

Context

Costa Rica's Northern border with Nicaragua is 309 km long. The region is very active in terms of population diversity and multiple dynamics of human mobility, including the permanence, pendular movements and transit of nationals as well as of migrants and people in need of international protection. Significant challenges arise from the rural and remote nature of the region, which also faces social and environmental challenges to achieve sustainable development. At the same time, the inclusion of refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and migrants, mostly Nicaraguans in the region, represents an opportunity, given their cultural affinity, agricultural occupation and contributions to society

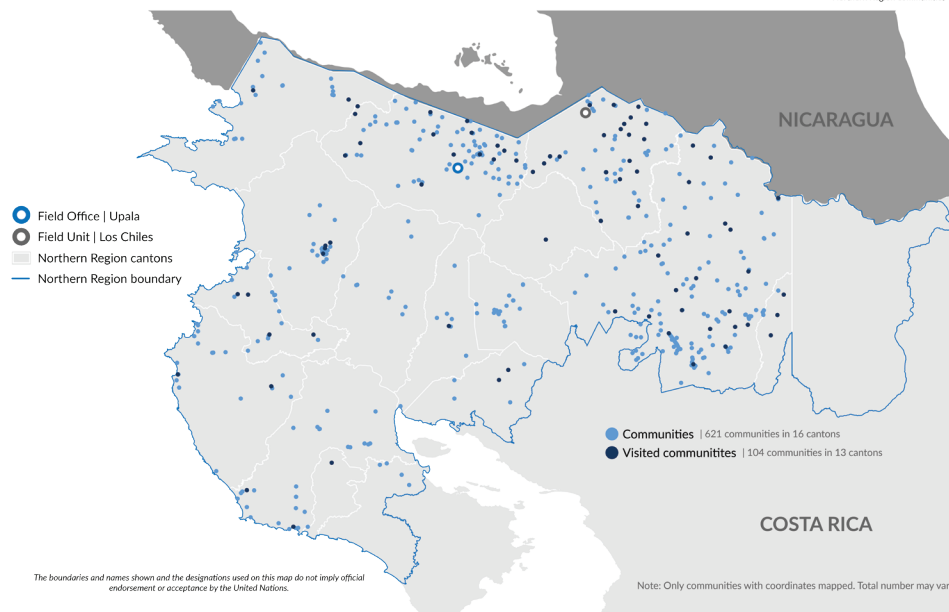
The settlement of the Northern region, as is often the case in cross-border contexts, reflects the history of integration and permanent coexistence between Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans, evident in the institutional and community leadership that has shaped their social, economic and political vision. This history has resulted in the formation of binational families of different generations, including Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans by birth or by naturalization. The economy is based on a variety of activities and has developed mainly in the rural sector, such as large-scale agriculture, along with some small and medium-sized operations and, to a lesser extent, other sectors such as tourism and services in the urban area. This has also meant permanent movements along the Northern border.

There are two main official border crossings: Peñas Blancas (La Cruz canton in the west) and Las Tabillas (Los Chiles canton in the east). There is also a regular crossing into Nicaragua at Río Frío in Los Chiles and a temporary crossing for the Ticofrut company during the orange harvest. In addition, at least 24 irregular border crossings have been identified, which are used by refugees and migrants to enter the country for a variety of reasons, both in a pendular manner and intending to stay.

In April 2018, the Northern Region was a gateway for more than 80,000 refugees who entered different areas of the country; some remained in the Northern Region and others made secondary movements to settle, mainly in rural areas. Given the historical ties of the people with this border, some refugees managed to turn to support networks to start their lives in Costa Rica, this continues to happen with a significant part of recent and gradual arrivals. As of 2019, Nicaraguan refugee civil society organizations, particularly from campesino movements, play an important role in these support networks.

UNHCR works in 15 Costa Rican cantons in the provinces of Huetar Norte and Chorotega, including four cantons bordering Nicaragua: La Cruz, Upala, Los Chiles and San Carlos. These 15 cantons are home to approximately 803,500 people¹, of which approximately 110,100 are foreign nationals (92% Nicaraguans) who have gradually entered the territory, particularly since 2018, seeking international protection. Most

Visited communities and communities with presence of people with and for whom UNHCR works | 2024



of these people live in about 630 rural, remote, and hard-to-reach communities; some are permanent residents and others move seasonally in search of livelihoods related to agricultural crops. Others live in urban areas, mainly in Los Chiles and Upala.

