Malmö University
Faculty of Culture and Society
School of Arts and Communication

Visual Ethnography:
Understanding Venezuela’s Humanitarian Disaster Through Photography

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Communication for Development

By: David Francisco Castro Peña
Supervisor: Anders Høg Hansen

January 02, 2018
Malmö, Sweden
Venezuela faces today an unprecedented social and political collapse that extends beyond the critical economy and the violence; a deadly combination of severe shortages of food and medicine which makes it extraordinarily difficult for most Venezuelans to obtain essential medical care and the adequate minimal nutritional intake to ensure survival. The primary concern of this research is to answer the question of how do visual representations of Venezuela’s humanitarian disaster elucidate the deterioration of the quality of life of its younger citizens? This study aims to examine and better understand the effects and implications of Venezuela’s humanitarian crisis on its citizenry through the use of photography as a method of qualitative research, by paying particular attention to young Venezuelans and their role as social and political agents. The study of young people’s realities through photographs provides an unique opportunity to appraise and comprehend real processes of social exchange; the ways in which visual images can be understood differently by different subjects in different socio-cultural spheres in the context of a humanitarian disaster. However, in order to enlarge the possibilities of conventional empirical research and withstand the intrinsic subjectivity of qualitative research, these visual representations were inserted into photo-interviews. Both the photographs and the photo-interviews of this study were analysed and interpreted by using the analytical approach of thick description. In this regard, this dissertation seeks to examine the length and complexity of an emergency situation by seeking to raise awareness and procure critical understanding about the colossal dimension of Venezuelan’s humanitarian crisis and its disastrous consequences on more than 30 million people.

**Keywords:** Venezuela, humanitarian disaster, crisis, emergency, food, medicine, shortages, hunger, violence, quality of life, visual ethnography, photography, photo-elicitation, thick description.
# TABLE OF CONTENT

**CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**  
I. RESEARCH QUESTIONS: 5  
II. OBJECTIVES 5  
III. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS 6  
IV. THE HUMANITARIAN DISASTER 7  

**CHAPTER II: COMDEV IN A HUMANITARIAN SITUATION** 9  

**CHAPTER III: FONS ET ORIGO** 11  
I. VENEZUELA’S OIL-BASED ECONOMY 11  
II. CHÁVEZ AND THE SOCIALISM OF THE 21ST-CENTURY 12  

**CHAPTER IV: LITERATURE REVIEW** 14  
I. PHOTOGRAPHY AS A METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION 14  
II. PHOTO-ELICITATION 16  

**CHAPTER V: STARTING THE RESEARCH PROCESS** 18  
I. USING A CASE OF STUDY 18  
II. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH 19  
II. RESEARCHER’S POSITION 20  
IV. CHOOSING THE RIGHT RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 21  
V. MIGUEL GUTIERREZ, THE PHOTOJOURNALIST 22  

**CHAPTER VI: THE PHOTOGRAPHS** 24  

**CHAPTER VII: ANALYSING THE DATA** 32  
I. THICK DESCRIPTION IN VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY 33  
II. INTERPRETING THE PHOTOGRAPHS 34  
III. INTERPRETING THE PHOTO-INTERVIEWS: 41  

**CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION** 49  

**REFERENCES** 51  

**APPENDICES** 56
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“To a hungry person, every bitter food is sweet. When the preferable is not available, the available becomes preferable! —Israelmore Ayivor

Caracas, Venezuela’s capital, is the world’s most murderous city, a place where death has become more certain than life. In 2016, Venezuela’s homicide rate was the highest in the world: 130.35 per 100,000 residents (CCSPJP, 2017, para. 1). According to Briceño-León (2012), Venezuela was not in the list of violent countries during the 80s. On the contrary, it “was an example of democracy, social policies, and peaceful behaviour”. However, the situation rapidly changed and Venezuela came to be the world’s most dangerous country with the number of murders doubling, tripling and even quadrupling in the course of two decades (para. 3). Tragically, Venezuela encounters today an unprecedented social and political collapse that extends beyond the critical economy and the violence; a deadly combination of severe shortages of food and medicines which makes it extraordinarily difficult for most Venezuelans to obtain essential medical care and the adequate minimal nutritional intake to ensure survival. The case of Venezuela cannot be seen as anything but a humanitarian disaster in spite of the government’s efforts to deny the existence of such an emergency.

ComDev practitioners usually believe that development is irreversible, however, what was once South America’s richest country has become today a bankrupt dictatorship on the verge of a full-scale humanitarian disaster. Organisations such as the United Nations and the Organisation of American States have long remained in silence affecting the health and dignity of millions of people. Even after the disproportionate repression of opposition protests in hands of Venezuelan security forces that resulted in more than 135 direct homicides, approximately 15,000 wounded citizens and hundreds of political prisoners last year (Reveron, 2017, p. 1), the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) finally made its very first report on human right violations and abuses in Venezuela in which they exhorted the General Assembly to take action on Venezuela’s social, economic, and political crisis. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017, p. 34). Political activists in Latin America are questioning whether the United Nations system has failed to fulfil its responsibilities in achieving peaceful change in the region, and are trying to influence policy-makers at different levels in order to change social and political structures as well as to challenge power dynamics within different stakeholders around the world.
I. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The purpose of this study is to examine and better understand the effects and implications of Venezuela’s humanitarian crisis on its citizenry through the use of photography as a method of qualitative research, by paying particular attention to young Venezuelans and their role as social and political agents. The study of young people’s realities through photographs and photo-interviews provide an unique opportunity to appraise and comprehend real processes of social exchange; the ways in which visual images can be interpreted and understood differently by different subjects in different socio-cultural spheres in the context of a humanitarian disaster. The primary concern of this research is to answer a question concerning the convoluted implications of the crisis:

- How do visual representations of Venezuela’s humanitarian disaster elucidate the deterioration of the quality of life of its younger citizens?

To answer this question, it will imperative to look into the domestic political and economic context of Venezuela before and after the rise of Chávez to power, in order to understand his own interpretation of socialism and its repercussions upon the country’s oil-led economy as the main sources behind the humanitarian crisis. During his mandate, poverty increased, inequality increased, hundreds of industries closed but he was still hailed as a hero by many. Venezuela’s economic collapse has had many reasons: foreign currency regulations, price controls, political corruption, State repression, impunity, among others. But the country’s poverty today is due, to a large extent, to the same thing that made Venezuela rich just a few years ago: oil.

II. OBJECTIVES

The case of Venezuela is remarkable and has to be understood from its political and economic history. Months of daily protests by hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans, mostly students, where many died and thousands were injured, have done nothing to stop the regime’s drive to aggravate the humanitarian crisis. The nationwide shortages of food and medicines and the ceaseless violent crime wave over the past few years have largely contributed to the deterioration and withering of quality of life for Venezuelans today. Hence, the specific objectives of this study are:
• Understand the impact and dimension of the scarcity of food and medicines in young Venezuelan’s lives as well as its consequences and repercussions through the analysis and perusal of photographs and photo-interviews.

• Recognise the importance of youth as advocates for social change and their impact in social stability in respect to the opinions, viewpoints and personal meanings elicited from different images.

III. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When exploring the extent of the Venezuela’s humanitarian disaster and its consequences on people’s lives, the methodology of visual ethnography and particularly photography seemed to be the most compelling research approach to put in display the evocative and graphic reality of millions of Venezuelans. Visual ethnography brings forth varied forms of visual representation such as photography or moving pictures which provide a means for recording, documenting, and explaining the social worlds, beliefs, behaviours and understandings of people on a specific context. According to Communication for Development, LTD (2017): “positive, compelling and informative visual storytelling has the power to change points of view and behaviour, to connect people who are worlds apart and to catalyse support” (p. 1). As a method of data collection, photography is not only personal but also a collaborative work where researchers and informants can serve each other. It involves researches engaging with the visual culture of their informants and handing over the camera. Informants often allow researchers the access to data they cannot gather independently (Pink, 2007, p. 88). Clearly, this was fundamental for my research as I did not have the possibilities to photograph firsthand the humanitarian crisis in Caracas. Miguel Gutierrez, a photojournalist based in the city, supplied the photographs for this study and also served as an important interviewee. This process promoted a collaborative investigative strategy in which we were able to construe while interpreting and reflecting upon the experiences, stories and diverse meanings revealed in the context of a humanitarian disaster. Miguel as a photojournalist, provided a distinctive and genuine representation of what he had in front of the camera, whereas I took the major responsibility to act as a visual storyteller rather than a mere photography researcher.

Furthermore, in order to recount these images’ stories and their significations, thick description was used as the methodological approach of the analysis as it is an intrinsic analytical resource in the
field of visual ethnography. It allows researchers to see below surface appearances by offering an understanding of underlying patterns and context that give the information a meaning. “Thick description involves looking at the rich details of the case, sorting out the complex layers of understanding that structure the social world” by the researcher (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010, para 1). However, qualitative research also acknowledges that the subjectivity of the researcher is intimately involved during an ongoing study as it conducts everything from the topic choice, to formulating a research question, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data. (Ratner, 2002, para. 2). Moreover, in order to enlarge the possibilities of conventional empirical research and withstand the intrinsic subjective of qualitative research, it was necessary to insert all of the visual representations into photo-interviews. Photo-elicitation is a technique that enables participants voices to come through, rather than only focusing on the researcher’s personal interpretation and understanding of the participants’ opinions and experiences, promoting a more direct involvement of informants in the research process, beyond the role of traditional interviews.

IV. THE HUMANITARIAN DISASTER

Venezuela’s humanitarian disaster could be worse than expected. According to Susana Rafalli, spokeswoman of Caritas Venezuela, around 300,000 children are at risk of death from malnutrition in a country where between five and six children die every week as a result of the severe lack of food. (as cited in Vinogradoff, 2017, para. 4). In 2016, a report made by ENCOVI on Venezuelan living conditions, found that nearly 75% of respondents lost an average of 8,5 kilograms involuntarily in the past year. The survey, which was conducted among 6500 families, suggested that approximately 86,3% of the country’s population, ate two times or fewer per day. (Landaeta-Jimenez, Herrea and Ramirez y Maura, 2016, p. 15) “The foods and other basic goods—such as diapers, toothpaste, and toilet paper—that people could buy were strictly limited, if available at all. For example, people usually could buy one kilogram of corn flour or rice, or two packs of diapers, per week, if those items were available. Some items, like sugar and toilet paper, have disappeared from supermarkets for months at a time” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 14). The crisis is so overwhelming that Zoo animals across the country are now being stolen and eaten as a result of the impossibility to acquire food through conventional means. However, “shortages have also left these zoos without
sufficient food to feed animals with some 50 animals starving to death last year” (The Guardian, 2017, para 9).

Likewise, skyrocketing infant and maternal mortality dramatically increased due to the significant shortages of necessary tools and even basic drugs in hospitals. Zuñiga and Miroff (2017) expressed at The Washington Post that: “more than 11,000 babies died last year, sending the infant mortality rate up 30 percent, according to Venezuela’s Health Ministry. The head of the ministry was fired by President Nicolás Maduro two days after she released those statistics” (para. 7). With hospitals suffering a catastrophic lack of supplies, child mortality is today at a higher rate than Syria (Muñoz, 2017, para. 1). But Venezuela’s health crisis affects treatment outside of hospitals as well. The great majority of patients with chronic medical conditions including cancer, HIV, diabetes, and epilepsy constantly face the impossibility to find medications. Caracas’ largest hospitals are now scrambling to cope with an influx of both newly infected and deteriorating HIV patients affecting not only LGBT people, but everyone, including infants and children:

“Unfortunately, due to the situation and the humanitarian crisis, there is no compliance with protocols, or they are not being complied with fully, which ends up exposing the child to possible infection with the HIV virus. We have recent cases of four pregnant, HIV-positive women who underwent vaginal delivery simply because there was no [safety equipment] available for obstetricians to protect themselves from possible infection [during the caesarean]” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 37).

