

## Who is responsible for refugee education? A multilevel analysis of integration and localization in Colombia

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Refugee  
Education  
Governance  
Inclusion  
Localization

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of integrating refugee children into host states' education systems and localizing humanitarian responses on the authority and responsibilities distributed among global and local actors. Focused on Venezuelan refugee education in Colombia, our multilevel analysis reveals sporadic horizontal dialogue and fair coordination only when local expertise serves the purposes of humanitarian organizations. These positive effects coexist with power imbalances and responsibility dilution, primarily affecting local actors. These disparities yield suboptimal interventions for refugee children. Mapping the global-local chains of authority and responsibility, the study elucidates the possibilities and limitations of current governance arrangements for refugee education.

### 1. Introduction

Refugee education has been criticized for the power concentration over decision-making on global actors, the tendency to prioritize donors' expectations over local needs and knowledge, and the inherent unsustainability and impracticality of short-term solutions (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Fiori et al., 2016; Sobe, 2007; Waters and Leblanc, 2005). In response to these concerns, two fundamental shifts have emerged in the governance of refugee education: the integration of refugees into the education systems of host countries and the localization of humanitarian responses. Integration holds the promise of delivering lasting, sustainable education solutions for refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Mendenhall, 2019), whereas localization seeks to foster interconnected networks of local and global partners that recognize domestic expertise and offer effective policies tailored to local requirements and expectations (Barbelet, 2018; Ramalingan et al., 2013). Integration has shown positive results on enrollment, but shortcomings persist regarding inclusion in curriculum and other sociocultural school practices (Arnold-Fernández, 2019; Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019; Dryden-Peterson, 2020, 2021; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Reddick and Chopra, 2023). Moreover, questions persist about the appropriateness of attributing responsibility to host states for safeguarding the right to education of non-citizens (Barnett, 2013; Martin et al., 2019).

In turn, research on localization suggests that international actors still hold most of the influence over refugee education and therefore responses still dismiss domestic expertise (Barbelet et al., 2021; Barnett, 2013; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Fiori, 2020; Menashy and Zakharia, 2022; Ramalingan et al., 2013; Zakharia et al., 2022). Less clear is how the combination of localization and integration has shaped educational responses for refugees. While localization has typically involved non-government partners in decision-making and implementation (Menashy and Zakharia, 2022), integration adds complexity by strengthening the role of host states and potentially changing the global-local distribution of authority and responsibility over the education of refugees, a topic that research has not yet sufficiently addressed.

To investigate the complexities of this combination, this study uses a multilevel governance framework (Bache et al., 2015; Hooghe et al., 2020; Hooghe and Marks, 2003) to examine how the interplay between localization and integration influences the allocation of authority and responsibilities across global, national, and local actors, and whether this redistribution of authority and responsibilities produce sustainable, effective and locally-owned responses for refugees. We base this analysis on a vertical case study (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017) of Venezuelan refugee education in Colombia that involved semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in non-government and international humanitarian

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organizations (IHOs), national government, three subnational jurisdictions, and fifteen schools with refugees.<sup>1</sup> We found sporadic occurrences of horizontal dialogue and coordination that have led to sustainable and locally-owned responses but juxtaposed with power imbalances that marginalize local actors from decision-making, all set against a backdrop of blame-avoidance dynamics among education stakeholders. Local actors, such as schools and subnational authorities in the host country, participate in refugee education decisions and shoulder a fair share of responsibilities only when they can contribute to IHO's objectives and do not need significant additional efforts. Otherwise, their authority is constrained, and they find themselves burdened with numerous responsibilities transferred by other actors.

This study has important implications. First, it shows that the combination of localization and integration blurs responsibility by mapping the chains of policy development and delivery resulting from the partnerships between the host country's education system and humanitarian actors. Second, it demonstrates that the multilevel governance architect emerged from integration and localization is a suboptimal solution that only partially achieves policies that promote ownership, effectiveness, and sustainability of interventions. Third, it offers a theoretical framework for understanding the global-local politics of refugee education policy, specifically highlighting the acceptance of a complex governance structure where the 'problem of many hands' (Bovens, 1998; Thompson, 1980) serves as a safeguard for both global and local actors limiting the adequateness of responses to refugees.

## 2. Recent developments in the governance of refugee education

Refugee education had been typically a matter of multijurisdictional governance. Between 1985 and 2011, the predominant model for refugee education was the outsourcing of provision from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to international and local humanitarian actors with minimal intervention of host states (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). The limited participation of states reflected preferences of humanitarian organizations to avoid coordination with governments that could have weak capacity, bureaucratize actions, or be responsible for oppression (Barnett, 2013; Burde, 2007). Additionally, host states preferred to avoid assuming the financial and political responsibility for refugee education (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Nevertheless, two recent shifts have changed this governance model: the calls by the 2012 UNHCR's Global Education Strategy (UNHCR, 2012) to integrate refugee children into the regular education system of the host country (a.k.a. integration), and the Grand Bargain agreement signed at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit calling for mainstreaming localization into humanitarian aid (The Grand Bargain, 2016).

The protracted character of displacement is behind the calls for integration. As refugees did not return to their countries in the short run, it became increasingly impractical to provide them with education through separate organizations, like refugee-camp schools (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). The required long term solutions for this population were not compatible with donors' budget cycle and therefore, funding problems made responses unsustainable (Barbelet et al., 2021; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Ramalingan et al., 2013). Integration efforts are expected to address these challenges by coordinating actions with local education actors, leveraging existing education infrastructure and capacity in host countries, and bolstering sustainability defined as local response capacity to provide long-term support for refugees (Barbelet et al., 2021; Mendenhall, 2019; Poole, 2014). This approach contrasts with short-term emergency responses and focuses on empowering local communities to provide ongoing support for refugees.

Countries have enacted heterogenous forms of integration of

refugees ranging from no access to government schools, access to separate schools run by the government, access to the same schools as nationals but in separate shifts, to full access to government schools where refugees and nationals are physically together (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Despite this variation, this shift has changed the usual hands-off approach of host states increasing their authority and responsibility over refugee education.

