

Strengthening Regional Cooperation on Migration from Central America: Possible Ways Forward

Research Paper

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North and Central American
Task Force on Migration



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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 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.

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Executive Summary

From Canada to Panama, 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 to Mexico—but have failed to build durable solutions to manage regional migration. As a result, the unabated root causes of migration continue to drive Central Americans, without accessible legal alternatives, to make the increasingly dangerous journey through irregular channels.

Renewed interest in cooperation and a set of intersecting policy priorities, however, provide a new opportunity to establish a regional migration management system based on co-responsibility to foster the common goal of legal, safe, and more orderly migration. Canada, the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama can strengthen regional collaboration by implementing a multifaceted approach to this enduring phenomenon. Laying the foundation for this regional system includes four key elements:

1. Developing temporary legal employment pathways for Central American workers that promote transparent recruitment and safe job conditions;
2. Creating new humanitarian protection mechanisms, focused on protection closest to home and expanding existing asylum access and refugee resettlement programs;
3. Professionalizing immigration and border enforcement to be consistent with rule of law and attuned to migrants' protection needs and other vulnerabilities; and
4. Investing in long-term development, governance, and rule of law that can open local opportunities for would-be migrants, returning migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people (Selee & Ruiz Soto, 2020).

Establishing this regional management system will be a difficult and long-term process, but it is not impossible. In the near term, it can also reduce mounting pressures on governments while providing legal and safer channels for migrant populations. This will require a shared commitment across governments to make concerted and complementary efforts in the system's four key elements, but each one can leverage their relative strengths and policy frameworks. For instance, Canada and the United States can quickly expand temporary employment pathways for Central American workers, Mexico can amplify its asylum capacity given its broader refugee protection framework, and Central American governments can lead with self-investment in governance and rule of law.

The success of these measures will also depend on two other requirements. First, it is indispensable for governments to partner with civil society and international organizations while designing and implementing some of these initiatives. Second, sequencing these policies and presenting uniform messaging and outreach in countries of origin, transit, and destination will be vital to maintain orderly flows and counteract the influence of human smugglers.

With leadership to open direct conversations with regional governments and key actors, the North and Central American Task Force on Migration is uniquely positioned to be a pivotal catalyst to strengthen regional engagement in the four key elements of collaboration. Particularly, four measures that the Task Force could implement to foster greater regional collaboration are:

1. Promoting the expansion of existing U.S., Mexican, and Canadian temporary employment programs, and adding flexibility to increase participation of lower- and middle-skilled workers from Central America;
2. Raising the capacity of regional asylum systems to adjudicate claims fairly and quickly, while identifying strategic opportunities to raise refugee resettlement from Central America to a consortium of countries, including but not limited to the United States and Canada;
3. Contributing to oversight and capacity building of migration enforcement agencies, including those in Central America, and informing pre-departure planning efforts that help returnees reintegrate to their origin communities and reduce repeated attempts to migrate without authorization; and,
4. Harmonizing economic development and humanitarian aid efforts to amplify their impacts on local conditions in Central America, while incorporating monitoring and evaluation of programs' effects on migration drivers and desires.

