

Livelihoods

BUILDING SELF-RELIANCE AND ECONOMIC RESILIENCE



Improving livelihoods for forcibly displaced persons and host communities

Challenges

- Limited access to work, information, and services
- Limited regularization avenues to access formal employment
- Vulnerabilities and limited services in host communities
- Xenophobia

Outcomes

- Resilience, empowerment, and protection
- Social cohesion
- Regained dignity
- Economic growth

Context

The constant inflow of refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced people to countries under the Multi Country Office in Panama places great strains on host communities and puts them at risk of increasing already existing vulnerabilities and deficiencies. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate socioeconomic impact on the forcibly displaced. This global phenomenon has shone a light on the need for refugees to build self-reliance and economic resilience through employment, business opportunities and financial inclusion. It has also made it clear that investments within host communities are the more necessary to ensure resilience. Since the beginning of the health crisis, they have endured disruptions in livelihoods and income, have faced challenges in covering basic needs, and have often felt forced into returns in adversity or negative coping mechanisms.

In 2021, displaced persons continue to face challenges to pursue livelihoods, including the lack of access to the right to work, and ongoing restrictions on non-essential businesses and the informal sector of the economy. Persistent displacement crises continue to contribute to movements of people even when borders remained

closed. The current situation has resulted to be a favorable setting for human trafficking and exploitation in various countries under MCO Panama. According to the most recent [Trafficking in Persons Report](#), Venezuelan, Central American, Cuban, and other Caribbean refugees and migrants are currently amongst the most at-risk of trafficking, exploitation, and forced labour.

UNHCR has identified improving livelihoods as a key component of achieving protection and solutions outcomes for refugees, as a major driver of inclusion. Therefore, it has built its response on vocational training, employability, entrepreneurial and financial literacy programmes; advocacy with both private and public sectors, as well as civil society; and targeted cash-based interventions to help refugees, asylum-seekers and locals become more self-reliant.

UNHCR continues to promote livelihoods and economic inclusion, to help build self-reliance of displaced persons by empowering them to meet their needs in a safe, sustainable, and dignified manner, preparing them to lead independent and fulfilling lives, as well as contribute to host communities and to local economies.

Milestones

Seeking to promote local integration and livelihood alternatives to strengthen income generating activities for both refugee and host communities:

In **Belize**, during 2021, 101 refugees and asylum-seekers participated in small business training sessions and vocational and skill building trainings. Of them, 43 have started their businesses and received start-up kits. In **Guyana**, more than 100 vulnerable Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and host communities have participated in a face masks production project. Since mid-2020, the individuals produced over 50,000 cloth face masks. Facilitating sustainability of the project, 70 sewing machines were donated to participants to continue their income-generating activities. In **Panama**, UNHCR, Microserfin – a financial institution – and the Panamanian Red Cross renewed their MoU to strengthen future collaboration for the micro credit and financial inclusion programme. Furthermore, as of July 2021, 66 refugees and host community members graduated from the employability programme Talento sin Fronteras, where they enhanced their job seeking skills, and gained knowledge on curriculum construction and personal branding. Finally, UNHCR, HIAS and City of Knowledge Foundation held a “Refugee Market” to promote the businesses, skills, and abilities that refugees and asylum-seekers have. All entrepreneurs participating in the market were strengthened through UNHCR supported livelihood programmes such as Canal de Empresarias. In **Trinidad and Tobago**, during the first semester of 2021 UNHCR partner Living Water Community (LWC) conducted a market labour assessment that identified the need of refugees and migrants to integrate into the labour force particularly in sectors like agriculture, agro-processing, retail and distribution, and personal care.

Financial gaps

The number of people of concern to UNHCR continues growing and the economic aftershocks of COVID-19 exacerbated the vulnerability of those with the least means. In this context, overall needs in most operations largely exceed available resources. In the absence of sufficient funding, prioritization of immediate and urgent assistance may negatively impact work on resilience and long-term solutions.

