



A Fractured Response

Policy Recommendations to Strengthen
Regional Collaboration on Migration in the
Americas

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Introduction

Throughout Latin America, multiple overlapping humanitarian crises continue to force the displacement and movement of millions of people seeking safety and protection. Violence, economic instability, and environmental distress continue to be the primary driving factors behind the increasing mixed and onward migration throughout the region. As of September 2021, the UNHCR had identified nearly [1 million](#) people of concern in Central America and Mexico, inclusive of IDPs, Venezuelans displaced abroad, asylum seekers, and refugees. Globally, there are more than [6 million](#) Venezuelans displaced abroad, most of whom are hosted in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Brazil. Mexico, alone, is home to more than 285,000 in need of international protection.

In response to the humanitarian, political, environmental, and economic crises that have driven people to seek safety across Latin America, local and international actors have developed overlapping responses to contend with humanitarian needs throughout the region. At the international levels, these initiatives include the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), the Marco Integral Regional para la Protección y Soluciones (MIRPS), the Quito Process, and the Friends of the Quito Process. These fora attempt to provide a space for humanitarian and development actors to develop collaborative response plans in Latin America. However, the patchwork attempts and lack of serious uptake by regional governments have resulted in confusing and dangerous conditions for people on the move through the region as they contend with a pervasive lack of protection policies and wildly different immigration regulations throughout their journey.

As a result of these conditions, the imperative to deliver principled and sustainable humanitarian responses throughout the region is of increasing importance. To this end, the IRC recommends:

1. Donors and host states should agree to concrete commitments on financing as well as responsibility sharing and a framework for harmonization of policies (on protection; documentation; access to school, work, and healthcare; regularization of immigration status; and initiatives addressing the needs of people at risk of harm such as women, girls, children, youth, indigenous populations, and the LGBTQI+ community) across the region. These commitments should be agreed to with robust input from civil society and implemented transparently through local fora, in addition to the Quito Process, 2022 Donor Conferences, the Summit of the Americas.
2. The Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other international financial institutions should incorporate lessons learned from other multilaterally-supported and -funded compact initiatives in humanitarian and protection emergencies around the world into the responses in Latin America. This includes expanding the scope of the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF) to include initiatives in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama, and expanding the GCFF's scope in Colombia.
3. Rethinking the approach to a humanitarian response in Latin America will require the sustained engagement of non-US donors to the responses, such as the European Commission, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Japan. The UNHCR, the United States, and the World Bank can and should utilize their convening powers to bring these new donors to the table and draw on lessons learned from the Jordan Compact to strengthen the humanitarian responses in Latin America.

THE IRC'S WORK IN LATIN AMERICA

The IRC operates across the arc of the humanitarian and migration crises in Central America, South America, and Mexico. Our presence has allowed the IRC to gain a deep understanding of the root causes of migration through a humanitarian and development lens by delivering services and humanitarian assistance to migrants on the move, refugees, asylum seekers, and returnees. We draw on our experiences as a global operational NGO responding to crises around the world to deliver an evidence-based response to meet the needs of our clients.

The IRC is on the ground delivering a collective response to support Venezuelans holistically—and timely—where they need it most: implementing programming with a mixed model of partnerships with local organizations and direct implementation in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, and providing support for populations at risk through local organizations in Venezuela. The programming includes protecting children and adolescents with psychosocial services and education; empowering people with cash assistance programs; granting access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health and primary health care; delivering child malnutrition services; and developing prevention and response programs to gender-based violence.

In Northern Central America, the IRC serves individuals and families experiencing violence and displacement. The IRC's programming includes multi-purpose cash transfers to meet basic needs; safe spaces for women, youth, children and the LGBTQ+ community who are survivors of gender-based violence; case management and psychosocial support to families, children and LGBTI+ people; and access to verified services and information through CuéntaNos, a digital platform—part of the Global Signpost project—to provide people with critical, up-to-date information and two-way communication and support with trained moderators as well as direct engagement for returned migrants, families and others at risk of violence.

