting food security during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article examines the food

security conditions of displaced Venezuelans in Ecuador and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food (in)security, from an intersectional and mixed-methods approach.

## 2. Methods

This study used mixed methods, starting with a systematic review of quantitative secondary data on migrant food security, followed by qualitative research conducted through focus group interviews. The systematic review was selected to provide a comprehensive view of the subject under investigation, using explicit, rigorous, and transparent procedures [26] and mechanisms for the replicability of reviews across texts [27]. Focus group interviews were conducted to explore the findings of this systematic review in greater depth, by considering the narrative framing of the of food (in)security of displaced Venezuelans.

To conduct the review, we used a multi-level approach to identify materials and their eligibility criteria. The database of the Working Group for Refugees and Migrants—Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants of Venezuela (GTRM/R4V) was selected because it is the most consistent and reliable source of information on migrant food security in Ecuador and the Andean region. This database was selected over governmental sources of information due to the lack of systematization of data available at the country level, pertaining to migration and food security, and the living conditions of migrants [20]. As a result, record-keeping, and responses to the food security of migrants are mainly led by groups of multilateral and international non-governmental organizations, in collaboration with federal and municipal governments. Most of the reports and statistical data on migration and human mobility in Ecuador are therefore generated by these international actors that possess a wide range of resources compared with other institutions, including academia, in the areas of migration and food security in urban contexts. The information and data collected included diagnostic reports, evaluations, situational analyses, and other documents issued by the organizations that form part of the GTRM/R4V platform and the inter-agency network.

As of June 2022, the platform hosted 3436 documents, of which, 464 were generated in Ecuador. To filter out information not relevant to the study, filters were applied using semantic nomenclators, such as “food security” + “nutrition”, which also corresponded to the sectors and working groups identified by GTRM. The search was conducted for the period 2020–2022 using the advanced search categories, organized by the type of documents available on the platform. Eleven results were obtained, including reports, data reports and statistics, fact sheets, and response plans (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Resources 2020–2022. Sources: [28–35]; table created by the authors.

Resource Title	Year	Type of Document
Refugee and Migrant Response Plan [28]	2020	Response plan
Refugee and Migrant Response Plan, Revision (COVID-19) [29]	2020	Response plan
(Mid-Year Report) Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants [30]	2020	Report
Refugee and Migrant Response Plan [31]	2021	Summary
Refugee and Migrant Response Plan [32]	2021	Response plan
GTRM Ecuador: Progress Report, May 2021 [33]	2021	Report
WFP: Analysis of socioeconomic vulnerabilities of the Venezuelan population in Ecuador, March 2021 [34]	2021	Report
Refugee and Migrant Response Plan, 2021 (Mid-Year Report) [35]	2021	Report
Food Security Update [36]	2021	Factsheet

These resources documented food security levels during the pandemic and the relationship between indicators, including increases in poverty, economic vulnerability, and depletion of assets, which led to coping strategies for livelihoods and food consumption.

While these texts make it possible to contextualize and examine the food security conditions of migrants, the data in these reports are limited, as they generally focus on short-term responses of the organizations that form part of GTRM.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the statistics and in order to triangulate the findings from the statistical data, focus groups were conducted. Rather than seeking a representative sample, focus group methodology was selected to identify migrant narratives and conceptual frameworks in relation to food (in)security and compare patterns of discourse across multiple sites. This made it possible to examine the similarities and variations in the narratives and discourses. Three focus groups were conducted on Zoom. Participants were based in cities in the provinces of Manabí (Manta and Puerto Lopez), El Oro (Machala and Huaquillas), and Pichincha (Quito) <sup>3</sup>.

The focus groups (conducted in June 2022) included 21 participants—17 were women <sup>4</sup>, 3 were men, and 1 person who identified as LGBTIQ+. The physical spaces and recruitment for the focus groups were facilitated in association with international agencies working with migrants. Participants were selected according to the criteria of having lived in Ecuador during the pandemic. Of the 21 participants, 80% were in irregular situations in the country and 60% had been living in Ecuador for 2 to 5 years. Moreover, 80% of the sample stated that they had dependents within their family or in Venezuela and 67% were mothers with children and adolescents under their care.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Systematic Review Results: Organizational and State Responses to Food Insecurity in Ecuador