For more information contact

Renee Cuijpers, Deputy Representative, cuijpers@unhcr.org

Diana Diaz Rodriguez, Associate Communications Officer, diazdi@unhcr.org

With additional sufficient funding and support, UNHCR could

improve self-reliance and livelihoods for forcibly displaced populations through enhanced access to self or wage-earning employment, including the following:

- **13 projects** supporting livelihoods for over 2,500 refugees, asylum-seekers, other displaced populations, and host communities (people of concern)
- **100 people of concern** provided with language training for livelihoods purposes
- **100 people of concern** provided with entrepreneurship / business training
- **150 people of concern** provided with guidance on labour market opportunities

Country highlights



BELIZE

Belize is home to over 5,000 refugees and asylum-seekers (70% of whom are from El Salvador). Asylum-seekers do not have access to work permits, and therefore cannot opt for formal employment opportunities. In response, UNHCR delivers livelihood training to enhance self-reliance. This includes courses on technical, vocational and language skills, which aim to support inclusion. In May 2021, the Government announced that roughly 600 asylum-seekers who have been recommended for refugee status will be granted a special work permit and access to work rights in the banana, sugar, and citrus industries. This decision comes at a time where countries across Central America strive to recover from the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prioritized specific needs

- Develop community-based livelihoods interventions for both persons of concern and host communities to facilitate access to the informal economy through skills enhancement, business training, and micro-business start-up kits.
- Facilitate access to English-as-Second Language (ESL) education and training, as well as technical vocational education and training (TVET).

There are approximately 23,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Guyana. Even as borders remained closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the country continued to receive the constant outflow of Venezuelan refugees and migrants. In a country like Guyana, where both displaced and host populations depend greatly on the informal sector, the economic impact of the health crisis and related restrictive measures have increased vulnerabilities and severely affected people's ability to cover basic needs. UNHCR has carried out advocacy actions targeting organizations such as the Guyana Revenue Authority to facilitate information for refugees on the obtainment of Tax Identification Number certificates to aide in access to employment, basic services, and business development.

GUYANA

Prioritized specific needs

- Strengthen livelihoods programming by conducting a socio-economic assessment, context analysis, market analysis, and institutional mapping,
- Ensure protection and solutions through comprehensive and integrated livelihoods programmes

PANAMA

Panama is home to more than 15,500 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly coming from Colombia, El Salvador, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. By 2021, 128,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants are estimated to be living in the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees and asylum-seekers in Panama have faced new and exacerbated risks. Asylum-seekers do not have access to work permits, and therefore cannot opt for formal employment opportunities. According to the 2020 protection monitoring, only 4% of respondents were formally employed in Panama, 48% is still unemployed in 2021 and 30% work in the informal sector for an average of 2-3 days a week. Thus, daily subsistence has become challenging after overall loss of livelihoods during the health crisis. In this sense, in 2021, UNHCR strengthened partnerships to promote micro credit opportunities and financial inclusion for refugees and asylum-seekers, as well as support livelihood programmes focusing on both entrepreneurship and employability for those with access to work permits.

Prioritized specific needs

- Ensure continuity of employability programmes and promote skills certification and academic growth of refugees and asylum-seekers.
- Strengthen alliances with other organizations to develop entrepreneurship interventions, create and strengthen business plans, sales and marketing spaces, and local integration.
- Carry out job fairs and sensitization sessions for private sector.
- Carry out advocacy activities with local and central authorities to eliminate restrictions and obstacles for employability and entrepreneurship.

Over 20,600 refugees and asylum-seekers are currently registered with UNHCR (86% of whom are Venezuelan); the vast majority is in an employable age. Although borders were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 through March 2021, Venezuelans continued to arrive irregularly and with heightened needs. The health and economic crises triggered prolonged loss of livelihoods among displaced people; in response, the Government implemented social assistance initiatives directed solely at nationals and permanent residents, excluding non-nationals in irregular situations. According to May 2021 data, applications for food assistance increased by roughly 750% compared to the previous month, and many were at a heightened risk of food insecurity, eviction, and lack of access to basic services and income generating activities.

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

Prioritized specific needs

- Conduct vocational training and financial literacy programmes, as well as English as a Second Language classes, and boost entrepreneurship
- Strengthen advocacy with authorities to extend the validity of the work permit exemptions for registered Venezuelans and to grant work permit exemptions to all refugees and migrants.
- Strengthen advocacy with the private sector, civil society, and employer associations.
- Deliver targeted cash-based interventions to help refugees and migrants become more self-reliant and less dependent on UNHCR cash assistance.