Most asylum-seekers face challenges in integrating into the country, in part due to structural constraints in the region, such as deficiencies in road infrastructure and services such as health and education. This is also related to the remote rural nature and low levels of education among some segments of the population, which limit their livelihood opportunities and their knowledge of and effective access to rights.

On the other hand, there are limitations related to insecure land tenure that pose challenges to making investments in the territory. This is the case for families located within the Borderline Wildlife Refuge, known as "La Milla", which is a special administrative area with limitations on land use and access to goods and services. Finally, according to the State of the Nation Report 2024, the Northern Region stands out nationally being prone to climatic events, which, combined with social vulnerabilities, creates a significant risk of cyclical climate related humanitarian impacts.

The Northern border area also observes the movements of people in transit from the South of the continent to North America. Between January 2023 and September 2024, according to the Migration Authority (DGME), more than 726,000 people transited through Costa Rica heading Northwards. Most of these people leave Costa Rica through irregular crossings near the central district of Los Chiles.

¹Population and housing estimate 2022, INEC.

²National Household Survey (ENAH), INEC 2023.

UNHCR Presence and Priorities

UNHCR has had a presence in Costa Rica since 1979 and has monitored the Northern Region through its partners. As of 2018, due to the **impacts of the socio-political crisis in Nicaragua**, UNHCR established a **permanent presence** in the territory to reinforce its actions. UNHCR supports and assists authorities in the management of forced displacement with activities including: **protection monitoring**, assistance for **safe access to the territory** for people in need of international protection, **prevention of refoulement**, attention and referral of cases with special protection needs to government institutions. In addition, UNHCR facilitates access to **refugee status determination** processes and offers **humanitarian assistance** to mixed movements.

In 2024, UNHCR extended its presence through a **Field Unit in Los Chiles**. In total, UNHCR has a permanent team of **25 people** in the Northern region. UNHCR works with **local authorities** and **local representatives of the central government** such as the Professional Migration Police, National Women's Institute, Joint Institute for Social Assistance, Joint Institute for Social Assistance, Ministry of Health, Ombudsman's Office and National Trust Fund for Children, DINADECO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the municipalities of the cantons covered in the Northern region; and with **humanitarian and protection** partners such as CENDEROS, CADENA Foundation, Omar Dengo Foundation, HIAS, UNDP, IOM, UN Women, SJM, UNFPA, UNICEF and World Vision, and other actors such as academia (UNED, UTN, UNA, INA) and civil society organizations. In addition, UNHCR works **hand in hand with the refugee communities** residing in or transiting through the Northern Region to learn first-hand about their needs and visions.

Specific needs

Refugees and asylum seekers

Source: UNHCR analysis based on participatory assessments with asylum seekers and refugees in the Northern Region.

There are information gaps regarding **access to the refugee status determination (RSD) procedure**. For those who do have information, there are still barriers to accessing appointments to initiate the procedure, which means seeking assistance through UNHCR and its partners, or in some cases going to processors and exposing themselves to fees and scams.

In terms of **access to health**, people identify effective insurance options, such as the UNHCR-CCSS agreement and State insurance. However, barriers to access persist, such as the limited supply of specialists in hospitals, requiring travel to other medical centers in the country. The Refugee Unit's delay in renewing documentation also limits people's access to health, as well as situations of xenophobia.

Access to basic education is limited due to the closure of educational institutions because of poor sanitary conditions; this means traveling to more distant centers and increasing transportation times and costs that not all families can afford. Adults are accessing formal education at night, which allows them to improve their job prospects.



People, particularly the elderly, say they feel that their **housing is unsafe** due to poor construction practices that do not offer sufficient protection from the weather, and lack connectivity to **public services such as water and electricity**.

In the cantons of San Carlos and Los Chiles there are perceptions of **insecurity** that in urban areas are related to robberies and scams, which some people relate to the elevated flow of people in transit. In rural communities, insecurity is usually related to the dynamics of irregular cross-border crossing of people and goods.

Gender based violence, not only as a cause of displacement for some women, but is also experienced in Costa Rica (e.g., domestic violence associated in some cases with the use of psychoactive substances). Awareness of reporting and protection mechanisms is identified as low.

