

Costa Rica's Approach to Migrant Protection and Integration: A Conversation with the Deputy Director of the Costa Rican Department of Migration and Foreign Affairs

English Podcast Transcript

Julia Yanoff: Welcome to this conversation from the Pan American Development Foundation, PADF. My name is Julia Yanoff and I am a Program Coordinator for the migration portfolio. Our team works throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to provide sustainable solutions to people who have had to flee their homes in search of better and safer lives. From emergency humanitarian assistance in Panama's Darien province, to job training in Aruba and Curaçao, we work to strengthen local capacity to address the needs of these populations through effective, participatory programs that seek to create sustainable change. Our work is made possible with the support of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

Well, I am very pleased to be able to speak today with Mr. Allan Rodriguez Vargas, who is the Deputy Director of the General Directorate of Immigration and Foreign Affairs of Costa Rica. Since 2009, he has worked in the General Directorate of Immigration and Foreign Affairs, holding positions such as head and deputy head of the Political Advisory. And for the last 10 years, until May of this year, he served as the Coordinator of the Refugee Unit. Allan has repeatedly represented the Costa Rican government in various international forums on migration and human rights issues. He has a law degree and a master's degree in domestic public law from the Universidad Autónoma de Centro América. Allan is an expert on protection, refugee, and migration policies in Costa Rica and has been a great partner for PADF in the implementation of the project we have in the country to address the needs of asylum seekers, refugees, and vulnerable migrants. Welcome, Allan! It is a pleasure to be able to speak with you.

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: No, really, it is a pleasure for us to be able to join you. And it is also an opportunity to share a little about our experiences and the Costa Rican migration context, which in recent years has had quite an important evolution.

Julia Yanoff: Well, I want to start with some context. Costa Rica has a long history of hosting refugees and migrants in its territory. In fact, it is one of the countries in the region with the highest percentage of migrants in its population. And, in addition, it has been a host country for refugees from countries such as Colombia, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Could you give us a summary of the most significant profiles, trends, and migratory routes in recent years?

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: Sure, with pleasure. It is a short question, but quite complex. For example, defining profiles or trends is a bit complicated. As mentioned at the beginning, Costa Rica has undergone a very important evolution in the last decade. We have faced a series of critical events that have tested and pushed the capacities of our institutional framework. We have had to reinvent ourselves to really be able to meet the great demand we have had in recent years. We can point to events such as in 2015 when we had more than 9,000 people of Cuban nationality arrive in the country, which, in a way forced our capacities to the maximum. In the end, we managed to establish a humanitarian bridge so that these people could continue on their way to northern countries. Later, Haitian nationals joined them. And for many years now, we have been experiencing a massive flow of people crossing the Americas in search of their American dream, and Costa Rica, due to its strategic geographical position, is one of the countries along this transit route. More recently, a year and a half ago, we have, for example, within this flow, seen a very important presence of people of Venezuelan nationality that are crossing Costa Rican territory. To all these mixed flows, and different nationalities, we add that, starting in 2018, Costa Rica received a massive wave of people of Nicaraguan nationality who have come to Costa Rican territory in search of protection under asylum frameworks given the political events and social confrontations occurring in

Nicaragua, and that this flow has continued since. It is possible that this year we will find ourselves with more than 150,000 accumulated asylum applications since 2018. This has also led to the fact that our capacities have been exceeded at some point. However, the system today is quite robust in terms of the capacity to receive applications. Nevertheless, we have significant challenges in terms of resolving these requests within acceptable time frames. This is where we have significant challenges.

Julia Yanoff: Based on what you mentioned, I think Costa Rica is very unique in being a transit country, as well as a destination country, in the region. And good that you mentioned the situation in Nicaragua. I was just going to ask you about that. As we know, the situation in Nicaragua continues to worsen and the number of people from Nicaragua coming to Costa Rica to seek asylum has increased dramatically in recent years. And as you mentioned, that has created a high caseload for the Refugee Unit. What are you doing at the DGME to address the increasing number of arrivals from this country, while also prioritizing the protection needs of migrants and refugees from other countries, like the ones you mentioned, such as Venezuela, Colombia, and Cuba?