While research on integration is still scarce, it indicates advancements in access to education. However, other aspects of the educational inclusion of refugees do not show the same progress (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019; Dryden-Peterson, 2020). This lack of progress is associated with the challenges involved in resolving dilemmas regarding the curriculum and languages that refugees need to learn –whether from their home country, host nations, or prospective resettlement contexts (Dryden-Peterson, 2021; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Reddick and Chopra, 2023).

Furthermore, the division of responsibility between the international community and host states has sparked debates regarding the political-economic dynamics that integration fosters. While integration has raised concerns about the voluntary nature and scope of responsibilities assumed by global actors, as well as the potential strain it may impose on low and middle-income countries hosting refugees (Martin et al., 2019), others highlight the absence of mechanisms delineating host states' obligations, enforcing accountability for their responsibilities, and ensuring proper implementation of integration policies (Arnold-Fernández, 2019; Buckner et al., 2018). Moreover, host countries' may not have the incentives to serve refugees (Barnett, 2013) or these incentives to undertake responsibility for refugee education are influenced by perceptions of refugee futures, which manifest in three potential scenarios (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, 2024): 1) limited future opportunities for refugees in the host country, resulting in minimal government investment in education (e.g., Lebanon); 2) uncertain futures for refugees characterized by ongoing negotiations between domestic and international stakeholders regarding integration (e.g., Kenya); and 3) possible long-term futures, where refugee education is envisioned as part of the host country's development strategy due to the tangible benefits in human capital that refugees can provide (e.g., Uganda). According to Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, the latter scenario is the only one in which responsibility sharing can lead to a political economy of refugee education that mirrors that of citizens.

In turn, criticisms toward the top-down and North-driven humanitarian aid along with the slowness and ineffectiveness of the international humanitarian system were the drivers of localization calls (Barakat and Milton, 2020). Localization refers to "the need to recognise, respect, strengthen, rebalance, recalibrate, reinforce or return some type of ownership or place to local and national actors" (Barbelet, 2018, p. 5). Localization has fostered partnerships between global and local community actors organized through network governance (Zakharia et al., 2022). This governance is theoretically pluricentric with autonomous participants horizontally articulated and regulating issues through deliberation oriented toward sharing knowledge, building consensus, and bargaining the distribution of resources (Reff Pedersen et al., 2011; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). In particular, networks for refugee education are expected to facilitate coordination, respect the role and knowledge of local actors, provide impactful and relevant responses, and develop prompt and democratic actions (Barbelet et al., 2021; Barnett, 2013; Menashy and Zakharia, 2022; Ramalingan et al., 2013; Zakharia et al., 2022).

While these partnerships may facilitate empowerment of local actors, they also have shown problems that contradict the purposes of localization and the theoretical benefits of network governance. Rather than being pluricentric and horizontal, these partnerships concentrate power in IHOs, such as UNICEF, UNHCR, Education Cannot Wait, among others, while local stakeholders remain at the periphery without collective bargaining power (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Fiori, 2020; Fiori et al., 2016; Zakharia et al., 2022). Lack of trust between local and global

<sup>1</sup> Although Colombia has not granted such status, we use the term refugees as it describes better the large-scale migration of Venezuelans looking for conditions of human dignity that their state does not guarantee.

actors, coupled with competition for funding between humanitarian organizations trumps horizontal coordination. This dynamic generates reactive and ad hoc interventions (Barbelet et al., 2021; Barnett, 2013; Menashy and Zakharia, 2022; Ramalingan et al., 2013). Lack of voice of and accountability to teachers and students compromise real ownership of responses (Shah, 2012). Consequently, these partnerships struggle to prioritize local needs and are rather prone to impose donors' agendas (Barbelet et al., 2021; Fiori et al., 2016; Menashy and Zakharia, 2022). These problems are paired with inadequate quality, quantity, and transparency of funding which make responses unsustainable (Barbelet, 2018; Barbelet et al., 2021; Ramalingan et al., 2013).

Localization efforts have prioritized partnerships between international actors and local civil society organizations as a way to prevent an overly regulatory approach, state's weakness, and lack of representativeness of affected populations (Burde, 2007). Nevertheless, calls for integration enhances the role of the state, adding complexity to the governance of refugee education. This new arrangement is more suitable for analysis through a multilevel governance lens rather than from a perspective of network governance. Multilevel governance recognizes the networks of non-state actors, but also their convergence with various levels of government. This results in the emergence of complex and heterogeneous relationships among autonomous yet interdependent actors, requiring cooperation and negotiation (Caponio and Jones-Correa, 2018).

At least two types of multilevel governance have been identified in the literature. Type 1 refers to vertical structures involving a limited number of nested government bodies separated by durable boundaries, usually territorial, such as national or federal, subnational or provincial, and local or municipal (Marks and Hooghe, 2004). Integration has incorporated refugee education into this type represented by the hierarchical education systems of host countries, resulting in the expansion of actors responsible for refugee education according to the domestic degrees of decentralization. Multilevel governance type 2 refers to horizontal structures with intersecting and fluid membership defined by specific policy problems rather than territorial jurisdictions (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). Localization has incorporated this second type through its fluid networks of voluntary actors, including IHOs and local NGOs. In brief, integration and localization collectively foster a complex multilevel governance framework marked by overlapping between type 1 and type 2.

Multilevel governance has been considered "the best of all possible worlds" (Barnett, 2013, p. 389) because it involves a relatively horizontal interaction and shared responsibility between different government and non-government actors in an effective institutional arrangement for cooperation (Marks and Hooghe, 2004; Scholten, 2013). Sharing responsibility across global, national and local levels permits access to greater resources along with flexibility that accommodates diversity of needs, and provides greater voice to local communities (Bache et al., 2016; Marks and Hooghe, 2004). Likewise, sharing responsibility with non-government actors on specific issues, such as refugee education, can make service delivery more effective and sustainable, prone to knowledge sharing, pluralism, and innovation (Bache et al., 2016; Hooghe et al., 2020; Papadopoulos, 2010).

