



Learning from Inclusive Service Design for Migration Service Centers in Colombia

Proof of Concept

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Abstract

Mass migration can lead to population growth that outsizes social service capacity, challenging service providers, migrants, and receptor communities to maintain livelihoods and social cohesion under these new circumstances. As part of its support, [USAID/ Colombia's Venezuela Response and Integration \(VRI\) Activity](#) and its task orders [Integra](#) and [Opportunities without Borders¹](#) help stakeholders address these service challenges. This proof of concept focuses on Integra and its partners' experience consolidating social services into one-stop-shop centers. By making services more accessible in communities facing high levels of migration, *Integrate* centers strengthen livelihoods, integration, and social cohesion. Rigorous co-creation and coordination are the backbone of the centers' success — leveraging the skills, assets, and influence of public, private, civil society, and international allies across layers of Colombia's migration ecosystem. Practical learnings from Integra can inform service provision options for countries with high levels of migration in Latin America and around the world.

The Emergence of *Intégrate* Centers

Migration context. Of the almost eight million Venezuelans who have fled social, economic, and political hardship, nearly three million now reside in Colombia. They join an already complex post-conflict context in which almost seven million people remain internally displaced from Colombia's 50-year civil war and the impacts of climate change. Migrants coming from Venezuela, including Colombian returnees, often deal with challenges like irregular migration status, joblessness, gender-based violence, and exploitation. Those not registered with the country's public institutions are unable to access the support they need (health, employment, education, etc.) to gain a stable foothold in Colombia. Migrants mostly settle temporarily or indefinitely in Colombia's largest cities and metropolitan areas, where many receptor community members also struggle to gain better social services. Meanwhile, national and local government agencies face challenges in planning for and managing their growing populations.

Integration needs. As is typical of migration crises, Colombia's social service systems were unprepared for significant population growth. Colombian and international aid initially mobilized to support migrants via short-term humanitarian assistance. Faced with ongoing population challenges and more people intending to stay in Colombia long-term, the government sought to reduce immediate humanitarian needs and strengthen integration — embracing opportunities for migrant inflows to help drive growth where the armed conflict had historically driven net outflows. Colombia's political and policy choices addressed key barriers to integration (such as lack of access to regular migration status and social support) to incorporate migrants into society via increased registration, visibility, and services. The government conceived *Intégrate* centers to help put these policies into practice, and requested USAID's support. Named for the Spanish verb *integrarse* —to integrate oneself — the centers make services easier to access by consolidating previously dispersed service points, while fostering community interactions. Centers serve migrants and receptor community members, mitigating perceptions of preferential treatment for migrants — which can aggravate xenophobic fears and conflict — and supporting both groups to improve livelihoods, social cohesion, and mutual integration within communities.²

Snapshot: Before and After *Intégrate* Centers

Before. Service users needed at least several days to visit distinct providers to access regular migration status, register for social benefits, and find housing or economic opportunities. Barriers like lack of information, transportation and childcare costs, and time away from work made services inaccessible.

After. Migrants and receptor community members alike can now visit a single place that will provide individually tailored attention and free, on-site childcare. In one place, people can take one day to register for a range of services and initiate psycho-social, economic, and other support.