According to recent estimates, the number of people reported to be food insecure increased by more than four-fold during the pandemic in Latin America, representing an increase from 3.5 million to 12.3 million between 2020 and 2021 [37]. In addition, there was a notable increase (64%) of undernourished people; in 2020, this represented 59.7 million people in the region. Similarly, international organizations estimate that there are 2 million migrants in situations of moderate or severe food insecurity, of which 284,000 reside in, or are transiting through, Ecuador. The Joint Needs Assessment in Ecuador, developed by the GTRM [38], indicates that the main priorities for the surveyed families (n = 2278) were access to food (87%), employment (65%), shelter and housing (53%), and medical services (25%).

The Ecuadorian government does not have social assistance mechanisms or food programs specifically for migrants and refugees. However, some limited assistance is available through decentralized autonomous governments (GADs). GAD initiatives operate in conjunction with civil society, including international organizations, which implement programs to assist street dwellers and vulnerable populations in obtaining temporary shelter and food. The migrant population is eligible for assistance within the frameworks of these programs, with one-time or time-limited assistance schemes that range from 3 to 7 days <sup>5</sup>. Although migrants are widely considered to make up a large portion of the national population who are at risk of homelessness, the data and scope of the situation are insufficiently documented at municipal levels.

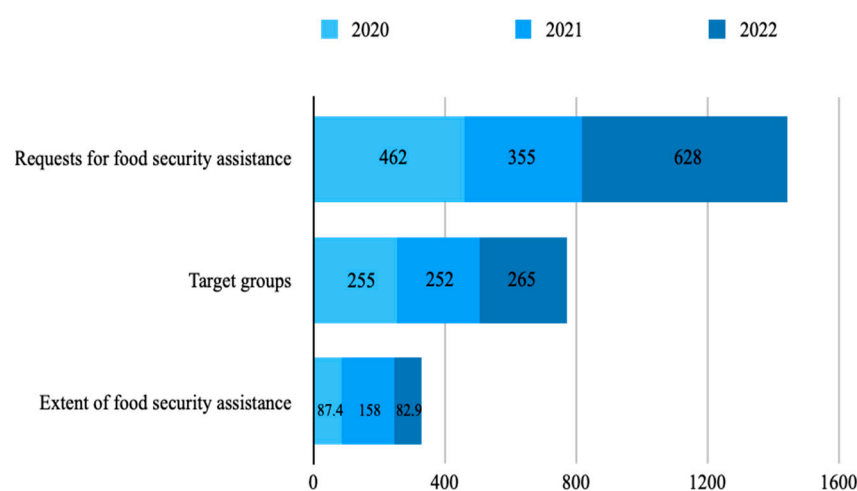
Shelters and temporary shelters mostly offer food assistance through meals served between one and three times a day, which are free of charge or low cost. Although not all institutions in the national shelter system provide food services, the 88% that do have “50% of special diets for cancer patients, pregnant women, people with diabetes and HIV” [9].

The shelter system absorbs a significant percentage of the food demands of mobile populations; however, three factors during the pandemic significantly affected access to food in the shelter system. The first factor was the reduction in the reception capacity of shelters due to the restrictions established by the national government to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Second, confinement measures prevented entry and exit from shelter spaces, and third involved extensions of stay in shelter spaces. The last two factors impacted the deterioration of the purchasing power of migrants since economically active groups could

not leave shelter facilities to carry out sustenance activities for income generation, limiting their ability to cope with the post-confinement food crisis [9].

On the other hand, prolonged stays in shelters generated an excess demand for food services, including the demand for prepared food, generating deficits in the availability of resources for people who were outside of the shelter systems. This was a central issue concerning access to food during the pandemic, considering that many migrants live outside institutionalized shelter systems.

The data in Figure 1 demonstrate the relationship between the requests for food support, the target groups, and the extent of food assistance given by international organizations; the population was remarkably uneven. In 2020, GTRM partners received 462,000 requests for food assistance, far exceeding assistance target figures. Despite the plans to meet the needs of 255,000 service users, only 34% of the food security assistance was executed. In other words, of the 462,000 requests for food, 87,400 demands were met, accounting for just 19% of the total requests made for food assistance.



**Figure 1.** Number of requests for food security assistance, number of services planned to meet the needs of the target groups, and number of food security services distributed by GTRM partner organizations (source of data: GTRM, [37,39,40]; figure created by the authors).