However, examinations of multilevel governance have questioned these theoretical benefits. While distribution of authority promises a participatory decision-making, only a select few held the power to set agendas and make decisions, while others primarily played a role in executing tasks (Stephenson, 2013, p. 828). This power imbalance in decision-making is likely associated with uneven administrative powers of involved actors (Di Gregorio et al., 2019; Ishtiaque et al., 2021; Stephenson, 2013), that is, their ability to 'convince key audiences that the work they do is worth accepting power over them' (Eckerd, 2023, p. 10). For refugee education, these audiences are not only citizens of the host country, but also international organizations, other government and non-government agencies. The multitude of audiences makes unclear whether the distribution of authority strengthens or weakens the power

of nation states vis-à-vis international actors, as well as whether the hierarchical domestic institutions that are embedded in multilevel governance (i.e., education systems) create barriers to the horizontal participation of local actors (Di Gregorio et al., 2019).

In addition, the number of involved actors in decision-making and the degree of decentralization in this multilevel governance create long chains of responsibility amenable to dilution and blame games (Bache et al., 2015; Brunsson et al., 2022; Hinterleitner et al., 2023; León and Jurado, 2021; Papadopoulos, 2010). This fuzzy governance facilitates that decisionmakers employ presentational strategies that highlight and take credit for positive outcomes, all the while mitigating their responsibility for failures by blaming the issue or the context (Bache et al., 2015; Hinterleitner et al., 2023; Hood, 2011). Similarly, stakeholders can use agency strategies by retaining responsibilities that gain credit and delegating tasks that are either more challenging or prone to attracting blame (Bache et al., 2015; Hood, 2011; Hooghe et al., 2020). Delegates or actors receiving the blame can employ a 'blame boomerang' approach through policy strategies, wherein they assign responsibility to regulations and procedures mandated by higher authorities (Brunsson et al., 2022; Hinterleitner et al., 2023; Hood, 2011). Although these strategies might shift responsibility to higher levels, they may be less impactful when dealing with IHOs and non-governmental organizations. Such organizations often wield influence through advisory roles and financial contributions, but their accountability lies more with donors than domestic actors (Brunsson et al., 2022; Papadopoulos, 2010). These blame games often result in the attribution of responsibility to the less influential actors of the multilevel arrangement (Hinterleitner et al., 2023).

The complexity of multilevel governance models has been considered as a rational self-defence strategy to deal with intractable socio-political challenges, such as large-scale migration, an issue of transnational character that cannot be addressed by a single actor and that involves often heated domestic debates about the distribution of resources (Bache et al., 2015; Scholten, 2013; Spencer, 2018). Identifying whether this complex multilevel governance is a deliberate attempt to blur responsibility is out of the scope of this article. However, using a multilevel governance framework allows us to examine whether integration and localization have produced the expected benefits of shared responsibility and authority, including coordination and sustainable and responsive interventions, or generated negative effects such as unclear responsibility, uneven power relations, and inadequate, insufficient or short-lived solutions. This examination also illuminates the extent to which host states may (or may not) be held responsible for refugee education.

### 3. Methods

Consistent with our theoretical framework, we employ a vertical case study (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2014, 2017) through which we map the networks of actors in the different levels involved in the governance of refugee education in Colombia (international, national, subnational, school). Colombia is a suitable case to study the combination of integration and localization for three reasons. First, this country is the main recipient of Venezuelan large-scale migration with around 2.48 million refugees (686,000 of them being children) reaching the country in the past seven years (Cancillería, 2022; GIFMM and R4V, 2022). Second, since the beginning of the crisis in 2015, the country adopted a full integration approach by enrolling Venezuelan children in Colombian government schools, regardless of their migration status (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2018; Ministerio de Educación Nacional and Migración Colombia, 2018). This approach quickly involved national and local governments in the provision of refugee education along with humanitarian actors and differs from countries that have opted for not integrating refugees (e.g., Kenya) or partially integrating them in alternative schools or shifts, such as Lebanon and Turkey do with Syrians. Thirdly, given that Colombia is issuing Venezuelans with

long-term stay permits affording them rights akin to citizens, it is reasonable to anticipate that the country will possess equivalent incentives to assume responsibility for refugee education, aligning with its human capital strategy for its own citizens (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

Within this country case, we also embed a horizontal comparison in three different subnational jurisdictions that allows us to trace similarities and differences of multilevel interactions in three different local governments or education secretaries (Giraudy et al., 2019). We selected these secretaries using a diverse case strategy to include a maximum variation that sheds light on different patterns of interaction across actors (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). Although all three secretaries have comparable autonomy and are among the jurisdictions with the largest number of Venezuelan refugee children, they represent the various types of secretaries in the country and differ in various factors that can shape the relationship with international, national, and school agents, as well as their ability to provide education to refugees (Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

Out of the three, Bogotá is the biggest secretary and the one with the larger number of Venezuelan students –although not the largest share out of the total enrolment in the city–. It is also the unit with more resources and better performance in terms of enrolment and dropout, which may facilitate the inclusion of refugees. By contrast, Cúcuta and La Guajira have fewer resources available, and comparatively, a larger share of refugees to serve, especially in the case of Cúcuta. The conditions in these two secretaries likely demand greater efforts to deliver education for refugees.

To fully map the actions of different partners involved in refugee education, we selected five schools in each secretary, representing typical cases (Gerring and Cojocaru, 2016) of schools receiving a large number of refugees. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of these schools that shape responses to Venezuelan refugees including receiving support from IHOs and the pre-existence of programs that may serve refugees, such as accelerated learning.

In each of these levels, we conducted interviews with decision-makers in governments, national and international organizations. At schools, we interviewed school leaders (principals or vice-principals), counsellors, and home teachers of the classes with the largest numbers of Venezuelan children (around three in each school). We conducted a total of 108 interviews of 60–90 minutes. During these interviews, we posed questions to identify the main challenges for the educational inclusion of Venezuelan refugees, what (non)responses has been undertaken to face these challenges, and what organizations participate and/or should be in charge of these responses. Table 3 summarizes the number of interviews in each level involved in the vertical case study.

We coded these interviews initially through open coding identifying challenges and responses. Based on team discussion, the resulting codes were grouped in categories that summarize the main challenges and responses. In addition, we coded the actors to which the responsibility for the challenge or response was attributed as well as whether and how participants support or receive support from other actors to implement responses. For each type of organization, we conducted two rounds of coding in which all team members coded the same interviews (two for IHOs, two for national and subnational governments, and seven for schools) so we could establish coding consistency and refine our codebook as needed. After these rounds, we continued coding the rest of the interviews using peer debriefing when doubts arose.

