

Strengthening the Technical Working Group in Venezuela

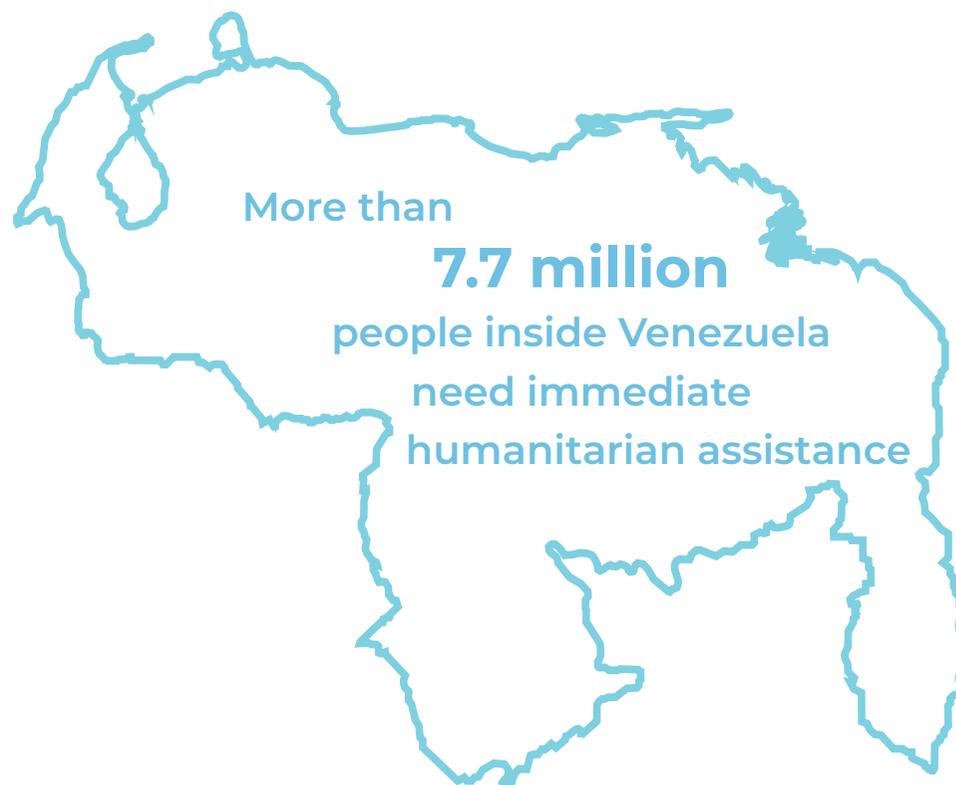
Carmen Valle-Trabadelo, IFRC PS Centre Co-Chair of the IASC MHPSS Reference Group and Barbara Levin, IFRC PS Centre Coordination and Communication Officer, travelled to Venezuela from February to March 2023 with the objective to assess the progress of the country's Technical Working Group (TWG), review its 2023 workplan, identify the current needs and challenges, and provide technical support for capacity building. This mission included a field visit to the state of Táchira, bordering Colombia, which continues to be heavily impacted by the migration crisis.



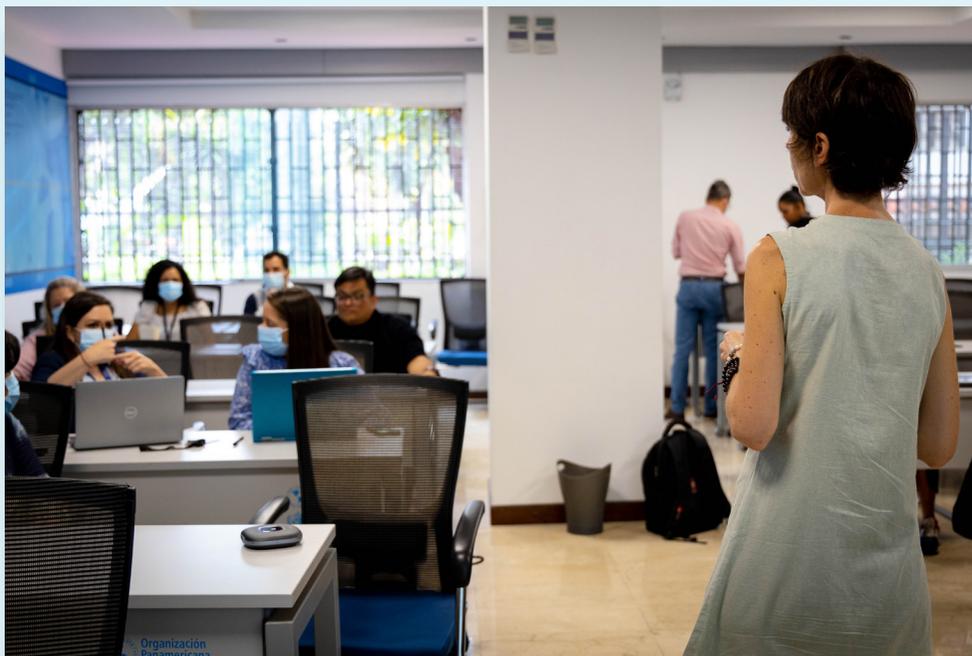
Watch this interview with Carmen, giving an overview of the mission in Venezuela with **English** and **Spanish** subtitles.

