

## The politicisation of humanitarian response and the migration and displacement crisis in Central America and Mexico: challenges and priorities

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**Mexico, on the northern border of the Central American subregion, is in a peculiar position: as one of only two terrestrial gateways to the United States, it has its neighbour’s full attention, even though the “humanitarian” dimension of the crisis it is experiencing is overlooked. Here, the author highlights the impact of the obvious politicisation of aid, whether it is provided north or south of the border.**

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**T**he recent experiences of humanitarian response processes in Central America and Mexico suggest a significant politicisation of the migration and displacement crisis that affects the region in ways that threaten neutrality by impeding appropriate action from the humanitarian community to adequately address growing needs. Considered by many to be distinct locations in which a single, shared crisis is unfolding, Central America and Mexico are facing dramatically different humanitarian responses. Although many donors and other actors tend to group these places together, the experience of response actors in countries in the north of Central America – Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala – is starkly different from that in Mexico in terms of funding, coordination and evidence, among multiple other factors. Based on the Danish Refugee Council’s (DRC) intervention in Mexico since 2020 as well as conversations with key informants, the following comparative analysis of the experiences of humanitarian actors in Central America and in Mexico explains the most salient differences and how these differences reflect an overall politicisation of the humanitarian response, while also providing insight on how to promote principled humanitarian action in a politicised context.

### **Migration and displacement crisis**

Within an overall context characterised by pervasive violence and structural inequality, diverse socio-economic, political and natural triggers in recent years have contributed to greater displacement within Central America and Mexico, at the same time as the subregion has seen a continually increasing dynamic of transcontinental migration from countries in Africa, the Middle East and South and Central Asia as part of multinational mixed migration flows.

Migration dynamics are also multi- directional, with northward movements directed mainly at Mexico, which ranked fifth worldwide for the number of new asylum applications received in 2022, and at the United States (US), which continues to occupy first place in that same ranking.<sup>1</sup> In Mexico, most asylum applications are presented by nationals of Haiti and Honduras, followed by Cuba, El Salvador, Venezuela

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<sup>1</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2022*, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>

and Guatemala, among other countries.<sup>2</sup> Restrictions on access to the US territory for people on the move have limited the outward flow of migrants from Mexico into the US, leading people on the move to be concentrated in Mexico and contributing to deteriorating humanitarian conditions in the country.<sup>3</sup> Mexico continues to be an important country of origin, with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to historic and recent incidents of violence.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Mexican nationals continue to displace and migrate outside of the country's borders. According to official statistics, since the beginning of 2023, Mexican nationals have been the most represented nationality among registered successful or attempted cross-border entries between the US and Mexico.<sup>5</sup> Southward movements include voluntary and forced returns, with hundreds of thousands of expulsions, expedited removals and deportations registered from the US to Mexico in 2023 alone, followed by onward removals from Mexico to Guatemala, Honduras and beyond.

The hundreds of thousands of people affected by these dynamics of migration and displacement are impacted by myriad risks and face multisectoral needs that demand a humanitarian response. DRC's Protection Monitoring in multiple locations in Mexico has confirmed the existence of serious protection risks, including kidnapping, gender-based violence, extortion and other forms of physical violence, as well as serious unmet needs that contribute to heightened vulnerability or diminished capacities.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some stakeholders have recognised that the humanitarian consequences of this complex situation in Central America and Mexico are identical in both nature and scale to those identified in armed conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

### Challenges in the humanitarian response: a comparative perspective

In response to this deteriorating situation, numerous humanitarian actors have launched or expanded interventions in Central America and Mexico in recent years. Some international organisations that had previously established a presence in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to address the effects of natural disasters, climate change, health crises or other phenomena began to extend their coverage to address the growing needs of people on the move through those countries, with migration programmes emerging in multiple locations. In Mexico, on the other hand, international humanitarian organisations have been slower to arrive, in part due to the limited funding available to cover humanitarian interventions in the country. DRC and other international organisations initially began work through implementing partners in order to complement the existing offer of services and strengthen the overall humanitarian response. Multiple international organisations<sup>8</sup> share experiences of relying on self-funding or privileged access to funds, particularly during the start-up phase of operations. Local organisations in the subregion have also seen an increase in funding to work on these

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<sup>2</sup> Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, *La COMAR en números – Agosto 2023*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.gob.mx/comar/articulos/la-comar-en-numeros-344147?idiom=es>

<sup>3</sup> Eric Reidy, "How the US-Mexico border became an unrelenting humanitarian crisis", *The New Humanitarian*, 10 May 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/05/10/how-us-mexico-border-became-unrelenting-humanitarian-crisis>

<sup>4</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, *Mexico. Displacement Data (Displacement associated with conflict and violence, displacement associated with disaster)*, 2022, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/mexico>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Nationwide Encounters*, 22 September 2023, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>

<sup>6</sup> Danish Refugee Council, *Protection Monitoring Mexico – October 2020 – August 2023*, <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoieMzRiMDMzZWUtYmQyMy00NDY1LWJlMjYtMmMxODc0MDVlZDBjliwidCl6IjJhMjE5MjQxLTg5OWMtNDc1Mi1iZDZlMzUxZWZlMjM1ODJkNSIsImMiOiJh9>

