**Regional Training Workshop**

**Protection of Nationals Abroad Affected by Crisis Situations**

**San José, Costa Rica  
1-2 February 2017**

**Report by the Technical Secretariat[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Participants

As Member Countries of the Regional Conference on Migration (RCM), representatives from Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and the Dominican Republic participated in the Workshop.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) also participated in their capacity as RCM Observers. The Regional Network of Civil Organizations for Migration (RROCM) was represented by delegates from Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras. The event was conducted by the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative (MICIC) and financed by the Mesoamerica Programme implemented by the IOM.

**DAY 1**

Inauguration

The Regional Training Workshop was opened with a welcome by Salvador Gutiérrez, Acting Coordinator of the RCM Technical Secretariat, who provided an overview of events related to natural disasters and migration, making it clear that migrants are among the most affected populations during crisis situations.

IOM Regional Director Marcelo Pisani then affirmed the importance of the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative, which makes it possible to bring greater attention to populations in countries in crisis and to raise awareness regarding their specific needs.

To finalize the inaugural session, Gisela Yockchen, General Director of Migration for Costa Rica, offered examples of good practices developed by the Costa Rican government for serving migrants in countries in crisis, besides emphasizing the disposition of Costa Rica to collaborate with future efforts and reiterating its government’s commitment to the MICIC Initiative.

Salvador Gutiérrez then introduced the RCM to the participants, mentioning its inception, structure, and Members, among other points, and described the RCM’s efforts related to the MICIC Initiative

**Session 1. Introduction**

Chiara Milano, MICIC Representative along with Lorenzo Guadagno, presented the MICIC Initiative and its directives, and reiterated its relevance to the RCM’s work. MICIC acts in favour of migrants, regardless of their legal status, in countries affected by natural disasters and conflicts, through actions designed to prepare for and respond to crises and recover from crisis situations. The MICIC Initiative began as a consulting process in Geneva in 2014, leading to a series of regional and thematic consultations.

Luis Alonso Serrano, Head of Institutional Planning for Costa Rica’s General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners, described the experience of the MICIC regional consulting process carried out in Costa Rica for Latin America, explaining the principal results and issues addressed, as well as the importance of having the region’s countries share experiences regarding assistance offered to migrants in countries in crisis.

Mr. Serrano explained how the various consultations generated the MICIC Guidelines, which consist of ten action principles, fifteen directive guidelines, and MICIC practices.

Lorenzo Guadagno then presented the Workshop objectives and asked the participants to share their expectations regarding the gathering and their experiences related to the general theme thereof, in order to gauge the general experience level of the participants.

**Session 2. Migrants in Vulnerable Condition and Crisis Situations**

The objective of Session 2 was to analyze in work groups specific cases from recent years related to the Workshop theme.

The five groups discussed the following cases: Hurricane Katrina (2005); the San Diego fire (2007); xenophobic violence in South Africa (2008); the Brisbane flood (2011); and Hurricane Sandy (2012).

All of the cases analyzed showed evidence of recurring vulnerabilities that affected migrants, such as the lack of communication in their language, lack of confidence in the authorities or fear of approaching them due to irregular migratory status, the lack of consular presence or assistance, and economic disparity, among others.

It was pointed out that government communication and intervention are fundamental, and that consular officials should actively participate in protecting migrants in countries in crisis.

The RROCM Representative stated that it is important to undertake mapping studies and compile data for shelters and associations that work with migrants, so that they may help in the event a Consulate closes during a crisis situation. The Dominican Republic Delegate mentioned that efforts can also be channelled through the migrant communities that tend to form abroad.

In a brief presentation, Mr. Guadagno explained that coordination between Consulates and migrants is the first step for providing aid in crisis situations, and that the main causes of migrant vulnerability are nationality, ethnicity, migratory status, and language barriers.

**Session 3. International and National Legal Frameworks and Cooperation with Relevant Actors**

During this session some of the Member Countries described how their institutions, programmes, and legal bases act in favour of their citizens abroad during crisis situations.

El Salvador serves around three million Salvadoran nationals through its System for Assisting Salvadorans Abroad. It also maintains a consular network in Canada, the United States, Mexico, Central America, and Europe, in addition to the National System for Civil Protection and Disaster Prevention and Mitigation at the national level, which forms part of a Central American network for natural disaster prevention within the SICA framework.

The principal legal framework for addressing this issue in Mexico is the General Civil Protection Act of 2012 and the organizational structure of SINAPROC. There is also a link between the National Emergency Commission and the Special Migration Programme, such that migrant population vulnerabilities may be identified and addressed through the Civil Protection Programme.

