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Real-Time Evaluation of UNICEF Multi-Country Response to Children on the Move in Latin America and the Caribbean

Evaluation Report

Real-Time Evaluation of UNICEF Multi-Country Response to Children on the Move in Latin America and the Caribbean

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For further information, please contact:

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
evalhelp@unicef.org

Evaluation Management

The regional exercise was commissioned by UNICEF Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO) and managed by the following staff.

Michael Craft	Regional Evaluation Advisor, UNICEF LACRO
Roberto Rodriguez Melendez	Programme Manager, UNICEF LACRO

Evaluation Team

The independent consulting team consisted of the following members from the firm Universal Management Group who supported the evaluation.

Beement Alemayehu	Evaluator
Rosa Cheng	Costa Rica evaluation Team Lead
Lissom Huang	Project Assistant
Charlotte Mines	Data Analyst
Alejandra Morales	Research Assistant Costa Rica
Katrina Rojas	Project Director and Quality Assurance
Virginia Thomas	Senior Evaluator
Mónica Treviño	Regional evaluation Team Lead

Evaluation Focal Points

UNICEF staff across the Latin America and Caribbean region served as focal points for coordinating matters related to the implementation of the evaluation at the country level – such as providing access to information and supporting data collection coordination – notably in the six countries that served as deep dives for analysis.

Raquel Barrientos	Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, UNICEF Costa Rica
Eva Prado	Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, UNICEF Mexico
Mariia Matsepa	Chief of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, UNICEF Brazil
Rubén Dario Narciso Cruz	Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, UNICEF Guatemala
Sergio Riaga Guerrero	Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, UNICEF Colombia
Patrice Bosso	Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, UNICEF Eastern Caribbean

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Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
CAPMiR	Centro de Atención a Personas Migrantes y Refugiadas
CATEM	Temporary Migrant Care Centre (Centro de Atención Temporal a Migrantes)
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
CCCs	Core Commitments for Children
CECOT	Terrorism Confinement Centre (Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo)
CERF	United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund
CO	Country Office
CoM	Children on the Move
COMAR	Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados)
CMAPS	Community Mobilization Strategy with Adolescent Participation
CPD	Country Programme Document
CPE	Country Programme Evaluation
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
ECA	Eastern Caribbean Area
ECHO	The Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ERAM	Migrant Response Teams (Equipos de Respuesta a Migrantes)
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HAC	Humanitarian Appeal for Children
HDN	Humanitarian-Development Nexus
HIAS	Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
HNRP	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
HPM	Humanitarian Performance Monitoring
IBC-HM	Issue-based Coalition on Human Mobility
ICBF	Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDAC	International Data Alliance for Children
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
KIs	Key Informants
LAC	Latin America and Caribbean
LACR	Latin America and Caribbean Region

LACRO	Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office
MCO	Multi-Country Office
MEB	Minimum Expenditure Basket
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
MMM	Mixed Movements Monitoring
MRF	Migrant Registration Framework
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OECD-DAC	The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development -Development Assistance Committee
PANI	National Child Welfare Agency (Patronato Nacional de la Infancia)
PPNNA	Child Protection Authority (Procuradurias de Protección de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes) - Mexico
PRM	Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
ProLAC	Protection for Latin America and the Caribbean
R4V	Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela
RMRP	Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan
RO	Regional Office
ROMP	Regional Office Management Plan
RTE	Real-Time Evaluation
RSSN	Regional Safe Spaces Network
SBS	The Secretariat of Social Welfare of the Presidency of the Republic (Secretaria de Bienestar Social de la Presidencia de la República) - Guatemala
SIPPINA	The National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (Secretaría Ejecutiva del Sistema Nacional de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes) - Mexico
SNDIF/DIF	National Social Welfare Agency (Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia)- Mexico
SOSEP	The Secretariat of Social Work of the Wife of the President of the Republic of Guatemala (Secretaría de Obras Sociales de la Esposa del Presidente de la República de Guatemala)
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
TOR	Terms of Reference
TPS	Temporary Protected Status
UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
UFA	Utilization-Focused Approach
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WINAD	Women’s Institute for Alternative Development
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive Summary


This Real-Time Evaluation assessed UNICEF’s multi-country response to children on the move in Latin America and the Caribbean during a period of significant disruption resulting from abrupt donor funding suspensions, shifting migration dynamics, and increasingly restrictive political and operational environments.

Evaluation framework

The evaluation examined relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and strategic positioning, with a focus on UNICEF’s capacity to adapt programmatically, operationally, and strategically under evolving conditions. It looked at three evaluation questions:

1. How ready and able is UNICEF to respond to evolving context?
2. What practices and/or principles can enable UNICEF to implement a migration response that effectively responds to the current context and in the longer term?
3. What are the internal and external factors affecting, or likely to affect, performance?

Data collection methods and analysis

 Key informant interviews	 Document review, including assessments, donor reports, Humanitarian Appeal for Children and Children on the Move protocols
 Focus group discussions	 Short polls
 181 stakeholders consulted from UNICEF, public institutions, Child-friendly Spaces co-ordinators, partners such as IOM and UNHCR	 Deep dives in 6 countries: Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago
 17 of 48 child-friendly safe spaces (espacios seguros) assessed	 Real-time interaction through meetings with migration working groups

Overall findings

UNICEF demonstrated **strong contextual awareness and operational agility**, rapidly pivoting from a route-based transit model to a **protection, inclusion, and reintegration-oriented approach** better aligned with the emerging needs of stranded, returning, and deported children (see Findings 1, 2, 4, and 10). This pivot—supported by decentralized decision-making and the 2025 Humanitarian Action for Children reprioritization exercise—ensured continued relevance and mandate alignment despite contraction in scale and coverage.

UNICEF’s **highest value and most durable impact** emerged when it acted as a **technical enabler and systems partner**, rather than a direct service provider. Government-owned or co-produced models such as *Espacios Seguros* and community-based psychosocial services in Costa Rica and Brazil demonstrated **institutional sustainability and replication potential** when supported by UNICEF’s technical expertise,

standard-setting, and inter-sectoral coordination (see Findings 7, 11, and 12). Integrated, multisectoral service delivery models targeting reintegration and social inclusion—combining child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, identity documentation, and education pathways—proved particularly effective in addressing complex and evolving needs (see Findings 11, 13, and 14).

However, the response faced **structural constraints** that limited scale, continuity, and evidence-based decision-making, including: (a) suspension of regional monitoring and data systems, (b) vulnerability arising from reliance on a narrow donor base, (c) weakened civil society partnerships, and (d) reduced direct access to affected children due to operational drawdown (see Findings 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10). These constraints affected UNICEF's ability to maintain situational awareness, ensure uninterrupted services, and measure medium-term outcomes, especially in locations where program delivery was reduced or transitioned prematurely.

Lessons learned and implications

The evaluation identifies several cross-cutting lessons that should inform future strategy. UNICEF's **agile and adaptive modalities** were essential to maintaining relevance in a fluid context; however, these relied on ad-hoc leadership and should be institutionalized for future crisis response. Sustainability was strongest when UNICEF prioritized **system-strengthening and institutionalization**, while **data system fragility, partnership vulnerability, and political-economy pressures** emerged as core risks to continuity. Additionally, effective reintegration and inclusion required **integrated service models** rather than siloed sectoral interventions, validating UNICEF's multi-sector comparative advantage.

Overall conclusion

The evaluation confirms that UNICEF maintained **strategic relevance, operational adaptability, and normative leadership** in the Latin America and Caribbean migration space. To maximize future impact, UNICEF should continue evolving from short-term humanitarian delivery toward **sustained systems transformation, integrated service models, and regional knowledge leadership**, underpinned by resilient data ecosystems and diversified partnerships. This pivot positions UNICEF as a **regional catalyst for durable, scalable, and child-sensitive migration and reintegration systems**, even under fiscal and political uncertainty.

Forward-looking strategic recommendations

Considering these findings, lessons, and conclusions, the evaluation makes six strategic recommendations, emphasizing that UNICEF should:

- **Consolidate its role as a convener and technical enabler** of child-sensitive migration and reintegration systems at national and sub-national levels, with a focus on co-production and institutionalization rather than sustained direct delivery.
- **Scale and systematize integrated multisector service delivery models** for reintegration and inclusion of migrant and returnee children, leveraging community structures, national systems, and costed modular packages.
- **Establish a regional knowledge and learning platform** to strengthen data-driven decision-making, system resilience, and South-South exchange, while addressing past evidence and monitoring gaps.

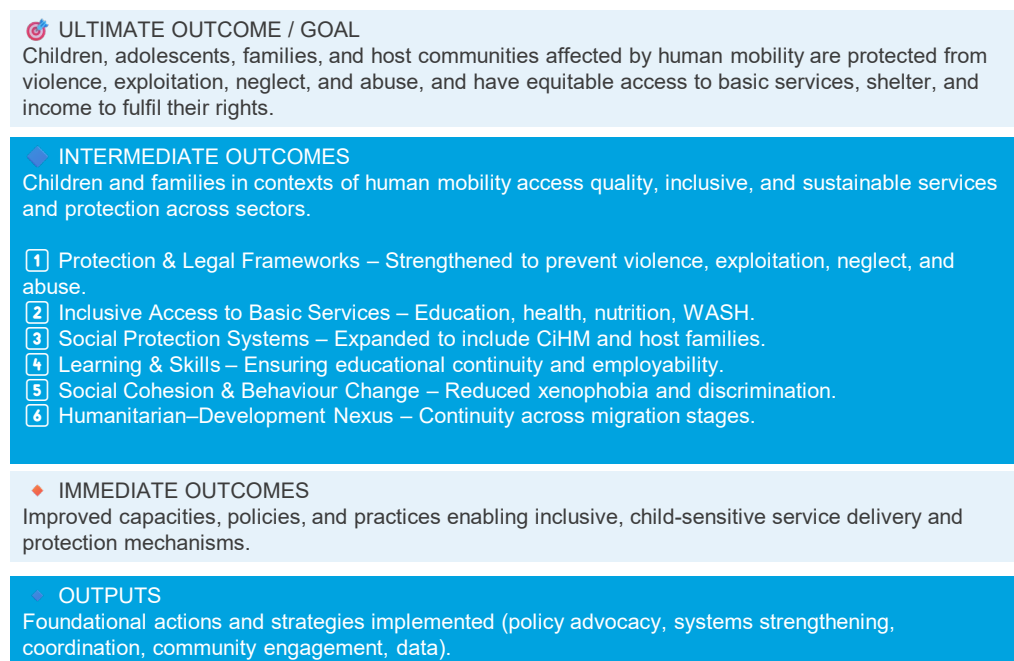
1 Introduction

This report presents the results of the Real-Time Evaluation of the UNICEF Multi-Country Response to Children on the Move in Latin America and the Caribbean, which was conducted by an independent team from Universal Management Group between December 2024 and September 2025. Volume I presents the background, methodological approach, findings in response to the evaluation questions, conclusions and recommendations. Volume II comprises all annexes referenced in this report.

1.1 Object of the evaluation

The evaluation covered UNICEF’s multi-country response to children on the move in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region from 2022 to 2025. This response includes the **provision of essential services** on health, nutrition, education, and safe water and sanitation services along migration routes and in host communities; as well as **promoting protection** of children’s rights, including access to protection and care services related to psychosocial support, case management, and gender-based violence.¹ Figure 1 presents a summary of the **strategic framework** and intended results of the response’s various interventions.

Figure 1 Simplified theory of change for children in contexts of human mobility²

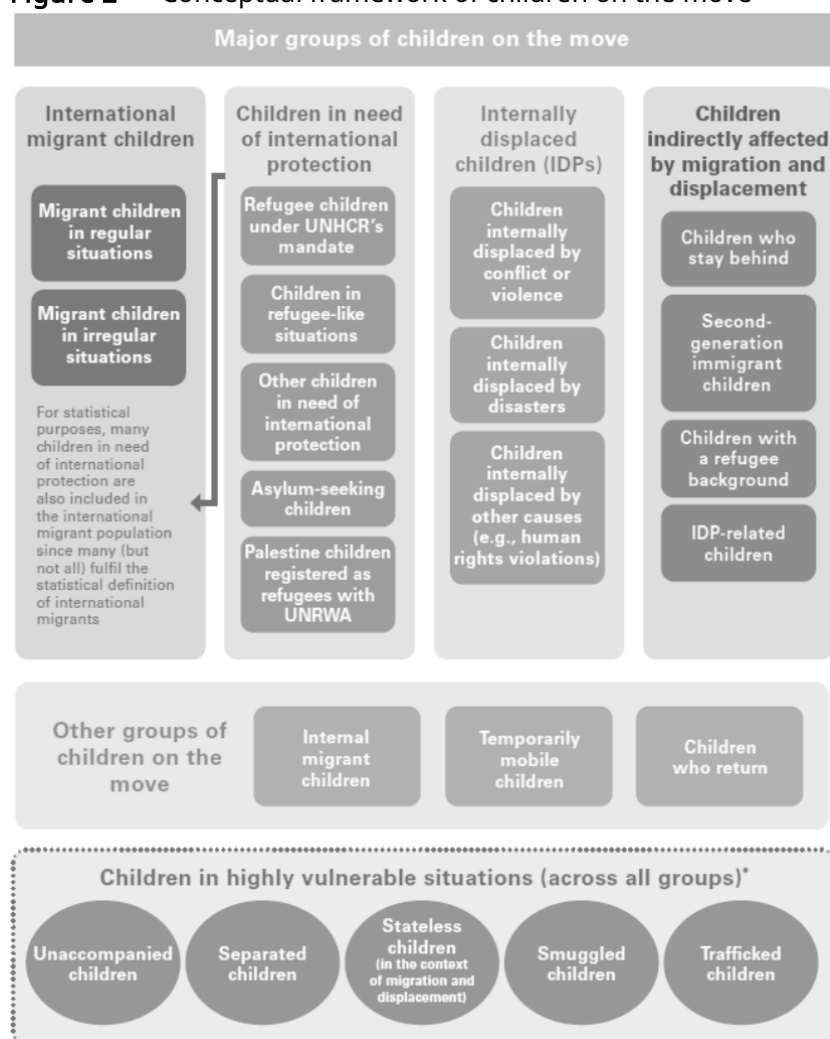


UNICEF’s response to children on the move in Latin America and the Caribbean works across 16 **diverse country offices** (COs) – ranging from small island development states in the Caribbean to larger countries such as Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil – each with **distinct migratory movements**. UNICEF responds across all sectors and within the humanitarian-development nexus, addressing both the urgent needs of migrants in crisis, and the longer-term institutional capacity for integration as well as root causes of displacement in the region. Through its integrated response to migration, UNICEF reported **reaching more than a million children in 2024** and mobilizing over \$100 million dollars for migration specific programming through the Humanitarian Action for Children appeal (HAC).³

UNICEF defines children on the move broadly, as shown in Figure 2, and uses this concept when considering beneficiaries of migration response work. UNICEF’s definition is sourced from the International Data Alliance (IDAC) and shared by other international partners working in this area such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The definitional framework for children on the move includes **children impacted by migration in diverse ways**, including those affected directly (e.g., in transit), indirectly (e.g. left behind by migrating parents), migrating internationally, and internally displaced.

Figure 2 Conceptual framework of children on the move⁴



Considering external policy changes in 2025 with a significant impact on this area of work, the real-time evaluation's object was revised to focus on assessing **UNICEF readiness and capacity** in LAC to adapt its response to children on the move to the changing landscape.

1.2 Context of the intervention

UNICEF's response to migration in LAC has faced **significant contextual changes** over the last several years at political, strategic, financial, and operational levels. In response to a protracted migration crisis in the region over the past decade, in 2024, UNICEF was undergoing a shift in its response towards a route-based approach together with global partners. It aimed to strengthen protection and support for children on the move, addressing their needs from their country of origin, along transit routes, and at their destination. However, the cooperation landscape drastically changed in 2025 with the **reduction of overseas development assistance (ODA)** globally. The migration response in LAC has historically benefited from United States government humanitarian assistance from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), including funding partners working with refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons and other migrants.⁵ Significant policy shifts of

the United States and other traditional government donors – including France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom⁶ – led to a rapid decrease in ODA.

1.2.1 Political unpredictability and rising anti-migrant sentiment

The regional political context in LAC has been characterized by increasingly anti-migrant rhetoric, which presents significant challenges for the development and implementation of a **coherent rights-based migration approach**. Governments have instituted policies that increasingly restrict human mobility. Earlier in the Venezuelan outflow crisis, host countries (e.g., Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Chile and the United States), took steps towards integration by expanding legal pathways for migration, conducting regularization campaigns, and providing protected status to migrants with access to public services and employment.⁷ Many of those efforts have since stalled or been reversed.^{8,9} Over the past several years, **anti-migrant rhetoric** in the political sphere has been escalating with leaders campaigning heavily on border security and immigration restriction as main components of their policy platforms.¹⁰ As the funding and legal landscape for migration shifted, **migration flows also transformed**. This has modified the location and number of children on the move, as well as their legal status, thus creating a shifting and uncertain set of needs that UNICEF is seeking to address.

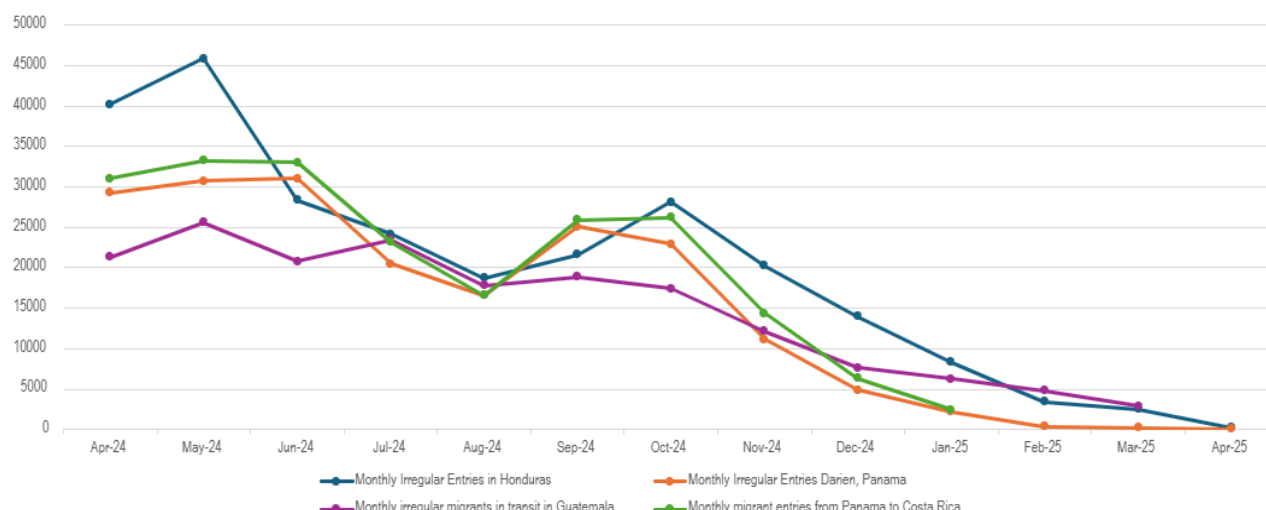
Migration flows have changed from a steady northward flow to returns, reintegration, and stranded migrants experiencing protracted displacement.