Refugees and asylum-seekers report barriers to **formal employment** due to difficulties in accessing documentation and recognition of academic degrees. **Self-employment** opportunities exist in the region's rural professions but are limited due to the high cost of land. Other opportunities for **labor and economic inclusion** are identified in relation to the tourism sector in the Guanacaste region.

³According to the epidemiological bulletin of the Health Department of Los Chiles, by 2024, a total of 162 cases of domestic violence, 104 cases of abandonment or neglect of children, and 50 cases of suspected rape were registered.

People in mixed movements

Source: Monitoring of mixed movements (UNHCR-UNICEF-WFP, with the support of HIAS) interviewed in the Northern Region, Jan-Oct 2024

1,053 travel groups interviewed

79% came from **Venezuela**

15% from **Colombia**

3% from **Ecuador**

56%

women



44%

men



88%

left their countries of origin due to **lack of employment or income**

78%

due to **fear** of the violence/insecurity situation

49%

due to having suffered from **violence, threats or intimidation**⁴

⁴ Respondents could select more than one reason for leaving; therefore, the results for the different motivations do not add up to 100%.

Destination

87% were destined for the United States **10%** for Costa Rica **3%** for other countries

The main needs reported were:



90%
food



79%
shelter



63%
clothing/shoes



10%
protection information

Response Priorities

Protection

UNHCR **supports and embraces** the refugee communities in the Northern Region in order to contribute to their integration in the country, by bringing them closer to the communities that host them and to the Costa Rican State.

- UNHCR facilitates exchanges between refugees, asylum-seekers and host communities on common issues affecting them, through community-led women safe spaces such as the *Tardes de café* (Coffee afternoons) strategy. UNHCR supports this dialogue by promoting the **development of leadership and self-care skills**, and by linking identified needs with local initiatives for access to services, livelihoods and integration opportunities.
- Based on the community dialogue, UNHCR supports the **capacity-development of specific groups** so that people in need of protection are aware of their rights in Costa Rica and know how to access complaint mechanisms.
- Through the **Mobile Information Centers**, a protection by presence strategy, UNHCR provides information and guidance on rights and services from both its partners and government institutions to refugees and asylum-seekers. This is crucial given the location of forcibly displaced persons in remote or hard-to-reach areas.
- UNHCR also facilitates **dialogue between institutions and communities** that have directly advocated for access to services and rights for their communities (e.g. for water and sanitation solutions). This is done hand in hand with key partners such as International Financial Institutions (IFI).



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- In response to risks of **statelessness**, UNHCR, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Civil Registry, both national institutions, has conducted institutional and community visits to **bring people closer to these institutions**. Through direct dialogue and field work, it has been possible to identify and initiate case management, streamlining procedures for late registration and recognition of the condition of statelessness.
- As part of the **collaboration between UNHCR and the National Women's Institute**, female asylum-seeker GBV survivors are part of a Human Training Group by INAMU, which includes a four-month training program on access to rights, information, health, sexual and reproductive health and employability. UNHCR is exploring links between this strategy and literacy training to support livelihoods. UNHCR also provides technical assistance to the National Women's Institute and other relevant institutions in the management of cases of gender-based violence, including referrals.
- UNHCR participates in the **Upala Violence Prevention Network**, an inter-institutional coordination space led by the Ministry of Health for the coordination of prevention, mitigation and response initiatives. UNHCR also participates in the **Upala Health Roundtable** to improve the response to the health needs of forcibly displaced persons, including those in mixed movements.

Response Priorities

Livelihoods

UNHCR helps to **enhance the existing skills and knowledge** of refugees by bringing together other actors to connect their collective and individual employability and entrepreneurship initiatives with local markets and the provision of institutional support. This includes:

- Following a **local assessment** in which four prioritized communities⁴ indicated their interests around livelihoods, actors such as the National University (UNA), the National Technical University (UTN) and the National Learning Institute (INA) provide **agricultural training**, so refugees and asylum-seekers can adapt their agricultural knowledge to the land characteristics in Costa Rica and cultivate more successfully. This **certified training opportunity** is a key requirement for the placement of their products in the market.
- In the meantime, implementing partner *Fundación Omar Dengo* provides **financial and material resources to support and ensure continuity** in the training program. UNHCR continues bringing **together additional actors** to expand and diversify the training. There are opportunities for articulation with local initiatives such as Integral Development Associations, which also offer specialized training (e.g. project management).
- The training opportunity goes hand in hand with **efforts to improve access to land and seeds** (e.g. through collective seed capital), establishing alliances with actors such as UTN, the State Distance University (UNED), the Cantonal Agricultural Center and the Ministry of Agriculture, among others. For communities that are not yet self-reliant, UNHCR offers in-kind assistance to promote food security.

