# RCCE Americas Response to COVID-19

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Americas, UNHCR and its partners and in coordination with key actors are implementing **prevention and mitigation measures,** developing **alternative means of communicating with communities**, **engaging with communities and key actors** and **mobilizing** them. Due to the alarming growth of infected cases in the region, many countries are imposing strict measures that affect the normal implementation of activities, therefore UNHCR and its partners are adapting all services and support and prioritizing the needs of those at higher risk.

**Multi-functional teams (MFT)** at regional, national and local levels have been set-up in order to design and put in place strategies to address the growing needs of persons of concern in each location. Teams are ensuring **two-way communication**, collecting feedback from the communities, analysing the protection risks, needs and gaps and coordinating with national authorities and different humanitarian actors an integral response for the protection of persons of concern.

This summary not only provides a first compilation of innovative efforts and good practices across the Americas region in Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) but is also part of an exercise to **promote, foster and develop the exchange of community of practice in the Americas**. As UNHCR is adapting to rapidly-changing dynamics in the field, it is also moving forward with creative and flexible approaches to communication with communities with UNHCR teams.

## Regional Guidance

The Regional Americas Bureau has been sharing with the operations **UNHCR's global tools and guidance** (e.g. Risk Communication and Community Engagement COVID-19 and Age, Gender and Diversity Considerations COVID-19) on different areas related to COVID-19. As well as other relevant tools and materials developed at global level.

Additionally, guidance tools in different areas have been contextualized and developed for the Americas (in both English and Spanish), including Key recommendations concerning COVID-19 for UNHCR offices and NGO partners providing direct attention and services to the public in the Americas; "If asked" guidelines developed to ensure a coordinated and consistent messaging to the response to COVID-19; Guidance on Protection Considerations related to Community-Based Protection and Specific Groups in the Americas - COVID-19 response; other series of regional guidance tools in Cash-Based Intervention (CBI), Refugee Status Determination (RSD) and Resettlement, among others.
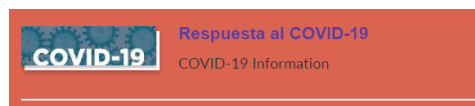
## Interagency Coordination

Through interagency coordination UNHCR is ensuring that a harmonized and coherent response is in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Below some examples of coordinated efforts of different structures in the region:

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

⮞ In the Venezuela Response, UNHCR along with IOM and in coordination with different UN agencies, international organizations, donors, financial institutions and civil society are working together to ensure a coordinated response in the context of the COVID-19. The regional CwC/C4D and Communications Working Groups are working together to compile the materials designed in different areas, recommending the use of WHO/PAHO messages, identifying needs and gaps, avoiding duplication. Different sectors of the R4V structure are working together on guidance, resources and materials to support national platforms. A link with ready-to-print products for specific groups provided WHO/PAHO, International

Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and other organizations was created, along with an online repository and is currently being used by all actors. The R4V website has added a section on COVID-19, including PAHO's dashboard and other relevant information www.r4v.info.

➲ National CwC/C4D and Communications R4V Working Groups, where established or under the Protection Sector, are also coordinating the efforts at national level. For example, in Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Joint efforts are also taking place with the UN Communications Group in Panama and specifically with IOM for the *Somos Lo Mismo* Campaign. In Mexico, UNHCR is coordinating with other agencies to homologue messages, avoid duplication and amplify the distribution.

➲ Regional Information and Communication Needs Assessment like the one published in January 2020 helps to understand the information and communication needs of refugees and migrants in the Venezuela Situation and to prioritize the main channels for information dissemination and access to the communities.

### RedLAC
The Communications Working Group has been activated to coordinate communications interagency efforts in the Americas. Regular meetings are taking place and a shared folder is available for the actors involved.

### Clusters
In Colombia, Venezuela, El Salvador and Honduras, UNHCR is actively participating in the different clusters and activities put in place to enhance the response. In terms of communicating with communities, some of the joint initiatives include joint needs assessments and information packages.

## Prevention and mitigation messages
Dissemination of WHO/PAHO and national authorities' key messages has taken place in all operations. Some of UNHCR offices have adapted these messages to different formats that are more accessible to the communities, including expanding them to Spanish and other languages (e.g. Creole, Portuguese). Additional materials for specific groups are also being developed by UNHCR. An online repository has been created to track materials available in each country, share good practices, identify needs and gaps.

