



Knowledge Sheet

Providing comprehensive protection and assistance to migrant persons during emergency situations

Facing the COVID-19 pandemic



Background

Between June and October 2021, a series of three workshops took place in the framework of the Costa Rica IV Action (2020-14), implemented by MIEUX+ in collaboration with the Directorate General for Migration and Foreigners (DGME). The events aimed to facilitate the exchange between Costa Rican public officials and officials from administrations of the region and the European Union (EU) and focused on the issue of providing comprehensive protection and assistance to migrant persons during emergency situations. This Knowledge Sheet focuses on the issue of governmental approaches to migration management during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

<https://www.mieux-initiative.eu/en/>





Lessons Learnt

Creating learning spaces for public administration peers

Lean and flexible administrations are necessary to manage sudden and massive migration flows as humanitarian emergencies. By sharing their experiences among peers, MIEUX+ contributes to creating an environment where the knowledge and praxis of public administrations can be replicated, adapted and contextualised to face the multidimensional nature of mixed migration flows.

Multidisciplinary and multisector approaches needed

The need for a multidisciplinary and multisector approach for migrants' access to health care services on a permanent basis as the best preparation for future health emergencies and as a way to reduce overall inequality, in line with [GCM Objective 7](#) and [SDG 10](#) and [MICIC guideline 11](#). Extending temporary regularisation measures, as was the case in Portugal, also facilitates these goals.



Actors

Slovakia

Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic

Delegation of the European Union to Costa Rica

Portugal

National Support Centre for the Integration of Migrants and Emergency of Portugal

European Public Health Association (EUPHA)



Further Reading

- [Snapshots from the borders](#)
- [Lampedusa Charter](#)
- [EU Consular protection mechanisms](#)
- [Operação Acolhida](#)



Slovakia and border management during COVID-19



Identified Challenges

One of the most visible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were the restrictions on human mobility due to public health concerns. In Costa Rica, it became apparent that while health authorities were to be in the lead, migratory authorities would need to play a key role in the management of the pandemic in order to strike a balance between the need to enforce the measures and addressing nascent challenges to border management. Likewise, Slovakia has had to navigate the new challenges posed by the pandemic due to their condition as part of the highly integrated EU-bloc but also as a Member State geographically situated on the EU external borders.



Good Practices

1. Reintroduction of internal borders with the EU Member States

Due to the exceptional situation, and in the case of air arrivals, the division between Schengen and non-Schengen arrivals and departures no longer made sense, as border controls were carried out in both cases.

2. Creation of a COVID traffic light system for the borders

Based on guidance from the health authorities, the government would decide which phase to activate with its corresponding protocols.

3. 'Green lanes' to ensure the flow of transport of goods and people

In spite of the reintroduction of borders, it was important in order to ensure that medical supplies reached their destination or that people could cross borders for professional reasons or to receive medical treatment.

4. Creation of a COVID traffic light system for the borders

Cooperation between national and local government, healthcare, armed forces, and fire and rescue departments became essential to uphold the state-mandated quarantine policy for travelers entering Slovakia, including registration at border and transport to designated quarantine facilities under police supervision. As an ad hoc response to the COVID-19 crisis, a permanent Secretariat was established in the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic to ensure more regular meetings of all relevant experts and representatives of the government and administration at national, regional and local.

5. Increased capacities for border officials

Ensuring that officials at border checkpoints were up to date with the latest measures and are able to understand them well enough to explain them to each individual entering Slovak territory.

6. Redefining what a crisis is

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects in relation to migration was the fact that the Bureau of Border and Foreign Police had protocols for crises based exclusively on large volumes of migration flows and hence were unprepared to deal with the COVID-19 health emergency. Enlarging the scope and definition of crisis to encompass several areas will facilitate the work of border management in the future.



EU Delegation to Costa Rica

Consular assistance to EU citizens - EU Delegation to Costa Rica



Identified Challenges

In the past countries have had to assist their citizens abroad during an emergency, but usually in one given location at a time. Like in the rest of the world, the pandemic tested Costa Rican authorities' ability to deploy resources effectively in different locations simultaneously. EU Member States faced similar issues, but were able to rely on EU Consular protection mechanisms that facilitated the repatriation of their citizens. EU Delegations, such as the one the San Jose, played an important role in coordinating efforts.



