

An Exploratory Study of the Food Security of Displaced Venezuelans in Ecuadorian Cities During COVID-19

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Abstract

The displacement of over 7 million Venezuelans is reconfiguring urban contexts in Latin America. Ecuador is the third largest receiving country for Venezuelan migrants. The absence of state migration policies combined with the worsening economic situation across the region has had a significant impact on migrant food security. Although food security and migration have been studied extensively in Latin America, their intersectional relationships remain under-researched. This paper draws on a systematic review and focus group research to analyze the food security conditions of displaced Venezuelans in urban contexts in Ecuador and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the levels of migrant food insecurity, from an intersectional approach. Our results show that in the cities of Quito and Huaquillas, food demands during the lockdown periods were met through direct food supply and coping strategies, while in the large and border cities in Ecuador, the effects of economic shortages and lack of systematic food access were more marked. Our study also found that food (in)security disproportionately impacted women migrants in all cities during the COVID-19 pandemic, who were compelled to share their food rations to meet the needs of children, grandchildren, and other dependants in their households.

Keywords

food security, Venezuelan migrants/refugees, COVID-19, urban areas, gender, Ecuador

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Cover Photo

Venezuelan refugee Deisy Rojas with her children Deric and Eithan in her apartment in downtown Quito.

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Introduction

The context of Venezuelan migratory crisis and food security in Latin America and Ecuador

The multidimensional crisis that has affected Venezuela during the last decade has led to the emergence of a complex humanitarian emergency, characterized by serious human rights violations, widespread violence, collapse of public services, increase of informality, and worsening of public health services (Zambrano-Barragán et al. 2021). A major consequence of this crisis has been a massive and continuous exodus, occurring in two critical stages between 2014-2015 and from 2017 up to the present time (Vivas & Páez 2017). Official estimates indicate that by May 2022, more than 6 million refugees, migrants and asylum seekers from Venezuela were in different countries of the world, of which approximately 5 million were in various countries of Latin America and Caribbean (R4V 2022).

The lack of food security in Venezuela has been widely considered as one of the main drivers for emigration. Food insecurity is also a core aspect in the deterioration of individual, family, or household and social well-being. For example, Landaeta-Jimenez et al (2018) found that 94% of Venezuelans did not have sufficient income to cover the cost of a basic food basket. 61.9% of the adults surveyed reported eating two or fewer meals a day and having gone to bed without eating during the last three months.

However, food insecurity is not simply a driver of migration. It is a key feature of local contexts marked by deep economic crisis and the deterioration in the quality of life of host communities across Latin America. In the case of Ecuador, poverty levels at the national level stand at 32.2% and extreme poverty at 14.7% of the total population (INEC n.d.). Ecuador is the third largest recipient country of displaced Venezuelans in the region, with approximately 513,903 migrant/refugee residents (R4V n.d.). According to a recent UNHCR (2021) study, 73% of Venezuelan migrants in the region are irregular migrants and, consequently, 90% are engaged in informal activities or are unemployed (UNHCR-ACNUR 2021). A pre-pandemic study published by the World Food Program indicates that approximately one third of host and migrant urban households in Ecuador were affected by poverty, chronic malnutrition, child labour or teenage pregnancy. 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 (WFP 2021).

These conditions were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of borders with neighboring countries during 2020. Levels of vulnerability thus increased for migrants, and other marginal groups, including women, children, adolescents, LGBTIQ+ persons as well as the elderly (Martens et al 2021). Migrants from Venezuela faced multiple convergences in terms of risks, earning below the poverty line with an average monthly per capita household income of less than USD 84.71 (INEC n.d.).

