

Responding to a non-traditional humanitarian crisis: the case of Northern Central America

Julio E. Rank Wright • Regional Vice President for Latin America at International Rescue Committee (IRC)

The “Northern Triangle” of Central America might seem a good place to put the famous nexus into practice. However, the author feels that, for too long, the favour given to development programmes has hampered the potential benefits of humanitarian actions, recognised and financed as such.

The first mistake the international community makes when speaking about Central America is not being clear on what part of the isthmus they’re referring to. By attaching varying degrees of tumultuous histories and challenges to a complex region, it’s highly likely that unclear terms have generated biased and at times overarching blanket policy responses applied to all Central American countries. The distinction is especially important today as the region becomes a major global migration route¹ that starts far from the coasts of any of its countries and, for some, far from Latin America.² It is not uncommon to hear analysts and academics from Central America and Latin America colloquially state that the United States border is no longer in Mexico but in Colombia, given the growing numbers of people on the move seeking refuge and passage to a new and better future. For the purposes of this specific article, I will be referring to the Northern Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Humanitarian organisations would do well to look at the non- traditional multi-dimensional and protracted humanitarian contexts and their respective responses in Northern Central America through a crisis lens. Until then it is essential that aid agencies integrate their efforts with local partners for both humanitarian and development responses.

The humanitarian context of the Northern Central America Triangle

Northern Central America is facing an unprecedented and growing humanitarian crisis, compounded by economic slowdown, chronic violence and the effects of climate change. Across the region, thousands of people seek safety and protection. In 2020, gang and gender-based violence, poverty, insecurity, and climate change caused the internal displacement of more than 1.4 million people in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. These numbers have been consistent in the last few years,

¹ Diana Roy and Sabine Baumgartner, “Crossing the Darién Gap: Migrants risk death on the journey to the U.S.”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 June 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darien-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us>

² WOLA Border Oversight, *Annual Migration Through Panama’s Darién Gap*, 20 September 2023, <https://borderoversight.org/2023/05/19/2022-monthly-migration-through-panamas-darien-gap>

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

except for in El Salvador, where the numbers have fallen. The 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview³ highlights the needs of internally displaced persons in the region. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC)⁴ indicates that Honduras alone recorded 937,000 new displacements due to disasters in 2020, exceeding the combined disaster and conflict displacement in countries such as South Sudan, Sudan and Afghanistan. In 2022, Honduras reported 19 disaster events that led to internal displacement. In June 2023, the Honduran government declared a red alert, its highest category, in 140 municipalities due to ongoing drought conditions.⁵ Hondurans have now been in the top three asylum-seeking nationalities in Mexico since 2021, with over 30,000 asylum applications.⁶ Forced migration is ultimately driven by people seeking safety, protection and better living conditions.

People are often not seeking to flee their country as a first resort, as needs assessments carried out by the International Rescue Committee since 2018 have revealed. Instead, people are being displaced within their country, finding themselves unable to reestablish their lives or connect with appropriate services and then are displaced again until ultimately they are forced out of their home country. As the global economic downturn continues, exacerbated by rising food prices due to the Ukraine crisis, migration flows risk further regional destabilisation.

Recent data from CuéntaNos⁷ – a dynamic searchable information platform with social media chat spaces for users in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala – signalled expected increases in migration flows from the region before the official data from the Northern Mexico border. An increase in demand for information on employment, identification documents and women's services and protection dramatically rose during the Covid-19 pandemic. These figures are further validated by a 700% increase in the number of users of InfoPa'lante in Colombia and double the users of InfoDigna in Mexico⁸ in the weeks prior to the end of Title 42, an article contained in a 1944 public health law that for over three years allowed unjustified curbs on migration⁹ in the name of protecting public health⁹ in May 2023.

A crisis lens on development: innovative nexus programmes

Since the early 1990s, the international donor community has been erroneously focusing almost exclusively on policy measures related to citizen security that often require addressing root causes of chronic violence which take years to remedy. While responding to long-term, almost generational shifts in attitudes towards social violence, humanitarian organisations were given little room to continue to

³ OCHA Services, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021, Latin America and the Caribbean*, <https://2021.gho.unocha.org/inter-agency-appeals/latin-america-and-caribbean> ; Humanitarian Action, *Latin America and the Caribbean*, November 2022, <https://humanitarianaction.info/article/latin-america-and-caribbean-0>

⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, *Displacement data by country*, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/honduras>