### Social media
➲ **WHO/PAHO key messages** disseminated through WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, among others in all countries. In Venezuela messages have been translated to Yukpa y Wayuunaiki indigenous languages and disseminated through WhatsApp. In Brazil, messages have been translated to Warao and disseminated with the communities. In Dominican Republic, nine social cards have been developed in creole and disseminated among community networks. In Mexico, WHO/PAHO messages have been redesigned and translated to five languages (Spanish, English, Portuguese, French and Creole).

➲ WHO/PAHO messages are disseminated as part of national campaigns like *Somos Panas* in Colombia or through *Somos Lo Mismo* and *Talento Sin Fronteras* accounts in Panama.

○ **Social cards and flyers** have been developed in Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador and Mexico to inform persons of concern about temporary closedown and changes in UNHCR service provision modalities. These cards are being shared through WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, among others.



○ Social cards were also developed jointly with members of the R4V national platforms regarding alternative ways of assisting refugees and migrants. For example, in Peru information of UNHCR and NGOs adapted services has been widely disseminated with R4V branding.

○ **Interagency material** has been developed by UNHCR and other actors in the framework of the R4V and disseminated in social media channels.

For example, in Brazil WHO/PAHO messages have been translated jointly with different agencies to Warao, E'nepa and Creole. A PDF is shared by outreach volunteers to the communities through WhatsApp.

○ In Ecuador, additional social cards to **counteract fraud messages** and cards to warn persons of concern about the **non-eviction measures** adopted by the Government were circulated through WhatsApp.

○ **Facebook pages** like *Confia en el Jaguar* have developed social cards and are providing updated information on COVID-19 to refugees and migrants in Central America and Mexico.



○ UNHCR at regional level developed **anti-xenophobia and non-discrimination messages** for dissemination through social media.

○ Through *Somos Lo Mismo* campaign and social media channels in Panama, persons of concern receive information on how to identify **fake news** specially through WhatsApp. Fake information regarding UN providing food and aid started circulating through WhatsApp in
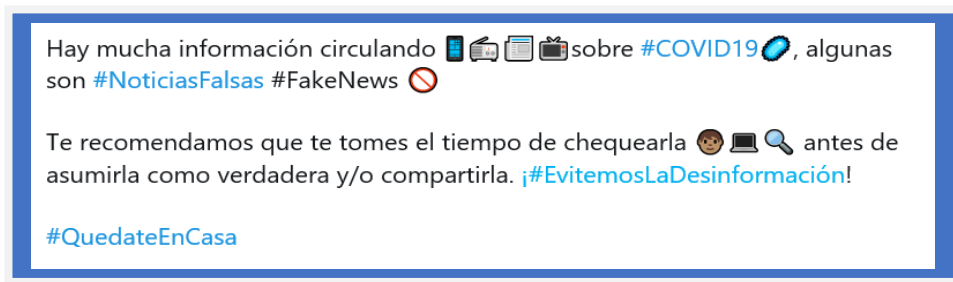
Panama, Colombia, Ecuador and other countries in Central America. PoC were alerted through social media and different pieces are being developed.

○ Social cards to inform PoC on **preventive measures and rights of persons living with HIV, including access to treatment and information for lactating or pregnant women,** was developed by UNHCR Ecuador and disseminated through social media. Other social cards regarding **migratory procedures and renewal of visas** were developed in Ecuador.

### Posters

➲ **WHO/PAHO posters are being displayed in different structures**, like Support Spaces, documentation centres, reception points and shelters in Brazil and Argentina along the routes, urban and border areas, and other attention spaces in El Salvador and Colombia.

➲ In Dominican Republic, UNHCR designed a poster on COVID-19 for persons of concern in Creole and Spanish.

➲ Access to asylum procedures and non-refoulment poster have been developed in Colombia and placed in strategic locations, specially at border areas.

➲ In Guatemala, WHO/PAHO posters were distributed to field partners, who are also conducting delivery of hygiene kits.