Regarding their employment and labour force participation, Céleri (2020) found that 70% of migrants in Ecuador do not have formal labour contracts or social security benefits. The labour situation of women migrants is especially precarious, with working hours that often exceed those regulated by the government. Many engage in multiple jobs with low levels of remuneration and/or payments in kind, mainly consisting of food. Due to the lack of access to childcare, many of the migrant adults of childbearing age are accompanied by their children who are minors. Productive activities operate simultaneously with their caregiving roles leading to increased risks of health conditions in migrant women and acceptance of working conditions that are close to slavery (Martens et al. 2021, Rivero 2019). Within migrant populations, other vulnerable persons, such as LGBTIQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities, are systematically excluded from access to basic goods and services, as well as from the labour market, citizenship rights and support networks. In a survey by the NGO, *Diálogo Diverso* (2020), only 11% of LGBTIQ+ respondents registered some form of informal income, whereas 89% stated that they did not have stable subsistence mechanisms in place, and 8% engaged in sex work on the streets or in nightclubs.

Popular negative views associated with the figure of migrants from the global south generate the widespread dissemination of stereotypes exposing migrants to different forms of violence, including symbolic violence, which consists of reproducing and normalizing unequal power relations and discrimination (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Expressions of xenophobia and discrimination towards displaced Venezuelans inhibits the possibilities of their socioeconomic integration and weakens the social fabric that allows coexistence in diversity and the easing of conflicts with host communities. Several studies suggest that a majority of Ecuadorians hold xenophobic views about Venezuelan migrants and refugees (*Diálogo Diverso* 2020, Martens et al. 2021, Rivero 2019, UNHCR-ACNUR, 2021).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador

The COVID-19 pandemic had complex and multidimensional impacts, especially in relation to incomes, access to education and overall healthcare in the Ecuadorian context. By the end of 2020, the country registered more than a quarter of a million COVID-19 cases and nearly 14,000 registered cumulative deaths, alarming figures for a country with a relatively small population of 17 million inhabitants (World Bank 2021). Estimates from UNICEF's ENCOVID-EC survey (2021) indicate that in 2021, 8 out of 10 households with children and adolescents had significantly reduced their income. 48% of households reported moderate or severe levels of food insecurity, which particularly affected households with children, rural and low-income strata households (UNICEF 2020). Increased levels of food security were especially marked for migrant and indigenous populations in the cities. Indigenous populations in Quito and Guayaquil, for example, returned en masse to their communities because of lack of work, mechanisms of subsistence and state support (2020).

Economic growth projections for the country by 2020 were at -11% and levels of poverty and extreme poverty expected to rise from 43% to 48.5% in households with children and extreme poverty from 19.8% to 25.9% because of large-scale loss of employment and income (Tuaza Castro 2020). Rising food insecurity in the context of COVID-19 had a direct impact on increased levels of hunger and poverty, contributing to a vicious circle involving the pandemic, food insecurity and malnutrition (OECD 2020). Abrupt declines in income for a significant segment not only led to an increase in multidimensional poverty levels, but also a rise in child labour and school dropout rates. Due to the scarcity of resources and technological gap, some communities were not able to access remote schooling (Gavilanes et al. 2021).

Health services, including sexual-health services, were also adversely impacted during the pandemic, with a direct negative impact on maternal death, obstetric emergencies and pregnancy in adolescents (MSP-IOM 2022, OCHA 2020). During lockdown, increased levels of domestic violence and gender-based violence were witnessed (MSP-IOM 2022).

With these social problems, the situation for migrants deteriorated further with the closure of land and air borders between 2020 and 2022. The closure of land borders contributed to the rapid proliferation of unofficial entry points and human trafficking on the border, increasing the risks and vulnerabilities of persons in mobility, particularly women and girls (CDH 2021). In addition, many families that were in transit were stranded in Ecuador, generating a rupture in their life plans and projects. This scenario significantly worsened the state of food insecurity of people in mobility and their stories of survival in the face of adverse situations, pushing families of Venezuelan origin to their limits, in terms of the subsistence capacities.

