

ICMPD

Regional Migration Outlook 2021

Latin America and the Caribbean

Five things to look out for in 2021

Key events and trends in the region

Five things to look out for in 2021

Below is a non-exhaustive list of trends and developments for LAC that will be high on the agenda of decisionmakers and analysts alike.

1. The further development of the COVID-19 crisis on a regional and global scale

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused deep disruption at social, economic and political levels in LAC. Migration did not form an exception. The pandemic has cut off mobility pathways, stranded migrants, destroyed jobs and income, and pushed millions of migrants and vulnerable populations into poverty. However, it has not put an end to migration. The further development of the pandemic will decide the tightening or lifting of mobility restrictions, trigger or impede migration movements, and allow economies to recover or push them further into recession. All of this will largely influence the size and direction of formal and informal migration flows in 2021.

2. Increased emigration from Venezuela

In December 2020, Venezuela held parliamentary elections, which were boycotted by the large majority of opposition parties and in which less than one third of registered voters participated. The United Socialist Party of Venezuela won more than 90% of seats to the National Assembly and Mr. Nicolás Maduro gained leadership of the last opposition-controlled power center in the government. The election results were rejected by the Lima Group, the EU, the USA and the OAS for failing to comply with the minimum international standards to be considered free and fair. Venezuela's multidimensional crisis and political gridlock will most likely not be solved in the near future and continue in 2021. It is foreseeable that the softening of lockdown measures will lead to an increase in migration flows from Venezuela to neighbouring countries mainly in the second half of 2021. Many Venezuelans who returned to the country during the pandemic have stated their intention to leave the country again in 2021. Estimates put the total number of Venezuelans abroad at 7.1 million by the end of this year (+1.7 million compared with 2020).¹

3. “Migrant caravans” putting pressure on political cooperation in the region

Migrant caravans started to emerge in 2018. The term refers to migrants who move in larger groups and try to cross borders jointly in order to reach their desired destination, mainly the United States. Although the phenomenon represents only a small fraction of migrants moving in the region, it gained relevance due to its high visibility and public attention. In January 2021, around 7,000–8,000 migrants, the vast majority from Honduras, joined the first Central American migrant caravan of the year.

Most migrants could not afford the negative COVID-19 test required by the Guatemalan authorities to enter the country. Once on Guatemalan territory, several efforts were made to stop the convoy and disband the caravan. More than 2,000 soldiers and police were deployed, along with immigration and healthcare personnel. While Guatemala had sent back more than half of the caravan members a few days later, smaller groups made it to and across the border with Mexico.² Nonetheless, it can be expected that migratory flows from Central America will continue and even increase in 2021, also in form of migrant caravans. Their high visibility is likely to raise further public concern about irregular migration in the U.S., which would put pressure on the new administration to take a harder stance on migration. This could affect the proposed immigration reforms in the U.S. but also make it more difficult to agree on better solutions for the many migrants and displaced in the LAC region.

4. Post-Covid-19 recovery in main regions of destination as an incentive to migrate further abroad

Most migration in the LAC is intra-regional. The U.S. and, to a lesser but increasingly important extent, Europe are the main destinations for LAC migrants further abroad. It is expected that the U.S. and Europe will manage a faster rollout of their vaccination programmes than the LAC. This is likely to result in faster economic recovery and increasing labour market demands. In conjunction with a lifting of travel restrictions, this might encourage an increasing number of LAC citizens to try to reach these destinations in both regular and irregular ways. The possibility, or impossibility, to migrate to high-income countries might be less relevant in terms of absolute migration figures but will be highly relevant in terms of migrant remittances and household incomes. A further decline in remittances would worsen the living conditions for many people in LAC even more and subsequently increase the potential for further emigration from the region.

5. Rise in xenophobia and anti-immigration discourse fuelled by increasing inequality

Xenophobia toward migrants has been on the rise in many LAC countries. A study by Oxfam International on perceptions of xenophobia and discrimination towards Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, shows that there is a general understanding in the population for the reasons that force Venezuelans to leave their country. However, the anti-immigrant discourse is nourished by the fear of competition for jobs and an increase in crime. There is a strong perception that migration does not benefit the national economy. Seven out of 10 people in these three countries consider that immigration lowers salaries and negatively affects working conditions as well as associate crimes with migration.³ Social networks and the mass media influence the construction of people's perceptions in relation to migration, and have been criticised for inciting xenophobia and labelling migrants as criminals.

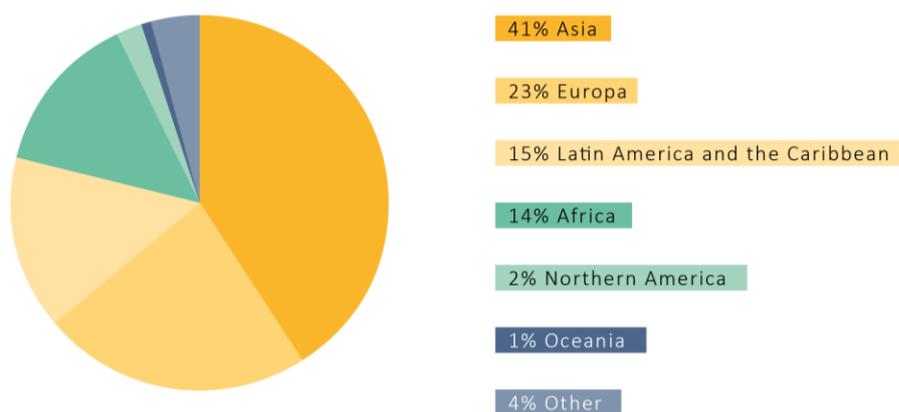
The LAC region is facing the biggest recession in the last century and struggling to accommodate the large influx of migrants, in particular from Venezuela. According to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, extreme poverty and income inequality will increase due to the pandemic. This will further fuel xenophobia and anti-immigration discourse. In this difficult regional context, more than 20 presidential, legislative, local or regional elections will be held in LAC countries in 2021. New presidents will be elected in inter alia Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica and Nicaragua. LAC policymakers should be prepared to ensure a more balanced narrative on migration, recognising the broader impact that this narrative can have on social cohesion, support for diversity, economic growth and innovation. Chile, for instance, is developing a National Platform and Strategy to fight xenophobia in local communities until the 2021 general elections take place in November.

