



## Migration Profile

### HONDURAS

#### A. Executive Summary

Honduras, which is one of the poorest countries in the Central American region, has been facing a complex migratory situation and an intensification of internal displacement for more than a decade. It is a country of origin for migrants in vulnerable conditions, and a transit territory for extra-regional migrants. Since 2018 it has become the point of origin of migrant caravans, trying to reach the United States, and the epicentre of a displacement crisis in the region.

In addition to the lack of jobs in the local labour market, the main drives of migration in recent decades have been related to the effects of natural disasters, like Hurricane Mitch in 1998, but also of prolonged droughts, new storms, hurricanes, and floods. Almost at the same time the expansion of crime led by gangs called *maras* has been very much felt throughout the country. These are the main causes of internal and international forced displacement. The organisation of migrant caravans directed to the United States has also been a collective response of migrants to the lack of national and international protection that these people experience both from their origin communities and on routes through transit countries.

The issue of trafficking in persons for the purpose of labour and sexual exploitation is quite common in Honduras, as well as the problem of refugees that has increased due to the structural fragility of the country.

As part of the responses that the State and Honduran society seek to offer, there have been changes in the legislation related to both migration and forced displacement, the creation of new government agencies to provide services to both Hondurans abroad and internally displaced persons, victims of human trafficking and deportees. International organisations, civil society organisations and the Catholic Church through the Pastoral Care of Human Mobility have taken a central role in the assistance and care of migrants, deportees, displaced persons, and victims of trafficking.

#### B. Country Profile

##### I. Basic Information

Honduras is part of the Central American region; it has a territory of 112,492 sq. km and is the second largest country in the region. It is the most mountainous country in Central America, with two thirds of the territory above 300 metres of altitude. Its territory is located in the centre of the Central American isthmus, bordered by Guatemala and El Salvador to the west, by the Caribbean Sea to the north, by Nicaragua to the east, and by the Pacific Ocean to the south. The official language is Spanish, although in the Bay Islands the use of English is widespread for historical reasons.

According to the 2013 Census, the population was 8,799,000. According to the 2021 statistics, a total of 9,512,342 inhabitants was estimated, of whom 4,628,894 were men and 4,883,448 women. 92% of the inhabitants are *mestizos* and the remaining 8% are made up of different ethnic groups, including indigenous and Afro-descendants. The capital of the country is Tegucigalpa, where 13.5% of the population is concentrated. The city forms a single urban complex with Comayagüela, in the so-called Central District, and after Guatemala City, this urban area is the most populated in the Central American region.

Traditionally, most of the people are Catholic, and they currently represent 45% of the whole population; however, in recent years there has been an increase of evangelical churches, which claim another 45% of the population. Around 8% of them say they have no religious affiliation, while the remaining 2% belong to other religious minorities. This country has a young population: 40% are under 18 and those over 65 are only 6%. This factor and the different inequalities mentioned above explain the large emigration of young people.

Honduras is considered the second poorest country in the hemisphere, surpassed only by Haiti. Its economy has historically depended on agriculture, especially monoculture coffee and banana plantations. In 1978, 40% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) came from agriculture; but by 2000 it had fallen to 14.4%, and in 2019 to 10.4%.<sup>i</sup> The industry, focused on products derived from the textile maquila, replaced agriculture, but this new production also experienced a crisis since 2000, as it went from 20.5% to 16% of GDP in 2020. Apart from lack of jobs in agriculture and industry, since 2000 40% of all workers faced precarious employment conditions, unstable jobs, part-time, poor pay and no labour benefits. This situation explains why international migration has grown significantly during the present century. The illiteracy rate is 12.8% for the population over 15 years of age; although the differences are few, illiteracy is lower among women (12.7%) than men (13%).

The country is located in the path of hurricanes and tropical storms that originate in the Caribbean, as well as in the Central American dry corridor, and these factors, added to the increase in insecurity, have produced many migration flows in the last twenty years and the appearance of migrant caravans arriving from the countries of the Northern Central America at the end of 2018. Migration under conditions of vulnerability and risk has also been aggravated by the country's political instability. Although since the mid-eighties the military regime did no longer hold power, in 2009 there was a *coup d'état*,<sup>ii</sup> and since then, there has been a political

polarisation weakening civil institutions and fostering allegations of corruption against political and business leaders being linked to drug trafficking in both Honduras and the United States. In this precarious situation, policies and programmes are crucial to protect migrants, forcibly displaced people and victims of trafficking.