Migration flows through Latin America grew consistently following the COVID-19 pandemic. Encounters with irregular migrants in Mexico rose by nearly 200 per cent from 2021-2024.¹¹ Encounters with irregular migrants on the United States southern border rose by even more over that period.¹² Further south, irregular crossings from Colombia to Panama through the Darien Gap rose 289 per cent from 2021 to 2023. More than 20 per cent of the 520,000 recorded crossing in 2023 were children.¹³ Beginning in the middle of 2024 and accelerating sharply in early 2025, **migration flows have decreased and redirected**. Many are looking to **return or remain** rather than continue in transit towards their initial destinations. Traditional countries of origin and transit are now destinations, while typical destinations are seeing both forced and voluntary outflow. These changes **require swift adaptation of services provided by humanitarian actors**, moving from serving migrants in transit to those who are stranded, returning home or looking to settle longer term. While each country in the region experiences these shifts in migration differently, there are several consistent regional trends that are affecting children on the move and UNICEF's ability to respond appropriately to their needs in this new context.

Declining migration northward and northward migrants demographic shift towards single men and extra-regional migrants.

At key migration points along the route north through Central America, reports of **irregular migrant entries and encounters fell dramatically** from the fall of 2024. In six months, from October 2024 to April 2025, irregular entries to Panama through the Darien fell more than 99 per cent, totalling just 73 entries in April 2025.¹⁴ This effect has rippled northwards, with data from Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico all illustrating unprecedented declines in migrant transit. This decline was mirrored in Honduras, where irregular entries to the country plummeted from more than 28,000 in October 2024 to just 227 in April 2025.¹⁵

Figure 3 Migrant entrance flows between LAC countries, April 2024 - April 2025



Source: Evaluation Team calculations from IOM DTM and government data sources

The **profiles of migrants** in transit have also shifted, with greater proportions of adults and males, and smaller proportions of women and children crossing the Darien in 2025 than in 2024.¹⁶ While migration flows north have comprised primarily Venezuelans over the last decade, recent data shows a transition underway with far fewer Venezuelans undertaking the journey through Central America with an increasing proportion of migrants from outside of the region, according to data from Panama. Similar decreases in the proportion of Venezuelan migrants at other border crossings are notable. Overall, fewer would-be migrants are willing to make the multi-country journey northward due to various factors. Mexican nationals are now the most common nationality of irregular migrants at the United States southern border, going from about one-quarter in late 2024 to almost 80 per cent in April 2025.¹⁷

1.2.2 Increase in stranded migrants and returnees, through reverse migration, voluntary return and deportation

While overall migration flows have fallen, entry statistics across land borders do not tell the whole story. Most migration monitoring is done at border points along traditionally trafficked northward routes. Movement through these routes has unequivocally decreased, but migrants have not disappeared. Rather, many moving north were stranded along the way or decided to turn around. Understanding the scale and composition of these groups is challenging, and reverse migration often occurs along lesser-known routes to avoid detection with greater proportions of returnees using air and maritime travel.¹⁸ Accordingly, reverse **migration southward has exponentially increased** in LAC as a proportion of overall migrant flows. Changes in policy by the United States in 2025 triggered this shift, and changes in migration policies of other governments have also led to increased deportations that raise concerns.¹⁹

Changes in migration flows increase vulnerability for returnees, and notably raise concerns for unaccompanied and separated children.

Returning migrants have limited options, many with far fewer resources to undertake the journey back than they had for their initial transit. Their increased needs to undertake return, compounded by insufficient resources from aid organizations and governments, and consistently risky transit options, have resulted in **high vulnerabilities among reverse migration populations**. According to multiple interviews, this is a different demographic of beneficiaries with distinct needs, made up of children, adolescents and youth who have lost hope, in some cases having experienced trauma on their outbound route, and now returning or finding themselves trapped; many have significant needs for psycho-social support.

In early 2025, nearly 8,000 persons crossed back through the Darien Gap to Colombia,²⁰ only to find limited support to receive them, with non-government organizations (NGOs) and government

services at the border having shut down operations.²¹ Lack of resources and services available from north to south has driven returning migrants to take even more dangerous routes to their countries of origin. Among surveyed returning migrants, 46 per cent reported engaging smuggler services to facilitate their journey home, a noticeably greater percentage than reported by migrants moving north.^{22,23} Furthermore, a larger proportion of migrants returning undertake the **precarious maritime routes** from Central to South America, leading to deadly shipwrecks.²⁴

While some migrants have the ability to self-initiate return using their own resources, and others choose to remain within transit countries, many others' **reverse journeys are facilitated by authorities** in the region, either by international organizations and host governments assisting in voluntary return, or by state actors enforcing removal through deportation either to their country of origin or to another country willing to take them. In this respect, IOM resumed in February 2025 its assisted voluntary return (AVR) programme in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama, prioritizing safe return and community integration.²⁵

The **vulnerability of deported individuals** is a concern for the international community. While most countries provide some level of reintegration services to citizen returnees, such as the *Mexico Te Abraza* programme, many migrants are being sent to third countries to which they have no ties, which can expose them to greater vulnerabilities removal. Mexico, Panama, El Salvador and others have accepted significant numbers of foreign deportees from the United States, most of whom have been detained without access to international organizations or legal representation. As of June 2025, more than 8,000 people have been deported to countries that are not their country of origin.²⁶

Another notable pattern is the **increase in deportation of unaccompanied children**. A small minority of those deported from the United States to Mexico are children, and that proportion has fallen from 18 per cent in September 2024 to 5 per cent in February 2025, with the proportion of women deported showing a similar decline. However, the proportion of deported children who are unaccompanied has increased by more than 100 per cent over the same period, from 36 per cent to 78 per cent. In May 2025, nearly 60 per cent of children returned to Guatemala from the United States and Mexico were unaccompanied.²⁷

There is an expansive immigrant detention system throughout Central America. Mexico in particular, supports a large network for migrant detention and expulsion, with hundreds of thousands of migrants scattered across thousands of facilities across the country, in spite of legal reforms which explicitly prohibit the detention of children in migration holding centres.²⁸ Guatemala also engages in significant deportations of irregular migrants, with more than 25,000 deported in 2024.²⁹ Mirroring the United States trend, overall deportation levels in both these countries have fallen in 2025, though deportation profiles from these countries also indicate significant vulnerability concerns. In the first three months of 2025, more than 20 per cent of deportees from Mexico were children (1 in 5 of whom were unaccompanied).³⁰

Refer to **Annex 10** for a complementary more detailed contextual analysis to this section.

2 Purpose, objectives and scope

2.1 Purpose

The original purpose of this evaluation was twofold: (i) support learning regarding UNICEF’s multi-country response to migration and displacement of children in the LAC region with a focus on areas that require a coordinated action among UNICEF offices; and (b) strengthen UNICEF’s accountability for results to affected populations, particularly women and children, as well as to strategic partners supporting the overall response in the region. This dual purpose was intended to support UNICEF’s efforts in the region to articulate a strategic shift towards a route-based approach to migration and displacement. To respond to this, the evaluation’s overall objective was to assess the relevance/appropriateness, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability/connectedness of UNICEF’s multi-country response .

However, the **evaluation purpose was reframed** given the contextual changes. Indeed, considering the likelihood of continued policy instability and of significantly reduced resources for the foreseeable future, the original approach to the evaluation was no longer fit for purpose. In particular, the route-based approach that initially framed the evaluation became less relevant, including due to the disruption of traditional migration routes have been disrupted. While still useful, past lessons may no longer be sufficient for future planning, and needs assessments conducted prior to January 2025 are unlikely to capture the changes in the needs landscape. To sharpen the utility and real-time intent of this exercise, the evaluation was refocused on understanding **what UNICEF will be best positioned and able to do in the future in this new context** considering more limited resources in ways that:

- Maximize the impact (effectiveness/efficiency) of UNICEF’s capacities in the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO) and Country Offices (COs)
- Maximize the impact (effectiveness/efficiency) of UNICEF’s interventions (including service provision, technical assistance, advocacy) in the region
- Reproduce/adapt good practices in terms of service provision, alignment with and/or strengthening of national systems (and therefore national policies and priorities), and reach the most vulnerable children, specifically focusing on contexts of (re)integration³¹ and the best use of resources (sustainability)

Table 1 Changes to the evaluation purpose and scope compared to the original Terms of Reference

Original Terms of Reference	Evaluation Adaptation Post January 2025
Route-Based Approach framing	Framing based on emerging needs of migrants including emphasizing psychosocial services, integration and reintegration programming and focus on unaccompanied and separated children
Use of relevant evidence base from 2022-2024	Refocus to change in migration patterns and political context in 2025 and how current UNICEF capacities are fit for purpose and how programming can continue in the new environment
Included field missions to key country cases	Resources for evaluation were reduced, in-person travel was no longer possible and instead the evaluation team conducted five virtual country deep dives to respond to specific needs of COs and complement the country-level evaluation of the Child-Friendly Safe Spaces in Costa Rica (see Section 2.2), and which serves here as a case study
Extensive real time modalities including dashboard for continual evaluation knowledge sharing and feedback	Real time methodological components included working group meetings, presentations to senior management, and participatory polling of CO staff in group settings, as well as a sense-making workshop on recommendations.

In terms of the **use dimensions** of the exercise, the evaluation is intended to have a strong learning component, with a view to generating timely data, providing learning on key elements of UNICEF’s

response and, in turn, support the decision-making process of UNICEF senior management as the situation in the region evolves. The **primary intended users** for this evaluation are UNICEF CO senior management in LAC, UNICEF CO technical teams, planning, monitoring and evaluation units, and UNICEF LACRO technical teams and senior management. **Secondary users** include national and local authorities, United Nations, donors, and other development partners, partner NGOs and other civil society organizations. Despite the shifts in context and scope of the evaluation exercise, these stakeholders are still relevant users.

2.2 Scope

During the inception phase, and due to the change in context, the evaluation team adjusted the scope of the evaluation across three dimensions:

1. **Thematic Scope** covering distinct facets of the multi-country response: cross-border coordination, including advocacy efforts; access to multi-country humanitarian services along migration routes, internal coordination and ensuring installed capacity; promotion of inclusion and integration in host communities. In addition, thematic adjustments were made in the approach to each of the five deep-dive countries, based on the interests expressed by those COs. These deep dives are complemented by a case study in Costa Rica focusing on Child-Friendly Safe Spaces.³²
2. **Temporal Scope** covering primarily the 2022-2025 period; the 2017-2021 period was also considered via analysis of existing evidence, such as relevant evaluations and other secondary sources of information.
3. **Geographic Scope** covering operations of UNICEF LACRO and COs involved in the multi-country response. In-person field work was carried out only in Costa Rica, where a country-level evaluation of the Support Centers model was carried out under the chapeau of this regional evaluation. In addition to Costa Rica, another five countries – Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago – were covered through desk review and virtual interviews and consultations.

3 Design and methodology

The evaluation was framed, as per the initial Terms of Reference, as a **real-time exercise**. Both this approach and shifting context required the team to be flexible in **reframing evaluation questions** and applying approaches and methodologies that responded to early findings and changing circumstances in the region and country contexts. Key elements of the team’s approach are outlined below.

Utilization-focused approach

The evaluation adopted a utilization-focused approach, with the objective to ensure that the evaluation is **useful to its intended users** in terms of providing learning, informing decisions, and improving performance. The team conducted this exercise according to the different uses and purposes identified in the TOR but also reflected the changes in focus emanating from the evolving context. For example, more emphasis was placed on themes related to **(re)integration and inclusion**, capacity needs to respond to a context of “reverse migration” of nationals and transit returnees, and a focus on policies in addition to implementation.

Participatory approach

By nature, a real-time evaluation requires a participatory approach, which emphasizes the involvement of stakeholders in **joint sense-making** of evaluation data and findings, co-development of recommendations, and fostering of ownership of evaluation findings and recommendations. The utilization focus requires meaningful engagement of potential users throughout the evaluation. The team engaged, to the extent possible, in participatory approaches to enrich the quality of the evaluation by collecting data from the widest possible representation of stakeholders involved in the multi-country response and to elicit the perspectives of the families of children on the move as part of the perspective of accountability to affected populations. However, direct consultation with affected populations was only possible in the context of the fieldwork conducted in Costa Rica. The evaluation team participated in and elicited feedback from participants in two meetings of the UNICEF Migration Working Group in LAC, as well as in the webinar “Desafíos y buenas prácticas en los procesos de retorno y reintegración de la niñez en movimiento en LAC” (see also Section 3.3 below).

3.1 Evaluation framework

The focus of the evaluation was on gaining a better understanding of the new context and its effects on the needs of children on the move, as well as on UNICEF’s ability to respond to this changed and unpredictable context. Therefore, the evaluation addressed three main evaluation questions:

4. How ready and able is UNICEF to respond to evolving context?

The evaluation addressed the themes of adaptation in general, consolidation of emergency programmes, and degree of alignment/complementarity and/or integration with national systems, which allowed the evaluation to assess the prospects for on-going relevance of UNICEF’s response to the migration in LAC and to the evolving context.

5. What practices and/or principles can enable UNICEF to implement a migration response that effectively responds to the current context and in the longer term?

This question sought to identify promising practices in addressing the needs of children, especially the most vulnerable, in contexts that are comparable to the current regional context. Such practices may be present in COs or LACRO. The evaluation sought to identify these practices from the recent past, and as far as possible contemplated recent innovations/adaptations in response to the current situation. The purpose of identifying such practices was to understand what can be adapted or replicated. The

key criterion for assessment was effectiveness (the extent to which they have met or are meeting their objectives in terms of service provision, advocacy, technical assistance, and policy or institutional changes). The evaluation sought to identify practices representing the full scope of activities conducted by UNICEF LACRO and COs.

6. What are the internal and external factors affecting, or likely to affect, performance?

The evaluation identified the factors that affect performance in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability based on a conceptual framework³³ that allows for assessment of **factors affecting organizational performance** along three key dimensions: the enabling environment, organizational capacity, and organizational motivation, as indicated in the figure below.

Figure 4 Organizational assessment model



Source: Organizational Assessment: A Framework for Improving Performance

While a full organizational assessment was not within the scope of the assignment, the evaluation probed respondents for a range of factors such as UNICEF’s organizational and institutional practices related to cooperation, mechanisms for collaboration with other key stakeholders including relevant UN agencies, and economic and political climate. Specifically, these included **internal factors** (e.g., leadership, resource management, operational efficiency, organizational culture, communication); and **external factors** (e.g., political environment, economic conditions, social factors, technological advancements).

3.1.1 Evaluation matrix

The proposed evaluation matrix in **Annex 1** was the guiding framework for the evaluation. It included the three reprioritized questions with related sub-questions, hypotheses that helped focus the evaluation’s inquiry, indicators that informed the basis for judgment, and sources of data. The following table indicates the initial evaluation questions that were removed (i.e., less relevant in the current context) or reframed in the evaluation matrix as sub-questions or indicators (see Annex 1).

Table 2 Correspondence to original evaluation questions

Original Questions (Terms of Reference)	Revised Questions
<p>1. How appropriate is the UNICEF multi-country response to the evolving context and the needs and priorities of migrant and displaced children, especially those in situations of greatest vulnerability?</p> <p>2. What are the lessons, good practices, challenges and adjustments required to ensure that UNICEF's multi-country response remains fit for purpose and addresses community and children's needs, including adapting to an evolving situation?</p> <p>7. How is the UNICEF multi-country response working in alignment with national systems and institutions of countries affected by displacement and migration in the region, and where relevant, regional actors?</p>	<p>Q1. How ready and able is UNICEF to respond to the evolving context?</p>
<p>2. What are the lessons, good practices, challenges and adjustments required to ensure that UNICEF's multi-country response remains fit for purpose and addresses community and children's needs, including adapting to an evolving situation?</p> <p>4. From the perspective of the expected synergies of coordinated multi-country interventions and advocacy, to what extent have UNICEF offices implemented the response to migration and displacement of children through sound, timely and quality sectoral integration and delivery of assistance and services?</p> <p>5. To what extent are relevant UNICEF interventions scalable relative to current coverage, delivery, and existing resources (human and financial), considering that the multi-country response is by nature spread across national borders?</p>	<p>Q2. What practices and/or principles can enable UNICEF to implement a migration response that effectively responds to the current context and in the longer term?</p>
<p>3. To what extent is the UNICEF multi-country response to migration and displacement in the region achieving its objectives and expected results, including sectoral integration any differential results across groups?</p> <p>5. To what extent have recommendations of previous UNICEF evaluations and assessments been implemented effectively, focusing on recurrent issues across offices?</p> <p>6. To what extent are relevant UNICEF interventions scalable relative to current coverage, delivery, and existing resources (human and financial), considering that the multi-country response is by nature spread across national borders?</p> <p>8. To what extent are UNICEF planning, reporting, and implementation systems able to integrate humanitarian/preparedness with development approaches in line with a nexus approach?</p>	<p>Q3. What are the internal and external factors affecting, or likely to affect, performance?</p>

3.2 Evaluation methods

3.2.1 Data collection

The evaluation drew on several qualitative data collection methods: key informant **interviews** (KIIs), **document review**, **focus group discussions** (FGDs), and short **polls** (see Section 3.3 below for more details on real-time modalities). The redirected focus of the evaluation implied modifications to the original proposed workplan in terms of the specific activities to be conducted. These were designed based on the stakeholder mapping conducted during the inception phase to ensure a strong analysis of the stakeholder landscape pertaining to the multi-country response. Given the changes in the evaluation scope summarized above, and the fact that in-country visits were discontinued apart from Costa Rica, the expected number of consultations was reduced from an initial plan of reaching over 300 individuals, including 200 beneficiaries. In total, the evaluation consulted **181 persons** through mixed methods.

Beneficiaries – while key stakeholders – were only included through KIIs and FGDs in Costa Rica. Data collected from UNICEF's beneficiaries was also included through **analysis of secondary data** including Situation Reports, HAC documents, and Mixed Migration Monitoring data among other sources. The evaluation adopted a **purposive sampling** for stakeholder engagement aimed to target an appropriate number of key informants, bearing in mind the reduced level of effort, timeline, stakeholder

fatigue, and the need to optimize data collection. Tables below present summaries of stakeholders consulted through primary data collection. A detailed list is presented in **Annex 4**.

Table 3 Summary of regional stakeholders consulted (polling and KIIs)

	National		National Total	Regional		Regional Total	Grand Total ³⁴
	External	Internal		External	Internal		
F	8	18	26	2	10	12	39
M	8	17	25	1	13	14	39
Total	16	35	51	3	23	26	78

Table 4 Summary of Costa Rica stakeholder consulted (interviews)

Stakeholder Organization	Political Level	Technical Level	Total Number of Stakeholders
UNICEF	1	7	8
Public Institutions	2	10	12
CFS Coordinators	0	4	4
Implementing Partners	2	5	7
Cooperating Agencies	0	3	3
Consultants	0	1	1
Total	5	30	35

Table 5 Summary of regional and Costa Rica stakeholder consultations by type

Regional polling	Regional KIIs	Costa Rica KIIs	Costa Rica FDGs	Total stakeholders
20	78	35	48 (38 F, 10 M)	181

3.2.2 Deep dives

To compensate for the reduction of planned in-country visits and to ensure that sufficient granularity was included in the data collected, a “deep dive” approach was selected. This involved a more focused **examination of aspects of the migration work conducted by UNICEF in five countries** through the conduct of KIIs with relevant UNICEF staff in COs and Field Offices; and analysis of additional country-specific documentation. The countries were selected based on an initial assessment of migration flows, thematic coverage, national context and programmatic interventions, as well as on the availability of COs to engage in the process.³⁵ Countries selected on this basis were Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Trinidad and Tobago. The emphasis of each deep dive was then agreed with each CO.