"In 2021 I had the first opportunity to visit the country with a request to improve the coordination of MHPSS. We suggested to establish the Technical Working Group and to support it by deploying a colleague through the rapid deployment mechanism, who worked in the country for six months. He helped establish the group, trained the country colleagues, supported mapping, etc. We wanted to make a second visit this year to see what the next steps are, what the situation is, and if it is necessary to strengthen any specific areas."
- Carmen Valle-Trabadelo,
co-chair of the IASC MHPSS Reference Group.

Venezuela is facing a prolonged crisis, with deep economic, social and political unrest that significantly impacts the health, social and other care systems, resulting in significant shortages in public services and increasing difficulties in access to food. Though the MHPSS needs continuously rise, the capacity to meet such demands remains insufficient.



In 2021, actors in Venezuela requested support in establishing a national TWG, to coordinate between various agencies and sectors for an efficient national MHPSS response. Carmen visited Venezuela to assess the situation and support the initial stages of establishing the TWG, meetings with cluster coordinators from protection, education, WASH, and others at the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group linked to the MHPSS activities across Venezuela. In 2022, an MHPSS expert was deployed for six months to Venezuela through the MHPSS rapid deployment mechanism, as the TWG coordinator to build its capacity, strengthen the collaboration between national and international actors and share information and resources with the TWG members. Since then, the continuation of the TWG has been supported and co-led by Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/OMS), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and International Medical Corps (IMC).



Carmen Valle-Trabadelo giving a workshop for the Venezuelan TWG members on service mapping and IASC MHPSS Reference Group resources



Barbara Levin presenting on how to communicate about MHPSS at the IOM headquarters in Caracas, Venezuela

The objective of the latest mission in 2023 was for the TWG to share their progress on MHPSS activities and identify the current needs to continue strengthening the intersectoral coordination. Upon request from the TWG, Carmen provided a workshop on service mapping and the IASC 4Ws and also introduced relevant IASC MHPSS Reference Group resources. In addition, Barbara held a workshop for the communications teams from PAHO/OMS and IOM on how to communicate about MHPSS, with sensitivity to specific topics such as suicide prevention and trauma.

Moving Toward a Coordinated MHPSS Response in the Prolonged Venezuelan Crisis

Currently, the most pressing concerns in Venezuela are public health, nutrition, food security and livelihoods, human mobility, protection risks, the provision of and access to services, and access to education.¹ The humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has become the second largest international displacement crisis in the world, with more than 7.7 million people inside Venezuela needing immediate humanitarian assistance and more than 6 million Venezuelans displaced throughout 17 countries across the region since 2015.²

[The Venezuela Humanitarian Response Plan 2022-2023](#) emphasizes the need to coordinate across all sectors and include referral routes to MHPSS services. The TWG co-leads in Venezuela, Hector Ojeda (PAHO/OMS), Alexandra Marcano (IOM), Clara Astorga (PAHO/OMS), and Jesús Sotillo (representing IMC until the integration of the new MHPSS officer), shared their experiences of bringing together the TWG members who bring different perspectives to the table and form joint actions to improve the coordination of MHPSS activities across the country. They feel that the approach of coming together and coordinating the response enriches their work to identify the most vulnerable populations in the country.

The TWG in Venezuela recognizes the importance of an integrated response, with a strong psychosocial aspect, focused on the needs of the communities and the implementation of various tools that can support their daily challenges. Though they face various challenges in integrating MHPSS services into areas such as protection and education, the TWG co-leads feel that raising awareness and educating all levels of the response, from policy makers to humanitarian workers, is a crucial component of their work.

“Having conversations at all levels improves the TWG functioning. It also creates space for people working within different clusters to be highly trained and motivated to learn about community approaches to MHPSS programming that are sensitive to people’s context, culture and needs. TWG members in Venezuela have shown to be very innovative and active with the issues that arise.”

