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The Latin American experience: inequality's role in shaping humanitarianism

Published in:

Handbook on Humanitarianism and Inequality

Publication status and date:

Published: 01/02/2024

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document License/Available under:

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Citation for the published version (APA):

Gómez, O. A., Lucatello, S., & Mena, R. (2024). The Latin American experience: inequality's role in shaping humanitarianism. In S. Roth, B. Purkayastha, & T. Denskus (Eds.), *Handbook on Humanitarianism and Inequality* (1st ed., pp. 458-473). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/handbook-on-humanitarianism-and-inequality-9781802206548.html>

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32. The Latin American experience: inequality's role in shaping humanitarianism

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the possible connection between two basic facts about inequality and humanitarianism in Latin America. The first, seemingly incontrovertible fact is how Latin America is one of the world's most unequal regions. Inequality in the region has been repeatedly highlighted in the development studies literature concerning income and other human development dimensions – i.e., education and gender. Such inequality has been linked to colonial legacies in the distribution of political and economic power, as well as social structures (see Chapter 2 by O'Leary McNeice on Humanitarianism and Colonialism in this volume), but underlying factors expand well beyond colonialism after two centuries of independence and many local and planetary transformations (Bértola and Ocampo, 2010). Data is patchy, but references to inequality can be found particularly from the last quarter of the twentieth century. The UNDP (2010) stressed the region's top position during the twenty-first century's first decade. However, the situation has improved in the second decade, and the region appears to be now in second place (UNDP, 2021). Nevertheless, inequality remains a top concern, not only in relation to economic and political problems, but also connecting with endemic violence, and other social challenges.

The second fact, still open to debate, is the limited role of international humanitarian action in Latin America. Here we understand humanitarianism in the narrow sense of response to crises of large scale, oftentimes driven by international funds, agencies, and structures (Davey et al., 2013). From this perspective, the region is usually at the periphery of the international humanitarian system's attention. In the Global Humanitarian Assistance Reports produced by Development Initiatives since the year 2000, Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras have occasionally appeared among the more affected countries – Venezuela has become a source of concern lately.² Development Initiatives (2016) reports Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela as part of the *forgotten* crises identified by the European Commission; lately, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico have also been mentioned concerning violence-related problems. Additionally, Latin American countries have never appeared among the 12 countries with the highest risk in the INFORM report. Mexico appears among those with the highest values in the hazard and exposure category. We have suggested this is a long-term characteristic of the region related to the timing of its independence, the impact of the Monroe Doctrine, the nature of the region's state-building projects, and the local approaches and frameworks that the region has produced to attend to its own crises (Lucatello and Gómez, 2022).

We argue that these two facts are not independent and, thus, explore their interconnections in this chapter. While the correlation of inequality with the vulnerability of disadvantaged populations is commonly accepted, a discussion of how inequality can keep international humanitarianism at bay does not exist in the literature. The chapter presents an original frame-

work to analyse inequality and humanitarianism interactions, explained in the next section. Then, we use it to analyse the cases of Chile, Colombia, and the Mexico-Guatemala border. The case selection showcases the plurality of old and new humanitarian needs in the region, as well as different degrees of capacities; the selection also offers geographical variety. In the last section, we reflect on our initial findings and the way forward.

1. HOW HUMANITARIANISM SHAPES AND IS SHAPED BY INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA

The Latin American experience in dealing with inequality and international humanitarianism alludes to at least four patterns of interaction (Figure 32.1). These patterns of interaction result from matching humanitarian needs and capabilities with the manifestations of inequality and how actors react to them. This framework reflects how inequality implies both weaknesses and strengths converging to the occurrence of crises and that agency in the response is not only top-down but also pushed by affected populations. The framework differs from traditional international humanitarianism in its emphasis on capacities and different forms of local agency – Figure 32.1 right column – which once ignored result in the usual ‘vulnerability justifies intervention’ narrative – left column. We sketch in this section the four patterns of interactions and provide further examples through the case studies.