The persistent lack of planning for food security programs to meet the needs of migrants is linked to the deficit in budgetary allocations. While food is a basic necessity and a central demand for migrant families in transit, this sector requires the most resources each year in response to the migration crisis. The data show that allocations only cover one-fifth of the total demand.

Food assistance (as shown in Figure 1) is distributed as follows: 1. Hot meals (meals served in protection and shelter institutions and/or community kitchens). 2. Cash transfer programs (cards used for the purchase of food in local distribution chains). 3. The target population benefiting from these programs and the various types of aid available vary, based on the territory, the length of stay, the family's vocation of permanence, and vulnerability criteria [37,39,40].

According to the GTRM data, the main beneficiaries of assistance programs that receive prepared hot meals are persons in migratory transit and/or living on the street. These vulnerable groups are eligible to temporarily reside in institutional shelter systems. Multipurpose cash transfer programs favor the acquisition of basic goods and services for different groups, including food cards for families with plans for vocational permanence, who meet the vulnerability criteria identified by the organizations running the shelters. These cards are usually granted to migrants for periods of up to a few weeks to one year so that families are inserted in parallel programs for capacity building in order to self-manage their livelihoods.

In-kind assistance is scarcer and more contingent. This was especially the case during the pandemic/lockdown period in 2020, where the ability to acquire food and necessities was drastically reduced, particularly for those working in informal sectors. Within this framework, several initiatives were implemented by governmental, private, and civil society organizations to ensure the distribution of food essentials door to door, the increase in the coverage of school breakfast programs, and food reinforcement for the elderly and vulnerable groups.

Although migrant families were not initially included in these vulnerable groups that were deeply affected by the pandemic, they were beneficiaries of the distribution of food kits through targeted programs of multilateral organizations and international and local NGOs. According to GTRM statistics, food demands far exceeded the response. Despite the diversity of instruments mobilized to respond to the demands in terms of access to food rights of migrants and local populations, the gaps between the needs and budgetary allocations are extremely disparate. Table 2. reflects the estimated financial needs and funds allocated by the inter-agency working group (GTRM), the allocations received by migrants, and the demands that were not financed, demonstrating the gap between both figures.

**Table 2.** Requests for financial support versus budget allocated by the GTRM Partners for Food Assistance Programs (2020–2022). Source: GTRM, [37,39,40]; table created by authors.

	2020	2021	2022
Requests for financial support *	47.12	30.5	40.0
Funding allocated *	0.02	10.3	1.74
Requests not financed *	99.8%	75%	96%

\* in millions of dollars.

The lack of State funding to cover the food security needs of migrants in Ecuador during COVID-19's confinement measures led to coping strategies with food insecurity, such as reducing the number of meals eaten per day and prioritizing food for children at the expense of adult nutrition, particularly with cases involving mothers looking for food in the trash or asking for money in the streets [41].

According to a recent UNHCR report on the situation of migrants and refugees in relation to the protection system in Quito [41] in the Ecuadorian capital, 61% of families surveyed implemented their own coping strategies, while 39% received some support from shelters, charities, and international aid organizations through meals served or food cards. Despite the worrying nature of these data, the statistics were generated at the end of the confinement measures and in the country's capital city where access to different types of assistance may be more extensive and diverse.

There is a *lacuna* of published data on the State of food (in)security among families in urban areas during the COVID-19 pandemic by State institutions in Ecuador. However, there are indications that poverty levels and food insecurity increased within priority groups, including migrant and refugee families. The absence of data that more fully characterizes and details this phenomenon and the impact during the pandemic motivated the documentation of stories involving several migrant families in the cities of Quito, Manta, Portoviejo, Machala, and Huaquillas. The following section documents the effects of the pandemic on migrant and refugee families in different contexts, as well as their strategies for coping and resilience.

### 3.2. Focus Group Results: Food Insecurity, Protection, and Well-Being

In the focus groups, participants discussed the links between well-being and food security, in relation to the satisfaction of physical, individual, and family needs, with a focus on the well-being of children. The intersectionality of the problems associated with food insecurity is expressed in other variables, including family care work, lack of employment, or insufficient resources to meet food security needs.

