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RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN CITIES ACROSS THE AMERICAS



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Executive Summary: Reception and Integration of Migrants and Refugees in Cities Across in the Americas

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About the OAS

The Organization of American States is the region’s leading political forum, gathering all independent nations in the Western Hemisphere to collectively promote democracy, strengthen human rights, foster peace, security and cooperation, and advance common interests. Since its inception, the OAS has had the primary objective of preventing conflict and providing political stability, social inclusion, and prosperity in the region through dialogue and collective actions such as cooperation and mediation.

Executive Summary

In the past decade, the Americas have been at the center of new migratory dynamics, which have converged with long-standing ones. Given this situation, and as a result of the functions they perform, local governments are critically positioned to support refugees and migrants within their communities. There is limited information available, however, on the needs and existing capacities of local governments to facilitate the reception and integration of these populations.

This study is a first step towards a better understanding of the reality of local reception and integration processes for migrants and refugees in cities across the Americas. To this end, 231 interviews were conducted in 109 localities throughout the continent. While the focus on the local level has been gaining traction in different areas of public policy, including migration issues, this report covers an important variety of localities in a profoundly diverse region.

The findings of this study confirm the premise that gave rise to this investigation: migration issues are increasingly part of the public agenda of local actors, and these actors play an increasingly important role in the care and integration of the migrant and refugee population in their territories. The findings also show that local governments do not act in a vacuum. This study evidences the strong influence—in multiple ways and for several reasons—of national governments. It also shows the important role of international and civil society organizations in the care of migrants and refugees at the local level.

Most of the localities (71%) identified “need for change in national policies or administrative practices” as one of the main challenges, followed by “lack of financial resources to guarantee an institutional response to migrants and refugees” (65%). It is precisely because of these challenges that it is extremely useful to highlight those case studies in which positive results have been achieved despite limited resources and existing tensions with national policies.

In institutional matters, many localities have a long way to go to provide a comprehensive and sustainable response to migrants and refugees. Analyzing the 109 localities studied suggests that there is a wide variety of institutional structures designed to attend to migrants and refugees at the local level. Furthermore, although the interviews reveal that in 47% of the localities, civil servants have received training on the subject, these are mostly focused on the normative and legal sphere, and not on the practical aspects and the design and implementation of policies.

According to the results of the study, only in 28% of localities have migrants and refugees been provided with spaces for participation in the design of local policies and programs that affect them. Where they exist, they need to be further strengthened to ensure stable and institutionalized mechanisms for the participation of migrants and refugees. This includes spaces that take into account their needs, concerns, and proposals, as well as general and/or thematic mechanisms for participation.

Of the four areas addressed by the study — reception, socio-economic integration, socio-cultural integration, and political integration — socio-economic integration emerges as the main priority in most localities, followed by reception. Socio-cultural integration does not figure as a priority except for access to education and healthcare, which were considered as part of this area. Finally, political integration is ranked as the lowest priority by the interviewees, which indicates a large gap and a long way to go in this area.