***Intégrate* service fair in Riohacha.**

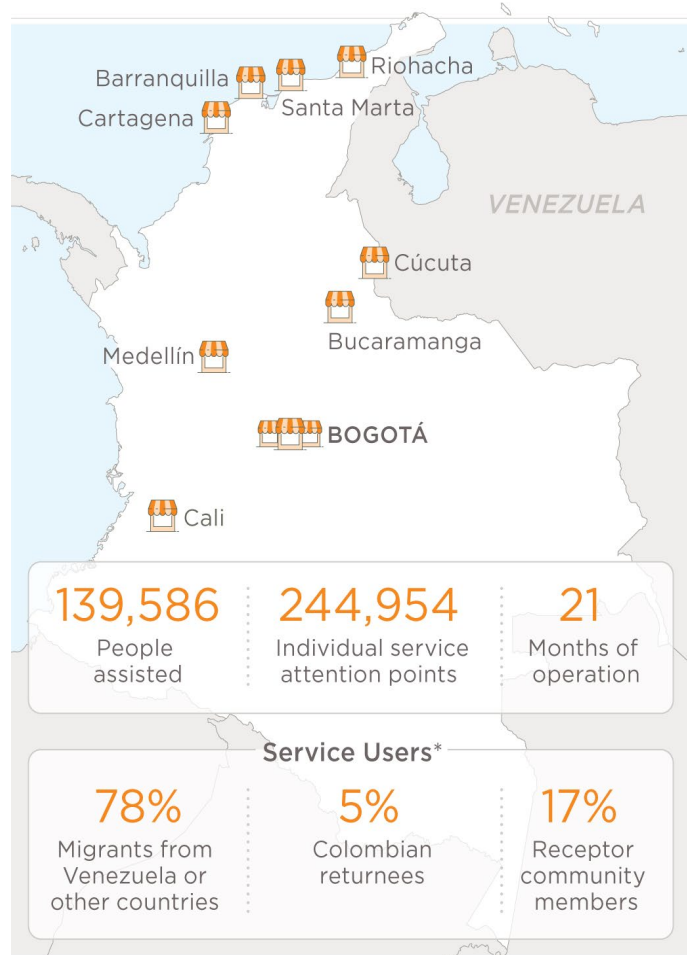
How the *Intégrate* centers work. Between May 2022 and January 2023, [Colombia's 11 *Intégrate* centers](#) launched in the nine areas of Colombia with the highest concentration of migrants (see map). Integra and partners used geolocation data to identify the most strategic locations for centers based on accessibility for target populations (learn more about the selection process [here](#)).

The centers aim to be welcoming to all. Their walls are painted with murals celebrating different cultures. They have play sections for children, lactation rooms for new mothers, and conference rooms for community organizations to meet. The centers reach out to people via social media and referrals, and host service fairs and community events with food and music. [See a video experience³ of the Cartagena center here!](#)

When entering an *Intégrate* center, visitors first see a desk where they can address their immediate needs (e.g., register migration status or enroll in school), and then meet with highly trained, organized, and friendly service providers embedded within the center. Providers use a holistic case management model to identify each service user's individual needs (adopted from [USAID's Case Management Toolkit](#)), and coordinate to design and