All focus group participants expressed that they experienced increased levels of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic and 80% had informal jobs in public spaces before the pandemic's lockdown stage. The confinement of families in their homes represented the loss of their income through informal work.

A common theme between the three focus groups was the loss of purchasing power during the confinement measures, affecting food security. One street vendor in Quito expressed that he feared starvation more than COVID-19:

*"I was working in the street selling my stuff, when they sent people to lock me up I was more afraid of starving to death than of COVID (...) we really had a very bad time with no money and no help, I did not know what to give my children, I suffered a lot because there were days with only a little bread and panela water" [42].*

Although confinement restrictions were in place throughout the country, there was a substantial difference in the enforcement of restrictions and economic activities in large cities, such as the capital city of Quito, compared with smaller cities, where fishing and family farming activities allowed the mobilization of coping and resilience strategies, such as reducing the quality and quantity of food and interpersonal loans as well as bartering.

One informant from Machala discussed how she would trade the service of making food with her neighbor, who was a farmer:

*"The neighbor would give me a carton of eggs and I would make my desserts and my things for dinner and from there I would give him his portion; he was alone, but he had his chicken farm. So, we made do and sometimes I would cook for him, and he would give me the raw material he brought from the farm, and sometimes the neighbor at the store would give us some money and we got by" [42].*

Focus group participants from medium-sized port cities, such as Portoviejo and Manta, discussed how they met their food demands through direct food supply:

*"Here the port never stopped. It is true that there were more restrictions to go out to the street and everything became a little more difficult, but there was no lack of food because everyone started to sell something" [43]*

The participants, discussing their situations in border cities, such as Huaquillas<sup>6</sup>, and the capital city of Quito, both cities with strict lockdown measures, discussed receiving food baskets and recurrently mentioned the lack of access to State programs or stable access to cover food needs:

*"We received a food basket from the IOM, but you know that this aid is given only once. I am a mother of two girls and the support ran out in a week. I went to the government, and they told me that they put me on a list, but I had to wait for them to distribute it to Ecuadorian families first, so I never received anything" [43].*

*"The closing of the border here affected the economy in Huaquillas a lot. Luckily, we did receive a lot of help from foundations<sup>7</sup> and I think that thanks to that there were many people who did not die of hunger" [43]*

*"They [NGOs] gave us tickets to go to the shelter's dining room for lunch and sometimes there was not enough food for everyone but we shared" [42]*

The perception of well-being was rooted in the narratives around the food needs of children, to the detriment of the needs of their parents, especially mothers and grandmothers. A widespread narrative in the three focus groups involved deprivation and hunger in relation to the food security needs of children and adolescents:

*"The priority is my grandchildren, if they have dinner, I feel good, there were days when I was dying of hunger, I was almost on the verge of fainting but I would have an aromatic tea or a glass of red wine and I would go on. I always say that it doesn't matter if I eat or not, because for me the most important thing is that the children can have something for breakfast and dinner" [44].*



*when you have children, you go to bed thinking about what you are going to give them for breakfast the next day (...) without working and having nothing, there were days when my husband and I did not eat to feed the kids [44].*

*The worst thing that can happen to you is to have hungry children because they do not understand what is happening (...) I was lucky that the lady who owned the house took pity on us and did not evict us because we could not even pay the rent" [42].*

The meals of adults, particularly adult women, were often sacrificed to meet the demands of younger members of the family group; however, overall, there was also a significant reduction in the quantity and frequency of food during the day.

All focus groups participants concurred that they had reduced the frequency of food consumption and eliminated at least one meal per day during the pandemic. Moreover, more than half of focus group participants eliminated breakfast most of the time, while others reduced dinner or eliminated lunch. Some of the strategies to minimize hunger included encouraging a later wake-up time—around noon—or going to bed earlier—in the late afternoon or at nightfall:

*"Imagine, we had to decide between breakfast or lunch because the way things were, we didn't have enough for everything. As such, we didn't go too hungry, but we did have to adjust a lot" [42].*

Finally, for the families, access to food became a bargaining chip in situations of significant economic precariousness. Several focus group participants performed different unpaid jobs and received food in exchange—often in poor conditions, expired, or unfit for consumption. The focus group results coincide with the results of a recent UNHCR report (2022), which found that some non-governmental organizations, in exchange for certain tasks, provide food for free or at a symbolic price. However, migrants did not always receive what they agreed upon or they received food in poor condition, endangering their health and that of their families [41].

