



# Risk Communication and Community Engagement in the Americas

Since March, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted operations and required a different approach to **communication with communities.**

UNHCR **communication** channels have been rapidly enhanced and enlarged to ensure the continued provision of vital health and protection information.

All operations support **national authorities and WHO/PAHO** efforts disseminating key messages in various **formats and languages.**

## Operational Context

- Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Americas in March 2020, UNHCR and its partners, in coordination with key actors, are developing alternative means of communicating with communities, engaging and mobilizing them.
- With rapidly changing dynamics in the field, UNHCR is continuously adapting its services and support to refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced populations, stateless people and those that host them in the region. As part of a comprehensive response for the protection of populations of concern to UNHCR in the Americas, UNHCR approaches communities through creative and flexible mechanisms, aiming at an open and sustainable two-way communication. This is also critical to ensure timely analysis of risks, needs and gaps of the people most in need, and to ensure coordination with national authorities and humanitarian actors.
- All operations actively disseminate WHO/PAHO and national authorities' key messages to widen impact and ensure the adequate information is provided. UNHCR offices have adapted these messages to different formats and languages that are more accessible to community groups, such as indigenous communities and children. All of this information is available in the UNHCR Americas **online repository** created to track materials available in each country, share good practices and identify needs and gaps.



## UNHCR Response

Strengthen Risk Communication and Community Engagement and critical protection case management, including identification and referrals, protection monitoring and registration.

This summary provides a compilation of innovative efforts and good practices across the Americas region in **Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE)** in the context of COVID-19, to promote, foster and develop the exchange of community of practice.

### Reaching out to the communities

#### Social media platforms

**WHO/PAHO key messages** in different languages and formats have been disseminated through social media.

Messages on preventive measures and rights of persons living with HIV, including access to treatment, health care and access to health services, SGBV prevention and response, information on migratory procedures, renewal of visas and provision of services by UNHCR and partners in the Americas, information on how to identify fake news and alert refugees and population in mixed movements, anti-xenophobia and non-discrimination messages, among many others, were disseminated through WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in all countries.



- **National campaigns** such as *Somos Panas* in **Colombia**, *Somos Lo Mismo* and *Talento Sin Fronteras* in **Panama** and *Incluir es Protegerlos* in **Honduras** disseminate key messages.

**WhatsApp** messages are disseminated through WhatsApp trees and community groups. Social cards, videos, audios and messages have been produced and disseminated. In Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Dominican Republic and Brazil material has been translated in different formats and languages including Creole,



Portuguese and Yukpa, Wayuu, Jivi, Wotuja, Eñepa and Warao indigenous languages.

- 294,253 messages have been disseminated by UNHCR since March 2020 through a **WhatsApp Chatbot in Ecuador**.

**Facebook pages** like *Confía en el Jaguar* provide updated information on COVID-19 to refugees and migrants in Central America and Mexico. New material is constantly shared on topics such as WHO/PAHO preventive messages, mental health, and protection of LGBTI+ individuals. The messages are available in different formats like posters, booklets, children's videos and book readings, among others.



**YouTube** videos to raise awareness on COVID-19 prevention measures were created by Venezuelan YouTubers/influencers with the support of UNHCR in Ecuador. See the videos on these links:

- COVID-19: What will happen to Venezuelans in Ecuador and to their legal procedures?



- Things to do during the quarantine period

#### Posters

**WHO/PAHO posters in various languages are displayed** in Support Spaces, temporary shelters and other structures that remain open along the displacement routes and border and urban areas. UNHCR operations have developed

posters on different topics, for example in the case of Colombia on [access to asylum procedures and non-refoulement](#); in Peru, at the interagency R4V level, on the [services available and remote attention](#). In northern Central America countries, posters help inform the population on the move on their rights and UNHCR services. In Brazil, [LGBTI+ COVID-19 related posters](#) were launched on the framework of IDAHOBIT. In Trinidad and Tobago, UNHCR worked with UNICEF to translate child-friendly posters on COVID-19 prevention.

To help address xenophobia, UNHCR Chile is developing multiple projects to promote inclusive environments. A brochure with recommendations on how to [prevent stigmatization of refugees and migrants in journalism and reporting](#) in the context of the COVID-19 was created jointly with UNFPA, UNESCO and the NGO Chilean Network of Migrant Journalists.