- **Mexico:** Given the wealth of documentary and evaluative evidence, and the strains of the current context, the deep dive focused on interviews with UNICEF staff, particularly regarding the strengthening of child protection systems and reflections on relevance of programming emphasis and operational models in the new situation.
- **Brazil:** The deep dive responded to CO strategic interest in highlighting the example of UNICEF and partners transitioning out with increased leadership for government, particularly related to the “Súper Panas” as a Child Friendly Spaces approach, guaranteeing continuity of education, psychosocial and mental health support, and protection against violence, as well as the Community Mobilization Strategy with Adolescent Participation (CMAPS) strategy focusing on adolescent and youth participation.
- **Colombia:** The deep dive offered multiple learning opportunities given that migration programming in the country has involved humanitarian and integration dimensions for some time. Furthermore, this country offered some of the strongest protections for migrants as well as access to social services. The deep dive focused on CO work on child protection and prevention of statelessness and considered the nexus approach adopted by the CO.

- **Guatemala:** The deep dive focused on integrated and multisectoral service provision, especially via mobile units, and technical support on norms, standards and services, especially for children and adolescents who are in a situation of return and reintegration to Guatemala.
- **Trinidad and Tobago:** As part of the UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Area (ECA) multi-country office, the country was noted by UNICEF for inclusion as a deep dive with a focus on the ongoing work in education, specifically integration into the public school system, along with reflection on how to improve efficiency in service delivery and improving advocacy.

3.2.2.1 Costa Rica case study

The Costa Rica case served a dual purpose: first as an independent evaluation commissioned by the UNICEF Costa Rica CO, and second as a case study in more depth than the deep dives, contributing concurrently to the broader regional evaluation on UNICEF's response to children on the move. In this second sense, the data collected and analysed for the Costa Rica evaluation was integrated into the analysis for the regional evaluation, with relevant information brought to bear on the development of the findings.

The primary focus of the Costa Rica evaluation was the assessment of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNICEF's Child Friendly Safe Spaces Programme (*Espacios Seguros para la Infancia y la Adolescencia*) within the national context, particularly as the programme transitions toward institutionalization by national and local governmental and civil society actors. As both a standalone evaluation and an in-depth case study within the broader regional evaluation, the Costa Rica component explored UNICEF's engagement at national, sub-national, and service-point levels, including direct service delivery, technical assistance, and advocacy. It included fieldwork, FGDs, and KIIs with stakeholders to examine practices, innovations, and contextual factors influencing programme performance. The findings contributed to programme systematization, informing a theory of change, and guiding discussions on scaling and institutionalizing *Espacios Seguros* in Costa Rica and across the region.

The Costa Rica case study leveraged a coordinated approach with a needs assessment covering 17 of the 48 total *Espacios Seguros* in the country operating with UNICEF support, allowing for data sharing, logistical efficiencies, and reduced burden on communities. Sampling for site visits was based on variables such as type of coordinating organization (public or private), geographic location (urban/rural, border areas, etc.), and type of services offered (e.g., risk protection, psychosocial support, community capacity building). Eight of the 48 *Espacios Seguros* were selected for in-person visits, representing both temporary spaces for migrant populations and integration-focused sites serving both migrants and host communities. Field activities, conducted from April to early May 2025, included semi-structured interviews with national and local stakeholders, direct observation, and FGDs with migrant and host community members. Where the two assessments coincided in the field, the evaluation team facilitated short, complementary segments during FGDs organized by the needs assessment team. Document and data reviews complemented fieldwork, drawing on sources from UNICEF, partners, and migration data platforms. Consultations with the CO team continued into July and August 2025. Further information on the Costa Rica Case methodology can be found in **Annex 3**. The separate evaluation report of this case was published in October 2025.

3.2.3 Data analysis

In addition to descriptive, comparative and contribution analysis, based on the criteria described in the evaluation matrix, the evaluation team employed the following specific analytical lenses: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis, sentiment and thematic analysis. Additional details on the evaluation activities, data analysis and limitations can be found in **Annex 2**.

3.3 Real-time modalities of engagement

Given the rapidly changing context for children on the move work in LAC, the evaluation engaged internal UNICEF stakeholders in real-time throughout the evaluation phases to facilitate data collection

and evaluation feedback. In addition to interviews, the evaluation drew on UNICEF LACRO regional Migration Working Group meetings³⁶ to facilitate communication with primary users, ensuring continuous information sharing, real-time feedback, and participatory interaction throughout the evaluation. Consultations with UNICEF staff highlighted a strong demand for better data and knowledge sharing, and allowed the evaluation to:

- **Disseminate evaluation findings** to present key insights, trends, and preliminary conclusions as they emerged
- **Provide real-time updates** to offer timely information on evaluation progress and UNICEF's migration response
- **Facilitate interactive stakeholder engagement** to enable staff to comment, ask questions, suggest additional data sources, and validate findings without extra reporting burdens, including through interactive visualizations
- **Support participatory decision-making** by allowing UNICEF and the evaluation team to collectively refine findings, conclusions and recommendations and adjust response strategies based on emerging insights
- **Integrate real-time polling** by embedding stakeholder polls within presentations and allowing staff to provide direct feedback and perception data to the evaluation team

For the latter, the team used Mentimeter³⁷ and targeted the polls primarily towards migration focal points within COs to capture a more comprehensive picture of migration work across the region, not only in deep dive countries. These polls aimed to understand staff perceptions of UNICEF's organizational readiness, response effectiveness and resource utilization; compare across CO contexts to identify shared challenges, best practices, and emerging trends; and map partner networks, strengths and weaknesses in UNICEF's response, and assess priorities between and across countries.

By embedding polling directly into working group presentations, UNICEF stakeholders were able to actively engage in the evaluation process, ensuring findings remain relevant, timely and actionable as the regional situation evolves. They could also see in real time aggregate responses to the poll questions, which provoked further discussion and reflection among the stakeholder groups. Through this interactive tool, the team aimed to foster a collaborative, data-driven evaluation process. Poll questions and responses from internal stakeholders are compiled in **Annex 4**.

3.4 Limitations and constraints

The following list provides limitations to the evaluation, as well as a description of the ways and extents to which these mitigated.

Table 6 Limitations, risks and mitigation strategies

Limitations and risks	Mitigation
<p>Data availability and quality: Missing or inconsistent quality data can reduce the evaluation's ability to reflect on the work of all CO participating in the response. In addition, type of existing and on-going data collection by CO (focused on needs) may not provide the information required to answer the evaluation questions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A series of polls targeting all COs were geared towards gathering broader feedback. The COs can also point us to relevant reports or examples of work that need to be considered. • To the extent possible, data collected by COs was complemented with other publicly available data on migration flows and forecasts. • Existing evaluations were also incorporated into this evaluation, to complement in particular information about internal processes within UNICEF at regional and country office levels, while recognising that the information provided predates the current context.

Limitations and risks	Mitigation
<p>Stakeholder Engagement Insufficient engagement of key stakeholders (e.g. due to crisis response and related workload) might lead to a lack of critical insights and lower acceptance of evaluation results.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carefully managed correspondence with and burden on CO. Clearly communicated the purpose and intended uses of the evaluation and the consultations. Avoided duplicating other recently conducted consultations. Nevertheless, some intended stakeholders were either unavailable or only available for limited interactions, and therefore the evaluation is mostly based on UNICEF self-reported information (reports and interviews with UNICEF staff)
<p>Access to affected populations/beneficiaries While hearing the voices of migrants and host communities is critical to this evaluation, the current context will not allow for in-person engagement except in Costa Rica, where only FGDs will take place. The evaluation will have to rely on data available from the Aurora and U Report systems, which may not focus directly on the issues under study, which do not target host communities, and which are no longer being updated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Costa Rica, the evaluation team closely liaised with UNICEF and implementing partners to access migrant and host community members in the selected Espacios Seguros. The evaluation team intended to utilise the Aurora and U Report data to mitigate the absence of host community data collection beyond Costa Rica. However, these data sources were too limited to allow for any generalisation and were therefore omitted.
<p>Effects on affected populations Any interaction with vulnerable populations may represent an unintended risk in terms of exposing them to additional scrutiny from authorities, or of re-traumatization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The evaluation team only interacted with beneficiaries in the context of spaces that were approved or provided by UNICEF and/or its implementation partners. The evaluation team requested that UNICEF and/or its implementation partners provide the presence of specialist psychosocial support personnel during data collection, and/or at a minimum a responsible person with the necessary information and authority to refer cases of concern to the appropriate support services. Unfortunately, this was not possible. Nevertheless, no negative effects of participation in the RTE were observed, and no cases requiring referral were identified.

In addition, the evaluation's future-oriented focus meant that there was not a direct assessment of the causal pathways implicit in the theory of change. Rather, the analysis centred on the adaptations and responses to the changing context that were perceived by stakeholders to have been most able to respond to the changing needs of children experiencing migration.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The evaluation followed United Nations ethical evaluation practices and codes of conduct, including in the context of humanitarian situations with affected and vulnerable populations. The evaluation was guided by a number of ethical normative and guidance materials: OECD-DAC Evaluation Quality Standards for Development Evaluation; UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research; United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards; UNEG Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct for Evaluation; Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide; Sphere Handbook and Standards for Monitoring and Evaluation; and the charter from Ethical Evaluations and Research Involving Children (ERIC). Based on these materials, the team paid particular attention to the following elements:

- Do no harm:** Ensuring that evaluation activities do not put the health or safety of any stakeholders at risk, in particular affected populations. This includes basing decisions on how to safely collect data on the security situation in the countries. The evaluation followed the "Do No Harm Principles" which specifies that the evaluation will avoid questions, attitudes or comments that are judgmental,

insensitive to cultural values, that place a child in danger or expose a child to humiliation, or that reactivate a child's pain and grief from traumatic events.

- **Risk-informed programming:** In addition, the evaluation team consulted the UNICEF Guidance for Risk-Informed Programming (GRIP) in the design of the methodology, including data collection tools, to ensure adequate risk management measures are undertaken to safeguard subjects from potential risks that may be encountered.
- **Ethics towards stakeholders:** The evaluation ensured that it conforms to UNICEF and UNEG ethical standards and norms throughout the evaluation cycle, including by ensuring cultural and linguistic sensitivity, respecting autonomy of participants, seeking the free, prior and informed consent of all respondents, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of the data they share and their identify.
- **Equity:** Ensuring the participation of a wide diversity of stakeholders, purposefully engaging with affected populations, particularly marginalized people (e.g. women, persons with disabilities, extremely poor), and integrating their contributions to the analysis and report.
- **Team members' ethics:** The evaluation ensured that its team members impartially conduct their work, and do not have any potential or perceived conflicts of interest. All team members abided by UNEG Ethical Guidelines and Guidelines on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations. During the inception phase, the team members signed a Confidentiality Statement and a commitment to ethical conduct.
- **Safety and security:** In locations where there are broader security concerns (related to kidnappings or shootings, such as Los Guido and Pavas in the Greater Metropolitan Area of San Jose), the team followed UNICEF's security protocols, including the use of UNICEF or UN vehicles and other security measures. Additionally, the support of the local police was requested to enhance the security of the participants.

The design of the evaluation, including data collection instruments, were subjected to a rigorous and independent process of ethical review and approval to ensure compliance with the ethical norms and standards concerning the research and evaluation processes with vulnerable populations. No direct consultations were made to children and adolescents; mothers, fathers and adult caregivers using the services of the Safe Spaces in Costa Rica were consulted. The interaction with people was based on the principles of: respect for dignity, cultural diversity, personal autonomy; as well as privacy, confidentiality and voluntary participation. In all cases, participants were informed of the purpose of the assessment, the use of the information, and their informed consent was requested to participate in the process. In the FGDs, names were not recorded, and photographs were not taken to protect privacy and anonymity. The voluntary nature of participation and the possibility of withdrawing during the session were reiterated throughout the activities. In addition, it was mentioned that opinions shared would not affect the beneficiaries' access to services.

Based on the independent ethical review, modifications were incorporated into the evaluation design and various measures to guarantee the physical and emotional integrity of the people consulted, especially the most vulnerable groups, under the principle of not causing harm. The field visit plan in Costa Rica integrated security and risk mitigation measures, such as communication protocols, travel routes and schedule adaptation; modifications to the instruments to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity; guarantee the presence of personnel responsible for safe spaces with knowledge in the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse; the children and adolescents present in the safe spaces where the consultations were carried out were always under the supervision of the people responsible for the safe space, or of their mothers, fathers or caregivers.

The principles of impartiality were applied at all stages of the evaluation; respect for the opinions and points of view of informants; transparency in the processing of data and safeguarding the confidentiality and anonymity of informants. Additionally, the team's Professional Code of Conduct and Sexual and Psychological Harassment Policy are in line with industry standards and with UNICEF's Policy on Safeguarding and the IASC Plan for Accelerating Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Response at Country Level and UN-wide standards and protocols.³⁸

4 Findings

This section analyses UNICEF’s multi-country response to migration in the LAC region based on three key evaluation questions around the organization’s readiness and capacity to respond to the dynamic context (Section 4.1), promising practices in this environment that can be prioritized for further replication and application (Section 4.2), and finally various factors affecting performance that should be taken into account in designing and implementing the future response to children on the move (Section 4.3).

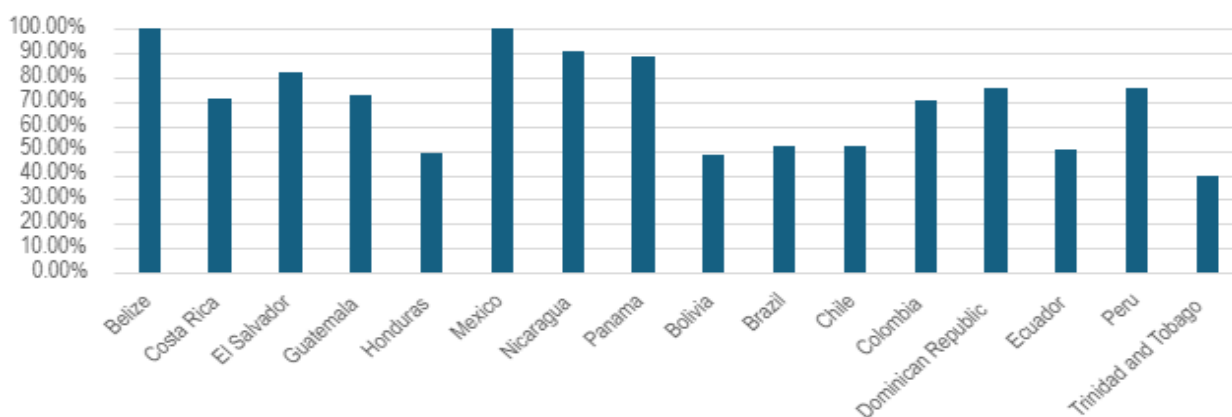
4.1 How ready and able is UNICEF to respond to the evolving context?

The evaluation addresses the themes of adaptation in general, consolidation of emergency programmes, and degree of alignment, complementarity and/or integration with national systems, which will allow the evaluation to assess the prospects for ongoing relevance of UNICEF’s response to the migration crisis and to the evolving context.

Finding 1. The reduction in financial resources has had an important negative impact on UNICEF’s work in the LAC region as well as on the presence and capacities of other organizations working in this field.

International organizations working on migration in LAC have been heavily affected by the reduction in financing and related uncertain sustainability of much of their work on migration. UNICEF offices working on migration in the region have been **heavily reliant** on United States funding in recent years. For UNICEF’s 2024 children on the move emergency response plans, PRM and BHA together contributed nearly 75 per cent of the funds, as indicated in the figure below.³⁹

Figure 5 Percent of total 2024 HAC resources contributed by the United States government, by country⁴⁰



The suspension of PRM funding, together with reductions from other traditional donors such as the directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), has already **resulted in notable reductions in services** and assistance offered by UNICEF. Previously, PRM resources were particularly valuable in migration work as funding agreements tended to offer greater flexibility. Contributions to UNICEF’s LAC offices by the United States government are almost 40 per cent less in 2025 than in 2024, with a particular decline in regular resources. According to KIIs, services for migrants in the Darien Gap, including those reversing their migration, were drastically reduced or suspended due to decreased funding. UNICEF and organizations such as the Red Cross cut staff and shut down service points in early 2025. However, the migration management policy of the Panamanian authorities has now

shifted to deterring further movement and enforcing border security, rather than facilitating safe movement and humanitarian assistance.

UNICEF's migration-related programmatic response plans, resource needs and mobilization efforts for 2025 – while already considering a scale down from 2024 due to the strategic consolidation of the migration HAC – were not designed to accommodate such drastic shifts in the funding landscape. Accordingly, the situation rendered many of UNICEF's original activities and targets unachievable and necessitated a **dramatic rescoping exercise** for what may be possible in this new context. The UNICEF Panama CO therefore reportedly adapted its response in June 2025, to provide lifesaving services to migrants arriving in Colon in transit towards South America.

While some UNICEF COs are better positioned than others to continue their work – for example due to more diverse donor networks and robust in-country resource mobilization – the fundamentally different context that UNICEF faces in responding to children on the move required **significant adaptation and flexibility** of its programming approach. It also underlined the importance of capitalizing on potential efficiencies, both internally to UNICEF and in collaboration with other partners who are experiencing similar financial challenges. In response to the constrained funding landscape, LACRO initiated a prioritization exercise in mid-2025 with migration HAC countries resulting in a considerable scale-down of migration programming and resource requirements. Available resources remain drastically insufficient to meet reprioritized needs with only the areas of child protection and cross sectoral work meeting at least 50 per cent of the prioritized funding requirements. Overall, there are significant **fundraising challenges** for children on the move work in the current context.

The prioritization exercise also **reduced the scope of programming and beneficiary reach**, from 2.73 million in the original HAC (an estimated 19 per cent of those in need) to just 1.44 million (~10 per cent of those in need, and 53 per cent of the previous reach). As a result of resource limitations, since January 2025, UNICEF has had to **suspend or close humanitarian operations** at border points in Chile, Honduras, Panama, Costa Rica and Belize. It should be noted that in some cases, such as in Costa Rica and Panama, the reduction of operations is also linked to the drastic reduction in migration flows resulting from the changes in policies discussed in the following section. While UNICEF LACRO and COs should be commended for their adaptability and responsiveness in undertaking the prioritization exercise, the continued funding shortages suggest **significant vulnerabilities in UNICEF's readiness** to confront the needs of children on the move.

Finding 2. UNICEF's ability to respond to this changing context is hampered by shrinking political space for migration work and depleted capacity for implementation, in both government and civil society.

