

The impact of COVID-19: an opportunity to reaffirm the central role of migrants' human rights in sustainable development

November 2020

Key messages

- In terms of migration, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has come at a time already characterized by involuntary migration and growing intraregional movements, resulting in a migrant population estimated at more than 40 million. This situation has been marked by increased emigration from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, a new migration route from Haiti to South America, and various vulnerabilities associated with the route that crosses Central America, Mexico and the United States.
- Despite the restrictions on movement as a result of border closures and lockdown measures, since much of the region's migration is involuntary or forced, it should not be assumed that it will come to a halt during the pandemic.
- During a pandemic, the vulnerabilities that pervade the migration cycle are heightened, such as the risks of job losses; declines in paid domestic employment for women; overrepresentation of migrant workers in front-line jobs; indefinite detention; a lack of prompt access to documentation needed for health care; poor housing conditions; and stigmatization of returnees in their communities of origin, especially when returning from the United States.
- The pandemic poses specific migration governance challenges in the region in terms of the range of unresolved situations for migrants. These relate not only to the humanitarian, social and economic spheres that significantly affect women, but also to health and habitability issues.
- In a pandemic, a dichotomy arises related to the prevalence of an exclusionary and unequal development model, which contrasts with the situation of migrant workers, who contribute flexible and unprotected labour and have been on the front line during the ongoing crisis, and who also have significant potential to contribute to the post-pandemic economic revival.
- National visa systems and regulatory frameworks for migration establish conditions that hinder the access of irregular migrants to benefits from the various emergency funds and other allowances offered in response to the pandemic.
- The ongoing crisis is expected to lead to a decline in the flow of remittances, as a result of rises in unemployment in destination countries. However, it will not be possible to properly analyse the situation for some time.
- Restrictions on movement—including those that hamper returns to countries of origin—should be seen as standard public health procedures and not as migration management and control measures.

Key messages

Introduction

- A. An overview of the region's migration
 - B. The pandemic and the unresolved issues for migrants: a health, humanitarian, social and economic crossroads
 - C. National and local measures to assist migrants
 - D. Recommendations for policy guidance
- Bibliography*



- There is a pattern of stranded migrants, including people who are temporarily living in holding centres or shelters or who are queuing outside the consulates of their respective countries, as well as those who are waiting at borders to return to their countries.
- In the context of the pandemic, living conditions —particularly overcrowding, which is very common in the migrant population— greatly limit efforts to prevent infection and the spread of the pandemic in migrant communities.
- Some media and political sectors have instrumentalized the pandemic to attribute a greater proportion of infections to migrant communities.
- The confluence of racism and xenophobia is the most serious source of vulnerability affecting migrant populations, and particularly those from relatively less developed countries, who are forced to migrate, have limited resources or belong to certain ethnic or racial groups. This should lead to a strengthened commitment to the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and to other international instruments.

Introduction¹

The COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions have severely affected countries and so many people, communities, activities and habits that it has become common to analyse specific situations and specific population groups that share the same hardships. This is the case with migration and migrants. There is broad consensus that the world is facing an unprecedented situation in terms of health and movement restrictions. Various reports compare the current situation with the crisis of the 1930s, the effects of the Second World War, or the influenza pandemic of 1918. The situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has never been seen before, both because of the speed with which the virus has spread and because of the pre-existing regional context, characterized by high levels of inequality. As a result, groups that have historically been excluded and marginalized, as is the case of many migrants, are being exposed to new vulnerabilities.

Epidemiologically speaking, the virus could affect all people equally, without discrimination, although risk does increase with age. In the region, however, this disease could disproportionately affect migrants, owing to the activities they engage in, their living conditions and their lack of health protection. This would increase the risk of these people becoming infected and of being discriminated against and excluded based on the various stigmas that are emerging in the context of the pandemic. This migrant population is estimated to stand at more than 40 million people, at the very least, taking into account various migration routes.

In the countries of the region, measures must be taken to mitigate the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic on particularly vulnerable groups, such as migrants, who are exposed to various risks at different stages of the migration cycle and in different spheres, especially when an irregular migration status limits access to protection and rights.

This report re-examines two issues that are crucial in the region. Firstly, an analysis of the current situation and of initiatives to address the impending social and economic repercussions shows that it remains important and relevant to implement the priority measures of the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development regarding protection of the rights of all migrants. Secondly, this document reiterates the call from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to pay special attention to certain vulnerable groups in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as migrants, owing to the various factors that affect them. In addition, some recommendations are given based on ongoing discussions, reflecting the need to share the various strategies governments and international agencies have put into practice to address current and future situations.

