

To trust or not to trust? Learning from migrants perspectives on humanitarian action in Honduras

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For migrant populations subjected to violence of all kinds, trust in humanitarian actors is essential. The study the two authors draw on is invaluable in showing that this trust is nurtured both by signs of the actors' independence and the accessibility of their services.

For more than a decade, Honduras – like other countries in Central America – has witnessed an increase in the movement of people in vulnerable situations, including migrants in transit, people seeking asylum and returned migrants. Much has been written about the causes of migration, and the risks faced by migrants, in the country and in the region.¹ Thus, this ongoing movement gives rise to a range of needs and vulnerabilities that require urgent responses from global and national actors, including humanitarian ones.

For humanitarian actors, like Honduran Red Cross (*Cruz Roja Hondureña* or CRH), who work to promote the safety, dignity and well-being of migrants based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality, maintaining the trust of migrants in vulnerable situations is essential. Without trust, the ability to provide humanitarian assistance and protection is diminished, with the potential for life-threatening consequences.

This article explores the findings of research led by the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (herein the Global Migration Lab) in collaboration with various components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (herein the Movement) across fifteen countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia Pacific and Europe, including CRH.² The project explored migrants' perspectives on, and trust in, humanitarian action. Through the lens of trust, this article analyses surveys and focus groups

¹ Warren Dodd, Marvin Gómez Cerna, Paola Orellana *et al.*, "Interrogating the dimensions of human security within the context of migration and rural livelihoods in Honduras", *Migration and Development*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2020, pp. 152–172; José Alejandro Quijada and José David Sierra, "Understanding undocumented migration from Honduras", *International Migration*, vol. 57, no. 4, August 2019, pp. 3–20; Jordi Raich, "Editorial: Mexico y Central America, the Humanitarian Priorities. Migration, disappearances, violence, use of force and prison emergency: the 5 most pressing issues in 2022", *International Committee of the Red Cross*, 15 March 2022, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/editorial-mexico-y-america-central-humanitarian-priorities>; Priscilla Solano and Douglas S. Massey, "Migrating through the corridor of death: The making of a complex humanitarian crisis", *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, vol. 10, no. 3, September 2022, pp. 147–172.

² Magdalena Arias Cubas, Nicole Hoagland and Sanushka Mudaliar, *Migrants' Perspectives: Building Trust in Humanitarian Action*, Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab, December 2022, https://www.redcross.org.au/globalassets/cms/global-migration-lab/gml-migpers_buildtrust_english.pdf

conducted with 142 migrants, who were in transit, returnees or deportees in Honduras, and discusses both the obstacles faced by migrants in accessing humanitarian assistance and protection as well as the factors that hinder the provision of adequate support.

Migration and the work of CRH in Honduras

Despite the significance of migration today, Honduras and other countries in Central America were “a relative unknown in hemispheric migration matters until recent decades”.³ In Honduras, emigration only grew exponentially after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Since then, emigration, voluntary and forced returns, and transit migration have intensified in a context marked by the increasing securitisation of migration, large-scale violence, the socio-economic impacts of disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic and families’ burgeoning need for reunification.⁴

Emigration to the United States (US), the main destination for Honduran migrants, has grown since the 1990s and continues to be characterised by conditions of irregularity with the associated risks and vulnerabilities.⁵ Migrants also face vulnerabilities and risks along their migration routes. As safe and legal pathways have been restricted, migrants travelling north through Mexico, including an increasing number of unaccompanied minors and family units, have been victims of human rights violations and situations that endanger their lives and dignity.⁶

Parallel to the increase in emigration in the last decade, Honduras has witnessed an increase of voluntary and forced returns, mainly from neighbouring Mexico and the US. Since 2014, more than 520,241 migrants have returned, voluntarily or involuntarily, 145,125 minors. To illustrate the dramatic change in the scale of returns, in 2014 the government recorded only 225 returns, a figure that rose to 94,339 in 2022.⁷

Honduras, like several other countries in the region, has also witnessed the growth of transit migration, as migrants travel across the country towards the US, often under conditions of irregularity. In 2022, Honduras registered the entry of 188,858 migrants in an irregular situation, compared to 17,590 the previous year.⁸ While Cubans and Venezuelans represented the most significant groups travelling through the country, the growing presence of migrants from as far away as India, Cameroon and China is also notable.⁹

³ Sarah Mahler and Dusan Ugrina, “Central America: Crossroads of the Americas”, *Migration Information Source*, 1 April 2006, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-america-crossroads-americas>

⁴ Warren Dodd, Marvin Gómez Cerna, Paola Orellana *et al.*, “Interrogating the dimensions...”, *art. cit.*; José Alejandro Quijada and José David Sierra, “Understanding undocumented...”, *art. cit.*; Priscilla Solano and Douglas S. Massey, “Migrating through...”, *art. cit.*

⁵ José Alejandro Quijada and José David Sierra, “Understanding undocumented...”, *art. cit.*; Nicole Ward and Jeanne Batalova, *Central American Immigrants in the United States*, Migration Information Source, 10 May 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states#unauthorized>