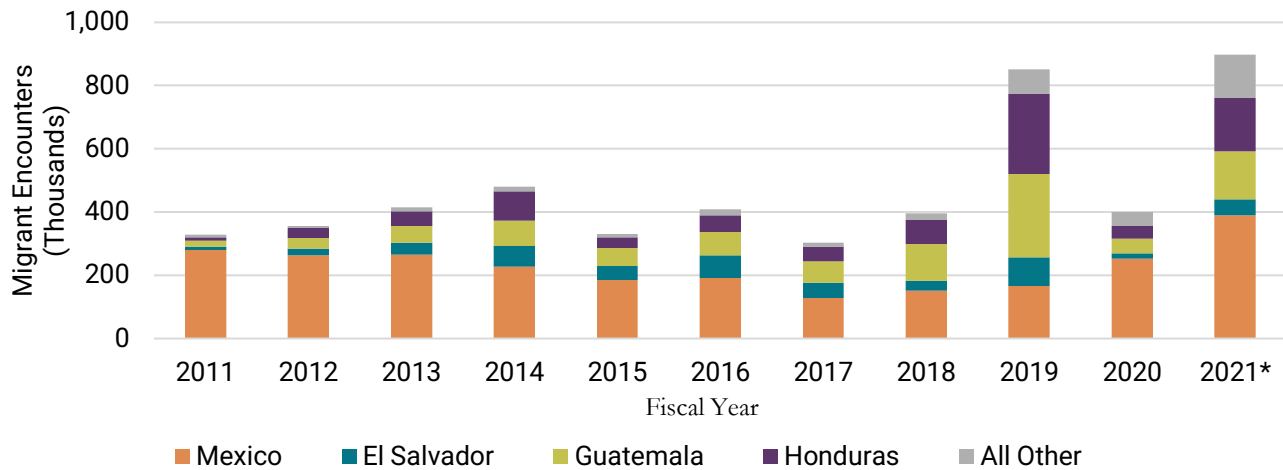
Recent mixed-migration flows from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras may be primarily headed for the United States, but the challenges that irregular migration presents, as well as the critical protection needs in Central America, affect all countries in the region. Collaboratively laying the foundation for a regional migration management system with the above measures not only can reduce these flows in the near term, but also build a set of institutional architecture and policy frameworks that can adapt and proactively address future migration flows from other regions of the world. As governments consider a way forward, expert forums like the North and Central American Task Force on Migration have a unique opportunity to inform and design policy road maps that drive regional dialogue and practical solutions.

Introduction

Addressing changes in the size and composition of Central American migration over the last five years has challenged sending, transit, and destination countries alike. In 2018, a growing number of migrants traveling in caravans through Central America and Mexico en route to the United States – including significant numbers of families and children – built up pressure for regional migration controls, culminating in the signing of a U.S.-Mexico migration cooperation agreement in June 2019 (Ruiz Soto, 2020). Migration levels decreased consequently over the fall months in 2019, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in conjunction with widespread regional mobility restrictions throughout 2020 led to relatively low and irregular migration.

Yet, irregular migration from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras is rising once again in 2021. During the first eight months of fiscal year (FY) 2021, U.S. authorities at the U.S.-Mexico border have encountered 371,000 migrants from the three countries (see Figure 1). And while the number of arrivals by the end of the year may fall short of the 608,000 migrant arrivals in FY 2019, arrivals in FY 2021 have already surpassed the total numbers for all of FY 2018 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2021). Additionally, Mexican authorities have apprehended 95,000 migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras over the same eight months, and are on track to reach 2019 levels (Mexican Interior Ministry, 2021).

Figure 1. U.S. Southwest Border Migrant Encounters, by Nationality, Fiscal Year 2011-2021 YTD



Note: Data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years (FY), which run from October through September. FY 2021 data run through May 2021. Beginning in March FY2020, statistics include both apprehensions under U.S. Title 8 and expulsions under U.S. Title 42.

Sources: Author calculations based on U.S. Border Patrol, "U.S. Border Patrol Apprehensions Nationwide by Citizenship and Sector, FY2007- 2019," updated January 2020; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Southwest Land Border Encounters," updated June 9, 2021.

The source of the current uptick in migration is the widespread economic downturn caused by the ongoing pandemic and the devastation of two hurricanes in November 2020, which have magnified the unabating drivers of migration from Central America: economic inequality, insecurity, violence, and corruption (Selee and Ruiz Soto, 2021). The easing of mobility restrictions in the region and perceptions that U.S. policy towards asylum seekers is changing under the Biden administration are also leading people to emigrate. Furthermore, part of the reason behind people’s decision to migrate without authorization is the lack of legal alternatives and access to protection mechanisms in the region.