1. Introduction

ICMPD's Regional Migration Outlook presents a brief analysis of migration and policy trends in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and provides an outlook on developments and events to watch out for in 2021. Thus, the outlook does not claim to foresee the future, nor to cover all relevant trends. It seeks to use past experience and highlight what might happen and is important to consider.

In 2020, the stock of migrants of LAC origin reached 42.9 million, accounting for 15.3% of the world's migrant population. Compared with other regions, the share of international migrants in the total population of LAC countries remains with less than 2% relatively low.⁴

Origin of International Migrant Stock 2020 by Region



Source: United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs

2. A migration year shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic

Migration in the LAC region cannot be explained by a single root cause. There are a number of main drivers that influence size, direction and patterns of international migration flows more than others. Such factors are the globalisation of economies, values and aspirations; changing technologies and means of communication; shifting demographics; conflicts associated with organised crime and gender-based violence; state fragility; food insecurity; family reunification; and climate change. These drivers are embedded in 'global opportunity structures' that push decisions, and enact or prevent individual migration projects. Global opportunity structures comprise geographical proximity or distance; the density and capacity of migration control; entry and residence regulations; the existence and capacities of migrant smuggling networks; the characteristics of asylum and protection systems; job opportunities in formal and informal labour markets; the existence of family and social networks and the degree of cooperation between States along migratory routes.

Any regional migration outlook on an upcoming year will have to take into account these long-term trends, and assess their potential development against the impact of short-term developments and events. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused a global health crisis of historic dimensions, but also represents the event that has impacted international migration in 2020 more than any other, and will continue to shape migration in 2021 as well. The pandemic itself and the subsequent containment measures in LAC countries have led to the deepest economic recession in more than a century, placed enormous pressures on public health systems, disrupted food and supply chains, and affected the entirety of established formal and informal channels for migration and mobility in one way or another. In the final quarter of 2020, the first pharmaceutical producers published highly promising results on the efficacy of their coronavirus vaccines. The news not only implied the fastest ever response to a global health threat but also presented the often quoted “light at the end of the tunnel”, the prospect that the world might leave behind an all-encompassing crisis in the foreseeable future. The first weeks of 2021 saw the roll-out of the biggest vaccination programme in history. However, three quarters of the first doses have been administered to citizens in only 10 countries worldwide. At a UN Security Council meeting in February 2021, Mexico called for countries to stop hoarding vaccines.⁵ Due to the initial scarcity of certain vaccines, as well as delivery delays, China and Russia are becoming major providers of COVID-19 vaccines to Latin America. Notwithstanding the potential effects of this “vaccine diplomacy”, the challenges in administrating the largest-ever vaccination programme will be immense and the path to recovery will be long, cumbersome and, most probably, unequal among the countries in LAC.

The impact of COVID-19 on economy and migration in LAC

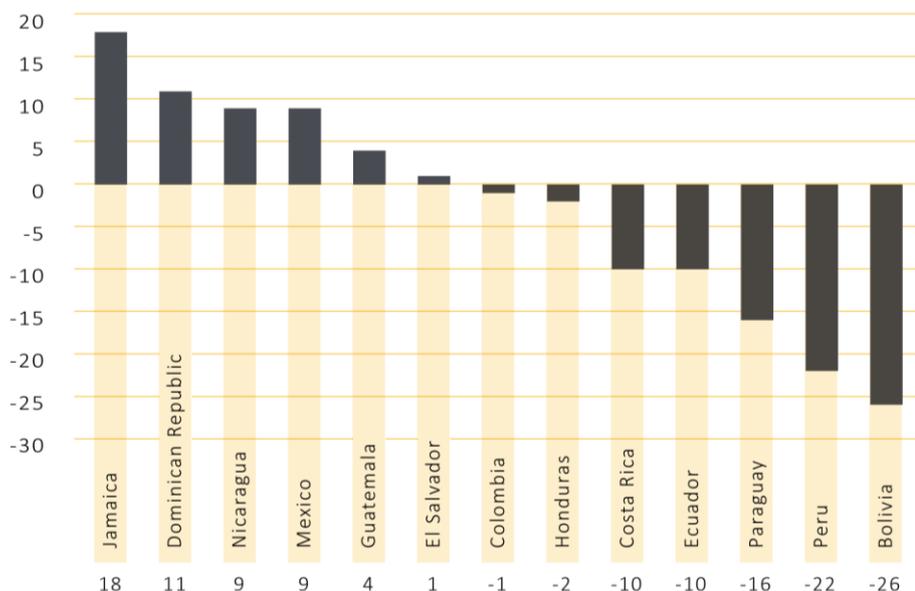
In February 2020, Brazil confirmed the first COVID-19 case in LAC. After registering relatively few cases in the following weeks, Latin America quickly became a global COVID-19 hotspot. In July 2020, the region accounted for more than 25% of cases worldwide and had the highest number of confirmed cases globally. Border closures across LAC have reduced movements on existing migration routes and from other continents. Entries by foreigners and nationals in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico and Panama dropped between 58% and 67% compared to the previous year. The number of migrants from outside LAC, mainly from Africa and Asia, who usually transit Costa Rica to reach the United States of America (USA), decreased from 21,018 in 2019 to 4,777 in 2020.⁶ However, since much of regional migration is involuntary or forced, and root causes and drivers have not changed, this did not stop amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 900,000 Venezuelans left the country in search of a better future in 2020. Several new migrant caravans departed from Honduras throughout the year. Whether moving voluntarily or not, the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities and disproportionately affected migrants and their family members.