¹ The cut-off date for the information used to prepare this report is 30 June 2020, unless otherwise indicated.

A. An overview of the region's migration

The region was already facing the significant challenge of reducing vulnerabilities, not only in transit and at destination, but also those in countries of origin that drive large volumes of people to undertake involuntary, and in many cases forced migration.

Extraregional migration, historical overseas immigration and intraregional exchanges have been the three most characteristic patterns of international migration in Latin America and the Caribbean since the second half of the twentieth century, as well as return to countries of origin, either planned or forced (Martínez Pizarro, Cano Christiny and Soffia Contrucci, 2014; Martínez Pizarro and Orrego Rivera, 2016). Some studies by the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC show that, since the 2000s, the main trends in international migration in Latin America and the Caribbean have been an increase in intraregional flows and a decline in extraregional flows, especially from Mexico to the United States and from South America to Spain. Information obtained in the 2010 census round shows that at that time there were around 30 million Latin American and Caribbean people residing in countries other than their country of birth, roughly 4 million more than those recorded in the 2000 census round. The United Nations Population Division estimated that in 2019 there were 11.7 million immigrants in Latin America and the Caribbean, while the total number of migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean was 40.5 million, corresponding to 1.8% and 6.2% of the region's total population, respectively (ECLAC, 2019).

An analysis of the main patterns and trends of international migration in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years reveals several characteristics: persistent negative net migration in the region; an increase in returnees and migrants in transit in some countries; migration from the countries of northern Central America; Venezuelan emigration, especially to South America; and an increase in Haitian migration to South America. Likewise, a confluence of hardships accounts for the existence of mixed migrations, which according to ECLAC (2019) characterize current migration flows in the region, including movements by asylum seekers, economic migrants, irregular migrants, smuggled persons, victims of trafficking and stranded migrants. The situation of those who have been stranded has become particularly pressing in the context of the pandemic; there have been various cases of people being unable to return to their countries and being stranded in countries of destination or transit. In this regard, ECLAC (2019) has stated that there is no international definition for the term “stranded migrant”, although it is often used to describe migrants who are detained for lengthy periods, have had their asylum applications rejected, or are of irregular migration status. This is even more relevant in the ongoing pandemic, as a new category is emerging, which could be called “situational stranded migrants”, referring to those people who have been unable to return to their countries of origin as a result of the pandemic.

As shown in figure 1, for decades the main destination of Latin American and Caribbean migrants has been the United States, followed by the countries of the region and Spain. In addition to the importance of the United States as a destination country, especially for Mexican migration, there has been sustained growth in intraregional migration, which rose from 24% of total immigration in 1970 to 63% in 2010 in the region as a whole (ECLAC, 2019).

Moreover, the migration route formed by northern Central America, Mexico and the United States has become particularly important in recent times, especially because of the increased visibility of migrant caravans, reflecting a confluence of structural expulsion factors, accompanied by an increase in vulnerabilities throughout the migratory cycle. These conditions at points of departure in the countries of northern Central America are associated with violence, political instability, economic crisis, poverty and inequality, and during transit through Mexico an additional set of risks exists, such as citizen insecurity, organized crime, extortion and risks to the health and lives of migrants. Upon arrival in the United States, migrants are very vulnerable because of the policy of mass deportations, the criminalization of undocumented migrants, and racism and xenophobia, among other factors that have been repeatedly denounced in the literature (Canales, Fuentes and De León Escribano, 2019).