		‘Humanitarian’	
		Needs	(In) Capacities
Inequality	manifestation	① Local vulnerability	② National institutions
	agency in reaction to	④ Internationalisation of crises	③ Bottom-up responses

Figure 32.1 A frame to analyse humanitarianism and inequality

The first and more basic interaction between inequality and humanitarianism is the vulnerability to crisis. The region has confronted all types of crises, and the impacts are not distributed equally among the populations. Therefore, (forced) displacement and disasters affect the most vulnerable. The pandemic also affected populations differently (UNDP, 2021: 65–78). Arjona (2021) and Schargrotsky and Freira (2021) suggest a robust connection between crime and inequality, one of the region’s most significant emerging concerns. It is also important to highlight how research on inequality suggests inequality and crisis mutual reinforcement: crises negatively affect the chances of people to escape poverty and vulnerability, resulting in more harm after crises (UNDP, 2010: 16; UNDP, 2021: 205–16). In other words, crises are part of the poverty trap. This first interaction between humanitarianism and inequality stresses a simple point: there have always been crises in Latin America.

The second interaction brings the focus to the other extreme of inequality: the accumulation of resources and capacities in Latin American societies (UNDP, 2021). The grim situation of Rio de Janeiro favelas receives so much attention precisely because of the stark contrast with the richness elsewhere in the city. This accumulation of resources has also brought along knowledge, capacities, and institutions that have been gradually developing for at least two

centuries. At different points in history, countries of the region have been among the richest of the world or promising emerging markets. Public health institutions nurtured during the twentieth century are at similar level as Western peers. The region has not experienced any catastrophic famine since late in the nineteenth century (De Waal, 2018). Latin America is recognised for its pioneering approach to displacement, starting with the Cartagena declaration in the 1980s (Regional Refugee Instruments and Related, 1984). The region has been at the vanguard of disaster management, particularly Chile early in the twentieth century, but to a certain extent shared by the rest of the region. While the region has experienced disagreements between technocratic and more social approaches to crises, the existence of these debates attests to the degree of professionalism and capacities in response to multiple hazards. Particularly important, most of these efforts are not framed as humanitarian but as part of the protective functions of the state. This second interaction pattern lays the groundwork for the interactions with international actors suggested below.

The third pattern of interaction refers to the reactions of different actors to the impacts of inequality within Latin American societies. The perception of an unfair distribution of resources, and the unfair treatment linked to this, is a source of uneasiness and instability. The region has been perennially afflicted by instability associated with struggles against unfair social arrangements, starting with the colonial system. Compared with the United States, Grandin (2012: 74) observes how dealing with racial differences in Latin America resulted in ‘powerful countervailing democratic movements and ideologies, often manifested in the collective militancy’ underlying multiple forms of social mobilisation. This plurality of movements demanding better conditions has taken multiple shapes through history, none of which has been ‘humanitarian’. They include independence struggles, human rights advocacy and litigation, liberation theology, and communist and indigenous guerrillas, among others (Lucatello and Gómez, 2022). Starting from the 1980s, disaster risk reduction in Latin America has always been connected to development concerns (Alcántara-Ayala, 2019). These movements have traditionally aimed to address the root causes of crises, so this third pattern suggests that not only capabilities for protection were present, but also capacities for resistance that produced their own languages to promote change.

Despite national capacities, vulnerability and social unrest open the door for the internationalisation of crises. Internationalisation can be actively pursued by any actor, including international humanitarian organisations looking for access, local non-governmental actors looking for support, or even national governments expecting some material or symbolic advantage. These continuous within and without pressures have been documented in Latin America from its origins (Grandin, 2012). Balancing them underlies Latin American’s international agency, for instance, in the nineteenth-century contributions to the development of international law (Obregón, 2006), or in moulding the United States (US) Monroe Doctrine somehow to its advantage (Friedman and Long, 2015). Human rights are also a well-documented example in the twentieth century – for example, Sikkink (2014) – about which Grandin (2012) emphasises the special role of social rights in the conception of Latin American States. Dependency Theory as a response to enduring inequality in the international economic order was also, to a large extent, a Latin American innovation (Cardoso and Faletto, 1967), as well as post-development and decoloniality. In other words, inequality has also pushed governments to resist unfairness and international intervention in different ways, which, we argue, include contesting international humanitarian action.

These four patterns of action and reaction to inequalities in the region are reviewed through the case studies of Chile, Colombia, and the Mexico-Guatemala border.