⁶ Jordi Raich, “Editorial: Mexico y Central America...”, *art. cit.*; Priscilla Solano and Douglas S. Massey, “Migrating through...”, *art. cit.*

⁷ Instituto Nacional de Migración, *Hondureños Retornados*, 2023, <https://inm.gob.hn/retornados.html>

⁸ Instituto Nacional de Migración, *Migración Irregular*, 2023, <https://inm.gob.hn/migracion-irregular.html>

⁹ Caitlyn Yates, “As more migrants from Africa and Asia arrive in Latin America, governments seek orderly and controlled pathways”, *Migration Information Source*, 22 October 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/extracontinental-migrants-latin-america>

A recent assessment led by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) with migrants at the borders of Mexico and Central America¹⁰ provides evidence of the urgent need for humanitarian assistance and protection. This includes: access to health care facilities, medicine, emergency and specialist care (including psychosocial support); access to sanitation facilities, sanitary products and drinking water; in terms of protection, access to safe accommodation spaces, protection and reporting services, and communication services – including the Restoring Family Links (RFL) service; access to shelter and food; and access to relevant information on the rights of migrants and on changes in legal requirements along migration routes.

In this context, humanitarian actors are increasingly active in providing humanitarian assistance and protection to migrants in vulnerable situations. As documented elsewhere,¹¹ CRH began working in migration in 2012 and has continued to do so in collaboration with components of the Movement, and other global and national actors. Key CRH initiatives that advance its inclusive, vulnerability and needs-based approach include:

- The establishment of the first Migrant Assistance Module at the Corinto border crossing, which provides assistance to returnees and migrants in transit, regardless of their country of origin or legal status.
- In agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, CRH manages the Centre for Attention to Returned Migrants in Omoa, and the Centre for the Care of Children and their Migrant Families in San Pedro Sula, which provide assistance to returned adults and children respectively.
- Since 2016, and in agreement with the National Institute of Migration, CRH assists migrants in transit through the Centres for Attention to Irregular Migrants, including through the provision of RFL services.
- With the advice of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the financial support of the Spanish Red Cross, CRH leads initiatives to support people internally displaced by violence and returned migrants in need of protection.
- Together with the IFRC and other RCRC National Societies, CRH has established Humanitarian Service Points to provide assistance to migrants in transit.
- In 2023, CRH is consolidating its partnership with the International Organization for Migration to strengthen the structure and functioning of temporary shelters for migrants in transit.

Questions of independence, unmet needs and access barriers

To be able to reach and respond to the needs of migrants, humanitarian actors, like CRH, need to build and maintain migrants' trust. Research by the Global Migration Lab highlights three lessons on the

¹⁰ Federación Internacional de Sociedades Nacionales de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja, *Necesidades de la Población Migrante en las Fronteras de México y Centroamérica*, Reporte interno, December 2022.

¹¹ Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja, *Misión del CICR en Honduras*, 2018, https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/Worldwide/Ameriques/mexico/folleto_honduras_2018.pdf; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Red Cross: Providing Services and Protection to Migrants in Central America is a Humanitarian Imperative*, 15 January 2021, <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/red-cross-providing-services-and-protection-migrants-central-america-humanitarian>; Arnaldo Ponce and Norma Archila, "Assistance for and protection of migrants: Experience of the Honduran Red Cross", *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 99, no. 1, April 2017, pp. 53–62, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/assistance-and-protection-migrants-experience-honduran-red-cross>

obstacles migrants face in accessing humanitarian assistance and protection and the factors that hinder the provision of adequate support.¹²

First, independence from public authorities, both real and perceived, is crucial. The principle of independence is fundamental to humanitarian actors, however, findings show a worrying trend, as many migrants in vulnerable situations associate seeking humanitarian assistance and protection with the risk of detention and deportation.¹³ Across the countries where research was conducted, a quarter of migrants (25%) expressed fear that accessing humanitarian assistance and protection – from any humanitarian actor – could put them at risk of detention or deportation. In Honduras, and in other countries where surveyed migrants self-identified as deportees, as migrants whose asylum claims had been rejected or as migrants with an irregular status – in other words migrants who were likely to have had negative interactions with public authorities along their journeys – this fear was more prominent. In Honduras, 53% of migrants expressed this fear.

Second, and despite the efforts of humanitarian actors to reach migrants in vulnerable situations, findings revealed a trail of unmet needs. In the countries where research was conducted, the majority of migrants (79%) reported needing assistance that was not available at various points in their journeys. In Honduras, 54% of migrants reported needing but not receiving assistance at one stage of their journeys, with more than a third (35%) declaring an unmet need while in transit to their planned destination. Notably, while migrants in other countries expressed ambivalence or disappointment with the support received, in Honduras the majority of migrants (87%) agreed with the statement that assistance and protection “provided by humanitarian actors covers the most important needs of migrants”. Yet, as the needs assessment referred to above demonstrates,¹⁴ there are persistent needs for basic health services, shelter, water and sanitation, protection and information.