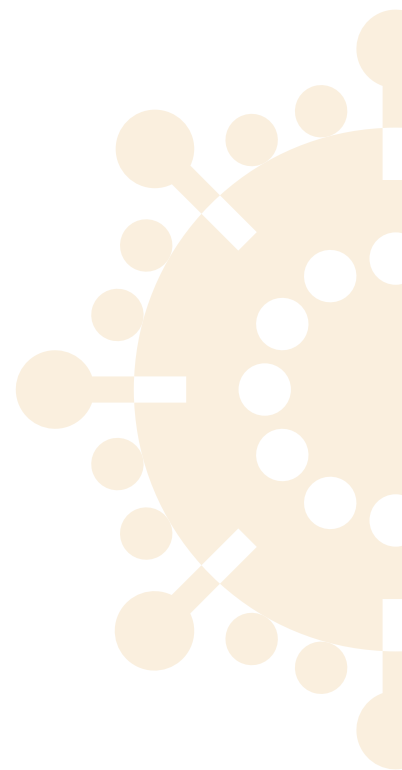
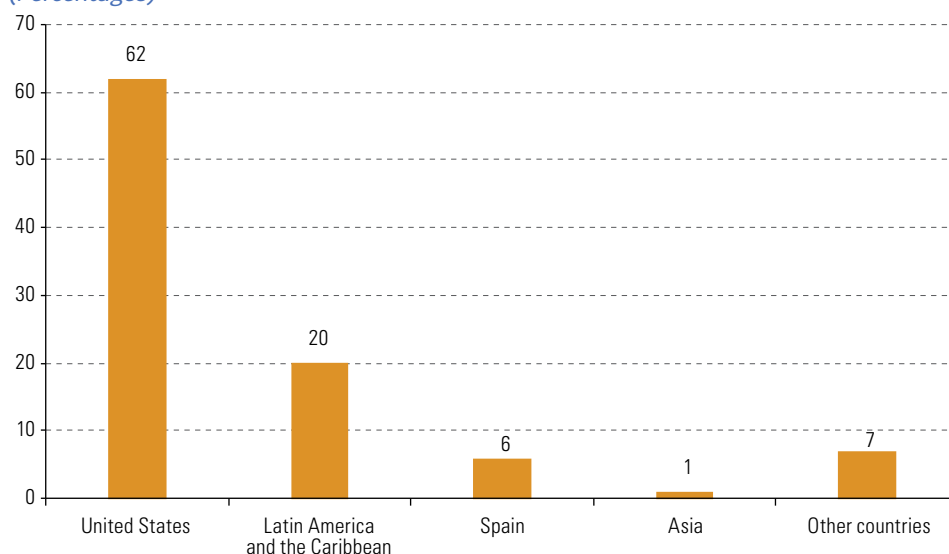


Figure 1
Latin America and the Caribbean: main destinations of migrants from the region, 2019
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of United Nations, “International migrant stock 2019” [online] <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>.

All of this poses a significant challenge of reducing vulnerabilities in transit and at destination, but also vulnerabilities in countries of origin that push many people to undertake forced migration. In addition, recently there has been increased coverage of the specific case of unaccompanied migrant children who have been returned to Central America from the United States and Mexico. Numerous initiatives led by academia, civil society and international organizations have warned of the risks these children face during the process of reintegration into their countries of origin. These risks are exacerbated by current circumstances, since unaccompanied migrant children are seen as being infected with the disease and as vectors for its reproduction.

Venezuelan migration has been creating new routes in South America for some time, reaching as far as Chile. According to estimates by the United Nations and the Response for Venezuelans (R4V) platform, in 2019 there were 5 million Venezuelans living abroad, equivalent to 17.5% of the country’s population.² Over a short period of time, this has changed migration patterns for countries such as Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, as well as driving a sustained increase in the number of applicants for international protection and asylum seekers, who numbered some 657,405 in November 2019, according to data provided by R4V.

B. The pandemic and the unresolved issues for migrants: a health, humanitarian, social and economic crossroads

In 2013, the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development highlighted the need to effectively apply measures to protect migrants, regardless of their migration status. This is vital for sustainable development.

Current patterns and trends in international migration in Latin America and the Caribbean reflect a diversity and complex dynamic of problems arising from conditions in countries of origin and destination, as well as during transit and return. The Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development, which was adopted in 2013, highlighted the need to effectively apply measures to protect migrants, regardless of their migration status. This requirement has become extremely relevant in the current health situation, particularly in terms of the

² See [online] <https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform>.

need to attend to migrant populations from a humanitarian perspective, paying attention not only to health but also to the economic, environmental and political problems faced by people throughout the migration cycle. One example of this is the increasing violence in several countries at multiple levels, including the gender and institutional spheres. Another example is that of migrants who are driven to return to their country of origin or migrate to third countries by restrictive migration policies and by the barriers to access to destination countries' social protection systems for those with irregular migration status.

Various international bodies have formulated concerted responses to support government efforts to address these situations. In the ongoing health emergency, these responses are particularly important. For example, the need to return to countries of origin for personal and family reasons is of particular relevance now, given the uncertainty over job security, over access to social services and over attainment of the goals of migration.³ This gives rise to other problems related to border closures, crowding, stranding at border crossings, curfews and restrictions on free movement, the lack of coordinated protocols between countries, the lack of humanitarian corridors, and in general, all the social hardships and difficulties that can overexpose migrants to infection and to the spread of the pandemic.