⁴Caño Negro, El Amparo (El Triunfo and San Andrés), San Gerardo de Medio Queso and Finca Las Melinas (Upala).

- The strategy allows **communities to access food and livelihoods that are viable**, efficient, and in accordance with their cosmovision; in addition to increasing their potential for commercial exchange, ultimately fostering their added value and fostering production chains. The strategy identifies a potential link with the cantons of San Carlos and Liberia, areas with higher potential for industry and development.
- In the context of entrepreneurship and employability, UNHCR seeks to promote the **economic empowerment** of refugee, asylum-seeker and host communities, in their territories and customized to their abilities. **UNHCR supports local entrepreneurship through group seed capital** allocated to women entrepreneurs, some of whom are survivors of gender-based violence in Yolillal.
- As community groups become more established (such as AMECUP – cacao growers, and *Movimiento Campesino Upala*), **self-management capacities are strengthened**; thus, more specific requests for support are met by the communities and supported by the implementing partner CENDEROS.



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Local integration

- UNHCR, together with IOM and UNDP, is implementing a project under the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) to strengthen peaceful coexistence and peacebuilding in **11 communities** in the border cantons of the Northern Region (8 in Los Chiles and 3 in Upala).
- UNHCR leads **the community component of the project**, which includes dialogue initiatives to transform conflicts and build a culture of peace as well as the design of projects for peaceful coexistence. Along these lines, UNHCR has guided the design of a project for each of the communities through a participatory methodology in four stages, ensuring the centering of local voices and perspectives.
- The approach of these projects is very similar, including the improvement or construction of community infrastructures to facilitate meeting spaces, accompanied by cultural and sports activities to promote a culture of peace and integration, the latter ensuring the continuity of the *Somos una Comunidad* ("We are a Community") strategy.
- Another priority activity of the project refers to community-based capacity development on conflict management: UNHCR reaches out through consultative processes, to learn their perspectives and facilitate dialogue towards collective solutions, providing tips and best practices. This helps to build a sustainable culture of peace.

- To ensure sustainability, UNHCR is integrating the **community-based protection approach** into the project through activities with leaders, networking and the consolidation of a network of community representatives to develop their capacities and ensure their access to rights, while connecting them with local government services (e.g. key institutions such as the Ombudsman's Office).



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Interagency coordination and key partnerships



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- Since August 2023, UNHCR has assumed leadership of the **Los Chiles Protection Workgroup**, which brings together four agencies of the United Nations System and five national and international NGOs⁶ working in protection. The Protection Workgroup participates, as a technical advisor, in the **Los Chiles Human Mobility Worktable**, which is the interinstitutional space⁷ for coordinating the response to mixed movements. The Worktable has operated permanently for three years and has received technical support from UNHCR since its inception.
- Through its leadership in protection, UNHCR has facilitated **protection analysis spaces in the field** to jointly position the protection needs and concerns of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers at an inter-sectoral and inter-institutional level.
- Similarly, the Protection Workgroup has strengthened the response capacities of key institutions and has led joint actions to complement the government's response efforts. An example of this is the implementation of **Mobile Information Centers**, spaces where institutions and partners provide information and attention regarding access to asylum and other rights in Costa Rica, while addressing specific concerns regarding services and refer to assistance and protection programs.
- UNHCR leads the **ÚNETE** group, which brings together UN agencies with a presence in the Northern Region for discussions on emergency response. UNHCR serves as the security focal point of this group.
- UNHCR facilitates the liaison between local governments and multilateral banks (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, among others), through **field visits and approaches to listen to the voices of the institutions and communities**, aimed at identifying and prioritizing needs and potential areas of common interest. As a result of this work, international financial institutions are providing technical support in the development of project proposals for key actions such as improving connectivity, infrastructure and education and economic empowerment in the Northern Region.

⁶UNHCR, Acción Joven, CENDEROS, HIAS, IOM, SJM, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Vision.

⁷Institutional Membership: Municipality of Los Chiles, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCCSS), Los Chiles Hospital, National Trustfund for Children, National Women's Institute, Joint Institute for Social Assistance, National Police, Border Police, Migration Police, Union of Local Associations.

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