<sup>7</sup> European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, *Humanitarian Implementation Plan 2023*, [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/funding-evaluations/funding-humanitarian-aid/financing-decisions-hips\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/funding-evaluations/funding-humanitarian-aid/financing-decisions-hips_en)

<sup>8</sup> While DRC has had project-based funding, it has also had access to Danish sources of funding. The experience is similar for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC).

issues, leading some that had previously been dedicated to addressing issues facing women or members of the LGBTQI+ community, for example, to begin taking action at the intersection of those issues and human mobility. Various local organisations<sup>9</sup> working in Central America and Mexico reported receiving significant funds, particularly since 2019, specifically to provide support to asylum seekers and refugees, prompting them to refocus their activities and implement limited, status-based targeting. More recently, in 2023, international and local organisations in Mexico cited significant cuts to funding, leaving many to consider how to restructure or downsize their existing operations in order to remain afloat.

In this context, efforts to respond to the growing crisis in Central America and Mexico have been dramatically inadequate in the face of the overwhelming needs of people on the move. Upon closer consideration, it is apparent that the political interests of key states – mainly the US – have hindered the implementation of sufficient efforts to address the complex humanitarian needs in the subregion, thereby prejudicing those in need of assistance in Mexico. This dynamic is evident in the discourse used, with international agencies frequently characterising the situation in Central America as a humanitarian crisis<sup>10</sup> and states participating in response planning. There is not, however, a clear and uniform recognition of the crisis in Mexico among traditional humanitarian actors and much less so by the Mexican state. While DRC and most other international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) addressing migration and displacement issues in Mexico are unequivocal in describing the magnitude of the needs and of using the term “humanitarian crisis”, some agencies deliberately refrain from using this characterisation so as to avoid challenges from the Mexican authorities and the potential loss of access. Although failure to characterise Mexico as a situation of armed conflict has been analysed in other spaces,<sup>11</sup> some key informants attribute the non-recognition of the crisis situation to the implications that this would have for US-Mexico relations as well as on the evidence in favour of the protection of Mexican asylum seekers in the US. However, the unwillingness to characterise the situation in Mexico as a crisis is certainly not the case across the board, with UNICEF publishing regular situation reports as part of appeals for Mexico in early 2022 before transitioning to a joint appeal for Mexico and Central America in 2023.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the grouping of Mexico together with Central America has allowed a number of international organisations<sup>13</sup> as well as donors<sup>14</sup> to partially overcome the non-recognition of the crisis situation and leverage funds generally directed at humanitarian needs in Central America to help cover the costs of response efforts in Mexico.

The unequal conditions of the humanitarian response in Mexico compared to Central America is also evident in the available funding. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, in 2023, reported funding for Mexico totalled less than \$US29 million, of which only 6.1% was funded through plans, specifically through the multi-country Venezuela Regional

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<sup>9</sup> For example, organisations receiving funding from UNHCR in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

<sup>10</sup> High Commissioner for Refugees, *Central America Refugee Crisis*, December 2022, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/central-america>

<sup>11</sup> Juan Francisco Padin, “Opening Pandora’s box: The case of Mexico and the threshold of noninternational armed conflicts”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 923, June 2023, pp. 772-794, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/opening-pandoras-box-the-case-of-mexico-923>

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF, *Children on the move in Mexico and Central America, situation report*, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/media/131701/file/2023-HAC-Mexico-Central-America.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> NRC has recently established a regional presence in Honduras from which to cover Central America and Mexico. DRC is currently exploring this possible set up.

<sup>14</sup> ECHO, for example, currently includes Central America and Mexico as a subregion within its Humanitarian Implementation Plan.

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Refugee and Migrant Response Plan.<sup>15</sup> While funding for Mexico has historically been low, 2021 and 2022 saw a significant increase in funding, before plummeting again in 2023. More than 90% of reported funding during 2023 was from the US government, followed by the European Commission with less than 7% of reported funds. The total funding of \$US29 million available for Mexico is in contrast to the over \$US100 million in funding for Honduras, \$US24 million in funding to El Salvador and nearly \$US46 million in funding to Guatemala in 2023.<sup>16</sup> Notably, funding through a Humanitarian Response Plan accounts for more than 40% of funding in Honduras, more than 94% in El Salvador and a slight majority of funding in Guatemala. This data confirms the significantly lower amount of funding available for humanitarian response in Mexico, despite the record high number of asylum seekers and others on the move through the territory, as well as the relationship between funding and response planning. According to some key informants, the dynamic of limited funding to Mexico is due mainly to its status as an upper-middle income country according to the World Bank's classification<sup>17</sup> and the associated understanding that the Mexican State has the capacity necessary to attend to the needs in its country. Still, other humanitarian actors, however, referenced the significant funds provided to support Mexico's control and contention efforts, reflecting the priority of enforcement over humanitarian aid. The US government's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs is notably absent from the funding community in the subregion, while US sources report that over \$US58 million were spent between 2015 and 2022 to support Mexico's immigration control and border security efforts.<sup>18</sup>

