Migration Profile

COSTA RICA

A. Executive Summary

Costa Rica has historically been the main migrant-receiving country in Central America, especially from neighbouring Nicaragua; but migrants have also arrived from other countries of the subregion and Latin America. Due to the dependence of the Costa Rican labour market on foreign workers, most immigrants, men and women equally distributed, are employed in activities related to agribusiness, construction and services.[i]

Unlike the northern Central American countries, emigration of Costa Ricans abroad is very small, and most of them reside in the United States, where they live in relatively better conditions than the other Central American migrants. This report also provides information on Costa Rica's role as a refuge for asylum seekers, mainly for political reasons, and for an increasing number of environmentally displaced persons. It also documents the problem of human trafficking for both sexual and labour exploitation.

Costa Rica has a broad legal framework that regulates migration, and its main instrument is the General Law on Migration and Aliens (Law 8764) passed in 2010, from which state policies are drawn to respond to the needs of control and also to the integration of migrants. The country has an important variety of programs provided by international institutions, civil society organisations and the Catholic Church, assisting international migrants, both resident in Costa Rica and in transit to the United States.

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

Costa Rica's geographic location and its political and social stability make it a desirable place for migrants. Historically, immigration from Nicaragua has had a long tradition, due to the need of workers in the Costa Rican labour market, but also because of internal conflicts in Nicaragua or the impact of natural disasters. Over the years, the country has also become a suitable place of refuge for political asylum seekers arriving from different Latin American countries, like Cuba

and Venezuela, along with Nicaragua. Many immigrants are located in the central part of the territory, but can also be found in the north and south, as well as in the coastal areas of the country.

Since 2016, the country has witnessed new migratory flows. Located in the Central American isthmus and, therefore, on the migratory route to the United States, immigrants from South America, the Caribbean and extra-continental countries, have crossed its territory or even remained in the country permanently, while others are waiting to continue their journey to the United States.

Costa Rica has a territory of 51,000 square kilometres and a population of 5,128,000 inhabitants. It is surrounded to the north by Nicaragua, to the south by Panama, by the Caribbean Sea to the east, and the Pacific Ocean to the west. The majority of the population is white or mestizo (83.6%), the remaining ones are mulatto (6.72%), and indigenous (2.42%). The State recognizes 24 indigenous groups, but those with the largest number of people are the Huetares, Malekus, Bribris, Cabécares, Bruncas, Ngäbes, and Chorotegas.[ii] Almost all of the Costa Ricans speak Spanish. 47.5% of them are Catholic, 19.8% are Evangelical, 5.7% belong other denominations and 27% do not profess any religion.

The economy of the country depends on the manufacturing industry (where high technology is used), in addition to sectors related to tourism (commerce, hotels and restaurants, among others), services, agriculture, forestry and fishing. In comparison with the rest of the Central American countries, Costa Rica invests an average of 740 USD per capita in social programs (mainly health and education), while in Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua this investment does not exceed 100 USD per capita. Despite the improvement of social services, at the beginning of 2021 unemployment still affected 17.7% of the Economically Active Population (EAP), and even though by the end of the year the overall unemployment was reduced by 2%, women's unemployment in the second half of 2021 continued to be thriving (19%). Poverty affects almost a quarter (23%) of the country's families, and extreme poverty affects at least 5.8% of them.

Notwithstanding its small territory, Costa Rica has one of the highest immigration rates in the Americas. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), it is close to 10% of the whole population. Although it is a small country compared to the other Central American nations, Costa Rica has also a good number of emigrants (about 150,400), which represents 3% of its population, and in recent years emigration shows a greater presence of women than men. The main destination countries are the United States, Nicaragua, and Panama.

Due to the political crisis in Nicaragua, as of 2018 there was a big immigration phenomenon, involving approximately 100,000 people who sought protection in Costa Rica, although according to UNHCR data only about 65,000 formally requested refugee status. Most migrants from Nicaragua who came into the country between 2018 and 2021 continue to be regular workers, while those seeking refugee status usually belong to occupational groups with a higher level of education.

II. International and Internal Migrants

Costa Rica is a country with a high immigration rate, proportionally one of the highest in the world in relation to the size of its population. This country has welcomed immigrants because of political crises in neighbouring countries, civil wars, displacements due to climatic disasters such as hurricanes and droughts, and labour flows for socio-economic reasons. To this should be added the transit flows to the United States involving Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans, and people originally from some African countries.