The growing anti-immigrant sentiments within the political and social environments of host and transit countries have constricted UNICEF's ability to work on migration. Indeed, while UNICEF was focusing efforts in 2024 to articulate a strategic shift towards a route-based approach to migration and displacement, such frameworks have become unrealistic with government stakeholders, as donors tend to prioritize, according to interviews, a framing of migration in terms of emergency preparedness and shock responsive systems. This therefore required a **rapid pivot in UNICEF's strategy**, which occurred mainly in an ad hoc and case by case basis, rather than with a coherent strategic direction. Certain interventions, such as cash-based transfers are similarly politically charged, as they can be seen as a mechanism to facilitate migrants' movement. Furthermore, as some countries have intensified the detention and deportation of migrant, UNICEF's ability to reach these individuals has been increasingly limited, in part because UNICEF cannot engage in situations that violate children's rights.

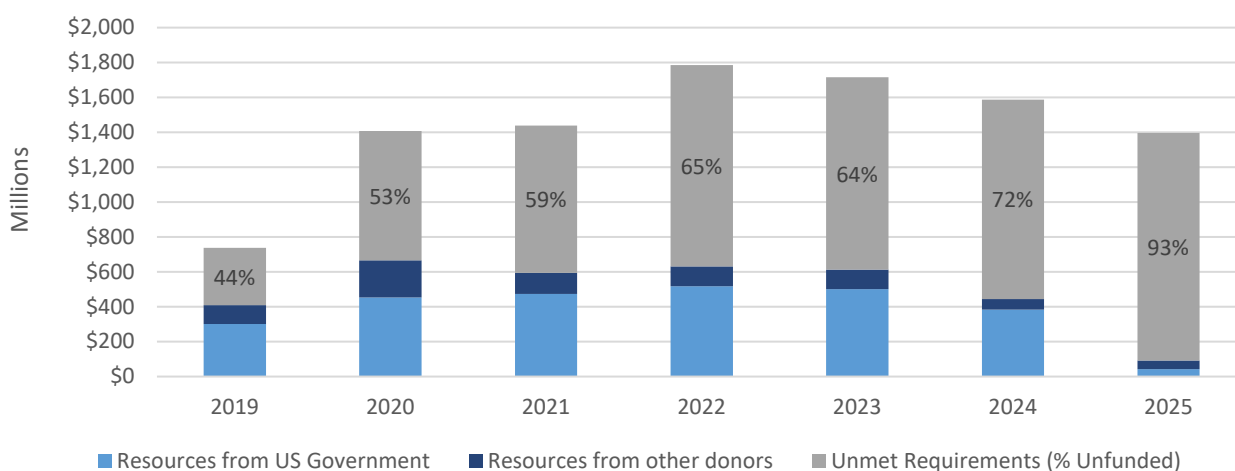
Both UNICEF and other international humanitarian organizations have faced **restrictions in accessing** deported migrants. When such access does exist, as in Costa Rica where UNICEF operates an *Espacio*

Seguro within a reception centre where deportees are located, UNICEF was only able to provide Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and recreational activities for children, along with some psychosocial support, at the time of the evaluation’s field visit. In Venezuela, Panama, and El Salvador, UNICEF reported significant delays and challenges in delivering services due to government-imposed barriers. In Panama, IOM at the request of the Panamanian authorities was the only agency initially permitted direct access to deportees from the United States in order to provide immediate humanitarian assistance and facilitate assisted voluntary return.⁴¹

In addition to the direct impacts of these political shifts on UNICEF, the organization’s ability to respond is also dependent on the strength of local systems and the extent to which NGOs, civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as national and subnational governments are able to provide services to children on the move. The **stress on these local systems** has been profound and continues to deepen as the full impact of funding freezes and cuts is still taking shape, as systemic adaptations are slow to emerge. While international organizations are grappling with how to reprioritize and restructure in this new environment, local actors, especially NGOs that complement often limited services provided by government are being forced to close altogether, leaving a critical and increasing gap in support for migrants across the region. UNICEF and other international organizations rely heavily on local NGOs and CSOs as implementing partners, who bring significant contextual knowledge and networks that facilitate buy-in from governments and communities. Experts cite weakening support for civil society-run humanitarian programmes as one of the most consequential impacts of the funding reductions within Latin America.^{42,43} Over decades of cyclical migration, a strong network of local support organizations has filled gaps in government provisions by providing direct services to children on the move within their communities.⁴⁴

Foreign aid, while largely channelled through international organizations, ultimately flows largely to local, national and regional actors.⁴⁵ Nearly a quarter of the resources required for the 2024 Venezuela Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) were destined for NGOs.⁴⁶ In 2024, the United States government was the largest institutional donor to migration humanitarian response plans in the region,⁴⁷ providing 86.3 per cent of the funding received for the Venezuela RMRP which works across 228 partners in 17 countries, most of which are NGOs, civil society and faith-based organizations.⁴⁸ This level of funding was typical for the United States, which from 2020-2024 provided \$400-500 million annually to the Venezuela RMRP averaging 80 per cent of the total resources contributed each year.⁴⁹ In 2025, the RMRP has received its lowest resourcing since its 2019 inception, reaching only 6.6 per cent of the target required resources (see below figure).⁵⁰ European Union (EU) funding to the RMRP also declined, with the smallest contribution to date in 2025.

Figure 6 Venezuela RMRP resourcing 2019-2025



The speed of the financing reductions from the United States has **negatively impacted local NGO capacity** who operate on limited budgets with high dependency on project-to-project funding. Many NGOs in the midst of implementing activities funded by the United States in early 2025 were not reimbursed for costs incurred ahead of the stop-work order, resulting in widespread liquidity, layoffs, and contract terminations within these organizations.⁵¹ With the globally shrinking funding landscape, few alternative sources are open to these NGOs. In this context, a compounding factor has been a significant decline in remittances across countries in Latin America where historically such financial flows comprise an important proportion of gross domestic product (GDP), which has further negatively impacted national and local governments' resource mobilisation.^{52,53,54}

In addition to funding impacts, restrictions on the political space for migrant support has also affected NGO operations in certain countries. Necocli, Colombia, a critical aid point for migrants in transit through the Darien, has lost most of its NGO infrastructure with locals reporting just seven migrant support entities operating in June 2025 compared to 17 the previous year.⁵⁵ This type of **erosion of local support networks** has had important **negative effects on UNICEF staff morale**, as was indicated by the majority of stakeholders consulted as part of this evaluation.

Finding 3. The combination of changing migration flows and increased vulnerabilities have meant that the needs of children on the move have changed; countries once mainly for transit are becoming hosts to returning, deported or stranded migrants.

The overarching trends in migration movement described in Section 1.2 have resulted in new vulnerabilities and needs for young migrants in LAC that require a swift and adaptive response from humanitarian actors, including **stronger links with mid-to longer term programming** to address needs in host and origin countries. This includes increased vulnerabilities of children on the move returning, deported or stranded, often facing significant social and economic problems, as well as specific concerns for unaccompanied and separated children. The response to this situation calls for a closer relationship between humanitarian and development responses; there is a greater need for integration support within host countries, especially those with large deportee populations or stranded migrants, while there is also a need to provide reintegration support for returned migrants in their countries of origin.

Within this new context, many previous transit countries are becoming long-term hosts for migrant populations, requiring **additional support for their integration systems**. National capacity to process asylum claims, provide legal status and facilitate long-term integration and family reunification are newly pressing priorities for many countries on the traditional northward route. Stranded and returning migrants' needs differ from those of first-time transmitters in several ways. Rather than seeking immediate but temporary service provision of basics like food, shelter and medical attention before moving onward, these migrants need longer-term care and orientation, including legal support, information on accessing public services and legal pathways towards residence. Providing integration services for unaccompanied and separated children, a larger proportion of deportee population than in previous years, comes with additional challenges, as specialized capacity is required to protect child rights in the regularization process. Mixed Migration Centres (MMC) found that 87 per cent of stranded migrants interviewed did not possess legal documentation allowing them to stay in their current country of residence, prohibiting them from moving freely, accessing public services (such as school, childcare and medical treatment) or pursuing legal employment.⁵⁶ This barrier is not easily overcome, as government processes for asylum and refugee status cannot quickly be ramped up. Mexico, which in 2024 received on average around 6,300 asylum applications each month, as of April 2025, was receiving approximately 1,000 applications daily.⁵⁷

Government or NGO-facilitated transfer is also in high demand, both within a country to resettle migrants from border points into host communities, and to return migrants to their country of origin through AVR or other assistance programmes.⁵⁸ Some countries have announced government-backed programmes

to assist with this need, including a joint protocol from Costa Rica and Panama. However, few details are available, and there are significant security concerns related to migrant safety during these facilitated returns.^{59,60} Furthermore, many of the government-supported reception centres used by migrants travelling north have not been made available to migrants returning south – in Panama, two centres have been closed;⁶¹ in Costa Rica, the main reception centre, CATEM, has been reoriented to serve only deportees from the United States and made inaccessible to other migrants, leaving them without aid options.⁶²

Large populations of stranded migrants, particularly children and adolescents, are **highly vulnerable to violence and maltreatment**, with few avenues for recourse. A 2025 survey of stranded migrants in Central America found that 42 per cent reported suffering some sort of abuse, particularly theft, extortion, bribery and discrimination.⁶³ There is a pressing need for support from international organizations such as UNICEF to support service capacity gaps for returnees, especially for those who are not in their country of origin, with emphasis on: unaccompanied, separated and out of school children, migrants in need of psychosocial support, and migrants without legal documentation in their host country.

Due to resource shortages, most **migrant monitoring tools** have been suspended or circumscribed, such as the jointly produced Mixed Migration Movement (MMM) data from UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP); the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM); and monitoring and survey processes from established NGOs such as MMC and Protection for Latin America and the Caribbean (ProLAC). This has resulted in **limited data about the current flows and needs of migrants** traveling in the region, which was validated by interviewed UNICEF staff. Without clear information on the needs profiles of stranded and returning migrants, there is a significant challenge for UNICEF in strategically deploying its limited resources to reach the most vulnerable children on the move.

Finding 4. UNICEF's ability to respond to the changing context is bolstered by its reputational assets, institutional experience, qualified staff and organizational commitment to migration work at the regional level.

UNICEF's **flexible structure** and strong **track record** in the region support its ability to confront these financial, political and demographic shifts. With a strong roster of seasoned emergency professionals, migration experts and a network of partners on global, regional, national and local levels, UNICEF has been able to adjust its programming to meet the moment. While staffing levels in LACR have fallen slightly in 2025 compared to previous years, and the region remains among the least staffed across UNICEF, strong national **talent pools**, efficient recruiting timelines (average of 58 days in 2025) and flexibility on temporary contracts and external consultants allow UNICEF to rapidly adjust its workforce to meet situational needs.⁶⁴

UNICEF is undertaking a **significant organizational change** process to adapt to the new global context, including structural changes that reduce the number of regional offices as well as the resources and responsibilities of each regional office with the intent to deliver streamlined, efficient and responsive programming. This draws on new complementary Centres of Excellence (CoEs) to support COs with thematic expertise. Key functions of the regional office will remain, including work on migration and emergency response. With a scaled-down office structure and a revised focus towards migration work, there is an opportunity for LACRO and COs to advocate more clearly on the issues facing children in a situation of migration.

Facilitated by migration's primary placement within emergency programming, UNICEF has been able to **rapidly adjust its migration response** in LAC for 2025 by revising the Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM) and HAC to reflect the new reality on the ground. The HAC prioritization exercise resulted in an overall scale down of UNICEF children on the move initiatives in LAC requiring fewer

resources and reaching fewer beneficiaries. The strategic approach to prioritization illustrates UNICEF's agility and responsiveness to current needs with additional investment in key areas, such as bolstering individual case management for vulnerable children. Through the **prioritization exercise**, UNICEF raised its target for individual case management beneficiaries by 94 per cent over the original response plan.⁶⁵ While this is an important positive example of UNICEF's needs-based adaptations, such examples do not reflect the overall picture. UNICEF's response to funding limitations has been to explicitly "prioritize immediate, life-saving interventions over longer-term sustainable activities" for migration programming in LAC.

4.2 What practices and/or principles can enable UNICEF to implement a migration response that effectively responds to the current context and in the longer term?

With a view to identifying existing strengths within UNICEF in LAC that could be leveraged in addressing future challenges, the evaluation sought to identify UNICEF responses to the changing context that have borne positive results for children on the move and/or, where evidence on results is not available, exemplify ways of work and principles that should prove effective in the longer term. These are characterized by a closer connection between emergency responses and long-term development responses; and a more explicit focus on strengthening national systems to make them responsive to the needs of migrant children. This is particularly important when seeking to facilitate the integration of migrants into the host communities, while also supporting the reintegration of returning migrants into their communities of origin. An approach that connects humanitarian and development interventions is the key characteristic of UNICEF's nexus approach, which "places an emphasis on a number of key initiatives, which include strengthening systems, developing risk-informed programmes, engaging community participation, planning and preparing for emergencies, fostering partnerships and mobilizing vital resources."⁶⁶

Finding 5. Although UNICEF offices in LAC have had to scale down programming linked to the emergency response for children on the move in 2025, some offices are repurposing and/or redesigning these interventions to serve the needs of returning children and those in situations of prolonged transit.

When the funding landscape changed significantly in early 2025, migration flows and dynamics also underwent drastic changes, as discussed above in Section 1.2. This meant that the needs of children on the move changed. In 2024, some reductions to services were introduced due to reduced funding and shifts in strategy (e.g., Colombia). In 2025, UNICEF COs have **narrowed their provision of humanitarian services** along the migration routes and border points in Chile, Honduras, Panama and Belize, while continuing to respond to some of migrants' most urgent needs by focusing programming in areas and among populations within the new migration patterns. In Panama for example, UNICEF redirected ECHO and PRM resources in response to reduced flows through the Darien, by suspending operations in two Temporary Migration Stations (Lajas Blancas and San Vicente) to support greater migration needs in Colon.

In several cases, UNICEF COs also found ways to **address changes in needs of children on the move** given reduced financing. They shifted the orientation of activities that support children in transit, towards serving the needs of stranded and returning migrant children and their families. For instance, in Guatemala, this was possible because the CO had already secured alternative funding sources (i.e., from Government of Japan) to address in-transit and returnee children and their families, which allowed the CO to continue working with the same implementing partners to adapt services for the returnees, albeit with a reduced scope. The following are examples of **relevant adaptations** and any **identified limitations**:

Use of mobile units for integrated services:

- In 2024, UNICEF-supported mobile teams provided mental health and psychosocial support to over 115,000 children and caregivers and screened more than 81,000 children for malnutrition across Central America.⁶⁷ Drawing on operational experience from the humanitarian response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota in late 2020, UNICEF Guatemala and its partners began deploying mobile units through retrofitted pickup trucks equipped to deliver a comprehensive suite of services at fixed points (such as CAPMiR centres) and high-transit and return areas along the migration route. These included psychosocial support, primary health care, WASH services, and nutrition interventions. Mobile teams also provided referrals to other service providers. This shift was a key example of UNICEF's agility and capacity to adapt service delivery models to the realities of migration dynamics and emergency contexts.⁶⁸
- Such mobile units are now being used by NGO partners to support families who return to the country or are returning through Guatemala. They are still **most effective near the border crossings** and for reaching department capitals; the vehicles are not made for the mountainous terrain and roads to remote communities. Partners interviewed noted that reduced resources have impacted **service quality**. Household visits to families who have returned and are reintegrating have become shorter and less frequent, with a shift toward telephone and group follow-ups to reduce costs, which resulted in a lower cost per household but also in more limited-service offerings. Similarly in Mexico, since 2024 UNICEF provided direct medical, nutritional and psychological care for young children, adolescents, their caregivers, and pregnant women through five medical mobile units located in Tapachula, Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, Nogales, and Mexicali. Health treatments for pregnant women have been stymied by distrust and disinformation about healthcare providers, though among those who visit and respond to surveys about their care, beneficiaries are overwhelmingly satisfied. These services continued to be provided in response to returning migrants in 2025.

WASH services:

- There is continued use and adaptation of WASH infrastructure and services developed for a humanitarian setting. In Costa Rica, investments in infrastructure (drinking water, toilets, handwashing and bathing facilities) for the government-run temporary safe spaces at southern border (*Centro de Atención Temporal de Migrantes*) are still in use and services are offered free of charge for migrant or host community populations. In Colombia, the refocusing of humanitarian attention on the crisis in the Catatumbo region, where both Colombians and migrants are being forcibly displaced, UNICEF Colombia has continued to apply lessons learned through the hygiene corners and *Tiendas Humanitarias* (Humanitarian Shops) where the forcibly displaced can access the types of hygiene products that they value most and can carry with them. In Brazil, the migration response included building the capacity of public actors to continue to develop WASH services.

Psychosocial support services:

- Interviews at the country and regional levels indicated the critical role of **psychosocial accompaniment for supporting children** in navigating the impact of repatriation or return or sudden integration. The emphasis on psychosocial support recognizes that those children face additional vulnerabilities to violence and even recruitment by gangs or organized crime groups in some cases. In 2024, HAC data indicate that CAMEX countries reached over 300,000 people.⁶⁹ The same source indicates that Costa Rica reported 48,000 instances, significantly more than the target of 34,000 for that year. For 2025, the original HAC set the target for this indicator at 656,000, which was revised down to 521,000 in the June 2025 prioritization exercise, a reduction of slightly over 20 per cent.
- Most deep dive countries and other COs such as UNICEF Honduras have experience supporting the provision of psychosocial support for reintegration.⁷⁰ Given the change in migration flows, there are still **challenges in adapting** and sustaining the necessary level of service. NGO partners in Guatemala, for example, reported on efforts to adjust the existing suite of services to the current dynamics of returnees, which was mostly composed of family units with young children (0-5 years of age), requiring attention for the entire family unit. The Mexico CO had been working to

Successful example of leveraging humanitarian funding for migration across the humanitarian–development nexus: Trinidad and Tobago

2023 Technical support to establish the Minimum Expenditure Basket, including migrants: In 2023, UNICEF provided technical support to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in establishing the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB)⁷² to update previous data on the average cost of the regular or seasonal basic needs of a household that can be covered through the local market. This exercise was designed to enable a tailored response to the differences in culture and access to markets between the nationals and the migrants and refugees, by exploring two MEBs – one to inform programmes for the nationals and the other for the migrant and refugee population – as a basis for strengthening the social protection system in Trinidad and Tobago. This exercise supported better understanding of what nationals require from the national social protection system but also highlighted how humanitarian actors should tailor their programmes to the needs of migrants, while ensuring the humanitarian cash transfers are aligned with national costs and market expenditures. It further helped to sensitize the government to the economic vulnerabilities experienced by the migrant population.

Social Protection ‘Costing’ of integration of 2019 Migrant Registration Framework (MRF) learners into the public education system: In 2023, UNICEF and UNHCR carried out a costing exercise to demonstrate both the costs, but also the benefits of integrating Venezuelan children into the public education system, as a key advocacy piece designed to help the government identify key investments that would enhance the national education system and build on the nexus framework. Among other powerful arguments made was the reality of the aging population in Trinidad and Tobago and the role that integration of Venezuelan children can play to compensate for the diminishing population of Trinidadian children.

transition towards a more sustainable national ownership model for child-friendly spaces and psychosocial support by leveraging universities as public institutions to provide direct service to migrants in 2025. This plan had to be adjusted and sped up due to the funding cuts.

