



MIRPS Learning Event
**ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT
SERVICES FOR DISPLACED FAMILIES AS KEY ASPECTS OF
INTEGRATION**

San Salvador, El Salvador

26-27 September 2023

Refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, and returnees with protection needs can be exposed to stress and trauma at every stage of their displacement, including from exposure to conflict and persecution, and gender-based violence, perilous journeys, family separation, xenophobia, and lack of livelihoods and education opportunities. In October 2022, the UNHCR Executive Committee¹ adopted a conclusion calling for increased availability of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services to refugees and other displaced and stateless people, including access to national health and social services.² The evidence-based on MHPSS interventions in situations of displacement has significantly improved in recent years, expanding information on effective approaches and demonstrating the importance of sustainable programming.³

In Central America and Mexico, several MIRPS States have reflected the prioritization of mental health and psychosocial support services in their National Action Plans, recognizing the importance of ensuring that forcibly displaced populations can access related national services and

¹ UNHCR's Executive Committee, or ExCom, is the subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly comprising 107 member States.

² Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme Conclusion No. 116 (LXXIII) on mental health and psychosocial support (2022) <https://www.refworld.org/docid/634969224.html> and <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/refugees-need-better-mental-health-support-amid-rising-displacement>

³ UNHCR, "Strengthening Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in UNHCR – Annual Report 2022." <https://www.unhcr.org/media/65872>

programs, and acknowledging the different needs and vulnerabilities that are specific to these populations, including age, gender and diversity considerations.

The Government of Panama, as the 2023 MIRPS Pro Tempore Presidency (PPT), designed its Regional Action Plan around the vision, “*Work together as a region to strengthen the protection response and solutions for displaced persons, with an emphasis on the recognition and promotion of skills and capacities of women, girls, boys and adolescents in situations of vulnerability and displacement.*” With particular relevance to the Working Group on Local Governance, the Panama PPT also proposed the objective to facilitate access to basic health care and mental health care services, in coordination with civil society.

From September 2022-December 2023, the United States holds the Chairship of the MIRPS Support Platform, with its Chair Strategy centered around the theme “*The Benefits of Successful Integration - Valuing the Contributions Forcibly Displaced People Bring to Host Communities.*” This Support Platform Chair theme focuses on highlighting the positive impacts refugees and other forcibly displaced people have on their communities, strengthening social cohesion, and addressing the needs of displaced persons and their host communities through the exchange of good practices for successful integration and other local solutions, with a particular emphasis on protection for the most vulnerable, including women and children.

To support national and regional efforts, the MIRPS Support Platform Chair Strategy 2022-2023 proposed the development of an *Inventory of Good Practices*, to document existing services, programs and related gaps related to local integration in MIRPS countries as well as good practices shared by MIRPS Support Platform Members. This inventory was designed to serve as a tool for information exchange between MIRPS States, and to support the planning of future learning events. Through a prioritization exercise, MIRPS countries expressed interest in Canada’s pilot program, ‘Enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of refugee children and their families’ which completed its implementation and review period and can provide information on lessons learned and adaptability to other settings. Similarly, in the *Inventory of Good Practices*, El Salvador documented a series of ongoing practices related to mental health, psychosocial support, and specialized attention to the needs of women and children, which illustrate creative practices that can offer opportunities for in-person visits and field-based learning.

Relevant programs in El Salvador

In the MIRPS *Inventory of Good Practices in Integration*, El Salvador shared the following practices related to mental health and psychosocial support for displaced persons, which are implemented by various government institutions and in collaboration with a wide range of partners.

Psychosocial support for refugees and asylum-seekers population

Since March 2023, with the support of UNHCR, the Commission for the Determination of Refugee Status (CODER) has been working on the development of an inter-institutional protocol for providing comprehensive support to refugees and asylum-seekers, including psychosocial care. This protocol will help define the referral routes to the different national institutions that provide specific support and services.

'A tu Lado' Support Spaces: In San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Vicente, San Miguel, "A tu Lado" support spaces offer comprehensive assistance at the local level to internally displaced persons, those at risk of displacement, asylum-seekers, refugees and returnees with protection needs.

Training for health personnel: In 2022, 584 officials of the Ministry of Health were sensitized through a course on forced displacement, law, and health in order to help provide specialized health services in an inclusive manner to displaced persons who require medical and psychosocial care. The course consists of five modules, including a module on comprehensive health care with a focus on rights and gender considerations for women and girls in situations of forced displacement who are affected by gender-based violence. As a result, officials from the Ministry of Health have the required training to provide timely quality care and make relevant referrals.