Diphtheria and malaria, diseases that were once controlled, are also on the rise according to data released by the Ministry of Health. Venezuela used to be a world leader in controlling malaria, but is today the only country in the Americas where incidence of the disease is increasing. “The situation in 2016 was much worse, with 240,613 registered cases, a 76% increase over the previous year. Unofficial sources calculate that Venezuela might have up to 48% of all cases in the Americas in 2016. Back in 2000, that figure was 2%” (Gabaldón and Hernandez, 2017, para. 3). The medicines people need to treat these diseases are often completely unavailable at both public and private pharmacies, and if they are available on the black market, they are outrageously expensive. This healthcare crisis has gradually intensified, over a number of years, as a consequence of intentional underfunding, inadequate health policies and macroeconomic problems within a rentier state.
CHAPTER II: COMDEV IN A HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

“You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.”
— John Bunyan

Communication strategies are fundamental to many aspects of work in humanitarian disasters, conflict and post-conflict settings. The use of mass media has long been acknowledged as playing a crucial part in providing information to individuals and communities during man-made disasters. Nevertheless, technological innovations have also created new opportunities and outlets for communication, in particular, the spread of mobile phones, crowdsourcing technologies and the usage of photography on social networks. ComDev in emergencies seeks to collect and disseminate paramount information “and/or data analysis for the purposes of saving lives, alleviating suffering, and protecting the dignity of crisis-affected populations when performed in accordance with international standards of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence” (Raymond, Card & Al Achkar, 2017, n. d, p. 2). Therefore, regardless of the Venezuelan government’s endeavours to deny the existence of a crisis, this research aims to serve as an analytical instrument within the field of emergency communication in achieving a better understanding and apprehension of the Venezuelan’s humanitarian crisis and its direct implications concerning the deterioration of the quality of life of its younger citizens.

Moreover, ComDev also involves coordinated actions aimed at influencing policy-makers, public perceptions of social norms, funding decisions and community support concerning specific issues during emergency situations. It is a mechanism of seeking change in bad governance, power relations and institutional functioning through advocacy processes. According to the UNICEF, communication for advocacy “requires continuous efforts to translate relevant information into cogent arguments or justifications and to communicate the arguments in an appropriate manner to decision makers” (p. 1) in order to support protocols that benefit populations affected by existing detrimental legislation, norms and procedures. In this regard, Venezuela’s government needs to redefine and change existing laws and to promote new policies to ameliorate the quality of life of its citizens in the short-term, as the economic and political situation depicted on this research forecasts an ongoing and appalling anthropogenic catastrophe. Communication for development is not only seen as
as a way to amplify the voices of children and communities in conflict zones, facilitate meaningful participation and foster social change, but also as a two-way process for sharing ideas and knowledge that empower individuals to take actions to improve their lives.

Therefore, affected-communities, ComDev practitioners, NGO’s, and governmental agencies need clearer reports of the current humanitarian disaster in Venezuela, from both visual representations of the crisis-affected populations and their plainspoken testimonies and depositions. The increasing use of diverse communication outlets by NGO’s and affected populations has changed how information is conveyed and received during disasters. It may even be changing how some crises occur and unfold. Aid organisations have already recognised and prioritised communication as a form of assistance, as important as water, food and shelter. Without access to the right information, disaster survivors cannot access the help they require. However, criticisms towards depictions of starving children and the negative effects of dehumanising imagery that reinforce stereotypical views of developing countries, have changed NGOs’ communication approaches and practices towards more positive imagery and accounts concerning distant suffering. Nevertheless, from an ethical perspective, some people see over-positive visual representations as potentially dangerous. As stated by Orgad’s and Vella’s research collaborators: “this doesn’t address violence. In fact, it masks violence… It actually makes a lot of people feel good but it is masking a reality”. They also assert that, “if you’re self-censoring, you’re not actually depicting the real life situation… You’re saying “it’s all fine.” It’s not. That’s taking it too far the other way” (as cited in Orgad & Vella, 2013, p. 4). Thus, this research’s usage of both photography and photo-interviews aims to examine the length and complexity of an emergency situation by seeking to raise awareness and procure critical understanding about the colossal dimension of Venezuelan’s humanitarian crisis and its disastrous consequences on more than 30 million people.
CHAPTER III: FONS ET ORIGO

“Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free. Oil is a resource that anaesthetises thought, blurs vision, corrupts.” Ryszard Kapuściński

I. VENEZUELA’S OIL-BASED ECONOMY

Venezuela is a very elucidating case of the negative impact of oil-booms in oil producing countries whose economies have been configured by oil-led development and dependency. It is therefore fundamental to examine its rentier model of oil exploitation in order to make sense of the humanitarian disaster and economic collapse depicted and described by both the photographs and interviewees of this research. Chávez’s socialism of the 21st-century has been highly dependent on oil revenue and made the population grown dependent on government subsidies with no incentive to work out difficult situations. This ideology along with the windfalls of oil revenue, has facilitated a system that eliminated accountability and transparency mechanisms while also mismanaging funds under corruption and impunity. Auty (2015), analysed this occurrence in a theory called the “Resource Curse,” which he expounds emerges when “a country, usually developing, has an abundance of a natural resource that is in high demand. The resource creates a dependent, inflated economy and leads to conflict, corruption, and poverty” (as cited in Huber, 2015, para. 2). According to the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC, 2016), Venezuela has the world’s largest proven reserves of oil and natural gas, surpassing Saudi Arabia, and has exponentially become an important player in the current global economic and geo-political arena. The country possesses 302.25 billion barrels of proved oil reserves which represents 24.8% of OPEC's total and ahead of Saudi Arabia's 266.21 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, meaning 21.9% of the organisation's reserves (p. 1). Due to ascending levels of the oil price until 2008, Venezuela benefited from the largest ‘oil-bonanza’ in its entire history.

However, coinciding with a deeply polarised society and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, the impact of its oil revenues has been highly criticised and the doubt of the connection between oil revenue and social welfare in particular has been put into question. With the election of Chávez as president in 1998, poverty reduction became key priorities for the Venezuelan government. Chávez called for the creation of special social programs and projects that could address the lack of basic needs such as health, education, housing, food security and job training that were not being dealt
well-enough through conventional government mechanisms. These new programs and projects came to be known as *misiones* and were designed to serve Venezuela’s poorest areas and encourage participation from members of their communities. “The *misiones* operated as parallel structures, or a form of dual government that were able to respond quickly to urgent social need through a multi-sectoral approach that maximised specialisation and logistical capabilities” (Buxton, 2016, p. 24). However, corruption and an excessive and uncontrolled social spending, combined with the subsidised sales of goods in the national and international markets, made PDVSA incapable of fulfilling its responsibilities. Oil came to account for 96% of the total value of the country’s exports, meaning that all the foreign exchange came into the country throughout the State. As a result, the government became more reliant on the oil industry and the largely inefficient state-owned enterprises to generate revenues and future growth. These current conditions mean that the government no longer has the resources it needs to alleviate the humanitarian disaster. For the same reasons, the impact of the *misiones* is steadily being deteriorated and massive civil unrest has taken place in the country. The problems faced by Venezuelans in their daily lives, especially the impossibility of obtaining food and medicine, the water shortages and electricity rationing, have led to growing levels of protest in the country.

II. CHÁVEZ AND THE SOCIALISM OF THE 21ST-CENTURY

Correspondingly, Venezuela’s socialism of the 21st-century supported by an oil-based economy, focuses on the pursuit of an anti-capitalist project of social change via processes of state-grassroots alliances which redistribute power to the people. The significance of Chávez’s as the ideologue of this socialist movement represents the departure point of the current political and economic crisis as well as the genesis of today’s humanitarian disaster portrayed in this study’s photographs. Terms such as revolution, socialism, nationhood or equality are therefore fundamental to the discourse of the government and demand redefinition in order to build a political and social system aimed to evaluate a process that seeks to develop social justice via class warfare or class struggle. The Venezuelan process is also known by Chávez’ and Maduro’s supporters as the “Bolivarian revolution”, named after Simon Bolívar (1783-1830), Venezuela’s national hero and leader of South America’s independence from Spain.
However, within the Bolivarian Revolution and the new system of power, there was no space for plurality, political diversity and self-criticism. It is clearly to see how the government has limited and restricted different human rights such as personal freedom, personal integrity, or freedom of expression, to a group of people because their individual ideology or belief is contrary to their socialist proposal. When Chávez fired 18,000 PDVSA employees, including many of its top engineers and technicians, for no other reason than opposing his Bolivarian Revolution, the political persecution of freethinking was institutionalised. “Their offence was to have taken part in a strike called-in protest at the politicisation of the company. Their punishment was to be barred from jobs not only in PDVSA itself but also in any company doing business with the oil firm” (The Economist, 2014, para. 1) It was a blast from which PDVSA has never made a recovery. Clearly, the revolutionists have used their system to illegally increase persecution, repression and punishment of those who think differently:

The arbitrary detention of citizens without warrants; the many complaints about the violation of due process of people arrested in demonstrations; the opening of criminal proceedings to protesters with unnecessary delays in their process; public harassment by representatives of the organs of the National Government to leaders of the Venezuelan opposition; the criminalisation of protest; complaints of citizens due to physical and psychological abuse of officials from the Intelligence Agency- SEBIN and the National Guard during their detention, are systematic and repeated practices applied by the Venezuelan state officials at different levels against Venezuelan citizens who oppose or disagree with the government of President Nicolas Maduro. (CEPAZ, 2015, pp. 6-7).

In addition to these acts of collective violence, the authorities also found the way to limit media coverage of the political and economic crisis, by censoring independent and opposition media outlets, including radio and television channels. The end-result is a desolated media landscape; The 2017 Press Freedom index rated the press in Venezuela as being among the least free in the world, ranking it 137 out of 178 countries, below Afghanistan, Cambodia and Zimbabwe (World Press Freedom Index, 2017, n. p).
CHAPTER IV: LITERATURE REVIEW

"While there is perhaps a province in which the photograph can tell us nothing more than what we see with our own eyes, there is another in which it proves to us how little our eyes permit us to see." — Dorothea Lange

I. PHOTOGRAPHY AS A METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

When exploring the extent of Venezuela’s humanitarian disaster and its consequences on people’s lives, the methodology of visual ethnography seemed to be the most compelling research approach to put in display the evocative and graphic reality of millions of Venezuelans. In qualitative research and data collection, researchers can choose to combine visual media and ethnographic analysis to provide purposeful representations of meaning relating to social events. Images are everywhere. They extend throughout our everyday lives, conversations, our imagination and even our dreams. As Pink (2007) points out:

“Images are inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space and truth. Ethnographic research is likewise intertwined with visual images and metaphors. When ethnographers produce photographs or video, these visual texts, as well as the experience of producing and discussing them, become part of their ethnographic knowledge” (p. 21).

