

# Costa Rica

## Multi-year Strategy 2025 – 2027



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## 1.1 Executive Summary

Costa Rica is a middle-income country with sustained political and economic stability and an established rule of law, favorable conditions for the arrival of people in need of international protection. Additionally, Costa Rican society has a tradition of welcoming refugees and respecting human rights. Nevertheless, there are challenges to address needs and achieve integration of people arriving and staying in the country, particularly to ensure their protection and providing them opportunities to contribute to society and gain self-reliance. Concerns about the deteriorating security situation, high unemployment rates and cuts in social expenditure also contribute to narratives undermining social cohesion. In a complex regional scenario with pressures on countries of origin, these integration challenges are compounded by the need to ensure minimum humanitarian standards for an increased number of refugees and migrants in transit through Costa Rica.

Given this situation, UNHCR Costa Rica developed its strategy for 2025-2027 seeking to achieve two major changes in the lives of forcibly displaced and stateless persons: (i) ensuring a favorable protection environment and (ii) finding solutions to improve people's living conditions. This often implies the continuation of ongoing actions.

The first impact area of the strategy focuses on ensuring that refugees and stateless persons enjoy legal and physical protection in Costa Rica without restrictions, including while transiting through the country and/or when climate induced emergencies emerge. This includes actions to guarantee access to rights and improve protection for refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons. UNHCR will work hand in hand with the government to promote safe access to the territory, non-refoulement, effective registration and documentation, access to a fair and efficient asylum system, prevention of and response to statelessness, and access to rights. UNHCR will advocate together with other UN actors for the effective inclusion of the refugee and stateless populations in government preparedness and contingency planning and contribute towards an effective and timely response to emergency situations affecting refugees and/or stateless persons.

The second impact area of the strategy aims to ensure that a growing number of refugees and stateless persons are integrating into their communities and that their needs are being met in a sustainable manner and on an equal footing with nationals - in Costa Rica or in a third country. To this end, UNHCR will develop partnerships and advocacy with institutional and civil society actors to ensure that refugees are included

and can access state programs for health, education, social protection, housing, and gain opportunities in the labor market through employability and entrepreneurship. Likewise, UNHCR will encourage host communities to be inclusive and acknowledge contributions of refugees and stateless persons staying in the country. UNHCR will also promote greater access to solutions in third countries either through family reunification, resettlement, or other complementary admission pathways.

UNHCR's overarching approach in Costa Rica is based on strengthening communities' capacity to know, access and protect their rights; complementing institutional efforts to ensure access to services and rights for refugees and stateless persons; and responding in a coordinated and effective manner to emergencies.

## 1.2 Situation Analysis

Since 2018, Costa Rica has faced two situations regarding displacement, resulting in increased needs for assistance and protection, under overstretched capacities: Firstly, due to the deteriorating socio-political and human rights situation in Nicaragua, Costa Rica has experienced a significant increase in asylum applications. These applications rose from 1,300 in 2014 to approximately 28,000 in 2018 and surged to 129,400 in 2022. According to the Directorate General of Immigration and Nationality (DGME, hereinafter Migration Authority), an average of 58,700 people per year requested refugee status from 2018 to 2023, which is 21 times the average of the previous six years (2,700 people from 2012 to 2017). This has placed significant pressure on the State's social services, coinciding with a second situation: the escalation of mixed movements towards North America. Since 2022, around 500,000 refugees and migrants per year have arrived from the perilous Darien region, seeking for assistance and protection.

Due to the overwhelming number of asylum applications, the system became congested and less efficient: by December 2023, over 192,000 asylum applications were pending, and an undetermined number of people were unable to even lodge their applications. Also, the Government introduced sweeping changes to the asylum system in late 2022. These reforms restricted access for asylum-seekers to refugee status determination. Consequently, the lack of access to a regular stay and work permits for many asylum-seekers hindered their integration into the formal labor market, deepening socioeconomic gaps and increasing vulnerabilities. In 2023, the Executive took steps to reverse the norms that severely curtailed asylum-seekers' rights, particularly their right to work. In June 2024, a new DGME resolution easing permit requirements. This led to a significant improvement: from only 55 work permits issued in all of 2023 (out of 222 applications) to 7,347 issued from June to September 2024.