These structural conditions, including the weak, ineffective response of the Ecuadorian state to both migration and food security has negatively impacted the perceptions and wellbeing of migrants and refugees, and possibilities of their integration in the host communities. Studies on the effects of COVID-19 measures on migrants (Brumat and Finn 2022, Herrera 2021) underscore the crucial role of non-state actors in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Vera-Espinosa et al. (2021) argue that the responses to COVID-19 in Latin America from institutional actors beyond the state are resulting in new configurations of actors.

In Ecuador, international organizations have led the response to food security during the pandemic, making up for the absence of the state in terms of social protection, particularly in urban areas. Alvarez et al. (2021) conducted a survey from mid-2020 of 729 migrants in 13 provinces, of which 96% were Venezuelans. Of the participants surveyed in Quito, two-thirds (76.1%) had faced food shortages during the pandemic. It is important to note, however, that 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 points to the need to

investigate the relationship between intersectional factors impacting food security during COVID-19. Using an intersectional approach, this paper examines the food security conditions of Venezuelans in Ecuador and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their levels of food insecurity.

Methods

This research used a mixed methods approach, starting with a systematic review of quantitative secondary data to analyze the situation of migrant food security, followed by qualitative research conducted through focus group interviews. The systematic review was selected to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject under investigation, using explicit, rigorous, and transparent procedures (Cooper 2017), and mechanisms for the replicability of reviews across texts (Tranfield et al. 2013). Focus group interviews were conducted in order to explore in greater depth the findings of the systematic review, by considering narrative framing of the problem of food insecurity from the narratives and repertoires of actions of displaced Venezuelans, including vulnerable groups.

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. This platform provides the most consistent and reliable source of information on migrant food security in Ecuador and the broader 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 (MSP-IOM 2022). A group of multilateral and international organizations, in collaboration with federal and municipal governments, have largely led record-keeping and responses to food security of migrants. Most reports and statistical data on migration, human mobility, and food security in urban contexts have thus been generated by these international actors, because of their wider resources and institutional frameworks of greater range and impact than other institutions, including academia. 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 inter-agency network.

As of June 2022, the platform 3436 hosted 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 correspond to the sectors and working groups identified by GTRM. The search was conducted for the period between 2020 and 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).

These resources documented food security levels during the pandemic period and the relationship between indicators, including increases in poverty, economic vulnerability, and depletion of assets, resulting in 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. This is because 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 to triangulate 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. Key migrant reception cities from three provinces in different regions of Ecuador were selected. This made it possible to compare similarities and variations in the narratives and discourses across regions. Three focus groups were conducted on Zoom with participants based in the cities of each of the three provinces of Manabí (Manta and Puerto Lopez), El Oro (Machala and Huaquillas) and Pichincha (Quito). According to the last census data (2010), the population of these areas is as follows: Quito (1.6 million), Manta (217 553), Machala (231 260), Puerto Lopez (206,682), and Huaquillas (47,7000).

Conducted in June 2022, the focus groups included 21 participants, of whom 17 identified as women, 3 men and 1 person identified as LGBTQ+. The physical spaces and recruitment for focus groups were facilitated in association with international agencies working with migrants. 80% of the participants were in irregular situations and 60% had been living in Ecuador for 2 to 5 years. Moreover, 80% of the sample confirmed that they had dependants within their family or in Venezuela and 67% were mothers with children and adolescents under their care and responsibility. The greater representation of women participants is tied to the gender-responsive criteria set by the international agencies, prioritizing programs for migrant women and other vulnerable groups within the Latin American region.

Results

Systematic review results: Organizational and state responses to food insecurity in Ecuador

The number of food insecure populations has increased more than fourfold since the onset of the pandemic in Latin America (R4V 2020). This represents a growth from 3.5 million to 12.3 million people between 2020 and 2021. In addition, there was a notable increase (64%) of undernourished people, which in 2020 represented 59.7 million in the region. International organizations estimate that 2 million migrants were in a situation of moderate or severe food insecurity, of which 284,000 resided in or were transiting through Ecuador. The joint needs assessment for mobile populations in Ecuador, developed by GTRM (R4V 2020), indicated that the priority requirements of the surveyed family groups (n=2,278) were access to food (87%), employment (65%), shelter and housing (53%), and medical services (25%).