Visual ethnography brings forth varied forms of visual representation which provide a means for recording, documenting, and explaining the social worlds, beliefs, behaviours and understandings of people on a specific context. According to the SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods, visual ethnography provide a means for empowering participants to think about their personal anxieties and interests and to share their perceptions on various issues and problems that may exist within their lives. “In effect, participants are able to negotiate their visual meanings, thereby expressing their cultural understandings and, to a lesser extent, the production of meaning as attached to aspects of people's social worlds” (pp. 935-938). But rather than just a simple method for the collection of data, ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge about society, culture and individuals that is majorly based on the ethnographers’ own experiences. It might not pro-
duce objective or impartial accounts of reality but it has to offer an interpretation of the researcher’s experiences of reality which should be as honest and reliable as possible, specially, in the context of an extreme political and economic crisis. The potential of photography to capture and record people’s realities is an incredible opportunity of exploring their individual subjectivities, viewpoints and paradigms. Viewed as representations of art and creative activity, photographs are thought to embody the personal and individual concerns of the photographer/researcher. These concerns can range from the exploration of conventional social issues, the expression of the photographer's inner beliefs in regards of cultural differences, or in this case, the understanding of people’s realities in the context of a political and economic collapse.

Photographs are thought to reproduce the reality in front of the camera's lens, offering an unmediated and unbiased visual report in form of visual storytelling. As a method of data collection, photography is not only personal but also a collaborative work where researchers and informants serve each other. It involves researchers engaging with the photographic culture of their informants and handing over the camera. Informants often allow researchers the access to data they cannot gather independently (Pink, 2007, p. 88) such as spaces where it is difficult to travel for safety reasons. Clearly, this was fundamental for my research as I did not have the possibilities to photograph first-hand the humanitarian crisis in Caracas. Miguel Gutierrez, a photojournalist based in the city, supplied the images for this study and also served as an important interviewee for ethnographic purposes. This process promoted a collaborative investigative approach in which we were able to construe while interpreting and reflecting upon the experiences, stories and diverse meanings revealed in the context of a humanitarian disaster. We both contributed to the researched from different perspectives and viewpoints; while I sought to understand how participants interpreted and gave meaning to their personal experiences, Miguel and the interviewees focused on identifying, prioritising, selecting and eliciting their viewpoints and apprehensions from the photographs. Miguel provided a distinctive and genuine representation of what he had in front of the camera, whereas I took the major responsibility to act as a visual storyteller rather than a mere photography researcher. “Collaborative visual ethnography is a form of dialogic research, an approach to research which aims to bring researchers, participants and communities together in a rich dialogue about the themes, issues and meanings that have been attributed to social phenomena and lived experiences” (O’Brien, Duffer and Griffiths, 2014, n. p).

Collaborative visual ethnography pays strong attention to participants and researchers as co-creators of knowledge in order to develop authentic representations of the different opinions, perspectives
and lived experiences of participants. It surpasses the dominant conventions of researcher-driven groundwork in which the interests, understandings and interpretations of the researcher are given priority over those of participants. As Miguel had control over the camera, my attention focussed on his visual messages, the different participants who shape his content and the information gather from the experiences and realities portrayed within the images. The usage of photography encourages participants to identify, reflect upon and communicate their own values, understandings and points of view. “The process of visual narrative construction encourages critical reflection among and between the participant and researcher groups and can sometimes lead to identification of potential solutions to troubling community issues”. (O’Brien, Duffer and Griffiths, 2014, n. p). Photographs or practices are not ethnographic by nature and the “ethnographicness” of photography is determined by discourse and content. Elizabeth Edwards (1992) suggested that: “an anthropological photograph is any photograph from which an anthropologist could gain useful, meaningful visual information” (as cited in Pink, 2007, p. 67). Certainly, any photograph may have ethnographic appeal, significance or meanings at a particular time or for a specific reason that can be elucidated through the process of thick description, an analytical approach of visual ethnography that will be explained in chapter VII. Therefore it is fundamental that ethnographers and researchers comprehend the local and broader discourses and meanings in which photographs are made relevant and purposeful, in both fieldwork situations and academic scenarios. However, in order to enlarge the possibilities of conventional empirical research and withstand the intrinsic subjectivity of qualitative research, it is necessary to insert all of the visual representations into photo-interviews

II. PHOTO-ELICITATION

Photo-elicitation is a qualitative research technique where photographs are used to stimulate and encourage conversations between participants and researchers in interviews. It aims to activate innermost responses and memories and reveal people’s opinions, views, beliefs, and interpretations of their realities. It promotes more direct involvement of participants in the research process and encourages and stimulates their participation beyond the role of traditional interviews. The distinction between interviews using photographs and interviews using words relies in the ways people respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. According to Harper (2002), “this has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that
process verbal information” (p. 13). Therefore, photographs stimulates deeper segments of human consciousness than words as the interactions based on words use less of the brain’s capacity than then interactions in which the brain is processing images. “In fact, the brain processes images 60,000 times faster than it does text. And it’s more accustomed to processing images—ninety percent of the information sent to the brain is visual, and 93% of all human communication is visual” (Pant, 2015, para. 4). According to many researchers, using images in research interviewing has extraordinarily advantages:

The majority of researchers have recognised the power of images, over oral interviews, to trigger richer conversations about the community, memories, and reflections (Clarke-Ibanez, 2004; Hazel, 1995; Holliday, 2000). Moreover, researchers have also asserted that the inclusion of photographs could operate as a bridge between the distant social and cultural worlds of the researcher and research subjects (Epstein et al., 2006; Harper, 2000; Wagner, 2002) and could contribute to the denaturalisation of the interviewees’ social worlds and their critical reassessment (Prosser, 1998). Finally, researchers have also positively valued the inclusion of photographs because of the open and indexical nature of images. In this sense, photographs favour richer interpretations of social actors’ perspectives by researchers and readers, and can potentially challenge researchers’ analyses (as cited in Meo, 2010, p. 150)

Another justification for the use of photo-elicitation is that the format utilised for representing specific ideas and intentions on photographs can strategically influence what people are able to say apropos of an ethnographic research. Images enable people to talk about different things in a more personal and intimate way. Photographs are a way to access participants’ implicit knowledge or what they might be hesitant to share. Lived experiences can be difficult to put into words because they are part of an unconscious undergone process, but images help to extract these ideas out into the open and get beyond the limitations of the written word. Photographs allow participants to feel more comfortable which helps enable them to speak intimately. “The photo can serve as an anchor point or as a springboard, and represents a sort of safety net for the participant as well as the researcher. Participants can sometimes have difficulty verbalising their experiences in an articulate manner” (Hatten, Forin and Adams, 2013, p. 4). Likewise, photo-elicitation forges a starting-point for these participants; “the burden is not on the participant to come up with a response completely on their own, as they can use the photo to help them craft their answers” (p. 5). Suggested in every photograph are several decisions about the places, objectives, and motives within the photo which provide opportunities for participants to express their individual conceptions of their world and realities. “The eyes look, but the brain sees”.
CHAPTER V: STARTING THE RESEARCH PROCESS

“Research is to see what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought.”
— Albert Szent-Gyorgyi

This part of the dissertation will present and discuss the initial process of finding the right methodological framework in order to answer the research question and whether this method was useful during the process of collecting data for further analysis. First, a remark about the use of a case study in qualitative research, then a brief elucidation of my position as a researcher, and finally a recount of my decision-making process in regards of the right research methodology and an outline about Miguel Gutierrez and his work as a photojournalist in Venezuela.

I. USING A CASE OF STUDY

A case study research starts with the desire to acquire in-depth knowledge or understanding, of a single or multiple cases, set in a real-life context, feasibly resulting in new learnings about real-world behaviour and its meaning; therefore examining the context and other elements related to the case or cases being studied, is fundamental for the study’s analysis, interpretation and discussion. By bringing attention to the study of a phenomenon within its real-life context, the case study method favours the collection of data in natural settings, compared with relying on “derived” data (Bromley, 1986, p. 23). However, “the case study is not itself a research method, but researchers select methods of data collection and analysis that will generate material suitable for case studies” (McLeod, 2008, para. 3), this means that the use of interviews, questionnaires or observational methods are essential as they collect and provide first-hand data that can be very useful for the researcher in understanding the social phenomenon in question. Clearly, having a case is relevant for my dissertation as it explain the ways the humanitarian disaster in Venezuela affects the quality of life of the great majority of young Venezuelans as a result of the severe scarcity of food and medicines and the acute violence; as well as a justification for the significance of this group in the social and political scene in Venezuela.
II. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

An important phase in defining the research process is to choose the most suitable methodological approach according to the research question. In my case, qualitative methodology was the approach that best met my research needs, because it allowed me to study in-depth the humanitarian disaster and its impact on young Venezuelans by exploring their individual contexts and circumstances. Consequently, I decided on this approach as I was going to look at young people’s realities and experiences in order to contextualise it within the political and economic crisis of the country. The significance of this approach according to Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, and Varpio (2015) is that it draws attention into social phenomena in natural settings. “These phenomena can include, but are not limited to, how people experience aspects of their lives, how individuals and/or groups behave, how organisations function, and how interactions shape relationships. In qualitative research, the researcher is the main data collection instrument” (para. 2).

However, it is important to mention that “qualitative research is empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers” (as cited in McLeod, 2008, para. 2) which implies that it is not about the quantity of the sample to collect information, but more about the quality of the data, and the attributes and distinctions of the case of study. In order to collect comprehensive and useful information, my research was based on a collaborative visual ethnographic process in which I served as a co-creator of the knowledge necessary to understand young Venezuelan’s actualities in connection with a humanitarian crisis. In addition to the photographs, I inserted all of the visual representations into research interviews with the objective of obtaining a wider and deeper apprehension of the political and economic crisis that millions of Venezuelans undergo everyday. The photo-elicitation technique centred around discussions of the photographs by preparing and assembling photographic sets which represented the situation from different perspectives and standpoints. In this regard, I understood that a case study had to rest upon multiple sources of evidence in order to provide a more detailed and effective structure to implement an adequate perusal. Photography was in need of a data collection instrument to generate additional pertinent and convenient empirical information to further analysis and interpretation and photo-interviews emerged as the most natural and appropriate adjunct.
II. RESEARCHER’S POSITION

Qualitative research acknowledges that the subjectivity of the researcher is intimately involved during an ongoing study. Subjectivity conducts everything from the topic choice, to formulating a research question, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data. (Ratner, 2002, para. 2) In qualitative methodology, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on the values and objectives he brings to his research and how these affect the research project. It also seeks to understand the subjective experience of both the researchers and the participants. Additionally, qualitative research must be comprehensive with interpretive and intuitive openness through a process by which researchers attempts to acknowledge their preconceived prejudices, biases, and stereotypes while disclosing the lens through which they build an interpretation of the subject. However, it is important to say that qualitative methodology can also have an objectivist strand as well:

Objectivism integrates subjectivity and objectivity because it argues that objective knowledge requires active, sophisticated subjective processes—such as perception, analytical reasoning, synthetic reasoning, logical deduction, and the distinction of essences from appearances. Conversely, subjective processes can enhance objective comprehension of the world (para. 8).