Third, findings highlight key barriers that prevent access to humanitarian assistance and protection. As mentioned above, more than half of migrants surveyed in Honduras declared an unmet need for assistance and protection during a stage of their journey. When asked, “What was the reason you did not receive support or assistance?”, barriers related to availability and knowledge were cited most frequently: a third of migrants said, “there was no support available” (34%) or “I did not know where to get support” (33%). Other barriers included obstacles related to distance or inaccessibility (22%); fear of arrest or detention (13%); and eligibility (10%), likely related to their legal status or citizenship.

Key lessons for humanitarian actors

These findings highlight valuable lessons for humanitarian actors, including the importance of maintaining independence, real and perceived. As reported by migrants in focus groups, those in

¹² Primary research included interviews, focus group discussions, face-to-face and online surveys with over 16,000 migrants in Argentina, Australia, Finland, France, the Gambia, Honduras, Maldives, Mali, Niger, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sweden, Türkiye, and Zambia. A detailed methodology, including a discussion on key limitations of the data, is available in Magdalena Arias Cubas, Nicole Hoagland and Sanushka Mudaliar, *Migrants’ Perspectives: Building Trust in Humanitarian Action*, *op. cit.*

¹³ Independent Monitoring, Research and Evidence Facility, *Exploring Migrants’ Trust in Humanitarian Organisations*, 19 March 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/exploring-migrants-trust-humanitarian-organisations-march-2021>; Ida Savio Vammen, Sine Plambech, Ahlam Chemlali *et al.*, *Does Information Save Migrants’ Lives? Knowledge and Needs of West African Migrants En Route to Europe*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2021.

¹⁴ Federación Internacional de Sociedades Nacionales de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja, *Necesidades de la Población Migrante en las Fronteras de México y Centroamérica*, *op. cit.*

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vulnerable situations may distrust others, including humanitarian actors, based on previous negative experiences (and even hearsay) and may develop evasion strategies to avoid the risk of being detained and deported. To build and maintain trust, humanitarian actors must not only clearly and visibly uphold the principle of independence but also take steps to communicate when, where and in what context they cooperate and coordinate with public authorities. In practice, this requires better communicating their principled humanitarian approach, as well as ensuring the protection of migrants' privacy and data and carefully considering the risk of participating in processes such as returns.

Furthermore, and despite the important work being done by humanitarian actors, there are increasing needs on the ground. As migrants reported in focus groups, those travelling through, from and back to Honduras faced risks such as death, violence, abuse and violations of their rights. Migrants may not have access to essential services due to their legal status or may face risks of detention and deportation. In this context, a lack of knowledge about where and how to access support, and the actual unavailability of such support, can contribute to feelings of loneliness and helplessness and increase migrants' dependence on less reliable individuals or networks. This highlights the importance of taking practical steps to increase access to, and awareness of, existing support – from developing strategies to improve migrants' access to information about their rights and available services and support, to developing an integrated approach that addresses humanitarian needs along migration routes.

Finally, to promote the safety, dignity and well-being of migrants, and to build and maintain their trust in humanitarian action, humanitarian actors must continue to engage in humanitarian diplomacy. They must encourage States to create an environment that allows for principled humanitarian action, to strengthen efforts to prevent and alleviate human suffering and to address the assistance and protection needs of all migrants. The effective provision of support is only part of the equation – as actively done by CRH since 2012, there is a need to advocate for the humanitarian imperative to protect and assist all migrants in vulnerable situations, irrespective of who they are, where they come from or their legal status.

In conclusion, the work of CRH and the research conducted by the Global Migration Lab demonstrates that as the scope and scale of migration-related humanitarian needs continue to grow, migrants must be at the centre of humanitarian action. Humanitarian actors must consult with migrants and listen to and respond to migrants' thoughts, fears and concerns about their situations, and about the humanitarian assistance and protection they receive. Migrants' perceptions of independence, their unmet needs and the barriers they face in accessing support not only offer important lessons on how humanitarian actors can build and maintain trust, but also – and equally important – on how their work can adapt to best respond to migrants' priorities, needs, strengths and vulnerabilities.

Biographies

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européenne des migrations internationales among others. Her research interests include the intersection between migration, inequality and humanitarianism.

Norma Archila Salgado • A lawyer by training, Norma Archila Salgado initially joined Honduran Red Cross to support its response to the displacement of Nicaraguan populations in Honduras, caused by internal conflict. Subsequently, she became National Coordinator of Dissemination, working on awareness-raising and training on Red Cross doctrine and legal framework and International Humanitarian Law. Norma promoted the creation of the Social Development Division, which includes human mobility. For ten years, she was the Focal Point for Migration, Protection and Restoring Family Links. Since then, Norma has promoted the development of internal policies on human mobility and gender and social inclusion and has contributed to the organisation of the Human Mobility Roundtable lead by Honduran Red Cross. With this long trajectory in the humanitarian field, in 2023 Norma became Head of Cooperation and Strategic Relations of Honduran Red Cross.

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