2. CHILE

Despite Chile's high GDP per capita and Human Development Index, the country is one of the most unequal in the region, resulting in large social mobilisations in recent years (Faúndes, 2019). The country is also one of the most exposed to hazards such as earthquakes and tsunamis worldwide (UNDRR, 2021). Despite all of these, Chile presents an image of economic stability, security, and opportunities in the region, making it the destination of choice for thousands of migrants.

The Vulnerability to Crisis

Multiple disasters in the last decades have shown how inequality and poverty in the country drove many to live in places and ways that increased their disaster risk. For example, in 2014 the poorest areas of Valparaiso, Chile, were affected by urban fires, killing tens of people and leaving more than 11,000 homeless (BBC Mundo, 2014). The impact of the fires relates to the fact that these neighbourhoods host a population of middle and low incomes in fragile livelihood systems (Atienza et al., 2012). Poverty strengthened the option of people to inhabit the hills of the city, without access to emergency services, fire taps, and in light and highly flammable buildings (Arellano and Bezama, 2014). However, people living in nearby and richer neighbourhoods were not affected by these fires. Facilitated by arrangements such as emergency response services, urban development and the construction of fire buffer zones, Valparaiso shows how inequality relates to this humanitarian crisis and is one of its causes.

Inequality in Chile also shows how crises affect vulnerable groups more. For instance, the measures taken by the government to address COVID-19, particularly the lockdown, had a severe impact on the poorest population (Alduenda and Ramos, 2021a). While people working in the informal economy, with the precarity of wages, and overcrowded households in the country started to fail to meet their basic needs every month, the same measures did not negatively affect people with the highest incomes by having formal jobs and greater access to public services (Olivares et al., 2020).

As these two examples show, the same humanitarian crises affected the most vulnerable populations more strongly due to the country's inequality.

Strong Institutions and Recourses to Respond to Crises

Chile has developed a robust institutional framework to respond to emergencies. The Oficina Nacional de Emergencia del Ministerio del Interior y Seguridad Pública (ONEMI) is the national office in charge of planning and coordinating public and private resources for the prevention and response to emergencies and disasters, particularly those related to natural hazards (ONEMI, 2021). ONEMI has a network of offices throughout the Chilean territory with the capacity to act in all phases of disaster risk management (ONEMI, 2019). Moreover, Chile recently approved the reform of the ONEMI, seeking to, among others, further professionalise the institution and strengthen prevention and response capacities at the local level.

Together with this institutional capacity, multiple international organisations are present in the country: the United Nations have offices of the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Program, the International Organization for Migration and the High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Children's Fund (United Nations, 2021). These organisations, however, play a limited role in responding to crises in Chile and acting on significant humanitarian crises is outside the ONEMI plan of action. The government, moreover, does not have another body or office that integrally works on humanitarian issues.

Moreover, Chile's capacity to act and coordinate international humanitarian aid is limited. Research on the health system and international cooperation response to the 2010 earthquake in Chile showed that while the general response worked well, the coordination of international cooperation was weak (López Tagle and Santana Nazarit, 2011). Using the same case, Trakalo (2016) concluded that while Chile has proper legal frameworks and tools for international humanitarian aid cooperation, the management and implementation of them present problems. The reform of ONEMI could have been an opportunity to address this, but the new system does not include humanitarian action as one of its responsibilities. Furthermore, the new body strengthens its technical capabilities but does not mention issues of social justice or inequality, reducing risk management and prevention to a technical exercise.

Strong Social Movements-Based Responses

Alongside the presence of an institution like ONEMI, historically the emergency response in Chile has also relied on social movement-based actions (see also Chapter 11 by Martí i Puig and Martín Álvarez on Political Solidarity Movements in this volume). This is grounded on the principle of solidarity and the distance between groups in power and the government with the most vulnerable in the society, both elements firmly rooted in the country's inequality.