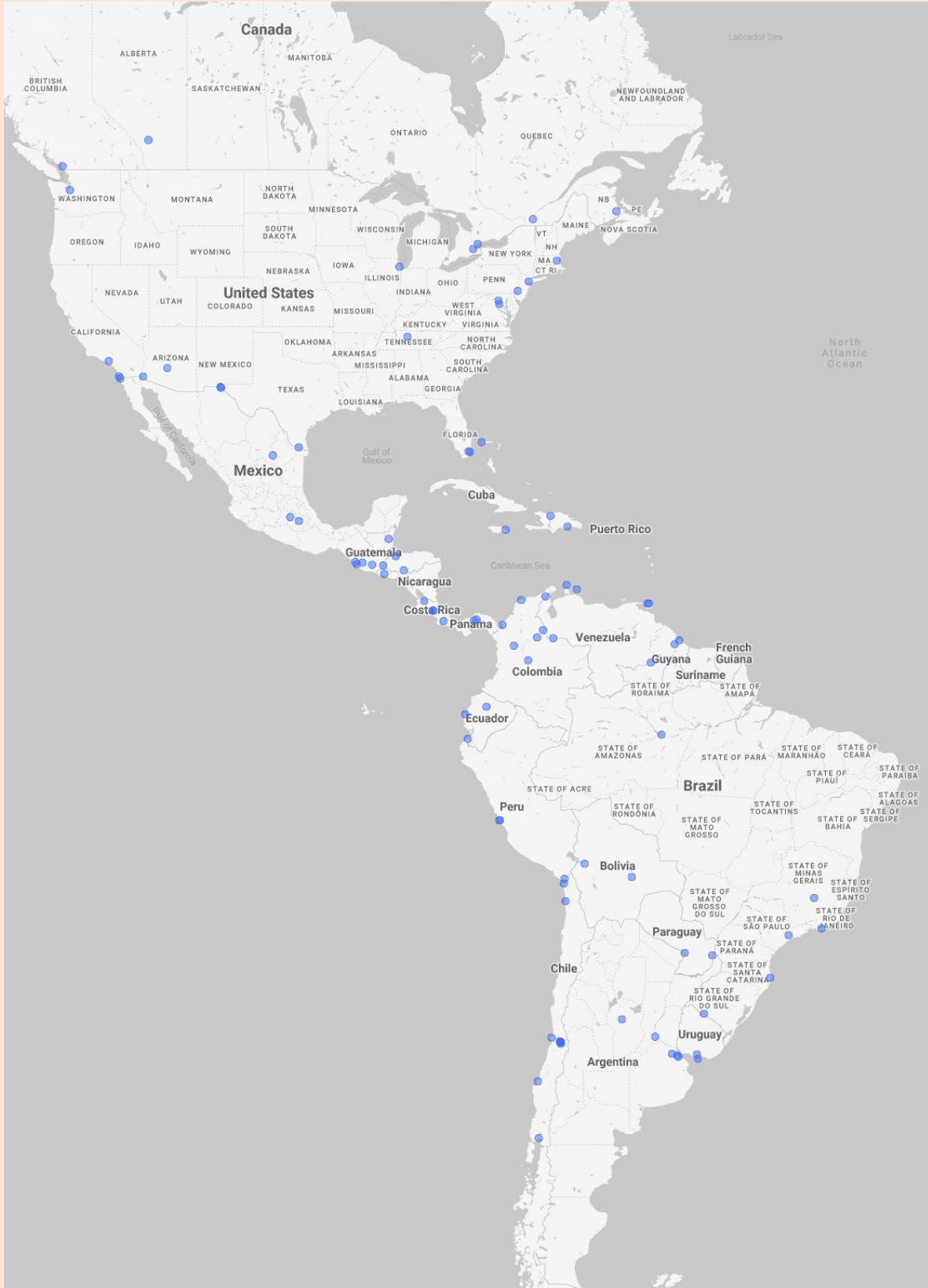
Priorities vary by type of locality. In border towns, reception is a higher priority than other areas. Only in certain localities with a greater historical immigration background and with a more consolidated approach does the issue of political integration figure with some relevance. Some localities that experienced new migratory movements were overwhelmed with limited response capacity and, in other cases, results were achieved with new policy and programmatic responses.

These findings allow us to make the following public policy recommendations to take advantage of the opportunity that local actors have to facilitate the reception and integration of migrants and refugees.

1. Provide trainings with practical approaches for the design and implementation of local policies.
2. Include migrants and refugees in existing community-wide policies and services, rather than creating dedicated parallel services, in order to maximize efficiency, strengthen services, promote integration, and prevent xenophobia.
3. Launch communication and assistance efforts that take advantage of networks and organizations that work with migrant populations to facilitate their access to public services and the fulfillment of their rights.
4. Link reception and integration policies in order to guarantee access to rights and quality of life.
5. Facilitate access to documentation and regularization of migratory status, as well as recognition of refugee status in order to guarantee access to public and private services.
6. Establish institutional structures that specialize on working with the migrant and refugee populations at the local level, while also coordinating with other local and national actors on policies that affect them.
7. Include migrants and refugees in the design and implementation of policies and programs that affect them, in collaboration with local communities, and allow their participation in participation spaces available to the host community.
8. In times of emergency, it is essential to simplify bureaucratic processes to facilitate and accelerate access to basic services, and to ease restrictions to access certain procedures, including, for example, residency applications, validation of educational qualifications, and labor skills certifications.