Today, regional governments from Canada to Panama face a unique and timely opportunity to shift from an enforcement-centered strategy to a comprehensive migration management system by leveraging growing interest in cooperation. The Biden administration’s recent proposal to devise a “collaborative management strategy” in the region may be the most concrete and influential example, but it is not the only one (Biden, 2021). The governments of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have previously called for the region to address migration based on a principle of co-responsibility (Mexican Foreign Ministry, 2021). More recently, Canada’s Immigration Ministry expressed interest in increasing its capacity to resettle more Central American refugees and, in advance of World Refugee Day, announced three new initiatives to increase refugee arrivals, including through the expansion of the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP) for certain high-skilled refugees (Mehler Paperny, 2021; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021). Other examples include a request by Panama’s Foreign Minister for regional cooperation and responsibility to address migration flows from Central America and Venezuela (EFE, 2021).

Moving forward with a regional implementation of existing bilateral and multilateral commitments and conversations, however, is still a work in progress, partially because the structure to connect these efforts is missing. Therefore, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) proposes the following multi-pronged model to effectively consolidate such regional migration strategy (Selee & Ruiz Soto, 2020; Selee et al., 2021):

1. Develop temporary legal employment pathways for Central American workers that promote transparent recruitment and safe job conditions;
2. Create new humanitarian protection mechanisms, focused on protection closest to home and expanding existing refugee resettlement programs and asylum access;
3. Professionalize immigration and border enforcement to be consistent with rule of law and attuned to migrants' protection needs and other vulnerabilities; and
4. Invest in long-term development, governance, and rule of law that can open local opportunities for returning and would-be migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people.

The North and Central American Task Force on Migration is uniquely positioned and equipped to be a catalyst of policy dialogue and research that can advance regional engagement across these four elements, given its leadership and trust among key government stakeholders and policy actors. To that end, this brief provides four sets of actionable options for the Task Force's consideration.

Developing Employment Pathways

Growing research evidence suggests that legal employment pathways, including for seasonal work, can be a beneficial tool to channel some irregular migration flows into legal and safer migration over time (Clemens, 2021; Clemens, Resstack, and Zimmer, 2021; Bier, 2019). As such, expanding existing temporary employment programs from Central America to the United States, Mexico and Canada can be effective short-term options for those who would otherwise migrate due to economic reasons.

In fact, programs to attract agricultural, low-skilled workers to these countries are already in place in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The H-2 visa program in the United States is open to seasonal agricultural (H-2A) workers without a cap on admissions and non-agricultural (H-2B) workers with some cap flexibility, authorized by the Department of Homeland Security (Gelatt, 2019). In Mexico, workers from Guatemala and Belize can work temporarily in Southern Mexico using a regional worker visa (Mexican Institute of Migration, 2020). Lastly, Canada's temporary foreign worker program contains an agriculture stream applicable to Central Americans (Government of Canada, 2020).

The U.S., Mexican, and Canadian governments have already expressed interest in scaling up these pathways, but key underlying challenges limit their expansion. First, logistical and cost issues discourage employers from recruiting workers in Central America (as compared to costs in Mexico) and unscrupulous recruiters exploit migrant workers. Second, non-agricultural seasonal pathways have strict skill requirements that may not match the profiles of Central American workers (Ramón, forthcoming).

These challenges, however, are not insurmountable. North and Central American governments can consider providing transportation subsidies to spark employer interest and additional oversight in recruitment and labor conditions to address workers’ concerns. To better match workers’ skillset supply with industry demands in destination countries, governments can collaborate in mapping skill and labor profiles of interested seasonal workers, like Guatemala and Honduras are already doing through relatively small but promising worker databases (Ramón, forthcoming). Although existing public profiles are outdated, they indicate that skills, like educational attainment, vary within Central America (see Figure 2). With better information, for example, Canada could calibrate required EMPP skill levels and consider eliminating its required refugee status determination to allow access to a larger share of Central American (and Venezuelan) workers with lower- and middle-skilled levels (Smith and Wagner, 2020).