Support Spaces

- Many UNICEF COs, together with UNHCR and with NGO partners, supported variants of Support Spaces (*Espacios de Apoyo*) providing a range of support services for children and their families from migrant populations or a combination of host community and migrant populations. A recent study⁷¹ identified good examples (as in the case of *Espacio de Apoyo Integral* in Manta, Ecuador) of spaces that are still operating due to **significant government buy-in**, while identifying challenges of Support Spaces that have reduced services/hours of operation, unclear role in supporting integration, and limited pathways to sustainability.
- The study highlights that Support Spaces in LAC take multiple different forms, which serves to make them adaptable to the different migration phases. It concludes that these spaces are most reliable when they are embedded in public systems at the municipal or national level, especially when they ensure not only the adoption of legal instruments but also the use of budgetary processes and workforce strategies that can be maintained across political and funding cycles. These findings align with this evaluation, and suggest that adaptability and flexibility are important hallmarks of successful interventions, but that this very flexibility needs to be **anchored within national protection systems** in order to be as effective as possible.

By addressing migration primarily through emergency/humanitarian response, based on the nature of the migrant crisis over the past decade, UNICEF COs in the region – many of which had traditionally worked on systems strengthening – refocused to respond to the organizational dynamics and challenges of humanitarian action. The characteristics of emergency response (e.g., prioritizing immediate needs, resource dependency, and HAC cycles) limited the ability of UNICEF to take a **longer-term view** and develop exit strategies. However, some of the largest COs – including Mexico, Colombia and Brazil – with a strong record of nexus and development-oriented migration work, were able to harness humanitarian funding to support systems strengthening and seek alternative funding or ensure government commitment of resources to mitigate the effects of the short-term humanitarian funding and emphasis on meeting immediate needs. The LAC experience in addressing/framing migration and the organizational lessons/implications of the emergency lens is further discussed in **Section 4.3**.

Finding 6. While the current context presents important resourcing challenges, some COs have a demonstrated track record of strong resource mobilization for migration work, while others have adapted and managed to do more with less.

Several UNICEF COs demonstrated a strong ability to **mobilize resources** to support their migration work, including Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama. Each exceeded their HAC resource requests for 2024. Other countries like Guatemala and Brazil showed capacity to fundraise successfully from domestic sources and to cultivate relationships with UNICEF National Committees as well as tap into Humanitarian Thematic funds.

Demonstrating **strong adaptive capacity**, other COs managed to do more with less. In 2024, Colombia CO received 13 per cent of the resources required for their HAC migration response and meet or exceed its programmatic targets for beneficiary reach on four indicators, with particularly strong performance in the area of Child Protection, including individual case management (112 per cent of beneficiaries reached) and PSEA awareness (206 per cent of beneficiaries reached). Bringing together these experiences through strategic regional knowledge-sharing will allow COs to learn from one another to respond to the current context, bolstering their internal capacities for resource mobilization and increasing the efficiency of their programmatic work to make each dollar go further.

Finding 7. In the changing context, offices are drawing on UNICEF's long-standing expertise in systems strengthening and solid relationships with governments and national partners to respond effectively to the needs of children on the move.

The LAC region has experienced a **protracted migration crisis** over the last decade with the mass migration of Venezuelans surging since 2015. Recent challenges to UNICEF have multiplied, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and increasingly **mixed migrant** profiles, as more than 100 nationalities have been recorded transiting the Darien, requiring significant adaptation of services to meet the needs of diverse cultures, languages and demographics. Such complex regional migration dynamics in many cases led COs to redirect regular programmes and development efforts towards emergency assistance.⁷³ According to interviews, in some COs this meant that the work that had been the norm in the region, supporting and strengthening national systems to protect and advance the rights of children – including migrant children – was reduced. Nevertheless, the results, expertise and capacity that was already in place in this area remained.

Strong **relationships with national governments** and experience that encompassed return and reintegration positioned UNICEF to provide technical assistance to governments as they formally launched reintegration programmes in early 2025, such as Guatemala's *Plan de Retorno al Hogar*, or the *Mexico te Abraza* programme, which was formally launched in 2025 but built on the components of technical assistance provided by UNICEF since 2018, including the work with the National Institute of Migration and the national system for child protection. The building blocks emerging from comprehensive work on child protection systems is further discussed in Finding 11.

UNICEF **systems strengthening work** goes from normative standard-setting to the application of those norms through protocols, programmes and services. In Guatemala, for example, it is possible to trace initial support for developing the Migration Code⁷⁶ to ongoing assistance in operationalizing that code. This has included developing service models, clear protocols, and reception pathways. Past evaluations confirmed that UNICEF's technical assistance and capacity-building efforts have been central to strengthening the institutional response to child migration.⁷⁷ External stakeholders consulted confirmed that UNICEF's work on policy and protocols has been critical for the national response to the crisis in 2025, although further adaptation for different and changing needs of migrant children and returnees is still needed.

Deep dives provide few examples of making **social protection systems more inclusive**. In Trinidad and Tobago, UNICEF demonstrated experience with humanitarian cash transfers (to enable households to assume education-related expenses, such as the costs of data and other supports for those children enrolled in the online learning system supported by UNICEF and UNHCR – *Programa TEEM*) but interviewees also noted a legislative context and political sensitivities that limit expanding the social protection system for migrant populations. At a regional level, interviews suggest that it will be important

UNICEF advocacy on establishing legal identity and preventing statelessness at national level

UNICEF's experience in Colombia and in Trinidad and Tobago illustrates the effects of multi-year advocacy on issues such as regular status for migrants, birth registration for children born to migrant parents, and facilitating access to public education and social protection systems.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNICEF partnered with the Women's Institute for Alternative Development (WINAD) to help 149 Venezuelan children born in Trinidad and Tobago receive their birth certificates, giving them legal identity and access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and protection. This initiative focused on addressing barriers that migrant families face in the birth registration process, including financial hardship, lack of documentation, administrative complexities, and language barriers. Birth registration is a legal requirement under Trinidad and Tobago's Births and Deaths Registration Act, which mandates that births be registered within three months. However, for undocumented Venezuelan families, the process is particularly difficult. Many parents cited financial constraints as key obstacles; others were unaware of the process or lacked the necessary paperwork. UNICEF and WINAD responded with a multi-faceted support strategy that included community outreach, bilingual assistance, legal guidance, and financial support to cover key expenses. Strategic partnerships with the Venezuelan Embassy and legal service providers also helped streamline the process.⁷⁴

In **Colombia**, UNICEF worked on the prevention of statelessness to ensure birth registration through the creation of registry units at hospitals in areas heavily impacted by migration. Easy access to birth registration, and the commitment of the civil registry and local authorities to sustain these services as per agreements with UNICEF, has helped protect and document Venezuelan children born on Colombian soil, as well as local host population and migrant/refugee children of other nationalities. UNICEF also played a key role in the advocacy with government for the creation and timely roll-out of the Temporary Protection Statute (*Estatuto de Protección Temporal*) for the regularization of Venezuelan migrants. Of the estimated 2.8 million Venezuelans in Colombia in April 2024, approximately 2.4 million have been "pre-registered" for TPS and in December 2024 almost 2 million had received the TPS thanks to the Colombian government and support received from UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF.⁷⁵ Deep dive interviews suggest the measure has allowed Venezuelan migrants to continue to legally reside in Colombia, and to some extent facilitates access to services, but it has not guaranteed the right to employment due to high levels of informal work and unemployment in the country.

Promoting inclusive education in Brazil

Throughout 2023, UNICEF worked with local secretariats and the Ministry of Education to enhance their integration strategies for Venezuelan students. This collaboration focused on incorporating discussions on linguistic and cultural diversity and the critical need to address xenophobia within the pedagogical planning of the Municipal Secretariats. At the same time, UNICEF held strategic discussions at the federal level to advocate for public policies that address the unique requirements of refugee and migrant children and adolescents, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and sustainable educational methods.

UNICEF led two major school enrolment campaigns in Boa Vista and Pacaraima, in collaboration with United Nations agencies, local governments, and civil society organizations. These campaigns facilitated the documentation and assessment process, culminating in over 2,300 new student enrolments. As a complement to this initiative in formal education, children and adolescents in various shelters benefited from gender, culture, and age-appropriate non-formal education and psychosocial support, provided through 13 Súper Panas - child-friendly spaces - impacting 20,922 young individuals in Pacaraima, Boa Vista, and Manaus.⁷⁹

for UNICEF to provide more support to governments to prepare for and lead the response to various types of emergencies, making systems (including health, educational and social protection systems), more shock-responsive, so that governments are prepared to respond to future waves of migration.

Finding 8. UNICEF's experience in advocating for and strengthening inclusive education systems provides a key entry point for expanding support for public access to services in the current context of integration.

Inclusive education for children on the move is a component in all UNICEF country programmes in the LAC region. Deep dives in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago illustrate the type of efforts that COs have taken over the past few years that have ongoing relevance in the current context. In **Trinidad and Tobago**, migrant access to education and social protection systems has been a consistent area of concern for UNICEF. Since 2018, UNICEF has been engaged in significant advocacy effort with the government on the issue of migrant children's integration in public schools. Joint advocacy and leveraging of opportunities within the programming context by UNHCR, UNICEF and other stakeholders led to steps taken in 2023 by the government to remove the legal and administrative barriers that prevented migrant children duly registered under the government's Migrant Registration Framework (MRF) registration exercise carried out in 2019 from accessing the national education system.

With leadership from UNHCR and UNICEF, the Education Working Group in Trinidad and Tobago is steering the process and has also developed a phased-approach strategy for the integration of MRF registered children into primary education. Concurrently, UNICEF and UNHCR costed the integration of such children to help the government identify key investments that would enhance the national education system and build on the humanitarian-development nexus. Because there are still legal, institutional and practical challenges/barriers for most migrant children to access public schools, such as requirements for regular migration status, birth registration and proof of vaccination, UNICEF developed and supported alternative programmes such as through Child Friendly Spaces and the online Dawere platform for high school learners.⁷⁸ This scenario emphasizes UNICEF's role in working simultaneously on two tracks – to advance integration in national school systems for those learners who are eligible, while also continuing to provide alternatives so that a majority of migrant children are not left behind to become a “lost generation” unable to integrate or be accredited by any formal educational system.

Colombia and Mexico have had the **legal basis for integrating migrant children into education** and in these countries, with UNICEF COs emphasizing the provision of support to government in modifying practices, systems and behaviours that limited their access. Colombia has made some progress in integrating migrant children into public schools, the number of Venezuelan refugee and migrant children enrolled in public schools increased from 34,000 in 2018⁸⁰ to 589,823 as of June 2023, amounting to 6 per cent of total students in formal educational institutions.⁸¹ The Government of Colombia maintained an open-door policy over the period, giving Venezuelan children the right to access the education system.

However, access to education is not determined at the national level, but at the local level and is subject to availability of classroom space. In both countries, UNICEF has supported access to education in two main ways:

- **Generation of data and evidence:** Collecting and analysing data on learning disparities and educational outcomes to inform its interventions and advocacy efforts with the government at national and departmental levels;
- **Advocacy with multiple actors:** UNICEF collaborates with national and local governments, civil society organizations, community leaders, and the private sector, to achieve results on access to education. It works with partners to develop and implement programmes, advocate for policy changes, and mobilize resources for education.

At the outset of the Venezuelan outflow, a focus on children on the move was central to UNICEF's humanitarian response, but this has shifted to a more general focus on all children impacted by humanitarian crises and excluded from the school system due to forced displacement (including both Colombians and migrants), poverty or remoteness, and also in relation to the current mass population movements of 70,000 displaced in the Catatumbo region. This is a mixed population movement made up of Colombians, Venezuelans, and Indigenous populations, all impacted by the armed conflict. Where UNICEF has done direct delivery of education in a humanitarian modality, this has been mainly to demonstrate models of social and educational integration of children on the move, and on a relatively small scale. To bring any educational intervention to scale in Colombia requires significant mobilization of resources and agreements between actors at national, departmental and local levels, and UNICEF's approach has shifted towards being a technical partner accompanying the government to realize its priorities and national security interests.

In Mexico, UNICEF supported access to education for children in irregular situations over 2020-2025. The Government of Mexico introduced the Protocol to Guarantee Access, Retention and Completion of Education for migrant children in 2023 to address the barriers faced by children in irregular situations and to provide guidance to local education authorities. UNICEF support facilitated training 16,000 teachers and administrators in the education sector to sensitize them about the legal underpinning of inclusive education, the nature of migration, and the steps to be followed by duty bearers to guarantee access. The Country Programme Evaluation (CPE) confirmed progress in increasing access to school for migrant children.⁸² UNICEF field office staff noted the relevance of this area of systems strengthening for expanding UNICEF's work in support of children on the move in the current context.

Data from the Costa Rica case – focused on the role of Child-Friendly Safe Spaces – signals that access to and continuity of education is one of the limitations faced by children and adolescents in transit and those likely to stay in Costa Rica. Although the Costa Rican education system provides access to children regardless of their immigration status, one of the problems faced by those in transit or stranded is the lack of documentation, which hinders their access to formal education. Only one of the Safe Spaces for Integration visited by the team helped make links to the education system. Programa Casa Llori hosted a safe space and offered accompaniment to migrant children and their families as they integrate and navigate the requirements of the Costa Rican educational system. In most of the deep dives, UNICEF's **strength in advocacy for access to services** has played out strongly in the education sector. As noted by interviews in two of the deep dive countries, making shifts towards a more inclusive health sector is still a pending agenda for UNICEF.

Finding 9. UNICEF's support in strengthening child protection systems and national capacities to implement a child rights centric response is the backbone for a migration response in the current context.

Over the past Country Programme cycles and prior to the height of the emergency, UNICEF COs with programming in migration addressed the rights of migrant children primarily as part of their work

on child protection.⁸³ Indeed, child protection is the **most prioritized sector** of the children on the move HACs – accounting for 30 per cent of requested resources in 2025 – and also the most resourced sector with donors providing more funding to this programmatic work than any other within the HAC.⁸⁴ The experience of three deep dive countries – Mexico, Colombia, and Guatemala – illustrate the trajectory of investment in supporting shifts in normative frameworks and their application to move migration from a detention and security focus to a child rights focus.

In addition, in the current environment, where integration programming for migrants takes on a new importance within UNICEF's work to respond to the increasing needs of migrants in this area, several COs have demonstrated experience in delivering strongly in this area. For example, Guatemala CO in 2024 reached nearly 150 per cent of target beneficiaries (57,000 persons) with community-based MHPSS and more than 100 per cent of their beneficiary target (2900 children) for unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs) reunified or provided with alternative care. Mexico CO performed similarly well on these integration indicators, reaching nearly 39,000 with community-based MHPSS services (195 per cent of target) and more than 26,000 UASCs with alternative care or reunification (130 per cent of target).

These experiences can offer useful models for COs that are less experienced in scaling up these areas of migration work (e.g., Costa Rica did not report on reunification/alternative care for UASCs in 2024; Brazil was only able to reach 12,200 migrants with MHPSS, just 35 per cent of their target in 2024). Similarly, Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago have had success in reaching children with individual case management, both exceeding their targets for 2024. This is a critical area of programming that few COs included in their 2024 HAC indicators, but which is a key component of the 2025 regional HAC indicators.

Application of norms and standards

In Mexico, evaluative evidence⁸⁶ and interviews illustrate how UNICEF **advocated for reforms** and contributed to the application of the **Comprehensive Protection Pathway** (approved by the child protection system – SIPPINA – in 2019) for the rights of children and adolescents in a migration situation and subsequent legal reforms in 2020 to establish the principle of non-detention for children for migratory reasons and the determination of their best interests by the Child Protection Authority. UNICEF worked in partnership with state and national level Social Welfare Agency (*Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia - DIF*) to strengthen the Child Protection Authorities (*Procuradurias de Proteccion de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes - PPNNA*) from 2021-2025 to take on the new attributes and functions required by these reforms. This included funding, equipment and technical support for multidisciplinary teams (e.g., psychologists, social workers, and lawyers) for PPNNA. The Mexico CO effort to strengthen government capacity to apply the 'Best Interest Principle' was cited as good practice in the context of a multi-country programme, leading to the restoration of the rights of children on the move and avoiding automatic deportation.⁸⁷ In a recent systematization of these efforts, the UNICEF CO team noted that changes in the targeted PPNNA were able to transcend administrative changes in government and the rotation of government staff.⁸⁸ UNICEF also supported an advocacy strategy that included a diagnostic of the capacity of the PPNNA and the costs for them to continue operating and fulfilling their mandate, with a view to increasing the public budget allocations for PPNNA in the future.

Strengthening National Capacities in Mexico

In June 2025, Mexico's DIF launched the National Case Management Model (*Modelo de Gestión de Casos - MOGEC*), a strategic tool intended to standardize procedures, document good practices and support attention centred on the best interest of the child, through the PPNNA. The model was developed with technical support from UNICEF in collaboration with the state-level PPNNA. The model incorporates specific standards for addressing the needs of children in situations of special vulnerability, including children in situations of migration, at risk of recruitment by organized crime, or victims of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. One of the key components of the MOGEC is the inclusion of *Primero CPIMS+*, the digital case management system that operationalizes these standards and strengthens institutional capacity at national and state levels.⁸⁵

Similarly, over the years, UNICEF Colombia has invested considerably in building the **internal capacity of the government on child protection measures** to respond to the risks faced by children on the move. The Migrant Response Teams (ERAM) of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute, were launched in 2021 with a pilot programme supported by UNICEF with three ERAM teams in three departments; over time it grew to cover nine departments most impacted by migration. The ERAMs are mobile teams, focused on identifying risks, providing psychosocial support, identifying unaccompanied adolescents, and activating care pathways, adapting to the changing dynamics of the migratory flow. The strategy was first called *Te acompaño* (I'm with you) and has evolved and been rebranded by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) to be part of its broader *Tejiendo caminos* (Weaving pathways) initiative. Interviewed stakeholders indicated that it has been effective in **expanding coverage and improving care for migrants and host communities** alike.

Recent evidence highlighted the effectiveness and relevance of UNICEF's support in Guatemala to the Secretariat of Social Welfare of the Presidency in developing **protocols and tools to ensure a rights-based approach** to care for children and adolescents on the move, especially unaccompanied children. UNICEF contributed to the development and implementation of the *Protocolo Nacional para la Recepción y Atención de Niñez y Adolescencia Migrante* and the *Protocolo para la Atención de Unidades Familiares Repatriadas*. These protocols were used by different actors in the migration and protection system, including the Guatemalan Institute of Migration and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and filled a gap in the institutional framework at the time.⁸⁹ These contributions to the institutionalization of reintegration protocols and psychosocial care for returnees, aligning with international standards and national priorities, were also recognized by the 2021 multi-country evaluation of the children on the move response.⁹⁰

Local coordination of child protection for children on the move

The **Protection Circles model** developed in Baja California, Mexico brings together institutions that are part of the child protection system to guarantee the rights of unaccompanied children and adolescents who are repatriated to or in transit in Mexico. The institutions include the National Institute of Migration, the Consulate of Mexico in San Diego, and UNICEF, among other entities. Although UNICEF supported the effort in Baja California for several years with technical backstopping, the initiative was led by the state government and interviews indicate that it is still operational in early 2025. Although the model has been adopted at the national level,⁹¹ interviews suggest that given the challenges of decentralization and diversity of contexts, expansion is still a work in progress. In addition, given the funding cuts and reductions in staff, UNICEF is no longer able to accompany state government actors on certain cases to help resolve legal and administrative questions as part of the technical assistance that was provided at field level.