A good example of both can be found in the response to COVID-19. The measures taken by the government, particularly the lockdowns, increased poverty levels and unemployability in the country. As a result, food insecurity increased, and the government announced the distribution of 2.5 million food baskets. However, logistics problems and lack of consideration of general vulnerability levels made this measure insufficient (Alduenda and Ramos, 2021b). To address this, many neighbourhoods started to organise the so-called *Ollas Comunes* initiative (common pots), in which people coordinate to purchase goods and cook for the whole community. This strategy is not new to the country. Its origins date back to Chile's *coup d'état* with Pinochet in the 1970s (Hardy, 1986), and resurfaced during multiple crises, like the earthquake in 2010 (Saracostti Schwartzman, 2010). Most people explain this measure as an act of solidarity (even having a webpage called *ollasolidaria.cl* where people can find the solidarity kitchen closest to them) and as non-political, seeking to aid everyone in need (Apablaza, 2021; Espinoza, 2020).

While solidarity and humanitarianism are not the same, people use the first to refer to the second in Chile (Vera-Pinto Soto, 2014). The idea of helping others in need as solidarity and as a remonstrance against the governments was strengthened under the liberation theology, strong in the region since the 1960s, that has promoted voluntarism and grassroots community's organisation as a way of protest and social support (Foroohar, 1986). It also strengthened the role of the church and the ideas of social justice, human rights, and social transformation. Since then, social movements have demanded the government to provide emergency humanitarian aid *and* address social injustices in the country with development and human rights pro-

tection approaches. Traditional humanitarian aid does not question or answer these demands and, therefore, has not been an adequate framework for this type of assistance in Chile.

In Chile, there is also a low legitimisation of the government. Since the dictatorship, a large part of the population does not legitimise the state's actions, in part because it sees that the neoliberal policies sustaining the miracle economic growth of the Country (Arturo, 1997) are the reason for the high levels of inequality that fuelled the aforementioned mobilisations. As Alduenda and Ramos (2021a) present regarding COVID-19 and the country mobilisations, 'Chileans were demanding social justice to a government that seemed not to be aware of inequalities'.

This delegitimising and inequality can also be seen in the so-called disconnection or distance between the government and the rest of the population. A statement from the country's former health minister is the best example: 'There is a level of poverty and overcrowding [in Chile] of which I was not aware' (El Mostrador, 2020: online). Therefore, and as mentioned by many, the *ollas comunes* are also 'a form of social organisation in the face of the abandonment of the State' (Apablaza, 2021 online).

A Sense of Fairness and Collaboration in Resistance to Interventions

Echoing what happens within the country, international humanitarian aid is seen in Chile with a sense of social justice, and the notion that international aid may entail interventionism.

For the earthquakes in Mexico 2017 and Haiti 2021, Chile's government sent humanitarian aid to these countries with the aim of showing solidarity with others who suffer. In the case of Haiti, Chilean President Piñera said 'We have all the reasons in the world to accompany, show solidarity and help the Haitian people' (Gobierno de Chile, 2021), and similar words have been used by the government when sending humanitarian aid items to Mexico in 2017 (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2017, online).

However, when the Government of Chile sent humanitarian aid to Cúcuta, Colombia, due to the Venezuelan migration crisis, the approach and social reaction were different. In this case, President Piñera travelled in person to deliver 300 tonnes of aid, justifying his trip for humanitarian reasons (to alleviate the suffering of the people of Venezuela, a 'sister country' in his words) but also for political reasons (Cooperativa, 2019). This act was seen in Chile as going against the country's foreign policy because it seeks to intervene in the politics of another country and the region using the discourse of humanitarian needs as a cover (Escobar, 2019). Other statements also claimed that the government could have sent the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or other personnel, but there is no need for a president to do it (Radio Duna, 2019).

These claims reinforce the fact that humanitarian aid in the country falls under the framework of international (bilateral) cooperation, such as South–South cooperation strategies (Portales, 2020), managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and not as homeland affairs.