Economic fallout from the pandemic is significant in LAC. In the most recent assessment, the Economic Commission for LAC estimates an economic decline of 7.7% in 2020.⁷ According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 50 million full-time jobs have been lost in the region. Women have been more affected by employment loss than men, especially in Brazil, Colombia and Peru.⁸ Mobility restrictions have led to a sharp decline in global tourism.

This has had huge effects on LAC economies and societies, which largely depend on this sector. In Barbados, The Bahamas and Jamaica, tourism contributes around 30-50% to the gross domestic product (GDP). The pandemic will result in the deepest annual contraction of GDP in these Caribbean countries in the last 45 years.⁹ High degrees of poverty; inequality and labour informality; limited fiscal resources; 80% of the population living in urban areas; weak social protection and healthcare systems; and limited testing and contact tracing are some of the structural factors that have led to the region's challenges in containing the pandemic, and will continue to generate difficulties for a sustainable and inclusive recovery.¹⁰

One glimmer of hope for families and economies in some LAC countries is the continued solidarity of communities abroad. The money sent by migrants to their home country contributed to the resilience in facing the pandemic. Although global remittances are expected to contract 14% by the start of 2021 compared to figures before COVID-19, the LAC region has not been impacted as badly by the pandemic as might have been expected. Remittances are projected to reach US\$96 billion in 2020, a decline of only 0.2% compared to 2019. This can be attributed to the fact that many migrants sending remittances are based in the USA where 69% are employed in essential services¹¹ and some migrants are also eligible for stimulus programmes.

Percentage Change in Remittance Inflows in 2020 compared to same period in 2019



Source: Economic Commission for LAC

Data for Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala refers to the period January and September 2020. Data for Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Paraguay refers to the period January to August 2020. Data for Costa Rica, Ecuador, Jamaica and Peru refers to the period January to June 2020.

Nonetheless, the impact was not felt equally by all LAC countries: remittances to Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica registered positive year-on-year growth between 4% and 18%. El Salvador's and Colombia's remittance inflow stayed almost constant whereas Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Ecuador and Costa Rica registered sharp declines from 10% to 26%.¹² In 2021, remittances could grow again with the opening up of economies, although intra-regional remittances might be strongly affected by the economic downturn in LAC economies.

3. Focus countries

The situation in LAC is mainly shaped by migration-related developments in Central America, Haiti, Mexico and Venezuela. This does not imply that other countries deserve less attention, but the major migration movements will be linked to the individual situations in these countries also in 2021. While the main regional migration drivers will not change, the actual dynamics will be highly influenced by the further development of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic fallout of the crisis and the extent to which containment measures, mobility restrictions and border controls impact migration opportunity structures.

Venezuela

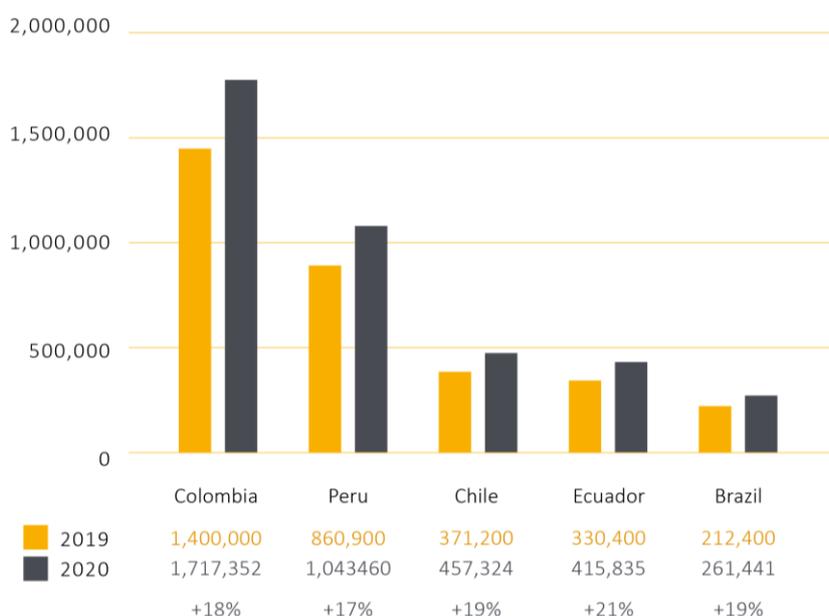
Venezuela's socioeconomic and political situations continue to deteriorate at unprecedented rates. Following the contraction of economic activity by around 65% between 2013 and 2019, the country's GDP decreased by 25% in 2020 and is projected to fall another 10% in 2021.¹³ Already in 2018, 85% of the population was living in extreme poverty. Food security is seriously compromised and prevalence of undernourishment jumped to 31.4% in 2017-2019, due to a combination of the devaluation of the national currency, hyperinflation and high dependence on imported food.¹⁴

The exact number of COVID-19 cases in Venezuela is unknown but, similar to other South American countries, significant community spreading is assumed. The COVID-19 pandemic put additional pressure on Venezuela's collapsing health system, affected by shortages in medication and health supplies, interruptions of basic utilities at healthcare facilities, and the mass emigration of doctors and healthcare workers.¹⁵ More than 50% of medical professionals have left the country over the past five years.¹⁶ The lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19 compromise the already scarce and precarious livelihood opportunities in Venezuela.

The pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges faced by countries of transit and destination for Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and tested countries' ability to maintain an inclusive society. Discrimination and xenophobic attacks against the migrant population are increasing in LAC, especially in South American countries with high numbers of Venezuelan immigrants. In LAC countries with high levels of economic informality, government measures decreed to curb the pandemic have substantially affected Venezuelans migrants.

Due to the lack of income opportunities, approximately 140,000 Venezuelans decided to return to Venezuela, especially from neighbouring Brazil and Colombia. Despite this significant number of returnees and travel restrictions, the total number of Venezuelan refugees and emigrants increased worldwide by 20% from 4.5 million in 2019 to 5.4 million in 2020. The vast majority of Venezuelans stayed within the region, with Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru hosting more than 93% of the regional Venezuelan refugees and migrants.¹⁷ Absolute numbers in these five destinations increased between 17% and 21% in 2020 compared to the previous year.

Top 5 Destinations of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean



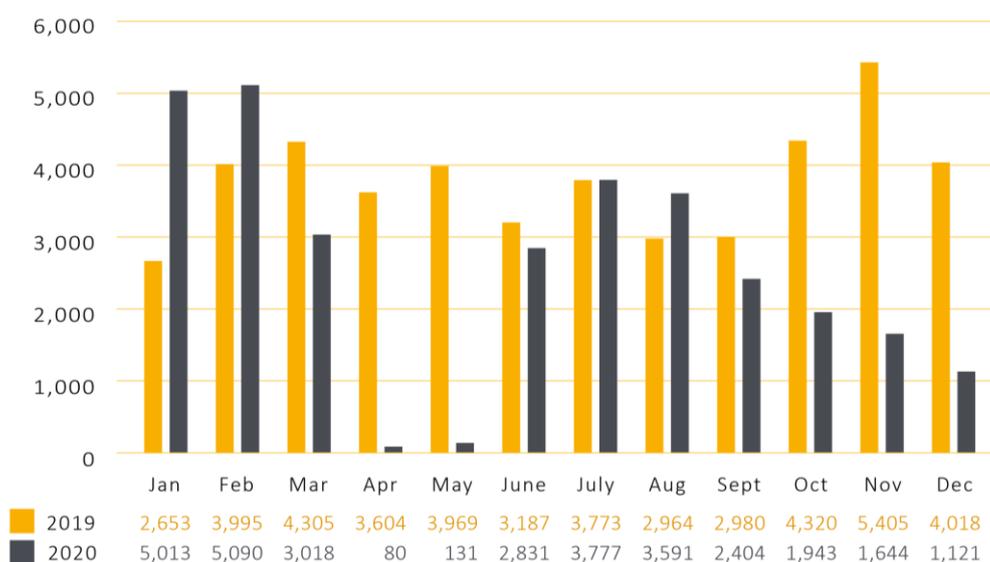
Source: Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela

Arrivals in the Caribbean sub-region are growing even faster (around 25%) from an estimated 150,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants at the end of 2019 to around 195,500 in December 2020. Aruba, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago in particular continue to witness Venezuelan arrivals. At the same time, Guyana receives also a significant number of Guyanese descendants returning from Venezuela. The majority, an estimated 114,500 Venezuelans, reside in the Dominican Republic.¹⁸ Also in LAC migrants and refugees are forced to undertake perilous journeys. In December 2020, to quote only one example, during a tragic incident, more than 30 Venezuelans died, after a boat carrying migrants towards Trinidad and Tobago sank.

Thus, displacement and emigration of Venezuelans is not limited to the region. Outside of LAC, the USA (255,141) and Spain (202,859) are important destinations for Venezuelan migrants. Spain also leads the number of recognised refugees from Venezuela with 57,481.¹⁹

Despite visa-free access to the Schengen area, Venezuelans lodged far fewer asylum applications in EU Member States (MS) compared with before the pandemic, presumably because travel restrictions for third country nationals cut off access to EU territory. Applications dropped from 41,155 in 2019 to 29,522 in 2020.²⁰ In Spain, where Venezuelans have ranked consistently among the top nationalities, applications decreased by 30%, from 40,886 in 2019 to 28,365 in 2020.²¹

Monthly Asylum Applications lodged by Venezuelans in EU+ in 2019 and 2020



Source: European Asylum Support Office

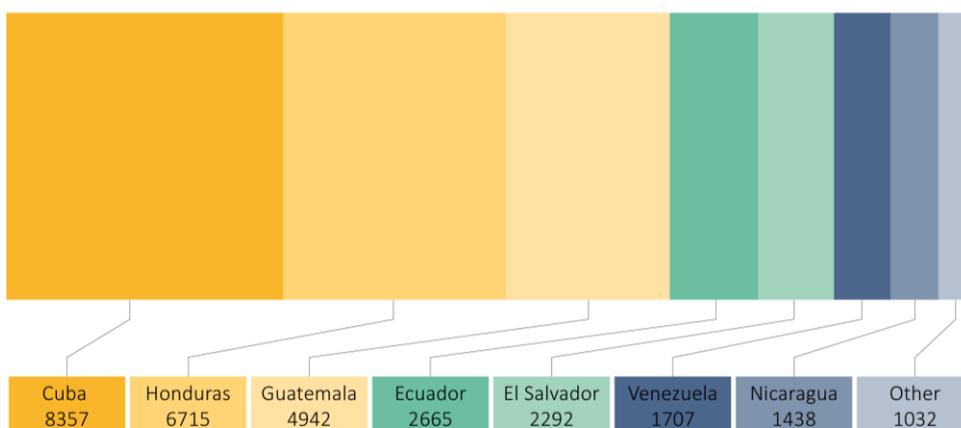
At regional level, the International Technical Meeting on Human Mobility of Venezuelan Citizens in the Region (Quito Process), with 13 MS from LAC, continued to promote communication and regional coordination among host countries of Venezuelan refugees and migrants by focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under Chile's pro tempore leadership in 2020, a Group of Friends of the Quito Process was formally established with the objective to assist the Quito Process technically and economically, as well as to help raise international awareness of the crisis. This group was formed by Canada, the EU, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the USA, and was joined more recently by France and the Netherlands. In 2021, under the pro tempore presidency of Peru, the Quito Process will address issues such as socio-economic inclusion, HIV/AIDS and COVID-19, with an emphasis on vaccination and mental health, child protection, trafficking in human beings, smuggling of migrants, and strengthening of regional cooperation.

