

Central America: between insecurity and population displacement, what roles can humanitarian organisations play?

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This latest issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* focuses on the multiple humanitarian concerns Central America is grappling with. Often regarded as a transit region, Central America is undergoing major demographic change that is destabilising the socioeconomic equilibrium in an already vulnerable area. This issue seeks to shed light on the daily lives of both the resident and migrant populations as they contend with the deteriorating regional security situation. The articles bring to light the role of humanitarian workers in a region that has long been low down on the priority list of the international community, despite an incredibly fragile political context.

Geographically, Central America spans between the southern border of Mexico and Panama’s Darién Province. It is generally agreed that seven countries make up this geopolitical area, namely Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and El Salvador. Home to some 50 million inhabitants, the area has experienced major challenges over the past few years: rising economic inequality; climate vulnerability worsened by increasingly destructive hurricane seasons; chronic violence; and very limited access to social services. Additionally, mass interregional and extraregional population flows further complicate this humanitarian context. As in other parts of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic increased the vulnerability of some groups, particularly women and indigenous communities, by heavily impacting the regional economy. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, over 25% of the region’s population have significant humanitarian needs, especially in terms of protection against violence perpetrated by armed groups, food insecurity and healthcare.¹

Mass population movements are one of the repercussions of this precarious context. The number of migrants (in transit, refugees and asylum seekers) has risen considerably over the past decade, and particularly since 2018. The dynamics of these movements are varied, which makes providing aid and protection more complicated. African migrants take the South American route from Chile up to the United States (US) and Canada, funnelling into the Central American migration routes. Interregional population movements can also be seen, with populations fleeing the unstable sociopolitical contexts in Nicaragua and Honduras. Since early 2022, a 110% increase in the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has been recorded in Central America’s Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador). The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that close to 900,000 people from northern

¹ OCHA, *Central America HRP Funding Snapshot – Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2021, August 2021 – December 2022*, November 2021,
<https://reliefweb.int/report/el-salvador/central-america-hrp-funding-snapshot-humanitarian-programme-cycle-2021-august>

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Central America have had to leave their homes, either to settle elsewhere in the region, or to head for North America. More specifically, over 318,000 IDPs in Honduras and El Salvador and over 102,000 Nicaraguans have applied for international protection as asylum seekers. This is in addition to the migrant populations from elsewhere, including Venezuelans, Haitians and Cubans who cross the dangerous Darién Gap (Panama) en route to the US. Surveys conducted in November 2022 in the transit regions of Honduras and Nicaragua confirmed that almost 80 nationalities are moving around Central America: people from China and Afghanistan, Mali and the Indian subcontinent, making the Central American migration routes some of the most significant globally.²

With both demographic pressure and population movements hitting an all-time high, the increase in the number of people seeking safety is severely testing the region's reception capacity, particularly in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, its poorest countries. The arrival and transit of thousands of displaced people place a heavy burden on already limited social services that are struggling to support the local populations. To varying degrees, the different countries of Central America are therefore grappling with significant social tensions caused by these displacement dynamics. Moreover, this is visible in urban spaces and border areas: while Panama and Costa Rica have implemented nationalised and safer transit systems for migrants, armed groups and criminal networks control migrant travel in Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. Human trafficking in the region, which generates billions of dollars, has become one of the main economic activities for drugs traffickers and other criminal groups. Some statistics are worth quoting here to demonstrate the sheer scale of the needs and vulnerabilities: 80% of female migrants in the region are raped during their journey, and 70% of migrants are victims of violence.

UNICEF has particularly focused on the push factors that explain why people flee and the pressures faced by people wanting to leave this region of Central America.³ There are many and varied reasons, ranging from crushing poverty to endemic crime (violence, extortion and forced recruitment into gangs) along with domestic abuse and the sexual abuse of girls and women. These are exacerbated by the lack of social services and educational and vocational training opportunities. In short, these population movements are an indicator of the inequalities and serious security issues experienced by the sub-region.

The sub-region is also heavily impacted by major changes to US foreign policy, which has played, and continues to play, a long-standing role in Central America. However, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, national security issues have dominated relations with the region's countries, with security and therefore border control becoming the cornerstones.

Independent humanitarian workers have also long been involved in Central America and have adapted to the region's geopolitical contexts. One example is in the context of the Cold War conflicts through the 1970s-1980s, which led to tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of displaced people (in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua in particular). Other more recent diverse events such as the Guatemala Peace Accords in 1996, Hurricane Mitch in 1998 in Honduras and the

² François Audet, *Rapport de recherche sur la population migratoire en Amérique centrale : recueil d'entretiens*, Observatoire canadien sur les crises et l'action humanitaires, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2022.

