

THOUGHT PIECE

From Learning to Earning: Making TVET Work for Migrant Youth in Colombia

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hosted by UNICEF Generation Unlimited (GenU)

About the University Content Collaboration (UCC)

University Content Collaboration (UCC) is a youth-led research initiative hosted by UNICEF Generation Unlimited (GenU) that partners with university students to explore key research questions and evidence gaps in the youth skills and livelihoods space. The initiative aims to bring young people's voices into research and learning efforts while generating applied, practice-oriented findings with actionable insights for programmes, partnerships, and policy.

Through the UCC, GenU works with students in a mentorship capacity: providing guidance, feedback, technical inputs and quality assurance throughout the research and writing process, while the analysis, arguments, and conclusions remain the students' own. The collaboration is designed to elevate youth's perspectives and lived experiences to inform global programming and policy conversations, and build the capacities of a new generation of researchers, evaluators and change-makers.

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The views expressed in this piece are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of UNICEF Generation Unlimited.

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Venezuelan migrant children in Maloka (2023).

Photo credit: Secretary of Government, Bogota's Mayor's Office

Dear future leaders,

As young Colombian women, we are part of the generation most affected by the youth employment and skills crisis. We understand how difficult the transition from education to work can be, and how much harder it is for displaced and migrant youth. The private sector, governments, policymakers, civil society and development partners all have a role to play. Together, there is an opportunity to strengthen Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), which has the potential to change the lives of the 800,000 Venezuelan children and adolescents living in Colombia (El Nacional, 2025).

These challenges are set within one of the most complex displacement contexts in the world. Colombia hosts more than 2.8 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants, making it the third-largest refugee-hosting country globally (UNHCR, n.d.). At the same time, our country continues to grapple with one of the highest numbers of internally displaced people.

Youth unemployment in Colombia is a pressing structural challenge. In 2025, the youth unemployment rate was about 15.3% (DANE, 2026), nearly twice the national average of 8.9% (La Silla Vacía, 2026), with even higher rates among migrant youth. One of the biggest drivers of this gap is skills mismatch: in 2019, 65% of firms in Colombia reported difficulty filling positions because candidates lacked key competencies (OECD, 2019), and 41% of Colombians are in jobs that do not match their skill level (OECD, 2024).

Migrant girls and young women face specific structural barriers on top of these. Youth pregnancy and traditional gender roles place caregiving responsibilities disproportionately on women,

limiting their access to education, increasing their drop out risk, and harming their academic performance. The scale of this challenge is striking: while only 8% of youth aged 15-24 had children in their care in their country of origin (Venezuela), that figure rises to 23% once in Colombia (Prada Collazos et al., 2025). Migration accelerates the assumption of family responsibilities, particularly for young women.

Addressing these barriers is a collective responsibility. A comprehensive approach must also ensure that gender-responsive TVET is integrated as a fundamental part of programme design, not considered optional.

TVET is designed to bridge this gap by equipping youth with relevant skills and pathways into decent work. There is evidence it is working in practice. Colombian tertiary graduates, including those from vocational and technical programmes, are more likely to be in formal, better-paid, and more secure employment than those who did not continue their education.

But these opportunities are not reaching everyone. In 2024, only 57% of Venezuelan primary-school-aged refugees and migrant children were in school (Education Cannot Wait, 2024), indicating that almost half of them are out of school long before reaching secondary education or TVET. Even when they remain in school, and where TVET is accessible, legal, economic, and social barriers limit displaced youth's ability to benefit from these programmes.