Figure 2. Average Years of Educational Attainment of Populations Age 15+ in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, by Select Groups, 2013-14

	Total population	Urban	Rural	Men	Women
Guatemala	5.3	6.5	3.9	5.2	5.7
El Salvador	8.0	9.2	5.7	7.8	8.4
Honduras	6.7	8.5	4.9	6.1	7.6

Source: Author compilation of data analyses by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL). See CEPAL, May 2019. *Hacia un nuevo estilo de desarrollo: Plan de Desarrollo Integral El Salvador-Guatemala-Honduras-México: Diagnóstico, áreas de oportunidad y recomendaciones de la CEPAL.*

Therefore, promoting the expansion of existing U.S., Mexican, and Canadian temporary employment programs, as well as adding flexibility to increase participation of lower- and middle-skilled workers from Central America, could not only strengthen regional cooperation, but also open future opportunities for workers to transition across employment programs.

Expanding Humanitarian Protections

With approximately 515,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and another 319,000 internally displaced people in Honduras and El Salvador, there is a critical need for strengthening regional collaboration on humanitarian protection (UNHCR, 2021a). Expanding and creating additional protection mechanisms for Central Americans is the responsibility of the whole region, though each government can play a different strategic role corresponding to its capacity and policy framework.

Raising the capacity of regional asylum systems to adjudicate claims fairly and quickly is at the heart of migration management. As the primary country of destination, the U.S. asylum system’s broad

closure since March 2020 has limited Central American migrants' access to protection. The spillover effect has strained the capacity of the Mexican asylum system, which has received applications at a historic rate in 2021 with nearly 52,000 submissions between January and June 2021 (COMAR, 2021). Reforming the U.S. asylum system is necessary to prepare for the imminent unwinding of U.S. Code Title 42, used to expel migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. Among other parameters, this includes authorizing asylum officers to make refugee status determinations to reduce the years-long backlog in immigration court adjudications (Chishti, Gelatt, and Meissner, 2021).

Given that Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are signatories of the Cartagena Declaration, their frameworks can also provide complementary protection to a likely high share of applicants who do not meet the conventional refugee status definition, unlike the U.S. and Canadian systems. Investment in these asylum agencies' capacities can make it possible in the long term for asylum-seekers to find protection closer to home. Innovative UNHCR examples of investment in Mexico could be a promising start for Central American countries (UNHCR, 2021b).

Reorienting U.S. and Canadian refugee resettlement programs' commitments to Central America could be another valuable collaboration opportunity. Despite the high capacities of both systems, refugee admissions from Central America have been consistently low in both countries (Monin, Batalova, and Lai, 2021; Smith and Wagner, 2021; Paperny, 2021). Concerted efforts to increase admissions from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras does not have to be a zero-sum game. The U.S. expansion of the Central American Minors Program (CAM) may be exemplary of small initiatives to boost public awareness and outreach in the United States and Canada (Blinken and Mayorkas, 2021). In Canada, private sponsorship can be an effective route.

The combination of raising the adjudication capacity of asylum systems and identifying strategic opportunities to grow refugee resettlement from Central America to a consortium of countries, including but not limited to the United States and Canada, has enormous potential. However, underpinning these protection options must be a shared regional commitment to clearly communicate to applicants that, if found ineligible for protection, they will be returned to their countries of origin. The processes and implementation of such programs can draw on the best practices from the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees (Casella, 2016).

Professionalizing Immigration Enforcement

Enforcement has been a central pillar of migration management, but the capacity of the region's migration agencies has evolved unevenly in response to changes in irregular migration flows and U.S. pressure. From Mexico to Panama, governments have deployed national police and military units to reinforce border controls and interior enforcement given migration agencies' limited capacity to conduct high scale operations. Over the last few years, immigration enforcement has expanded particularly in Mexico and Guatemala, and in both countries, immigrant rights organizations have documented concerning allegations of human rights violations by Mexico's National Guard and Guatemala's National Police (Ruiz Soto, 2020).