Everyone is bound to have predisposed ideas about the outcome of a research, as well as why a certain research topic is chosen in the first place. Researchers will also be affected by their former experiences and individual backgrounds. Therefore, I believe readers of this dissertation need to know my identity as a researcher, my investment in this topic, and my intentions within this project. I was born and raised in Venezuela and I lived most of my life under Chavez’s regime. I was both, an eyewitness and partaker of the political and economic collapse of the country for over a decade; sometimes as a witness, and some other as a victim. As a master’s degree student at Malmö University, my seeking after an appropriate research methodology for my Degree Project led me to develop interest in visual ethnography as a method of qualitative research to put on display the Venezuelan reality. I was inevitably engaged in the tortuous process of narrowing down my research topic, honing my questions, and trying to find the most appropriate way of selecting the right technique to collect the most desirable data for analytical purposes. The current paper is the product of this decision-making process. Thus, my intention is to provide a vivid and explicit illustration, through the analysis of photographs and photo-interviews, of my own experience as well as the experiences of the vast majority of Venezuelans who are perishing in the hands of a criminal dictatorship. Rather than aspiring to an unreachable goal of absolute objectivity, I believe that it is important to simply
be honest and transparent about my subjectivities and personal positions in order to allow my readers to draw their own conclusions about the interpretations that are presented through this research.

IV. CHOOSING THE RIGHT RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The theories used in research to understand and interpret phenomena in the world have a direct influence on the research topic and how the collected data and information are being analysed. Data is often used to generate hypotheses and measure variables based on the results of the collected information. However, often compilations of statistics and numbers piling together are not the answer to analyse meanings, beliefs and experiences, sometimes intangible, of individuals in specific contexts and situations. In terms of comprehending a humanitarian disaster and the personal opinions and stances of young Venezuelans regarding the economic collapse of their country, it was vital to employ a qualitative methodology to collect the data needed to answer their research question. With the intensification of the political and economic crisis in Venezuela, all-encompassing criticism of both Maduro’s government and its political opposition, originated from both sides of the political spectrum. I knew it was a very contentious and vexed topic of research, taking into account the susceptibilities and sensitivities of the individuals appraised, so it was important to tackle and address it correctly as I was dealing not only with people’s personal views and standpoints, but also with my own subjectivities and personal stances as a researcher. I also understood that the vivid, evocative and graphic reality of the Venezuelan case was intended to be studied through the lens of a camera because it was the most suitable way of exploring and documenting the lived experiences and meanings of people inside the country. Photography as a method of data collection, offered me an opportunity for collaboration with other research colleagues and participants upon my research which was an exceptional opportunity for challenging many imageries and biases. Also, it offered me the chance of putting on display the delicate and difficult reality that some of my friends and relatives are going through as way of honouring my own biography and history. I also wanted to enlarge the possibilities of conventional empirical research through the use of photography, so I decided to insert all of the visual representations into research interviews. The intention was that the photographs used by participants were not necessarily the focus of the interview, rather, they were
used as a support table to understand their perceptions and impressions and embrace their viewpoints and positions concerning the humanitarian disaster.

V. MIGUEL GUTIERREZ, THE PHOTOJOURNALIST

Finding the right research collaborator for my dissertation was as important as choosing the right research methodology. I was conscious that as a method of data collection, photography was not only personal but also a collaborative work where researchers and informants served each other. These informants often allowed researchers the access to data they could not gather independently (Pink, 2007, p. 88). I started an exploratory process on social media platforms in which I sought to identify possible and potential photojournalists that could be interested in assisting me with the images. I contacted approximately 5 photojournalists on Instagram and Facebook whose photographs went viral during the 2017 protests in Venezuela and were published by international news agencies. I was intrigued and fascinated with the allurement, allegiance and virtuosity of some of these images and their capability of communicating the difficult reality of young Venezuelans under Maduro’s regime in such a reliable manner. However, some of these photojournalists only worked with specific topics imposed by their corresponding news organisations and could not assist me in capturing and depicting the humanitarian crisis for my ethnographic purposes. Nevertheless, Miguel Gutierrez, a photojournalist based in Caracas who had been working with different topics in Venezuela, was interested in serving as my research photographer. I became aware of his outstanding and impressive work when one of his photographs made it to the front page of almost every single newspaper in Venezuela during the protests last year (figure 1).

Unquestionably, it was a privilege to be assisted by Miguel, not only as a photographer but also as a participant during the photo-interviews. His practical knowledge, professional background and experience with the camera, made him the ideal collaborator for a visual ethnographic research, being that he also worked for many international news agencies in recent years. At present, he manages the photography department of EFE International News Agency in Caracas, where he has worked since 2012. Prior to this, he worked for France-Presse International News Agency as a photojournalist covering news and sports in Venezuela. His photographs have been published by The New York Times, The Washington Post, The United Nations, ESPN, Sports Illustrated, Le Monde and
The Guardian. As a matter of fact, the report made by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, cited on this research introduction, features Miguel’s photographs. In regard to this dissertation, Miguel had complete control over the camera. This compel my attention to focus on his visual messages, the different participants who shaped his content and the information gather from the experiences and realities portrayed within the images. The process promoted a collaborative learning experience in which we learned while creating and reflecting upon the different experiences, stories and diverse meanings revealed in the context of a humanitarian crisis. Miguel and I contributed to the research from different angles; while I sought to understand how participants interpreted and gave meaning to their personal experiences, Miguel focused on identifying and eliciting his viewpoints and apprehensions from his photographic work.

Figure 1.: Opposition demonstrators clash with Bolivarian National Guard in Caracas, 2017.
CHAPTER VI: THE PHOTOGRAPHS

“It’s one thing to make a picture of what a person looks like, it’s another thing to make a portrait of who they are.” — Paul Caponigro

The following 16 photographs have been used as a means for data collection and analysis on this research. No captions or explanations have been included on this chapter in order to allow readers to freely construct their own meanings and interpretations. “Photographs can only represent culture of people or only represent part of the story if they are ideologically constructed rather than naturally taken” (as cite in Kharel, n. d, 157). The meanings of photographs are unpredictable and subjective and they depend on who is looking. The same photographic image may have a variety of (perhaps conflicting) meanings invested in it at different stages of ethnographic research and representation, as it is viewed by different eyes and audiences in diverse temporal historical, spatial and cultural contexts (Pink, 2007, pp. 65-95). The analysis and interpretation in regards of the photographs will be given in chapter VII.

Figure 2.
Figure 4.: [Mom, I went to defend Venezuela today, if I don’t come back, I perished with her]
Figure 13.

Figure 14.
CHAPTER VII: ANALYSING THE DATA

“In photography there is a reality so subtle that it becomes more real than reality.”
— Alfred Stieglitz

Photography, since its inception, has been a resource for anthropologists in the recording and analysis of ethnographic data. By using photography in ethnographic fieldwork, many researchers acknowledged that the photographic image is ‘true’ in the sense that it holds a visual trace of a reality the camera was pointed at (as cited in Kharel, n. d, p. 149). “Many visual research scholars such as MacDougall (1997), Banks (2007), and Harper (1998) remark that photographs were a prominent feature of ethnographies” during the emergence of academic photography (p. 149). MacDougall (1997), for example, remarked that ‘features such as nakedness and the use of animal products (feathers, skin, hair and bones), communicated by means of photographs and visible artefacts in museum and magazine illustrations, became symbolic indicators of how close people were to nature (p. 279):

Methodologically, to make the photographs ‘intellectually denser’, Becker (1974) suggests the photographer must become conscious of the theory that guides one’s photography. That theory may be ‘lay theory’- taken for granted assumptions about the world is organised or it may be ‘deep, differentiated and sophisticated knowledge of the people and activities they investigate — for photographic projects concerned with exploring society it means learning to understand society better’ (as cited in Kharel, n. d, p. 150).

Banks (2007), on the other hand, mentions that researchers must be sensitive to local perception of photography and should always try and establish connections and correspondence with people before taking photographs. He asserts that photographs are open documents where viewers can learn and construct layers of cultural meaning. (p. 150-151). Thus, images do not only speak louder than words but also provide individual meanings, especially if it is not clarified by an explanatory caption, offering the viewer almost total freedom to follow up and ‘construct’ any number of meaning from those potentially contained within it (p. 151). Therefore, the 16 photographs used on this research will be analysed by using the ethnographic approach of thick description.
I. THICK DESCRIPTION IN VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

A key analytical approach of visual ethnography is the process of “thick description” – a method used to characterise a social event or action that takes into account not only the immediate behaviours in which individuals are engaged but also the contextual and experiential understandings of those behaviours that make the event or action meaningful. “In case study research, thick description involves looking at the rich details of the case, sorting out the complex layers of understanding that structure the social world” (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010, para 1). According to Geertz (1973) one action that outwardly appears to be the same can in fact have multiple meanings depending on the intentions of the person who performs it (and of course the person interpreting or receiving that message):

In one this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-camera, 'phenomenalistic' observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however, unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows (para. 12)

The distinction between the two twitches lies in the intentions of the two boys, and the social codes that exist surrounding such gestures which separate a mere twitch from intentional communicative language. “The meaning of the wink as a culturally informed activity, whether it is intended to communicate seduction, complicity, parody, or anything else—rests not in the movement of the eye but in the intricate layers of inference and interpretation that turn the movement of an eye into an act of social significance” (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010, para 3). Thick description, Geertz argues, is the ultimate objective of ethnography, which is "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not … in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids” (Geetz, 1973, para. 14). The goal of case study research is to understand the characteristics and particularities of the case in question. “Thick description contributes to achieving this outcome through the emphasis it places on detail; context; thoughts; feel-
ings; webs of relationships; and meanings that are both spoken out loud and those that are communicated by gesture, silence, and innuendo” (para. 4).

II. INTERPRETING THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Geertz (1973) suggests that an ethnographer must present a “thick description” which is composed not only of facts but also of commentary, interpretation and understandings made by his own perspectives and stances in order to produce new knowledge. He asserts that:

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author’s ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzle-ment—what manner of men are these? (para. 44)

Therefore, I will analyse these 16 photographs from 5 major points of views in regards of its ethnographic content. In addition, these images will also be interpreted and understood from the perspectives and stances of the interviewees of this research. By working with ethnographic photographs in the context of a humanitarian crisis and presenting them for a discussion within photo-interviews, I generated opinions and understandings in an attempt to elicit and gain access to the meanings shared by the participants. All of the photographs used on this research were taken in 2017 by Miguel Gutierrez in Caracas and were carefully selected vis-à-vis my research necessities. Some of the photographs had been already posted by Miguel on his social media platforms and published by several news agencies in Latin America and Spain; some others were taken specifically for this research, and were approved and selected according to my case study. Miguel and I worked meticulously together in assembling a cohesive narrative along the 16 chosen photographs whereas the humanitarian disaster could be exhibited as honestly and veraciously as possible. Most of the discussions and exchange of views took place on WhatsApp Messenger while photographs were shared via e-mail for further examination. Deliberation occur twice a week during a time frame of 3 months in which 3 different compilation of photographs were pieced together for analytical, methodical and interpretative purposes. These compilations were set out on an online platform following an strategic plan-of-action addressed to mould the photo-interviews and will be explained further ahead.
In order to understand these 16 photographs, I will examine and interpret them by taken into consideration 5 major categories of analysis:

1. Biographical: Who are the people on the photographs?

Venezuela is a multiethnic country comprising a rich combination of different heritages. About 51.6% of the population is mestizo (of mixed European and indigenous ancestry) while 43.6% are white of European ancestry (specially from Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and German descent). Another 3.7% is black/African, while 1.0% is of other ethnicity, including Asian people. (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2014, p. 29). Figure 5. and figure 13. expose to view the racial diversity of Venezuelan people in a country where most of its citizens, regardless of how white or dark-skinned they are, will proudly say that they consider themselves to be nothing but simply mestizos. According to Central Intelligence Agency (2017), the population is 31,304,016 in 2017 and is largely concentrated in the northern and western highlands along an eastern spur at the northern end of the Andes, an area that includes the capital of Caracas. 64.9% of the total population is between 15 and 65 years of age whereas 10,196,132 are males and 10,321,746 are females. Venezuela’s sex ratio is in average 0.98 males per 100 females (p. 1). Furthermore, figure 9. shows the sometimes surreal art of extreme queueing in front of supermarkets and grocery stores in major cities like Caracas or Valencia where overcrowding is quite common and food is very scarce. Both women and men are given time off work to queue, specially younger Venezuelans. They get up early in the morning to queue for about 7-8 hours every single day. Often people join a queue without even knowing what's on sale. They get into line and then they ask the person in front what they're waiting for. However, Venezuela’s minimum monthly wage worths $4.30 which hardens the chances of buying the basic basket of food. “After almost 20 years of this Chavismo, those in poverty increased (between 2014 and 2016 the poverty increased from 48.4 % to 82% while extreme poverty rose from the 27% to 52%), the middle class has almost disappeared and the economy is completely imploded” (Montanari, 2017, para. 3). Certainly, the people on the photographs are not only depressed and demoralised but they have also been intentionally impoverished and deprived by the ruling class. They are penurious, hopeless and agonising individuals. Most of them have left behind their normal lives in order to ensure they will have a meal the next day. As faithfully described in the 16 photographs of
this dissertation, there is no quality of life whatsoever; surviving and enduring is their only and ultimate goal.

2. Situational: What is the context behind the photographs?

Venezuela faces today an unprecedented social and political collapse that extends beyond the street violence. Annual inflation in crisis-hit Venezuela is the world’s highest as its triple-digit inflation is set to jump to more than 2,300 % this year, the highest ever estimated for any country tracked by the International Monetary Fund. (Laya & Saraiva, 2017, p. 1). Figures 5., 6., 7., and 8. put on display the reality of a country where prices go up mercilessly from one day to another. With no solution to the food shortages, these people have begun looking for new strategies to make life easier by eating trash to sustain. It is quite common to see crowds of people searching through piles of garbage for some leftovers to eat. From children to the elderly, even a woman in work uniform in figure 6., many Venezuelans are turning into scavenging to ensure survival. These photographs reassure the enlargement of a humanitarian disaster in one of the world’s potentially richest countries. Likewise, figures 11. explicitly illustrates the dimension of the healthcare crisis in Venezuela through the face of moribund man whose fate is to die cruelly and slowly in one of the many hospitals that don’t function in Venezuela. Similarly, figure 12. also shows an aged-man with a chronic disease laying on the floor as a result of being offered a bed with two broken legs. Services are extremely limited in both public hospitals and private clinics, where shortages of supplies have reduced the number of beds available to its lowest point. But finding a hospital spot is no guarantee that the patient will receive the required treatment being that that hospitals currently have less than 5% of the supplies needed to operate normally. The critical scenario includes shortages of medicines for treating severe diseases like cancer, diabetes and HIV, and for containing outbreaks of contagious diseases such as malaria and diphtheria. However, the context behind the photographs is more devastating than this. Figures 14., 15., and 16. recount the assassination of David José Vallenilla in the hands of a national soldier which ratifies that violence is one of the most harrowing issues Venezuela encounters today. According to the CCSPJP (2017), Caracas is the world’s deadliest city with 130.35 homicides per 100,000 residents (para. 1). However, this is not an isolated condition of Caracas. Three other Venezuelan cities are among the world’s 10 most violent: Maturín, Guayana and Valencia (para. 2). Criminality and delinquency is well-spread across the country and as Vallenilla’s murder conveys, Ma-
37

3. Historical: What led to this crisis?

As Venezuela suffers a massive humanitarian crisis, it is not difficult to distinguish its specific causes or sources. Two of the major starting-points of this disaster were carefully explained and recounted in chapter II. However, they are not exclusive; corruption is another fundamental core behind the food and medicines shortages and the dreadful street violence. According to Transparency International (2017), Venezuela scored 17 points out of 100 on the 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index and the position 166 out of the 176 countries under investigation and analysis (p. 1). The vast natural resources in Venezuela should make it an extremely profitable and prosperous economy, but those resources are instead used to directly profit the pockets of the ruling class. The National Assembly’s stated in 2016 that $70 billion (about 16% of Venezuela’s overall GDP) was purloined from public institutions. It also determined that one of the most corrupt institutions in the government is the state-owned oil company PDVSA which accounts for roughly 95% of Venezuela’s export revenues and 25% of the country’s GDP (Venezuela Investigative Unit, 2017, para. 3). Nevertheless, $70 billion may even underestimate the true scale of corruption in the country. Oscar Solorzano, a Peruvian lawyer at the International Centre for Asset Recovery of the Basel Institute on Governance, denounced that “$350 billion have been siphoned off from government coffers, 3.5 times more than any other country in the world” (para. 9). Figures 8. and 9. pay particular attention to the dimension of 20 years of extreme corruption and failed policies: supermarkets are empty while streets are full of hungry people. Unquestionably, Venezuela is running out of almost everything these days: food, medicine and even electricity. Some neighbourhoods go without power for up to 12 hours a day due the nationwide electricity rationing (Otis, 2016, para. 5). But this is not all, high-level politicians and military officials are suspected of being deeply involved in Venezuela’s lucrative cocaine trade and terrorism. Venezuela’s vice-president, Tareck El Aissami, was accused by the US government of “playing a major role in international drug trafficking” and terrorism. He was declared and sanctioned by the US Treasury Department as an important designated narcotics transnational criminal. Consequently, Venezuela is delivered into a human tragedy that is not only economic and social but also political. The situation is compounded by political violence, repression, and the persecution of nationalist dissidents and international human rights organizations. The dictatorial regime is also responsible for the killings and persecution of dissidents. Figure 2. epitomises the menacing context in which the vast majority of Venezuelans are immersed today: endangerment, hopelessness and demise.
trafficker. According to The Guardian (2017): “El Aissami has been the target of American law enforcement investigation for years, stemming from his days as interior minister when dozens of fraudulent Venezuelan passports ended up in the hands of people from the Middle East” without any correspondence with Venezuela (para. 7). It is not an easy task to assimilate the many reasons at the back of this crisis. However, the consequences and repercussions of a rentier-state amalgamated with a corrupt socialist regime rapidly precipitated the humanitarian disaster which is represented and divulged over the 16 photographs used on this dissertation.

4. Relational: What’s happening on the photographs?

In order to understand the specific circumstances and occurrences of the 16 photographs, they will be incorporated into three different thematic groups:

- **Group 1 - Violence/polarisation**: Venezuelan society has become divided on almost everything, in two parallel worlds, between chavismo and the opposition. Figures 1. exhibits the emotional strain and political unease between these two narratives: the security forces embodying the chavismo and the Venezuelan youth personifying the voices of millions of Venezuelans who oppose Maduro’s government. Figures 2. and 4. point to the hopelessness and desolation of a suppressed and restrained country where students battle against pellets, marbles, teargas canisters and bullets with creativity and conviction. “Mom, I went to defend Venezuela today, if I don’t come back, I perished with her” denotes the overwhelming evidence of extreme force against peaceful protestors by the National Police and National Guard. Some of these munitions have been used unlawfully, at too close a range or directly targeting people, causing severe injury or death. In many cases, such as figure 3., the victims clearly did not pose imminent threat to the integrity of the authorities. The girl on the floor signifies the brutality of a repressive and criminal regime over anyone who dares to think differently. In fact, the assassination of David José Vallenilla in figures 14., 15., and 16. truly elucidates and clarifies the extent of this brutality: this is not only a repressive regime but also a murderous and homicidal one.

- **Group 2 - Food shortages**: Families in Venezuela are substituting traditional groceries for more available alternatives, including garbage leftovers. Figure 9. shows Venezuela’s distressing actu-
ality: a severe food shortage that forces most people in the nation to wait in supermarket queues that can last up to eight hours. The government put into effect a socialist ration system in which Venezuelans were prohibited to buy more than what it was allowed by law. Likewise, figure 9. also makes manifest Maduro’s order to have military units in front of supermarkets to crack down and arrest anyone attempting to buy more than their permitted rations. However, this is virtually impossible as groceries stores’ shelves lie bare. Therefore, thousands of people have no option than to eat the trash left on the streets. On average, 75% of Venezuelans have lost 8.5 kilograms due to food shortages. Figures 5., 6., and 7. unveils the despair and anguish of many Venezuelans, including children, who could literally starve to death if the humanitarian disaster worsens. For the individuals on these photographs, meals consisted of rotten tomatoes and expired milk. For others, meals consisted of a small piece of bread and a glass of water.

• **Group 3 - Medicine shortages/health emergency:** In Venezuela's hospitals, the chaos never stops, as every day is a struggle for survival. The economic collapse has sparked a public health emergency that has claimed the lives of thousands and deprived many others of treatment and care. The medical needs are basic, but deeply felt, ranging from gloves to antibiotics and from clean water to available beds. Figure 12. exemplifies the critical condition of some patients across the country where their only option is to rest on the floor. Inside most of these hospitals, “paint has peeled off walls, there are dirty hallways, broken floors and death. Bloodied needles, used tubes, bandages and soiled diapers -- medical waste that should otherwise be disposed of in closed containers -- is often left in open bags in some hallways, letting out an acrid stench” (ABC News, 2016, para. 19). Accordingly, figures 10. and 11. also confirms that both children and elderly suffer the most and are more susceptible to die. The rate of death among babies under a month old increased more than a hundredfold and malaria cases soared to over 240,000 in 2016, a 76% increase over 2015. But as the humanitarian crisis aggravates, more illnesses, more deaths and more doctors leaving the country.

5. **Interactional: What are the meanings of these photographs?**

Each photograph has an unspoken biography which recounts its own story and testimony in a real-life episode. This is not a secluded occurrence but rather a synergic and interactional practice of in-
terpretation between the photographs and the photographer/researcher. I believe that each photograph is born with an appellative which communicates and explains its raison d’être and therefore, its personal signification. Thus, the photographs of this research will be labelled and designated with a common noun according to the meanings and intentions of their concealed imagery. In this regard, the Merriam-Webster dictionary will be used to expound each of the chosen words.

- **Figure 1.** *Skirmish* - minor fight in war usually incidental to larger movements.
- **Figure 2.** *Resistance* - act to withstand a force.
- **Figure 3.** *Oppression* - unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.
- **Figure 4.** *Bravery* - having mental or moral strength to face danger, fear, or difficulty.
- **Figure 5.** *Starvation* - to perish from lack of food
- **Figure 6.** *Struggle* - to proceed with difficulty or with great effort
- **Figure 7.** *Requirement* - something essential to the existence.
- **Figure 8.** *Emptiness* - containing nothing.
- **Figure 9.** *Chaos* - a state of utter confusion.
- **Figure 10.** *Anguish* - extreme pain, distress, or anxiety.
- **Figure 11.** *Moribund* - being in the state of dying.
- **Figure 12.** *Hopelessness* - having no expectation of good or success.
- **Figure 13.** *Sorrow* - deep distress, sadness, or regret especially for the loss of someone or something loved.
- **Figure 14., 15 and 16.** *Demise* - a cessation of existence.