⁵ teleSUR, *Honduras: Red alert in 140 municipalities due to drought*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Honduras-Red-Alert-in-140-Municipalities-Due-to-Drought-20230616-0018.html>

⁶ Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, *Solicitantes por nacionalidad*, 5 June 2023, <https://www.gob.mx/comar/articulos/la-comar-en-numeros-336049?idiom=es>

⁷ [Editor's note] CuéntaNos is a reliable information platform for empowering people in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, using the social networks Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Instagram, <https://www.cuentanos.org>

⁸ International Rescue Committee, *IRC celebrates end of Title 42, calls for further action to protect legal rights of asylum seekers*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/title-42-ends-irc-highlights-soaring-visits-latin-america-information-platform-need>

⁹ Colleen Long, Rebecca Santana and Elliott Spagat, "Title 42 has ended. Here's what it did, and how US immigration policy is changing", *Associated Press*, 12 May 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-biden-border-title-42-mexico-asylum-be4e0b15b27adb9bede87b9bbefb798d>

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

operate in the wake of decreased levels of funding, except for responses to natural disasters. In doing so, the region missed out on valuable learning from international and national civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that had been actively working on protection, wrap around services like mental health and psychosocial support and education in crisis settings during the region's civil wars and post-conflict, peace-building phase. Nexus programming is often used to describe contexts where seemingly protracted crises have moved from immediate humanitarian needs to ones where long-term policy or system-strengthening strategies would be welcome. The Northern Central American context offers what, in theory, would be fertile ground to implement innovative nexus programmes. The reality is that the international donor community has no clarity on what nexus programmes truly look like. The danger of loosely using the guise of nexus to continue to design purely development-focused interventions would be to lose the inherent benefit of looking at a blended approach where both the humanitarian and the development track are sought and funded simultaneously. Assuming a linear link between humanitarian aid and development would lead everyone with a vested interest in Northern Central America to suffer the confinement of a self-imposed straitjacket. Adaptability, flexibility and responsiveness are maximised by intentionally recognising the need for a blended approach of humanitarian assistance with longer-term development programmes running in parallel.

Guatemala and Honduras' current context with sustained levels of violent crime and gender-based violence continue to expel thousands who view migration as their last resort. This reality is compounded by the fact that all three Northern Central American countries are now places of expulsion, transit and even destination for some nationalities like Venezuelans. International humanitarian organisations bring a crisis lens which the region, its policymakers and donors haven't seen for decades. Bringing a crisis lens to a protracted crisis (traditionally approached from a development point of view) offers the ability to provide immediate solutions to vulnerable population groups who can't afford to wait for long-term policy measures to be effective. Local organisations can effectively partner with long-standing, reliable and credible organisations who've worked in the world's most severe conflicts and crisis. Some opportunities for partnerships exist in innovative integrated protection case management systems across borders and in programmes focusing on economic recovery and development. The integration and reintegration of returnees to their municipalities of origin also poses an opportunity for nexus programmes.

Partnering for impact and scale

Northern Central America, much like the rest of Latin America, has a robust civil society. A historical tradition which includes NGOs, civil society networks, labour unions, business associations and academia has contributed to the possibility of establishing strategic partnerships. Humanitarian organisations are able to ensure that programmes are based on client¹⁰ perspectives. Needs assessments, humanitarian intervention's most basic tool, can mainstream what being client-centred truly means. At the International Rescue Committee (IRC), for example, we partner with local actors in all contexts – from complex chronic conflicts where the state is fragile to stable countries of asylum with fully functioning governments. The common purpose of IRC's partnerships with each type of stakeholder is to expand the

¹⁰ [Editor's note] Interestingly, the author uses the term "client" in line with a recent choice made by the organisation to which he belongs. See Internal Rescue Committee, *IRC Client Voice and Choice Initiative. Making the Case and Making the Difference: Strategies to Promote Client-Responsive Humanitarian Aid*, July 2016, p. 2, <https://rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/926/160831cvcbriefingpaper-responsiveness-final.pdf>: "The IRC has chosen to use the term 'client' because of the greater sense of action it carries, as opposed to the more passive recipient of aid encompassed by the term 'beneficiary'."