<sup>2</sup> In Colombia, education is managed in a decentralized manner, with autonomous education secretaries (certified) possessing the authority to plan, organize, and distribute human, technical, administrative, and fiscal resources. They also oversee the functioning of education to ensure efficiency, transparency, and the effectiveness of educational services. The country has certified secretaries in each department (equivalent to province or state), each municipality with more than 100,000 inhabitants, and in municipalities that are granted a special administrative regime, called districts.

This coding strategy helped us map involved actors, their relationships of influence and distribution of responsibilities regarding education provision for refugee children. In addition, this coding enabled the comparison of these actors, relationships, and responsibilities across selected subnational units, as we will describe in our findings section.

#### 4. The multilevel governance of Venezuelan refugee education in Colombia

The Colombian armed conflict led the country to consolidate a humanitarian coordination architecture based on a cluster approach prior to the widespread migration from Venezuela. This approach encompassed various sectors including but not limited to an education in emergencies cluster. The UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) built on this coordination architecture to create a parallel institutional arrangement, called Inter-Agency Group for Mixed Migratory Flows (Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos – GIFMM).<sup>3</sup> The GIFMM is responsible for the humanitarian assistance across all migrant-related issues through specific taskforces (e.g., education, health, protection), mirroring the clusters of the existing humanitarian coordination (communications with four IHO officials).

The humanitarian coordination architecture and the GIFMM, as well as their respective clusters or taskforces, are multilevel governance type two arrangements. Both, the education in emergencies cluster and GIFMM's education taskforce are chaired by the same organizations at the national and local level: UNICEF, Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the national education ministry (at the national level), and education secretaries (at the local level). Other IHOs are also affiliated to GIFMM's education taskforce at the national or local level according to their presence in the country, including the International Refugee Council (IRC), World Vision, Plan International, among others. The goals of both national and local GIFMM's education taskforces are the provision of accelerated education programs, student assistance and teachers' training in socio-emotional wellbeing, improvement of educational infrastructure, and provision of school kits (R4V, n.d.). To achieve these goals, IHOs do not only coordinate with the national and subnational governments, but also work directly with schools.

The GIFMM's education taskforce interacts with a multilevel governance type I body, the Colombian education system, led by the education ministry through local secretaries that assist and oversee public schools (Fig. 1). Although hierarchical, the Colombian education system is fairly decentralized with considerable autonomy for secretaries to adapt and formulate policies, and for schools to make decisions regarding their pedagogical projects. The division of responsibilities between GIFMM and the Colombian education system seems to be clear: GIFMM's education taskforce coordinates education in emergency responses according to the above-stated goals, and the education system provides regular schooling to Venezuelan refugees (communications with 5 IHO officials and 3 national government officials). However, there is an overlap in certain areas of action: while the education taskforce of GIFMM focuses on enhancing infrastructure, local secretaries also submit requests for infrastructure projects that require approval and may be fully or partially funded by the education ministry. IHOs affiliated with GIFMM are responsible for running accelerated learning programs and socio-emotional development initiatives, as well as training teachers for their operation. Simultaneously, the education ministry provides curriculum standards and guidelines for these programs and, in collaboration with the secretaries, devises and executes subsequent in-service teachers' training. Additionally, schools have the autonomy to adapt these standards and guidelines, choose the training

<sup>3</sup> In Latin America, this platform is known as Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela and is named differently in each site of operation including Brazil, the Caribbean, Central America and Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Southern Cone.

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of the education secretaries involved in the study.

Secretary	Type	# of schools	Total enrollment (% <sup>a</sup> )	# of enrolled Venezuelan refugee (% <sup>b</sup> )	% dropout	Local revenues for education <sup>c</sup>
Bogotá	District	402	1080,180 (94%)	70,219 (7%)	3.4%	41%
Cúcuta	Municipal	61	143,777 (97%)	31,470 (22%)	4.7%	8%
La Guajira	Department	91	91,001 (86%)	9531 (10%)	5.1%	9%

Authors' elaboration based on (Forero and Moreno Parrado, 2019; Ministerio de Educación, 2022; R4V-GIFMM, 2023).

- <sup>a</sup> Enrollment rate of 5–17-year-old children in each secretary;
- <sup>b</sup> percentage of Venezuelan students out of the total enrollment of the secretary;
- <sup>c</sup> percentage contributed by the secretary to the total education budget of the jurisdiction.

**Table 2**  
Characteristics of participant schools.

School ID <sup>a</sup>	Sector	School size	% of Venezuelan students	Support from IHO	Pre-existing accelerated learning programs
EB1	Public	>5000 students	5–10%	Yes	No
EB2	Public	2000–3000 students	15–20%	No	No
EB3	Public	<1000 students	> 5%	No	Yes
EB4	Public	< 1000 students	> 30%	Yes	No
EB5	Public	1000–2000 students	5–10%	No	No
EC1	Public	2000–3000 students	>30%	Yes	Yes
EC2	Private <sup>b</sup>	1000–2000 students	>21–25%	Yes	No
EC3	Public-private	1000–2000 students	>30%	Yes	Yes
EC4	Public	1000–2000 students	>30%	Yes	No
EC5	Public	1000–2000 students	>30%	Yes	Yes
EG1	Public	>1000 students	>30%	No	No
EG2	Public	>1000 students	11–15%	No	No
EG3	Public	1000–2000 students	11–15%	Yes	No
EG4	Public	1000–2000 students	11–15%	Yes	Yes
EG5	Public	>1000 students	>30%	Yes	No

- <sup>a</sup> EB corresponds to schools in Bogotá, EC corresponds to schools in Cúcuta, and EG corresponds to schools in La Guajira;
- <sup>b</sup> the school is privately owned but publicly funded.

**Table 3**  
Number of interviews by level of governance.

Governance level	Number of interviews
International	16 interviews (UNICEF, Save the Children, NRC, IRC, UNHRC, World Vision, among others)
National	5 interviews (education ministry and migration management agency)
Subnational	9 interviews (3 in Bogotá, 4 in Cúcuta, and 2 in La Guajira)
School	78 interviews (11–13 per school)

programs in which they wish to participate, and decide whether to opt in for the implementation of accelerated learning programs and socio-emotional development initiatives.

