

## COVID-19 must be addressed through international solidarity and cooperation

### UNSDG LAC Joint Statement



*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted, either directly or indirectly, millions of people in Latin America and the Caribbean, and refugees and migrants especially women and children are some of the worst affected. Photo: IOM*

**26 May 2020** - UN agencies part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group for Latin America and the Caribbean (**UNSDG LAC**) expressed their concern over the profound health, social, protection and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on millions of refugees and migrants in the region, and called for more international support to scale up governments responses with special attention on the most vulnerable such as women and children.

“COVID-19 is a global challenge that must be addressed through international solidarity and cooperation” stated the UN agencies representatives. As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said: “We are in this together – and we will get through this, together”, only with an inclusive approach that truly leaves no one behind, the region will be able to overcome this crisis of unparalleled magnitude and proportion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted, either directly or indirectly, millions of people in Latin America and the Caribbean, and refugees and migrants especially women and children are some of the worst affected. Thousands have lost their livelihoods and can no longer afford basic needs such as shelter, food, and health care; others could not continue to pay their rent and were evicted. Women, who are more likely than men to work informally and receive lower salaries, are even more affected. Vulnerable refugees and migrants are now on the streets – where they risk detention for their inability to obey physical distancing measures and comply with quarantines. Others are blocked at borders and need increased and immediate humanitarian assistance. Shocking and violent cases of discrimination and xenophobia have been reported throughout the region.

As a result of this context, in some instances, a growing number of refugees and migrants are going back to their origin countries, despite the lack of economic prospects there and the risk of crossborder COVID-19 contagion that such return movements imply. The drop in remittances that comes with the pandemic-induced global economic crisis also affects migrants' origin countries, thus contributing to worsening living conditions in them.

The protection situation remains equally challenging, particularly in border areas. Although the COVID-19 pandemic may oblige governments to implement extraordinary measures to limit the transmission of the virus, it is important to ensure that such measures are following the fundamental principles of human rights, child protection and refugee standards, such as non-refoulement and access to the territory for asylum seekers. The temporary suspension of deportations and the release of refugees and migrants held in detention, especially unaccompanied children, are strongly recommended to prevent the transmission of the virus and protect the health of refugees, migrants, and their communities.

At the same time, migrants and refugees continue to show their resilience and contribution to host communities. Working as doctors, nurses, or caregivers, refugees, and migrants, especially women and children, are a vital part of many countries' public health responses. Many are also an essential part of the workforce in other key sectors of the economy that continue providing services and goods to communities during the periods of quarantine and movement restrictions such as agriculture, food processing and distribution, and cleaning disinfection services.

Taking into account the vital role and vulnerable situation of millions of refugees and migrants, it is important to consider them in governments' social protection responses, including targeted and universal measures that can mitigate the pandemic's socio-economic impact. The UN System is ready to support countries in addressing this challenge and has been working side-by-side with governments and civil society in Latin America and the Caribbean, providing guidance, assistance, and protection to support national responses. "Our concerted action remains more necessary than ever. Only by coming together will we be able to face the Coronavirus and mitigate its shattering impact on millions of lives", emphasized the representatives.

"Refugees and migrants as well as their local hosts need practical and non-discriminatory access to information, and to adequate medical care. All individuals, no matter their migration status, should be included in national systems and services – along with other populations at risk of marginalization or exclusion", underlined the representatives. "The virus does not discriminate. Everyone is at risk and so, everyone – including refugees and migrants – should be able to access health facilities and existing social safety net programmes during this emergency." Employers should also make efforts, whenever possible, to maintain workers' salaries, in particular those at the bottom of the wage ladder.

In the framework of the response for refugees and migrants from Venezuela, the Interagency Coordination Platform – led by UNHCR and IOM, has revised the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) launched in November 2019, to account for new needs since the COVID-19 outbreak. Together with NGO partners, UN agencies are implementing several prevention and response activities in

the main locations where refugees and migrants are hosted. These gendersensitive activities ensure people can adequately access information, clean water, soap, and appropriate waste disposal. Organizations are working around the clock to find innovative ways to continue supporting the most vulnerable individuals in the current context, while also supporting national authorities to set up observation and isolation spaces for potential positive COVID-19 cases. UN agencies are also working on livelihood initiatives to help refugees and migrants, as well as host communities, recover from the current health and economic crisis., in addition to supporting measures to ensure the protection of migrant and refugee populations, especially those with international protection needs.

The international community must respond to this dire invisible humanitarian crisis. Today, the International Donor Conference, in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants, was convened by Spain and the European Union, and with the support of UNHCR and IOM. It is essential that donor countries find ways to continue supporting humanitarian and protection response by hearing and responding to the voices of the most vulnerable. Unless the international community more strongly supports host countries, there is a high risk that millions of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially women and children, will be left behind, increasingly invisible during the pandemic.

For more information

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