In Mexico, the IRC is responding to the crisis in Mexican southern and northern border towns, as well as in Mexico City. The IRC's programs offer a timely and comprehensive response to the most urgent needs of people on the move, including: prevention and response to gender-based violence; access to critical information through InfoDigna, a multi-channel information platform; prevention and mitigation of COVID-19; economic recovery and development; child protection services; as well as identifying needs and referring cases to local service providers. Additionally, the IRC is supporting local integration efforts by providing cultural orientation to individuals who have chosen to stay in Mexico.

Host countries are taking on great responsibility with insufficient support

Although the Venezuela and regional displacement crises continue to worsen, funding has not increased to meet the scale of need. As the IRC noted in our [2022 Emergency Watchlist](#) report, the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has produced one of the largest external displacement populations in the world, comparable to those originating from Syria and Ukraine, and the largest in Latin American history, with ripple effects across the hemisphere.

Despite soaring needs, the region's 7 UNOCHA humanitarian (HRP) and regional (RMRP) response plans were largely underfunded in 2021: [Venezuela HRP](#) (39% funded), [Venezuela RMRP](#) (41%), [Colombia HRP](#) (49%), [Honduras HRP](#) (33%), [El Salvador HRP](#) (53%), [Guatemala HRP](#) (63%), and [Haiti HRP](#) (27%). Mexico, although it hosts more than 285,000 people of concern, including refugees, asylum seekers, displaced Venezuelans, and IDPs does not have an active HRP.

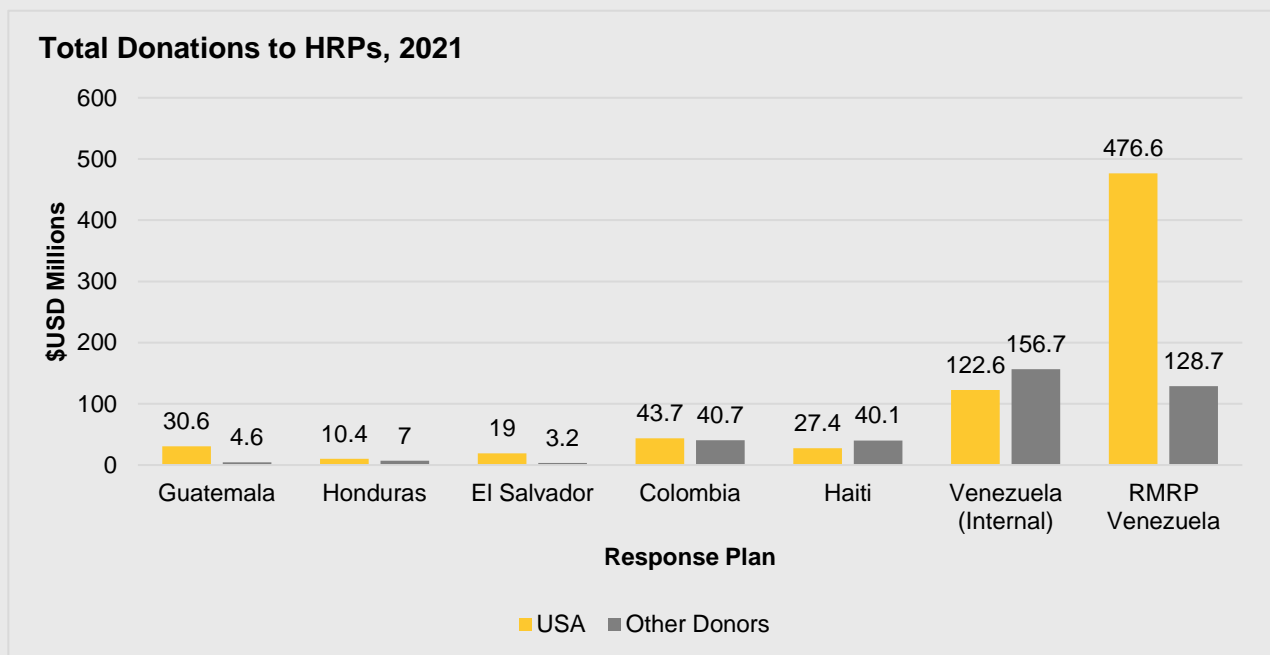
The countries in Northern Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) only gained an HRP in 2021, allowing the humanitarian actors in those countries to coordinate their activities more effectively and help funnel funds to where needs are highest.