Although the multilevel governance of Venezuelan refugee education in Colombia at times promotes coordination that facilitates ownership and sustainability of specific initiatives aimed at ensuring refugee educational inclusion, more frequently, this coordination is

impeded by fragmented efforts that undermine the objectives of both localization and integration. The subsequent sections elaborate on this nuanced scenario of coordination and fragmentation.

#### 4.1. Mixed dynamics of participation and marginalization of domestic partners in decision-making

Our findings indicate that authority gets fairly distributed among stakeholders and horizontal participation occurs when IHOs can harness existing domestic administrative powers –primarily local practices and resources– to fulfill the objectives set by their donors. In the absence of these administrative powers, authority tends to concentrate within IHOs, marginalizing local actors and relegating them to a minor role in implementation. This dynamic often leads to interventions that are less sustainable, ineffective, and unresponsive to local needs.

##### 4.1.1. Horizontal participation builds on local practices

We identified three instances of horizontal bargaining and participation, all of them involving local actors with solid resources to support IHO's work: (1) the education ministry setting GIFMM's agenda, (2) Bogotá's secretary setting goals for responses in the city, (3) and a few schools negotiating the implementation of accelerated learning programs.

The education ministry is acknowledged as an equal partner negotiating GIFMM's objectives, activities, and resource allocation for two reasons. Firstly, the ministry serves as a primary supporter of Venezuelan refugee education, channeling fiscal contributions directly to schools for the admission of refugee children. While these financial contributions do not go to IHOs, the collaborative partnership with the ministry significantly alleviates their operational burden. Secondly, this collaboration provides IHOs with strategic leverage in seeking support from international donors. For instance, this partnership has helped Save the Children, UNICEF, and other partners to secure about 12 million dollars from Education Cannot Wait for a multi-year project. These partnerships have therefore created a dynamic that benefit both the ministry and IHOs affiliated to GIFMM:

"A lot of money started to reach the country... so one could observe the 'parade' of [international] organizations approaching the ministry, even though they had previously shown little interest in institutional coordination [with the government]. And of course, the ministry was also looking at who could fund more projects and give them more money. It is a game" (IHO official).

Likewise, Bogotá's secretary provides funding for humanitarian initiatives that enables this entity to bargain the goals and scope for projects conducted by IHOs, such as a survey to identify the educational conditions of Venezuelan refugees and the implementation of accelerated learning programs. Furthermore, this secretary has successfully negotiated the enhancement of pre-existing practices, such as the 'active

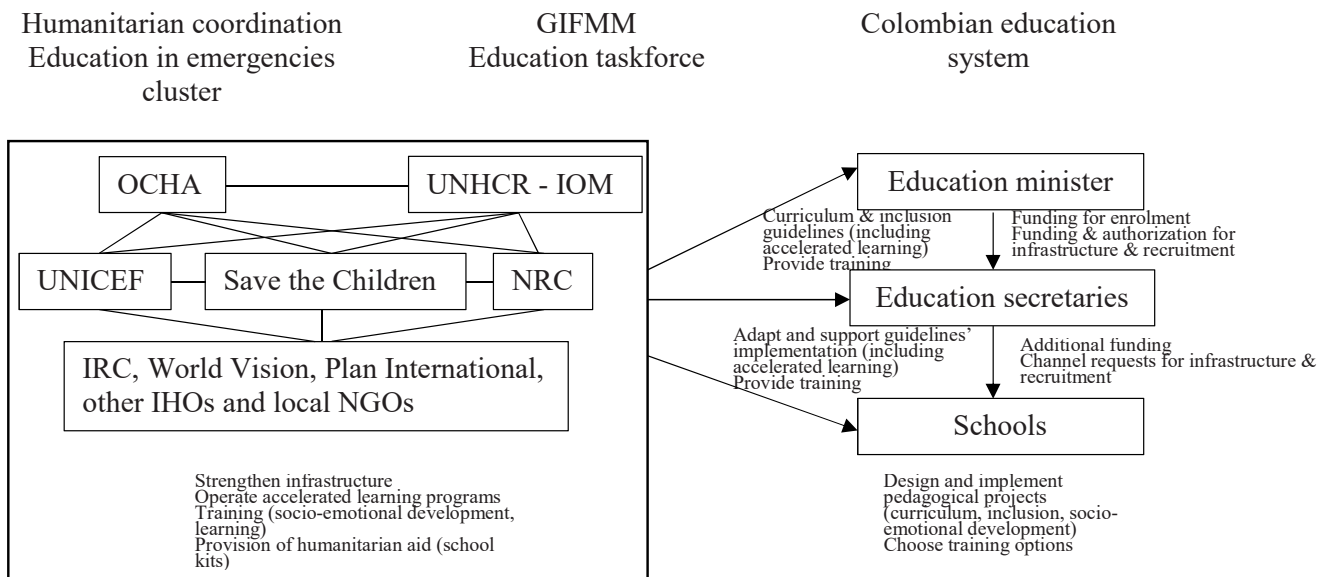


Fig. 1. Multilevel governance of refugee education in Colombia.

search' for the unschooled population.<sup>4</sup> This initiative was traditionally carried out in collaboration with a local UNICEF operator, and now also includes the identification of out-of-school refugee children (communication with a Bogotá's secretary official, and a NGO official). Bogotá's funding and expertise facilitate IHOs' operation and position the secretary as a peer with the authority to exert influence on IHOs' decisions:

"The fact that we co-fund allows us to pilot, monitor, and demand quality. In the negotiations with the OEI [Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture], for example, they presented a proposal and we demanded that it should be more ambitious... So, it's an advantage. The fact that the secretary can contribute a significant share relatively equal to IHOs' contribution gives an important leverage to steer and oversee [actions] according to secretary's needs" (Bogotá's secretary official).

Schools are rarely considered as equal partners. However, when educational organizations already have established practices that align with IHOs' goals, and school leaders actively strive to enhance these practices, there is a higher likelihood of constructive and mutually beneficial collaborations with IHOs. This dynamic is observed in only three out of the fifteen participant schools (School C1, C4, C5), where initiatives include tailored training for teachers, the provision of temporary instructors, and pedagogical support for their independent initiatives, among other forms of assistance.

