



Migration Profile

NICARAGUA

A. Executive Summary

Nicaragua is a Central American country with many emigrants mostly located in the United States and Costa Rica, and in a lower scale also in other countries. Since the mid-2010s, its territory has been used as a transit area for extra-regional migrants and other mixed flows. Also, since 2018 the number of Nicaraguan refugees has increased in some countries of Central America.

Throughout Nicaraguan history, there have been several moments in which, in addition to economic migrants, armed conflicts have also caused forced displacement, especially of men, political leaders and intellectuals who moved to other countries in the Central American region or to the United States. A civil war that began in 1977 ended with the overthrow of the Somoza family and the rise to power of the Popular Sandinista Revolution, that continued during a second war between armed groups of the Nicaraguan Resistance, known as the "contras" and the Popular Sandinista Army (EPS).

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

The territory of Nicaragua, characterised by a great geographic, environmental, and ethno-demographic diversity, occupies 130,370 sq. km and is the largest country in Central America. It is located in the centre of the Central American isthmus and is surrounded by Costa Rica to the south and Honduras to the north. Even though Nicaragua is highly dependent on agriculture, it also has a diversified economy in trade and services, as well as in the manufacture of garments, under the maquila regime.ⁱ

According to the National Institute of Development Information (INIDE), the main commercial activities contributing to the country's GDP are manufacturing (15.5% of GDP), trade (9.94%), transportation and communications (8.47%), and agriculture (8.34%). The unemployment rate in 2020 was 6.26% (202,000 people). Although income per capita in 2020 was estimated at almost

\$2,000 US, this was poorly distributed due to the income concentration in the hands of very few people.ⁱⁱ

In 2020, according to INIDE data, the country had 6,595,674 inhabitants, of whom 49% were men and 51% women, and 57% of them lived in urban areas, mostly in cities located along the Pacific Ocean coast. Of the total population, 11% recognised themselves as members of an ethnic minority, including the Miskitu (27.2%), Mestizos from the Caribbean Coast (25.3%), and the Chorotega Nahua (10.4%).ⁱⁱⁱ

Nicaragua is considered a Christian country (90.5%), with 58.5% Catholics, 21.6% Evangelicals, and 1.6% Moravian; the remaining 10% belongs to other congregations. Although the Catholic faith is practised by many people, other Christian denominations are currently growing in membership.

Due to its geographic location in the centre of the continental mass and between two great seas, its territory is often affected by storms and hurricanes. Nicaragua is also located in the dry tropics and, like other countries in the region, faces extreme climate changes and disruptions. The country's territory is divided into different regions: the Pacific Zone, the North Central Zone and the Caribbean Region, where fifteen Departments and two Autonomous Regions (the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic Autonomous Regions) are also located. Finally, these different areas are divided into 153 municipalities.

During the last thirty years, emigration has been thriving because of poverty and unemployment. After Honduras, Nicaragua is the second poorest country in Central America, and its proximity to Costa Rica has invited many labour migrants to relocate in that country, as well as in the United States. Since 2018, the country has been experiencing political conflicts between the government and other opposition groups. The local government has become more authoritarian and repressive, while the opposition groups are trying to destabilise the country and promote a coup d'état with external assistance.

Currently, it is estimated that more than 10% of Nicaraguans reside outside the country as workers, refugees, or refugee applicants, and many live in irregular migratory conditions. The main destinations are the United States (44%), Costa Rica (43%), Spain (3.8%), Panama (2%), and Canada (1.55%).

II. International and Internal Migrants

Nicaragua is not a country that is attracting a migrant population; on the contrary, approximately 10% of its population has already emigrated. The movement of people entering the country is minimal. In 2019, 42,172 people entered the country (58% women and 42% men). Among them, 13,057 (39%) came from Honduras, 11,283 (26.8%) from Costa Rica and 3,777 (8.9%) from the United States. Nicaragua is also one of the signatories of the Central American Single Visa Treaty

with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, which allows nationals of those four countries to enter the other territories for tourism or commercial purposes, but not as labour migrants.