This bestowal of name and identity is a kind of symbolic contract between the photograph and the researcher. Seen from one side of the contract, by giving a name the researcher confirms the individual existence of the photographs and their intentions towards their audiences and spectators. The name differentiates the photograph from others within the same thematic, thus, making it easier for the researcher to distinguish them as independent units of signification. Each of these photographs’ names explain and justify their meanings, implications and significance in unravelling the humanitarian disaster in Venezuela.
III. INTERPRETING THE PHOTO-INTERVIEWS:

I also conducted 4 in-depth photo-interviews which focused on young Venezuelans’ experiences and understandings of the humanitarian disaster as well as their evolving apprehension of the negative effects upon their everyday lives, including individual reports of specific occurrences in regards of the food and medicines shortages and the street violence. The data was collected over a period of three months. Several candidates were selected through Instagram and Facebook by evaluating their academic and professional backgrounds, the potentiality behind their opinions and conjectures of the crisis and their compliance to reveal their identities. Results from the preliminary evaluation were used to strategically recruit 5 final participants that represented different experience levels (from undergraduates to working professionals) and epistemological participation (whether they were involved in some kind of youth’s activism) as well as gender and racial diversity. However, it is important to note that the photo-interview with Miguel Gutierrez did not have any prior assessment and was planned and arranged since the beginning of this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rafael Cerrada</td>
<td>Youth activist</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel Gutierrez</td>
<td>Photojournalist</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Orozco</td>
<td>Political Science student</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica Orozco</td>
<td>Dental student</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José M. Cirera</td>
<td>Economist</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As stated before, photo-elicitation is a technique that enables participants voices to come through, rather than only focusing on the researcher’s personal interpretation and understanding of the interviewees’ opinions and experiences. Hence, it allows the participants to assert agency in the research process and to diminish the distance between the researcher and the case of study. Individuals do not interpret each experience in an identical manner as interpretations are unique to each person. Therefore, when using photographs to elicit peoples’ ideas and significations, it is not enough to ask them to describe the pictures; rather, the relevant questions should convene on explaining what the
photo represents and means. Implicit in each of the 16 images of this dissertation are personal decisions about the places, individuals, and motives within the photographs, providing the opportunity for participants to express intimate conceptions of the context in which they live in. Certainly, responses to the 9 intended questions demonstrated that these images held deep meanings and were not randomly hand-picked with little preparation. I always made clear from the start the purpose of the interview, and why I was conducting this research. I explained my situation of being a Venezuelan but not living in the country over the past several years, and therefore missing out many important details and eventualities of the humanitarian disaster.

Table 2. Interview questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 1.</th>
<th>Section 2.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions asked:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. If you were to describe the situation in</td>
<td>1. If you were to describe the situation in Venezuela in one word, what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela in one word, what would it be?</td>
<td>would it be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How is this word represented in any of the</td>
<td>2. How is this word represented in any of the photographs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>photographs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How is your own reality depicted on the</td>
<td>3. How is your own reality depicted on the photographs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>photographs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What would you say is the overall message</td>
<td>4. What would you say is the overall message of the images?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the images?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Would you say that these photographs display</td>
<td>5. Would you say that these photographs display the reality of the vast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the reality of the vast majority of</td>
<td>majority of Venezuelans? Explain why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuelans? Explain why.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. According to the images, would you say that</td>
<td>6. According to the images, would you say that Venezuela is an example of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela is an example of a humanitarian</td>
<td>a humanitarian disaster? Choose one photograph and explain why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disaster? Choose one photograph and explain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>why.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Has the quality of life of Venezuelans been</td>
<td>7. Has the quality of life of Venezuelans been affected as a result of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affected as a result of the humanitarian</td>
<td>humanitarian disaster?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disaster?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Can any of these photographs recount how</td>
<td>8. Can any of these photographs recount how your quality of life has been</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your quality of life has been affected?</td>
<td>affected?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What is your opinion about the international</td>
<td>9. What is your opinion about the international community’s role regarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community’s role regarding the humanitarian</td>
<td>the humanitarian disaster?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disaster?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews were conducted over the phone and using an online platform for exhibiting the photographs. The images were arranged in 3 different compilations and were strategically allocated to different participants in order to elicit individual opinions and responses about the different angles of the crisis; Rafael Cerrada, Virginia Orozco and Veronica Orozco obtained compilation 1; José Cirera obtained compilation 2; and Miguel Gutierrez obtained compilations 1, 2 and 3. Participants were told to open the online platform on their computers and to examine the images before proceeding with the phone-call. The 16 photographs of this research were uploaded onto https://david-
for an easier and more dynamic process. After the photo-interviews were recorded, the next step was to transcribe them, a very much time consuming process but necessary to review my own understanding of the humanitarian crisis. During the process, it was important to code and find meaningful connections in the data for further interpretation even when most of the responses offered straightforward inferences about the crisis. This is why short extracts of each interview will be used and briefly reviewed. However, in order to transform the information of the transcriptions into a theoretical narrative, I organised my analysis into coherent categories based on the themes expounded by participants in the first question of the photo-interview where they were asked to choose one word to describe the situation in Venezuela.

In accordance with the analytical approach of thick description, these extracts will be interpreted by using the interactional slant, in which participants’ chosen word will serve as the entrance to the meanings and significations behind the opinions, postures and viewpoints expressed during the photo-interviews, and how they interact with the context of a humanitarian crisis.

1. Interactional: What are the meanings behind the photo-interviews?

As chosen by the 5 participants themselves, the words of emergency, despair, disaster and misery were used to describe and expound their understanding of Venezuela’s actuality. Their opinions and commentaries about the selected photographs ratified and validated the previous analysis and interpretation performed on these images. As stated by UNICEF, ComDev “involves engaging communities and listening to adults and children as they identify problems, propose solutions and act upon them” (p. 1). Hence, It was fundamental for this research to acknowledge the impressions and reflections of the participants in regards of the photographs vis-à-vis their experiences as protagonists of a humanitarian emergency. Each of these words unraveled the suffering and agony of the great majority of Venezuelans and their hopelessness towards their future. Clearly, some of the participant’s responses were very moving and heartbreaking; like if they were uncertain about their own survival in the short-term. Behind their opinions, there was inherent fear and consternation of perishing like some of people depicted on several of the photographs who died as a result of the street violence or the food and medicine shortages. The participant’s assessments about the crisis portrayed their individual and daily interactions with life and death, as well as their menacing synergy
with the selected words of emergency, despair, disaster and misery, in a country where people’s survival does not seem to be a priority. Thus, the following extracts will provide a better discernment and appreciation of such interactions and their significations:

• Rafael Cerrada (23): Youth activist

Chosen word: Emergency

Extract 1: Interview 1:4

Researcher: According to the images, would you say that Venezuela is an example of a humanitarian disaster? Choose one photograph and explain why.

Rafael: Look, yes, this is a undoubtedly a humanitarian disaster without precedent. As a Venezuelan, this is what terrifies me the most. There is no way we can make a comparison of this regime with a previous dictatorship. This is really a new level of crisis. If I have to choose one photograph, I would choose figure 5., the image with the young guys looking for food in a trash can… (sobbing…) and, it is so difficult not to be affected by this, emotionally. This is not fake, this is something I see everyday. I have friends who text me and tell me that they have no food; nothing to eat. They are my age… Sometimes they don’t eat during 1 or 2 days; this doesn’t have any explanation. I am so sorry… You know, this level of famine doesn’t know limits. And as you see in the figure 5, these are young guys; we are the ones starving to death (sobbing…)

In this segment we see the respondent discussing his photograph selection in the context of the food shortages. He has not been asked about the motif behind his selection or the direct consequences of the crisis upon his life, but he has become reflexive about figure 5. and the implications within it. As part of his response, he commented on the experiences of his friends and the impossibility for many Venezuelans to find food while using the word “famine” to describe this immediate reality. According to WHO, “famine is declared when there is evidence of extreme conditions regarding food access, child malnutrition and an increase in the death rate” (UN News Centre, 2017, para. 2) which are some of the occurrences recounted by Rafael during his interview. Starvation touches upon the biological consequences of continuous scarcity of food. During the famine, starvation oc-
curs on a mass scale. There is no doubt that Venezuela is in the verge of a humanitarian emergency and that Rafael’s viewpoints about the crisis ratify and corroborate what the photographs have portrayed. Unquestionably, his emotional response is nothing but a desperate call for political and social change in the country.

• Miguel Gutierrez (34): Photojournalist
  Chosen word: Despair

Extract 2: Interview 2:4

Researcher: How is this word represented in any of the following photographs?

Miguel: We can see in all of these photographs how people make manifest their despair. I think I managed to photograph different types of human desperation; in figure 2., this lonely protestor, uncovered, wearing shorts, with a carton shield and a molotov cocktail, is putting a fight against 10 National Guards who are heavily armed. Despair makes people commit deranged acts such as this one. Figure 3. also shows another act of despair performed by a young girl who was physically assaulted by several soldiers and didn’t know whether she was going to be prosecuted for simply disagreeing with the government. As an anecdote, I would like to tell you that this image went viral on social media in Venezuela and because of this, her parents were able to release her from imprisonment that same day; the public pressure was overwhelming. Likewise, in figure 5. some despairing guys are forced to eat garbage. These guys are not vagrants and actually have a good physical make-up. However, they were hungry and demoralised with no option than to ingest food-waste. But to me, figure 10. represents the best example of despair in the country. This is a little kid with acute malnutrition and measles skin rash. He was over 1 year-old when the photograph was taken but his body measurements were tremendously small in comparison with other kids of his age. His entire existence was in despair.

Extract 3: Interview 2:4

Researcher: Would you say that these photographs display the reality of the vast majority of Venezuelans? Explain why.
Miguel: No, I wouldn’t. I think our reality is actually much more brutal and severe. Censorship in Venezuela is a big issue due to power factors and there is no interest inside the government whatsoever in encouraging objective journalism and coverage about the humanitarian disaster. Thus, I can affirm that these images only show a little segment of a gigantic crisis. There are events that are very complicated to photograph. I mean, the vast majority of Venezuelans are going through a major depression that is very hard to capture and portray in a single image.

Miguel uses several photographs to explain a side of crisis that has not been discussed before and that is fundamental to understand the proportion of the humanitarian disaster. He makes reference to the widespread and collective despair of the population and how it encourages people to do deranged acts. His response to the first question alludes to the physiological effects over the mental health of the great majority of Venezuelans. Just in trying to keep up with the economy, the rampant inflation and the food shortages, many individuals are reaching the brink of madness. According to physiologist Yamila Guerrero, there has been a striking increase of panic attack cases, referring to disorders that include sudden attacks of fear and nervousness, as well as physical symptoms such as sweating and a racing heart. “In this situation of generalised tension, anything extra – an illness, a breakup, or any family situation – can trigger a crisis that in other circumstances [the patient] could have handled well” (as cited in Jorge, 2016, para. 7). People are willing to eat waste leftovers, queue for 8 hours and murder with little remorse if necessary. However, Miguel also makes clear that the photographs cannot capture the real dimension of the crisis and that the devastating consequences are more catastrophic than what it is shown on these 16 images.

• Virginia Orozco (28) & Veronica Orozco (26): Political Science student & Dental student.