Mexico

The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge for Mexico as a country of origin, transit and destination of migrants. Due to border closures, many foreigners were unable to continue their journeys, regardless of their destination. Consequently and although Mexico did not close its borders, many foreigners who were in the country at the time of the health crisis were left stranded by measures adopted in other countries, leaving many of them in conditions of vulnerability and fearing that they would find themselves irregularly present in Mexico. Between 01 April and 03 June 2020, a total of 7,116 foreigners applied for regularised migrant status, including those whose 180-day period for finalising regularisation under the Migrant Law had ended.²²

Following the closure of US immigration courts in March 2020, it was also unclear how many asylum seekers continued to wait for their hearing in Mexico. The signature of a migration collaboration agreement between the USA and Mexican Governments in 2019 had included the expansion of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). The MPP implies that certain categories of asylum seekers arriving at the US Southern border were sent back to Mexico, where they had to wait for their court hearings. According to data from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse Immigration Project, more than 71,000 people are registered under the MPP in 2020, the vast majority originating from Latin American countries. A total of 29,148 MPP cases were pending before the Immigration Court in January 2021.²³ However, at the beginning of this year the new US administration announced the suspension of new enrolments, a review of the programme and outlined steps to create a more humane asylum system.

Nationalities of Total Pending Migration Protection Protocol Cases



Source: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse Immigration Project

Demands for humanitarian protection have also been increasing in Mexico. Asylum applications have doubled each year since 2017, reaching 71,230 in 2019. Despite border closures, 41,329 asylum applications were lodged in Mexico in 2020. The six main countries of origin of applicants for refugee status in Mexico were Honduras (15,440), Haiti (5,938), Cuba (5,752), El Salvador (4,020), Venezuela (3,439) and Guatemala (2,993).²⁴ It remains to be seen if the announcement of the US administration to ensure access to legal avenues to the USA for Central American refugees and asylum seekers will reduce the number of asylum applications in Mexico.

Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)

Emigrants represent 6.7% of the total population in Guatemala, 8.2% in Honduras and 24.7% in El Salvador.²⁵ Since the early 1980s, mixed migration flows from the region to, in particular, the USA have been fuelled by diverse and multidimensional root causes. These include weak state infrastructures, inequality, and, despite a moderate reduction, high levels of poverty. Although the economies have grown in the last years, there is still a lack of employment opportunities. In 2017, the labour force in the region increased by more than 353,000 people, but fewer than 35,000 jobs were created in the formal economy.²⁶ In addition, insecurity has been one of the main push factors for migrants, especially from El Salvador, as the NTCA has experienced since the mid-2000s an increase in insecurity linked to transnational organised crime networks. This has translated itself into high homicide and extortion rates in all three countries²⁷ as well as high levels of gender-based violence. El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala ranked respectively 76th, 91st and 107th out of 167 countries on the Women's Peace and Security Index in 2019.²⁸ Lastly, environmental degradation and phenomena such as the 'Dry Corridor' – an area characterised as a zone of high climatic risk causing persistent droughts – has accentuated poverty as it has devastating effects on livelihoods dependent on agriculture and livestock.²⁹ This combination of factors, and the subsequent pull of family reunification and labour demand in the USA has pushed many to seek better opportunities abroad, and due to the lack of legal migratory pathways migration flows from the region have primarily been irregular.

The outbreak of the pandemic reduced intra-regional mobility due to the strict measures imposed by all governments in Central and North America. As of August 2020, there was a 50.1% decrease in visas issued by the USA for non-agricultural temporary workers, of which NCTA nationals are among the primary recipients. However, NTCA nationals figured among the top six nationalities applying for international protection in Mexico, and the USA issued a similar number of visas compared to 2019, for temporary agricultural workers (where NCTA nationals are among the primary recipients).³⁰ The economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the structural drivers of migration prior to 2020. The economies of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are estimated to have contracted by 2.5, 8.0, and 8.6%³¹ in 2020 respectively. Additionally, in November 2020, Central America was hit by hurricanes Eta and Iota which affected an estimated 5 million people and displaced an estimated 200,000 people across Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador. Livelihoods were severely affected putting an added layer of pressure on the current health contingency and creating new challenges for returned migrants.

By the end of 2020, more than 350,000 people were in emergency shelters both in Guatemala and Honduras. The impact of these natural disasters was a principal driver behind a new migrant caravan departing from Honduras in December 2020.³²

Taking into account these developments, but also the growing optimism based on the proposed immigration reform by the new US administration, it is highly probable that north-bound migratory flows from the NCTA will continue and even increase in 2021, even if movement restrictions are only partially lifted. Deteriorating socio-economic conditions and the continued effects of sudden and slow-onset climate change will continue to be key factors in individuals deciding to migrate. The recent extension of the US Temporary Protected Status (TPS) immigration route for people coming from disaster-struck countries, such as El Salvador and Honduras, might further solidify these plans.