- Alexandra Marcano (IOM).

1 U.S. Humanitarian and Development Assistance for Venezuela Regional Crisis - Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). (2023, March 28). ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/us-humanitarian-and-development-assistance-venezuela-regional-crisis>

2 Venezuela. (n.d.). European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/latin-america-and-caribbean/venezuela_en

“It allows us to identify where the gaps are. When we respond without having a clear idea of what the national needs are, we may be repeating efforts within some sectors or areas, and there could be gaps in other responses, especially from the pyramid perspective. Therefore, the Technical Working Group allows us to identify the initiatives to see where the humanitarian actors feel there is the greatest need.”

- Clara Astorga (PAHO/OMS).

In this interview, Clara (PAHO/OMS) shares her experience in developing the TWG and continuing the process of identifying gaps through joint efforts.

Watch the interview with Clara with [English](#) or [Spanish](#) subtitles.

Eva Villasmil, MHPSS Coordinator at the Maniapure Foundation, is a member of the TWG in Venezuela. She works closely with the indigenous populations in Venezuela to improve psychosocial activities and strengthen community-based MHPSS approaches.



Eva Villasmil (Maniapure Foundation), TWG member in Venezuela

“The Technical Working Group has allowed me to connect with professionals in the field, some of my teachers from the university, and other fellow students who were more junior when I was studying. That has allowed us to see and integrate each other’s strengths to our own work in the field.”

***- Eva Villasmil
(Maniapure Foundation)***

In this interview, she shares the challenges and motivation within her own work, as well as how the TWG has strengthened their agency’s response to the MHPSS needs in the communities.

Watch the interview with Eva with [English](#) or [Spanish](#) subtitles.

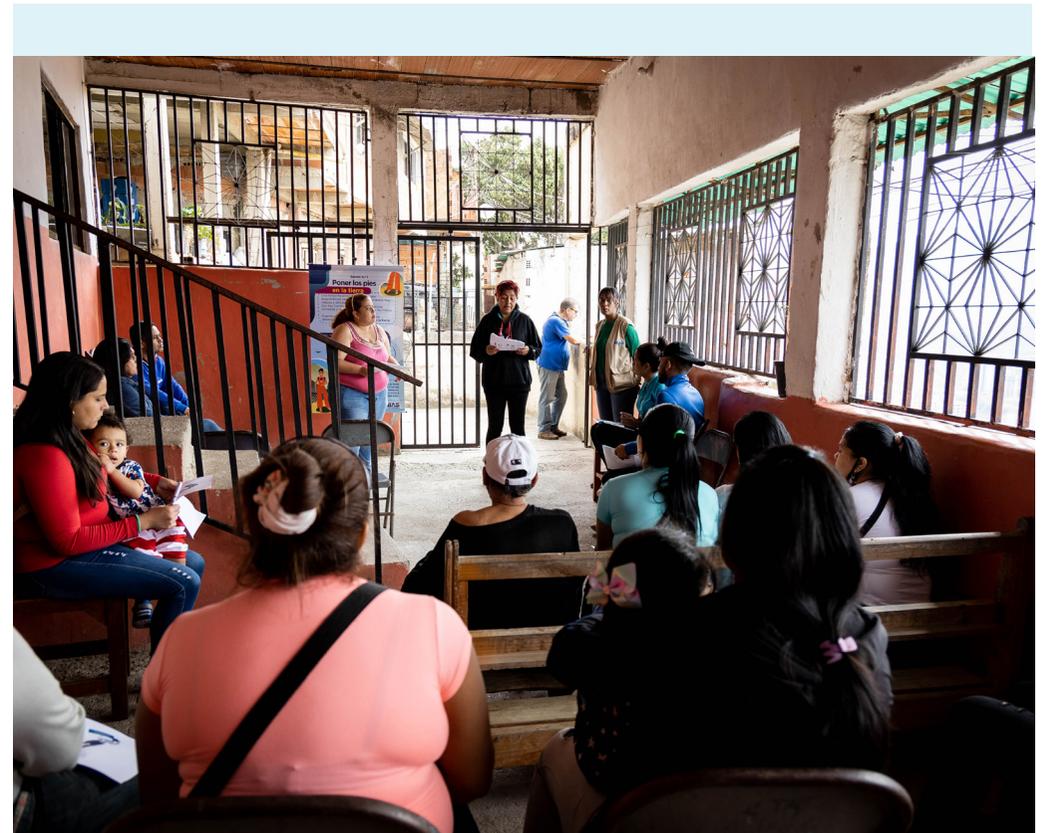
HIAS Visit to Las Mayas



Las Mayas, a community located in the suburbs of Caracas, Venezuela

Las Mayas is a neighborhood located in the suburbs of Caracas, with limited infrastructure and access to services. The community includes about 3500 families, totaling to approximately 9000 people, who are living in low-income settings with limited access to gas and clean water. [HIAS \(Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society\)](#), has been providing activities focused on MHPSS and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in Las Mayas. They have served around 3000 community members since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In such projects, community members are trained to give workshops with a focus on mental health and well-being by using WHO's tool "[Doing What Matters in Times of Stress.](#)"