Regarding mixed movements, Costa Rican authorities have progressively addressed the challenges posed by the increase in population in transit by issuing an Emergency Decree. The Government reached an agreement with Panama on a “controlled flows” system to organize safe transportation, and also established a temporary collective shelter called the South Migration Station (EMISUR), enabling a timely and coordinated humanitarian response with support from UNHCR and other UN actors. At the Northern border, efforts are underway to create a similar humanitarian operation scheme including a shelter facility in Los Chiles, an area with a high concentration of people crossing to Nicaragua, to address assistance gaps and mitigate current protection risks such as human trafficking, smuggling, and gender-based violence.

Resolving pending applications and modernizing the asylum system are top priorities for the Costa Rican Government, as highlighted during the Global Forum on Refugees in December 2023. In 2024, the Migration Authority, with UNHCR’s support, designed and began implementing a strategy for the modernization of the Asylum system aimed at transforming the three asylum bodies to handle new applications more efficiently and expedite the resolution of pending cases. This strategy includes differentiated processing modalities and implementing more predictable and efficient case analysis, in addition to a temporary scale up of human resources, and the digitalization of the asylum system to enable the submission and processing of claims through an online platform. These efforts aim to create a fairer and more efficient asylum system aligned with international standards.

Regarding inclusion, Costa Rica continues to host a significant number of people forced to flee: 248,208 people in total as of June 2024, including 27,684 refugees (and people in refugee-like situation), 206,700 asylum-seekers, 336 stateless persons and 13,462 others. The country has policies enabling their participation in social protection schemes: for instance, universal healthcare is granted to children, the elderly and pregnant foreign women including refugees; as well, emergency healthcare is ensured for all populations regardless of nationality. Besides, evidence shows that foreign-born population is boosting Costa Rican economy and society through productive work - which is complementary to national human capital in the labor market- as well as through tax revenue collection and social security contributions (estimated to exceed the public expenditure they receive).

However, this favorable scenario requires significant effort: Costa Rica, by the end of 2023, hosts the third highest proportion of asylum-seekers relative to its national population in the Americas, following Colombia and Peru. Despite positive economic trends and the country’s transition from a middle to an upper-middle income status, tax collection has declined, and the public budget for social protection has decreased. These factors present substantial challenges for inclusion, prompting the Government to seek additional support from the international community. Therefore, it is crucial to implement a comprehensive strategy to grant work permits and strengthen the asylum system, facilitating the inclusion of a significant number of asylum-seekers in the labor

market. This approach will enable refugees to contribute substantially to the economy, mitigating tax and social protection burdens in the mid-term. Additionally, to address security risks for high-profile refugees, resettlement has become an important solution, providing legal pathways for individuals at risk to find safety in third countries.

In view of this situation, UNHCR has prioritized actions in its multi-year strategy to i) support the Costa Rican state in favoring the effective access to the asylum system, ii) develop institutional capacities to continue recognizing the rights of refugees - already integrated into the country's social policies - at all levels, iii) work hand in hand with refugee communities to inform and empower them for their effective access to rights and participation, iv) strengthen protection networks to support people in the exercise of their rights, v) promote multi-stakeholder mechanisms to integrate refugees into and contribute to the Costa Rican economy, and vi) promote evidence-based communication efforts to inform Costa Rican society about the contributions of refugees and stateless persons to the country, counteract discriminatory and xenophobic narratives, and favor peaceful coexistence at the community level.

### 1.3 Vision and Strategic Orientation

Documentation that recognizes asylum seekers as refugees or stateless persons constitutes the determinant condition that allows their enjoyment of rights such as housing, work, health, and social protection. This is only possible if there is a functioning asylum system that is accessible and efficient. In social terms, integration requires recognition of the cultural and economic contribution of this population, in order to overcome the perception that the cost of hosting refugees is greater than the opportunities offered by hosting and integrating them.

Costa Rica has a historical precedent of welcoming refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from Nicaragua (88% of the total numbers); therefore, it has been challenging for society and authorities to accept the -relatively recent changes in the situation due to the presence of the population in transit, as in 2023 more than half a million people crossed the country from border to border heading to North America. Refugees and migrants in transit have different conditions, movement histories and needs; the understanding of such dynamics must continue evolving, both in terms of the response of the authorities and the complementary support provided by UNHCR and other relevant international actors to address this new reality. Thus, UNHCR's priorities are to stabilize those who transit towards North America and decide to seek asylum in the country, while ensuring that those who are - and will remain - in Costa Rica increase their possibilities to have their status recognized more quickly, as well as enhancing that their integration into Costa Rican society allows them to live in dignified and safe conditions.

The Costa Rica operation will have three strategic priorities in this multi-year strategy, which align with UNHCR's global strategic directions (2022-2026), to change this narrative and counteract the swing towards an unfavourable protection environment, including the hardening of access to asylum and rights:

**PROTECT:** "Uphold a favourable and resilient protection environment for refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people as well as promote public awareness through evidence".