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: Thank you. Yes, indeed, these four years of receiving this influx has meant that the administration has had to not only reinvent itself, but also transform its service provision. It is really quite a complicated situation. However, we have had important support in all these efforts from international organizations and have had strategic partners who have helped us carry this burden. However, it is necessary to add more resources in order to ensure the protection of the rights of migrants and refugees and to provide them with the solutions they are looking for. In this regard, we can say that, the administration has been in a process of strengthening the Refugee Unit. We continue to monitor developments that occur in the countries from which we receive migrants and refugees in search of protection. We try to anticipate the different phenomena that arise.

However, when we talk about migration, we must be clear that it is a very variable phenomenon and what is a reality today, may change significantly next week, such that the administration has to react very quickly to the different events that are presented to us. Sometimes, we start a quiet week and then end up with a critical situation in one of our border regions due to some phenomenon that occurs. The administration in these cases takes precautions to try to be as prepared as possible to address these different flows and ensure respect for the rights of both migrants and refugees, whether they are in transit or arriving in Costa Rica as a destination country. And yes, indeed, 92 percent of our asylum applications come from Nicaraguan nationals. However, we continue to receive people of Venezuelan nationality, Cubans, Colombians, and people from the north of Central America as well; we have a significant flow of people who come in search of protection. And, likewise, they deserve the solutions they are looking for to be able to integrate into Costa Rican society. There are different integration and migration management processes that we carry out, and in which international organizations, such as PADF, serve a critical role in supporting the capacity of migration institutions to ensure these integration processes.

Julia Yanoff: Very good. Talking about integration, we know that Costa Rica's refugee and migration laws, especially in the area of integration, are some of the most advanced in the region in terms of the rights granted to the asylum-seeking, refugee, and migrant community, since they allow access to education, health, and informal employment. What opportunities for integration have these laws created in particular, and what challenges still exist with regards to turning these laws into reality? And how could the international community also support the Costa Rican government's efforts in terms of integration?

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: Yes, indeed, I believe that Costa Rica has a legal system that, as you rightly mention, could be seen as advanced in terms of protection, and the guarantee and respect of human rights. However, many times, despite the fact that the legal system clearly states certain provisions, it is in practice where we sometimes have important challenges. This is because the capacities of the state to

address such massive events as we have had in recent years means that we cannot necessarily implement the necessary measures to mitigate and guarantee the protection of people.

However, very important efforts are being made on this topic. Costa Rica, specifically the General Directorate of Migration, is implementing integration initiatives in partnership with international organizations, to help make the dreams that many people bring with them as they set off to make a new life in Costa Rica a reality. We have a series of projects that we promote and given our, perhaps limited budgetary capacity, we seek the support of international organizations, who can give us a hand to continue honoring our commitments in terms of respecting the rights of migrants and refugees. Therefore, it is very important that even more partners take on these efforts, as PADF has done, and which have resulted in very good results, not only for the administration, but also for the people who have been beneficiaries of the initiatives that have been implemented. This is how I reiterate the call that has been made from the highest tiers of the Costa Rican state to international actors to join in these efforts and accompany Costa Rica as part of this shared responsibility to these populations, which can ensure an effective integration into Costa Rican society, as well as guarantee the fundamental rights of those who are in transit through the Americas.

Julia Yanoff: Great, thank you. Could you give us some examples of these projects you mention in terms of integration, and especially if they are implemented with international partners?

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: Of course. For example, let's see, with PADF, we have been able to support economic projects for people interested in entrepreneurship, but who did not have the necessary resources to make it a reality. For example, in the Upala area, we were able to support a group of people, specifically women, who were dedicated to the elaboration and commercialization of tortillas. They had an incipient idea and we managed to provide them with the necessary tools and logistical support so that they could make this enterprise a reality. Similarly, in the northern part of Costa Rica, specifically, in Upala, and also in the southern part of the country, in a joint effort with the municipality of Corredores, we were able to support a series of activities that work with the community to facilitate integration processes through sports, not only working with the host communities, but also with diasporas precisely to mitigate any type of xenophobia towards these populations. These have been quite successful experiences that, for us as an administration, make us feel proud and motivated to continue hopefully replicating these types of activities, in order to guarantee these integration processes. Support for these types of initiatives has been fundamental for us. The administration would not have been able to carry them out by itself. The helping hand, in this case of PADF, has been essential to make all these initiatives a reality. These are just a few examples of many that we carry out as an administration.