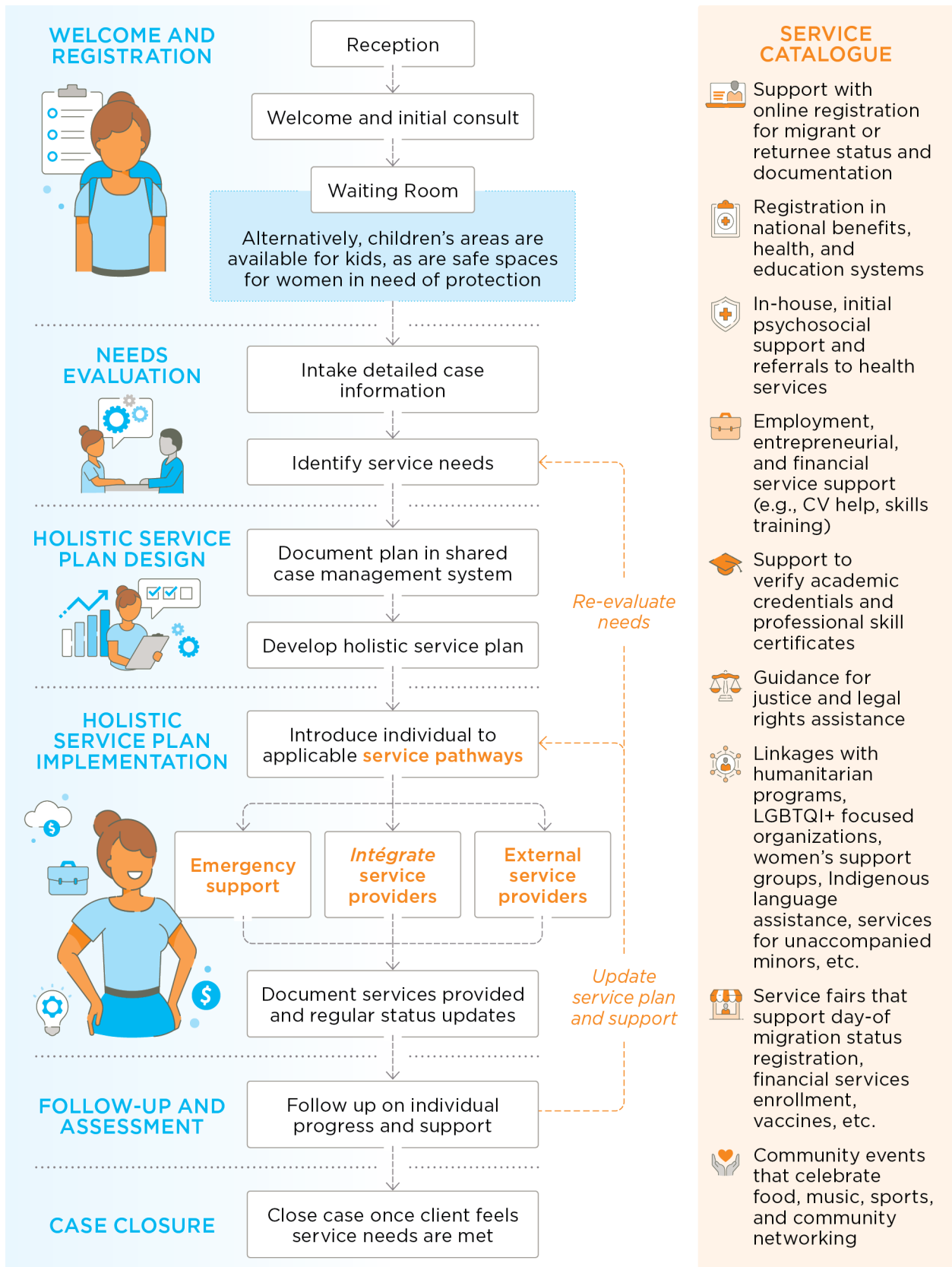
implement a tailored plan to meet those needs. This model does not stop at addressing the immediate needs that service users may raise when they walk in the door; it comprehensively looks at each person's interconnected circumstances to identify all possible interventions and walk people through their options, doing everything possible to support their livelihood and integration (see flowchart, Exhibit 2). All providers are trained in cultural sensitivity, gender equity, and social inclusion so that their care style respects and attends to the intersectional needs of users. They use a digital tracking system to coordinate and guide people between service points, avoid duplicating efforts, and manage case sensitivities (e.g., mitigating re-victimization of service users with trauma). With the Colombian government in the lead, a range of actors across sectors make this model possible, as detailed in the next section.

Exhibit 1. *Intégrate* Centers by the Numbers



*Data as of January 31, 2024

Exhibit 2. Holistic Case Management Model



Lessons from *Intégrate* Centers' Inclusive Design

Build on momentum. Each location and its ecosystem of public, private, civil society, and other actors respond differently to migration dynamics. Colombia's municipal governments had reacted in their own ways to the unexpected crisis using their existing resources. They were operating urgently, but without the information required to fully analyze migration dynamics and service needs (e.g., data on irregular migration was only a partially visible, moving target), this led to disjointed efforts with mixed results. The national government sought to use more standard, effective ways to manage the crisis that still accounted for regional differences. To support this goal, the government strategically harnessed international assistance, working with USAID through In to [Think and Work Politically](#) (TWP) — to embrace ongoing development assistance programming as an opportunity to help stakeholders operate as a more coordinated, effective ecosystem of actors.

Colombian systems are familiar with user-focused centers given the country's groundbreaking [Comprehensive Victim Support and Reparation Units](#) that have supported internally displaced persons since 2012. Building on this experience, national-level public champions had identified potential for a select set of migration-focused service centers (also with digital service access points) prior to Integra's start in 2021. To facilitate Colombian actors' solutions for migration governance, Integra began its support with a [5R analysis](#) (via focus groups and stakeholder meetings, for example) to gauge the nine priority migration ecosystems' interest in co-creating service centers, and to measure their capacity to do so, providing the national government with a baseline understanding of different municipal starting points. With confirmed municipal interest and capacity, co-creation then became a powerful tool to set up the centers with broad support. Integra and partners emdedded co-creation into phases, adapting [human-centered design principles](#) to the service provision context (see box).