In the case of Panama, the main instruments are the Information Coordination Centre (CECODI), which serves as the official medium for information transmission, and the 311 Citizen Hotline, which is staffed by volunteers.

Mr. Guadagno then gave a presentation on practices implemented by countries outside the RCM: Canada’s Disaster Assistance Response Team; the Consular Agreement between Canada and Australia and their shared early warning system for natural disasters; the joint contingency plans and joint consular offices of Finland, Norway, and Sweden; and the Philippine system based on community leaders.

Several countries offered examples of similar programmes and agreements, as well as occasions during which they have shared consular offices with other countries. The TRICAMEX Initiative between Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras deserves special mention.

Session 3 ended with Salvador Gutiérrez reiterating the existence of an RCM fund to assist with the return of migrants in highly vulnerable situations, which has been applied and could be eventually applied to aid migrants in countries in crisis.

**Session 4. Gathering of Information on Migrants Abroad   
to Facilitate Crisis Preparedness and Response**

The fourth and final session of Day One began with work groups in which the participants were asked to brainstorm ideas about existing and/or desirable resources related to the following topics: the main sources of information available in the country of origin; the main sources of information available in the destination country; topics on which information should gathered; and information gathering by country-of-origin authorities.

The work group activity was followed by presentations from Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic focused on the sharing of experiences.

Belize described its programme for protecting its nationals abroad, called the Diaspora Programme. This programme is implemented by way of Embassies and Consulates in order to reach out to Belizeans, especially in the United States, and inform them of changes in destination country migratory policies or assist them in the event of a natural disaster.

Guatemala explained that, besides having numerous Consulates (especially in the United States and Mexico), it offers the mobile app MIGUATE financed by the IOM, as well as   
e-learning courses, SICAS (databases), and a call centre that provides information in Spanish, English, and Mayan.

Ms. Milano pointed out that the IOM is completing work on the e-learning course and the application, and that both can be adapted to each country.

Honduras described its information gathering media, mobile Consulates, training and orientation sessions, a fund for destined to cover the costs of transporting bodies or remains of Hondurans killed abroad, as well as support for people who are in vulnerable situations and with a call center called ALHO-VOZ; in which follow-up is given to queries received protection.

The Dominican Republic presented its good practices, including a procedures manual for dealing with natural disasters, free legal assistance, consular registration, and body transport insurance.

After a brief question-and-answer session, Mr. Guadagno presented the MICIC website, where good practices can be shared and queried.

**DAY 2**

After a review of the Day One activities, Day Two of the Workshop focused on drawing up a recommendations document to be presented at the next RCGM Meeting.

**Session 5. Communicating with Migrants in Times of Crisis**

El Salvador, Honduras, and the IOM shared their experiences on this topic during the session.

El Salvador, for example, operates a call centre that receives 390,000 calls per year, and uses Whatsapp to contact migrants along the migratory route. El Salvador also undertook an initiative with civil society to provide accurate information to migrants, as a process to expedite the delivery of passports that are requested on-line.

In Honduras, where the crises are more humanitarian than related to natural disasters, the government offers a direct hotline and a Chancellery website with data on missing persons. In addition, a campaign to discourage irregular migration was carried out, and a consular observatory with relevant statistics has been developed. Within this context, work has also focused on social networks, including a Whatsapp group of Consuls from different regions.

The IOM presented its proposal for an application designed to provide information and assistance to migrants, while finding out more about them and their routes and profiles, in order to improve assistance efforts. The application will be available in Spanish, English, and French, and will include a survey system that asks a different question each day, the response to which shall be voluntary and anonymous, as well as a warning system for natural phenomena.

In a brief presentation, Lorenzo Guadagno explained some examples of good practices applied in Sri Lanka.

The final activity of the session focused on communicating in times of crisis, with the objective of developing five recommendations for each of the following topics: developing messages for migrants; evaluating the characteristics of communication; and types of information products.

**Session 6. Crisis Response Planning**

Lorenzo Guadagno presented a reference model for contingency plans at the consular level, which should include an area profile, information about the country, migrant numbers, delivery to migrants of maps showing contact points for the institutions or NGOs involved, and an emergency kit bag. The plan normally consists of two pages with very basic information. A fundamental element is the prior establishment of a system for coordinating between Consulates and destination countries.