3. COLOMBIA

There are two traditional sources of protection needs in Colombia, namely violent conflict and disasters triggered by natural hazards. Inequality is seen as a crucial factor underlying those needs, although some nuance is necessary. Armed conflict has been ongoing in the country at least since 1958, with its more intense period being between 1996 and 2005 (Grupo de

Memoria Histórica, 2013). A government-sponsored and internationally recognised effort to document the history of the war suggests that 450,664 persons have died because of the conflict between 1985 and 2018, victims of guerrilla, paramilitary forces, drug cartels, and state forces' violence (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). Perhaps the most renowned form of humanitarian need has been internal displacement. The displacement size has been a contentious topic because of the measurement difficulties and the political use of those numbers. The government estimates that between 2003 and 2012 there were 2,729,153 displaced persons in the country. External actors report figures twice as large, which peaked in 2016, when a peace agreement was signed with the largest guerrilla group.³

Armed conflict in Colombia has not affected equally all the population. It has been mostly of low intensity, in which terror is used by all parties to advance political and economic interests. Actions have taken place mostly in the countryside, allowing the public to remain indifferent, as more than 70 per cent live in cities. The victims of the conflict have been mainly poor populations, as well as indigenous and afro communities. Moreover, inequality has not been only a source of vulnerability but also a direct cause of the conflict, particularly because of the struggle for land ownership.

Inequality also plays an important role in vulnerability to disasters. Campos G. et al. (2012) reviewed 40 years (1970–2011) of disasters data in Colombia and found an important relation between poverty and losses. Low-income families cannot afford housing outside of risky areas resulting in exposition and harm. Cities with more poverty also have less recovery capacity, reproducing vulnerability. It is, however, important to observe that an important share of the damage from disasters results from small and middle-scale events. For housing, in 2010, losses from small and middle-scale events were two and half times higher than those from large events. Since these events are locally managed, international humanitarian action is not expected to play any significant role.

A third source of protection needs has emerged since 2016, becoming the dominant crisis of humanitarian concern in the country: Venezuelan migrants. This migration results from the collapse of Venezuela's economy, pushing more than 5 million people to leave the country. According to Colombian government records, 1,837,652 migrants were registered by early 2022, although many more have moved through the country to reach other parts of the continent.⁴ As economic migrants, Venezuelans in Colombia experience different degrees of vulnerability, in their uncertain process to access new opportunities of subsistence.⁵ The Covid-19 pandemic has added another layer of complexity to this displacement, because its health and economic repercussions.

The government has created institutions and invested significant resources to deal with these crises. About disasters, the country has gradually built capacities, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by a hiatus in the 2000s (Campos G. et al., 2012). Since 2011, the system has obtainable visible and stable leadership in the shape of the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (UNGRD). The development of capabilities at the response level has been significant, including efforts to standardise humanitarian efforts (UNGRD, 2013). The Unit has played important roles in the early phases of both the peace agreement implementation, the migration crisis and even the pandemic response before the government creates crisis-specific institutions. For the case of Venezuelan migration, the government created new capacities under the umbrella of the migration office linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while involving a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The government's decision to allow migrants to stay and work in the country – the so-called Temporary Protection Statute

for Venezuelans in Colombia – is due to require further state resources, beyond the 0.4 per cent of the GDP expected to cover health and education between 2020 and 2022 (Tribín-Uribe et al., 2020).

National capacities to address needs from the conflict are more complicated to assess. The peak of protection needs coincides with the government adopting an all-out-war strategy to finish the conflict, which was possible because of the state's (military) capacities. At the same time, from the late 1990s, the government recognised the forced displacement problem and started efforts to provide support. According to Ibáñez Londoño (2008), out of three areas of state's support, namely prevention, humanitarian aid, and socioeconomic stabilisation, humanitarian aid has received most of the attention. This support became further institutionalised in 2012 with the creation of the Unit for the Victims, in charge of the integral attention, support, and reparation of all the victims. The Unit has an annual budget of more than 500 million dollars, which is used in different kinds of activities.

Now, discussion about the internationalisation of protection needs in Colombia has been mostly limited to the armed conflict. Disasters catastrophic enough to trigger international humanitarian action have been scarce and the government's position has not been necessarily welcoming. The best known and most devastating disaster in the history of the country was a volcanic eruption in 1985, which resulted in several lahars – i.e. mudflow on the slopes of a volcano – that killed over 25,000 persons – most of them from a single town (López Jiménez, 2021). While the emergency was followed by a wave of international support, the humanitarian experience was not positive.⁶ The government reaction to massive floods in 2010 and 2011 was a programme called 'Colombia Humanitaria', which resulted in the creation of the present disaster management institutions. On this occasion, the government pondered making an international appeal, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not allow it (Gómez, 2019). The UNGRD keeps an international cooperation strategy and actively engages with national and international humanitarian actors, aiming to avoid unnecessary aid and unintended harm.

