Strategy: #YoCamino, to prevent irregular migration of children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, lessons from Nicaragua

Risk Communication and Community Engagement & Migrant Protection and Assistance
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Risk Communication and Community Engagement & Migrant Protection and Assistance
Preventing irregular migration of children and adolescents in Nicaragua.

This strategy is part of a three-stage joint program developed with UNICEF. When the third stage was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementing team quickly modified its activities from: 1) Information management on human mobility, 2) Prevention of irregular migration through the #YoCamino strategy, 3) Strengthening institutional care and protection of migrant children; to adapt them to this new reality. Incorporating elements of direct humanitarian assistance through the distribution of NFI Kits, complemented with risk communication efforts related to the trafficking of minors and prevention of contagion.

Strengthen the capacities of the involved institutions, civil society organizations, educators, caregivers, children and adolescents; to prevent the irregular migration of children and adolescents in Nicaragua during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accomplish this through the #YoCamino strategy.

Nicaragua

Nicaraguan youth (children and adolescents), caregivers, youth migrants, educators, government personnel, and implementing partners.
Introduction & Context

This initiative is part of a program developed in conjunction with UNICEF, starting in 2018, to strengthen the institutional framework for the protection of migrant children and prevent irregular migration in Nicaragua. Composed of three pillars: 1) Information management on human mobility, 2) Prevention of irregular migration through the #YoCamino strategy, and 3) Strengthening of institutions for the care and protection of migrant children.

The IOM Nicaragua team was focused on the third stage of implementation, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the country. The leaders of the initiative immediately began to identify additional needs and reacted by adapting new messages to the context of the spread of COVID-19, with a focus on children and adolescents. Additionally, they carried out activities related to strengthening the capacities of leaders and partner organizations, as well as unaccompanied children. Direct humanitarian care focused on stranded migrants, children of migrant parents who were no longer receiving financial support (remittances) and returned migrants.

IOM staff donated personal hygiene items to children and adolescents in conjunction with sister organization and partner - Casa Alianza.
IOM Nicaragua quickly reprogrammed its funds for face-to-face activities to distribute NFI to targeted populations and provide direct humanitarian assistance through other means. A key element was relying on the organization’s long-term partners, to help identify the beneficiaries in these targeted categories. IOM Nicaragua focused on specific geographic areas by collecting data based on common profiles and previous experiences. They used the data to locate recipients and provide hygiene kits, food and materials for young people – such as coloring books, comics and play dough. The overall focus was on children’s rights and COVID-19 prevention. IOM staff directly supported the printing of books and materials, with the appropriate messaging, including creative COVID-19 informational stickers.

The materials were provided directly to the children and teenagers. Initially, materials were delivered to 200 minors; and later assistance was extended to reach a total of more than 300 beneficiaries. IOM staff expanded the beneficiary base, thanks to local partners who collaborated in locating groups of minors based on profiles provided by IOM. Some examples included: 1) A large community of refugee girls and boys, whose status classified them as a beneficiary group; 2) Children from remote communities, dependent on remittances or without legal guardians; and 3) Children identified as part of an assisted voluntary return program.

One of the partners, Casa Alianza, provided specialized assistance to five adolescents, who were to be repatriated. This specific assistance provided a teenage mother with a kit of baby products, including a baby seat for her return trip in a consulate car. During the initiative, IOM staff and partners found a key benefit to be the identification of beneficiary needs, thanks to profiles created by professional psychologists working to provide more comprehensive and appropriate care. Without the data from these profiles, these experiences would have been more difficult or even impossible to attend to.

IOM staff combined kit distribution with data collection. The data collected included age, school system, information on the people they lived with, immigration status, father and mother data, and whether they were receiving remittances. This information helped to create a database to identify and refer cases of minors to UNICEF. The protection and confidentiality of youth data was guaranteed by the IOM-UNICEF agreement, which exclusively allows for the sharing of personal data between both agencies (see Annex 6).

The work with various institutions was never-ending. One of the challenges was to share basic techniques with teachers to provide psychological support regarding protocols for external and internal migrant children and adolescents. IOM staff shared and coordinated the data collection processes with the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, while providing specific teacher training for migrant children and adolescents. Other partners who received training and participated in the initiative were the Ministry of Children and the Family, the Ministry of Education and SOS Children’s Villages.

IOM staff also created and delivered a course on migrant children. Training took place in three face-to-face sessions – 3 hours each, with a maximum of 5 participants in each session for social distancing. The courses were taught weekly with ample space between sessions for self-study. Prior to these sessions, the beneficiaries had to take a series of virtual training sessions on the E-Campus platform. As the program progressed, it was determined that the people from the different institutions to which the training was directed did not know how to use the platform (E-Campus) or did not have the necessary equipment. For this reason, IOM staff decided to complement the virtual training with additional face-to-face sessions to facilitate enrollment and engagement. There were some technical challenges as well, that made the face-to-face training sessions more effective.