According to data from the Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), after a period of stagnation in migratory flows, in 2012 immigration picked up again, reaching in 2021 a 12% increase. Nicaraguans were the biggest group of immigrants (78.9%) residing in Costa Rica in 2019, and that growth was determined by the labour participation of Nicaraguan workers in the Costa Rican labour market. However, between 2018 and 2019 the growth was also influenced by refugee claimants. The Nicaraguan-born immigrants were mostly young people concentrated in the active working age groups. However, in the 2012-2019 period, the proportion of people under 26 decreased, while those over 40 increased. Even so, Costa Rica continues to benefit from Nicaraguan immigrants, as 85% of them are from 13 to under 60 years old. In addition, in the 25 to 40 age bracket, Nicaraguans are more present than those born in Costa Rica or belonging to other immigrant groups.

Of the total number of immigrants, 397,058 were permanent residents, 70,961 temporary, 89,332 under some special category, which included refugees. Of the immigrants in the regular migratory category, 71.7% are Nicaraguans, 5.6% from the United States, 5.6% Colombians, 2.7% Salvadorans, and 2.4% Venezuelans and the rest from other countries.

In 2019 81% of adult Nicaraguans in Costa Rica had not completed high school, higher than Costa Ricans (67%) or all other immigrants, including other Central American immigrants. Nicaraguans are the second largest labour force in Costa Rica (11% of all employed persons), after Costa Ricans (87% employed). In 2020 Nicaraguan workers were more than 50% engaged in low-skilled trades or elementary occupations, and this affected their income and quality of life. The immigrant group most concentrated in the poverty strata was Nicaraguans (25%), compared to 17% of those born in Costa Rica, 11% from another Central American country and 7% from the rest of the world.

Since the beginning of the previous decade, the presence of immigrants arriving from other countries of the continent, but also outside of it, has increased especially because of the strict controls on African migration going to Europe; therefore the search of new destinations, including the United States, has turned Costa Rica into a corridor of African immigrants willing to get to the North American country.[iii]

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

Of the 150,400 Costa Ricans registered as emigrants, 66% live in the United States, 7.5% in Nicaragua, 5.5% in Panama, 2.8% in Canada and 2.3% in Spain. This emigration has a high female percentage, since 57.8% are women and only 42.2% are men. The main causes of Costa Rican migration are unemployment or the search for better jobs (56%), studies (16.42%) and family reunification (11.34%). In terms of academic qualifications, Costa Rican emigrants have the following characteristics: 36.42% completed primary school, 33.43% instead the academic secondary school, 20.60% were university students, 4.18% completed technical secondary school, none 2.69%, specialties 1.49%, university students 0.60%, and high school 0.60%.[iv] In comparison with the profile of the rest of Central Americans, with the exception of Panamanians, Costa Ricans are the group of Central Americans with the best qualification levels in the United States.

The percentage of Costa Ricans with regular migratory status in the destination countries is not precise. They are above other Central Americans with completed high school and university studies, and their level of education distinguishes Costa Ricans mainly in the United States and in other destinations outside the Central American region. For that reason, Costa Ricans also participate more in labour activities that require higher levels of qualification, better pay, and better job stability. Costa Ricans are also less likely to be among the groups of immigrants without papers or forced to migrate under vulnerable conditions. Despite the migration of people with better academic levels and professional profiles, emigration does not produce a brain drain or a loss of qualified human resources, given the high level of schooling with the local people.

IV. Forced Migrants (internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees, climate displaced people)

Costa Rica is a sanctuary for immigrants and asylum seekers. It has become a destination for men and women, who have been forced to leave their countries of origin to seek protection for their safety since the recognition of their refugee status. Since the 1970s, there have been no records of Costa Ricans exiled to other countries for political reasons, and even the number of people who have left the country as asylum seekers for other reasons was very low. Most of them were located in the United States and Canada, where they registered not as refugees but as asylum seekers.

Based on UNHCR data,[v] in 2020 Costa Rica received 121,983 people as refugees or refugee claimants: 9,613 were refugees and 89,770 claimants, pending resolution by Costa Rican migration authorities. The majority of refugee applicants were from Nicaragua (80.5%), followed by Venezuela (7.5%), Cuba (6.3%), Colombia (3%), El Salvador (2.4%) and the rest of the world (0.2%). In December 2020, the Costa Rican government adopted a new process for political asylum seekers, whose applications were rejected in the first instance; and this allowed them not to be expelled from the country and gave them the right to seek employment. In February 2021, UNHCR and the government of Costa Rica signed an extension of an agreement to provide health coverage to 10,000 refugees who had no health insurance.

Costa Rica is also located in the Mesoamerican dry corridor, and therefore its territory is often exposed to the variability of climate potential risks that affect the rest of the region. Nevertheless,

there is no reliable estimate of the number of people who could be considered climate displaced persons, especially because their number is very small. However, many farmers, fishermen and small livestock farmers have been affected by droughts, as well as impacted by higher production costs and market problems for their products. For this reason, some of them have left their jobs and, as has already historically happened, have started migrating into urban centres. Due to the environmental disasters in Nicaragua, Costa Rica also received, among the thousands of immigrants who arrive annually, an undetectable number of climate displaced persons who are now part of the local economy as cheap labour providers.