The lack of an HRP in Mexico hampers coordination of humanitarian action across the country, including a principled response to the needs of people on the move and widespread violence from armed non-state actors, such as gangs and narcotraffickers. The creation of an HRP would allow for effective mobilization toward addressing humanitarian concerns in the country and present more opportunities for local and international actors to advocate for policy changes that would positively affect the outcomes for displaced people.

The broader international community has largely failed to respond to the crises in Latin America comprehensively or holistically. A 2021 [Brookings report](#) demonstrated that, by the end of 2020, total funding per displaced Venezuelan was \$265 in comparison to \$3,150 per displaced Syrian. This disparity is stark when one considers that the number of displaced people from Venezuela and Syria is roughly equal. Furthermore, Colombia has the fourth largest population of internally-displaced people due to conflict (5.2 million) in the world after Ukraine (7.1 million), Syria (6.7 million) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (5.3 million), yet receives scant attention or funding from the international community in comparison.

Furthermore, the United States is, by far, the largest donor to the humanitarian response plans in the Americas. Out of the \$1.09 billion invested in the HRP and RMRP in the Americas in 2021, 65.7% (\$730.3 million) of that came from the United States. As a point of comparison, the United States accounted for roughly 40% of total global response plan/appeal funding in [2019](#), [2020](#), and [2021](#). It is unsustainable for the United States to be the largest donor to such an extreme degree. Other wealthy donors that are signatories to the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) (GCR), which set out a [program](#) of action for more equitable and predictable responsibility-sharing by UN members states and stakeholders, should contribute their fair share.

The below chart compares US contributions to the humanitarian and regional response plans in Latin America to contributions from other donors. The United States, alone, out funds the rest of global contributions to Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, and the regional Venezuela response. Global donors outpace the US in contributions to Haiti and the internal humanitarian response in Venezuela. Source: FTS



This lack of sustained support from the international community has meant that host countries, many of which are themselves facing mixed migration, internal displacement, and humanitarian need, are taking on most of the responsibility for providing protection and resources to refugees, migrants, and other people on the move throughout the Americas. Host countries play a critical leadership role in responding to the regional refugee crises. But they are neither equipped on their own, nor receiving the right support, to face the complex challenges of increasing refugee and migrant populations, especially in the longer-term.

Colombia, which hosts approximately [32%](#) of displaced Venezuelans, took on the extraordinary move of granting Venezuelans [Temporary Protected Status](#) in February 2021, which will [provide](#) work permits, access to healthcare, educational opportunities, and a path to regularization to Venezuelans in Colombia. Such a commitment will require sustained technical, financial, and political support from donor countries to ensure the program is a success. Further north in [Mexico](#), communities of people on the move in Tapachula, Monterrey, and Ciudad Juárez have put pressure on educational, healthcare, and migration systems that have been strained for years. Increased international support is required to strengthen these public services and provide essential wrap-around services to migrants and host communities alike.

[R4V](#): Established in 2018 by IOM and the UNHCR, the R4V is a forum to "coordinate the response efforts [to the regional response to the situation of refugees and migrants from Venezuela] across 17 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, with a particular focus on achieving coherency and consistency throughout the response."

[MIRPS](#): The MIRPS, adopted in 2017, is an application of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). It aims to encourage regional cooperation between countries of origin, transit, and destination, to foster responsibility-sharing on matters related to prevention, protection, and durable solutions.

[Quito Process](#): The Quito Process refers to the meetings and commitments established between Latin American countries to coordinate the response to the Venezuela migration crisis. The first meeting was held in Quito, Ecuador in 2018 in order to "exchange information and good practices, seeking to articulate regional coordination with respect to the migration crisis of Venezuelan citizens in the region."