## **II. International and Internal Migrants**

Honduras was until the late sixties of the twentieth century one of the largest recipients of Salvadoran migrants; later on, because of civil wars in that country, that also affected Nicaragua and Guatemala, Honduras began to welcome refugees from all of the three neighbouring countries. That situation changed, however, after the end of the armed conflicts, and Honduras stopped receiving refugees and became a country of origin for migrants to the United States.

This new migration phenomenon was determined by Hurricane Mitch in 1989, but other causes existed long before. The hurricane impact just accelerated the process of migration between 1990 and 2000, increasing it by 118% and placing Honduras in third place within the countries of the region with the highest number of emigrants. After 2010, the growth of migration slowed down, but it has not disappeared, evolving into new types of mobility, like forced displacement and the organisation of migrant caravans. In 2017, the number of Honduran migrants was estimated at 800,707 people (8.20% of the country's population), of whom 82% were registered in the United States, and 59.8% were women. The emigration rate in 2015 was 7.5% in rural areas and 6.8% from urban centres.

In 2020, remittances sent by migrants to their families were equivalent to 24% of the country's GDP, surpassing exports of agricultural and industrial goods.<sup>iii</sup>

Honduran emigration to other Central American countries has remained low, even though statistics are often not updated due to the informality of the cross-border mobility. Honduran migration to other countries of the world also grew by almost 200% in the 2000-2010 decade, and by 117% in the 2010-2019 decade. There has also been a growth of Honduran immigrants in Mexico, which ceased to be a transit country for people trying to reach the United States and became a country receiving Central American migrants. Due to migratory conditions and limitations of the registration systems in Mexico, the data provided may have a significant underreporting. According to the 2019 IOM report, Mexico carried out more than 100 returns of Central Americans, 80% were men and the most deportees were Hondurans.<sup>iv</sup>

According to the 2013 Census, foreigners in Honduras were only 0.36% of the inhabitants, most of them coming from the United States, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Mobility between Honduras and these last three countries benefits from the existence of the Central American Single Visa, under the CA-4 agreements. The CA-4 does not contain clauses that allow labour mobility, however, the possibility of mobility of nationals of the four countries of Northern Central America favours labour employment, usually in the informal sector of the economy. The

immigration of men exceeds that of women, with 20,440 men (52.50%), compared to 18,493 of immigrant women (47.49%).

The emergency of internally displaced persons was officially recognized by the Government of Honduras in 2013, when it created the Inter-Institutional Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence (CIPPDV). However, the 2019 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) Report noted that the scarcity of data since 2014 prevented an accurate assessment of the real incidence of internal displacement in Honduras. This also makes it impossible to distinguish the internal forced displacement from the internal labour migration, related to the temporary attraction of labour force in agriculture or to territories where job opportunities are available.

### **III. Emigration and Skilled Migration**

About half of Honduran migrants in the United States over the age of 25 have an education level below high school, reaching mostly the basic level. According to data from the 2017 American Community Survey (ACS), about 25,000 Hondurans were pursuing postgraduate studies in the United States, and, although there is no data available for other countries, it is estimated that a similar number may be for other OECD countries. In the United States, 6 out of 10 Honduran students were in grade 1 through 12, indicating that most of them are children and adolescents.<sup>v</sup>

According to the 2019 IOM report,<sup>vi</sup> 46.9% of Hondurans in the United States are in an irregular situation, 38.4% are residents, and 14.7% have already been naturalised. Honduran immigrants in the United States are among the most vulnerable communities due to the high percentage of undocumented people, low levels of education and poor English language skills. Therefore, they are employed in the least qualified and lowest paid trades. In addition, their poverty levels are higher than the average of all immigrant groups in the country. For every 100 Honduran women who emigrate and live in an irregular condition, there are 117 male migrants in the same condition. But that changes when people have the resident status, since, for every 100 women with residence, there are only 76 men sharing this status.

Foreigners residing in Honduras from the United States, China and Mexico work in managerial positions, scientific areas, sales or mid-level professionals; while Central Americans are in shops and services, qualified agricultural activities, and handicrafts.

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

Labour market constraints are not the only cause of migration, as threats caused by climate crisis and public insecurity have increased and affected even more the migration flows, often leading to forced displacement. According to the Secretariat of Human Rights, between 2004 and 2018 there was the displacement of 247,090 Hondurans.<sup>vii</sup> 55% of displaced victims moved elsewhere within the same municipality, 17% to another town, and 28% to another department.