Good Practices

1. Coordinating role for the repatriation of stranded EU citizens

Although EU Delegations do not count with dedicated staff for consular assistance, it was necessary to adopt this role given that many EU citizens that were present as tourists in Costa Rica when the state of emergency was declared in March 2020 did not have their own embassy in the country.

2. Multi-stakeholder coordination

Daily meetings and contacts with the Minister Counsellors of the five EU embassies that were present in Costa Rica to identify needs and share updates, as well as liaising with representatives of the remainder 22 Member States without delegations on site.

3. Fast designation of honorary consuls

A network of contacts was identified, including honorary consuls in Costa Rica, Consuls and diplomatic staff based in embassies in the region as well as civilians who might have information about the citizens of EU-27 Member States.

4. Redefinition of contingency plans

A common contingency plan, including risk assessments, emergency contacts and evacuation plans was developed in early 2019 just weeks before the COVID-19 hit. However, it focused on natural disasters and excluded pandemics, which meant that it could only act as a partial reference for the course of action to follow during the consular crisis. As the situation escalated, the EU Delegation had to constantly adapt to the situation and respond to repatriation needs from EU citizens.



Portugal

Assistance to foreign citizens in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic



Identified Challenges

In the last year and a half, it has been often highlighted that while many migrants played an essential role in the COVID-19 response, the pandemic has had particular consequences on their livelihoods and created new vulnerabilities. Costa Rican authorities have had to seek solutions to mitigate the effects on Nicaraguan labour migrants, who contribute significantly to the national economy. Similarly, Portuguese authorities including the High Commission for Migration have had to adapt to coordinate their assistance to foreign citizens in their territory.



Good Practices

1. Repatriation of Portuguese citizens

Over 2 million Portuguese citizens were abroad as migrants or tourists, therefore, as a matter of priority the Portuguese Government fledited military and commercial flights to return citizens to their territory.

2. Stranded citizens on Portuguese territory

Coordination with other European Governments to accommodate EU migrants in a safe manner whilst they were stranded on Portuguese territory because of border closures with Spain and awaiting their repatriation.

3. Resettling in decent accommodation

Given new sanitary measures in place, the Government quickly realised that accommodation in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions was not uncommon among the migrant population. Hence it became a priority to rehouse migrants in accommodations that could provide a safe environment.

4. Considering internal migration flows

International migration flows are not the only ones that need to be taken into account when planning for contingencies. In the case of Portugal, the Government reviewed internal migration flows linked to seasonal work to predict where there could be new sudden population movements or overcrowding.

5. Provisional regularisation

A regularisation was extended for all irregular migrants with pending regularisation cases to access all social protection measures until December 2021. This enabled over 350 000 migrants to access services during the pandemic.

European Public Health Association (EUPHA)

Access to medical services for irregular or stranded migrants in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Norway and Spain



Identified Challenges

The pandemic has underlined the importance of reliable medical health systems and the need to address inequalities in access to health care. Although Costa Rica's health system is one of the best in Latin America and the Caribbean, the pandemic overstretched its capacities and resources as well as creating new challenges. Europe was for months the epicentres of the pandemic. To support public health institutions in establishing evidence-based policies, actors such as the European Public Health Association and its Migrant and Ethnic Minority Health section continuously developed and disseminated knowledge with the contributions of its members and partners such as the Spanish Society of Public Health and Health Administration (SESPAS) and the Pandemic Centre at University of Bergen (Norway).



Good Practices

Norway

1. Extending access to health care

With the pandemic, all migrants had access to the health care system regardless of migratory status. This experience proved that it is more cost effective to provide food, shelter and preventive care for irregular migrants than to provide hospitalisation and intensive care.

2. Adaptation of pandemic contingency plans

These plans existed, but focused on preventing the spread of influenza and hence had to be adapted.

Spain

1. Redefining emergency protocols

Similar to Norway, there were protocols for emergencies, but mainly for local emergencies such as heatwaves or massive levels of contagion, but not for a pandemic of the magnitude of COVID-19.

2. Protection of vulnerable groups

In light of the pandemic, the protocol for the reception of unaccompanied migrant children arriving in Spain had to be revised.

3. Whole-of-society approach

It was detected that migrants were tested less frequently due to multiple factors such as lack of information or knowledge about the process, lack of links to local health services, and limited understanding of the language. Through collaboration between the Norwegian health authorities and leaders of migrant organisations and communities, information campaigns were launched to explain access to the tests, the lack of fees, the convenience of avoiding contagion in the family, and this led to migrant populations having a higher rate of testing than the native-born population.

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