[Friends of the Quito Process](#): This group was founded with the intention of making the Venezuelan migration crisis visible and keeping it among the international community's priorities, in order to protect and integrate refugees and Venezuelan migrants, as well as be able to rely on the group's technical and financial support for the development of the agreed measures and actions.

Current tools and responses do not meet the scale and complexity of the challenge

Regional humanitarian platforms such as MIRPS and R4V have been an important starting point for coordinating the humanitarian responses across countries with differing immigration policies and national systems for hosting displaced populations. However, it is important to consider that migration and displacement from and throughout Latin America is not a new phenomenon. Latin American countries have a long history of migration, as places of origin, transit, and destination. Rather, the scale of the humanitarian and displacement crises affecting the region is unprecedented. Despite this history, the current tools are not meeting the scale and complexity of the challenge as national systems are overstretched and international funding has not kept pace with the scale of need in the region.

The [Cartagena Declaration](#) has been an important attempt to strengthen the international protection mechanisms to which displaced populations can access. The 1984 declaration is [noteworthy](#) in that it

- 1) broadened the definition of "refugee" to include individuals fleeing "generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order," while excluding mention of traditionally defined forms of "persecution" that could result in objection by the country of origin
- 2) linked and enshrined three distinct threads of international protection—humanitarian law, human rights, and refugee rights—in a regional accord

- 3) emphasized regional solidarity and the practice of burden-sharing through “solidarity resettlement” as the basis for cooperation on humanitarian protection, foreshadowing language that would be adopted later by the European Union.

The Declaration, however, lacked a specific implementation mechanism. This has resulted in ad hoc application of its principles across the region despite the attempt to harmonize policies at the national level. For [example](#), twelve countries in Latin America grant temporary residence to refugees and offer the option of permanent residence after 2-4 years. Four countries immediately grant this permanent status to refugees.

All countries in the region, except for Venezuela and Colombia, allow for the extension of [work permits](#) to refugees. (Colombia has granted temporary protected status specifically to Venezuelans, which include work authorization. This does not extend to other groups.) Eleven countries allow asylum-seekers to seek paid employment. It is important to note that although refugees and asylum seekers may be afforded legal status, [bureaucratic red tape](#) and long waiting times do, in some cases, pose a barrier to protection. The lack of harmonized responses and streamlined asylum application processes has forced people on the move to navigate starkly different immigration and asylum policies throughout their journey.

As a result of this lack of coordination, the [R4V](#) was created in 2018 to provide a platform for 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to coordinate their humanitarian responses and develop shared principles and systems specifically in response to the Venezuela crisis. R4V principally provides these humanitarian actors in these 17 countries a mechanism by which to share information and best practices. However, the ability to [coordinate](#) responses through the platform has not fully come to fruition, leaving in place the ad hoc national policies that deepen the protection risks faced by migrants and refugees, especially women, children, indigenous people, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

A sustainable response requires interventions integrated into national systems that allow refugees not only to survive, but to recover and rebuild their lives. As such, host states must develop and implement coherent policies that center the needs of people on the move, in both the long- and short-term. This means international donors should make concerted investments in the capacity of host communities to provide protection to IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants throughout the arc of the crisis until durable solutions are made available by the international community and host countries. This exercise in capacity building could deliver concrete [regional commitments](#) on coordination and harmonization of national policies that address the provision of security, documentation, education, employment, healthcare, and pathways to citizenship for all people on the move. However, in order to make good on these assurances, donors and host countries must agree to concrete commitments on financing, responsibility-sharing, and cross-border policy harmonization.

Efforts to strengthen the asylum systems in Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia have been welcomed, but the emphasis on the securitization of migration and a [lack of integration](#) of these foreign policies into domestic practices has largely resulted in a confusing system for refugees and migrants that heightens their vulnerabilities.

New partners and models are required to meet the displacement challenges in Latin America

The international community has long responded to the migration challenges in Latin America through the lens of economic and social development. The theory was and, in some cases, continues, that precarious economic conditions are the primary driver of migration in the Americas. Although in many cases, the pervasive violence and persecution that drives many people in Latin America to leave their homes is a symptom of economic challenges, interventions that solely tackle economic issues miss the mark. A comprehensive, whole-of-

government or -society, approach is needed to address the complex overlapping factors that drive migration from, through, and within the region.

Simultaneously, the misperception that the United States is the destination for all people on the move in the region continues to have traction, despite Mexico, Costa Rica, Belize, and Colombia all being considered [viable options](#) for international protection. As a result of these dynamics, donors, multilateral institutions, and civil society organizations must rethink their approaches to responding to these crises to consider humanitarian and protection needs throughout the region.

The political and economic realities of protracted displacement in the Americas demand a more coordinated approach that responds to both the immediate, short-term needs of refugees and migrants, host communities, and governments during crisis, as well as the long-term development needs of countries and their populations. An attempt at achieving this was made in the Syrian humanitarian response with the implementation of the Jordan Compact in 2016. This compact brings together donors, host countries, and civil society organizations to create mutually reinforcing commitments to resources, policy changes, and projects that are designed to achieve a shared vision and set outcomes. To this end, the Compact [offers](#) favorable economic incentives and EU trade agreements in exchange for the granting of work permits in specific sectors and accommodation of Syrian children in publicly-funded schools. The IRC followed the implementation of the Jordan Compact [closely](#) in its initial three years of implementation.

It is not possible to characterize the Jordan Compact as an unmitigated success; it has [struggled](#) to deliver on the promise of economic independence for Syrian refugees in the country and refugees were not adequately consulted on their needs and constraints in the planning process. However, the Compact offers some important lessons that host countries and donors in Latin America should heed as future migration agreements are announced in the coming months. Namely, host governments should commit to a framework for long-term, inclusive policies for displaced populations that expand to cover integration into healthcare and education systems and the workforce, in addition to humanitarian entry requirements, and pathways to citizenship or residency. Additionally, there should be a robust mechanism for civil society and especially local actors (especially refugee- and migrant-led organizations) to feed into the development of these mechanisms to ensure that the needs and desires of displaced populations are adequately met by any new initiative.

International financial institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank can and should play a more responsive role in the development and implementation of a new regional agreement on migration. To further the implementation of the Jordan Compact, the [World Bank](#) released \$300 million in grants and low-interest loans through the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF), which was created to address refugee crises in middle-income countries. Colombia has already received a [\\$31.5 million grant](#) that allowed the Colombian government to regularize Venezuelans in the country and facilitate access to jobs and basic social services to them. Although the TPS rollout in Colombia has had a few hiccups, it represents a crucial step toward increasing protection of people on the move in the region. In this vein, we call for Mexico to also have access to GCFF funds as a middle-income country that is contending with complex migratory movements.

European donors were intimately involved in the [creation and implementation](#) of the Jordan Compact. As a result, these institutional partners can play an influential role in the creation of a regional migration agreement in the Americas and can offer important lessons to regional counterparts on regional responsibility-sharing and client consultation. The IRC encourages donors from the European Commission to engage more directly with the

humanitarian responses in Latin America not only to equitably distribute responsibility of protection across the world, but also to share best practices, information, and financing.

Policy Recommendations

International and regional cooperation and funding are necessary to ensure protections for vulnerable populations and all who are fleeing for their safety

A comprehensive humanitarian and refugee response in Latin America requires the development of new relationships, practices, and sustained international investments in the strengthening of the systems that provide displaced populations dignity, safety, and protection.

- 1) Donors and host states should agree to concrete commitments on financing as well as responsibility sharing and a framework for harmonization of policies (on protection; documentation; access to school, work, and healthcare; regularization of immigration status; and initiatives addressing the needs of initiatives addressing the needs of people at risk of harm such as women, girls, children, youth, indigenous populations, and the LGBTQI+ community) across the region. These commitments should be agreed to with robust input from civil society and implemented transparently through the Quito Process, 2022 Donor Conferences, and the Summit of the Americas.
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Prepared By:

Saúl Ulloa

Global Policy & Advocacy Officer

Saul.Ulloa@rescue.org