Finding 10. UNICEF experience in seeking feedback from rights holders and community consultations continues to be relevant. Decentralized and community-based approaches will continue to be part of the system strengthening for reintegration, integration, and future responses to children on the move.

Maintaining close contact with beneficiary populations throughout programme design, implementation and follow-up fills a critical gap in knowledge, especially in a context where data from many traditional monitoring systems are unavailable. This is especially important, given the shifting profiles and needs of migrant populations in the region as the policies around migration fluctuate. Intentional consultation of rights-holders has been essential in making migrant-sensitive adaptations to the UNICEF response to this emergency. UNICEF Colombia has generated a number of strengthened processes for the participation of and accountability to local communities over recent years. These include greater **participation of local leaders and communities** in the design and implementation of locally delivered programmes, as well as innovations in the WASH sector such as the provision of standardized hygiene kits and a “humanitarian

shop” where migrants could have more choice in selecting the items most relevant to them and easy to carry.

A similar emphasis on **community consultations to inform strategy** has been adopted by UNICEF ECA for its children on the move response, where a range of tools were utilized to gather feedback from rights-holders throughout the cash programme TEEN. The RapidPro, Post-Distribution Monitoring (PDM) surveys provided important insights into household spending and the effects of the programme, focusing on

CMAPS in Brazil

The Community Mobilization Strategy with Adolescent Participation (CMAPS) is an initiative of UNICEF, in partnership with the Pirilampos Institute and Adra, to involve young people in the co-creation of solutions to the problems they identify in the places where they live, in the context of the migratory flow from Venezuela in the state of Roraima. These volunteer mobilizers (between 18 and 24 years old) receive a tablet and a grant (to acquire mobile data) to work within their communities, between official shelters, spontaneous occupations and Indigenous communities in Boa Vista and Pacaraima. It is currently formed by 25 young people who carry out surveys of the families' needs, disseminate reliable information, mobilize the community and collect suggestions for interventions in the places where they live. A strategy created to overcome the lack of access to communities during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, CMAPS soon became a network that aims to develop the skills of young participants, who receive periodic training while integrating the strategy, including mobilization of the community, leadership, rights, monitoring and evaluation, among other topics. The volunteers, all members of Indigenous communities (*Pémons, Eñepas, Waraos, Ka'riñas* and *Taurepangs*), are able to provide information in the relevant languages for elders who may not speak Spanish or Portuguese, and have the ability to take action in addressing their own situation as youth.⁹⁵

beneficiary experiences and satisfaction. Further, these surveys provided detailed information on how households prioritize spending and explored changes in decision-making and how these factors influence access to education and overall welfare. Third party monitoring complemented the RapidPro data, focusing on beneficiary satisfaction and programme effectiveness. Finally, a grievance redressal mechanism was put in place, including a telephone hotline, an online form (managed by UNICEF) and a WhatsApp chatline.

UNICEF COs invested in strengthening their direct relationship to the migrant populations they serve through tools such as **U-Report** for Children on the Move and the **Aurora ChatBot**,⁹² partly in response to past evaluation recommendations in this area.⁹³ The CO in Mexico helped to systematize regular stakeholder consultations facilitated through national authorities like the SIPINNA commission to enable more direct participation of migrant stakeholders and a collaborative approach to programming.⁹⁴ These community-based consultations have been useful for improving the relevance and effectiveness of UNICEF programmes and services for migrants. However, as they involve primarily those families already engaged through UNICEF-supported initiatives, they do not fully respond to the overall need for more data on those children on the move who are not covered by the programmes of humanitarian actors.

More localized and **decentralized approaches are likely to become more prominent**. In Colombia, UNICEF's strategy for humanitarian action reflected an emerging regional shift toward localization and deeper community engagement in the migration response. The UNICEF Colombia Country Programme and HAC in 2025 emphasize moving away from emergency-driven service delivery toward building sustainable, community-owned systems.⁹⁶ Key informants note that UNICEF Colombia had pivoted from broad, overstretched humanitarian coverage to more focused work in fewer territories, prioritizing partnerships with local actors and community-based organizations. This shift has been partly driven by funding constraints, which encouraged closer collaboration with communities and more adaptive programming. For example, interviewees highlighted that the Community Care Networks pilot with ICBF uses participatory design to prevent violence against children. Despite progress at the national policy level, however, local implementation remains challenging due to Colombia's decentralized governance and limited municipal resources.

Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) has also been a consistent feature within HAC migration programming, with both the 2024 and 2025 HAC for LACR migration response including an

indicator to measure the reach of established feedback and accountability mechanisms. In 2024, more than 60 per cent of LACR countries reported on this indicator, demonstrating appreciable **commitment to beneficiary engagement**.

Decentralized approaches are also being strengthened in other deep dive countries, such as Guatemala and Mexico. In Guatemala, current work on reintegration is focusing on the Secretariat of Social Welfare of the Presidency (SBS) departmental offices and municipal authorities, an emphasis that both NGO and government interviews confirmed as critical for the way forward. In Mexico, as illustrated above, the Protection Circles in Baja California showcase a local mechanism for responding to changing needs of children on the move with possibilities for application in other states. However, other experiences – such as the implementation of Child-Friendly Safe Spaces in Costa Rica and more broadly in the region – illustrate the **challenges for local governments or child protection systems** to sustain initiatives intended to provide humanitarian, integration or other services for children on the move and host communities. In Costa Rica, Child-Friendly Safe Spaces for humanitarian assistance and for integration are being adopted by the National Child Welfare Agency (PANI). That process of institutionalization will need to address the definition of responsibilities and functions of different actors in the child protection system and the financing and strengthening of community organizations that are responsible for implementing the Safe Spaces for integration.

4.3 What are the internal and external factors affecting, or likely to affect, performance?

To develop a successful adaptation to the current context and to future-proof UNICEF's work in the thematic area of migration, it is important to understand the factors that affect performance in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. Based on the framework of organizational assessment described in Section 3, the evaluation has distilled a range of factors relating primarily to organizational culture and capacity. These include UNICEF's institutional practices related to cooperation, mechanisms for collaboration with other key stakeholders including relevant United Nation agencies, and knowledge management and internal capacity building.

Finding 11. Strong institutional partnerships with government entities, where previously established, enabled UNICEF to adapt its interventions more effectively to the changing context.

While the response to the migration crisis started out as a humanitarian or emergency response, those interventions that appear to have been most able to respond to the changed context have been those that were already **embedded within national authorities**. As noted regarding the evolution of the *Te acompaño* rapid response model for migrant child protection in Colombia (see Finding 11 above), a positive pilot phase was followed by rebranding to *Equipo de Respuesta y Acompañamiento Migrante* (ERAM). Interviews indicated that the programme thus evolved strategically from a UNICEF-supported initiative to one managed by the ICBF. By mid-2024, eight departmental ERAM teams covered key transit and reception zones operating 24/7 to receive spontaneous arrivals, process protection screenings, and link children to family tracing, foster care, or legal assistance as needed. While the reduction of international support has had an impact on the scale of the ERAM, stakeholders indicated that the Colombian government has taken greater responsibility for caring for migrant children and now fully funds and oversees the ERAM teams embedded within the ICBF.

Similarly, in Guatemala, UNICEF pivoted to providing support for returnee children and families. This transition was made possible by alternative funding, **strong institutional partnerships with government** entities like the Secretariat for Social Welfare of the Presidency (SBS), and effective collaboration with capable NGO partners that were able to manage through funding shocks in 2025. By leveraging these relationships and adopting a **multisectoral approach**, UNICEF maintained its

relevance and supported government with adjustments required for continued delivery of essential services. This shift in Guatemala also built on a long-standing commitment to child protection in migration contexts and to supporting the institutionalization of reintegration protocols and psychosocial care for returnees.⁹⁷ UNICEF's **recognized capacity** to collaborate with key governmental institutions thus constitutes one of its fundamental strengths, when it is embedded in its humanitarian or emergency interventions.

Finding 12. Disparate data systems – about migration data flows and case management across UNICEF, between United Nation agencies, and with government authorities – hinder real-time decision-making and leave many children invisible to service providers.

UNICEF's response to children on the move, as well as its response to the new context, has faced challenges stemming from unaligned, **fragmented data systems**, as identified under Finding 4 above. This situation impairs UNICEF's ability to monitor migration flows, to coordinate referrals, plan resources and adjust interventions in real time. Without data monitoring systems in place and robust support to national authorities handling migration, those most vulnerable (unaccompanied and separated children, migrants with disabilities, migrating survivors of gender-based violence) are likely to fall through the cracks. Even before the funding challenges of 2025, UNICEF struggled to track both migrant movements and migrant-specific programming results. While the HAC and HPM mechanisms provide a standard set of indicators for countries across the region to report on migration programming, no two UNICEF COs are consistent in which indicators they choose to report results. While this allows for programmatic flexibility, it hinders standardized accountability and progress measurement. Moreover, the data that is reported lacks consistency, with regional aggregations differing from country-level results data.

Consolidation of the migration HAC into one regional appeal for 2025 may help resolve some of these data management issues internally, but the situation on the ground – in which migrants are often stranded and not in transit through traditional border points – indicates less available data about migrants' characteristics, needs and movements in the future and a reduced capacity to collect this data going forward. Without data, programmes and initiatives cannot respond appropriately to needs, resulting in wasted resources and increased vulnerabilities for would-be beneficiaries. Interviews with UNICEF staff indicate this gap is already having **negative repercussions on programming effectiveness** because of a reduced ability to reach migrants where they are, collect data on their needs and establish appropriate responses. UNICEF staff recognized that independent data systems for monitoring migration flows and services provided present a challenge in obtaining reliable, up to date and interoperable data. Polled UNICEF personnel⁹⁸ and pulse survey showed that roughly half believed that data and knowledge management systems need to be strengthened (see Annex 4), which was also a recurring theme raised to develop lessons learned and recommendations for this evaluation.

While the specific issue of data systems is not mentioned in most previous evaluations addressing migration in LAC, some regional evaluations do indicate this is a long-standing challenge. The **diversity and frequent lack of interoperability of information systems** was also noted previously: "Enhancing, harmonizing, and standardizing monitoring tools and processes, particularly in terms of data collection for vulnerable children on the move, is crucial. Consistent data disaggregation and dissemination also require significant improvement";⁹⁹ similarly, an evaluation of UNICEF's response to the Venezuela outflow crisis also noted gaps in information and coordination with local and national government institutions.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, an evaluation of UNICEF Venezuela Country Programme 2015-2022¹⁰¹ noted that the Result Assessment Module – which has since been replaced by dashboards – included ambiguously formulated indicators. The parallel existence of the Mixed Movements Monitoring Reports, the Protection Monitoring by UNHCR and the Displacement Tracking Matrix by IOM implies a certain level of duplication, and results in only partially interoperable systems.

A more positive development is the progress made by the Government of Mexico in consolidating the “Por tus Derechos” information system, which includes a dedicated module on administrative data for children on the move. This module is jointly fed by child protection authorities and migration authorities (the National Migration Institute and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance), which makes it possible to collect specific information on country entry, family links, causes of migration, transit conditions, risk factors, and accommodation data. The system is already being implemented in all 32 states of the country and is expected to launch its public version later in 2025, representing a significant step forward in improving visibility and coordination for child protection.

Finding 13. While the strategic framework for UNICEF’s work on children in contexts of mobility in LAC emphasises the principle of non-discrimination and sensitivity to the needs of different groups of children based on their identity, internal data disaggregation in relation to migration is uneven, and complicates the assessment of gender and disability responsiveness.

The strategic framework for children on the move in LAC reflects the key commitments in UNICEF’s recent policies regarding **gender and disability responsiveness**, in particular the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (“Children and their families have access to safe and age, gender and disability appropriate reception, accommodation and care”) and UNICEF’s Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (“UNICEF will support evidence-based policies, programmes and products to support inclusive education for children with disabilities; migrant, ethnic minority, refugee and displaced children; and other children with special needs”). Further, the theory of change outlined in this report consistently identifies gender-sensitive outcomes, and outlines as part of the change strategies the need for UNICEF COs and LACRO to “disaggregate M&E on [children on the move] by gender, age, and where possible, by ethnicity and disability and advocate for similar disaggregation by other stakeholders”.

The evaluation found some evidence on the intervention’s efforts to be **gender-responsive**, especially for **guidance and training materials** such as the report “Migration and Displacement of Children in Latin America and the Caribbean: A gender perspective”, and the “Compendium of case studies on best and promising practices for the protection of children on the move in EL Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico”, which outline the importance of addressing the risks and consequences of gender-based violence and of providing gender-appropriate health care and hygiene kits. However, data was not conducive to robustly assess such gender responsiveness. While five Core Standard Indicators (CSIs) across three goal areas offer disaggregation specifically for children on the move separate from migration status overall, only four COs over 2023-2024 (Bolivia, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago and Belize) reported this disaggregation for one indicator focused on social assistance (CSI 5.2.5 number of households reached by UNICEF-supported cash transfers).

COs report somewhat more frequently on CSIs that include disaggregation that allows for migrants to be separated by their status (IDPs, returnees, asylum-seekers/refugees, and migrants) but **reporting shows inconsistencies**. For instance, ten LACR countries report on CSI 3.2.8 (number of children receiving individual case management) with migration status disaggregation in 2024. Mexico and Brazil report on this CSI indicator for migrants in 2024, but do not report on the corresponding HAC indicator for 2024. Most COs do not clearly use the migration status disaggregation; many use “migrant” or “other”. Even when COs report on the CSI and HAC indicators that correspond, HAC shows overreporting and CSIs underreporting. For example, reporting on the number of migrants reached with MHPSS is inconsistent although within range.¹⁰² Disaggregation within CSI reporting is also used inconsistently.¹⁰³

Importantly, while the CSIs that include disaggregation by migration status enable the differentiation of results between migrant and non-migrant populations, disaggregation by gender is not applied within each of these categories. In other words, it is possible to assess differential effects between migrants and

non-migrants, or between men/boys and women/girls, but this is not possible between men/boys and women/girls within the migrant category.

Finding 14. Communicating knowledge and incorporating it into operational decisions has been a challenge for LACRO due to weak knowledge dissemination strategies, slow distribution of information and a tendency to develop operations without reference to other experiences.

Feedback of LACRO technical assistance was mixed. While it compiles guidance materials that were generally perceived as **high quality and relevant**, dissemination processes were not always sufficiently effective. For instance, the development and piloting of the **Minimum Package of Humanitarian Services** demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of LACRO information-sharing processes. The Minimum Package is intended as a practical tool for COs responding to the needs of migrant children and families in transit in the LAC region. Grounded by UNICEF's organizational policy of Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, it aims to provide a coherent humanitarian response to the ongoing migration crisis so that children benefit from a continuum of services supported by UNICEF throughout their journey.¹⁰⁴ This is a comprehensive and detailed document with clear guidance for COs to apply the model in their own context. However, as was pointed out by UNICEF staff, the development of the model was perceived as having been too slow, so that it was only being rolled out (and partially, for Tier 1 needs only) at a time when the provision of services in transit had been essentially stopped given the shifting migration flows in 2025. At the same time, other key informants expressed frustration at not seeing their own experiences and learnings shared more broadly within the region.

While LACRO knowledge-sharing approach is not optimal, several key informants in deep dive countries also indicated limited time review LACRO materials due to heavy workloads. This indicates a relative **lack of engagement** on the part of CO staff that does not appear to have been resolved by the various measures put in place by the RO, in particular the Migration Working Group. This group meets regularly, providing participants with a platform for exchanging experiences and learning from one another. This is a positive response to recommendations from previous evaluations, and participants indicate that this represents a **useful learning space**. Nevertheless, such spaces appear to be relatively underused, as there does not seem to be a **deliberate strategy** to ensure that the information exchanged in this space and the documentation shared by LACRO are translated into strengthened capacities for UNICEF staff. This type of initiative from LACRO could support and enhance the information sharing and technical assistance efforts of the LACRO, but requires a more explicit and organized strategy to ensure uptake.

This relative lack of engagement with knowledge shared is exemplified by the development of the *Espacios Seguros* model in Costa Rica, which would have benefitted significantly from more consistent and more robust information sharing. The evaluation of the 2018-2022 Cooperation Programme of UNICEF Costa Rica recommended designing a "model strategy" adapting it to the particularities of the Costa Rican context and institutionality, to apply it to its interventions. During this evaluation, it was found that several UNICEF offices have implemented safe space initiatives, but the Costa Rica CO was not aware of these experiences or models.

In addition, in 2016, UNHCR formed the Americas Regional Safe Spaces Network (RSSN),¹⁰⁵ an initiative of UNHCR's Regional Legal Unit for the Americas, under the leadership of the Child Protection and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence team. The network promotes access to services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, children at risk, people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, people with disabilities, Indigenous populations, and other vulnerable people in every phase of the displacement cycle in the Americas. This network has more than 50 organizations from seven countries, and in Costa Rica there are eight affiliated organizations.¹⁰⁶ While the UNHCR model is different from UNICEF's, some key informants noted that the Costa Rica CO did not draw on the experiences of this network either, in spite of UNHCR's invitation, although other KIIs suggest that there was some

coordination. While in the context of the R4V there is a similar regional group where different countries, including Costa Rica, have shared their experiences, it seems that the implementing team did not take these into consideration.

As a result, for the development of the *Espacios Seguros*, several consultancies were hired to design the conceptual proposal and methodological materials, which could have been avoided had the CO been aware of existing initiatives. It is unclear whether this lack of awareness stems from a small CO team being overwhelmed by the response to the migration crisis and seeking to develop their own response independently, or from a process of information sharing from LACRO that may be limited to disseminating announcements of publications and experiences without a sufficiently robust process for ensuring that the teams for whom the information would be most useful are able to engage with the materials. KIIs in Colombia also highlighted that methodologies developed in that country could have been usefully and efficiently shared with other countries impacted by the migration crisis, but that LACRO was not sufficiently focused on disseminating and promoting these good practices. In other words, while LACRO takes multiple steps to promote information sharing and mutual learning, there seems to be a **missing link between information-sharing and uptake** by the different COs, in particular when they are faced with rapid changes in context.

Ensuring that knowledge management across LACRO and COs is effective becomes even more important when there is a need to adapt interventions in an unstable environment. Indeed, in the survey conducted in the framework of the real-time evaluation (RTE), 8 of 17 respondents considered that technical assistance is one of the most important contributions that the RO can make to the COs, ranking at highest/high priority (see **Annex 4**).

Finding 15. Collaboration and cooperation mechanisms across UNICEF offices are inconsistent, undermining strategic alignment, in spite of various measures taken since 2024 to improve them.

