

## Consequences of USAID Cuts on Humanitarian Response in Colombia

Since mid-2019, ZOA worked in Colombia to support Venezuelan migrants and Colombian host communities affected by displacement and poverty. These migrants, often travelling from Venezuela through Colombia towards the north and south, were vulnerable: they lacked food, hygiene, security and shelter. With our USA funding, ZOA implemented a **5 million USD project for migrants on the move**, providing food and hygiene items, protection services, and safe transport options for families that were travelling across the country.

When PRM (Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration) and USAID abruptly stopped their funding in 2025, ZOA was forced to close all operations in Colombia, including projects financed by UNICEF and World Food Program. This left **thousands of migrants and host community members without access to food, water, sanitation, and protection services across five regions in Colombia**. Families in transit were left to walk for weeks without support, facing hunger, violence, and exploitation. At the same time, more than 120 national staff members—Colombians deeply committed to serving their own communities—lost their jobs overnight.

The most visible consequence of our phase-out is the absence of **safe transport for migrants crossing Colombia by foot**. Families now walk along highways and mountain passes for weeks, exposed to extreme weather, accidents, hunger, and violence. Children and adolescents are at particular risk of recruitment by armed groups or sexual exploitation.

What is at stake is not just numbers, but people in need. Behind every statistic is a mother carrying her baby, a teenager walking alone, or a father who has lost hope and is crossing the Darién jungle with his family. When USAID funding ended, their journeys became longer, hungrier, and far more dangerous.

As a Colombian humanitarian worker, I witnessed these struggles first-hand. *The day ZOA closed the office, it was devastating not because I lost my job, but because I knew that tomorrow families would still be walking—and nobody would be there for them.*

Nevertheless the USAID cuts go far beyond the closure of one NGO. Colombia is witnessing:

- **Increased Poverty & Food Insecurity** – Migrant families now depend on begging or precarious informal work, which worsens tensions with vulnerable host communities.

- **Rising Insecurity** – Armed groups are filling the vacuum, extorting migrants, controlling informal transport routes, and recruiting youth.
- **Protection & Mortality Risks** – Children, pregnant women, and elderly people walk for days without food or medicine.

Moreover, the impact of USAID's withdrawal extends beyond Colombia:

- **Venezuela's Instability** – Venezuela remains in deep turmoil, with political and economic shocks possible at any moment. If migrants attempt to return, **tens of thousands will walk back through Colombia** without humanitarian support, facing enormous protection risks.
- **Regional Ripple Effect** – Migration flows through Colombia are not stopping; they connect directly to Central America and eventually to the U.S. border. Weakening Colombia's humanitarian response places additional pressure on the entire regional system.

As former humanitarian worker for a Dutch-based NGO, I have known the Dutch government as a principled voice for humanitarian needs worldwide. In the aftermath of USAID's termination in Colombia, I believe the Dutch government has a role to play, and could make a decisive difference by:

1. **Enabling Flexible Funding and strengthening Food Security and WASH** – Support to respond quickly to shifting migration flows with programs that guarantee meals, water, and sanitation for migrant families and host communities.
2. **Investing in Protection for Children and Youth** – Fund safe shelters, psychosocial care, and prevention of recruitment by armed groups.
3. **Championing International Solidarity** – Use diplomatic influence to keep Colombia and Venezuela high on the European humanitarian agenda.

Today, Colombia stands at a crossroads. The migration flows will not stop; in fact, they are likely to grow. Without support, families will continue to walk through dangerous territories, children will remain unprotected, and armed groups will keep exploiting this vacuum. But with targeted and principled action from partners like the Netherlands, these risks can be reduced. This is not only about humanitarian aid—it is about safeguarding human dignity and the values of solidarity that the Netherlands has always stood for. By stepping in where others have stepped back, the Netherlands can help ensure that no family is left to face this journey alone.

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