Together with other partners in the region, IOM staff created a course for young people, on content generation and social media management, all on the E-Campus platform. As a result of the course, the participants had to generate content from the perspective of youth, which would be part of the #YoCamino campaign. Since the training was carried out in virtual settings, the IOM team reinforced its strategy and actively involved groups of teenagers by creating small subgroups to provide mentoring to the beneficiaries. While it was difficult to get positive results in a large group, they were able to get 6 very engaged people. This training (supported by UNICEF- SOS Children’s Villages) focused on developing a youth network in the area.
Additionally, the #YoCamino1 web platform was deployed. With an additional component, a Chat Box, to answer frequently asked questions. After the recent launch of this platform, work is being done on promoting the site. As the pandemic progressed, #YoCamino’s focus began to shift towards COVID-19 issues. Beyond the normal preventative measures of a pandemic, IOM staff and #YoCamino content creators focused on combining the effects that COVID-19 has generated on migration and on filling information gaps related to border closures.

Along the way, IOM staff collaborated very effectively with UNICEF, with each agency working together per their respective strengths. However, there were challenges, such as cumbersome administrative processes within both organizations, related to project extension logistics, finance, and contracting requirements. One issue that arose was related to the reprogramming of funds. IOM staff had to request an extension given the response time required by government agencies regarding the approval of various protocols. In the end, additional funding was essential to add an additional 100 kits created and delivered to children.

Young participants – part of the #YoCamino network created and promoted by IOM Nicaragua.

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1 Webpage (yocamino.info)
Lessons Learned

- IOM staff did not consider the time for administrative tasks as well as the time required to hire a web designer and the technical testing required for the website’s hard-launch. This became a limitation for the project. In the future, this type of work and support will require a much longer turnaround time.

- Although the functionality of the Chat Box was a good idea, it could not generate sustainability for the identification of cases and the mapping of needs.

- A key learning was that, although there are barriers to identifying potential beneficiaries, some people are more willing to share their experiences through social media.

- Government’s counterparts required lengthy deadlines to approve the protocol for the care of children and adolescents as well as the design methods. The accommodation of these internal deadlines and procedures should be considerate time-wise; for that reason it is recommended to be more proactive in planning and include extended deadlines for revisions and approval time needed.

- The social media platform #YoCamino needed to be prioritized to focus on case management and detection of common situations that affected the target population. This way the information gathered could have been used to strengthen the assessment and focus the communication campaigns on specific identified needs.

- A good practice was to involve young people in the content generation for the platforms – while working on advocacy and communication activities.

- There were some shifting priorities on the part of UNICEF. IOM Nicaragua faced this situation by being flexible and providing specific data on youth profiles (providing solid evidence of what was needed).

- It is necessary to have information adapted to the context when implementing similar initiatives. Therefore, it is suggested to update the diagnosis made to children and adolescents, to incorporate realities introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters and the political situation in the country.

- The platform #YoCamino and communication campaign requires sustainability elements. This helps to adapt the messaging to new scenarios and to continue socializing relevant information in order to prevent irregular migration among children and teenagers.

Beneficiaries receiving food kits and children’s rights and COVID-19 prevention materials, all delivered by IOM Nicaragua Staff.
Recommendations

- **Develop better alliances with diverse implementing partners**, complementing IOM’s limitations and gaps. One example was the facilitation of the SOS Children’s Villages field promoters, to cover the mapping of the target population and the delivery of NFI.

- **The partners involved can strengthen their capacities through close coordination with the IOM**, for example in data collection, risk communication and recognition of the profiles of migrant children.

- **Use pre-existing platforms like E-campus and take advantage of pre-existing communication materials.** In this way, we spend less time “reinventing the wheel.”

- Internally, a strong recommendation is to **create a guide for developing websites** – identifying important costs, timing and processes to consider by each country office.

- **Ensure that the necessary trainings and outreach are developed**, with a management approach based on the expected results of the initiative.

- **Make sure all work with the youth involved is regular and consistent.** Make this a key focus as it is valuable to generate content and communicate from the perspective of your target population.

Awareness raising material about migration created along with the #YoCamino youth network – promoted by IOM Nicaragua.
Annexes

**Annex 1**

**Program presentation:** Fortalecimiento Institucional para la protección de la niñez migrante y prevención de la migración irregular en Nicaragua.

**Annex 2**

**Summary Sheet:** Diagnóstico Comunitario sobre la actitudes y prácticas de niñez y adolescencia frente a la migración irregular.

**Annex 3**

**Promotion material:** #YoCamino campaign.

**Annex 4**

**Summary Sheet:** Estrategia de comunicación para el desarrollo (CD*) #YoCamino

**Annex 5**

IOM-UNICEF agreement: UN Agency to Agency contribution agreement.