As part of co-creation, Integra and public partners aligned system resources and influence to support each center. The exact makeup of partner resources, roles, and

Co-Creation in Phases

Phase 1 (Discover): Ask target service users what they need, avoiding making assumptions. Integra and national partners identified nuanced service barriers and needs, existing service portfolios, and potential resources for centers through 40 workshops with public and civil society actors, migrants, and receptor community members.

Phase 2 (Design): Based on service user-identified needs, brainstorm possible solutions and test their feasibility. In co-creation workshops with municipalities, Integra and national partners introduced a basic care model concept to guide discussions and co-design the specific *Intégrate* model, tailoring it to each mayoral office's priorities and capacities.

Phases 3-4 (Deliver, Measure): Launch the service solution and ask users for continual feedback to inform data and iteratively adapt services. Centers embed digital user satisfaction surveys that measure service quality and prior outreach. Centers review feedback monthly to co-create service and outreach updates with providers, ensuring evolving user needs are met.

responsibilities, thus varies per center based on the makeup of actors and resources per city (see box). Services in the centers also vary, depending on the local service portfolio and population makeup and needs, with providers and referral networks representing public, private, civil society, and international sectors. For example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) supported the centers' infrastructural startup and embedded its *Puntos Visibles* ("Visible Points") within the centers to coordinate efforts for migration status regularization services. While international support has been an important catalyst to jumpstart the Colombian-led *Intégrate* centers, municipal governments and Integra are working together to enable full public administration of centers in the coming years (see more on sustainability, following paragraph).

TWP Aligns Crucial Resources

Riohacha is a city in northern Colombia, where migrants now make up 29% of the population. To provide crucial integration support, multiple system actors contribute their resources to the *Intégrate* center. The mayor's office provides the building and its operations (security, cleaning, utilities), as well as support to economic services. National-level institutions provide in-house officials that offer registration and benefits support independently (*Registraduría Nacional*) or with donor support (*Migración Colombia* via USAID and IOM, and the national benefits system, SISBEN, via the World Food Program). Civil society organizations disseminate information, refer people to the centers, and provide services at fairs and events. Private sector actors host financial inclusion days and coordinate with economic services. Integra currently provides center staff and, along with other USAID and U.S. government programs, supports a range of system actors and services in the referral network.



An *Intégrate* staff member in Cartagena introduces a center visitor to an initiative that celebrates Colombian and Venezuelan cultural unity.

Enter with an exit strategy. Like many countries, Colombia's legal and fiduciary structures did not have the parameters to significantly support most migrants. The country's support to internally displaced persons has long been established in institutional policies and budgets, but is less adapted for populations like immigrants, returnees, refugees, and asylum seekers. Without a dedicated line item in a municipal budget — or legislation that requires their implementation — there is no obligation for municipalities to implement *Intégrate* centers. This reality can make it challenging for governments to fund the centers within existing budget parameters, and make the centers vulnerable to defunding during turnover to government administrations that may be less-than-enthusiastic about supporting integration efforts, despite their crucial role in societal well-being. Lessons learned in navigating these challenges have led us to the following tips to consider in other contexts.

Three Tips to Embed Local Ownership of Migration Services

Formalize commitments in writing for sustained political support. When governments turn over, the successful handover of service provision tasks between administrations should reference standing formal agreements, with spokespersons other than donors promoting service continuity. While *Intégrate* centers have relied on public partners' goodwill to honor agreed-upon commitments, better formalizing these in writing early would facilitate smoother processes to secure political support during turnover. We recommend firming up service provision roles, responsibilities, and resources from the onset (e.g., to design and manage the service portfolio, methodologies for care, case management, and operations). Written agreements do not need to be complex or standardized, as each local government may have a different preference (e.g., documented meeting minutes or memoranda of understanding).