Why It's Not Working Yet: Implementation Gaps



Photo credit: Secretary of Government, Bogota's Mayor's Office

- Economic

Economic hardship is one of the most significant barriers preventing displaced and migrant youth from accessing TVET in Colombia. Many Venezuelan migrants and internally displaced youth live in extreme poverty, making it impossible to cover even indirect costs such as transportation, materials, or foregone income from not working. In 2024, a survey found that over 28% of Venezuelan migrants live in multidimensional poverty (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, n.d.), which is more than twice the rate of the host population. This financial pressure forces youth to prioritize immediate survival in informal jobs over long-term education. Without targeted subsidies, stipends, or flexible scheduling that accommodates part-time work, TVET programmes remain inaccessible to those who need them most. Extending programmes like Renta Joven (Prosperidad Social, n.d.), which combine cash transfers for tuition and retention with community engagement and employment opportunities, to migrant youth is a critical step toward ensuring that economic hardship is no longer a barrier.

- Social

Beyond economic constraints, social barriers, particularly discrimination, prevent migrant youth from fully accessing and benefiting from TVET. Venezuelan migrants in Colombia frequently face xenophobia in educational and professional settings, discouraging enrollment and increasing dropout rates. Educational staff are often unprepared to recognize or address the specific vulnerabilities of migrant students, resulting in unequal starting points that are rarely corrected. Women face compounded disadvantages: including gender-based discrimination and the disproportionate burden of caregiving, which limit their participation (Prada Collazos et al., 2025).

- Safety and Security

Violence is a major barrier keeping migrant youth out of school and TVET programmes. Between 2022 and 2025, more than 48,000 students were directly affected by over 450 attacks on education by armed conflict groups (Ayala, 2025), forcing classes to be suspended and interrupting learning continuity. In conflict zones, armed groups control migration routes, deter travel to school, and trap families in danger (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025). Research shows that internally displaced and migrant youth have significant schooling gaps (Valenti, 2022), with IDP children having, on average, roughly half a year less educational accumulation and a lower secondary enrollment compared to non-migrant peers (Uwaifo Oyelere & Wharton, 2013). Armed conflict further discourages women and girls from pursuing education by reinforcing traditional gender roles and increasing caregiving responsibilities (Suárez-Mesa & Gómez, 2025).

- Administrative transparency

Lack of clear, accessible information and consistent administrative practices is another barrier. Even where policy guidance exists, such as the Ministry of Education Policy 038 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2023), which outlines how students without regular identification can receive diplomas, implementation and communication gaps remain. Many migrants are unaware of these

rights, don't understand how to use them, or struggle to navigate bureaucratic systems. This contributes to delays in accessing credentials, which disincentivize migrants from participating in TVET in the first place. Without intentional efforts to publicize and simplify procedures, these barriers will continue to exclude those who could benefit the most.

What needs to change

Closing these gaps requires deliberate action across three areas.

First, Colombia must build stronger public-private partnerships. TVET cannot, on its own, translate improved employability into employment outcomes. By partnering with growing industries, Colombia's TVET agency, Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA), could directly reduce skills mismatch. Tourism is the fastest-growing sector of the Colombian economy (Colombia Chamber, 2026), and reports shortages of trained hospitality, logistics, and customer service workers. If SENA formalizes training pipelines with tourism employers, especially in fast-growing cities like Cartagena, Medellín, and Bogotá, migrants and displaced youth could be directed into real, available jobs. UNESCO and ILO have documented that public-private TVET partnerships reduce youth unemployment by improving the relevance of training and creating direct hiring pathways (UNESCO et al., 2023).

Second, gender-responsive design must be built into every programme. Opportunities must offer pathways into diverse, fairly compensated sectors rather than reproducing the gender-segregated labor markets that have historically undervalued women's work.

Third, educators must be trained to apply trauma-informed, culturally sensitive practices, and programmes must be designed around the realities young women and mothers actually face.

“The decisions we make today will shape lives. We must make them count.”

A different future is possible

The barriers facing displaced and migrant youth in Colombia are complex, but they are not undefeatable. TVET has the potential to be a powerful equalizer, connecting young people with skills, dignity, and economic opportunity.

We believe a different future is possible, one where migrant youth are recognized as contributors, not burdens. But that future requires all of us: governments, the private sector, civil society, and communities. We must build TVET systems that meet young people where they are. The decisions we make today will shape lives. We must make them count.

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