Words: Disaster & Misery

Extract 4: Interview 3:4

Researcher: What would you say is the overall message of these images?
Virginia: I think it relies on the kid’s picture.
Veronica: Yes! I think so too!
Virginia: I mean, we have a social and political crisis in Venezuela. However, the main issue right now is undoubtedly the humanitarian disaster. You can see it in figure 10. This kid… I am not sure what disease he suffers from, but he represents every single Venezuelan who is suffering as a result of the shortages of medicines and the inefficiency of our healthcare system.
Veronica: Yes, I hear everyday that countless children have died from malnutrition. You know, our health is the most important thing we have, the one thing everyone is fighting for…
Virginia: Figure 6. also has a strong message. There is a woman looking for food leftovers in the garbage. This is something that you also see everyday. People think that it only happens in certain areas or cities but this is everywhere, and I am not talking about homeless people; this is everyone.
Veronica: I mean, you can see that this woman is not homeless! She is well-dressed and yet she doesn’t have anything to eat, like the great majority of Venezuelans. We are starving to death even if the government refuses to acknowledge it.

In this segment Virginia and Veronica exemplify their understanding of both disaster and misery by recounting their personal experiences apropos of figure 10. To them, the scarcity of food and medicines is the most prominent issue in Venezuela today as it has direct consequences on people’s survival. They also endorse some of the sources cited on this research when they comment on specific eventualities they see and hear in their everyday lives, such as the demise of several children due to acute malnutrition. They want to make sure that people abroad comprehend that this is an universal crisis and no one is exempt from it; small business owners, college students, teachers and pensioners - people who consider themselves middle class even though their living standards have long ago been pulverised by triple-digit inflation. Lamentably, they are now frequently seen picking through rotten fruit and vegetables nearby grocery stores in order to sustain, attesting that Venezuela’s middle class has finally been exterminated.
José Cirera (25): Economist

Chosen word: Disaster

Extract 5: Interview 4:4

Researcher: Has the quality of life of Venezuelans been affected as a result of this humanitarian disaster?

José Cirera: Absolutely, and in all aspects. We face crime in the streets, we face hunger at home, we have to sacrifice something in our lives if we want to access to something else; we even put in risk our health when we are forced to queue for 6-7 hours everyday, as you can see in figure 9. You can see children and elderly queuing under the sun for hours and hours; some of them very sick. There is way more old people around than youth these days as the younger generations are desperately escaping the country. If nothing changes, those who remain will simply perish, including myself.

José also selected the word disaster as the major descriptor of Venezuela’s actuality and migration as one of its greatest repercussions. As it happens with many other statistics, the Venezuelan government hasn’t published the annual migration rate for several years. However, hundreds of thousands are now fleeing hardship and persecution. According to Lin (2017), “In February 2017 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Homeland Security Department announced that Venezuelans are the largest group of asylum seekers in the U.S. In Fiscal Year (“FY”) 2016, 18,155 Venezuelans applied for asylum in the U.S” (para. 2). One in every five asylum applicants this FY is Venezuelan. And just as in the U.S., South America and Europe have also seen huge increases in the number of Venezuelan asylum seekers. “In Spain, Venezuelan applications top those from Syria and Ukraine, according to the Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid”. Even in the UK there are now as many as 30,000 Venezuelans (as cited in Long & Rathbone, 2017, para. 7-8). As each day passes, it is becoming clearer that the rapidly deteriorating internal situation in Venezuela has consequences for the region as well. In a number of countries geographically close to Venezuela, there is great concern that the humanitarian crisis may dramatically increase the number of Venezuelans seeking to flee their country, with implications for regional stability, provoking something not seen in the region before: a refugee crisis.
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”
— Marcel Proust

The potential of photography combined with photo-interviews to capture and interpret people’s realities was an incredible opportunity to explore their individual subjectivities, beliefs, experiences and viewpoints in regards of their immediate context. The data analysed on this research suggested that socialist economic policies alongside an oil-based economy and rampant corruption, have led to severe food and medicine shortages, electricity blackouts, and runaway inflation in Venezuela. Governmental criminality in the forms of brutal treatment, torture and political persecution against dissidents, has taken over Maduro’s regime, where an extreme insecurity crisis caused its capital, Caracas, to become the world’s deadliest city. Amid the worst economic and political downturn in its entire history, Venezuela’s health system, food supply, and basic services have completely collapsed. Supermarkets’ shelves are empty; pharmacies have nothing in stock; hospitals lack resources or personnel to treat patients; and gang violence is skyrocketing. Diseases eradicated decades ago are resurgent epidemics. However, Venezuela’s government shows no interest in fully admitting the extent of the problem. In fact, the government has explicitly and officially denied the existence of a humanitarian crisis which has created an emergency far worse than it already appears. Delcy Rodriguez, the president of the Constituent Assembly of Venezuela, stated last year the following:

That's an important question. I have denied and continue denying that Venezuela has a humanitarian crisis. Because under international law by definition, it can facilitate and justify foreign interventions of international coalitions. In Venezuela, not only is there not a humanitarian crisis, but since 1999, Venezuela has had a model of social inclusion that has allowed us to combat poverty and hunger, recognised even in 2016, in 2015. In recent years, our social programmes have received wide recognition, for fighting hunger and poverty. Perhaps you say, the United States is not to blame. But we are at a stage where the masks are being removed after President Donald Trump signed an executive order applying financial sanctions against Venezuela (as cited in Aljazeera, 2017, p. 1)
In that respect, the photographs and photo-interviews analysed on this research not only reaffirms and reassures the existence of a humanitarian disaster without precedent, but also serves as an analytical instrument for a better understanding and comprehension of the colossal dimension of this catastrophe. The 16 images of this study as well as the testimonies exposed throughout the 4 in-depth photo-interviews, substantiate and verify Venezuela’s calamitous reality. Compared to 2015, consumers lost an average of 8.5 kilograms in 2016 and cannot afford to eat more than 2 times a day. As a result, Venezuelans are starving to death. Public hospitals and private clinics do not have enough supplies or equipment to care for all. Gloves, available beds, clean needles and sanitising soap are all lacking. Child mortality has risen to 18.6 per 1,000 births, higher even than rates in Syria (Muñoz, 2017, para. 1). However, as the government denies the crisis, it has also rejected all international aid. In consequence, there are no supplies on their way to Venezuela, because officially, there is no crisis. NGOs, political activists and ComDev practitioners have to respond to these challenges through promoting multi-stakeholder dialogue, raising awareness and procuring a critical understanding about the crisis by using and acknowledging social media outlets, ICTs or traditional academic research -such as this dissertation- to increase people’s access to information, in order to help mobilise individuals, organisations and governments to take action in achieving and preserving a peaceful outcome in Venezuela, regardless of genders, political ideologies or social backgrounds. Communication for development seeks change at different levels, including listening and interacting with affected-communities, building trust, sharing knowledge and fostering informed decision-making in order to achieve sustained and meaningful change in developing countries. As stated by Eduardo Galeano, “many small people, in many small places, doing small things can actually change the world”.

REFERENCES


APPENDICES

A. APPENDIX I

The interviews:

• **Interview 1: Rafael Cerrada, 23 years old - Political activist**

1. If you were to describe the situation in Venezuela in one word, what would it be?
   - Rafael: This is definitely a humanitarian crisis without precedent; in one word: emergency

2. How is this word represented in any of the following photographs?
   - Rafael: I think it is represented in every single aspect of them. Hunger, scarcity of medicines, violence. Crisis is everywhere.

3. What about your own reality? Is it depicted on these photographs? How?
   - Rafael: Uhmm, I have to say that you have successfully selected very accurate and factual images of our realities. In figure 3, for example, we can see how the National Guards, whose only duty is to protect their citizens’ integrity, are savagely assaulting a young lady. This is what outraged me the most as a young Venezuelan. Figure 5 perfectly describes the food situation. I mean, I know about other dictatorships elsewhere in the world that at least produce food for their people. And figure 8 depicts the reality of every single supermarket in Venezuela; they are completely empty.

4. What would you say is the overall message of these images?
   - Rafael: I think that the humanitarian crisis we are experiencing in Venezuela has to be acknowledged as a learning process (*aprendizaje*). We have to stop looking for a messiah to save us and learn to follow the good ideas, values and principles of our people.

5. Would you say that these photographs display the reality of the vast majority of Venezuelans?
   - Rafael: Absolutely! This is not an exaggeration. This dictatorship is kicking each one of us like in figure 3. Look at the guys in figure 5, they lost all dignity; that is our reality.

6. After looking at these images, would you say that Venezuela is an example of a humanitarian disaster? Choose any of the photographs to explain why.
   - Rafael: Look, yes, this is a undoubtedly a humanitarian disaster without precedent. As a Vene-
zuelan, this is what terrifies me the most. There is no way we can make a comparison of this regime with a previous dictatorship. This is really a new level of crisis. If I have to choose one photograph, I would choose figure 5., the image with the young guys looking for food in a trash can… (sobbing…) and, it is so difficult not to be affected by this, emotionally. This is not fake, this is something I see everyday. I have friends who text me and tell me that they have no food; nothing to eat. They are my age… Sometimes they don’t eat during 1 or 2 days; this doesn’t have any explanation. I am so sorry… You know, this level of famine doesn’t know limits. And as you see in the figure 5, these are young guys; we are the ones starving to death (sobbing…)

7. Has the quality of life of Venezuelans been affected as a result of this humanitarian disaster?
   - Rafael: I am convinced that 95% of Venezuelans are suffering and their quality of life deteriorated exponentially. The other 5% are the people working for the government. The rest of us only worry about what we are going to eat tomorrow. These corrupt people have completely scrapped our quality of life.

8. What about your quality of life? Can any of this photographs narrate what you have been through?
   - Rafael: Recently, figure 10. I need an inguinal hernia surgery but our healthcare is literally non-existent. I mean, you can’t even find pills for headache. Figure 2 and 3 also narrates what I have been through. I was buckshot by the National Guards on my back, I also received a tear gas bomb directly on my chest. Thank god, I was wearing a bullet-proof vest like most political activists and I survived. I have been a direct victim of this murderous dictatorship.

9. What about the international community? What is your opinion about their role regarding this humanitarian crisis?
   - Rafael: Sincerely, the international community has done a lot for the Venezuelan people. The problem is not abroad; the problem is within. I have to say that the international community has really been phenomenal in regards of our situation.

• **Interview 2: Miguel Gutierrez, 34 years old - Photojournalist**

1. If you were to describe the situation in Venezuela in one word, what would it be?
   Miguel: I would say Despair.
2. How is this word represented in any of the following photographs?
Miguel: We can see in all these photographs how people make manifest their despair. I think I managed to photograph different types of human desperation; in figure 2, this lonely protestor, uncovered, wearing shorts, with a carton shield and a molotov cocktail, is putting a fight against 10 National Guards who are heavily armed. Despair makes people commit deranged acts such as this one. Figure 3 also shows another act of despair performed by a young girl who was physically assaulted by several soldiers and didn’t know whether she was going to be prosecuted for simply disagreeing with the government. As an anecdote, I would like to tell you that this image went viral on social media in Venezuela and because of this, her parents were able to release her from imprisonment that same day; the public pressure was overwhelming. Likewise, in figure 5, some despairing guys are forced to eat garbage. These guys are not vagrants and actually have a good physical makeup. However, they were hungry and demoralised with no option than to ingest food-waste. But to me, figure 10, represents the best example of despair in the country. This is a little kid with acute malnutrition and measles skin rash. He was over 1 year-old when the photograph was taken but his body measurements were tremendously small in comparison with other kids of his age. His entire existence was in despair.