The Ecuadorian State does not have social assistance mechanisms or food programs directed specifically at migrants and refugees. However, some limited assistance is available through the 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 to be assisted within the framework of these programs, with one-time or time-limited assistance schemes that range from 3 to 7 days. For example, the Patronato San José shelter of the Metropolitan Council of Quito provided 13,871 services to nationals and foreigners in street situations between January and June 2022.

Although migrants are widely considered to make up a large segment 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 by serving between one to three meals daily free of charge or at low cost. Although not all institutions in the national shelter system provide food services, the 88% that do offer half of the

| Resource title | Year | Type of document |
|--|------|------------------|
| Refugee and Migrant Response Plan | 2020 | Response plan |
| Refugee and Migrant Response Plan, Revision (COVID-19) | 2020 | Response plan |
| (Mid-Year Report) Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants | 2020 | Report |
| Refugee and Migrant Response Plan | 2021 | Summary |
| Refugee and Migrant Response Plan | 2021 | Response plan |
| GTRM Ecuador: Progress Report- May 2021 | 2021 | Report |
| WFP: Analysis of socioeconomic vulnerabilities of the Venezuelan population in Ecuador, March 2021 | 2021 | Report |
| Refugee and Migrant Response Plan. 2021 (Mid-Year Report) | 2021 | Report |
| Food Security Update | 2021 | Factsheet |

Source: <https://www.r4v.info/es>, table created by the authors

special diets for cancer patients, pregnant women, people with diabetes and HIV (Martens et al. 2021).

The shelter system absorbs a significant percentage of the food demands of the mobile population. However, the pandemic significantly disrupted access to food through this system due to three main factors. The first factor was the reduction of the shelters' reception capacity due to the public health measures undertaken by the national government to prevent the contagion and spread of COVID-19. Second, confinement measures prevented the entry and exit from the shelter spaces, and the third factor involved the extension of the periods of stay in the shelter space. The last two factors directly led to the deterioration of purchasing power of migrants, since economically active groups could not leave the shelter facilities to carry out subsistence activities for income generation, limiting their ability to cope with the post-confinement food crisis (Martens et al. 2021).

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

The data in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the requests for food support, target groups and the extent of food assistance provided by international cooperation organizations. The population is remarkably uneven. In 2020, GTRM partners received 462,000 requests for food assistance, far exceeding assistance target figures. Despite plans to meet the needs of 255,000 service users, only 34% of this 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.

The persistent lack of planning for food security programs to meet the needs of migrants is linked to the deficit in budgetary allocations. Food is a necessity and a central de-

mand for migrant families in transit. This sector requires the greatest resources each year in response to the migration crisis. However, data shows that allocations cover only one-fifth of the total demand.

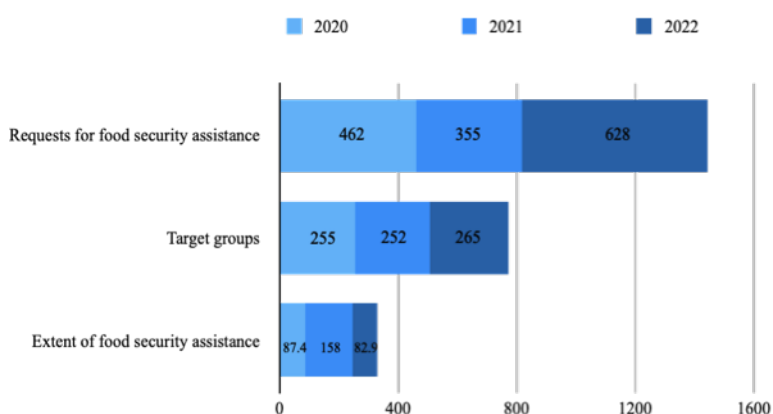
Food assistance (as depicted in Figure 1) is distributed as follows: 1. Hot meals (meals served in protection and shelter institutions and/or community kitchens), 2. Cash Transfer Programs (cards for the purchase of food in local distribution chains); and 3. The target population benefiting from these programs and the various types of available aid vary, based on the territory, length of stay, the families' vocation of permanence and vulnerability criteria (GTRM 2020, 2021, 2022).