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

impact and scale of the response and reach the best outcomes for people affected by crises, in both the near and long term. In each case, we aim to contribute to improved service delivery and stronger organisational capacity and local systems. The specific objectives of each partnership, as well as IRC's role, vary according to the partner type. The richness and diversity of Northern Central America's context has given an organisation like the IRC invaluable lessons and insights into how to build strategic partnerships more effectively. These learnings have been applied in the Syrian crisis, East Africa and Asia, for instance. Being bold about redefining what it means to partner and how we measure impact are vital. Organisations like the Inter-American Foundation have been actively posing this question across Latin America¹¹ as well. Success in new models of strategic partnerships starts with an explicit recognition that stakeholders in the frontlines of a crisis are the main agents of response and recovery. When international humanitarian organisations partner with local actors, we contribute to greater impact and scale and more sustainable outcomes. The second *sine qua non* condition is to embody shared partnership principles – equality, complementarity, mutuality, solidarity, result-orientation, humility – as beacons of good partnership conduct. Lastly, a strategic partnership in the field of humanitarian action in Northern Central America must include systems thinking, adaptability, common sense and flexibility. These four elements start with a deep understanding of the local context, history and cultural nuances that define not the sub-region but each of the three countries in Northern Central America. Each is unique, each is different, each requires a differentiated approach. The common denominator for any humanitarian organisation seeking credibility in Northern Central America is talent. Embracing multidisciplinary teams from the region and who are committed to the region aid in learning about nuanced histories and cultures that differentiate each country to ensure efficiency and sustainability in programme delivery.

The need for an integrated humanitarian response

The broader international community has largely failed to respond to the migration crises in Latin America comprehensively and holistically, leaving the responsibility in the hands of host countries like Mexico. These communities have shouldered the response despite dealing with pre-existing structural challenges and receiving insufficient support as the global economic outlook worsens.

The challenge all international humanitarian organisations and their local partners face in Northern Central America is twofold: first, being recognised as a multi-dimensional crisis that, although seemingly not a traditional one with no refugee camps, has all the characteristics of a protracted crisis. Secondly, this crisis has been forgotten along with other crises in the region, like the situation in Venezuela, from where more than 7.7 million have left.¹²

Historically, migration in Northern Central America has been addressed by economic development programming and, more recently, violence prevention and programming to address the prevalence of social violence in the region. These measures have been insufficient in recognising the humanitarian needs of those who are in need of safety and who are moving to seek it. Furthermore, efforts that

¹¹ Inter-American Foundation, *Beyond Grantmaking, We do more with less*, <https://www.iaf.gov/what-we-do/grassroots-development/beyond-grantmaking>; See also : Rebecca Nelson and Mary DeLorey, "A responsive approach to out-migration from Central America's Northern Triangle", Inter-American Foundation, 27 April 2022, <https://www.iaf.gov/content/story/a-responsive-approach-to-out-migration-from-central-americas-northern-triangle>

¹² Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, *Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela*, 5 August 2023, <https://www.r4v.info/es/refugiadosymigrantes>

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

solely address economic development fail in providing needed trauma-informed wrap-around services and protections for those who seek to benefit from them.

Bringing a crisis lens to a non-traditional humanitarian response provides not just impact and scale in interventions but also a significant shift in programme implementation, especially when executed in partnership with local organisations across the region. As Latin America becomes a major migratory route not just for Latin American and Caribbean people but also for transcontinental populations, humanitarian organisations need to focus, intentionally, on integrated protection programmes which are accompanied by supplemental services like reliable information for decision-making and support to promote the recovery and reintegration of displaced populations.

The success of the humanitarian response will rely on a collaborative and integrated humanitarian and development response plan to address the causes, effects and impact of regional migration while also developing and implementing solutions that increase protection capacity and pathways for individuals fleeing violence, persecution and life-threatening situations, whether they remain in their countries of origin or seek safety elsewhere.

Biography

Julio E. Rank Wright • Julio E. Rank Wright is the Regional Vice President for Latin America at International Rescue Committee (IRC), an international non-profit helping people affected by humanitarian crises to survive, recover and rebuild their lives. Julio provides leadership in strategic, programmatic and operational management support to country programmes and colleagues in Latin America, with a focus on programming related to humanitarian action, especially for migrants, refugees and displaced people.

With more than twenty years of experience, Julio has worked in international development, the design and management of humanitarian programmes, democracy promotion and international strategy. He has worked in Mexico, Central America, Colombia and countries in Asia and Africa. Julio was chosen as a “Voice of the New Generation” by the Council of the Americas/Americas Society in 2010 and is a Fellow at the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. To quote this article:

Julio E. Rank Wright, “Responding to a non-traditional humanitarian crisis: the case of Northern Central America”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 24, November 2023, pp. 50–59.

<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2023/11/17/responding-to-a-non-traditional-humanitarian-crisis-the-case-of-northern-central-america/>