Protection needs from internal conflict have been traditionally presented as human rights violations. This is part of the country's long-standing international law tradition (Sikkink, 2014). However, it is also part of the government's strategy to contain international pressure. Through the strategic ratification of all human rights instruments, the country can gain international recognition without necessarily affecting the conflict dynamics at home (Borda Guzman, 2011). The government accepts international support, particularly from the United Nations and its agencies, to legitimise its peace efforts, while keeping strong pressure against any criticism. From the point of view of the army, Kalmanovitz (2018) further shows that the 'humanitarian discourse' in the country is a casualty of this pattern of action: initially conflated with human rights, the armed forces were hostile to this legal approach; however, disentangling human rights and humanitarianism has helped the army to use humanitarian law to justify some of its actions as part of the conflict.

The human rights approach is associated with a plethora of civil society organisations and NGOs, which play the traditional role of humanitarian protection. The Catholic Church plays a crucial role in these activities, as well as other national and international organisations, including traditional actors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Yet, it is important to bear in mind how the internal conflict was connected to the Cold War dynamics, as the emerging guerrilla groups upheld different ideologies from the extreme left (see Chapter 3 by Tudor on Humanitarianism and the Global Cold War in this volume). Human rights activism has been traditionally seen as a continuation of this tradition, resulting in NGO

action being associated with the political left and, thus, stigmatised and targeted by paramilitary groups – a tragic dynamic that continues today with the frequent assassinations of social leaders. Violence thus forces humanitarian action to keep a low profile. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has sustained efforts to maintain a national humanitarian team that coordinates international and local non-governmental actors, interacting with the UNGRD to guarantee smooth communication. However, in a protracted situation, as the Colombian case, each member maintains its own identity (humanitarian or not), to keep access and guarantee the safety of its staff.

Paradoxically, the Venezuelan migration crisis resulted in a very different dynamic for international humanitarian action. The Colombian government has encouraged international humanitarian support for Venezuelans with two major goals: first, to highlight the bankruptcy of the Venezuelan system and pressure for regime change and, second, to attract international cooperation money, which as an upper-middle-income country member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is difficult to justify. The Venezuelan migration crisis gave a new space for international actors to remain active in the country, particularly as the peace process was seen by some as the beginning of the end of humanitarian presence in the country. Still, it is important to stress that the contribution of humanitarian actors and international money is less than the practical support from local communities and the funding from the government. For instance, Tribin-Uribe et al. (2020) register US\$ 384 million from international donors between 2017 and 2019, while only the government's health and education expenditures for Venezuelans in the same period amounted to US\$ 430 million, not including emergency, security, and regularisation costs.

4. THE MEXICAN-GUATEMALAN BORDER

Manifested Inequality

A lack of access to income determinants like health services, education, and business tools together with chronic economic conditions and conflicts, are part of the big frame to understand inequality in Mexico and Central America. Furthermore, overcoming socioeconomic boundaries is incredibly tough. For instance, in the last 20 years, Guatemala's income Gini coefficient has averaged 0.53 (OECD, 2015). There is ample evidence that a lack of access to means of production and opportunities is a determinant element in poverty. Indigenous women from rural areas and poor urban homes are the groups with the fewest chances. In Guatemala, 59 per cent of the population lives in poverty today. Chronic malnutrition affects five out of 10 children under the age of five, and this number rises to eight out of 10 when only indigenous children are considered. As a result, millions of people have been moving out and displaced over the past few years, with increasing impressive numbers over the past three years.

Amidst these several challenges, the Mexican Government is trying to find its own humanitarian way to handle the crisis on its southern border. From a 'soft' and emerging donor of humanitarian relief and aid during the last decade, mostly in support of disasters in the Latin American region affected countries (for example, in the Haiti earthquake in 2010), the country passed to be an active and engaged migration 'controller' and building its policy over three pillars: protection of human rights, economic and social development in the Central American

countries, and the orderly registration of migrants who enter Mexico as a precondition to protection (SRE, 2021).