Ensure public investment early for increased buy-in later. Formal commitments *must* start with concrete public investments, even minimally. The more public resources invested at the start (complemented with international aid in Colombia's case), the more the government will want to see a return on those resources, and the easier it will be to grow and sustain resourcing down the line. Public investment varies by *Intégrate* center and is an ongoing challenge even with support of the most enthusiastic political champions. As governments transition to fully resourcing the centers, it is easier to do so in places like Bogotá, where initial public investment included longer-term operational structures, such as use of public-owned facilities vs. rentals. Donors can best support governments to allocate sufficient resources towards service provision during annual budget development cycles (vs. facing more challenges to do so mid-cycle), via support like in-kind municipal budget specialists. For example, Integra's public finance specialist helped municipalities streamline budgets to increase center funding.

Update public mandates for structural longevity. Implementers (public officials, donors) should identify which policy and financing instruments will obligate governments to fund social service priorities, and prioritize updating those *as early as possible* to enable permanent fixtures that can withstand political turnover and financial cycles. The available structures to do so look different everywhere. In Colombia, Integra is currently working with governments to incorporate centers into local development plans, which are the north star for mayoral resource allocation. Meanwhile, administrative acts, commissions, and secretariat-level support that promote centers with incoming governments have been useful to encourage continuity. Similarly, with UN Refugee Agency support, Medellín incorporated indicators for migrants and receptor communities supported, incentivizing ongoing *Intégrate* work to meet targets.



***Intégrate* centers refer entrepreneurs to economic services to grow their businesses.**

Serve the whole community. Targeting social services for migrants separately from overall public services not only can create structural siloes, but may also aggravate xenophobia and misperceptions that migrants are being treated preferentially by governments. Politicians monitor these sentiments closely given that migration remains a polarizing topic for voters, influencing political support to include migrants in service provision. Making migration-related support available to the larger community — not only migrants — takes a conflict-sensitive approach to help navigate social frictions and broad service needs. This approach can help 1) garner political and community support and 2) foster social unity and positive narratives about migration. While Colombian government partners recognized early on that support to migrants would be humane and necessary for society to adapt and grow (whereas neglect could worsen aggregate social problems), they were sensitive to longstanding issues like [food insecurity](#) that affect the diverse populations they serve. As such, Integra and public partners positioned migration assistance as an opportunity to expand service provision for the community at large. For example, the Cartagena mayor’s office elevated *Intégrate* outreach to Colombians to achieve a near 50-50 split of its center’s users between migrant and receptor community populations. Other tactics reinforce this inclusive vision, including center murals co-designed with community members, celebrations of Colombian and Venezuelan holidays, and establishing relationships with neighborhood councils to better address community concerns.

“The human being is a glass that must be filled with love, with accompaniment, with everything that makes us human – and one finds it in the *Intégrate* center.”

– Colombian returnee *Intégrate* center user in Cúcuta

Focus on the user experience. Long service wait times, confusing information, and unfriendly providers or denial of care can be demoralizing. Positive service experiences, on the other hand, can translate into individual and societal benefits, and empower people to advocate for themselves again in the future. *Intégrate* centers aim for the service experience to enhance well-being in a way that encourages users and their networks to further engage with formal Colombian systems (mitigating barriers to entry, such as fear of deportation, stigma or exploitation). The more engagement there is, the more local governments have visibility and understanding of mobile populations and community needs, which are critical to supporting individual and aggregate integration. *Intégrate* centers foster positive experiences by taking a [human-centered](#) approach to service design, operations, and data management.

Three Tips to Foster Positive User Experiences

Use clear procedures and protocols for effective case management. Providers operating with clarity themselves can best provide clear information and guidance to the people accessing their services. To achieve this dynamic, *Intégrate* centers use clear guidelines that define providers, referrals, and their roles. The centers use step-by-step processes and protocols to guide users through services and manage robust information, focusing on integral case management rather than case resolution.

