Costa Rica: Community-Based Protection

2,469 People of Concern had access to two-way communication

402 HH were mobilized for UNHCR presence in communities

Overview

Costa Rica is a country with a longstanding commitment to human rights. It has been a model in the region on refugee protection and integration schemes and is a leader in seeking to end statelessness. In the past four years, Costa Rica has become an increasingly important country of asylum for persons fleeing from the four main displacement situations in the Americas (Nicaragua, Venezuela, North of Central America, and Colombia), and transit for persons in mixed movements from within the region and beyond. The continued situation of socio-political strife in Nicaragua, particularly in the wake of the Government responses to the April 2018 protests and the more recent presidential elections of November 2021, has resulted in a constant increase in the numbers of persons seeking international protection in Costa Rica – with a record high of 14,500 starting the process in the month of January 2022 alone. At the end of 2021, Costa Rica was home to over 150,000 asylum seekers (mainly from Nicaragua, followed by Venezuela, Cuba, and the North of Central America). This has continued to increase in 2022.

To respond holistically to the increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers in Costa Rica, UNHCR established a dedicated Community-Based Protection (CBP) sub-unit in 2019, intending to provide community-level interaction, communication, empowerment, and assistance to the population of concern. The Costa Rica Operation carries out various actions to better understand PoC and their host communities so as to respond better to needs, create responsive programming and consider ways to incorporate community strengthening and equality within initiatives to promote protection structure, integration and peaceful coexistence in communities.

UNHCR Community Based Protection (CBP) strategy

UNHCR developed the 2022-2024 CBP strategy to respond holistically to the increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers in Costa Rica. The strategy increased its emphasis on Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) and the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) to be more inclusive in the response. UNHCR works together with partners, local authorities, and displaced and local communities to implement and achieve the objectives of the strategy. The strategy focuses on five key objectives:

1. **Enhance outreach and Communication with Communities (CwC),** to ensure UNHCR's field presence through outreach sessions and community visits, and community-based communication channels are provided and strengthened.
2. **People of concern to UNHCR at heightened risk receive targeted support** based on the AGD approach of UNHCR, which includes targeted community-level of case management of reporting and referrals.
3. **Strengthen Community Mobilization, empowerment, and Protection Structure in the community leading to self-reliance** by building community protection structure and reducing the community's reliance on UNHCR and its partners.
4. **Enhance meaningful participation of the community through a consultative process and continuous engagement** through regular consultation (including Participatory Assessment) with communities, including people-led organizations, faith-based organizations, and other key informants.
5. **Enhance peaceful coexistence and social inclusion of the people UNHCR serves,** providing network and space for discussion between communities, implement initiatives to promote solutions to community issues, and build respect and mutual understanding on xenophobia.

UNHCR's first Mobile Information Center in San Sebastian, San Jose. UNHCR colleagues are registering PoCs at the reception.

Main Achievements/ Progress

- As part of the activities of the CwC strategy, UNHCR began the implementation of **Mobile Information Centers (CMI),** which is planned in eight communities of San José, for two continuous days per month. The objective of these CMI is to provide accurate, accessible, and timely information to PoCs and, at the same time, to reinforce two-way communication with the people UNHCR serves at the community level. During the period, UNHCR facilitated three Mobile Information Centers in San Jose central, Guadalupe and Alajuelita and 402 HH visited and received accurate and adequate information about their rights, programs, and services available in Costa Rica. These Mobile Centers allow the people we serve to have holistic information and support for their needs in a single visit without visiting different offices of UNHCR and its partners.

- From August 16th to 18th, UNHCR facilitated the in-person **Participatory Assessments in GAM** with the support of partners agencies such as CENDEROS, JSM, RET, Fundación Mujer, Consultorio Jurídico La Salle and DNI. A total of 15 sessions were held with the participation of 139 persons of concern in line with the AGD approach. The topics addressed during the sessions were access to the RSD procedure, access to information, integration into the country and community, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), PSEA, fraud prevention, and sexual and reproductive health.

- On September 23rd, 17 children from the **"Red de Adolescentes"** in coordination with DNI participated in a volunteer activity in Parque la Libertad, which is 32 hectares of a public park located between three highly populated communities in San José and it is part of a biological conservation corridor that protects the local rivers. The participants helped rehabilitate the botanical garden by planting climate-change resilient plants that support pollinizers and others with medicinal properties. Also, they learned to create planters with recycled materials and were able to take a pollinizer plant back home. They learned about their actions' positive impact on the park and the host community and the importance of environmental conservation so they could become agents of change in their communities

- The office launched a new communication channel, a **WhatsApp Chatbot** on the 27th of September as part of the Regional chatbot initiative. This channel is generated based on the frequent queries made by PoCs related to their access to rights, national services, and programmes of UNHCR and its partners. The Chatbot has been designed to be a communication channel mainly for PoCs, however, it can be accessed by anyone who requires relevant information on the international protection and integration of PoCs in Costa Rica. In order to disseminate more information about the channel, CBP staff conducted Facebook Live and Radio sessions and also printed flyers and banners. During the first week of the launch, 251 persons accessed the chatbot and about 2,000 messages have been received and responded to. The office expect the chatbot will be an useful channel to reduce the information gap that PoCs are encountering in the country.

- CBP staff participated in the regional virtually training process **"Engaging Men in Accountable Practice (EMAP) Training of Trainers (TOT)"** facilitated by the International Rescue Committee, from 27 June 2022 to 15 August 2022. The objective of the training is to reinforce the capacities of the UNHCR Operations for their Gender Based Violence response and generate a country-level strategy that facilitates the involvement of men in the fight for gender equality and as preventive agents of violence against women and girls. In order to apply and share the knowledge and skills gained with the fellow colleagues in the Operation, the CBP colleagues will organize the capacity-building process for our staff and also will coordinate the implementation of the EMAP Program in two communities in the GAM. This process is expected to be developed during 2023 as part of the office's gender strategy.

Gaps and Challenges

- Scattered communities continue to be a significant challenge in the operation. The people of concern are widely spread in the country, it is challenging for the Office to reach out to persons who are not part of major communities and have limited smartphone access.
- A limited number of NGOs or organizations are working closely with the people of concern, especially with a limited number of PoC-led organizations and communities in the country.
- Providing accurate and timely information to the people remains a gap in the operation. The continuous arrival of new asylum seekers has increased the information gap in the country, including information mainly on access to the asylum system and other services provided by UNHCR and its partners.
- The population of concern constantly changes their phone numbers and the new information is not shared with UNHCR and its partners so it is often difficult for UNHCR to get in touch with them in communities.
- The literacy level is low and there are many without access to smartphones and telephones which makes communication difficult and challenging for the Office.

Way forward

- UNHCR continues to implement Mobile Information Sessions in the communities to increase its presence and strengthen two-way communication with the population of concern.
- UNHCR will continue to promote WhatsApp chatbot and disseminate information about the use of the channel with the community to ensure they have accurate and adequate information whenever they need.

Financial Information

UNHCR is grateful for the support provided by donors contributing to this operation.
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