### Community radios

WHO/PAHO messages and other preventive messages adapted to the needs of different groups, such as [indigenous communities such as the Yukpa, Wayuu, Jivi, Wotuja, Eñepa and Warao](#), are shared by UNHCR and partners through community radios in Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil.

In Manaus and Pacaraima, Brazil, a partnership between UNHCR, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and Mana Institute was established to implement community radios and disseminate information about prevention measures, health, hygiene and general guidance to indigenous sheltered groups.

### Multimedia

Different audio and video materials with key messages are disseminated across the Americas.

- ➔ Youth networks: community structures and youth groups in Zulia, Venezuela and Honduras produced and disseminated videos and songs with messages on COVID-19 prevention.

- ➔ In the Southern Cone, Argentina has adapted messages with audio and subtitles to allow access for people with visual and hearing impairments. Additionally, a video on SGBV prevention, access to information and support by UNHCR was developed and disseminated through social media.



- ➔ Recorded stories produced by youth part of the youth initiative fund "Cuentacuentos" supported by UNHCR Spain are disseminated to children in Guatemala.
- ➔ Videos of UNHCR's support to the government's response in the different countries are shared through social media. Some examples are the building of health facilities in Cucuta, Colombia and Boa Vista, Brazil. Additionally, UNHCR El Salvador, produced a video to explain the mechanisms of communication with communities and the provision of humanitarian assistance in the context of COVID-19.

- ➔ A song "*Sácale lo' pie*" interpreted by Dominican singer Xiomara Fortuna on key messages on COVID prevention was produced with the support of UNHCR, IOM and the EU; the song and video are being disseminated through different communication channels.

"Sácale lo' pie" es una canción de Xiomara Fortuna para el mundo, en colaboración con el ACNUR, la Agencia de la ONU para los Refugiados, con apoyo de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas en República Dominicana, Organización Internacional Para Las Migraciones, Unión Europea en República Dominicana y del Instituto Nacional de Migración: *quédate en casa* y sigue las recomendaciones de las autoridades para juntos vencer al Covid-19! #COVID19 #ConLosRefugiados #Yopertenezco



- ➔ UNHCR, in alliance with the Mexican Refugee Commission, the Mexican Institute of Cinematography, UNICEF and other collaborators, put together a video library accessible to shelters. The videos include messages on COVID-19 prevention, information regarding international protection, breathing and meditation exercises and entertainment for different ages, among others. The content was



distributed to 24 shelters who owned information screens donated by UNHCR.

- ➔ A video was produced by LGBTI+ refugees and migrants from Venezuela in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Brazil and Argentina and contain messages of solidarity and resilience amid the COVID context. We are all together on this, "*Estamos todes juntas!*"

The [short version of this video](#) is circulating in social media, long versions are available at the following R4V YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPoDhyPVIAs> - Spanish

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDzdtLnPDEA> - English

### Call Centres and helplines

UNHCR and partners in the Americas enhanced helplines in most of the countries. Information on new numbers is disseminated through [help.unhcr.org](http://help.unhcr.org), WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, among others.



- ➔ In Venezuela, hotlines were disseminated in communities to keep assisting persons with specific needs.
- ➔ In Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador hotline numbers for returnees, IDPs, and people in need of international protection have been made available for calls and WhatsApp messages.
- ➔ In Costa Rica, the call centre 800-REFUGIO operates remotely via cell phones.
- ➔ Trinidad and Tobago expanded its hotline offerings to include two new hotlines (three in total) operating 24/7.
- ➔ In Mexico, the national hotline amplified by 3 its capacity to respond to the contingency, launching a nationwide WhatsApp number and opening two information lines to cover the south and the northern borders. The total number of hotlines in the country is 65.
- ➔ In Colombia, three call centres (Medellin, Cucuta and Bogota) and 26 helplines

continue to provide daily support to PoC with updated information on access to rights and services.

### SMS

Bulk messaging is being explored in Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and other countries as other means of sharing information with the communities. In Guatemala and Trinidad and Tobago, prevention messages are shared through SMS with refugees and migrants.

### UNHCR HELP website

Currently there are 24 countries in the region that updated information on preventive messages and remote services in [help.unhcr.org](http://help.unhcr.org). Operations such as Argentina, Aruba, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curacao, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela have specific sections with information on COVID-19. Information on how to request asylum in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic is also available in English and Spanish through the help website.