According to the GTRM data, the main beneficiaries of assistance programs that receive prepared hot meals are migrants in transit and homeless migrants living on the streets. These vulnerable groups and families are eligible to temporarily reside within the institutional shelter system. Multipurpose cash transfer programs support the acquisition of basic goods and services for different groups, including food cards aimed at families with plans for vocational permanence, who meet the vulnerability criteria identified by organizations operating 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 to self-manage their livelihoods.

In-kind assistance is scarcer and more contingent. This was especially the case during the lockdown period in 2020, when migrants' ability to acquire food and necessities was drastically reduced, particularly for those working in the informal sector. Within this framework, several initiatives were implemented by governmental, private, and civil society organizations to ensure the distribution of food essentials door to door, increase 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 deeply affected by the pandemic, they

Figure 1: Number of requests for food security assistance, number of services planned to meet the needs of target groups and number of food security services distributed by GTRM partner organizations



Source of data: GTRM 2020, 2021, 2022, figure created by the authors

were beneficiaries of the distribution of food kits through targeted programs of multilateral organizations and international and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). According to GTRM statistics, food demands far exceeded this 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 needs and budgetary allocations are extremely disparate. Table 2 shows the estimated financial need, funds allocated by the inter-agency working group (GTRM), allocations received by migrants, and demands that were not financed, demonstrating the gap between both figures.

The lack of state funding to cover the food security needs of migrants in Ecuador during the COVID-19 confinement measures, led to an increase in coping strategies for food insecurity, such as reducing the number of meals eaten per day, prioritizing food for children at the expense of adult nutrition, over the food and nutritional intake of adults (R4V 2021). This was especially the case for mothers who looked for food in the trash and asked for money in the streets.

The UNHCR report Monitoring the Protection Situation of Refugees and Others in Human Mobility in Quito (R4V 2021) reveals that 61% of families surveyed in the Ecuadorian capital adopted these coping strategies. 39% received some support from shelters, charities and international cooperation organizations through meals served or food cards. It is important to note, however, that these statistics were generated at the end of confinement measures and in the country's capital city where the conditions of access to different types of assistance may be more extensive and diverse in Quito than other parts of the country.

There is a dearth of published data by state institutions in Ecuador on the state of food (in) security of families in urban contexts during confinement and the COVID 19 pandemic at large. However, there are some indications that poverty levels and food insecurity increased within priority groups, among them migrant and refugee families. It is this absence of data which motivated our qualitative research to examine the experiences of several displaced families during the pandemic in the cities of Quito, Manta, Portoviejo, Machala, and Huaquillas. Focus groups also make it possible to document the effects of the pandemic on families in their different contexts, as well as their strategies for coping and resilience.

Focus group results: Food insecurity, protection and well-being

The focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish, and we have translated all quotations in this paper. During the focus groups, participants discussed the links between well-being and food security, in relation to the satisfaction of physical, individual/personal and family needs, with a focus on the well-being of children. The intersectionality of various problems associated with food insecurity are 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. Eighty percent possessed informal jobs in public spaces before the lockdown stage of the pandemic. The confinement of the families in their homes represented the loss of their income through informal work.

A common theme across the three focus groups was the loss of purchasing power during the confinement measures. One street vendor in Quito said that he feared starvation more than the Covid-19 infection:

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.