In order to implement these recommendations, it is essential to allocate sufficient funds for the design and execution of policies benefiting migrants and refugees.

▶▶ Map of studied localities



Methodology:

231 interviews, 109 localities, 25 countries.

Of the 231 interviews conducted, 45% were in South America, 22% in North America, 21% in Central America and Mexico, and 12% in the Caribbean. Of the total number of interviews, one third (34%) corresponded to civil servants, followed by members of civil society organizations (21%), national public officials (13%), members of international organizations (9%), members of local communities or community-based organizations (8%), and other categories (15%).



Content

Chapter 1

Six Keys for Reception and Integration:

- 1. Adaptation:** It is essential to adapt policy responses to local needs and priorities in order to ensure an adequate reception and integration of migrants and refugees. To this end, it is essential to create more spaces for participation migrants, refugees, and host communities, which can inform the design and implementation of public policies.
- 2. Training:** Along with ongoing training focused on regulations and human rights, it is important to expand training opportunities to focus on practical aspects aimed at the design and implementation of local policies and programs, based on human rights principles and standards as well as other basic objectives, such as sustainable development goals.
- 3. Inclusiveness:** It is very important that policies facilitate the inclusion of migrants and refugees in existing services, such as education, health, social protection, and labor market integration, to name a few. Beyond emergency humanitarian assistance (carried out through local, national, and international actors), integration processes require universal access to services for the whole community, strengthening these services, and, at the same time, avoiding separate and parallel services which could potentially lead to xenophobic attitudes.
- 4. Communication:** It is important to carry out communications campaigns specifically aimed at migrants and refugees, which frequently encounter barriers in identifying and accessing services. These programs can be strengthened through the participation and interaction of civil society organizations that work with these populations, as well as associations and groups organized by migrants and refugees themselves, taking advantage of their networks and digital platforms.
- 5. Partnerships:** It is necessary to establish sustainable and strategic partnerships with other national and local actors, such as civil society organizations and international organizations. It is also important to link reception policies with integration policies to guarantee human rights and a dignified life for migrants and refugees.
- 6. Regularization and Identification:** Although regularization depends on national governments, it was one of the biggest needs that emerged in this study. However, even in contexts where there are practical difficulties or formal obstacles to accessing a residence permit at the national level, local governments can develop various measures to register and provide local identification to people who have arrived and/or settled within their communities, thus facilitating access to services and opportunities.

Chapter 2

Local Governance and Participation

Most of the localities (71%) identified "need for change in national policies or administrative practices" as one of the main challenges, followed by "lack of financial resources to guarantee the institutional response to migrants and refugees" (65%).

Those localities that have more successfully dealt with migration challenges within their communities have had a focal point or department in charge for migration; have fostered the participation of migrants, refugees, and host communities in the design of relevant policies; and have adequately trained their staff on topics relevant to the reception and integration of migrants and refugees, as further explained below.

Migration Focal Point or Department

In 55% of the localities studied, a focal point on migration exists or existed. However, as migration is a relatively new issue on the local public agenda in many of the cities in this study, a wide variety of institutions were identified.

Participation

Participation measures for migrants and refugees exist in 35% of the localities. In North America, there are measures for the participation of migrants and refugees in the design of policies that affect them in 55% of the localities studied, which is higher than the regional average of 35%. In South America, 38% of the localities analyzed had such measures in place while only 24% of localities in Central America and Mexico had such measures in place. The Caribbean had the weakest levels of participation measures, with them identified in only 8% of localities in the subregion.