**SOLVE:** "Enable an environment that facilitates the full-fledged integration of refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons, promoting socio-economic inclusion and political participation as well as durable solutions";

**RESPOND:** "Enhancing emergency response capacity for a large-scale influx of populations in mixed movements, as well as addressing climate change-induced emergencies and natural disasters affecting refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people in Costa Rica".

In the process of creating a vision of what UNHCR seeks to see in Costa Rica in 2027, after a situation analysis and the aforementioned strategic priorities, the team has formed the following statement:

A growing number of refugees are embraced as valued community members in Costa Rica and make meaningful contributions to their hosting community; thus, allowing Costa Rica to preserve its tradition of protection and foster socio-economic inclusion of refugees.

## 1.4 Fair Access and Representation

UNHCR Costa Rica designs and implements programmes adopting an age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach to tailor them to specific priorities and needs of the affected population." This is jointly identified through the implementation of participatory assessments, focus groups and ongoing communication with key actors, and community-based organizations including those led by refugees and stateless persons. UNHCR also prioritizes the strengthening of strategic partnerships with public institutions mandated to assist particularly vulnerable populations, as well as with other civil society partners and allies. Through such partnerships, UNHCR promotes the establishment of sustainable protection networks that ensure fair access to services and the effective enjoyment of rights by refugees and stateless persons, especially those with specific protection needs, so no one is left behind.



UNHCR facilitates the mainstreaming of the Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) approach through advocacy, technical assistance and capacity building of partner agencies, ensuring that all projects comply with UNHCR's policy on fair, inclusive and non-discriminatory access, and promoting intersectional analysis in case management, assistance generation and specific programs. Similarly, working with community-based organizations and other key actors aims at strengthening protection networks to assist the most vulnerable populations.

UNHCR ensures that the AGD approach is included in all consultation and feedback processes, such as participatory assessments and focus groups, which allow for the inclusion of their perspectives, priorities and protection strategies in the planning and implementation of projects and programs. At the same time, UNHCR develops strategies for Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), such as mechanisms for complaints and suggestions, and the opening of multiple two-way and inclusive communication channels that enable all people to provide feedback on assistance and the issues that affect their lives.

## 2. Impact Statements

### ***Impact statement***

***Refugees and stateless persons can enjoy unrestricted legal and physical protection in Costa Rica.***

*Impact area: Attaining favourable protection environments*

*Outcome statements*

*An increasing number of refugees and stateless persons access documentation through a more efficient, accessible and fair international protection system; or through other legal stay arrangements.*

*Outcome area: Access to territory, registration and documentation*

*Authorities and communities facilitate non-discriminatory access to protection services for refugees and stateless persons*

*Outcome area: Safety and access to justice*

*The Government, communities, the UN System and other relevant actors respond effectively and in a timely manner to emergency situations affecting refugees and/or stateless persons.*

*Outcome area: Well-being and basic needs*

### ***Impact statement***

***A growing number of refugees and stateless persons are integrating into their communities and meeting their needs in a sustainable manner and on an equal footing with nationals - in Costa Rica or in a third country.***

*Impact area: Securing solutions*

*Outcome statements*

*Refugees and stateless persons have effective access to decent work, social security, financial services, education, health, housing and social protection.*

*Outcome area: Local integration and other local solutions*

*The local community includes and recognizes the contributions of refugees and stateless persons.*

*Outcome area: Community engagement and women's empowerment*

*Refugees have better access to resettlement or other complementary pathways.*

*Outcome area: Resettlement and complementary pathways*

### 3. Costa Rica 2025 Indicators and Targets

Country	Results Level	Result Area	Indicator	Population Type	Baseline	Target 2025
Costa Rica	Impact	IA1: Protect	1.1 Proportion of people seeking international protection who are able to access asylum procedures	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	58%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA1: Protect	1.2 Proportion of people who are able to move freely within the country of habitual residence	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	100%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA1: Protect	1.2 Proportion of people who are able to move freely within the country of habitual residence	Stateless Persons	100%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA2: Respond	2.2 Proportion of people residing in physically safe and secure settlements with access to basic facilities	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	90%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA2: Respond	2.3 Proportion of people with access to health services	Refugees and Asylum-	70%	Not applicable