In 2020, due to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, several tens of thousands of Nicaraguan migrants who were in Costa Rica, Panama, other Central American countries and even Mexico returned. Due to health restrictions, they initially had problems entering the country. Therefore, in 2020 Nicaraguan returnees were more than those who left the country, also because many of them entered the territory through unauthorised passages, and data does not record all that movement.

Since 2018, there has been a constant influx of Haitian, Cuban and Venezuelan transmigrants in numbers never seen before. In the last decades, the Nicaraguan territory has been experiencing the transit of extra-regional and extra-continental migrants, as part of mixed flows of migrants and refugee applicants using the territories of Central America and Mexico in order to reach the United States.^{iv}

Since official crossing points are not an option, the porous borders with Costa Rica and Honduras have made this phenomenon a daily occurrence for the inhabitants of communities along the crossing routes. The most common crossing areas are Bahía de Salinas, on the border with Costa Rica on the Pacific coast, and other points south of Lake Nicaragua and in the San Juan River basin, which are also often used by undocumented Nicaraguan migrants moving to Costa Rica. These transmigrants then continue their journey to Honduras using different locations along the common border.

Internal migration is a widespread phenomenon in Nicaragua. Search for employment and climate crisis are its main drives. Nicaragua supplies other countries in the region, mainly Costa Rica, with some 100,000 workers who serve as temporary labour for agricultural activities, but also for its own domestic labour market. Agricultural workers are distributed throughout the months of each year between the harvest cycles in Costa Rica and other employment opportunities in their own country.^v In addition, periods marked by prolonged droughts in the Pacific and northern regions of the country, coupled with the effects of hurricanes, have led to an increase in climate refugees moving from the drier lands of the Pacific, Caribbean, and northern regions of the country into urban centres.

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

Emigration in this country has multiple causes. Social inequality, political conflicts, and environmental disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and climate risks, have been the main drives of an emigration that since the 1980s has had two main destinations: the United States and Costa Rica. Spain and Panama also became other destination countries in the last 10 years. In addition, there is in a smaller scale a circular migration to other Central American countries. In 2019, the departure of 682,865 people (54% women and 46% men) was recorded, exceeding the number of Nicaraguan entries back into the country.

In 2019, 302,845 travelled to the United States, 296,541 to Costa Rica, 25,969 to Spain, 13,762 to Panama, and 10,511 to Canada. The largest number of people who left the country (26.1%) came from the department of Managua, where the capital is located and has the highest concentration of inhabitants of the country. However, in relative terms, the department of Chinandega, the poorest area in the country, registered the largest relative volume compared to the size of its population.

The educational profile of Nicaraguans abroad is distributed as follows: people with no education are 4.9%, with less than a high school degree 22.9%, with a high school diploma 20.2%. Immigrants with a university degree accounted for 19.5%, but 24% had not completed their university education. About 4.5% had technical training. It is more common to find Nicaraguans with completed high school or higher levels of education in the United States or Spain than in other destinations in the region, such as Costa Rica. This variable distinguishes Nicaraguans from other Central American immigrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in that destination. For this reason, it is common to find Nicaraguans employed in administration, business, the arts, or sciences. In addition, the average income of these immigrants was almost equivalent to that of U.S.-born workers, around US\$60,000 per year, which is above the average US\$46,000 earned by a worker coming from other Central American countries.^{vi} This factor is determined by the fact that Nicaraguan migration to the United States has been a more skilled migration, since the 1980s. However, this is different from the migration to Costa Rica, where the educational and labour profile of Nicaraguans in the country is similar to the one of the other Central Americans.^{vii}

The educational level and labour market insertion of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica is different from the others living in the United States. Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are relatively young people who are concentrated in the 25 to 40 year old bracket. Eighty-one percent of Nicaraguans residing in Costa Rica over the age of 18 had not completed high school in 2017. However, that situation may have changed somewhat because since 2018 Costa Rica has received a significant number of refugee claimants from Nicaragua.^{viii} In a survey of that population, 47% were professionals or had a university degree. Even so, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica continue to be mostly employed in low-skilled and low-wage jobs in the Costa Rican labour market.