Coordination is another important challenge that is closely tied to recognition of the crisis and the available funding opportunities. In Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, functioning cluster systems have facilitated the consolidation of evidence and response planning that provide greater visibility to the humanitarian situation and enable more robust funding for operations. In July 2021, a multi-country Humanitarian Needs Overview was published reflecting a common understanding of the dynamics of the crises, the impacts on people and the priority needs and services.<sup>19</sup> Each of the three countries has a humanitarian response plan that is regularly monitored and updated.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, Mexico does not have a formal cluster system, and despite local and national level coordination meetings through some sectoral working groups, these tend to be centred on information sharing, with extremely limited operational coordination and an absence of practices and processes that characterise cluster dynamics. Additionally, the lack of these mechanisms in Mexico means that there is no Humanitarian Needs Overview or Humanitarian Response Plan for the country, which serves as an additional challenge for resourcing response efforts. However, the coordination difficulties in Mexico are not limited to the humanitarian community. Alternative coordination mechanisms, including specifically government-led sectoral coordination, are generally absent. This despite the participation of some individuals within government or certain institutions in some agency-led spaces.

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<sup>15</sup> OCHA – Financial Tracking Service, *Mexico, 2023*, 20 September 2023, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/144/summary/2023>

<sup>16</sup> OCHA – Financial Tracking Service, *Honduras, 2023*, 16 October 2023, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/99/summary/2023>; OCHA – Financial Tracking Service, *El Salvador, 2023*, 16 October 2023, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/67/summary/2023>; OCHA – Financial Tracking Service, *Guatemala, 2023*, 16 October 2023, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/91/summary/2023>

<sup>17</sup> World Bank. *Data for Mexico – Upper-middle income, 2023*, <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=MX-XT>

<sup>18</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Mexico's Immigration Control Efforts*, 13 March 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10215#:~:text=U.S.%20assistance%20helped%20Mexican%20agencies,of%20its%20migrant%20detention%20centers>

<sup>19</sup> OCHA, *El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras: Humanitarian Needs Overview (Humanitarian Programme Cycle, July 2021)*, 9 August 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/guatemala/el-salvador-guatemala-honduras-humanitarian-needs-overview-humanitarian-programme>

<sup>20</sup> OCHA, *HNO/HRP North of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras)*, 9 August 2021, <https://response.reliefweb.int/latin-america-and-caribbean/hnohrp-north-central-america-el-salvador-guatemala-honduras>

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For example, the participation of the asylum authority in some local-level coordination meetings organised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGO partners in Tapachula, Mexico. While government actors have prompted *ad hoc* coordination on specific processes (for example, the relocation of residents of an informal camp in Matamoros to a government-backed shelter), there are currently no government-led working groups including government and non-governmental actors to address sectoral issues, beyond some inter-institutional cooperation. Upcoming national elections have also made it difficult to engage with authorities on migration issues, which are notably absent from the political agenda in Mexico.

### Priorities for principled humanitarian action

These challenges have undoubtedly created a political dimension to and undermined the humanitarian response capacities in the subregion, with disproportionate impacts on those affected by the mixed migration crisis in Mexico. In this context, DRC, along with other humanitarian actors on the ground, has focused on a series of strategic actions to promote the delivery of humanitarian aid neutrally and in line with the other core principles. One priority action has been to invest in building a common and neutral understanding of the crisis by growing a shared base of evidence to inform programming. DRC has done this both by collecting and sharing data and information, specifically within the protection sector<sup>21</sup> and by promoting collaborative processes aimed at mapping existing information within Latin America.<sup>22</sup> A second priority action has been to strengthen coordination within the country, by co-leading the national Protection Working Group together with International Rescue Committee (IRC) and UNHCR and by promoting the use of tools, guidance and frameworks used by the Global Protection Cluster. At the intersection of evidence and coordination, DRC together with IRC has been leading the consolidation of a Protection Needs Overview which seeks to foster knowledge and familiarity of the Protection Analytical Framework among humanitarian actors as well as collective capacities in the analysis of humanitarian data and information, while also contributing to a shared understanding of the crisis situation and the relevant needs. It is hoped that the product of these efforts will enable humanitarian advocacy in favour of more neutral funding decisions to facilitate a principled response to the crisis in Mexico.

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### Biography

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Kavita Kapur, "The politicisation of humanitarian response and the migration and displacement crisis in Central America and Mexico: challenges and priorities", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 24, November 2023, pp. 28–39.

<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2023/11/16/the-politicisation-of-humanitarian-response-and-the-migration-and-displacement-crisis-in-central-america-and-mexico-challenges-and-priorities/>

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<sup>21</sup> DRC has promoted and implemented Protection Monitoring in Mexico since July 2020.

<sup>22</sup> CDR, *Evaluación del Panorama de Información de Protección en América Latina (2021-2022)*, September 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/evaluacion-del-panorama-de-informacion-de-proteccion-en-america-latina-2021-2022-septiembre-2022>