Haiti

Haiti is one of the main countries of origin for migrants from the Caribbean, and migration flows from the country have historically been complex, being driven primarily by political instability and economic hardship, and at times exacerbated by natural disasters. An estimated 13% of the total population (1,585,681) lives abroad, mainly in Canada, the Dominican Republic and the USA.³³ Following an earthquake in 2010, communities have established themselves also in Chile where they represent 12.5% of all foreigners (185,865)³⁴ and Haitians have increasingly used the migratory corridor through Central America to reach the USA. Furthermore, about 5.6% of all Haitians living abroad reside in the EU,³⁵ with the overwhelming majority (87,300) living in France where Haitian nationals represent the largest group among migrants originally from the Americas.³⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated movement restrictions have slowed down migratory flows outside of Haiti, and involuntary returns were halted during the first part of 2020. An estimated 30,000 Haitian nationals returned from the Dominican Republic due to the lack of access to employment opportunities because of the restrictions. Overall, between March and November 2020, movements observed on border crossing points from the Dominican Republic to Haiti vastly outnumbered those from Haiti to the Dominican Republic (602,352 versus 389,645).³⁷ However, COVID-19 also exacerbated the socio-economic situation in the country, which was already fragile prior to 2020 due to the latest political crisis ongoing since July 2018. The global health crisis has contributed to a further downturn in the economic situation, with the GDP contracting by 3%,³⁸ and has added pressure on remittances from the diaspora, which accounted for 37.1% of the GDP in 2019.³⁹ In order to support their relatives, the diaspora increased its contributions by 20% in 2020, increasing from US\$ 2.5 to 3 billion, despite initial contrary predictions. The lack of economic opportunities, deterioration of the security situation, and the escalation of the political crisis at the beginning of 2021 could increase the potential for growing levels of labour and irregular migration from Haiti to the Dominican Republic and the USA, but also to other destinations in the Caribbean, where Haitian communities are already established.

4. Migration trends in the region

In 2020, the stock of migrants of LAC origin amounted to 42.9 million. Women comprise 51.7% of all international migrants in LAC. The share of women among migrants is the second highest compared with other regions and confirms the growing feminisation of migration in LAC. Moreover, recent estimates suggest that around one in five migrants in the region is a child or adolescent. In Central America, 40% of international migrants are below the age of 20.⁴⁰

Mexico is the largest emigration country in LAC (11.2 million), followed by Venezuela (5.4 million), Colombia (3 million) and Brazil (1.9 million). However, Mexico's share of all emigrants from the region has declined from 36% in 2010 to 26% in 2020 due to a slow-down in people leaving the country.

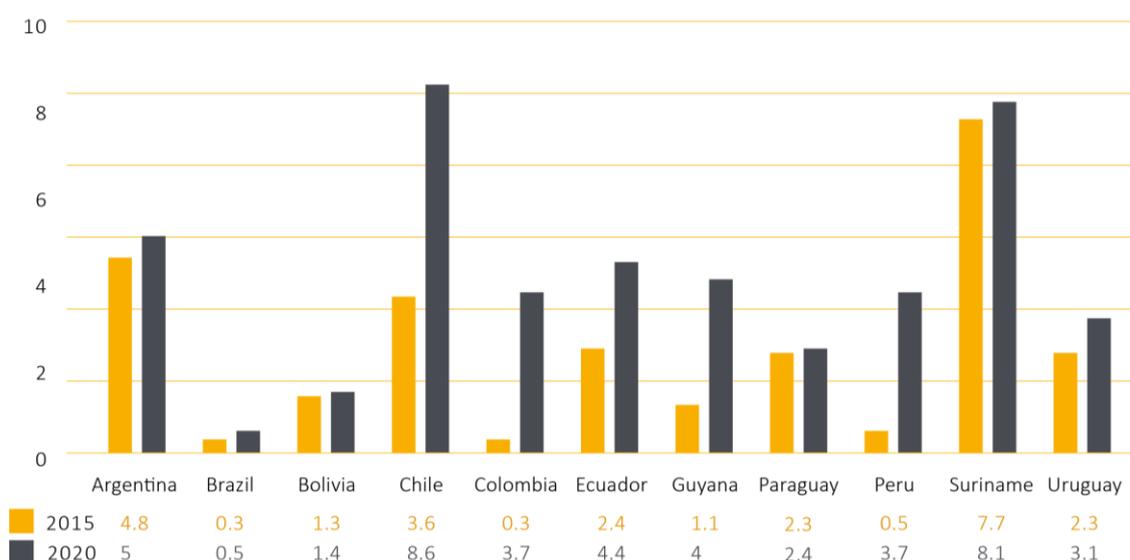
The USA continues to play an important role as top destination, and is home to more than 67% of LAC's emigrants. Many Caribbean countries – such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica – have large migrant populations in the USA, as do Latin American countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Peru. While the share of migrants from LAC living in Europe is relatively low at 12%,⁴¹ the total number has quadrupled since 1990,⁴² with Spain and Italy being the main destination countries. LAC countries with the majority of emigrants in Europe are those such as Suriname (52.7%) and Ecuador (45.3%).⁴³

The number of immigrants in the LAC region has been increasing 2.5 times faster than the number of emigrants between 2000 and 2019.⁴⁴ In absolute numbers, Argentina and Colombia host the largest foreign-born populations in the region. Several Caribbean islands with smaller populations have large shares of immigrants, such as Antigua and Barbuda (30%), St. Kitts and Nevis (14.5%), Barbados (12.1%) or Dominica (11.5%). In Costa Rica, migrants constitute 9% of the total population, making it one of the highest percentage shares in Latin America.⁴⁵