				seekers		
Costa Rica	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.1 Proportion of people who have the right to decent work	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	50%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.1 Proportion of people who have the right to decent work	Stateless Persons	50%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.2a Proportion of children and young people enrolled in primary education	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	88%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.2b Proportion of children and young people enrolled in secondary education	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	57%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.3 Proportion of people feeling safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	51%	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA4: Solve	4.2a Number of people who departed on resettlement	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	399	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA4: Solve	4.3a Number of stateless people for whom nationality is granted or confirmed	Stateless Persons	119	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Impact	IA4: Solve	4.3b Number of refugees for whom residency status is granted or confirmed	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	2,690	Not applicable
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA1: Access/Doc	1.1 Proportion of refugees and asylum seekers registered on an individual basis	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	100%	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA1: Access/Doc	1.2 Proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	99%	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA1: Access/Doc	1.2 Proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	100%

Costa Rica	Outcome	OA1: Access/Doc	1.3 Proportion of people with legally recognized identity documents or credentials	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	93%	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA1: Access/Doc	1.3 Proportion of people with legally recognized identity documents or credentials	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA2: Status	2.1 Average processing time (in days) from registration to first instance asylum decision	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	1,164	365
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA2: Status	2.3 Proportion of people undergoing asylum procedures who have access to an effective appeal mechanism after first instance rejection of their claim	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	100%	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA2: Status	2.3 Proportion of people undergoing asylum procedures who have access to an effective appeal mechanism after first instance rejection of their claim	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA3: Policy/Law	3.1 Extent national legal framework is in line with the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol	None	Broadly aligned: ≥90 points	Broadly aligned: ≥90 points
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA3: Policy/Law	3.2 Extent national legal framework is in line with the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness	None	Broadly aligned: ≥90 points	Broadly aligned: ≥90 points
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.1 Extent participation of displaced and stateless people across programme phases is supported.	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	Extensive: ≥70 points
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.1 Extent participation of displaced and stateless people across programme phases is supported.	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	Moderate: 40-69 points	Extensive: ≥70 points
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.1 Extent participation of displaced and stateless people across programme phases is supported.	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	Extensive: ≥70 points
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7:	7.2 Proportion of people who	Others of	To be	100%

Rica		Community	have access to safe feedback and response mechanisms	Concern	confirmed	
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.2 Proportion of people who have access to safe feedback and response mechanisms	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	To be confirmed	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.2 Proportion of people who have access to safe feedback and response mechanisms	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	100%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.3 Proportion of women participating in leadership/management structures	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	50%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.3 Proportion of women participating in leadership/management structures	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	65%	50%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA7: Community	7.3 Proportion of women participating in leadership/management structures	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	50%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA8: Well-being	8.1 Proportion of people that receive cash transfers and/or non-food items	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	5%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA8: Well-being	8.1 Proportion of people that receive cash transfers and/or non-food items	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	3%	5%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA8: Well-being	8.1 Proportion of people that receive cash transfers and/or non-food items	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	5%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA8: Well-being	8.2 Proportion of people with primary reliance on clean (cooking) fuels and technology	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	95%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA8: Well-being	8.2 Proportion of people with primary reliance on clean (cooking) fuels and technology	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	94%	95%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA8: Well-being	8.2 Proportion of people with primary reliance on clean (cooking) fuels and technology	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	95%

Costa Rica	Outcome	OA13: Livelihood	13.1. Proportion of people with an account at a bank or other financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	72%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA13: Livelihood	13.1. Proportion of people with an account at a bank or other financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	66%	72%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA13: Livelihood	13.1. Proportion of people with an account at a bank or other financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	72%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA13: Livelihood	13.3 Proportion of people (working age) who are unemployed	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	8%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA13: Livelihood	13.3 Proportion of people (working age) who are unemployed	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	7%	8%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA13: Livelihood	13.3 Proportion of people (working age) who are unemployed	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	8%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA15: Resettle	15.1 Number of refugees submitted by UNHCR for resettlement	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	3,763	To be confirmed
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA16: Integrate	16.1 Proportion of people with secure tenure rights to housing and/or land	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	90%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA16: Integrate	16.1 Proportion of people with secure tenure rights to housing and/or land	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	85%	90%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA16: Integrate	16.1 Proportion of people with secure tenure rights to housing and/or land	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	90%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA16: Integrate	16.2 Proportion of people covered by national social protection systems	Others of Concern	To be confirmed	75%
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA16: Integrate	16.2 Proportion of people covered by national social protection systems	Refugees and Asylum-	70%	75%

				seekers		
Costa Rica	Outcome	OA16: Integrate	16.2 Proportion of people covered by national social protection systems	Stateless Persons	To be confirmed	75%