### Information sessions

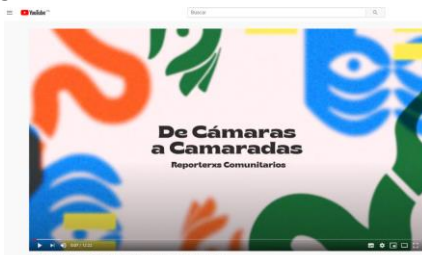
In Brazil and El Salvador, interagency actions on disseminating information and health practices continue to take place in temporary shelters, spontaneous settlements and some Support Spaces (e.g. screening centres).

### Outreach Volunteers and Community Groups

Outreach Volunteers (OV) in Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela, among others continue to support actively in remote community awareness, information dissemination, identification of specific needs and sharing of feedback from the communities with UNHCR and partners.

In different countries of the Americas, UNHCR is working with community committees, community leaders, associations and community groups to ensure two-way communication, understand their needs and produce COVID-related information material to be disseminated with their communities.

- Videos with preventive messages have been produced by outreach volunteers in Venezuela, to encourage their peers to stay at home and feel supported and in Brazil, outreach volunteers prepared audio messages for Warao and Eñepa indigenous communities. In Dominican Republic, preventive messages have been disseminated by outreach volunteers in urban neighbourhoods through loudspeakers.
- In Brazil, guidance material based on WHO orientations was designed with Warao indigenous communities in order to guarantee their safety, preventing COVID-19 contamination during burials.
- UNHCR offices are in regular contact with community leaders and community groups, holding virtual focus group discussions with different community members. In Colombia, 300 cell phone lines are being distributed to community leaders in Apartado, Arauca, Barranquilla, Bogota, Cali, Cucuta, Medellín, Mocoa, Pasto, Quibdo and Riohacha.
- UNHCR Ecuador organized an online workshop with refugees and Ecuadorian youth participating in the *Dale Play* initiative to collectively write a script and produce [video blogs related to COVID-19](#). The first script was written by all the participants and they agreed to produce at least one video per month to share key messages with their peers.



- "From Cameras to Comrades - Community Reporters" (in Spanish: "*De Cámaras a Camaradas – Reportersxs Comunitarixs*") is an online community film project executed by the ALDHEA Foundation and UNHCR Ecuador that supports refugees, migrants and host community youth from different countries living in Ecuador through online tutoring to write and record their own

scripts about the experiences during confinement.

- Capacity building sessions with volunteers, community leaders and community groups, as well as UNHCR and partner staff are regularly organized across the Americas on topics related to COVID-19. In El Salvador, trainings on psychological first aid were also conducted with community leaders and PoC.

## Remote protection services

Considering national measures imposed to contain the spread of the disease, UNHCR and partners are mobilizing communities to support those at heightened risk through existing community networks and online platforms and without compromising their own security.

- In Chile, a document responding to frequently asked questions has been drafted to support information efforts.
- In Brazil, the Federal Government is providing emergency cash assistance to everyone, including refugees and migrants. In order to disseminate this information and ensure their rights, guidance material was developed and distributed in Spanish, French, Arabic, English, Portuguese and Warao, including audio materials.
- In Guatemala, social workers and psychologists providing case management services, including remote individual counselling established Support Networks on MHPSS in order to meet on a monthly basis, share good practices and also find strategies and solutions for some difficulties faced, especially with persons with disabilities and persons with specific psychiatric needs.
- A partnership with the [Latin American Network of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and their families \(RIADIS\)](#) is being prioritized in order to conduct a regional assessment on the situation of persons with disabilities and produce more inclusive information materials for COVID-19.

**Remote simplified protection monitoring tool** – To continue monitoring the situation of the populations of concern to UNHCR during the COVID-19 situation, a simplified online self-assessment has been created with the online KOBO Toolbox, which helps the remote identification of needs. This tool is currently being piloted in Ecuador, Chile, Argentina and Brazil. In El Salvador, protection incidents reported by community leaders during the COVID-19 are registered by UNHCR staff through KoBo community protection monitoring tool. In Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula (Honduras), the protection situation continues to be monitored through phone calls and WhatsApp communication trees set up in 41 communities in high risk urban and rural areas.

## Regional Guidance

UNHCR's Bureau for the Americas provides guidance through global and regional tools adapted to the impact caused by the COVID-19 situation on issues as Refugee Status Determination (RSD), registration, resettlement cash-based interventions, sexual and gender-based violence, child protection, mental health and risk communication and communities engagement, among others. UNHCR operations have contextualized the guidance and shared it their teams and partners to standardize approaches and keep staff up to date.