With the presidency of López Obrador, who took office in December 2018, a new narrative of humanitarianism for Mexico was introduced. Advocating a humanitarian migration policy based on the above-mentioned pillars and vowing to support Central America's development through a '*grand vision*' for Central America, Mexico signed a Comprehensive Cooperation Development programme with the region. In real terms, this initiative tried to cover the Trump administration's request to hold off migrants from Central America; in other words, the US security perimeter was moved from the US–Mexico border to the southern border with Guatemala and Belize by pushing the Mexican Government to adopt a series of 'new' and more assertive measures to stop migration. This unusual geopolitical and strategic move from the US, conceived under the Trump presidency, envisaged a quick 'shutting down' of its US–Mexico border to restore 'law and order' in the border (Ramos-García et al., 2020).

Since April 2019, Mexican president López Obrador took a hard line toward migration due to the US pressure. In a further escalation of border control, the government deployed its new National Guard for immigration enforcement and therefore, violation of human rights and mistreatment of migrants grew heavily. Until October 2021, the Government of Mexico has detained 228,115 migrants who were passing through its territory irregularly. The figure breaks the record for migrant arrests in the last 20 years and represents an increase of 37 per cent compared to 2019, the year before the pandemic (Segob, 2021). During the crisis, Mexico sought to keep asylum seekers in southern Mexico despite dire conditions and began requiring visas for those from Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela. It also expelled some Haitian migrants to Haiti and some Central Americans to Guatemala. The enforcement position of the government has also been having side effects for migrants, who have taken more dangerous routes and increased their reliance on smugglers to cross the southern border (Barragán, 2021).

Considerable displacement events were also caused by the 2020 hurricane season, historically one of the most active registered in the Atlantic. Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in particular were deeply impacted by Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020, and the pandemic has complicated the disaster response in the region by experiencing several waves of migrants displacing (IDM, 2021). How these measures may increase inequality and exacerbates the border crisis remains to be seen.

Institutions and International Cooperation

Three distinctive features characterise the current Mexican humanitarian policy and institutional building to cope with the Central America crisis. The first is the enhanced military cooperation with the US. The US State Department spent almost US\$ 60 million on the Mérida Initiative to bolster Mexico's immigration control and border security activities since June 2015 (CRS, 2021). And recently, the two countries, based on a renewed cooperation agreement, changed the Mérida Initiative to the Acuerdo Bicentenario – Bicentennial Agreement in English. The change of the agreement was pushed by Mexico in the middle of a bilateral tension for the long-standing problem of legal and illegal arms trafficking smuggling into Mexico and responsible for the death of thousands of lives over the past 10 years. Mexico is also bringing a lawsuit against ten-gun manufacturers in a US federal court, accusing them of knowingly facilitating the sale of guns to drug cartels in the country.

In this complex set of political decisions, López Obrador's left-wing administration is clearly accepting US foreign aid to face not only security concerns related to drug lords and narco-trafficking but also to extend this cooperation effort into the humanitarian space. For example, the aid package for *Acuerdo Bicentenario* includes the provision of nonintrusive services like canine teams, inspection equipment, and mobile kiosks to control streets and borders. In the southern border area, a strong infrastructure plan includes the collecting of biometric data, connections to databases in the US, as well as attempts to combat human trafficking and alien smuggling (Selke, 2022).

The second pillar of the internationalisation of the humanitarian crisis is about international cooperation and development. Mexico is leading the Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) for northern Central America and south and southeast Mexico that addresses the structural causes of irregular migration from a development and integration perspective. The CDP for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and south and southeast Mexico also involves 20 UN agencies, funds, and programmes operating in Latin America and the Caribbean, and it is the most ambitious international development programme applied to Central America after the 1980s conflict. It is also supposed to be a plan that includes sustainable development and peace, putting migrants' dignity and human rights at the centre of a human security approach, and focusing on the full migratory cycle: origin, transit, destination, and return. Institutional strengthening (including transparency, management, and public procurement), technology transition and change, regional integration, and public-private partnerships are also four cross-cutting pillars of the Plan. Its thematic pillars are divided into 15 programmes and 114 projects that are ready to go live, with a total investment of US\$ 44.735 billion over five years (CEPAL, 2020). Institutions part of the projects are development and cooperation departments, economic and Interior Ministry mostly in countries like Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Interesting enough, the CDP envisages the complete management of the migratory as one of its main pillars. However, as we mentioned previously, current Mexican governmental actions seem to contradict the nature of the CDP in its essence.