Based on the interviews conducted, measures to facilitate the participation of host communities in the design and implementation of policies and programs aimed at the migrant and refugee population were identified in 28% of the localities. There were also regional differences in this case. In North America, the existence of these measures was reported in 59% of localities, while in all other subregions this percentage did not exceed 26%.

Training

47% of localities reported having trained their officials on their responsibilities and the rights of migrants and refugees. the majority of training opportunities identified (42%) focused on "policies and regulations" and "human rights," thus identifying a need for more practical trainings that contribute to the development of daily activities. About 40% of training opportunities identified focused on "procedures and care guidelines" and there were also trainings focused on specific topics, such as human trafficking and smuggling (18%), domestic violence (4%), labor and entrepreneurship (4%), and health and sanitation (3%).

Local Needs and Policies

Socio-economic integration was identified as the priority need in the majority (52%) of localities in the study. This was followed by reception (36%), socio-cultural integration (6%), and political integration (6%). This ranking varied by type of locality. In the case of border localities, reception was mentioned as the most important necessity in 54% of the cases, while political integration did not appear in the first or second place in any of the localities.

Of the policies mentioned by people interviewed for this study, 53% were related to socio-economic integration, followed by those related to socio-cultural integration (44%), political integration (41%), and reception (35%) (Graph 7). The importance of socio-economic integration is evidenced by its ranking as the main need identified as well as the number of policies focused on this subject. It is noteworthy that, although reception appears as the second highest need, it is where there is a smaller number of local policies. Often, reception is linked to emergency and short-term situations, so the development of policies and the designation of resources are not always prioritized. In addition, migrants and refugees do not normally stay in the areas where substantial reception efforts are required, and therefore they do not receive prioritization.

Chapter 3

Reception

Reception refers to a set of policies, measures, and short-term activities that aim to provide primary care to migrants and refugees upon their arrival, satisfy their basic needs, guarantee their access to appropriate processes, and protect their human rights in accordance with international standards. Reception services include the provision of shelter, food, primary healthcare, financial assistance, relocation services, and orientation on available regularization processes and access to basic rights.

Reception was identified as the main need in 36% of the localities studied. Its ranking varied according to the type of locality, with it being identified as a main need in 54% of border localities and in 31% of non-border localities.



Chapter 4

Socio-Economic Integration

Socio-economic integration refers to initiatives that facilitate migrants' access to goods and services—including employment—to meet their basic needs and those of their families. In emergency situations or in particularly vulnerable circumstances, access to social protection programs should also be possible, in order to avoid conditions of exclusion and marginalization that deepen such circumstances and hinder the reception and integration of these populations. In this report, socio-economic integration is understood to include access to employment, decent working conditions and fair wages, as well their access to housing and economic assistance, and the prevention of exploitation, among other issues.

The socio-economic integration of migrants and refugees was chosen as the highest priority in most of the localities analyzed under this study. It was ranked as a top priority in 55% of the non-border localities, while elsewhere, particularly in the border towns, it came in second place, after more urgent reception matters.

The priority need identified among all the localities studies, was migratory regularization, followed by access to employment, and access to housing. Ranking varied when looking at the data by locality type. Access to employment was chosen as the main need in 85% of the non-border localities, compared to 52% in border localities. In contrast, access to migratory regularization was chosen as the highest priority in 81% of border localities, compared to 75% in non-border localities (Graph 10).

Chapter 5

Socio-cultural Integration

Although socio-cultural integration was not highlighted among the most urgent needs in the region, given greater needs in reception and socio-economic integration, it was however acknowledged as a key aspect for the well-being and quality of life of migrant populations, and definitely as a crucial part of their long-term integration within their host community. In this report, socio-cultural integration is understood as a set of measures that facilitate access to education, health care, and culture, as well as linguistic integration.

Within socio-cultural integration, the main priority reported was access to healthcare services, followed by access to education. This is reflected both in the list of priority needs as well as in the socio-cultural integration policies identified. Access to mental health also emerged as an important issue, mentioned by 50% of the respondents. Linguistic inclusion, even if less prevalent, figured prominently in some of locations, such as in the Caribbean, in Brazil, and in Argentina, Chile, and other countries that received Haitian populations. Finally, access to culture was considered a lower priority need compared to the other aspects mentioned.