3. What about your own reality? Is it depicted on these photographs? How?
Miguel: Each of these photographs faithfully depict our daily life. I think that figure 8 is a representative piece of how supermarkets across the country look like. It is quite common to go to a grocery store and run into empty shelves; it is frustrating. Similarly, figure 7, is also a familiar scene for most of us. You can find people seeking for food between waste material everywhere, regardless of whether they are small children, elderly, women or men. Uhmm, about figure 13, I can tell you that Caracas is sorrowfully the world’s most dangerous city and it is constant to hear that people have lost some of their relatives or friends in a homicide. This is a city in recurrent mourning.

4. What would you say is the overall message of these images?
Miguel: When I see these 3 compilation together I ascertain 2017 in a nutshell; a humanitarian disaster. However, I personally think that we could find a solution for this disaster if we aim to fix this tragedy with humanity, sincerity and correctness. Without being idyllic, I think that Venezuelan people need to understand that we have to fix our own issues ourselves. There is not a messiah who will come to save us. The power of changing our misfortune is within ourselves.
5. Would you say that these photographs display the reality of the vast majority of Venezuelans? Miguel: No, I wouldn’t. I think our reality is actually much more brutal and severe. Censorship in Venezuela is a big issue due to power factors and there is no interest inside the government whatsoever in encouraging objective journalism and coverage about the humanitarian disaster. Thus, I can affirm that these images only show a little segment of a gigantic crisis. There are events that are very complicated to photograph. I mean, the vast majority of Venezuelans are going through a major depression that is very hard to capture and portray in a single image.

6. After looking at these images, would you say that Venezuela is an example of a humanitarian disaster? Choose any of the photographs to explain why.

Miguel: Venezuela is definitely an example of a humanitarian disaster. However, we shouldn’t make comparisons with related events because it is very unpleasant. Each country and each reality has an specific and distinctive context. Our crisis took off as a consequence of the very particular economic context of Venezuela. As people may know, our country has the largest proven oil reserves in the world, and paradoxically, Venezuelans are today starving to death. Therefore, if I have to choose 1 photograph to illustrate the humanitarian crisis, I would select with figure 10. The reason why I am choosing this image is because Venezuela’s future and fortune is hanging by a thread. And of course, I believe that we can still go lower than what we already are because Venezuela is completely endangered.

7. Has the quality of life of Venezuelans been affected as a result of this humanitarian disaster?

Miguel: Yes sir, because accessing to medicines and basic groceries, or investing over 60% of your salary to buy a couple of items in the supermarket that barely last a single night is enough evidence to corroborate that our quality of life has deteriorated.

8. What about your quality of life? Can any of this photographs narrate what you have been through?

Miguel: Without doubt, no ones escapes from it. If I have to choose a photograph to recount an occurrence that really affected me recently, I would choose compilation 3; the sequences of José Vallenilla’s assassination. This has no name… For a long time, I worked in a local newspaper, the biggest newspaper at the time, “Últimas Noticias”, in the coverage of “incidents”. It was a very rough and grievous field of work and I had the opportunity to photograph many times the street violence in Caracas. However, this was the very first time I was photographing and witnessing the murder of a person. I faced it in a very personal way. Despite of the fact that I kept
photographing the entire sequence and I could see how Vallenilla managed to walk away from the National Guard, I remember my head screaming: he’s already dead, he’s already dead, he’s already dead! Frankly, this moment deeply affected me; my life split into before and after this day.

9. What about the international community? What is your opinion about their role regarding this humanitarian crisis?
Miguel: I believe in democracy, civic participation and integration. When you are in contact with foreign affairs ministers, ambassadors and high-profile political leaders from foreign countries, it is clear to me that they are expecting Venezuela to fix its internal issues internally. This is why I tell people that we cannot hope for a foreign military intervention. This is the true. I think that the international community has taken the actions they are supposed to take. Some people say that they have done too little for us. But again, it is up to us to fight back and overcome this crisis.

• Interview 3: Virginia, 28 years old & Veronica, 26 years old - Modern Languages student & Dentistry student

1. If you were to describe the situation in Venezuela in one word, what would it be?
   - Virginia: Disaster
   - Veronica: Misery

2. How is this word represented in any of the following photographs?
   - Virginia: When I see the confrontation between young Venezuelans and the authorities, those who are supposed to guarantee our security as citizens, I can truly see the disaster of the country I live in. There is no law.
   - Veronica: Yeah, there is nothing. For example, in figure 10, there is a little kid who seems to be suffering due to the scarcity of medicines. There is no healthcare in Venezuela, even if the governments claims it is for free. Nothing really functions here. In figure 8, there is a man looking for food in a supermarket, and there is literally nothing to buy.
   - Virginia: There is misery represented.
3. What about your own reality? Is it depicted on these photographs? How?
   - Virginia: Let me see. In my case, figure 2 shows what I have experienced myself because I demonstrated. This guy holding a molotov portrays what we are doing as young Venezuelans; protect ourselves from the same people who are supposed to protect us.
   - Veronica: They’re basically our enemies. Instead of defending us, they rather be with the government because they have better salaries than the rest of the people. They’re traitors.

4. What would you say is the overall message of these images?
   - Virginia: I think it relies on the the kid’s picture.
   - Veronica: Yes! I think so too!
   - Virginia: I mean, we have a social and political crisis in Venezuela. However, the main issue right now is undoubtedly the humanitarian disaster. You can see it in figure 10. This kid… I am not sure what disease he suffers from, but he represents every single Venezuelan who is suffering as a result of the shortages of medicines and the inefficiency of our healthcare system.
   - Veronica: Yes, I hear everyday that countless children have died from malnutrition. You know, our health is the most important thing we have, the one thing everyone is fighting for.
   - Virginia: figure 6. also has a strong message. There is a woman looking for food leftovers in the garbage. This is something that you also see everyday. People think that it only happens in certain areas or cities but this is everywhere, and I am not talking about homeless people; this is everyone.
   - Veronica: I mean, you can see that this woman is not homeless! She is well-dressed and yet she doesn’t have anything to eat, like the great majority of Venezuelans. We are starving to death even if the government refuses to acknowledge it.

5. Would you say that these photographs display the reality of the vast majority of Venezuelans?
   - Veronica: Completely!
   - Virginia: Yes, totally!

6. After looking at these images, would you say that Venezuela is an example of a humanitarian disaster? Choose any of the photographs to explain why.
   - Virginia: I don’t think a single picture can represent the humanitarian disaster in Venezuela. The combination of figure 5., 6. and 10. is crucial to understand the dimension of this crisis. I have to say that this is all thanks to this government’s socialist policies. They say that through socialism Venezuela will be one day an egalitarian society because they will redistribute the oil
revenue among all of us. But all they have really done is to create more poverty and misery. Our only option is to eventually die. What else do we have?
- Veronica: Yeah, we don’t have anything. All this government craves is for people to be submissive and to blindly believe in socialism. Socialism is misery. You have to be here to really know.

7. Has the quality of life of Venezuelans been affected as a result of this humanitarian disaster?
   - Veronica: To begin with, there is no such a thing.
   - Virginia: There is no quality of life here. Even if we can work and generate some money, there is no access to basic things like food. Inflation is eating us alive; prices used to go up every month. Nowadays they are increasing every hour. If you buy something during at 7:00am you know for sure it will be more expensive later on that day.
   - Veronica: We are not living; we are surviving.

8. What about your quality of life? Can any of this photographs narrate what you have been through?
   - Virginia: Absolutely. Figure 10 again. You don’t know David, I feel completely horrified every time I think of getting sick. I know I won’t have access to medicines. I might find the money; but where do I go to buy them? I’m afraid of dying.
   - Veronica: My mom was sick a few weeks ago and we were not able to find any medicines for her. She had a very severe bronchitis and we didn’t manage to find any antibiotics for her treatment. I mean, as I said, the government refuses to acknowledge this horrible crisis but people keep dying.

9. What about the international community? What is your opinion about their role regarding this humanitarian crisis?
   - Veronica: They turned their back on us.
   - Virginia: I think that even if some countries are trying to help, the government doesn’t allow any help from abroad to materialise. All of their good efforts are in vain.
   - Veronica: In my opinion, I don’t think they’re actually helping much. They’re not doing enough. They have never done enough.

• Interview 4: José Manuel Cirera, 25 years old- Economist
1. If you were to describe the situation in Venezuela in one word, what would it be?
   JM: Disaster.

2. How is this word represented in any of the following photographs?
   JM: When you see the disarray and disorganisation, the lack of rules, the irrationality of the people; things that are not in line with the definition of a Republic. The photographs portray our disaster.

3. What about your own reality? Is it depicted on these photographs? How?
   JM: The simple act of going to work everyday enables me to confront the horrid realities depicted on these photographs; through my own experience or through the experiences of my relatives and friends. For example, it is unbelievable how you have to face queues for pretty much everything in Venezuela, as showed in figure 9. There is chaos and disruption everywhere; so much suffering and anguish.

4. What would you say is the overall message of these images?
   JM: Despair. We’re uncertain about everything: what we’re going to eat or if we’re going to make it alive home after an ordinary day at work.

5. Would you say that these photographs display the reality of the vast majority of Venezuelans?
   JM: Yes, as I said, if you don’t see any of the occurrences depicted on the photographs by yourself, you’ll hear it from a friend or a relative. However, this is truly a collective reality. If you go to a bakery, there is no bread. If you go to the bank, there is no cash. There is just no life.

6. After looking at these images, would you say that Venezuela is an example of a humanitarian disaster? Choose any of the photographs to explain why.
   JM: Venezuela is a very clear example of a humanitarian disaster. Figure 12. proves the extent of it; this is a severe malnourished man. We are not even talking that he may or may not come from a poor family anymore; this is everyone. We don’t have access to food or medicines. He’s the living proof of that.

7. Has the quality of life of Venezuelans been affected as a result of this humanitarian disaster?
   JM: Absolutely, and in all aspects. We face crime in the streets, we face hunger at home, we have to sacrifice something in our lives if we want to access to something else; we even put in risk our health when we are forced to queue for 6-7 hours everyday, as you can see in figure 9.
You can see children and elderly queuing under the sun for hours and hours; some of them very sick. There is way more old people around than youth these days as the younger generations are desperately escaping the country. If nothing changes, those who remain will simply perish, including myself.

8. What about your quality of life? Can any of this photographs narrate what you have been through?

JM: Yes, my quality of life has been negatively affected. Recently, I got a position as a professor at the University of Los Andes and it is outrageous to see how my salary only provides for 6 or 7 basic items at the supermarket which don’t even last the entire month. Thus, I am forced to have two jobs if I want to eat and this evidently implies more physical and psychological efforts. It is not hard to understand how our quality of life is non-existent.

9. What about the international community? What is your opinion about their role regarding this humanitarian crisis?

JM: The international community has had a stronger stance towards the humanitarian crisis than the actual Venezuelan opposition. They have maintain a more coherent and realistic posture in regards of the economic collapse which has been overshadowed by some of our internal political forces. I believe that most of the political parties in Venezuela are not only striving to preserve the current status quo but also their individual quotas of power and dominance, regardless of the situation.