➲ In Trinidad and Tobago, posters produced by PAHO, WHO, ICRC and the Ministry of Health in TT were distributed.

### Videos/Audios

➲ In the Southern Cone WHO/PAHO messages were adapted for video dissemination.

➲ In Brazil, UNHCR produced **audio messages in Warao with the support of outreach volunteers**. Videos of key messages in Spanish using WHO/PAHO material were also produced and were disseminated. In Venezuela, audio messages in yukpa and wayuunaiki (for Yukpa and Wayuu indigenous communities) were also produced and disseminated by UNHCR through community radios. This material will also be available in four other indigenous languages: Jivi, Wotuja, Eñepa and Warao.

➲ In Ecuador, UNHCR is supporting **YouTubers/Influencers** on the development of information materials to be shared with the communities.

➲ In Guatemala and Colombia, UNHCR is sharing video messages with PoC informing them that ACNUR remains operational, providing alternative ways of support.

➲ In Argentina, a short video to fight fake news was produced by UNHCR and disseminated through social media accounts.



Hay mucha información circulando 📱📷📰📺sobre #COVID19🦠, algunas son #NoticiasFalsas #FakeNews 🚫

Te recomendamos que te tomes el tiempo de chequearla 👨🏽💻🔍 antes de asumirla como verdadera y/o compartirla. ¡#EvitemosLaDesinformación!

#QuedateEnCasa

### Call Centre/Hotlines

➲ In most of the operations there are hotlines managed by UNHCR and partners. In Guatemala new hotline numbers of attention for people in need of international protection are available, opened for calls and WhatsApp messages.

➲ Colombia has established 27 helplines in order to support PoC with updated information on access to rights, services and support in the context of COVID-19.

➲ In Costa Rica the call centre 800-REFUGIO continues to operate via cell phones. Information on the temporary numbers is disseminated through help.org, Facebook and Twitter, among others.



### SMS

➲ In Guatemala, SMS with prevention messages are shared with refugees and migrants.

### Support Spaces and Safe Spaces

➲ Most of the Support Spaces and Safe Spaces have adapted their service provision to telephone or online assistance and direct services remain temporarily closed.

➲ Some of the structures operating as shelters continue to assist persons of concern in need of accommodation, however new entries are restricted, and capacities are very limited.

➲ A splash page with WHO/PAHO key messages on COVID-19 is now active in Support Spaces with free WiFi access points. Leveraging this initiative, almost 100 WiFi access points managed by NetHope in Colombia have replicated this splash page with WHO/PAHO messaging.
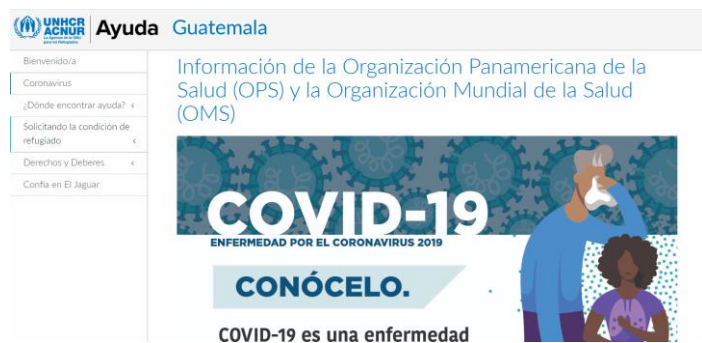
### Information sessions

➲ In Brazil, interagency actions on disseminating information and health practices is taking place in shelters, spontaneous settlements and some Support Spaces (e.g. screening centres).

➲ In Chile, Q&A for refugees and asylum seekers on COVID-19 is under development. The document will be written in a simple language and will include friendly, didactic illustrations.
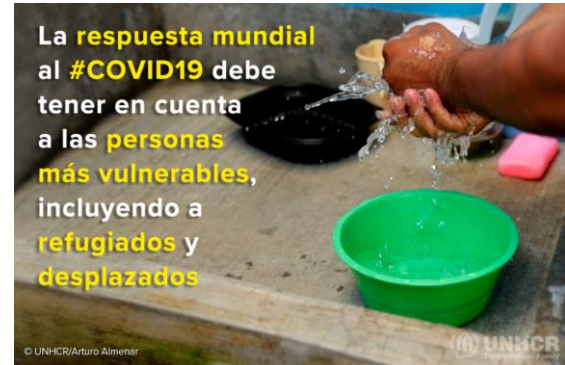


### UNHCR HELP

➲ Currently there are 22 countries in the region that have information in help.unhcr.org, most of them reported having updated their information recently, others are in progress. Some of the operations like Argentina, Aruba, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay have specific sections with information on COVID-19.