This workshop was focused on stress management in which the facilitators, members of the community themselves, demonstrated coping tools such as breathing exercises to help community members cope with their daily challenges. As one of the facilitators told us, these workshops not only aim to support the psychosocial needs, but also to connect the community members with one another so they do not feel alone in their thoughts and daily concerns.



Community workshop on stress management in Las Mayas, supported by HIAS

Visit to Táchira with the Venezuelan Red Cross

Táchira is a border state in Western Venezuela, that has been hugely impacted by the combination of displacement, armed groups and poverty. Meetings and workshops with the MHPSS Venezuelan Red Cross volunteers were held in San Cristóbal, the capital of Táchira, and community projects were visited. This MHPSS team of volunteers mostly consist of psychologists and psychiatrists with different specializations. This was an opportunity for us to listen to their experiences in the field, as well as their concerns and needs, with the technical support from Carmen. As a group of experienced psychologists, much of their response is focused on specialized care, but activities focused on community and family strengthening have been the base of the response from which expansion to other layers was developed. While specialized interventions are beneficial to the response in Táchira, given the absence of services, this meeting also highlighted the importance of integrating psychosocial components into other sectors such as protection and education.

The main topics discussed included: the importance of training all staff in psychological first aid (PFA); collaborating with hospitals to train nurses in PFA; peer support and care for staff and volunteers; and giving more workshops for teachers, parents, and other community members about pressing topics such as stress management and the impacts of bullying. As Carmen highlighted in this meeting, it is crucial to implement preventative actions within the communities to make sure that the basic psychosocial needs are met and to create supportive spaces to promote coping mechanisms in managing emotions and supporting one another.



Meeting with Venezuelan Red Cross MHPSS team of volunteers in Táchira



Odalys Ávila Escalante, the MHPSS Team Leader of the Venezuelan Red Cross in Táchira

Odalys Ávila Escalante, the MHPSS Team Leader of the Venezuelan Red Cross Táchira, shares her experience of how the team was established and has developed since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Watch the interview with Odalys with **English** and **Spanish** subtitles.

"It has been very gratifying to be able to cover, from an individual aspect, not only prevention, but also follow-up treatment and interventions with a team that includes psychologists, psychiatrists, speech therapists, child psychiatrists and family therapists serving a rather large population."

- Odalys Ávila Escalante (Venezuelan Red Cross)

Mission Outcomes

While the TWG has made significant process in coordination and uniting agencies to continue their joint MHPSS efforts, the mission contributed to a reviewed workplan for the TWG and to identify, within the priorities of such workplan, a number of additional supports from the Reference Group. Specifically, the deployment of a mapping and information management expert was identified, to develop an Interagency MHPSS Situation analysis and assessment which would include 4Ws service mapping to identify the MHPSS activities across the country and improve the referral pathways.

Another support will be the deployment of an expert to support a the strengthening of skills and knowledge in interagency MHPSS programming and coordination, by conducting ToT on key resources such as the IASC MHPSS Guidelines, MSP, M&E Framework, to experts in several organizations and sectors.

In addition, the Reference Group will provide training on the IASC coordination manual and on the job technical support to the coordinators from the three co-leading agencies, with a focus on the capacity to cascade such knowledge to future coordinators. Finally, joint advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy opportunities will be identified to give visibility to the MHPSS needs of Venezuela and the good practices of agencies from different sectors.

Although this report mainly highlights the audiovisual content recorded throughout the mission, all agencies we met with should be commended for their hard work in the MHPSS response in Venezuela and their support in providing information regarding the needs, strengths, strategic actions, and best practices of their work is highly appreciated. These agencies include: International Organization for Migration (IOM), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/OMS), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), International Medical Corps (IMC), Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Venezuelan Federation of Psychologists, World Vision International, Venezuelan Red Cross, Doctors of the World (Médicos del Mundo), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), Maniapure Foundation, Action Against Hunger (ACF), Solidarity Action (Acción Solidaria), Rehabilitate Foundation, AVESOC and CECODAP.