This form of horizontal participation and fair distribution of authority recognizes local knowledge of Colombian authorities and schools, enhancing its strength and consequently bolstering the sustainability and responsiveness of interventions. Regrettably, disparities in resources and expertise among the various local actors engaged in the governance of refugee education are more frequent, which undermine their opportunities to influence decision-making.

#### 4.1.2. Concentration of authority instrumentalizes inexperienced local actors

Except for the above-mentioned instances, we find a concentration of authority in IHOs when working with other local actors. Unlike Bogotá, the secretaries of Cúcuta and La Guajira are unable to fund humanitarian

<sup>4</sup> Active search is a targeted program designed to connect children with educational opportunities. Personnel are deployed in marginalized communities where they conduct a door-to-door search for families with unschooled children and guide them through the enrollment process.

interventions and have little expertise working with IHOs. Prior to the Venezuelan migration, they were routinely bypassed by IHOs that directly approached schools for their interventions (communications with two officials in Cúcuta's and La Guajira's secretaries). The establishment of GIFMM has led to increased engagement by these secretaries, albeit with a focus primarily on facilitating connections between IHOs and schools that align with donors' criteria. However, secretaries' role is confined to that of brokers rather than equal decision-making partners. Consequently, in these jurisdictions, IHOs tend to assert their own agenda, overshadowing the influence of the secretaries.

"It is too difficult to change the scope and goals of humanitarian organizations' projects. They say 'this project goes to this school' and there isn't human power that can change that. But in the education in emergencies cluster, they have tried to adapt and make some additional interventions. That has been good... but there are flaws in the structures and coordination of international humanitarian assistance reflected in their operation in the field... So, sometimes I end up talking with each organization separately trying to understand their goals and dynamics and fitting them into corresponding activities" (Cúcuta's secretary official).

Similarly, schools lacking programs or expertise that readily align with IHOs' objectives find themselves unable to exert influence over the decisions made by these organizations. In such cases, IHOs offer interventions that permit them show rapid, tangible results to donors but have limited long-term impact, such as the provision of school kits. Alternatively, IHOs also offer training to teachers, based on what these organizations consider adequate. However, these processes are often of such short duration that they fail to foster school ownership and, instead, erode the trust of school personnel.

"We had the chance to participate in a project led by [IHO's name] that aimed at training us to implement the integration of migrant children... But it was conducted for a very short time. It was a nice opportunity, we learned, but honestly, I felt that the secretary and [IHO's name] did this project just to check a box and show that they have done something to integrate migrants rather than actually willing to engage in working together with schools, teachers, parents and students. At the end, they were asking us for results but in a really short time."

Lack of participation of local governments and schools in decision-making not only impacts the ownership and effectiveness of responses but also diminishes responsiveness to refugee needs and the sustainability of interventions. This situation leaves local decision-makers and educators frustrated with the programs that are implemented:

“We have noticed that teachers and principals are tired of humanitarian aid being mostly the provision of school kits. We have asked for the strengthening of human capital. Recently, all IHOs have focused on teacher training, but then, at the beginning of last year, they stopped their assistance... We are trying to identify and find ways to respond to needs in a coherent and adequate way. It is not about one training or one course of 20 or 30 hours. I am all in for training, but it is important to agree on how it is done. We need to be participating in the design of interventions from the beginning” (Cúcuta’s secretary official).

IHOs’ behaviour towards distribution of authority shows that not only states but also international actors have particular incentives regarding the integration of refugees. While deepening engagement with partners who simplify their work is a rational choice for IHOs to achieve their objectives, this practice perpetuates power imbalances that detrimentally impact the most disadvantaged local actors, be it secretaries or schools. Furthermore, when analyzing whether states should hold responsibility for refugee education, in addition to their incentives, we need to look at their administrative powers to bargain with international actors. Our analysis shows that local actors rarely have influence in decision-making and, often are being instrumentalized to implement interventions that satisfy expectations of international donors.

#### 4.2. Distribution of responsibilities: coordination on minimal efforts, blame avoidance for major transformations

Similar to the distribution of authority, our findings indicate that responsibility is fairly allocated when responses are built upon existing local practices and do not require additional efforts from any particular stakeholder. However, responses that demand the adoption of new practices and investments tend to generate a ‘pass the buck’ dynamic. This dynamic shifts blame onto less influential actors, such as schools and teachers, burdening them with additional responsibilities. Without adequate support, schools and teachers can do very little to generate sustainable interventions that adequately include refugee children.

##### 4.2.1. Boosting refugee enrollment by straining schools

The multilevel governance of refugee education in Colombia has produced outstanding results in enrollment. Between 2018 and 2022, enrollment of Venezuelan students in Colombian schools increased from 34,030 to 586,971. This achievement can be partially attributed to the education ministry that has taken on the responsibility to transfer fiscal resources to secretaries and issue regulations, so schools can admit these children irrespective of their migratory status (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016; Ministerio de Educación Nacional and Migración Colombia, 2017, 2018). In turn, IHOs affiliated to GIFMM have facilitated this process with assistance in school registration for refugee families and nutrition plans for refugee students (GIFMM and R4V, 2022). Despite this allocation of responsibilities, funding distribution suggests that the international humanitarian community is ‘passing the buck’ to the Colombian government. Save the Children (2018, p. 5) estimates that upper-middle income countries, such as Colombia, absorbing large-scale migration need to receive 40% of the costs of educating refugee children to avoid overwhelming the domestic education system. Nevertheless, by 2022 the country required humanitarian aid for education for US\$50 millions but only received US\$4,8 millions (GIFMM and R4V, 2022), a negligible amount compared to the US\$120 millions contributed by the education ministry to enroll Venezuelan children.

Given this unfair distribution of funding responsibility and despite the education ministry’s commendable efforts through financial transfers and regulation, the Colombian government does not have the incentives –and likely neither the capacity– to go further in the integration of refugees. Thus, the ministry has strategically avoided making necessary investments in certain areas by taking advantage of the overlapping responsibilities with GIFMM and education secretaries. Employing presentational strategies, the education ministry deflects responsibility

for the expansion of infrastructure and educational staff, shifting the burden onto secretaries. The argument presented is that the Colombian education system already possesses sufficient capacity and tools to accommodate Venezuelan newcomers:

“Yes, we increased funding transfers. But we didn’t need much else because, we had a decline in local school population prior to the Venezuelan migration. Municipalities can also contract private schools if the public sector does not have sufficient capacity” (Education ministry official).