Proportionally, households were displaced for the following reasons: threats 55%, murders 40%, restrictions on mobility 24%, injuries 16%, extortion 13%, and sexual violence 10%. According to these investigations also, the places of origin for displacements coincided in 96% of the cases with the areas where the highest rates of homicides took place, mainly urban territories under the control of *maras*: Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba and Choloma. The working, educational, housing and health conditions of people forced to migrate did not improve with internal displacement, but deteriorated even more, and that translated into a possible cause of migration abroad.<sup>viii</sup>

Between 2015 and 2020, there were 338,444 returnees or deportees from various countries of the world, and among them the largest number came from the United States and Mexico. In the 2018-2020 period, 37,874 children were returned, 60.4% of whom were male and 39.6% female. Of the total number of minor returnees, 87.5% came from Mexico.

In Honduras there are only 186 people holding a refugee status, while in other countries of the world there are 132,036 Honduran applicants for refugee status, and 18,860 of them have already received a positive response to their application.

Although there is no statistical data available on environmentally displaced people, it is estimated that, since 1994, climate changes have affected Honduras more than any other country in the world. According to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the country with 247,000 new displaced people in 2020 became the territory with the highest increase in displacement cases.<sup>ix</sup> Due to the complexity of the causes of migration and forced displacement, the profile and number of migrants affected by the climate crisis cannot be defined, but surely droughts and the severe effects of several hurricanes over the last decades have been among the main factors that, together with poverty, social inequality and violence, fostered the growth of migration flows. As a matter of fact, Honduras often experiences the impact of drought periods affecting agriculture; but, to make things even worse, at the end of 2020 two hurricanes, Eta and Iota, occurred almost simultaneously causing abundant damage to the production, infrastructure and living conditions of most of the population, already penalised by poor housing infrastructure and public services. It has been pointed out that some recently adopted productive practices, although beneficial for the labour force, are also causing alterations in the vine production system of the territories where they have settled, becoming also a reason for internal displacement.

The caravans of Central American migrants were mostly formed in Honduras as an organised response to the causes and risks faced by people during their migration journeys. In these caravans most people are between 18 and 35 years old, although there are also families and other groups with children and adolescents.

## **V. Victims of Human Trafficking**

According to data from the Honduran Human Rights Secretariat,<sup>x</sup> in 2019 84 victims of human trafficking were identified, of whom 57 were from Honduras and 27 were foreigners. 32 cases

were taken to court and a dozen people connected to trafficking networks were sentenced. However, the data provided may be underestimating this issue. A report by the US Embassy states that in 2019 the government served a disproportionately low number of victims of trafficking for forced labour, compared to the magnitude of the problem.<sup>xi</sup>

The most widespread forms of human trafficking are associated with forced labour in different branches of the economy, especially in agriculture and domestic work, but also in some cases they involve drug smuggling or the forced recruitment of young adolescents to commit crimes. Cases related to the sexual exploitation of women and girls have also been reported, with girls employed in sex tourism business and many women forced to work in brothels.

There is also a practice among gangs of recruiting teenage women, who end up as sex slaves for the leaders of the organizations.

Although no detailed records are kept, trafficking in persons occurs in urban areas, especially in cities under the control of *maras*, and in rural areas, particularly in agricultural activities, and also in tourist areas where sexual exploitation of persons proliferates. The difficulties of controlling networks that exploit minors subjecting them to forced criminal activities is due to the fact that they occur in territories with high crime rates and because of the challenges faced by police and judicial authorities to restrain these traffickers.

## **VI. National Legal Framework**

Honduras has an extensive and up-to-date legislation to regulate immigration. The current Migration and Aliens Act entered into effect in March 2004, and its regulations have also been enforced since May 2004. These two laws provide the tools needed for the proper functioning of the national institutional framework. The National Institute of Migration (INM) is the body in charge of dealing with anything related to migration, but its area of competence is mainly aimed at immigration control; therefore, it ensures compliance with the requirements and expenses of procedures for foreigners entering the country. Although it is its responsibility to assist Hondurans when they leave the country, its involvement becomes very limited when people leave the country with no immigration papers. Therefore, the country has developed specific laws to protect Hondurans residing abroad, and that led to the approval of the 2014 Law for the Protection of Honduran Migrants and their Families. Under this law a number of procedures have been established to facilitate agreements with other countries, especially in the Central American region, as well as with those of transit and destination of people.