## Interagency Coordination

Through interagency coordination UNHCR continues to ensure that a harmonized and coherent response is in place during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the examples of coordinated efforts of different structures in the region include:

### Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V)

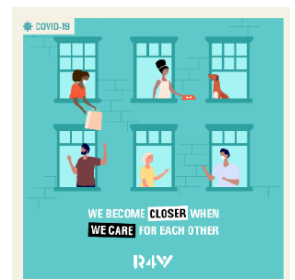
As part of the Venezuela Situation coordinated response, UNHCR and IOM, along with a range of key actors through regional and national sectors and groups, jointly ensure a coordinated response in the context of COVID-19. National platforms are

coordinating the regular update of information on service provision, sharing it among its members and with national authorities. Flash updates and Newsletters on COVID-19 are shared on a weekly basis.

A section on COVID-19 is regularly updated in the [R4V.info website](#) with information on needs assessments, reports, guidelines about assistance y response to returns, statistics and materials produced by regional sectors and national platforms. Over 6,500 new user visits were recorded only in the last month.

- The interagency [online repository](#) includes materials developed at regional and national levels by different actors on SGBV, child protection, HIV, trafficking and smuggling, shelter, evictions and returns, among other issues. [Key messages on COVID-19](#) have been adapted for social media in formats such as animated videos, gifs and social cards. The animated videos have been uploaded to the [R4V YouTube Channel](#).

- The Regional Communication Working Group created content to counter xenophobia in the current pandemic context. Products are developed in English, Spanish and Portuguese and disseminated through social media channels.



- The Protection Sector is conducting virtual focus group discussions and interviews with persons with specific needs refugees and migrants and service providers. This intervention includes consultations with persons with disabilities organized in coordination with RIADIS and UNHCR; as well as SGBV survivors.

Compilation of updates on evictions, border mapping and returns continues to be gathered,



and key messages are regularly shared with the communities.

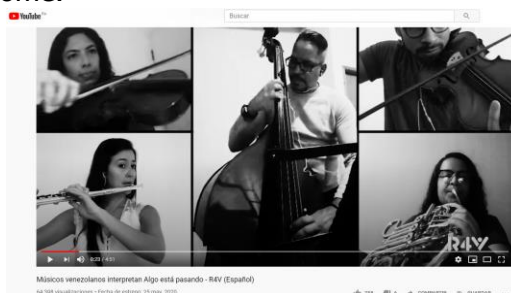
- ➔ The regional R4V **Service Mapping** tool continues to be updated in order to provide information on services and **Support Spaces** in the region and aims at collecting updated information including remote modalities of attention (online, telephone) during quarantine and after restoration of services in health, protection and food security, among others. A card with useful information to access this map has been disseminated through **social media**.



- ➔ U-Report on the Move: *Uniendo Voces*, an interagency regional initiative was launched in **Ecuador**. This platform will provide adolescents and youth with access to information on rights and services, preventive measures, as well as serve as a channel to voice their concerns and needs on how COVID-19 is affecting their lives.



- ➔ Over 50 Venezuelan musicians who live across 11 countries in the Americas recorded themselves during confinement playing a song in common: *Algo está Pasando* (Something is happening). This song offers a hopeful message in times of uncertainty, a boost of energy and joy with confidence that a better tomorrow is yet to come.



## RedLAC

The Communications group continues coordinating efforts on messages and information regarding COVID-19. A **repository of content and material** is used by all members. A **video** showing messages from different UN agencies and civil society organizations in the Americas was produced and disseminated through social media. The Protection Group and the gender roundtable have issued joint advocacy documents, including one on **returns to the NCA** and **SGBV considerations** in the context of COVID19.

## Clusters

Clusters in Colombia, Venezuela, El Salvador and Honduras continue to run a coordinated response. Mapping services and continuously sharing updated information with the communities in coordination with partners.

- ➔ In El Salvador, in coordination with IOM, UNHCR has distributed cards and posters with contact details of UNHCR and organizations in the Protection Cluster. The material has been distributed in quarantine centres hosting deported persons.