In addition, the sale of personal items or household goods was a main coping strategy during COVID-19 for participants. All participants agreed that they had to sell their goods to buy food.

Although the focus group data are exploratory and limited by their lack of generalizability, the results provide a systematic and rich description of the challenging conditions and food insecurity, as well as resilience strategies of Venezuelan migrants in urban contexts during COVID-19 crisis. The focus groups data also demonstrated that the food security needs exceeded the support received by governmental or non-governmental actors.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from the systematic literature review are supported by the focus group narratives, demonstrating the significant gaps between food security requests versus available assistance to migrants during the COVID-19 crisis. This exploratory study, while limited in scope, highlights several of the main challenges Venezuelans in urban areas in Ecuador faced in terms of food security during COVID-19. In all the focus groups informal work and precarious incomes resulted in a drastic reduction in the possibility of income and food security during confinement.

It is important to note that the experiences of food insecurity were not homogeneous or linear in their trajectories in urban settings in Ecuador. Differences were identified in the urban contexts and varied according to the enforcement levels of confinement measures in each of the cities in this study. In port cities, such as Machala and Portoviejo, productive schemes involving family agriculture, fishing, and other production activities demonstrated more successful dynamics in meeting the social and food security demands of migrants. In the cities of Huaquillas, and the capital city of Quito, higher levels of assistance from governmental and international organizations were evident but fell short of meeting the food security needs identified in both the quantitative and qualitative data.

While our results concur with Vera Espinoza et al. [24], that migrants in Ecuador are generally excluded from social protection schemes and that there are changes in the configurations in terms of social protection, with International organizations increasingly taking over responsibilities in the absence of the State. Our findings, however, underscore how the actions taken are falling short in all counts when it comes to meeting the food security needs of Venezuelan migrants in urban context in Ecuador.

The focus groups, demonstrate, however, a wide range of resilience and survival strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included prioritizing the well-being and food security of children and adolescents and included selling personal goods and family belongings as well as acquiring debts, personal loans, and bartering to meet food security needs.

Access to food during COVID-19 became a transactional mechanism for several families who, in exchange for performing different types of work, received food. As reflected in other research [41], this mechanism constitutes, in many cases, increased levels of precarity and leads to the exploitation, without meeting the conditions required for safe and sustainable food security.

Finally, the impact of food (in)security in the context of COVID-19 and its disproportionate effects on women requires further academic attention. Across the focus groups, in all the cities in the study, women shared narratives of giving away their food rations to meet the needs of their children and grandchildren. For many women, their sense of well-being in the context of urban food security was related to satisfying the demands of their dependents, rather than their own.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The quantitative data used in this research is available in the references cited. Qualitative data from the focus groups are not available not publicly available due to confidentiality obligations towards the study participants. No names have been used in the paper to respect these obligations. The data presented in this paper is part of a larger study, in which other outputs are still under development.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Indigenous populations in Ecuador, according to Tuaza Castro (2020), were marginal-ized and impacted by COVID-19, yet demonstrated a great degree of resilience in their response to COVID-19, by tapping into local, regional, and national networks, and re-vitalizing the use of ancestral medicine.
- <sup>2</sup> Land borders remained closed from 16 March 2020, for a period 20 months in the case of the Ecuador-Colombian land border and 23 months in the case of Ecuador's land border.
- <sup>3</sup> According to the last census data (2010), Quito had a population of 1.6 million people, Manta 217,553, Machala 231,260, and Puerto Lopez 206,682 Huaquillas, 47,700.
- <sup>4</sup> The disproportionate representation of women is related to the criteria set by interna-tional organizations, which prioritize programs for migrant women and other vulnera-ble groups within Ecuador and Latin America.

- <sup>5</sup> For example, see Patronato San José, of the Metropolitan Council of Quito, which from January to June 2022 provided 13,871 services to nationals and foreigners in street situations. Available at: <https://www.patronato.quito.gob.ec/patronato-en-datos/> (accessed on 21 October 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> The population of Huaquillas according to the last available census data in 2010: 47,706.
- <sup>7</sup> The term foundation was generally used by participants to refer to local non-governmental organizations.

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