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

UNHCR estimated that in 2020 more than 108,000 Nicaraguans were seeking refuge in the world;^{ix} about 77,000 were in Costa Rica, 8,000 in Panama, 9,000 in Europe, 3,600 in Mexico and 5,100 in other countries. Political exile or refugee applicants are not new to Nicaragua due to ongoing political and military confrontations taking place. Nicaragua has also welcomed on different occasions refugees arriving from other countries of Central America and beyond. Although in recent decades this flow has decreased, small groups of refugees remain in the country or have settled there permanently.

Unlike other northern Central American countries, in Nicaragua there are no criminal gangs or *maras*; therefore, the phenomenon of forced internal displacement due to public insecurity is not present. Even internal displacement caused by political conflicts has decreased since the mid-1990s; however, as of 2018, some of its manifestations resurfaced, and many of their leaders and workers left the country for fear of further sanctions. Most of these people lived in the capital city, Managua, or in some of the main cities of the country and, for the most part, have a high professional education.

In 2020, two hurricanes hit the region less than a week apart, which according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) were considered the worst disaster that impacted some 600,000 people in Central America as a result of flooding, landslides and other extreme weather effects, destroying infrastructure and ruining crops.^x One of the most affected countries was Nicaragua, whose territory is very vulnerable to climate disasters; in fact, 60% of its territory was damaged by these two hurricanes, and, as a consequence, several thousands of people were internally displaced or migrated to Costa Rica, and some of them even joined the Central American migrant caravans. The main victims of these disasters lived in the Caribbean coast of the country, in the northern and western departments, where there is a large concentration of rural population living in poor conditions and lacking the most basic services, thus increasing their vulnerability.

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

In recent decades, human trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation has increased in Nicaragua. The people most vulnerable are children and adolescents (44.2%), adult women (24.8%), and people of sexual diversity (16.2%). Victims of trafficking who are minors are forced into begging, generally by close relatives; in the case of girls and adolescents, into prostitution; and adults are subjected to over-exploitative labour or prostitution.

Data collected by IOM in 2017^{xi} shows that victims of internal trafficking cases were originally from Managua, Chinandega, Carazo, Masaya, Nueva Segovia, Matagalpa, Estelí, León and Bluefields. Meanwhile, other Nicaraguan victims of transnational trafficking were identified in Guatemala, Panama, El Salvador, the United States and Belize. The main factors fostering the proliferation of this crime is the poverty of the victims' families, the search for employment or the desire to emigrate, which allows them to be deceived by traffickers. These traffickers are often no strangers to the victims, but may be family members, friends and other people with whom there are social or work ties. In the case of children, they are subjected to punishment and forced to trafficking activities very often by their own family members.

The government acknowledges the existence of this crime, but it has had difficulty in dealing with it and taking action against human trafficking networks and practices. One of the major limitations is the fact that these abusive situations occur in contexts of precariousness and poverty that are considered normal by most people, due to a low level of education, lack of information and recognition of its criminal nature.

VI. National Legal Framework

Nicaragua has not made substantial changes to its legal framework on migration since 2015, when the Law against Trafficking in Persons was approved, by including this crime in its legislation and adopting measures to combat labour exploitation of migrants. The General Migration Law was passed in 2011, which is the main legal framework regulating migration management in the country. The General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (DGME) within the Ministry of the Interior is the institution in charge of migration control and services. Nicaragua has ratified a significant number of international agreements to protect the rights of migrants. Under this legislative framework, the country offers access to public health services regardless of one's immigration status, free primary and secondary education, and the Law against Trafficking in Persons provides protection and safeguards the rights of victims.

VII. Main Actors

The State

The National Council on Migration and Aliens is the governmental body responsible for designing and coordinating the implementation of migration policy. This in turn responds to the guidelines of the National Migration Strategy, which is part of the National Human Development Plan. The General Directorate of Migration and Aliens (DGME) is part of the Ministry of the Interior, and this is the executive body responsible for the management, control, and administration of migration services in the country.