Although confinement restrictions were undertaken 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. In smaller cities, fishing, family farming activities and strategies such as bartering were important components of the coping and resilience mechanisms. One informant from Machala discusses how she would trade the service of cooking food with her neighbor who was farmer:

The neighbour 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 what 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.

| | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---|-------|------|------|
| Financial need* | 47.12 | 30.5 | 40.0 |
| Funds allocated* | 0.02 | 10.3 | 1.74 |
| Requests not financed | 99.8% | 75% | 96% |
| * in millions of dollars | | | |
| Source: GTRM 2020, 2021, 2022; table created by the authors | | | |

Focus groups participants from medium-sized port cities, such as Puerto Viejo 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.

In border cities such as Huaquillas and the capital city of Quito, participants were more dependent on food donations and repeatedly mentioned the lack of 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.

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.

The perception of well-being of focus group participants was rooted in narratives centring on the food needs of children, to the detriment of the needs of their parents, especially mothers and grandmothers. A common narrative in the three focus groups involved deprivation and hunger to meet 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.

The food security of adults, particularly adult women, was often sacrificed to meet the demands of the younger members of the family group. There was also a significant reduction overall in the quantity and frequency of food during the

day across these groups. All focus group participants said that they had reduced the frequency of food consumption and eliminated at least one meal per day during the pandemic. 70% of focus group participants reported eliminating breakfast most of the time, while 20% reduced dinner and 10% eliminated lunches. 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.

Finally, for the families, access to food became a bargaining chip in a situation of significant economic precariousness. Several focus group participants performed different unpaid jobs and received food in exchange. The food they received was often in poor condition, expired or unfit for consumption. The focus groups results coincide with the findings of a recent UNHCR (2022) report, which reaches a similar conclusion:

There are non-governmental organizations that, in exchange for certain tasks, provide food for free or at a symbolic price. However, migrants do not always receive what they agreed on or they receive food in poor condition that endangers their health and that of their families (translation by the authors) (p. 21).

In addition, the sale of personal items or household goods was a main coping strategy during COVID-19 for the people contacted. All participants confirmed that they were forced to sell their owned items to be able to purchase food.

Table 3 summarizes the common food security-related strategies adopted by focus group participants. While this focus group data is exploratory and may not be generalizable, the results offer a rich and systematic description of the challenging conditions and food insecurity and resilience strategies in urban contexts during the COVID-19 crisis. The focus groups data also demonstrated that the food security needs far exceeded the support available through non-governmental and governmental actors.

| | Quito | Manta and Puerto Viejo | Huaquillas and Machala |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Food security of children | Reduction of adult portions | Reduction of adult portions | Reduction of adult portions |
| Coping strategies | Selling goods | Bartering, selling goods | Selling goods, bartering Food baskets (Huaquillas) |
| Meals missed or reduced | Breakfast, lunch | Breakfast | Breakfast, reduced dinner |

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from the systematic literature review are supported by the focus group narratives, demonstrating the significant gaps between food security needs and requests versus assistance available 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 the pandemic. In all the focus groups, informal work and precarious incomes resulted in a drastic reduction in the possibility of income and food security during periods of pandemic 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 various urban contexts territories and were dependent on the severity of confinement measures adopted by each of the cities in the study. In port cities, such as Machala and Portoviejo, productive activities involving family agriculture, fishing, and other production endeavours demonstrated more successful dynamics in meeting the social and food security needs of migrants. In the cities of Huaquillas, and the capital city of Quito, higher levels of assistance from government and international organizations were evident, but fell short of meeting the food security needs, identified in both the quantitative and qualitative data.

Finally, migrant food (in)security and its gendered dimensions during the pandemic require further academic attention. Across the focus groups, in all the cities in the study, women migrants 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 dependent on satisfying the needs of their dependants, rather than their own physical well-being.

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