Collect robust data for informed decision-making. *Intégrate* centers use a standard operating system to manage individual and collective case details. Providers use it to track the “characterization” of each person (a detailed profile on an individual’s demographics and life circumstances) on which to base their care plan. This information facilitates holistic care in a cycle that updates characterization and service plans and allows stakeholders to understand which groups (by age, migration status, etc.) are using which services. The centers follow standardized data monitoring and reporting cycles and can also generate population reports tailored to the needs of different audiences. With differing interests and data requirements among stakeholders, tailored information enables government entities, for example, to raise awareness on the conditions and needs of each population and consider these within decision-making for governance and service portfolio improvements.

Collect user feedback for continual service improvement. *Intégrate* partners asked intended service users about the issues affecting them. After testing solutions to address those issues, they asked again. This human-centered process is critical to turn investment in service improvements into tangible impacts on livelihoods and integration. Case management should embed service user feedback loops to adapt services and processes, asking questions like, “What are the barriers for you to access support for the challenges you’re facing?” and “How was your service experience?” These questions, combined with other data, aim to identify where there were access barriers, confusion, or backlog, to adapt services to address those needs moving forward. For example, an *Intégrate* education liaison saw that many students in Riohacha maintained irregular migration status and were, thus, ineligible to receive their high school diplomas upon graduating, leading to exclusion from higher education and formal labor opportunities. As such, Integra and the mayor’s office remained flexible in deciding where they provided services, organizing service fairs in schools with *Migración Colombia* and USAID’s *Juntos Aprendemos* to bring migration status registration services directly to students, and increasing their registration and corresponding access to post-high school opportunities.

Leverage referral networks. *Intégrate* centers are nodes in the connectivity tissue between actors in a larger system. While the relevance of the centers themselves may be timebound as migration flows stabilize throughout the years and service needs and nodes evolve, the connectivity tissue itself is where strengthened service provision lies — with system actors better communicating and sharing information to improve collective impact.

In any system, a range of actors engages with community members in different ways, not all of which will be a match for their exact services. With effective referral networks, service providers can avoid operating in siloes or denying care, and better align service providers with individuals' needs (including for providers themselves — see box, right). To do so, public and donor assistance should help service providers strengthen their quality and scale of service, as well as their capacities and resources to share information. At a minimum, we recommend supporting two-way referral networks between public service providers and civil society organizations, or CSOs (see box, below, for other referral network examples). As CSOs offer specialized services to specific populations (e.g., support to people who have suffered gender-based violence), they bring established services and community networks. In *Intégrate* networks, CSOs give and receive service referrals, disseminate *Intégrate* center information, and provide goods and services at fairs and events. One CSO in Barranquilla even operates in the center to provide its range of service programs, e.g., one that supports soon-to-be parents with their specific needs. These referral networks are a win-win-win: the Colombian government strengthens the system's ability to meet and mitigate service needs by improving access, CSOs meet and expand their service agendas, and communities benefit from a broader range of services. The presence of CSOs has also supported community recognition of *Intégrate* centers as trusted, safe spaces.

Caring for Caretakers

Intégrate centers receive a range of people with different life experiences, sometimes involving trauma. As center operators offered psychosocial, legal, and human rights support and/or referrals to help people with trauma, they began to identify burnout and secondary trauma from sensitive cases. For service providers to maintain their own wellbeing and provide the best possible support to communities, they also need support. *Intégrate* centers have begun building in support to providers. Others may consider integrating this support earlier on.

Scaling Collective Impact

Private sector actors and international donors also represent significant opportunities for two-way referral processes. *Intégrate* centers communicate bi-directionally with actors like MOVii and the Cartagena Chamber of Commerce for financial service and job-matching support, and with Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration operators like Blumont and USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance for humanitarian support. Centers (supported by Integra) also benefit from Opportunities without Borders, which addresses [labor inclusion barriers](#) via partners that provide economic services, while [enhancing opportunities](#).