Through the DGME, Nicaragua participates in consultative processes and regional forums such as the Central American Commission of Migration Directors (OCAM) and the Regional Conference on Migration (CRM). It is also part of the Central American Integration System where issues and regional actions related to migration are discussed and developed. Being part of the Central American Single Visa System through the CA-4, Nicaraguan citizens have free entry passes to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

The Church

The Catholic Church works to assist migrants through various initiatives, coordinated by the Caritas network. This is made up of eight different Diocesan Caritas agencies located in Managua, Juigalpa, Matagalpa, León, Estelí, Jinotega, Granada, and the Vicariate of Bluefields. Since 1960, this organisation has promoted a number of programs aimed at meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged people. Since the 1990s, Caritas has also been involved in assisting migrants and internally displaced persons, as well as the families of external migrants, developing its pastoral activity in communities where the highest concentration of migrants is attested. Since the early 2000s, Caritas has facilitated the coordination of government institutions, civil society organisations and international agencies helping migrants, especially thanks to the Nicaraguan

Network of Civil Organisations for Migration (Red Nica), which as of 2015 has been serving groups of migrants in transit in different parts of the country.

The Jesuit Migrant Service is an organisation involved in the promotion and defence of human rights of Nicaraguan migrants in the country of origin, transit, and destination. During the last few years it has also dealt with the location of missing Nicaraguans on the migratory route to the United States, supporting at the same time forcibly displaced persons and migrant workers. JMS provides pastoral activities in the countries of destination and transit of Nicaraguan migrants.

International Organisations

The State of Nicaragua has been a member of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) since 1967. In 1979, when the organisation was called the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (CIME), it opened its office in Managua, and since then has collaborated with the Government of Nicaragua regarding migratory matters. IOM Nicaragua has since expanded its activities to include counter-trafficking and assistance to vulnerable migrants, voluntary return and reintegration, unaccompanied migrant minors, labour migration, migration, and development.

Currently, IOM is part of the United Nations Country Team (UNCT), participating through the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) to strengthen national development strategies with government counterparts and UN System agencies. IOM's work consists of ensuring the orderly and humane management of migration, promoting international cooperation on migration issues, helping to find practical solutions to migration problems and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in need.

Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not have a representative office in Nicaragua, the problem of refugee applicants is dealt with by the office from Costa Rica, to attend to the needs of people who may require assistance and protection.

Also, different agencies and funds of the United Nations System develop some programs for migrants' families, victims of displacement or under conditions that may cause it, by cooperating with the government and its institutions.

Other Organisations

Since the early 2000s, Nicaragua has had a large network of civil organisations providing services to the migrant population. These organisations are collaborating with Nicaraguan communities in the United States, Costa Rica and Spain. Although their profile has been reduced in the last three years, the organisations have joined the Nicaraguan Network of Civil Organisations for Migration (Red Nica) which coordinates activities with Caritas, the Jesuit Migrant Service, and other governmental organisations, mainly in the countries of destination, and other international organisations.

On October 15, Nicaragua's National Assembly approved Law 1040, for the Regulation of Foreign Agents. The purpose of this law is to establish a legal framework for both individuals and organisations receiving foreign funding. Under this new set of rules and regulations, the government did not renew the legal status of some 50 civil organisations and forced them to close their activities and confiscated their assets. Many of these organisations served migrant populations, internally displaced persons, victims of trafficking and people living in territories vulnerable to the climate crisis. These included human rights organisations, research centres, environmentalists and even organisations providing health care especially in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.^{xiii}

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ⁱⁱⁱ International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, "Indigenous Peoples in Nicaragua," <https://www.iwgia.org/en/nicaragua.html>

^{iv} Morales-Gamboa, Abelardo et al, 2011.

^v Morales-Gamboa, Abelardo, 2018.

^{vi} O'Connor, A., Batalova, A., & Bolter, J., 2019

^{vii} Morales Gamboa, Abelardo, 2021.

^{viii} IFAM, 2019.

^{ix} UNHCR, *Displacement in Central America*

^x IFRC, *Comunicado de prensa*.

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