Evaluative evidence indicated that while there are strong pockets of collaboration among UNICEF offices in LAC, systemic barriers persist. These include unclear role definitions, fragmented planning processes, and underutilized learning platforms, limiting UNICEF's capacity for cohesive regional action. A regional evaluability assessment found a lack of clarity around responsibilities for assuring and fulfilling the roles of coordination, facilitation, accountability and results management for the LACRO collective effort. Indeed, this suggests that strategic planning remains centralized in LACRO, leading to weak ownership at the CO level and inconsistent implementation of multisectoral initiatives.¹⁰⁷ The challenges around coordination have also been noted in other evaluative exercises of UNICEF's migration response in the region,¹⁰⁸ which found relatively little coordination across COs except for individual activities that are usually bilateral. This fragmentation reduces UNICEF's ability to effectively mobilize joint resources, measure cross-sectoral results, and build momentum for regional goals. Addressing the clarity of roles and enhancing integrated planning processes is essential to strengthen collective impact.

Another challenge is the fact that CO indicators in some cases, such as Costa Rica, are aligned with those of the national development plans, which leads to a misalignment between the Country Programme and the indicators provided by the regional office, creating an additional administrative and reporting burden. While additional efforts have been put in place to improve collaboration, such as the appointment of a Migration Coordinator in LACRO, the establishment of a regional UNICEF Migration Working Group, periodic meetings within the LACRO, as well as quarterly meetings of LACRO with UNICEF CO senior management (Country Representatives and/or Deputy Representatives) with regular participation from HQ Migration and Displacement specialists, it appears that these initiatives have yet to bear fruit, as collaboration and cooperation across UNICEF offices is still inconsistent.

Collaboration with other United Nation agencies can provide valuable synergies. Collaboration and coordination in migration are inconsistent. As found in recent evaluative exercises:

“Strengthening knowledge exchange and cross-learning within UN agencies and implementing partners is critical for improving programme outcomes. One of the invaluable lessons learned from the programme is the critical role of information sharing and the exchange of lessons between countries. While the programme design envisioned this exchange, it did not occur consistently or in a structured manner. This highlights the need to establish more formalized mechanisms and platforms to systematically facilitate bilateral and multilateral learning. Purposeful structures and processes are required to facilitate robust country to country and inter- and cross-regional exchanges that create opportunities for programme adaptation based on other countries’ experiences. A consistent structure of exchange is essential for translating information into improved practices and outcomes.”¹⁰⁹

In Costa Rica, the Preparedness and Response Plans for People in Transit of the UN System for 2022 and 2024 helped to support the national government and were deemed by stakeholders to be very useful. They served to coordinate the work of the different agencies by distributing responsibilities and budgets across the national territory and among the agencies. These plans also strengthened the governance structures for the response to the migration emergency, although the extent to which it has created lasting capacities to address future emergencies varies.

The provision of services to children on the move sometimes benefitted from United Nations agencies collaborating to ensure all relevant services were offered in a single location, with each entity providing the types of assistance for which it holds the most expertise. For example, as discussed during a session held with the Migration Working Group, in Bolivia, the *Centros de Acojida* were set up such that IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF had separate spaces within the same complex, thus providing the whole range of services needed. This approach facilitates access for migrant families, and avoids some of the challenges identified in Costa Rica, where some families did not use the *Espacios Seguros* because they could not leave the children unattended while they sought support to regularize their legal situation. In Mexico, UNHCR, IOM, and UNICEF have collaborated to advocate with the government on high-impact issues, such as the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the United States on the protection of unaccompanied children, and more recently, the development of the indicator matrix for the Child Protection Route for children on the move led by SIPINNA (*Sistema Nacional de Proteccion de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes*).

An important inter-agency collaboration is the Mixed Movements Monitoring (MMM) initiative launched by WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF to monitor the situation of people on the move along the migration corridor from South to North America. This consists of standardized qualitative and quantitative surveys to capture information on the situation of people on the move. The initiative covers seven countries (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, and Chile). It has served to address the needs identified by people on the move themselves and supports joint initiatives such as the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), the Human Mobility Group and the Issue-based Coalition on Human Mobility (IBC-HM). While this represents a commendable joining of forces, this initiative is parallel to the IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix, thus potentially creating some level of duplication.

Furthermore, with each agency having its own data security and privacy protection measures, this system is difficult to access, as the RTE has found, thus potentially reducing the ability of the evidence collected for broader research and policy development uses.

Finding 16. The recent emphasis on an emergency perspective presents both advantages and challenges for the implementation of programming. While it provides for more agile administrative procedures, it also hinders UNICEF’s ability to efficiently address the protracted crisis context.

UNICEF benefits from more agile procedures for emergencies that allow for a set of simplifications to standard UNICEF procedures to allow for greater flexibility and speed to respond to emergencies. These procedures are typically designed for sudden-onset emergencies and enable direct selection of implementing partners and approval of workplans without requiring review by a committee. This flexibility has been critical for **rapid response**, particularly in the context of mobility-related interventions.

While these mechanisms facilitate quick action, they are **not always well-suited for protracted or evolving crises**. One key limitation is the short duration of humanitarian funding cycles, often just six months, although in this case they are in place for the one-year duration of the HAC. This relatively short planning cycle creates instability and high staff turnover, as many personnel are hired on short-term contracts. Even longer projects, such as the 18-month Japan-funded initiative, face implementation delays when disbursements are late, effectively reducing the operational window. These constraints complicate planning and continuity, especially when layered with additional requirements from frameworks like the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) and the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) applications. This was noted in the Multi-Country Evaluation of Children on the Move.¹¹⁰

As discussed in detail in above, in the LAC region in particular, a significant proportion of UNICEF's financial resources for migration interventions has come from the HAC mechanism. Furthermore, the funding for migration of work of 12 COs came in its majority from PRM funds. This created a significant vulnerability which became a reality in early 2025, when the freezing and reduction of these funds caused a significant disruption in UNICEF's ability to engage in migration work, as already noted above. Funding has often come with limited flexibility. Interviews across the deep dive countries and with regional respondents indicate that once it was made available again, PRM funding could only be used for populations in transit, not for returnees, and only for life saving purposes. For example, in Guatemala, UNICEF CO and other stakeholders interviewed perceived that there was limited flexibility in the use of PRM funds for returnees, as these funds prioritized unaccompanied children. In early 2025, with more children returning as part of family units, which fall under the responsibility of SOSEP (*Secretaría de Obras Sociales de la Esposa del Presidente*) as opposed to the SBS, UNICEF and its partners drew on alternative funding sources and bolstered the operational relationship with SOSEP.

Similarly, as noted in earlier sections above, the temporary suspension of emergency funding forced the cessation or severe reduction of activities in multiple countries, leaving them unable to address the needs of stranded and returning children and families. In Brazil, for example, according to KIIs, the freeze and reduction of funding meant the temporary closure of seven of the nine Super Panas spaces in Roraima, as well as a reduction in health and nutrition personnel, in a location where local authorities do not have the financial capacity or the qualified personnel to provide humanitarian services to migrants that are still arriving.

Understanding migration as an emergency is a strategy that leans into UNICEF's strengths – direct service provision to address urgent needs through rapid and targeted interventions. While UNICEF excels in this type of work and it is highly appealing to donors, this strategy **undermines the long term strategic and necessary shift towards systems strengthening and local ownership** that many COs have been working towards and was highlighted as a necessary transition in interviews. Systems strengthening work not only is more sustainable, requiring less intensive investment from UNICEF, but also desperately needed by beneficiaries within this context, where issues of integration and reintegration are paramount, and cannot be readily addressed through direct life-saving humanitarian assistance. Integration work requires working closely with state and local authorities, strengthening existing systems, engaging in advocacy and providing consistent technical assistance to partners. These areas are not the focus of UNICEF's revised response plan. While the prioritized HAC increases the envelope for individual case management, other systems level work that should be prioritized based on needs, is constricted, such as the care and reunification of unaccompanied and separated children. The target beneficiary reach for

this intervention was cut by 33 per cent, despite evidence of increasing vulnerabilities for this group (as described in sections above).¹¹¹

However, the short-term, service provision approach includes considerable risks, as this emergency-first mentality undermines long-term sustainability and prolongs UNICEF's direct engagement as a service provider, prolonging the transition to local ownership and shifting away from the exit strategies many COs had been working towards, especially in more developed countries such as Mexico. UNICEF interviewees indicated that the current contextual changes and decreases in funding could be an opportunity for UNICEF to move towards a sustainable exit strategy, building on capacity developments by national governments over the last decade. This would involve increasing temporary positions within UNICEF, diversifying donors with an emphasis on in-country and in-region resources, moving away from indicators based on beneficiary reach targets and towards results monitoring that emphasizes advocacy, technical assistance and local accountability.

Rather than focusing on transitioning to sustainable government systems, the practice in recent years of prioritizing emergency and short-term work and service delivery, while at times necessary, puts UNICEF in a position to repeat past mistakes and builds beneficiary reliance on assistance that is unlikely to continue, given that direct service provision typically requires greater resources and incurs higher operational costs. The funding landscape in 2025 seems to have pushed UNICEF further into emergency mode, relying on emergency resources earmarked only for lifesaving initiatives, engaging more heavily in expensive direct service delivery, and away from system supportive investments. While the prioritization does respond to the evolved needs in part, it takes a short-sighted view of integration and reintegration work. The emergency framing of children on the move programming in Latin America and the Caribbean has also undermined the integration of intersectoral approaches as well as of linkages between humanitarian and development interventions. Indeed, a less clear-cut effect of funding migration work from emergency mechanisms is that it fosters a short time horizon mindset. Over the course of the RTE, multiple stakeholders noted that the sense of urgency was a factor in developing response plans with limited information, as well as not planning for an exit strategy from the outset or ensuring the integration of the migration response into national systems of child protection, social protection and health in particular. In effect, it predisposes a conceptualization of the intervention as an ad hoc, temporary action.

In 2021, the Multi-Country Evaluation of Children on the Move recommended strengthening intersectoral approach for interventions in children on the move, and to strengthen the linkages between humanitarian and development interventions, including moving the migration theme away from protection and to document multisectoral experiences and good practices of CO's to improve exchanges on experiences through a consultative migration group.¹¹² It is noteworthy that the regional office responded to this recommendation's dimension of promoting intersectoral approaches by creating a separate Migration Coordination unit within the RO, instead of grounding it within child protection exclusively. The extent to which this unit has been able to communicate to the COs the need for both multisectoral approaches and for a closer link between humanitarian and development interventions is, so far, relatively limited. Indeed, while staff at COs recognize the value of this integration, the realities of daily concerns and tasks leave them little time to actively pursue it. In addition, KIs noted that separate funding mechanisms for humanitarian and development activities represent an additional administrative hurdle to integration.

5 Conclusions

The evaluation finds that UNICEF's multi-country response to Children on the Move in Latin America and the Caribbean remained relevant and necessary despite the significant shifts in migration dynamics, funding availability and political constraints that emerged in late 2024 and early 2025. These conclusions outline the main points raised in the findings in relation to each of the evaluation questions.

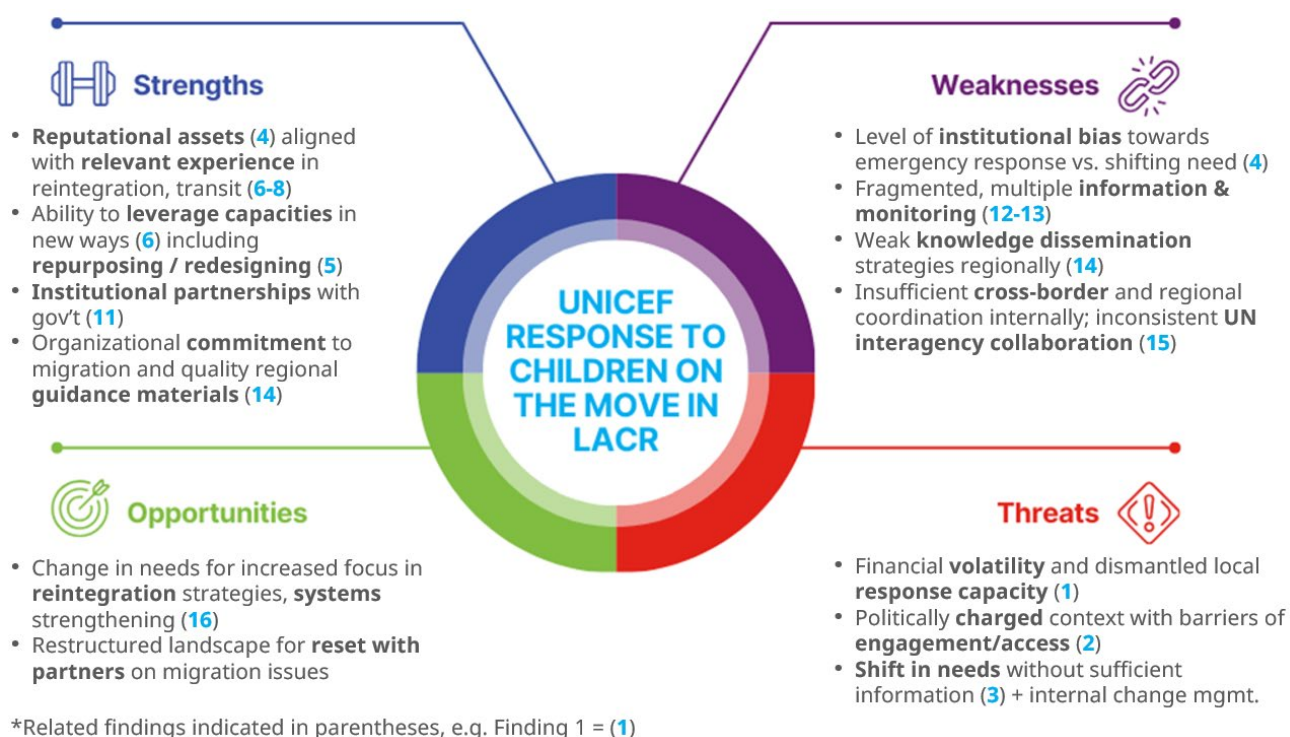
Conclusion 1: Overall, UNICEF's readiness is best described as strategic but stretched: the organization retains the credibility, technical capacity and multisectoral mandate to redefine its role in the evolving migration context, yet its operational agility remains limited by funding volatility, data blind spots and the need to move from an emergency-centric model toward approaches capable of addressing cyclical and long-term migration dynamics.

While the region has experienced a protracted migration crisis, the beginning of 2025 saw significant changes in the context for migration and providing assistance to children on the move in LAC. This has resulted in an unstable context for strategic positioning and programming on migration. To further complicate this unstable context, data available for the returning populations indicates an increased level of vulnerability, with a higher proportion of unaccompanied minors than had been the case in the past, as well as children and families migrating in conditions of increased vulnerability (see Section 1.2). This situation calls for increased and different interventions, at a time when funding has been significantly reduced, not only for UNICEF but for all United Nation agencies, international and national civil society organizations, and national governments.

In this context, the real-time evaluation assessment of UNICEF's readiness and ability to respond to this evolving context found that UNICEF in LAC remained highly relevant and necessary despite the dramatic shifts in migration dynamics, funding availability, and political constraints that emerged in late 2024 and early 2025. The evaluation found that UNICEF demonstrated strong adaptive capacity and continued strategic alignment with the rights and protection needs of migrant, stranded, deported and returning children, even while operating under significantly reduced programmatic scope, geographic reach, and financial resources (see Findings 1, 2, and 4). This relevance is further underscored by the strengths and opportunities identified in the SWOT analysis (Figure 7), which highlight UNICEF's institutional credibility, repurposing capacity, and comparative advantage in reintegration-oriented programming.

The figure below provides a **SWOT analysis** that synthesizes various findings into a holistic picture of where UNICEF can leverage its strengths and potential opportunities, while addressing weaknesses and mitigating threats.

Figure 7 SWOT analysis



The evaluation confirms that UNICEF's pivot from a route-based model to a protection-, inclusion- and reintegration-focused approach was both appropriate and timely (Findings 1 and 4). This adjustment aligned with the "shift in needs without sufficient information" and the threats highlighted in the SWOT (Figure 7), where political volatility and weakened local response capacity required rapid strategic recalibration. UNICEF demonstrated notable agility through the 2025 HAC prioritization, enabling swift reprioritization and programme redesign despite fragmented information systems (Finding 10). This responsiveness reflects the SWOT-identified institutional strength to repurpose capacities and maintain strategic relevance under constrained conditions.

UNICEF's **value added** was most evident where it acted as a **technical enabler, systems partner and normative actor**, leveraging strong government partnerships and reputational assets to support model design, policy alignment and institutionalization (Findings 7, 11, 12). Its support for multisectoral, integrated service packages (spanning child protection, MHPSS, social protection and education) aligned with the SWOT-identified commitment to high-quality regional guidance (Figure 7) and resulted in scalable, sustainable interventions in several countries.

However, the evaluation also identifies clear **areas of reduced impact**, consistent with weaknesses and threats flagged in the SWOT. UNICEF's **direct service delivery footprint became fragmented and limited**, particularly after partner downsizing, reducing its ability to maintain consistent coverage or operational access (Findings 4, 10). **Fragmented information systems, weak knowledge dissemination and insufficient cross-border coordination** (Findings 12-15) further diminished UNICEF's influence on regional policy and collective response efforts. Advocacy impact was lower in politically charged contexts with restricted access (Findings 2 and 15), and gaps in robust, continuous data systems constrained UNICEF's comparative advantage in evidence-based coordination (Findings 8 and 9), echoing the SWOT-noted weakness of "multiple, fragmented monitoring systems."

Conclusion 2: UNICEF practices and principles on systems strengthening and a nexus approach offer a solid foundation for designing and delivering a migration response that is resilient to contextual fluctuations and capable of producing sustainable results, but its future usefulness will re-quire ensuring the consolidation of robust and

interoperable data systems as well as safe-guarding and diversifying operational partnership ecosystems.

UNICEF's **commitment to strengthening and working through national systems** is one of the principles of an effective response in this thematic area. The most durable results across country contexts were achieved when UNICEF acted as a technical enabler supporting governments to institutionalize child-sensitive models, ensuring continuity beyond the lifespan of external funding. Examples such as those presented in Finding 11, demonstrate the value of co-production, policy alignment, and government capacity strengthening for sustaining child-sensitive migration services.

A second principle emerging from the evaluation is the **importance of embedding the humanitarian-development nexus from the outset** rather than treating it as a late-stage transition phase. Where emergency responses were combined with development-oriented activities such as legal identity registration, education access, MHPSS, and social protection integration, UNICEF's responses proved more resilient during the funding contraction and better aligned with the protracted and cyclical realities of migration. Findings 11, 13 and 14 consistently show that integrated, multisectoral models were more effective than narrowly defined humanitarian approaches.

The evaluation also underscores the centrality of robust and interoperable data systems. **Weaknesses in data collection and analysis**, compounded by the discontinuation of MMM, DTM and other monitoring mechanisms, limited UNICEF's ability to identify high-risk groups, target interventions, and articulate evidence-based priorities. Findings 4, 8 and 9 reinforce that long-term effectiveness depends on investments in data architecture that allow for real-time monitoring, cross-border coordination and child-level case management.