However, as the wealthiest secretary, only Bogotá possesses adequate schools, classrooms, teachers, and organizational procedures to shoulder the enrollment responsibility without requiring significant alterations to their existing administrative practices or additional support from the education ministry. Furthermore, all interviewed principals in Bogotá’s schools indicated that the prospect of additional resources for their schools motivated them to enroll Venezuelan children:

“After enrolling all children, traditionally Bogotá ended up with a surplus of 100,000 spots. And now, at the end of the year, we have a surplus of only 50,000 thanks to the Venezuelan population, who is using some spots. We have employed some additional resources for other things like school transportation and nutrition plans. They were provided by the secretary because the ministry did not contribute additional resources for the migrant population. But Bogotá has not required much more... Enrollment procedures worked out just fine with what the secretary has been historically doing through the active search of unschooled children” (Bogotá’s secretary official).

By contrast, Cúcuta and La Guajira have historically struggled with shortages of infrastructure and/or educational staff that have become worse with migration (communications with principals in C1, C4, C5, G1, G2, G3, and G5). To circumvent the burden imposed by the ministry regarding these matters, these secretaries employ a combination of agency and presentational strategies. On the one hand, these secretaries blame the education ministry back indicating that the central level does not authorize additional infrastructure and teachers in a timely manner. On the other, secretaries point at the administrative difficulties of planning for a very mobile population:

“With the rise of school population with the same number of teachers, we have overcrowded classrooms. This is one of the main challenges, but we don’t have authorization to recruit new teachers... We have even proposed the recruitment of temporary teachers, but that has not been supported by the ministry... We expect that the Venezuelan situation will change, and this population is going to return. So, if we create permanent teacher positions, what are we going to do with them?” (La Guajira’s secretary official).

Since GIFMM’s responsibilities include strengthening infrastructure and the operation of accelerated learning programs, IHOs partially compensate for these deficits by renovating school spaces and providing temporary instructors for such programs. Yet, when it comes to the continuity of these initiatives, IHOs pass the buck again to the ministry:

“At the end of the day, the system needs to be able to hold the teachers because there’s no point in us recruiting teachers for the ministry of education, pay them, when we only have funding for a short period of time. So, none of the partners are actually doing that. It’s under the ministry of education with their own resources, they recruit, they retain, and they pay for the teachers, teachers of the formal system.” (IHO official).

These blame avoidance dynamics between the ministry, secretaries, and IHOs ultimately pass the buck to schools. Some schools attempt to negotiate children’s admission with IHOs in exchange of resources that they do not receive from the ministry or the secretary:

“I talk with the principal. Sometimes, secretaries tell the principal ‘this child is from [IHO’s name]... they say that to convince the principal to accept the child... principals want to look good in front of the organization. Next year, the same principal refuses to accept new children or asks what [IHO’s name] is going to provide in exchange of accepting

these children. Shame on them” (IHO official in La Guajira)

More frequently, schools make every effort to accommodate refugees, even if it means overcrowding classrooms, saturating counseling services, and reallocating non-educational staff to teach some classes. However, these strategies have a detrimental impact on the quality of education they can offer:

“Here I am alone with a student population of 2500 students. That’s absurd. Just one counsellor can’t cope with the demand, not to mention the kind of support that they [refugee children] require” (Counsellor of school C5).

#### 4.2.2. *Passing the buck of socio-cultural inclusion to teachers*

In addition to enrollment, another successful area of the education of Venezuelan refugee children in Colombia is the implementation of accelerated learning programs. Our interviews and different analyzed documents (Ministerio de Educación, 2022; UNESCO, 2020a; UNESCO, 2020b; USAID,) suggest that these programs have effectively prepared children both academically and socio-emotionally for their transition to regular classrooms (communications with two IHO officials, two NGO officials, two principals, and two teachers of schools C1, C5). These initiatives build upon prior collaborations among IHOs, the education ministry, and Colombian NGOs, that have consolidated a clear distribution of responsibilities with IHOs funding the initiatives, local NGOs executing them, the education ministry certifying acquired skills, education secretaries mobilizing schools for participation, and schools enrolling children after they complete the programs. The previous existence of such collaborations has also reduced the efforts required from involved stakeholders:

“In 2001, we adapted our program for our forcedly displaced population. Given its positive results and the rigorous monitoring of students and their transition to regular schools, other partners joined, such as NRC, IOM, UNHCR, and the education ministry, who transformed our program into the national strategy for forcedly displaced children in 2008. Recently with the Venezuelan migration crisis, along with UNICEF, we reactivated this program in five cities and started implemented in 2019” (Local NGO official).

Nevertheless, these programs cannot cope with the demand for sociocultural integration coming from overaged Venezuelan children and Venezuelan students in regular classrooms (UNESCO, 2020a). These children find themselves caught in a cycle of blame games, as achieving their inclusion requires more fundamental changes in curriculum and other school practices that exceed the role of IHOs’ accelerated learning programs. The ministry employs agency strategies that shift responsibility to schools citing their autonomy:

“The country [Colombia] doesn’t have a unified curriculum... each school must formulate its own educational project and identify the conditions, learning, and development of Venezuelan students, so they can adapt their curricula” (Education ministry official).

Secretaries use either presentational or agency strategies to shirk its responsibility over sociocultural inclusion. Bogotá, for instance, minimizes the need for additional efforts claiming that its existing programs are also applicable to include Venezuelan refugees:

“In the Direction for Inclusion we already had the program “Back to School”, which is for overaged students. So, when a Venezuelan student arrives without their previous certificates, we identify the course that the student should be in and their age. If they are overaged, we send them to “Back the School” (Bogotá’s secretary official).

Other secretaries, such as La Guajira and Cúcuta, completely delegate this task to IHOs due to their lack of resources:

“We don’t provide this direct support to tell schools ‘implement this or that’ except from the guidelines from the education ministry. We lack the resources to assign a teacher for catch-up programs, and we also face a shortage of learning materials for these students. We just have partnerships with UNICEF, Save the Children, NRC, who are the ones contributing the pedagogical guidelines for refugee inclusion” (La Guajira’s secretary official).