At the same time, inter-regional migration flows are of growing importance. More than 72% of immigrants in LAC countries originate from within the region, mostly from neighbouring countries. Paraguayan and Bolivian migration to Argentina, and Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic, have long histories. Data published by the Chilean Institute for Statistics reveals that the number of Peruvians living in the country increased from 7,500 to 235,165 between 1992 and 2019.⁴⁶ More recent migration flows include the emigration of Venezuelans, the worst displacement crisis in LAC in recent history. Out of the 5.4 million Venezuelan migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in January 2021, 77% stayed within the region. Most Venezuelan migrants have settled in urban areas, typically in large metropolitan areas and border cities, contributing to increased housing overcrowding and shortage, in a region where 24% of the urban population already lives in precarious settlements.⁴⁷ Up to 500,000 Venezuelans live in just three Colombian cities: Bogota, Barranquilla and Cucuta. In Peru, close to 300,000 live in the Lima metropolitan area.⁴⁸

Migration has also been increasing in the South American sub-region in the past years due to the Residence Agreement adopted by the Southern Common Market granting temporary residence and a work permit of up to two years in another MS. Chile (+5%), Colombia (+3.4%), Peru (+3.2%), Guyana (+2.9%) and Ecuador (+2%) have seen significant increases in the share of migrants in their total population between 2015 and 2020.

International Migrant Stock in South American Countries as a Percentage of the Total Population



Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Migrant caravans

Besides the unprecedented migration from Venezuela, migrant caravans from Central America have been one of the most visible migration flows in the region and received a lot of media attention worldwide. While this phenomenon is not new and represents only a small fraction of migrants trying to reach the USA, they have gained relevance due to their visibility and frequency. Between October 2018 and December 2020, around 20 caravans, mainly organised through social media, departed from Central America. The vast majority of migrants joining caravans are from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The journey from Central America through Mexico to the USA border is one of the most dangerous in the world, and many migrants have disappeared, been kidnapped or been sexually assaulted. It is estimated that as many as six in 10 female migrants experience sexual violence along the route.⁴⁹ In January 2021, several Guatemalan migrants were found shot dead and burnt near the USA border.⁵⁰ Caravans offer more protection for migrants and visibility on the dangerous route, and at the same time help to avoid the high fees of coyotes or smugglers to cross borders.

The former U.S. administration implemented a ‘zero tolerance’ policy and put pressure on Guatemala and Mexico in particular to stop the caravans from advancing. In the last quarter of 2020, three migrant caravans departed from San Pedro Sula in Honduras, despite travel restrictions. The widespread damage caused by hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020 and some hopes for policy change and immigration reform after the US elections were the main drivers for the formation of new caravans. Mexico deployed additional military forces to its southern border and announced that migrants taking part in the caravan would have to comply with the country’s COVID-19 regulations upon entry or would face arrest and prosecution.⁵¹ All three caravans were dissolved at the border between Guatemala and Honduras before reaching Mexico. Nevertheless, without addressing the underlying causes of migration in the NTCA, the migrant caravans are expected to continue, regardless of the strict border control policies implemented.

5. Migration policy developments

Developments in migration depend on structural factors embedded in specific regional contexts but also on the respective policy responses that are implemented at the regional, national and local levels. Over the last decade, migration has increasingly become a subject of intense policy debates in LAC. While progress has been made in many migration policy areas, for instance regional cooperation, refugee protection, tackling human trafficking networks, this section highlights two topics of particular relevance that have also triggered significant developments in the regional migration policy debate: environmental migration and social cohesion and inclusion of migrants.

At the same time, migration developments in LAC are highly influenced by policy developments outside the region as such. The US is home to two thirds of LAC’s emigrants. The proposals for immigration reform announced by the newly-elected government clearly would have an impact particularly on migrants from LAC and will therefore be outlined in this chapter.

Environmental migration

LAC is highly exposed to the negative impacts of climate change, in terms of sudden onset events and long-term processes.⁵² The 2020 Atlantic hurricane season was the most active on record and confirmed the region’s vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change. Although the full effects of climate change on international migration are still subject of broad debate among academic and policy circles, the Central American Dry Corridor is one of the distinct cases where – in conjunction with other causes – migration could be directly attributed to environmental factors.

LAC countries have moved forward in progressively incorporating environmental migration into their policies and strategies. Most countries have integrated this issue in a cross-cutting manner, climate migration emerging as an element in broader migration management tools.

El Salvador, for instance, approved in 2019 the Special Law on Migration and Foreigners, giving the Directorate General of Migration and Foreigners the capacity to admit persons who “it deems appropriate for humanitarian reasons, in accordance with international human rights instruments” (Article 104). It also allows the extension of tourist visas to persons “in cases of anthropogenic disaster, epidemics, natural phenomena, humanitarian matters [...]” (Article 85).

Other States include environmental migration in climate or disaster risk management tools. Brazil and Haiti even mention migration as a positive adaptation strategy to climate change in their disaster risk, planning and climate frameworks.⁵³ In this regard, it is worth mentioning the Regional Guidelines on the Protection of Persons Displaced across Borders and Assistance to Migrants in the Context of Disasters approved by the MS of the South American Conference on Migration in 2018.

Some less numerous countries have opted for the development of specific instruments dedicated to environmental migration. For example, Peru’s climate change framework law of 2018 requests the Executive Branch to issue an “action plan to prevent and attend to forced migration caused by the effects of climate change, in order to avoid increasing pressure on urban infrastructure and services, increasing the possibility of social conflicts and, among migrants themselves, the detriment of health, education and social indicators”. The regulation of this 2019 law gives the Ministry of the Environment, together with the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations, the responsibility for the drafting of the action plan.

It can be expected that the trend of mainstreaming environmental aspects into migration-related policy responses will continue next year as well. The main challenges in 2021 and years to come include policy coherence, synergy and coordination to reconcile the different angles adopted to tackle environmental migration, as well as the operationalisation and implementation of the various adopted policy documents.