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

In Costa Rica, a total count of 332 cases of human trafficking were registered in 2020. Of these, 31.6% were for sexual exploitation; 26.2% for labour; 3.9% for organ trafficking, and 3.6% for domestic servitude. Of these, 35.5% were men and 64.5% women, of whom 65.6% were adults and 34.4% were minors. By nationality, 43% were Costa Ricans and 57% were foreigners of Nicaraguan, Vietnamese, Colombian, and Salvadoran origins.[vi]

Among the causes fostering human trafficking in Costa Rica, there are issues connected to the experience of deplorable working, health, and housing conditions, especially in large projects related to agribusiness and tourism. Nicaraguan and indigenous Panamanian migrant workers are more exposed to labour trafficking in agricultural activities or domestic service, or for sexual purposes in Pacific coastal communities or near land borders. In addition, the country faces the influence of human trafficking networks for sexual exploitation that recruit Costa Rican, Mexican, Colombian, Dominican, Panamanian, and Nicaraguan women with false promises of employment and force them into prostitution. Because of its dependence on tourism, this country has been exposed to sex tourism, which has become a threat to women, sexually diverse people, and even adolescents.

The local authorities recognize the existence of human trafficking and are making efforts to combat it; however, in 2020 funding available for some programs has been decreased, including those aimed at protecting victims of trafficking.

VI. National Legal Framework

Costa Rica has a broad legal framework that regulates migration, whose main reference is the General Law on Migration and Aliens (Law 8764), passed in 2010. Under this law the country defined the different processes to deal with both migration and immigration, but it also adopted a human rights approach under which a set of provisions was introduced to facilitate the integration of migrants into the local society.[vii] In 2013 the country established for the first time a Comprehensive Migration Policy and within it the National Integration Plan (2013-2022). In 2012, the Legislative Assembly approved the Law against Trafficking in Persons and created a national coalition, made up of institutions, international agencies, and civil organisations, to combat smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons.

The country has signed a significant number of international treaties for the defence of human rights and, in particular, for the protection of victims of human rights violations, especially women, children, indigenous people and other vulnerable persons.

VII. Main Actors

The State

Under the jurisdiction of the General Law on Migration and Aliens, the National Immigration Council was created, which is a body chaired by the Minister of the Interior and has the General Directorate of Migration and Aliens in charge of its executive secretariat. It comprises representatives of various state institutions and two representatives of civil society. They oversee the approval of policies and guidelines under which migration management is held. Under the General Law on Migration and Aliens, the Migration Social Fund was also instituted, which is financed with contributions from the migrants themselves and allocates its resources to strengthen the areas of health, education, community development, citizen security and integration of the migrant population.

International organisations and other organisations

In Costa Rica, the presence and management of international agencies such as IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, as well as the headquarters of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) have been formally established, which means that there is an important mobilisation in terms of respect for the human rights of these populations.

In terms of civil society, there are different organisations working to defend the human rights of migrants and refugees, which are gathered in the Network of Civil Organisations for Migration. There are also other organisations that have emerged since the exodus started in April 2018 in Nicaragua, including a significant majority of young students.

The Catholic Church

Since the early 1990s, the Catholic Church has been developing the *Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana* (the Human Mobility Pastoral Care) under the direction of the Pastoral Social-Caritas. It carries out pastoral activities in the seven Costa Rican dioceses, with special attention to migrants, displaced persons, asylum seekers, and victims of human trafficking.

The Jesuit Migrant Service also has a long tradition of offering legal advice on migration and actively participates in proposing actions to improve migration management and services for migrants.

The Sisters of Mary Help of Christians have set up medical and psychological clinics to attend to the population that requires their services, but also offer training to promote the integral development of migrants.

The Sisters of Mercy of Saint Anne, the Claretian and Franciscan Families with their JPIC commitments (Justice, Peace and Integrity with Creation) and the mission of the Scalabrinian Sisters provide a variety of pastoral and social activities, such as food provision, clothing, medicine and support to migrant families and inhabitants of the peripheries of the Greater Metropolitan Area of the country.

In 2018, the Clamor Network (Costa Rica chapter) was established, bringing together more than a dozen faith-based organisations and carrying out joint efforts, from the approach of the Social Doctrine of the Church, together with migrants, refugees, and victims of trafficking.

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D. Endnotes

[i] Morales Gamboa, Abelardo, 2021.
[ii] See Camacho-Nassar, 2020.
[iii] Drotbohm H, Winters N., 2021.
[iv] Gustavo Gatica, Y. R., 2018.
[v] See UNHCR, 2021.
[vi] See US Department of State, 2021.
[vii] Sancho, E. V., 2021.