Within the scope of regional collaboration, professionalizing how immigration control operations are conducted has been an afterthought, despite being critical to safeguarding migrants' rights and

following the rule of law (Selee et al., 2021). For example, training and oversight by U.S., Canadian, or Costa Rican governments on how to address immediate needs of asylum seekers and civilian populations could be particularly important in El Salvador and Honduras, where military units lead migration control efforts. Otherwise, ensuring that these enforcement agencies inform detained migrants about their rights, for example, the right to request asylum in Mexico, can make enforcement more transparent and humane.

Another opportunity for collaboration in immigration enforcement is promoting the creation of pre-departure planning programs for migrants in removal proceedings. Evidence from reception and reintegration studies suggests that providing migrants information about services they can access once in their communities can improve program participation and reduce repeat migration (Ruiz Soto et al., 2019). Because the largest shares of migrant returns and removals to Central America are from Mexico and the United States, linking migration enforcement to successful reintegration in these countries can be a mutually beneficial investment.

Thus, prioritizing the professionalization of migration enforcement, especially in Central America, would be valuable in strengthening future collaboration, as well as building migration agencies' capacity to take over enforcement responsibilities. Additionally, by contributing to pre-departure planning efforts that help returnees reintegrate to their origin communities, governments can reduce repeated unauthorized migration attempts.

Investment in Economic Development and Governance

Perhaps more than in any prior attempt to establish a regional migration strategy, North and Central American governments agree that addressing the root causes of migration must fundamentally be part of regional collaboration. But while ongoing discussions have focused on aligning development strategies, less collaboration has been centered on the complex, long-term relationship between economic development assistance and migration flows.

Indeed, a growing volume of research suggests that development assistance is a blunt tool on its own for reshaping migration flows, and that in fact it can increase migration among some groups over the short term (Clemens, 2020; Le Coz and Ruiz Soto, 2021; Ruiz Soto, 2021). This does not mean that development assistance should be abandoned, but that collaboration is most effective when policymakers set realistic expectations and target assistance for priority groups from the beginning.

A ripe opportunity to strengthen regional collaboration is harmonizing similar components of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America and Mexico's Comprehensive Development Plan (Meyer, 2021; CEPAL, 2019). Targeting violence prevention and food security programs in communities with high emigration rates and focusing on at-risk youth, for instance, can amplify impact and reshape irregular migration flows in the short term (Ruiz Soto, 2021). Still, these specific investments are unlikely to solve the constellation of migration drivers that are often related to broader issues of governance. Balancing targeted assistance and governance measures is complex but necessary to engender co-responsibility and establish actionable commitments by origin countries.

Leveraging the strengths of government and non-government partners in monitoring and evaluating development assistance and programming can also be a strategy to strengthen regional collaboration. These measures are significantly important in adapting or expanding investments, but unfortunately are rarely included in the project design. Whether it is sharing across governments or institutions, building monitoring and evaluation mechanisms into collaborative projects not only increases program transparency but also promotes best practices.

In sum, to amplify the impact of investing in root causes of Central American migration, it is equally as important to coordinate economic development and humanitarian aid as it is to establish realistic goals from the start of the collaboration. This facilitates the incorporation, monitoring and evaluation of programs that can illustrate the effects on migration drivers and desires.

Conclusions

Recent mixed-migration flows from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras may be primarily headed for the United States, but the challenges that irregular migration presents, as well as the critical protection needs in Central America, affect all countries in the region. Thus, collaboratively laying the foundation for a regional migration management system with the above measures can not only reduce these flows in the near term, but also build a set of institutional architecture and policy frameworks that can adapt and proactively address future migration flows from other world regions, regardless of changes in government administrations. As governments consider a way forward, expert forums like the North and Central American Task Force on Migration have a unique opportunity to inform and design policy road maps that drive regional dialogue and practical solutions to foster more safe, orderly, and legal migration.

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