³ Maryanne Buechner et Sarah Ferguson, « 7 raisons pour lesquelles les migrants fuient l'Amérique centrale », billet de blog, Unicef Canada, 16 août 2018, <https://www.unicef.ca/fr/blog/7-raisons-pour-lesquelles-les-migrants-fuient-lamerique-centrale>

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2001 El Salvador earthquake enabled major aid funding mechanisms to be set up for the region and US influence on regional geopolitics to be consolidated.

Humanitarian work still faces major challenges in the region. Specifically, aid earmarked for displaced populations is often poorly evaluated, given the complex nature of the dynamics. Indeed, it is particularly difficult to determine the needs of a population on the move, or who simply do not want to be identified. As for the needs of the local populations, which are insufficiently addressed by inadequate social services, they pave the way for increasing forms of precarity, with organised crime networks then taking advantage of the situation. For all that, it is the self-same local communities who host the migrants and are therefore on the aid frontline: churches, community centres, small local councils and collectives of small farmers in the border areas are particularly called upon, either to offer accommodation services or access to healthcare. In the city of Danlí in Honduras, local churches served as temporary accommodation for several months, the time it took for the Red Cross and the local council to provide more appropriate solutions. In the space of a few weeks, this modest district became a nerve centre through which tens of thousands of migrants transited. A situation that nonetheless creates friction between the migrants and the residents of a region that has been practically abandoned by the State.

In the face of such sizeable challenges, *Humanitarian Alternatives'* new geopolitical *Focus* aims to underline the fact that the migration tree conceals a forest of almost endless humanitarian issues. The harsh reality of the scale of the regional migration crisis appears in the map published at the start of the dossier and produced by our colleagues from CartONG. The map is followed by the different viewpoints provided by the authors to “journey into” this map, as it were, and gain a better understanding of the dynamics at work on the ground. Marcos Tamariz provides a transnational view of regional population movements through the *Médecins Sans Frontières'* projects that help migrants from southern Panama to northern Mexico. Kavita Kapur, representing the Danish Refugee Council, takes this analysis a step further by looking at the politicisation of the migration crisis in the region, with the article highlighting differences in migration parameters between Central America and Mexico. The article provides the reader with an understanding of the very different legal dimensions, aid policies and the recognition of migrant status in the various countries. This situation increases the vulnerability of migrants along the migration route.

Mechanisms have been developed to mitigate the harmful effects of illegal migration. This is true of “temporary labour migration”, a very well-documented practice on the other side of the Atlantic which François de Montigny focuses on. His article shows that the legal and ethical issues are complex for Central American seasonal workers who spend several months a year working in Canada or the US. Julio E. Rank Wright, meanwhile, specifically refers to the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), and writes about a “non-traditional, multidimensional and prolonged humanitarian context”, in so much as the three countries forming the triangle are contending with similar challenges linked to the chronic violence caused notably by armed groups, which itself generates its own share of displaced people. His article also highlights the complexity of interpreting and applying the Nexus approach for the region’s funding bodies.

The article from Magdalena Arias Cubas and Norma Archila Salgado explores the specific features of Honduras’ migration crisis. The authors expound the research undertaken by the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Global Migration Lab. The research focuses on the vulnerabilities of displaced populations in Honduras by bringing to light the concept of trust between migrants and humanitarian workers. While useful in other contexts, the findings of this research more than ever underline the

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critical nature of the principles of neutrality and impartiality. Still in Honduras, Marc-André Anzueto looks at mining and its influence on relations with Canada which isn't too far of a leap from the issue of migration. In his article, Professor Anzueto offers a historical overview of relations between the two countries from the perspective of the mining sector, which goes as far as affecting humanitarian aid programmes for migrants.

Another Northern Triangle country is explored in the article authored by Charlotte Volet and Laurence Ouellet-Boivin, who delve into the loss of democratic space in Guatemala. The two authors enable the reader to understand how the government has toughened up legislation and repression of civil society organisations, first and foremost human rights defenders. We cannot help but be concerned when reading their article: this expansion of State hostility against non-governmental organisations does not bode well for local populations or for those experiencing the hardships of migration.

Far from being exhaustive, this dossier at the very least enables us to shed light on a region of the world affected by complex humanitarian issues that mainly go under the radar of other continents. Our goal is to simply show our readers the reality of the almost forgotten subcontinent that is Central America.

Translated from the French by Gillian Eaton

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