

Costa Rica: Community-Based Protection



13,294 people we serve had access to two-way communication



711 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 2022, Costa Rica was home to 253,800 refugees and asylum-seekers (mainly from Nicaragua, followed by Venezuela, Cuba, and the North of Central America).

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 people we serve (PwS). The Costa Rica Operation carries out various actions to better understand PwS and their host communities 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 host 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 UNHCR serve 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.



Teenagers participated in a recreational activity in the framework of the 16 days of activism, to reflect on the prevention of violence against women and girls.

Main Achievements/ Progress

- As part of the activities of the CwC strategy, UNHCR implemented the **Mobile Information Centers (CMI)**, in six communities of San José. The objective is to provide accurate, accessible, and timely information to PwS and reinforce two-way communication. During the year, UNHCR organized CMI in collaboration with partner agencies in San Sebastián, La Carpio, San José central, Goicoechea, Alajuelita and Tibas. **963** PwS received information about their rights, programs, and services available in Costa Rica.
- From August 16th to 18th, UNHCR facilitated an in-person **Participatory Assessments in GAM** with the support of partner 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 **148** PwS in line with the AGD approach. The topics addressed were the RSD process, access to information, integration into the country and community, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), PSEA, fraud prevention, and sexual and reproductive health. Also, with persons at risk of statelessness access to birth registration and SSD process.
- On September 23rd, **17** teenagers from the **“Red de Adolescentes”** in coordination with the partner agency DNI, participated in a volunteer activity in Parque la Libertad, which is 32 hectares 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 supported the rehabilitation of a botanical garden. Also, they created planters with recycled materials. They learned about impact of their actions on the park and the host community so they could become agents of change for the conservation of the environment.
- The work of the Information Center (IC) is inserted into the CBP strategy as one of the main mechanisms to inform PwS about their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities to get assistance in the country. The IC has been consolidated as a direct two-way communication with PwS that allows UNHCR to learn about their experience in Costa Rica, the gaps that they face, as well as their protection risks and needs in the country. During 2022, the IC assisted a total 13,294 persons through the different [UNHCR communication channels](#) available.
- The office launched a new communication channel, a **WhatsApp Chatbot** on the 27th of September as part of the Regional chatbot initiative, based on the frequent queries made by PwS related to their access to rights, national services, and programmes of UNHCR and its partners. To promote this channel, CBP staff conducted Facebook Live and Radio sessions and printed flyers and banners. Since it launched, **1,702** persons accessed it and 7,640 queries have been responded. The office expects the chatbot to be a useful channel to reduce the information gaps that PwS are encountering in the country.
- During the 16 days of activism campaign a film-forum was held on San José, with the presence of women we serve and members of the Gender Interagency Group, to discuss the Costa Rican movie *“El despertar de las hormigas”*. The panel included the main actress, a refugee activist and members of the partner agency CENDEROS, and it allowed the analysis of the expressions of gender-based violence portrayed in the film and how does it affect forcibly displaced women and girls as well as actions carried by civil society to empower survivors and prevent violence in the communities. Also, twenty-six adolescents participated in a recreational event that included activities aimed at raising awareness and reflecting on the prevention of violence against women and girls. Key messages were shared by CBP staff as well as partners DNI and CENDEROS.

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.
- 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, especially considering the recent changes in the asylum system the country faced at the end of the year.
- 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 reinforce the Information Center through the promotion of the communication channels, particularly the visibility of the 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.
- UNHCR will continue to empower refugee and women led organizations in order to promote community mobilization, peaceful coexistence and gender-based violence prevention actions.
- UNHCR will resume the work plan with DINADECO, in order to promote the participation of people we serve in community organization initiatives.

Financial Information

UNHCR Website: <https://www.acnur.org/costa-rica> Twitter [@ACNUR_CostaRica](#)

CONTACT Federico Martinez, Senior Protection Officer (martinez@unhcr.org) and Maria del Mar Gonzalez, Senior Protection Associate (gonzalez@unhcr.org), Costa Rica

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