➲ Information "How to request asylum in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic" (English and French versions) is also available through help website.

➲ In Ecuador a WhatsApp information line for mass communication with communities associated with Help.unhcr platform has been rolled-out. Through this number +593 99 441 3446



persons of concern can register their number to receive regular information on COVID-19.

## Mapping of Services

➲ The regional R4V Service Mapping tool in being updated with information/services available and updates on new modalities of attention (online, telephone). The Service Mapping includes Support Spaces, and interagency initiative supported by UNHCR, and other services available in each location, including health, legal, food, among others. Social cards informing of these tools will be distributed on social media.



➲ Other mapping exercises are conducted at national level in coordination with partners. For example, in Honduras, a mapping of services is available between the Government and partners providing protection services in order to ensure emergency/life-saving assistance to PoC at risk. Similar exercise is conducted in Panama and Venezuela. In the latter, a mapping of protection services available during the quarantine established by the Venezuelan government, information to be shared with the prioritized communities.

## Protection Services

- In Honduras (Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula) monitoring of protection situations in high risk urban and rural areas is ongoing through WhatsApp Communication Tree.
- Efforts to mobilize the community to support those at heightened risk, considering national measures imposed without compromising their own security, through the use of existing community networks and online platforms is ongoing.
- Prevention material tailored to the needs of specific groups continues to be developed in coordination with specialized actors. This including solidarity-based messages jointly developed under the interagency structures like is the case of Ecuador.

## Feedback from the communities

- Engagement with persons of concern through community networks, leaders, trusted interlocutors, community groups (e.g. Venezuelan Associations) and outreach volunteers continues to take place on a regular basis mainly through WhatsApp groups, communication trees and mobile phone, among others.
- Feedback is also collected currently via email, private messaging, hotlines and individual interviews. In Guatemala for example, PoC send written, audio and video messages to UNHCR Protection unit, providing insight of the early effects of the COVID-19 emergency in their lives. In Colombia, virtual focus group discussions are being organized with community members. The analysis if these data will help to raise awareness, produce materials (e.g. articles, videos and social media stories, among others) and continue adapting our interventions.

## Challenges

- The need to implement RCCE strategies and initiatives not yet put in place is a significant challenge when simultaneously trying to respond to increasing operational demands, reporting requirements and growing needs in the communities.
- Stricter measures imposed in each country limits the opportunities and modalities for communication and outreach to the communities. Outreach through direct contact exposes the health and security of staff, partners, focal points and community members, including outreach volunteers.
- Limited access to the internet is a burden when trying to ensure two-way communication with the communities when measures imposed (e.g. total lockdown) restrict the regular movement in some countries. In many contexts, PoC rely on free hotspots in urban areas, borders and along the routes provided in Support Spaces, Safe Spaces, community centres, partners and governmental offices, among others, to access information and communication.
- Limited or no access to livelihood opportunities exacerbates protection risks, including access to basic services, food, communication and connectivity, among others.
- There are additional challenges for two-way communication with PoC when xenophobia is exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic while national authorities crack down on irregular movements and populations, all of which serve to drive persons of concern to maintain a low profile creating further distance with humanitarian actors.

➲ Frontline staff receiving and responding to communication from PoC cannot address or resolve the full range of increasing needs given the operational barriers at the moment. This creates broth frustrations and anxieties with PoC and stress and anxiety for staff.

**RCCE REGIONAL TASK FORCE**

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**LINKS**

UNHCR Americas CwC- Community of Practice shared folder

UNHCR Help, Information for Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Stateless People

R4V website – with dedicated Coronavirus page with latest information

R4V Regional Service Mapping – online mapping for refugees and migrants (English, Spanish and Portuguese).