Sin Fronteras - Addressing Gender-Based Violence through Digital Platforms (ISDEMU Initiative Supported by IADB in El Salvador): This initiative, "126 Orienta," seeks to provide guidance and support to women from El Salvador that may be victims of gender-based violence in transit and/or destination countries through digital platforms (126teorienta.gob.sv). In this framework, ISDEMU, and the Ministry of Foreign Relations of El Salvador have established a response mechanism, including on issues of psychosocial support.

Related initiatives in MIRPS States

Technical Standard for Mental Health Care (PANAMA): In 2021, Panama adopted the "Technical Standard for Mental Health Care for the Migrant and Refugee Population in Panama," which instructs the regional offices of the Ministry of Health to produce related statistics and for institutions, NGOs, and local communities to be involved in a comprehensive approach to mental health, which emphasizes prevention, referral systems, universal access, and community-based initiatives. The protocol provides mental health professionals with specialized tools and support to work with these populations to address the consequences of their forced displacement, address their integration challenges within the national public health system, and invest in related support systems and host community capacities.

Coordination mechanisms to facilitate access to mental health services (MEXICO): Mexico has established Inter-institutional Roundtables on Refuge and Complementary Protection, comprised of federal agencies, civil society organizations and international organizations, to promote a coordinated approach for identifying and responding to the gaps faced by people in need of international protection at the federal level. Under the umbrella of the roundtable on health services, work is underway to establish coordination mechanisms to support refugees with mental health care needs. Furthermore, in its MIRPS National Action Plan, COMAR in collaboration with the Technical Secretariat of the National Mental Health Council, has committed to carrying out actions aimed at ensuring access to mental health services for asylum-seekers, refugees, and beneficiaries of complementary protection.

Casa Joven's support to children and youth (GUATEMALA): Casa Joven in Amatitlán, led by the Social Welfare Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, supports adolescents and youth in vulnerable situations by offering a wide range of programming including psychosocial support,

technical training, and educational, cultural, and supports activities. In 2022, 749 individuals received psychosocial attention.

Engagement of MIRPS Support Platform and Other Partners

In response to the inventory of good practices, MIRPS Countries expressed interest in learning more about the following practice in **Canada**, as a member of the MIRPS Support Platform.

Enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of refugee children and their families (CANADA)

The pilot project, “Enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of refugee children and their families in smaller sized Canadian cities through innovative play and art therapy program intervention” tested the use of creative arts therapies to support the mental health needs of refugee children and to reduce barriers and ensure mental health supports are equitably distributed. The project provided an effective model for providing art-based therapy directed at newcomer children and youth, by tailoring existing play-based therapies to address the specific concerns of newcomers.

UNICEF Guide on psychosocial support for displaced girls, boys, and adolescents: As part of the MIRPS Advisory Panel, UNICEF has shared its ‘**Guide on psychosocial support for displaced girls, boys, and adolescents**, which aims to establish the principles, criteria and methodological processes for the psychological and social support required by children and adolescents in contexts of human mobility (migrants, refugees, and other forcibly displaced persons) who have survived gender-based violence (GBV). This guide develops and describes the phases and forms of remote psychosocial care, and facilitates understanding of the psychosocial care model for its appropriate application in different contexts and according to the needs of girls and adolescent survivors of GBV specifically in the context of human mobility.

Location and Format

The Government of El Salvador will host the event in San Salvador.

This two-day learning event will include presentations and discussions among all participants, as well as field visits in which El Salvador’s good practices will be shared, in relation to psychosocial support services to displaced persons, as documented in the MIRPS Inventory of Good Practices.

Simultaneous interpretation (English and Spanish) will be provided throughout the event.

Objectives

- Establish a common foundational understanding of the importance of mental health and psychosocial support programs for forcibly displaced populations, and specific needs for children, youth and survivors of gender-based violence, and through an in-depth exchange of relevant good practices and challenges from MIRPS States and Support Platform Members, identify the specific elements that contribute to successful implementation, lessons learned, and the challenges and support needed.

- Identify next steps in MIRPS States, to contribute to a regional objective for incorporation at the MIRPS Regional Action Plan 2024 (led by Belize as PPT).
- Explore the possibility to pursue a joint MIRPS GRF pledge related to MHPSS/integration, and establish a notional 'draft zero' pledge that can be used by the Support Platform to mobilize pledge matches.