In the case of Mexico, the preparation of contingency plans started with the idea of helping Mexicans in the United States. The structure for Mexicans outside the U.S. is still limited. The mechanism includes a registry of Mexicans abroad, an app, a call centre, a 24-hour emergency hotline, and a proposed crisis response center.

The organization of Costa Rica regarding this topic is based on constant communication between Consuls and on an emergency hotline. Although a definite contingency plan has yet to be developed, Costa Rica has succeeded in providing economic assistance to Consuls in the form of a credit or debit card for assisting nationals with returns, transport of deceased persons, and other aid.

**Session 7. Providing Relief and Recovery Assistance to Affected Nationals**

In this full-group session the countries shared their systems or good practices related to topics such as evacuations, the use of consular facilities as shelters for nationals, and documentation.

An RROCM Delegate proposed efforts aimed at establishing closer relations between civil society and governments, considering that each can contribute to the other, and that civil society should be taken into account when decisions are made, with an emphasis on joint efforts.

Costa Rica gave a presentation on the identification of vulnerability profiles, the team for activating proper procedures, and the protocol to be followed in situations of heightened vulnerability.

**Dialogue on Developing Cooperation Mechanisms for Crisis Preparedness and Response**

The final session of the Workshop was devoted to working in groups to develop recommendations to be submitted to the RCGM Technical Group. The participants were divided into three groups focused on three different topics: development of regional guidelines designed to strengthen the capacity to assist migrants during a crisis; training for the entities responsible for protecting and assisting migrants during a crisis; and regional coordination to improve crisis preparedness and assistance for affected migrants.

The results generated by the work groups can be summarized as set forth below.

**Draft Recommendations for Consideration by the RCGM**

**I. Development of Regional Guidelines Designed to Strengthen the Capacity to Assist Migrants During a Crisis Situation**

The work group proposed the development of a Consular Network Emergency Unit Response Plan. This plan would first need to define clearly what constitutes a crisis and what types of crises would be covered by the plan. That debate remains to be taken up at a later date, but it was determined that the plan should contain the following elements:

1) Guidelines/measures to ensure immediate coordination.

2) Guidelines/measures to ensure coordination at the international level.

3) Implementation and follow-up measures to be taken by the consular protection liaison network.

4) Exchange of information on actions taken by emergency response authorities and incorporation of same into coordination meeting agendas.

**II. Training for the Entities Responsible for Protecting and Assisting Migrants during a Crisis**

The work group recommended moving ahead in the following areas:

1) Implementation of the IOM e-learning programme to train consular officials on responding to emergency situations.

2) Broader training for consular officials on this subject, making use of technology to lower costs.

3) Active participation of consular officials in training activities.

4) Build a regional network of consular officials to share good practices focused on common-interest topics, with migration officials to be included in such groups.

5) Include in training programmes the use of warning systems and mechanisms to measure vulnerabilities.

6) Ensure that training efforts include both civil society and governmental entities.

7) Preparation of a regional manual that clearly defines who does what in a crisis situation and, depending on the type of crisis, how intervention should be handled.

8) When there are written programmes or training materials or other texts, regardless of the subject thereof, same should be translated into the language of each country, using simple language.

9) Creation of an ad hoc group to give continuity to the training process.

**III. Regional Coordination to Improve Crisis Preparedness and Assistance for Affected Migrants**

The work group agreed on the need to move ahead in the following areas:

1) Prepare a directory listing contact information for the consular officials of each country, as well as for civil society organizations and private institutions. This directory, which is to be updated every six months, shall serve to establish joint mechanisms and communication strategies for the pre-crisis and post-crisis phases.

2) Request that the RCM Technical Secretariat prepare a list of focal points related to consular protection and assistance.

3) Develop information-gathering mechanisms as part of crisis preparedness efforts.

4) Prepare a protocol or basic guide that sets forth standard procedures for actions during crisis situations.

5) Develop operating procedures for coordination, including the development of joint systems for crisis reporting.

The RCM Technical Secretariat noted the observations offered by the work groups, with the commitment to systematize same and submit them to the Member Countries for their input.

1. This document presents a non-exhaustive summary of the Workshop discussions, as noted and interpreted by the RCM-TS. The content of this document has not been approved by the Workshop participants. As such, the content hereof does not necessarily reflect accurately the statements made nor the agreements reached during the event by the persons and organizations to which a given opinion, comment, or position is attributed. The objective of this document is only to illustrate in a general manner what took place and what was agreed during the event, in order to keep the RCM Member Countries informed and facilitate the recapitulation of input and the implementation of topics and agreements. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)