## Support Spaces and Safe Spaces

- ➔ In Venezuela, the Regional Safe Spaces Network continues providing on-line psychosocial services and remote case management for SGBV survivors and children at risk.
- ➔ The Support Spaces have adapted their services and continue to operate remotely, a few still providing direct services. Out of 161 Support Spaces in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil and Chile, a total of 107 are currently operating remotely. A newsletter with the latest updates is available in the **R4V.info**.





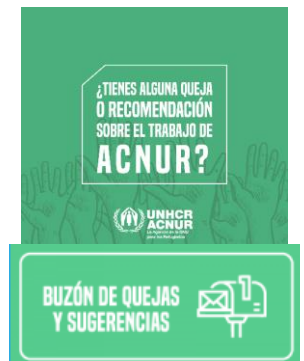
## Feedback from the communities

Through different communication channels, persons of concern are sharing with UNHCR and partners that they are suffering from a lack of access to livelihood opportunities, financial resources to pay rent, access to public services, food security and access to medical care, among others. Added to rising incidents of discrimination and xenophobia. All of this is causing insecurity, uncertainty about the future, increasing levels of stress for not being able to support their families, and a deterioration of their emotional and psychological wellbeing. This situation is leading some refugees and migrants to return to their countries of origin.

Engagement with persons of concern through community networks, leaders, trusted interlocutors, community groups and outreach volunteers take place on a regular basis via WhatsApp groups, virtual focus group discussions, protection monitoring, communication trees, and online or remote services.

Feedback mechanisms are monitored, and feedback is currently collected via email, private messaging, hotlines, online platforms, focus group discussions and individual interviews when possible.

- ➔ In Guatemala, refugees and asylum seekers can share written, audio and video messages with UNHCR Protection Unit, providing insight to the effects of the COVID-19 emergency in their lives.
- ➔ In El Salvador and Honduras, community leaders and PoC provide feedback regarding protection concerns due to COVID-19 and the tropical storm Amanda. Additionally, UNHCR El Salvador has reached out to PoC at risk and conducted interviews to collect testimonies of their experience during COVID-19 for public information materials, considering protection concerns.
- ➔ In Trinidad and Tobago, refugees and migrants are using hotlines and emails to provide feedback.
- ➔ In Colombia, virtual focus group discussions with community members, inform UNHCR efforts to raise awareness, produce materials and adapt interventions. Mapping of services, service provision modalities during COVID-19 and referral pathways have been consolidated and disseminated as part of the *Valientes* component of the *Somos Panas* campaign. Additionally, [community feedback and complaints mechanisms](#) were established (online form and colbocwc email). Information material on these mechanisms are currently disseminated.
- ➔ In the Americas, the Regional LGBTI+ Network with the support of UNHCR conducted virtual focus group discussions with 45 LGBTI+ refugees and migrants in six countries in the region (Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Chile and Argentina) to better understand the impact of COVID on their lives, needs and priorities. During the discussions, persons of concern provided testimony of incidents of violence, discrimination, and physical abuse, among others. The situation worsens for transgender refugees and migrants.



## Challenges

- ➔ In a context of heightened risks and needs, opportunities and modalities of communication and outreach with the population of concern are limited as a result of the impact of the pandemic, such as loss of income, lack of food and basic needs -including access to phones-, along with general restrictions on movement imposed in most of the countries.
- ➔ Considering the current restrictions of movement, limitations to internet access pose an obstacle to effective two-way communication with communities of concern. In many contexts, individuals rely on free hotspots in urban areas, borders and along the displacement routes, as well as on free WiFi areas provided in Support Spaces, Safe Spaces, community centres and partner and government offices, among other locations, to access information and communication services.



- ➔ Increased xenophobia and discrimination against refugees, IDPs and others of concern with the spread of the disease in the COVID-19 context is driving them to maintain a low profile, making it harder for humanitarian actors to reach out to those at heightened risk.

**DO YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE? FOLLOW THESE USEFUL LINKS**

- ➔ UNHCR Help, [Information for Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Stateless People](#).
- ➔ R4V website – [with a dedicated Coronavirus page with latest information](#).
- ➔ R4V Regional Service Mapping – [online mapping for refugees and migrants \(English, Spanish and Portuguese\)](#).
- ➔ Central America and Mexico data portal – [with up to date information on forced displacement in the region](#).

**Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19**



(launched 25 March 2020)



**Global Focus COVID-19 Situation page**



(including UNHCR's Coronavirus emergency appeal and sitreps)



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