



Task Force Summary Report

Key Recommendations

**North and Central American
Task Force on Migration**

April 2022



The **North and Central American Task Force on Migration** is a non-governmental forum of academics, civil society and business leaders, and former policymakers in dialogue with current government officials created to facilitate a broadly driven solution dialogue among the countries involved in the crisis of migration and forced displacement in the region. Initiated by the World

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Refugee & Migration Council with the Center for U.S.- Mexican Studies, El Colegio de México, the Migration Policy Institute and the Inter-American Dialogue, the task force will issue concrete recommendations for collective, regional action based on evidentiary research to promote responsibility sharing across North and Central America. More at:

wrmcouncil.org/TaskForce

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Task Force Summary Report

North and Central American Task Force on Migration

Overview

The North and Central American Task Force on Migration is a non-governmental forum of academics, civil society and business leaders, and former policymakers established to facilitate a broadly driven dialogue among the countries involved in the crisis of migration and forced displacement in the region, with a particular focus on the three countries of Northern Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Initiated by the World Refugee & Migration Council with the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, El Colegio de México, the Migration Policy Institute and the Inter-American Dialogue, and supported by the Government of Canada, the Task Force has met monthly since May 2021 to develop concrete recommendations for collective, regional action to address both the immediate needs of migrants and to respond to the longer term economic security and governance issues that impel migrants and asylum-seekers to embark on often treacherous journeys towards North America.

This has been an intensive, consultative process. The Task Force has consulted with academic experts, civil society and private sector representatives, government officials, and UN representatives in developing its recommendations. Smaller working groups grappled with specific issues – from humanitarian protection in the region to the development of alternative migration pathways. Five interim reports have been issued which provide both analysis and suggested actions. Research has been commissioned and 12 research papers have been published.

The high-level recommendations of the Task Force are:

- A comprehensive, strategic, regional approach is needed to address migration from Northern Central America. No one country can deal with the complexities of this migration on its own. Central American governments, together with civil society and the private sector must intensify efforts to address the systemic political and economic factors that have led millions of Central Americans to leave their countries.
- Governments in Northern Central America must address the political, economic and institutional drivers of migration. There are no quick fixes to address the drivers of migration; fundamental political, institutional and economic change is necessary. While foreign investment in Central American economies is needed, systemic issues of political will and corruption must be tackled to reduce political risk. Respect for human rights and rule of law are needed to provide human security and education, and health care and social infrastructure must be strengthened. This will take time and political courage. While governments of the migrants' countries of origin must demonstrate a commitment to change, other governments in the region must step up to support these efforts.

- The United States, Canada and Mexico must increase legal channels for Central Americans to migrate – through both labor migration and protection pathways. Central Americans are migrating through irregular means because there simply are not enough legal pathways to migrate.
- All regional actors – from Central American governments to donors, international NGOs and financial institutions – must find ways to support the active engagement of civil society in addressing the drivers of migration, supporting migrants and returnees, and in advocating for needed policy changes. Civil society actors are playing a valiant, humanitarian role in the region but are under threat and under-resourced.

The Task Force has developed close to 70 recommendations with over 80 pages of background information in interim reports on specific aspects of Central American migration. In this summary report, we highlight a few recommendations in each of the six areas of focus, including recommendations which can be implemented in the next few months as well as those which will show results in the longer term, but which should be started now. We understand that political leaders need to be seen to be taking immediate action. While it may be politically expedient to postpone those actions whose effects are likely to be seen years from now, if measures aren't taken to address the long-term drivers of migration, the pressures will continue to grow. We believe that all governments in the region have a responsibility to take actions which will reduce the pressures on Central Americans to leave their countries and to support those who migrate. More importantly, we believe that those actions should be taken in concert and by the countries of the region working together.

The following sections outline key recommendations under each of the Task Force's six areas of focus:

- Developing a comprehensive, strategic regional approach to Central American migration
- Protecting women, children, indigenous populations and the internally displaced in Northern Central America
- Developing alternative migration pathways
- Tackling political-institutional drivers of migration
- Addressing economic and environmental drivers of Migration in Northern Central America
- Changing the narrative and supporting integration

The key recommendations in each of these sections were developed based on a series of corresponding research papers commissioned by the Task Force as well as detailed interim reports with additional recommendations, all of which

are available on the North and Central American Task Force on Migration website at wormcouncil.org/TaskForce.

Addressing the drivers of migration, protecting people in the region and upholding the rights of migrants at all stages of their journeys are not tasks for the faint-hearted! Political will, economic resources and creative thinking are needed. But the Task Force is convinced that the human, political and financial capital exists in the region to tackle these challenges. The time to begin is now.



Developing a Comprehensive, Strategic Regional Approach to Central American Migration

From Canada to Panama, waves of unilateral and bilateral attempts to address increasing Central American migration have been characterized by their reactive nature, limited reach, and narrow focus on reducing irregular migration. Policy responses prioritizing control and enforcement may have temporarily stymied spikes in migration levels — primarily to the United States and more recently also to Mexico — but have lacked a proactive, regional strategic approach to migration management and have failed to address the root causes of migration. There are many regional organizations which have been involved, to varying degrees over the years, in migration — from the Organization of American States to the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Puebla process to the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework for Central America (MIRPS). They should all seek ways to incorporate migration issues in their work — including those focused on the environment, security and development cooperation — but more coherence is needed. As recently as December 2, 2021, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees made an impassioned appeal for “a regional mechanism that would help to scale up, coordinate and create synergies between the different programmes, policies and initiatives dealing with the unprecedented magnitude and complexity of the

Read the report:

[Regional Cooperation and Co-Responsibility: Interim Report and Recommendations](#)

population movements in Mexico and Central America” (UNHCR 2021). He is absolutely right.

- **Key Recommendation 1:** We recommend the establishment of a North and Central American Council on Migration, based on the model of the Arctic Council, to serve as a forum for strategic discussions concerning Central American migration and to coordinate concrete actions. The Council should have a rotating chair and include representatives of migrant communities, civil society organizations, academics and the private sector as full participants. Details of how such a Council might work are [provided here](#).



Protecting women, children, indigenous populations and the internally displaced in Northern Central America

The protection needs in Northern Central America are urgent, particularly for women, children and members of indigenous and other marginalized groups. Basic human rights are being violated on a large scale. We suggest a layered approach to providing protection in the region – working to increase the protection of people in their own communities, when they are displaced within their countries, when transiting through other countries and when they seek protection in neighboring countries. Protecting people in the region is a way of addressing humanitarian needs and upholding human rights. It also addresses at least one of the causes that forces families to make the awful decision that abandoning their homes is the only way to find safety. A layered approach also means working at different levels: supporting grassroots initiatives and refugee-led organizations at the local level, pressing for meaningful change in national governments' policies and strengthening broader regional initiatives to share responsibility for those who move in search of safety.

Read the report:

[Humanitarian Protection in the Region: A State of Emergency](#)

- **Key Recommendation 2:** We suggest that women's organizations and networks in Mexico and Central America take the lead in organizing a

regional network meeting within the next year with a view to developing a consortium of organizations to take the lead in identifying and implementing priority actions to protect women and children in the region. We ask international organizations such as Vital Voices and the Pan American Development Foundation as well as donor governments to support the development of such a consortium.

- **Key Recommendation 3:** Recognizing the potential value of a regional system of child protection, we call on UNICEF, together with child-centered NGOs and UNHCR's Safe Spaces Network, to convene a meeting with stakeholders in the region to examine both governmental and community-led mechanisms for upholding the rights of children, including those at risk of displacement as well as migrant and displaced children.
- **Key Recommendation 4:** We call on national governments, donors and regional actors to provide adequate financial and political support for asylum, to support innovations for asylum-seekers and refugees such as the internal relocation program in Mexico, and to adopt and implement policies on internal displacement. These policies should be based on international standards.



Developing Alternative Migration Pathways

Existing programs for temporary labor migration were mainly developed decades ago in a very different context and do not take into consideration the current conditions in Central America and the labor needs in North America. These programs need to be revised and expanded to reflect present needs in both Central and North America. While regional labor migration systems are outdated, the system for protecting refugees from Central America is broken: they are not protected in their home countries, in transit through Mexico, or at the US-Mexico border.

Read the report:

[Reducing Irregular Migration from Central America Through Alternative Regular Migration Pathways](#)

- **Key Recommendation 5:** The US, Canada and Mexico should use bilateral and multilateral agreements to increase labor migration pathways from Central America by at least 50,000 in the next two years, a figure compatible with demographic and labor needs. Moreover, these three governments should coordinate their labor migration policies to ensure that they complement each other.
- **Key Recommendation 6:** The United States and Canada should expand all protection pathways available to Central Americans, including refugee pathways, complementary protection, parole and other forms of temporary protection. This expansion, which should be based on a review of available mechanisms and eligibility criteria and should be carried out in the first half of 2022, should address protection gaps and consider ways of improving

operational efficiency. Together with the Mexican government, they should seek opportunities for collaboration to increase the availability and effectiveness of protection pathways.

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Tackling Political-Institutional Drivers of Migration

While we recognize that most Central American migrants cite economic reasons for leaving their countries, we also believe that until the political drivers are tackled, it will be difficult to address the economic causes. Simply providing more economic assistance will not stop migration. There is no bypassing the thorny issues of political drivers of migration: poor rule of law, corruption, lack of accountability, access to justice for victims and criminal and domestic violence. Unfortunately, there are also no quick fixes. Corruption and organized crime have been a constant presence in Northern Central America for the past two decades; unless they are addressed head-on, irregular migration will continue. The widespread violation of rights of Central Americans and the enduring threats to citizens by criminal gangs must be overcome. The US and Canada also need to change their laissez-faire attitudes towards their private companies which have contributed to Central American poverty and inequity, especially extractive industries that plunder the environment, weaken communities and deprive local populations of their livelihoods.

Read the report:

[Institutional and Political Drivers of Migration in Central America](#)

If the root causes of Central American migration are to be addressed, steps must be taken now that will likely only pay off years from now. While the issues are difficult to tackle, we believe that a strong comprehensive regional framework – such as that outlined in our [report on regional co-responsibility](#) – will provide the political space to deal with some of these issues.

- **Key Recommendation 7:** We support and urge donors to support civil society initiatives and academics working against corruption and identifying bottlenecks in their judicial system, and to provide protection to these human rights defenders calling out their governments for corruption. We further support regional bodies, such as the newly-constituted Centro contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en el Norte de Centroamérica (CCINOC), which are tackling corruption and seek ways to give them real ‘teeth’ to carry out change. We urge that steps be taken now to establish an international anti-corruption court and ask governments in a position to impose sanctions on corrupt individuals and governments throughout the region, as well as to consider the confiscation and re-purposing of their frozen assets to address the needs of citizens in their countries of origin. International financial institutions should stop funding corrupt governments. Existing efforts and institutions should be reinforced and supported with sufficient resources.
- **Key Recommendation 8:** We urge governments in Northern Central America, with the support of other regional actors, to implement bold policies to professionalize and root out corruption in the security forces and to prioritize reforms in their penitentiary systems.



Addressing Economic and Environmental Drivers of Migration in Northern Central America

Most Central American migrants cite economic conditions as a reason for their decision to leave their countries. For some it is the only reason: they migrate because they can no longer survive where they are. Structural factors, such as increased competition resulting from free trade agreements, contributes to economic hardship. For some who turn to migration, their loss of livelihoods is due to environmental pressures such as drought, hurricanes or the long-term effects of climate change. For others, their decisions to migrate are the result of both economic desperation and personal insecurity due to criminal violence. For almost all of them, poverty and loss of hope that conditions will improve are factors in their decisions to move. Until that economic reality and those perceptions change, Central Americans will continue to seek economic opportunities in other countries. The fact is that for many Central Americans, migration is a tried-and-true poverty-reduction strategy.

One of the key factors associated with migration is that migrants send money back home. The contribution of remittances to the region's economy is

Read the report:

[Economic and Environmental Drivers of Central American Migration](#)

considerable as it represents close to a fifth of GDP for the countries of Northern Central America. These flows are the largest source of foreign exchange in the region and generate disposable income for at least 4 million households (in a region with 14 million households). Receiving remittances overall has become an economic source of survival, and, at least for some, prosperity.

- **Key Recommendation 9:** We recommend organizing an international conference with academics, policy-makers, civil society groups and representatives of international financial institutions to consider measures to launch an ambitious, new initiative which addresses the structural inequities and forces that compel people to migrate. Specifically, we ask the members of this Task Force, together with other initiatives, to collaborate in planning this international conference in 2022. Such a conference could be used to identify the elements of a comprehensive strategy for economic revitalization of the region and to jump-start activities that will have an immediate impact on the lives of Central Americans.
- **Key Recommendation 10:** We recommend that governments and other stakeholders lower the barriers to formalizing informal enterprises, especially for micro or informal businesses led by women and young people. Bureaucratic red tape to formalize businesses must be reduced and mechanisms created to facilitate the transition. We further urge governments and other stakeholders in the region to take steps to encourage migrants to formalize their savings of remittances, including through public marketing campaigns, cooperatives' and banks' encouragement of such savings mechanisms.
- **Key Recommendation 11:** We urge governments to prepare for assisting environmental migrants in both slow and sudden onset scenarios, including the development of micro-insurance schemes. In their planning for environmental and climate change, we urge governments and other stakeholders to recognize that migration can be part of the solution.



Changing the Narrative and Supporting Integration

The narratives – the stories – that circulate about migrants reflect public attitudes, while also shaping policies and affecting the ability of migrants to integrate in their destination countries. Such narratives are spread by people who come into contact with migrants, and by political leaders in support of specific policies. Elite top-down messages about migration often clash with views on the ground. Both positive and negative narratives about migrants tend to use moral frameworks. Positive narratives about migration tend to evoke national pride, while most dominant threat narratives are driven by insecurity. As one recent study concluded, “[p]erceptions of losing control over migration can exacerbate existing threat narratives, and in many cases may elevate them” (Banulescu-Bogdan et al 2021). Perhaps more than the rising numbers of migrants, the issue of losing control – of failing to manage the borders – leads to political pressures to increase border enforcement. A regional comprehensive strategic approach to Central American migration may alleviate some of these very real political pressures.

Another dimension of migration which does not receive sufficient attention concerns those who return to their countries of origin, whether voluntarily or through forced deportation. Between 2015 and 2019, 1,051,272 Central Americans returned – or were returned – to their countries of origin, most of whom did not receive any assistance with reintegration. For example, in 2019, 72.5 percent of returned Hondurans did not receive any re-integration assistance (OIM 2021). Returnees who are not able to reintegrate to their communities may be more likely to migrate again. And indeed, IOM surveys of Guatemalan returnees found that 2 of every 5 returnees planned to migrate again in the next 12 months; in El Salvador the figure is 1 of every 4 (OIM, 2021a,

7; OIM 2021b). Mexico is similarly challenged to support the re-integration of its returned nationals.

- **Key Recommendation 12:** We urge all stakeholders – governments, civil society, the private sector, regional and international organizations – to develop a common understanding that can be shared with citizens in each country about the ways that the countries in the region are working together to manage migration. Not only does this mean ensuring that their narratives about Central American migrants do not contribute to negative stereotypes, but also affirmatively highlighting why cooperation is in the national interest and consistent with national values in each country.

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