Apart from schools with expertise in education in emergencies, other educational organizations often resort to presentational strategies, either denying or downplaying inclusion problems within their institutions. For instance, principals and teachers in most of our participant schools assert that they have not encountered issues of xenophobia and thus believe that specific interventions to address the matter are unnecessary. Schools also employ policy strategies to deflect responsibility, asserting that they strictly adhere to the ministry’s regulations without actively promoting the development of inclusive practices for migrants:

“It is not only about enrolling the children and following regulations... The support is limited to being admitted, the teacher welcomes them and treat them as if they were regular students. The school leaders confuse that with giving student support for their inclusion, and they say ‘that is how it is done at this school, we are following ministry’s mandates’... But they don’t consider the context of the migrant children and the differential and comprehensive support they need” (Teacher in school G1).

The prevalent approach adopted by schools to integrate Venezuelan refugees is to place them in grades below their age-appropriate levels (communications with principals of B1 to B5, C1, C3, C4, C5, G1 to G5). Once this is done, sociocultural inclusion hinges on the voluntary initiatives of individual teachers and counselors. They implement ad hoc measures like personalized tutorials, evaluation modifications, mentoring, and referrals to psychologists or education specialists (communications with teachers in B1 to B5, C4, C5, G1 to G5). Additionally, agreements are frequently signed with guardians and students, outlining independent assignments to facilitate catch-up (communications with teachers in B1 to B5). Despite their good intentions, these strategies lack systematic implementation and are hindered by the diverse capabilities of teachers in delivering inclusive education:

“The school doesn’t have an organizational strategy to help refugees catching up. That depends on what each teacher does separately. What they consider according to the difficulties they observe, that is what they improve. That depends on each subject. I, for instance, teach Spanish. So, I focus on making students read more, so they improve their reading comprehension” (Teacher of School G3).

Although occasionally these individual strategies contribute to students’ sense of belonging and academic progress within the school community, more often they increase the risk of dropout. This risk intensifies, particularly when refugees feel uncomfortable among younger students, consistently lag behind academically, or encounter unaddressed issues of discrimination within educational institutions.

These blame games within the multilevel governance structure resulting from the localization and integration of Venezuelan refugees in Colombia highlight a critical dilemma. While this arrangement can capitalize on existing local capacities to provide education for refugee children, as demonstrated in the case of Bogotá, disparities in resource distribution across territories present challenges. Regions with fewer resources, such as Cúcuta and La Guajira, bear additional burdens they cannot cope with and often resort to shifting blame among higher and lower levels of authority, leaving teachers alone in the design of solutions for refugee children. In other words, the current governance framework fails to account for varying capacities within the state to support Venezuelan children adequately. Moreover, it does not incentivize schools and government entities at both national and local levels to introduce new initiatives for refugee integration. Consequently, these domestic actors typically extend to refugees the same programs offered to citizens based on limited administrative capacities, undermining the potential for refugees to receive support tailored to their specific needs.

## 5. Conclusions

Our study investigates how the interplay between integration and localization influences the distribution of authority and responsibility among stakeholders involved in refugee education, and whether this



distribution results in sustainable, effective, and locally-owned responses for refugees. In contrast to integration and localization promises, our findings reveal that the multilevel governance framework for Venezuelan refugee education in Colombia does leverage domestic capacity, but genuine horizontal coordination between global and local actors is sporadic, and the domestic education system has not been strengthened. IHOs persist in concentrating authority by collaborating solely with domestic actors capable of advancing their objectives and instrumentalizing those with limited administrative powers. Moreover, integration and localization have created overlapping and unclear lines of responsibility, utilized by both global and local actors to shift blame, particularly towards those with less influence in the governance structure: schools and teachers. The marginalization of local actors in decision-making, coupled with their overwhelming burden of responsibilities and limited resources, yields ad hoc solutions that are unsustainable and do not replace the short-term approach of emergency responses.

Our analysis underscores the limitations and political implications of multilevel governance arrangements in countries that fully integrate refugees with the prospect of permanence in the territory. Although this approach has notably improved access to education, the voluntary and inconsistent nature of global aid provision is depleting Colombia's capacity to integrate Venezuelan children effectively. Without authentic authority sharing, domestic actors lack motivation to assume responsibility for long-term initiatives that could further strain schools. Consequently, refugee education remains as a marginal topic for domestic authorities and schools.

These findings do not advocate for abandoning integration and localization efforts. On the contrary, our data suggests that authority and responsibility over refugee education can be equitably distributed when interventions harness existing local practices and resources of the host country. However, since this scenario is not the most common, our analysis emphasizes the need to reassess multilevel arrangements. This re-evaluation should consider not only the incentives of host countries to assume responsibility for refugees, but also the motivations of IHOs to alleviate their own burdens and the resulting global-local inequities of the diminished global responsibility. Additionally, the reassessment should consider the varying motivations of subnational units within host countries to integrate refugees, especially in resource-constrained contexts.

Future research could explore how a multilevel governance framework reveals alternative distributions of authority and responsibility in countries with different types of integration (e.g., double shift, separate schools), localization arrangements (e.g., various domestic decentralization schemes, predominant relations with non-government actors), and different prospects for refugees (e.g., limited and uncertain futures). Another area for future inquiry is tracing the accountability mechanisms within these multilevel governance models. Notably absent stakeholders in this multilevel governance structure are refugees themselves. While humanitarian organizations are supposed to represent their interests, our study suggests a prevailing accountability of these organizations to donors. Moreover, while refugees and nationals may experience similar educational conditions in countries where they attend the same schools, shared problems may not necessarily lead these two populations to push together for their demands but to tensions over scarce resources—a conflict in which refugees may be disadvantaged politically, as citizens may prioritize their own interests, disregarding the need for locally owned, sustainable educational responses for refugees.

## Funding

This research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (Canada) through an insight development grant [grant number 72060024], the Connaught New Researcher Award, and a grant from Universidad del Rosario.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Nathalia Urbano-Canal:** Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Supervision. **Indira Quintasi-Orosco:** Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Alejandra Fandiño-Hoshino:** Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Claudia Milena Diaz-Rios:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Data curation, Supervision, Writing – original draft.

## Conflicts of interest statement

None.

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