Showcase results to build trust. One Integra staff member described the key ingredients of *Intégrate* centers as: commitments, procedures, results, and visibility. Quality service provision should generate results that can, when showcased effectively, help build positive narratives around migration and thus influence social cohesion and support for migration-related services. We recommend using co-creation with partners to develop an umbrella communications and outreach strategy that raises visibility on migration and service provision so that it drives behavior change and trust. The strategy can establish core messaging, while remaining flexible enough to tailor different communications tools and outreach activities to distinct audiences and channels. (Consider the nuances of local governments' distinct branding requirements and messaging interests, for example, being careful to help unify communications such as shared service provision logos in ways that multiple regions and governments can reasonably use and adapt, without using symbols that associate strategies with any one administration).



Community members embrace at the Barranquilla *Intégrate* center.

While *Intégrate* centers thoroughly vet staff and other providers to ensure they are empathetic towards migrants — some being migrants themselves — institutional discrimination remains an issue at different system levels. Integra and partners' communications strategy engages secretariat officials, for example, so that they visit centers, participate in activities, and hold meetings there. Once they see these spaces, meet migrants, and see Colombians and Venezuelans interacting, their minds and behaviors around migration begin to change. The same change happens when receptor communities see that centers are also there for them and they have the opportunity to interact with new community members (under a whole-of-community service approach), fostering integration, social cohesion, and trust. Showcasing events like service fairs and community celebrations across social media and within community spaces can promote the value of inclusive service provision in migration contexts, continuing to help convince incoming governments that the strategy is worth funding.

“I haven’t received this type of care for me and my family anywhere else. I have been able to access services, but above all, I have been welcomed amid great difficulties that I have faced as a migrant.”

– Venezuelan *Intégrate* center user in Riohacha

Criteria for Success

Governments and other system actors can take inclusive service provision steps independently and adapt larger-scale lessons to smaller contexts as needed, considering other opportunities — like digital development innovations — that can increase information on services and make them more accessible to migrants and other community members. Based on the above lessons and recommendations, the following factors facilitate effective service provision in a migration context:

- *Relevant.* Stakeholders, including migrants and communities, identify solutions that respond to real barriers and challenges, and build on existing work and resources.
- *Committed.* Contributors formally agree to roles/responsibilities and resources, with at least some public investment, to foster lasting solutions with institutional protections.
- *Community- and user-focused.* Consolidated, strengthened services meet the needs of a range of service users, whose inputs regularly inform service offerings, data, and case management.
- *Collective.* System actors work together to share information and referrals that combine service offerings and support to communities, avoiding siloed efforts.
- *Visible.* Communication strategies showcase results to raise visibility and support, while fostering positive narratives of migration and stronger social cohesion.

With growing global development investment in migration-related support for Latin America and other regions, international actors can also provide support to jumpstart governments' and local systems' ability to provide consolidated, strengthened services that focus on integration instead of exclusion.

CONTACT

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To learn more about this work, check out [USAD/Integra](#) and [USAID/Opportunities without Borders](#) Facebook pages, or contact pmu-col-vri@chemonics.com.

Cover image caption: People access services at an *Intégrate* service fair in Cartagena. Credit (for all photos): USAID/Integra and USAID/Opportunities without Borders.



Integrate-supported sports bring young Colombian and Venezuelan community members together in Cúcuta.

¹ USAID/Colombia's VRI IDIQ Activity works with the Colombian government, the private sector, and civil society to support Venezuelan migrants, Colombian returnees, and receptor communities to strengthen integration. Active since 2021, VRI currently implements two coordinated, five-year projects with distinct but interconnected objectives. VRI's Migration Management Activity or "Integra," helps improve border and migration governance, subnational government capacity for quality service provision, and social cohesion, with the aim of reducing xenophobia. VRI's Migrant Economic Integration Activity, or "Opportunities without Borders," facilitates formal economic inclusion by improving access to employment, entrepreneurship, and financial services, and by strengthening the regulatory framework.

² We understand integration as a gradual, two-way process of adaptation between migrants (including returnees) and receptor communities. Integration develops as migrants reach sufficient levels of economic solvency, psychosocial wellbeing, civic participation, and social stability, and as migrants and receptor communities mutually adapt and develop cultural understanding. Integration facilitates migrants in achieving higher degrees of resilience, self-sufficiency, empowerment, social cohesion, and control of their lives within their new communities.

³ For mobile access to the Cartagena video, use this QR code:

