

# UNHCR Country Strategy Evaluation- Mexico

2017-2021



## Evaluation Brief

**Purpose:** To provide evidence from UNHCR's interventions, determine how and why they did or did not improve the lives of refugees and asylum-seekers, and document lessons and recommendations to improve UNHCR Mexico's actions over the next planning period.

**Evaluation type:** Country Strategy Evaluation

**Methods:** Mixed methods including key informant interviews and focus group discussion.

**Scope:** Mexico 2017-2021

**Commissioned by:** Evaluation Office upon request from Mexico operation.

### Evaluation Context

Traditionally, Mexico has seen a wide range of human mobility flows and has evolved from being a country of emigration and transit to also being considered a destination and receiving country for people on the move. The migration corridor in Mexico towards the USA includes flows of persons in need of international protection, either passing through the country or arriving there as their destination. These people predominantly come from the North of Central America (NCA), with increasing flows from Cuba, Venezuela and Haiti.

Crime and violence committed by cartels and gangs, along with poverty and growing inequality in NCA, as well as political, economic and social changes in countries in the region (essentially Central America, the Caribbean and Venezuela) are the main "push factors" and characterize the flow of population movements to Mexico and the USA. Likewise, changes in US asylum policy are essential for understanding how Mexico's asylum policy has been shaped, shifting between humanitarian protection, contention, and dissuasion. The US Supreme Court's ruling to reactivate Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) in 2021 (as well as continued returns under Title 42) continues to cause uncertainty regarding real access to asylum in the USA.

In the last five years, Mexico has become an increasingly important country of asylum; the year 2021 saw a record number of asylum claims (over 131,000). The government's actions have had an impact on access to international protection for people on the move. Despite progress in terms of human rights, driven by Mexico's Migration Law and Refugee, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum Law, passed in 2011, and later initiatives to respond to various "waves" and flows of people on the move, contention-oriented responses, such as detentions and deportations, have increased, along with international protection challenges.

### Key Findings

#### How strategic has UNHCR been in working with the Government of Mexico to support the MIRPS and refugee and asylum-related areas of the Regional Development Plan?

Between 2017 and 2021, UNHCR has been instrumental in expanding the protection space and contributing to the perception of Mexico as a host country for populations in need of international protection by public institutions and society (rather than just one of transit and emigration). UNHCR and partners have helped transform the national asylum system; there is broad consensus on the improvements achieved in access, registration, refugee processing and status determination, and local integration, despite systemic barriers and persistent challenges. UNHCR's added value can be appreciated in five spheres: i) the increased visibility of international protection in the political and social agenda; ii) the technical expertise and institutional support provided to further develop national capacities; iii) the regional vision and analysis of migration flows and policies; iv) the reactivity to respond to sudden population movements ("waves") and v) a country strategy focused on the humanitarian-development nexus, particularly through the local integration of refugees.

UNHCR (Panama regional office and Mexico country office), in collaboration with other organisations, has played a fundamental role in configuring and launching the MIRPS (2017) and subsequently working to ensure that it functions as a cohesive regional platform in the context of increasing and complex mixed population flows and growing pressure on national institutions and organisations.

**How coherent, effective and sustainable has UNHCR been in ensuring the transition from humanitarian assistance to self-reliance, socio-economic inclusion and the full integration of persons of concern, as outlined in the MIRPS and the refugee and asylum-related areas of the National Development Plan?**

The strategy of integrating refugees locally through the Local Integration Programme (LIP) has been appropriate (given the complex evolution of population flows and protection needs) and innovative in proposing life choices for many PoC. The LIP has performed well in terms of relocating people from the southern border to the north of the country, increasing the number of companies hiring refugees, improving the participation of federal, state and municipal authorities, and providing access to essential services in destination cities. Originally a pilot project, the LIP has significant potential to become a benchmark intervention in Mexico and potentially at a regional level. One of the main challenges for the LIP is addressing the delicate balance between the pull factors of the USA (family ties, support networks, higher wages), the risks associated with being in an irregular situation in the USA, and the benefits of permanent residency, access to employment opportunities and support during integration in Mexico. These factors, and their evolution over time, influence the decisions of relocated people on whether to remain in Mexico or continue their migration further north.

**How effective has the UNHCR funding model been in Mexico, and how did the current funding structure impact the operation?**

Funding from the USA and, to a lesser extent, from other donors has allowed UNHCR to respond to growing international protection needs. The funding strategy has seen UNHCR move from financial requirements of USD 24.4 million in 2018 to USD 74.3 million in 2021. UNHCR has strategically positioned itself to attract new donors and made progress in diversifying funding, including from the private sector,

although some reliance on North American financing remains. Prospects for obtaining new funding are good although, in the case of bilateral and multilateral contributions, UNHCR Mexico lacks sufficiently developed capacities in some areas. Good progress had been made in raising funds from private donors in Mexico (and North America), but efforts to increase their share in the overall funding of the operation should continue in order to balance the investments made with the return obtained (to date).

**How appropriate and effective is UNHCR's field office/unit structure? What are the most relevant strengths and weaknesses in the field offices/units in terms of protection and assistance to persons of concern?**

The increase in human resources (HR) and the distribution of staff among field offices is consistent with the specificities of population movements, international protection and local integration in the different areas (southern border, centre, CDMX, northern border). The increased human resource capacity has allowed for creation of a 'roving team', which extends UNHCR's reach to locations where it does not have a stable presence, the expansion of strategic programmes (e.g. LIP), and the specialisation of teams to better cope with the huge increase in flows and evolving protection needs.

Externally, HR support to the national asylum system is perceived as a necessary, albeit transitory, step in upgrading and strengthening national capacities. UNHCR's support has been crucial in enabling COMAR and partners to manage record-breaking numbers of asylum claims in Mexico. However, the support provided by UNHCR to COMAR and other protection bodies ("procuradorías") in terms of staff should be exceptional, given national capacities. The analysis of the staff structure, even without sufficient data, shows that the CDMX office appears to have concentrated a significant part of the growth in human resources, primarily due to recruitment to support the MPP response. Ongoing recruitment processes and decentralisation are aimed at strengthening sub-offices and should help balance resources between CDMX and the field.

## Recommendations

1. **Articulation of the response to a large-scale regional phenomenon** - Reinforce coordination and regional analysis of population movements (internally and externally), capitalising on existing data generation mechanisms and networks to drive evidence-based government and UN plans and responses, as well as joint and multi-country strategies of a wider scope.
2. **Integrity of the national asylum system** - Promote the strategic vision of the role to be played by the national asylum system among national institutions (at different levels of the public administration), within a context of intense mixed flows, in order to promote new migratory alternatives and preserve and broaden progress made in international protection and local integration.
3. **Quality of the protection and humanitarian assistance response** - Integrate a quality and mitigation plan (including work areas with COMAR and partners) into the operation's risk register. This plan should include immediate actions for improvement in critical areas and ensure uniform standards of planning, project management and assistance for persons of concern among all programmes and offices.
4. **Durable solutions – Local Integration Programme** - Showcase the Local Integration Programme (LIP) by reinforcing the evidence available on the results achieved, with a view to broadening its geographical coverage and its adoption by government authorities, the private sector and other organisations supporting refugee integration.
5. **Relationships with partners** - Reinforce the strategy with partners to consolidate a shared medium-term vision (without detriment to short-term emergency responses and while promoting organisational development) and foster the emergence of leading national actors in asylum and international protection that can mobilise, advocate and act with less reliance on UNHCR.
6. **Structure of UNHCR in Mexico and talent** - Update the organisational chart of UNHCR staff in Mexico, promoting decentralisation and strengthening field teams, applying short-term actions to reduce organisational pressure (e.g; stabilising the integration and performance of new recruits, reviewing workloads and roles), and improving the consistency and efficiency of internal functioning procedures.
7. **Funding model of UNHCR in Mexico** - Intensify on-going diversification efforts, capitalising on the initial experiences of access to multilateral and bilateral donors, promoting private funding with a regional viewpoint, exploring access to international financial institutions (IADB, WB) and designing eligible programmes to apply for tenders of a larger diversity of donors.

## Suggested Actions and Conclusions

### *Strategic level*

The national asylum system faces a paradox deriving from the complexity of regional population movements. On one hand, coverage of growing international protection needs has been expanded greatly, more actors have been involved in protection and humanitarian assistance, and national asylum capacities have been reinforced. On the other, despite huge investment and progress, the national asylum system is at its limit. The system is under pressure due to the accelerated growth and increasing intensity of international protection needs, greater knowledge of the asylum process among people on the move, and the lack of migratory alternatives, which can generate a risk of misuse of asylum claims in order to obtain documents with the hope of moving on from Mexico to the USA. So much has been done in so little time that progress may partially be affected or slowed down by a lack of migratory alternatives (and become a 'victim of its own success' or 'trivialise asylum').

The strategy and stance adopted by UNHCR in Mexico since 2017 have contributed significantly towards

reinforcing asylum and international protection as a priority area for action on both the national and regional (MIRPS) institutional agenda. This is significant considering that Mexico is on one of the most important migration corridors in the world, in a highly unstable regional context with countries experiencing chronic crises that have been causing forced displacement for decades. UNHCR has positioned itself with government and other actors through humanitarian diplomacy and technical assistance vis-à-vis the state's institutions. UNHCR has positioned itself publicly in an effort to safeguard the right to international protection in a context of institutional decisions and practices that breach the principles recognised in national policies and the international commitments taken on by Mexico and the USA.

### Operational level

Efforts to support the national asylum system and develop the local integration programme have been hindered by emergency actions that UNHCR, COMAR and partners have had to implement to respond to a chain of events or migratory 'waves', as well as to the impact of COVID-19 and the policies adopted by the USA. UNHCR has been reactive, flexible and effective in responding to basic needs in emergency situations and its presence in the field has been decisive in maintaining protection and access to asylum during the critical phase of the pandemic. UNHCR's strategy in Mexico shows relevant efforts to articulate the 'humanitarian-development nexus', which needs to be consolidated and balanced, due to the permanent tension between the humanitarian response and long-term action.

Local integration as a durable solution has proved to be an effective strategy for thousands of refugees who have decided to stay in Mexico, especially given the limited number and capacities of actors in the 'ecosystem' that can offer specialised support. However, there is still a certain level of compartmentalisation between emergency interventions and the local integration programme (LIP), which indicates a need to strengthen the connection between these two approaches.

UNHCR's strategy in Mexico has brought together a wide range of government authorities, civil society organisations and the private sector in an 'ecosystem' of actors that provides mobilisation and makes asylum more visible.

### Organisational level

The intense growth in UNHCR resources in Mexico has allowed for remarkable progress, but it has also generated quality risks in two key spheres of the organisation. First, technical risks have been identified in key areas (e.g. internal processes, humanitarian actions, asylum claim and related procedures, infrastructures, local integration) that reduce the consistency of some results. Second, it has resulted in an overstretched organisation, especially from a human resources perspective, with excessive, sustained operational pressure requiring staff to take on double and triple roles and respond both to regular responsibilities and recurrent emergencies.

## Management Response

- UNHCR Mexico agreed to 7 (out of 7) recommendations proposed by the evaluation.
- "The evaluation was a thorough and very well conducted exercise, and the findings will allow the operation to adjust some elements of its strategy and operational footprint."
- Full management response can be found [here](#).

The evaluation report can be found [here](#)

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