Although access to healthcare was identified as a priority need in 82% of localities, in border localities, access to COVID-19 tests, medical treatment, and vaccines was mentioned as a more urgent need (52%) than in non-border localities (38%). Access to mental health care services was also identified as a greater priority in non-border localities (58%) than in border localities (48%). Similarly, access to education was identified as a more urgent need in non-border localities where people usually intend to stay permanently (78%) compared to border localities (48%).

Chapter 6

Political integration

Political integration refers to the process of granting political participation to migrant populations, including—among other mechanisms—the recognition of their political rights in the community in which they reside. Additionally, political integration also refers to the process of accessing regularization, residence, and nationalization, which also contributes to the political integration of migrants within their host community. In this report, access to justice, prevention of violence, and prevention and punishment of human trafficking are also included as part of political integration.

Political integration was considered of least importance relative to other needs of the migrant and refugee population. In a way, this reflects the experience of persons in situation of human mobility, who upon arrival at the host city first require basic reception services and economic opportunities. This is why some of the classical issues of political integration, such as voting rights and other forms of participation, are identified as more relevant in localities that have historically received migration populations, with migrants having settled there for many years.

Regarding the different needs analyzed as part of political integration, the need mentioned in most surveyed localities (73%) was “access to identity documents,” followed by “prevention of discrimination, xenophobia, and racism” (72%). Two needs were also mentioned frequently: “access to justice” (58%), and “access to nationality” (54%). The issue of “access to nationality” emerged mostly in non-border localities (62%) compared to border localities (30%). This is perhaps due to the fact that migrant persons may be more inclined to settle in non-border localities.

Noticeable differences in priorities were identified between localities with stable migration trends and those with changing trends over the last ten years. Access to justice and access to nationality were mentioned more often as priorities (71% and 69%, respectively) in localities with stable trends than in localities with changing trends (45% and 42%, respectively). This may reflect the fact that in localities with stable trends, people may have been settled for more years and have greater desire to stay, which allows them to prioritize more complex needs, such as access to justice, as well as to apply for the nationality of the country of residence, in cases where the national legislation allows it and the requirements in each country are met.

Chapter 7

Times of Emergency

The main impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the reception and integration of migrants and refugees at the local level was an increase in barriers for accessing public services and programs (Graph 16). This included difficulties in accessing services remotely, especially due to limited internet access and lack of digital tools among vulnerable migrants and refugees.

In 66% of localities studied there was at least one COVID-19 national and/or local policy that included migrants and refugees. For example, several healthcare policies covered migrants and refugees, facilitating their access to prevention, vaccination, and treatment, although this did not always occur on equal terms with nationals and there were instances of discrimination based on nationality or immigration status. Despite being covered by public policies, some people, especially those with an irregular migratory status, also feared approaching public entities to access services.

Conclusion

This study is a first attempt to provide a broad perspective of the varied landscape of policies and measures that are being developed at the local level for the reception and integration of migrants and refugees in the Americas. It is a heterogeneous context, but there are relevant trends that show progress, opportunities, and challenges. Faced with the rise of nationalist and populist tendencies observed in recent years worldwide and in some countries of the region, the policies and projects developed at the local level for the reception and integration of migrants and refugees in many cities and localities of the Americas have, in many cases, gone against the tide of repressive migration policies at the national level. At the same time, they have represented positive innovations to provide protection and better life opportunities for migrants and refugees.

Local governments do not operate in a vacuum.

One of the main findings of this study is that local governments do not operate in a vacuum when working on the reception and integration of migrants and refugees. On the one hand, the heavy influence of national governments on local action was evidenced—both in positive and negative ways. For most local governments, coordination with national policies represents one of their main challenges. On the other hand, civil society organizations and international organizations play a key role in most of the localities studied. These organizations fill institutional gaps to meet the needs of migrants and refugees. Although support from international organizations helps to address short-term needs and, in some cases, to strengthen local governments, when international organizations fill government gaps, challenges arise regarding the sustainability of these measures in the medium and long-term.