Social cohesion, integration and inclusion of migrants

The stock of international migrants in the LAC region increased by 56% between 2015 and 2020. The large-scale movements of migrants, especially from Venezuela, have meant new opportunities and challenges for transit and destination countries and have impelled national and local governments to revise and develop new policies. It has been necessary to rethink policies for admitting and granting status to newcomers and for providing access to basic services such as education and health-care.⁵⁴ As emigration from Venezuela continues, the focus has turned from crisis management to providing long-term solutions, as well as to the topic of social cohesion and inclusion. Indeed, the migrant population that arrived in the last few years is likely to stay in the host countries for some time, as expressed by 94.8% of the Venezuelan migrants in Peru surveyed by the National Institute of Statistics and Information in 2018.⁵⁵

Costa Rica was the first country in LAC to develop a National Integration Plan, and in 2015 established a dedicated Directorate for Integration and Human Development with the main objective to provide assistance to institutions eligible to benefit from the Social Migration Fund. This fund uses administrative fees paid by migrants to support migration integration initiatives across government institutions in relation to health, education, security and justice. Costa Rica's second plan, covering the period 2018-2022, was considered by the Organization of American States (OAS) as a good practice that could be replicated by other countries in the region.⁵⁶

As a result of major immigration reforms and the introduction of a new Migration Law (13.445/2017) and Decree 9199/17, immigrants to Brazil enjoy more equal opportunities, including the right to change employers; equal access to education and healthcare; and an unconditional path to permanent residence. At the same time, many opportunities and challenges with regards to social cohesion and inclusion of migrants rest largely with local communities. The city of São Paulo, for instance, has launched its first Municipal Plan of Public Policies for Refugees and Migrants – a pioneering initiative with refugee inclusion at its heart, set to be rolled out from 2021 to 2024.

In Chile, immigrants have particularly benefitted from improvements in the health sector. Access to the national health system is free including for undocumented migrants.⁵⁷ In 2020, Colombia initiated the process of adopting the country's first Comprehensive Migration Policy, addressing, inter alia, the social, economic and cultural integration of migrant families.⁵⁸

However, the rise of anti-immigrant attitudes in public opinion, as well as the additional layer of complexity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has limited the willingness of some countries in the region to promote inclusion of migrants. Although immigrants in Argentina enjoy to some extent favourable policies, greater barriers to equal opportunities seem to emerge, especially with regards to labour market participation; education; political participation; and access to citizenship. In Mexico, immigrants enjoy basic rights and long-term security, but they do not enjoy equal opportunities, with significant obstacles in the area of education and political participation.⁵⁹ Most countries preferred to adopt targeted measures such as laws, provisions or decrees to meet the urgent needs linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the saturation of several health systems, governments such as Argentina, Chile and Peru have published decrees allowing health professionals with qualifications abroad to practice their profession during the emergency.

The major repercussions of the pandemic will further solidify social cohesion and inclusion as a key migration policy area in the years to come, which will have to be taken into account in an integral manner at local, national and regional levels.

Proposed reform of the United States Immigration System

The new US administration immediately took numerous steps to reform the immigration system and reverse many of the previous administration's policies. At the end of January 2021, new legislation was sent to Congress to create a citizenship pathway for the circa 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the country, including young undocumented immigrants brought to the USA as children. Up to 8.1 million of the 11 million are from LAC and could be granted legal status (around 4.9 million Mexicans, 1.5 million Central Americans, 775,000 South Americans and 475,000 from the Caribbean). The Department of Homeland Security announced a halt to the deportation of certain undocumented immigrants for a period of 100 days, as well as enrolment in the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), a programme that allowed the US to return asylum-seekers to Mexico for the duration of their asylum hearings. Around 99% of MPP cases concern asylum seekers from LAC. At the same time, the state of emergency at the Southern border was terminated and the border wall construction, as well as the obligation of funds, was paused. In February 2021, the administration announced a series of new actions, including the creation of a task force to reunite families (where parents had been deported to their country of origin in Central America), promotion of integration of new Americans, the development of a strategy to address irregular migration across the Southern border, as well as the creation of a more humane asylum system. An increase in the refugee cap to 62,500 spots for the current fiscal year and to 125,000 during the next fiscal year was proposed to Congress.

The proposed immigration reforms are very ambitious and would affect a large number of immigrants, especially from LAC. It has to be seen if the proposed legislation, which has been presented as a top priority for the first 100 days of the current presidency (to end of April 2021), can be approved within the short time frame and fulfil the hopes of many migrants.

6. Conclusions

The migration year 2021 will be shaped by two sets of drivers. Firstly, there are the long-term drivers related to conflict, economic imbalance, socio-economic development, demographic imbalance and the environment. Secondly, there are the migration-related effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that already saw their impacts last year and will linger on well into 2021.

A migration outlook for 2021 for LAC will have to assume that the previously observed drivers will continue to increase the regional potential for international migration. As described in the various segments of this outlook, inequality will continue to play a particular role in LAC. The region is particularly impacted by COVID-19 because of the economic challenges, deep inequalities and high levels of insecurity that had already existed before the pandemic. The Center for Global Development recently estimated that the number of poor people in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico could increase by more than 25 million, and income inequality by 2 to 4 percentage points.⁶⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic hit migrants and vulnerable populations particularly hard. In addition to the loss of human lives, migrants disproportionately often faced health hazards, and had to cope with mobility restrictions and lost income opportunities. The unequal access to coronavirus vaccines among the world's regions and within LAC has resulted in uneven paths to economic recovery. This trend is likely to continue in 2021, implying increased migration pressures as well. The pandemic will not bring an end to migration, also not in the LAC. On the contrary, it will further aggravate the global and regional economic imbalances and will increase the pressure on people to migrate in search of a decent living or a better future.

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