A normative aspect of migration governance is the Returned Migrant Care Centres (CAMR), thanks to the work of state-run centres (specifically by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation) that provide humanitarian assistance to returnees. In addition, the National Institute of Migration has Centres for Attention to Irregular Migrants (CAMI), providing care and protection to migrants in transit. The INM is responsible for the control of exits and entrances of people from these centres. The INM and the Border Police coordinate with various

international organisations the training of their personnel on issues relevant to the effective and humanitarian management of migration.

At the international level, the country has ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, and the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

The country also passed a Law against Trafficking in Persons (Decree No. 59-2012), that allows the Honduran State to investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes in their many forms, to allocate resources for the care and service of victims of trafficking, including the financing of protection shelters. Under this law, the Inter-Institutional Commission against Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Persons (CICESCT) was created, connected to the Human Rights Secretariat.

## **VII. Main Actors**

### *The State*

The Honduran State institutions exercise the main functions related to migration, care for refugees and victims of trafficking, as well as deportees. These responsibilities fall under the Law on Population and Migration Policy (Decree 34 of 1974), under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior and Justice. The integrated management of all these functions is the responsibility of the National Migration Institute.

Due to the increased risks faced by a large number of Honduran emigrants, both in transit and destination countries, the Honduran National Congress approved the creation in 2014 of the National Council for the Protection of Honduran Migrants as part of the Law for the Protection of Honduran Migrants and Their Families. This council is an advisory board connected to the Secretary of State, in the Office of Foreign Affairs.

The government, in the exercise of its functions, also set up agreements with international and civil organisations to improve the implementation of recently adopted laws, through training courses and other activities that seek to improve care services for migrants, refugees, victims of trafficking and internally displaced persons.

### *The Church*

Among the organisations of the Catholic Church involved in the migrant ministry, there are the Pastoral Care of Human Mobility of the Episcopal Conference, the Jesuit Service for Migrants of Honduras, Caritas Honduras, and Red Clamor with its Honduran branch.

Since 1991, the Catholic Church in Honduras has been developing a specific pastoral care to accompany immigrants; mechanisms for coordination, exchange of information and support

have been provided by the Church, as well as by civil organisations and the government of Honduras, to assist the migrant population.

The National Commission for the Pastoral Care of Human Mobility (PMH) carries out the coordination and promotion of joint activities. It includes two representatives of the Pastoral Commissions of Human Mobility or liaison agents of the 8 dioceses, from those responsible for the Centre for Attention to returned Immigrants (CAMR), the Scalabrinian Centre for the Promotion of Immigrants (CESPROM, REMHU), the Interdisciplinary Journal of the Pastoral Care of Human Mobility in Honduras, the Association network of committees of immigrants and their relatives (ASOC. RED COMIFAH), the Scalabrinian Missionary Sisters and the lay Scalabrinian missionaries. In parishes, there are grassroots organisations involving several people who are pastoral agents, called Pastoral Teams of Human Mobility.

The Catholic Church has played an active role in encouraging the work of civil society organisations, in promoting coordination between organisations, but also in the formation of connections among the diocesan commissions of human mobility, committees of migrants and their relatives, including missing migrants, support for returnees and migrants with disabilities, in addition to a significant investment in the organisation of care homes for migrants.

#### *Other organisations*

There is also a wide range of civil society organisations, most of them meeting at the National Forum for Migration in Honduras, whose mission is to promote respect for and protection of human rights of the migrant population and their families by the Government of Honduras and society in general. It is made up of social, community and ecclesial leaders and has the support of international agencies.

#### *International organisations*

Several international organisations present in Honduras carry out activities, aimed at helping the migrant population. The most important ones are the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that have within their programs activities directly targeting migrants. However, other organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), UN Women and other multilateral and regional organisations also include activities related to migration, because the phenomenon is widespread in all areas of the Honduran society.

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## D. Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Our own estimates based on statistics from the World Bank database.

<sup>ii</sup> The last *coup d'état* had been in 1978, but until 1982, a military *junta* ruled.

<sup>iii</sup> World Bank, Workers' remittances

<sup>iv</sup> IOM, 2019.

<sup>v</sup> O'Connor, Batalova, and Bolter, 2019.

<sup>vi</sup> IOM, 2019.

<sup>vii</sup> CICESCT, Secretary of Human Rights, 2020.

<sup>viii</sup> Inter-institutional commission for persons displaced by violence, 2015.

<sup>ix</sup> IDMC, 2020.

<sup>x</sup> CICESCT, Secretariat for Human Rights, 2020.

<sup>xi</sup> US Department of State, 2019.