Local structures and capacities vary significantly.

There is significant diversity in the structures and capacities of the 109 localities studied under this report. On one side of the spectrum, there are localities with a long migratory history and with resources, which have stable structures designed to provide services to migrants and refugees. These include the Mayor's Office for Migration Affairs in New York City in the United States and the Coordination of Policies for Immigrants and Promotion of Decent Employment of São Paulo in Brazil. There are also localities with new migratory dynamics, which have been overwhelmed and have had to depend on the support of international organizations but have been able to develop local response initiatives, such as seen in several non-border localities in Colombia, Chile, and Brazil. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum are border localities that are generally isolated and have few resources to provide a comprehensive response to the needs of migrants and refugees. Lastly, in terms of capacities, although there are still significant gaps, in 47% of the localities training programs training for local officials on issues of reception and integration of migrants were reported. It is important to emphasize, however, that 42% of these training programs are based on normative and rights issues, and do not focus on practical aspects of policy design and implementation.

Socio-economic integration is a priority, followed by reception, although needs and priorities vary by type of locality.

In all the sub-regions studied, socio-economic integration was identified as the main need, followed by reception. This suggests that at the beginning, the main need is to provide migrants and refugees with measures that facilitate access to goods and services—including employment—to meet their basic needs and those of their families. For this, and for any type of integration, access to migratory regularization is a fundamental precondition. It is worth highlighting that for border localities in particular, the priority was reception, although this was often understood as the rapid processing of people and not as the comprehensive provision of services for the population. Lastly, in some of the newer destinations, in the absence of sufficient social networks that can provide support to migrants and refugees in host communities, there is greater awareness, urgency, and need for local actors to provide adequate reception and socio-economic integration services. Finally, for all localities, it is essential to have disaggregated and updated information on migrants at the local level to facilitate the creation and access to appropriate reception and integration services.

There is still a long way to go to achieve political integration.

In most of the localities studied here, there are almost no mechanisms for the political participation of migrants and refugees, which goes against their intention to stay and their priorities. In this area, access to identity documents was identified as the main need since this allows access to public and private services.

With regard to identity documents, different models of municipal identification have been adopted in Mexico City and in localities across the United States. Likewise, in cities such as Bogota and São Paulo, permanent spaces for political participation have been developed for migrants and refugees. However, there is a long way to go and a pressing need to adopt an official narrative that presents migrants and refugees as neighbors, newcomer, and citizens, and also to encourage associativity not only within migrant spaces but in other broader community spaces.

General policies, specific communication efforts.

Given limited resources in most of the localities studied, there is a need to include migrants and refugees in general policies. This not only allows for greater efficiency by not having to create new policies and programs, but also helps to avoid xenophobia since the perception of favoring these groups with differentiated programs or services does not arise.

However, it is still important to make differential efforts to ensure access to public programs and services for migrants and refugees. In many cases, and especially in times of emergency, targeted communication and orientation efforts are required to reach this population and can be carried out taking advantage of existing networks and organizations. Normalizing migration in our countries and cities and, therefore, to stop perceiving it as a problem or from reactive and repressive approaches, requires proactive work in the development of an official narrative that highlights the positive contributions that migrants and refugees bring to our communities, as well as the development of targeted communication campaigns that facilitate access to reception and integration services for this population.

Perhaps the most pressing conclusion of this study is that at the local level, there are opportunities for the reception and integration of migrants and refugees, and that local actors can play a key role in

the reception and integration of this population. Despite numerous challenges, the cases shown here demonstrate that with will, innovative ideas, respect for human rights, and the support of international organizations, civil society, the private sector, academia, and the media, there are important advances at the local level that can serve as the foundations for future progress on the successful reception and integration of migrants and refugees across the Americas.

To read the full report, see:

https://www.oas.org/en/sare/publications/Report_OAS_PADF_IOM_UNHCR.PDF