Julia Yanoff: Great, thank you. Well, apart from the partnership that we obviously have between PADF and the Refugee Unit, can you also tell us about the importance of inter-institutional coordination in Costa Rica, perhaps between various government departments that work on migration, and also between the DGME and local NGOs, the private sector, and academia, and the impacts this has?

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: Of course, thank you. Yes, definitely, with such a complex phenomenon like migration, the government has a major responsibility, but it is a responsibility that is also shared among different sectors. In order to work on the issue correctly, we have to engage the private sector, especially the private sector, employers, and international actors who can help finance initiatives. It is also essential to work with host communities and local leaders, as well as with diasporas through the different nongovernmental organizations who communicate the main needs to the government. This whole strategy must take into consideration the voice of affected communities and given that local NGOs have that special closeness with communities that the government does not have, it is through these NGOs that the information is often most organically transmitted. When we manage to coordinate each and every one of these elements, the initiatives that are carried out are more likely to succeed because we are covering all the necessary spheres so that we can effectively achieve a positive impact for these populations. I believe

that this type of experience is a major lesson that we have learned as an administration and that we must continue to replicate. Again, this is not only a matter of the government as such, but it involves a set of different actors who can help guarantee the success of these types of initiatives.

Julia Yanoff: Okay, my last question: What lessons do you think can be learned in other countries from the experience in Costa Rica and the work that you have done in the Refugee Unit and the DGME?

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: Well, as lessons that we can share, I believe that the important thing is that in order to reach the level of experience that we have on this subject, we had to make many mistakes, but we have had the maturity to understand and try to find the best way forward to serve the population. This is a constant process where the administration must always be in search of continuous improvement. I believe that we must constantly and periodically review each and every one of our processes, always listening to the communities, always listening to those who are most affected and whom we as an administration are there to serve. It is through this exercise that we can truly determine when our migration programs have achieved success. Through these processes we begin to understand that we as an administration have to listen not only to affected communities, but also to engage different sectors in these conversations. So, I think that is how we have been able to find value in the treatment of this issue and really learn. And in addition, we must always look at other experiences where countries have had quite successful experiences and try to replicate the good things, adapting them to our realities. But not only replicate, rather, also try to improve and take as a starting point what others have already done. I believe that, in this way, we are always aiming at continuous improvement with humility. We are clear that we must always carry out actions through this dynamic of internal review, especially in each of our processes.

Julia Yanoff: Yes, I totally agree, I believe that these two elements: 1) the internal review and monitoring of results internally, 2) as well as the exchange of experiences in the region are very important and I see that they have been very key in Costa Rica's experience.

Well, I want to thank you, Allan, for being part of this very valuable conversation. I think the work that you are doing in Costa Rica to strengthen responses to mixed migration is very important and innovative. And that these conversations help us reflect on all that has been done in the country, and the gaps that still exist. Thanks again and I look forward to continuing the conversation soon.

Allan Rodriguez Vargas: No, thank you all for the opportunity and for the support you have given us during this time. Really, amid these complex issues that we mentioned before, the helping hand of PADF has been essential to achieve our objectives. I hope that this relationship can continue for many, many years to come, as I am sure it will. And that we really achieve this positive impact on migrants and refugees as we have done thus far. Thank you very much indeed.

Julia Yanoff: Thank you very much for listening to our conversation today. You can learn more about our work in Costa Rica and other countries in the hemisphere by visiting www.PADF.org and following us on social media at @PADForg. The music you heard in this episode is Positive Fuse by French Fuse. If you have any questions about this podcast or the information you heard in it, you can contact us at Migration@padf.org. Thanks again for listening.

**Please note that the migration programs mentioned in the podcast are still in progress and may not be fully implemented at the time of this podcast's publication.*