Finally, the reform of the normative framework for addressing migrants and asylum seekers concerns is also under consideration by national authorities. Alternative avenues to regularised status, as advocated by civil society and COMAR, are needed in Mexico, as is authorisation for migrants to relocate away from Mexico's southern border while their cases are being handled. Asylum seekers may currently risk persecution in Mexico, as well as unaccompanied children whose best interests may be to be reunited with family members in the US. From January to August 2021, Mexico's refugee agency, COMAR, received a record-breaking 77,559 protection requests. Most of the petitions (almost 55,000) were filed in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico's poorest and southernmost state. Asylum seekers from different nationalities in Mexico must remain in the state where they applied for refuge while their applications are being processed (WOLA, 2021). Asylum seekers are now trapped at Mexico's southern border for months due to a high volume of outstanding cases. Because of prejudice and exploitation, as well as a lack of access to work and housing, many people live in precarious situations. International organisations like the UNCHR are trying to support Mexico's reform laws in asylum seekers policy as well as other migration temporary status permission to circulate in the country. Therefore, hundreds of individuals have sought to relocate and find work in other parts of Mexico by travelling north from Tapachula (Chiapas), hoping to find a way out of their predicament but the government responded by detaining groups of migrants heading north with the use of military troops and the migration authority (INM) agents.

CLOSING REMARKS

In this chapter, we review the interactions between economic inequality and international humanitarian action through three case studies, exploring how the former explains why the latter is less important in Latin America. The connection between inequality and vulnerability was common and well-documented in all settings. National institutions were also present in all the cases, confronting in different ways and with different levels of success crises affecting their territories and their neighbourhood. In all the cases, humanitarian action was not the favoured framing for action. Disaster management, institutions for migration, and security are some of the frameworks used instead, complemented by human rights and solidarity movements from civil society and non-governmental organisations. Such local capacities reduce the need for international actors and the humanitarian frame associated with them. Dedicated institutions like INM, ONEMI, or the UNGRD have resources and mandates covering emergencies, but going beyond just relief. Civil society also has its own approaches to counter crises, which also go beyond the emergency and do not need to identify themselves as humanitarian. This combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches facilitates articulating emergency responses to each country's social protection institutions and development planning. However, some crises in Mexico and Colombia have a geopolitical background that menaces co-opting humanitarianism (in Colombia, with Chilean contribution), or narrowing down the range of solutions available for vulnerable populations (Mexico).

Therefore, inequality is not only a source of humanitarian crises, but also a force that shapes the responses to it, either (historically) promoting national and local humanitarian actions, as well as how international humanitarian is received and used in these cases. The experience questions the relevance of humanitarian discussions on localisation and decolonising aid. A good share of the resources is already local, and the power distribution shows an active contestation between national actors, although the case of Mexico is different. International humanitarian actors still have a presence but under government conditions, which only accept humanitarian framings strategically. More pressing seems to understand how to influence the local dynamics reproducing vulnerability, so national institutions and stakeholders keep moving towards better approaches to crises. The interaction of political changes and crises also seems a promising area for further inquiry, as it seems to have serious impacts on the 'humanitarian' practices in each country.

NOTES

1. The authors are all male and come from (or have been adopted by) the region. We have been involved in research and practice of humanitarianism for more than a decade, not limited to Latin America.
2. Haiti's situation is different, but we do not cover the Caribbean in this chapter.
3. See the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre at <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia>. The government registers victims, not displacements, who up to December 2021 totalled 9,231,426 persons. See: <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/>.
4. Information available at: <https://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/visibles>.
5. A characterisation of migrants can be found in Tribin-Urbe et al. (2020).
6. The UNGRD keeps in its digital library a journalistic account of the international cooperation, describing flaws such as miscommunication, false expectations, lack of coordination, inadequate

support (e.g. old clothes), donors wish for visibility, paternalism, among others. Available at: <https://repositorio.gestiondelriesgo.gov.co/handle/20.500.11762/20395>.

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