Finally, the evaluation highlights the **necessity of safeguarding and diversifying partnership ecosystems**. The collapse or downsizing of many frontline NGOs revealed structural vulnerabilities in UNICEF's reliance on these partners for implementation. Without intentional measures to strengthen the resilience of civil society networks, continuity of services will remain at risk during future funding contractions. At the same time, UNICEF's effectiveness is closely linked to its ability to engage with public institutions, human rights organizations and non-traditional actors, particularly in politically restrictive environments, as highlighted in Finding 15. Together, these principles emphasize again that an effective long-term migration response requires institutional agility, systems strengthening, partnership resilience, and proactive political economy engagement.

Conclusion 3: UNICEF's performance in the LAC migration response reflects internal strengths in rapid humanitarian action alongside data and workforce systems that still limit longer-term programming. Externally, shifting political conditions and funding volatility constrain operational continuity.

UNICEF's performance within the LAC migration response is shaped by a complex interplay of internal capacities, organizational culture, and external forces that either enable or constrain results. Internally, the organization's structure and operational culture remain strongly oriented toward short-term humanitarian action. While this has supported rapid mobilization during acute crises, it has also limited the organization's ability to plan for and respond to longer-term dynamics such as reintegration, secondary displacement, and cyclical mobility. Finding 10 shows that **the predominance of project-based, short-duration humanitarian funding** has constrained the development of multi-year, government-anchored programming models that could better respond to evolving child protection risks.

Internal data limitations further affect performance. The absence of harmonized regional monitoring systems, paired with inconsistencies in child-level disaggregation and tracking, restricts UNICEF's capacity to develop evidence-driven strategies and articulate outcomes. These constraints,

reflected in Findings 4, 8 and 9, also **limit UNICEF's ability to provide clear regional leadership** in a space where data and analysis are essential for advocacy, programming and resource mobilization. Human resource challenges—particularly the reliance on short-term and emergency-focused personnel—add to these constraints by limiting continuity and reducing institutional memory.

Externally, UNICEF operates in an environment shaped by **intensifying political restrictions**, fluctuating migration practices, and reduced civil society space. These trends limit access to children and undermine the operational environment, as highlighted in Findings 1, 2 and 15. The funding landscape remains another major determinant of performance. The suspension of U.S. migration funding, which accounted for a dominant share of resources across several countries, exposed **significant vulnerabilities in UNICEF's financial model** and highlighted the need for greater diversification and contingency planning, as demonstrated in Findings 3, 5 and 6.

Demographic shifts also carry implications. Increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors, children with disabilities, and children experiencing protracted separation call for **more specialized, multisectoral interventions; however, the systems and funding mechanisms needed to support such responses remain uneven** across the region. Finally, technological opportunities exist to improve case management, data sharing and cross-border coordination, but these advances require coherent governance structures that are not yet in place.

Overall Conclusion

The findings of this evaluation highlight both the strengths on which UNICEF can build and the structural and contextual constraints it must address to remain effective in the evolving migration landscape. The evidence indicates that future impact will depend on consolidating UNICEF's role as a technical and systems-strengthening actor, reinforcing data and partnership resilience, and adopting integrated, multisectoral approaches that span humanitarian and development domains. The recommendations that follow translate these findings into actionable strategic directions aimed at enhancing UNICEF's adaptability, strengthening national systems, safeguarding partnerships, and operationalizing a migration response capable of meeting both current and long-term child protection needs.

6 Lessons learned

The evaluation generated several lessons on organizational readiness, adaptability and strategic positioning within a rapidly evolving policy and funding landscape. The following takeaways aim to inform future regional and global programming, enhance learning, and strengthen UNICEF's strategic preparedness for complex migration contexts globally.

Lesson 1. Agility and Adaptive Management are Critical in Volatile Contexts

UNICEF's rapid adaptation to the profound policy and funding shifts of early 2025 demonstrated institutional flexibility and responsiveness (see Findings 1, 2 and 4). The transition from a route-based approach to a needs-based strategy focused on stranded, returning, and deported children enabled UNICEF to maintain relevance despite reduced resources and constrained political space. The HAC prioritization exercise exemplified this agility, with country offices able to reorient programming and targets in real time. However, while this adaptability was commendable, the evaluation also found that such shifts were largely ad hoc rather than systematically embedded (see Finding 10). Institutionalizing adaptive management across Country Offices (COs), including structured scenario planning, flexible financing, and rapid learning mechanisms, would enhance UNICEF's readiness for future volatility.

Lesson 2. Strengthening National Systems Enhances Sustainability

Sustainability was strongest where UNICEF embedded its migration response within existing national systems and progressively transitioned ownership to public institutions (see Findings 7 and 11). In Costa Rica, the Espacios Seguros model's integration into national child protection frameworks demonstrated how UNICEF's technical assistance can contribute to durable institutionalization. Similarly, Brazil's transition of the "Súper Panas" and Community Mobilization Strategy with Adolescent Participation (CMAPS) to national and local partners reflected effective system strengthening and government ownership. These experiences show that UNICEF's comparative advantage lies in bridging humanitarian response and long-term social policy (see Finding 12). Future migration programming should therefore prioritize policy alignment, capacity development, and system integration to ensure continuity of protection and inclusion services for children on the move.

Lesson 3. Reliable Data Systems are Foundational for Strategic Readiness

The evaluation identified significant data and information gaps following the suspension of regional monitoring systems such as the Mixed Migration Monitoring (MMM) platform, IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), and the ProLAC network (see Findings 8 and 9). These limitations constrained UNICEF's ability to assess real-time needs, target resources efficiently, and advocate for policy change. Staff interviews consistently cited the "lack of updated and disaggregated data on migrants' location and needs" as a critical operational barrier (see Finding 9). Further, disaggregation would ensure that gender and disability responsiveness could be systematically documented and assessed. This highlights the importance of investing in resilient, interoperable data systems that can continue functioning during crises or funding interruptions. UNICEF's leadership within the International Data Alliance for Children (IDAC) offers an opportunity to strengthen data governance, promote harmonized indicators for children on the move, and facilitate multi-agency collaboration on data resilience.

Lesson 4. Partnership Ecosystems Require Protection and Diversification

The evaluation found that UNICEF's operational reach in migration programming relies heavily on local NGOs and civil society partners, many of whom were severely affected by funding suspensions and donor policy shifts (see Findings 3, 5 and 6). The freeze of United States funding and other donor cutbacks forced multiple local organizations to scale down or close, resulting in service gaps and weakened protection networks. This experience underscores that UNICEF's partnership model must evolve to include strategies for safeguarding local capacity during financial crises. Diversifying funding streams (through pooled financing, private sector engagement, and South-South cooperation) as well as providing technical and financial resilience support to national and community partners are key to maintaining continuity of services for children on the move (see Finding 6).

Lesson 5. The Humanitarian–Development Nexus Delivers Greater and More Durable Impact

Country Offices that integrated humanitarian and development approaches achieved more sustainable results (see Findings 11, 13 and 14). In Guatemala, mobile units delivering integrated child protection, psychosocial support, and health services proved adaptable to both emergency response and reintegration contexts. In Colombia, migration work linking humanitarian assistance with statelessness prevention and access to national systems illustrated effective operationalization of the humanitarian–development nexus. The evaluation found that such nexus-oriented programming enhanced efficiency and long-term outcomes, particularly in contexts of cyclical displacement and return (see Finding 13). Embedding principles (such as risk-informed planning, system strengthening, and community participation) from the design stage rather than as an exit strategy will maximize sustainability and resilience of UNICEF's migration responses.

Lesson 6. Political Economy Awareness Enhances Strategic Positioning

The evaluation revealed that UNICEF's operational access and advocacy capacity have been increasingly constrained by the contraction of political space for migration and rising anti-migrant sentiment (see Findings 2, 5 and 15). Several Country Offices reported delays, access barriers, or limitations on service delivery imposed by host governments. At the same time, shifts in national narratives and donor agendas reshaped UNICEF's ability to position its migration response within broader child rights frameworks. Continuous political economy analysis, stakeholder mapping, and adaptive advocacy strategies are therefore essential for anticipating risks and maintaining UNICEF's relevance. As seen in Colombia and Costa Rica, working with subnational governments and national human rights institutions can help preserve humanitarian access and reinforce protection standards even in restrictive policy environments (see Finding 15).

Cross-Cutting Reflection

Collectively, these lessons reaffirm that effective migration responses for children on the move depend on institutional agility, strengthened national systems, reliable data, resilient partnerships, and coherent humanitarian–development strategies informed by contextual political analysis. The LAC experience in 2025 demonstrates UNICEF's capacity for rapid adaptation but also highlights the need for deeper structural readiness and sustained investment in systems that can withstand uncertainty and uphold children's rights across changing migration dynamics.

7 Recommendations

One of the key purposes of this evaluation was to support UNICEF LACRO in futureproofing to the extent possible its relevance and efficacy in the theme of migration for the foreseeable future. Based on the evaluation's findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are aimed primarily at reducing the weaknesses identified in this evaluation, mitigating threats, harnessing strengths and utilizing the opportunities presented by the current context. These recommendations were developed by the evaluation team. They incorporate input from participants in the 23 September 2025 regional workshop with UNICEF staff from each deep-dive office and LACRO. Recommendations are organized into two main dimensions (strategic positioning and organizational management) along with their priority, timeline, responsible party, and financial implications for supporting implementation. Related findings are noted in parentheses.

Strategic Positioning

Recommendation 1: UNICEF in LAC should devise and deploy an advocacy strategy at the country and regional levels to ensure that the rights of children affected by migration are not forgotten.



Priority:
High



Timeline:
Medium term



Responsibility:
LACRO and COs



Financial implications:
None

In this region, migration has long been both a voluntary livelihood strategy and the all too frequent result of involuntary displacement due to socio-political and increasingly environmental crises. Children will continue to experience migration in its various dimensions, whether being on the move or being left behind, with the corresponding consequences and needs that these situations create. Therefore, UNICEF's work to ensure that the rights of all children in this region are upheld and realized will of necessity continue to involve addressing the needs of children on the move. This will be the case regardless of policy and funding fluctuations, and these fluctuations will potentially put these rights more at risk. In fact, this evaluation has found that the unstable and politically hostile context has already led to increased and more diverse vulnerabilities. (Findings 1, 2)

Recommendation 2: UNICEF should consolidate its role as a convener and technical enabler of child-sensitive migration systems at national and subnational levels, scaling and systematizing integrated service delivery models for reintegration and inclusion of migrant and returnee children.



Priority:
High



Timeline:
Medium term



Responsibility:
LACRO, CoE Panama and COs



Financial implications:
Moderate

UNICEF's most durable results were achieved where it served as a technical and coordination enabler, supporting governments to institutionalize and align child protection and migration responses within national systems. Experiences from Mexico to Colombia and Brazil demonstrate the effectiveness of UNICEF's support in designing, standardizing and embedding services within public institutions. Further, integrated, multisectoral models that combine child protection, psychosocial support, education, and social inclusion were identified as the most effective and adaptable interventions in the 2025 context. These models offer scalable frameworks that balance immediate assistance with long-term reintegration outcomes. UNICEF should consolidate this role by institutionalizing proven service models through technical assistance, costing and integration into public budgets; supporting subnational governments and social welfare agencies to strengthen protection and reintegration mechanisms for migrant and returnee children. (Findings 7, 11, 12, 13, 14)

Organizational management

Recommendation 3: UNICEF should institutionalize adaptive management systems to strengthen organizational agility in crisis contexts, data management and monitoring frameworks, and learning.



Priority:
High



Timeline:
Medium term



Responsibility:
LACRO and COs



Financial implications:
Minimal

Regarding **adaptive management for agility**, UNICEF should formalize mechanisms that enable offices to rapidly revise programmatic priorities, budgets, and response plans in volatile contexts. This could include establishing a regional adaptive management framework, scenario-based contingency planning templates, and internal decision-making triggers linked to early warning systems. These tools should ensure that future adjustments, such as those prompted by the 2025 funding and policy shifts, are systematic rather than ad hoc. The process should also include documentation of real-time adaptations and evidence of results to support learning and accountability. (Findings 1, 2, 4, 10)

Regarding **data management and monitoring frameworks**, the incompleteness, duplication and multiplication of data sources create challenges for the appropriate design and monitoring of interventions, at the same time that it creates inefficiencies. While data sensitivity related to individuals is an important constraint, depersonalized migration flow data should be available in systems that are compatible (i.e., that include comparable data, are collected and analysed on similar schedules, and have similar methodologies for data collection), which the current HPM data is not consistently able to deliver. Similarly, the use of comparable monitoring indicators within the thematic area across the region would improve the usability of this type of information for the purpose of developing regional strategies. (Findings 11, 13)

Regarding **monitoring and learning practices**, UNICEF should establish a regional repository of adaptive practices to promote continuous learning across COs working on children on the move, focusing on innovations in service delivery, partnership models, and system integration. The repository should feed into LACRO's real-time dashboards and global knowledge-sharing platforms to support organizational learning and cross-country replication. This would consolidate gains from the real-time evaluation process and ensure that adaptive innovations are documented and scaled. (Findings 9, 10, 12)

Recommendation 4: UNICEF should continue to work on improving coordination and collaboration, through a more proactive approach to knowledge sharing and cross-border interventions.



Priority:
Medium



Timeline:
Medium term







Responsibility:
RO, CoE Panama and COs



Financial implications:
None





Coordination and collaboration across borders are a necessity in the area of migration and can facilitate information sharing, which may lead to better intervention design and avoid efficiencies. The RO has taken some positive steps by setting up the Migration Working Group and ensuring it meets regularly. However, it remains mostly a forum for information sharing and lacks a mechanism to ensure follow up and mutual support for the design and implementation of interventions. Such a mechanism could take the form of creating sub-regional clusters with shared characteristics/facing similar challenges, or the organization of study-visits to learn from especially effective experiences, with the RO acting as the connecting hub by identifying potential partnerships and successful experiences worth learning from. (Findings 12, 13).

Recommendation 5: UNICEF should diversify and protect the partnership ecosystem to sustain service delivery capacity.

 Priority: High	 Timeline: Short-term	 Responsibility: LACRO, CoE Panama and COs	 Financial implications: Minimal
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UNICEF should lead efforts to diversify resource and partnership models to reduce dependency on a small number of bilateral donors and to protect local NGO and CSO capacity. Actions could include developing pooled funding mechanisms, engaging private-sector and philanthropic donors, and expanding South–South and triangular cooperation arrangements to sustain cross-border collaboration. LACRO should also design a “Partnership Resilience Framework” to assess and mitigate the vulnerability of implementing partners during funding crises. (Findings 3, 5, 6)

Recommendation 6: UNICEF should embed humanitarian-development nexus approaches across all migration programming.

 Priority: High	 Timeline: Medium term	 Responsibility: LACRO and COs	 Financial implications: Moderate
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COs, with the support of the RO, should design migration interventions that simultaneously address humanitarian needs and support long-term integration and reintegration systems. Practical actions include joint programming with Social Policy and Education sections, integration of psychosocial and child protection services into national systems and strengthening coordination with development partners to ensure continuity of services beyond emergency phases. LACRO could support by developing regionally tailored humanitarian–development nexus guidance for migration responses. (Findings 8, 10, 11, 13, 14)

Endnotes

- ¹ “Terms of Reference: Real-Time Evaluation on UNICEF Multi-Country Response to Children on the Move in Latin America and the Caribbean,” UNICEF LACRO, October 23, 2024.
- ² Adapted from UNICEF. 2023. “Theory of Change and Strategic Framework for UNICEF’s Work on Children in Contexts of Human Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean”
- ³ UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action for Children appeals (HACs) are organized annual efforts by UNICEF to raise resources for regionally and thematically clustered programmatic work oriented towards providing emergency humanitarian aid to conflict- and disaster-affected children. There has been a dedicated HAC appeal for Children on the Move in Latin America since at least 2020. HAC appeals include specific resource requirements, programmatic indicators and targets by country. More information about HAC appeals is available: <https://www.unicef.org/appeals>
- ⁴ International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, Key terms, definitions and concepts, UNICEF, New York, 2023.
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- ⁶ Adam Sabow et al., *The Future of Foreign Aid: A Generational Shift* | McKinsey, with Connor Rochford and Sarah Anderson (McKinsey & Company, 2025), <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/a-generational-shift-the-future-of-foreign-aid#/>.
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- ¹¹ *Boletines Estadísticos: Personas En Situación Migratoria Irregular (Antes, Extranjeros Presentados y Devueltos), 2024* (Gobierno de México - Unidad de Política Migratoria, 2024), <http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/CuadrosBOLETIN?Anual=2024&Secc=3>.
- ¹² “Southwest Land Border Encounters,” United States Customs and Border Protection Data Portal, 2024, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters>.
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- ¹⁴ *Tránsito Irregular de Extranjeros Por La Frontera Con Colombia: Año 2024*; *Tránsito Irregular de Extranjeros Por La Frontera Con Colombia: Año 2025*. (República de Panamá Gobierno Nacional – Migración, 2024); *Tránsito Irregular de Extranjeros Por La Frontera Con Colombia: Año 2025*. (República de Panamá Gobierno Nacional – Migración, 2025).
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- ¹⁶ In Q4 2024 (Oct-Dec), men made up on average 61% of recorded migrants crossing the Darien. In Q1 2025 (Jan-Mar), men comprised on average 71% of migrants crossing. Average proportion of children crossing fell from 23% in Q4 2024 to 15% Q1 2025.
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- ³¹ Integration in this case refers to the integration of children in countries of transit, and reintegration refers to address the needs of children returning to countries of origin or of their parents' origin.
- ³² Child Friendly Spaces are defined as "places designed and operated in a participatory manner, where children affected by natural disasters or armed conflict can be provided with a safe environment, where integrated programming including play, recreation, education, health, and psychosocial support can be delivered and/or information about services/supports provided." Source: UNICEF (2009). "A Practical Guide for Developing Child Friendly Spaces." See also the concept of Support Spaces as defined in UNICEF (2025). "Review of the Implementation of Support Spaces in Latin America and the Caribbean"; defined as "any physical or mobile space that provides coordinated, multi-sectoral services to refugees, migrants, returnees, and host communities along key migration routes, in urban settings, and at points of entry and return" which commonly provide "Information and orientation on rights and available services; Safe referrals to protection services; Psychosocial support and immediate assistance; Health services (e.g., first aid, sexual and reproductive health); Hygiene facilities or distributions; Child- and gender-sensitive environments".
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⁹⁸ These polls were conducted during two meetings of the Migration Working Group, with the participation of 20 migration focal points from the region

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¹⁰⁰ *Multicountry Evaluation of UNICEF's Response to the Venezuela Outflow Crisis (2019-2021)* (UNICEF Evaluation Office, 2022).

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¹⁰³ For instance, for the indicator on MHPSS (CSI 3.2.7) in Guatemala in 2023, the CO reports a breakdown of beneficiaries across "returnees", "migrants", and "others", whereas in 2024, they only report on "migrants". In 2023, El Salvador, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago reported on the same CSI indicator (3.2.7), but none of those countries reported 2024 numbers for this CSI indicator, despite reporting on the same indicator within the children on the move HAC.

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