Under current conditions, pre-existing vulnerabilities throughout the migration cycle and their intensification have been compounded by vulnerabilities related to the health crisis and its effects on different areas, which need to be addressed by both countries and humanitarian aid and assistance agencies (see table 1). Some of these vulnerabilities were already raised in the Social Panorama of Latin America, 2019 (ECLAC, 2019), such as those caused by violence, racism and xenophobia, in addition to interconnected discrimination arising from national origin, gender inequalities and the life cycle.

Table 1
The migration cycle and the main risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic

Origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulties with family reunification. - Reduction in income from remittances
Transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased exposure to trafficking in persons and people smuggling - Closure and militarization of borders - Lack of access to social protection - Deportation - Routes taken by asylum seekers - Sensation of being constantly transient
Destination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of access to specific measures taken in response to COVID-19 - Irregular migration status - Lack of legal identity - Evictions owing to non-payment of accommodation - Concentration of migrant workers in sectors with low productivity and higher exposure to the virus - Women in paid and unpaid work - Obstacles to the validation of migrants' health-care qualifications - Overcrowding - Racism and xenophobia - Overrepresentation of men in construction and of women in care - Discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons
Return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forced returns - Stigmatization of people returning to Central America from the United States (attribution of infections)

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

In particular, in the spirit of the priority measures of the Montevideo Consensus, it is also important to highlight the difficulties faced by young people, women and children who are migrants in accessing social protection, either because of the forced nature of their migration, its large scale or the fact that it raises cross-cutting and emerging issues without adequate protocols (ECLAC, 2019).

³ Vera Espinoza, Zapata and Gandini (2020) propose that, after the crisis, there will be two types of returnees: those that are the result of bottom-up actions and decisions by migrants to return, and those propitiated by top-down measures, owing to forced return or deportation policies.

At the international level, and particularly in the current health situation, there is growing and objective concern about the situation of many migrants. The specific vulnerabilities of communities that lack networks, documentation and psychosocial support, among other aspects, must be addressed. Various international bodies, including ECLAC, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in addition to academic institutions, cooperation agencies and civil society organizations, among others, have put forward measures, recommendations and warnings that governments should take into account and which are related to the risks to which various population groups are exposed. Among these groups, the migrant population could face even greater difficulties because of the barriers and obstacles that bar access to primary health care and non-contributory social protection (see box 1).

Box 1

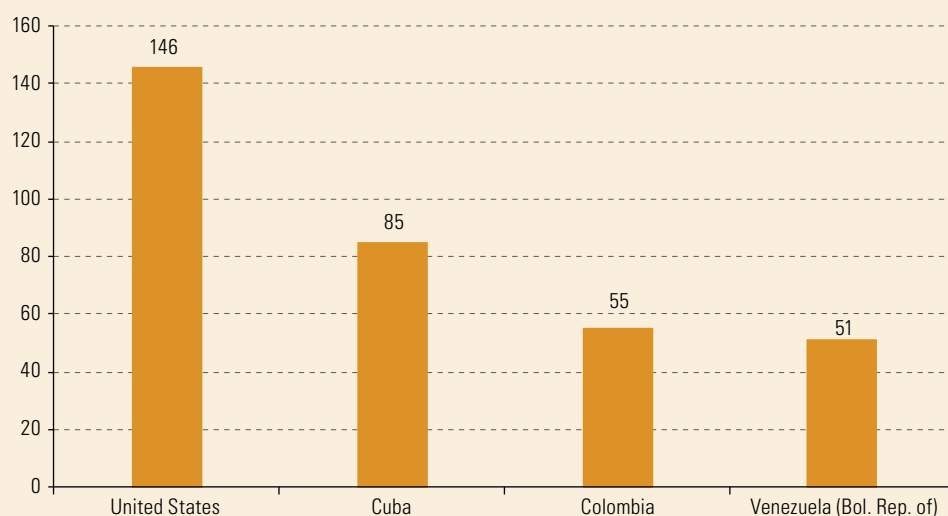
Costa Rica and Mexico: proportion of migrants among COVID-19 infections and deaths

During the pandemic, a number of concerns have been raised about the incidence of COVID-19 among migrants, sometimes with the unacceptable aim of holding them responsible for the spread of the virus. The real analysis should focus on identifying the risk of infection, mortality and the ability to access health care in a timely manner. In this regard, the information provided by Costa Rica and Mexico, which publish data on COVID-19-related infections or deaths of migrants, is noteworthy.

In Costa Rica, according to figures provided by the Ministry of Health, on 16 June there were a total of 1,796 confirmed cases, of which 459 were foreigners, representing one quarter of the total. In Mexico, meanwhile, according to official figures provided by the government, as of 15 June there had been a total of 150,264 deaths, of which 648 corresponded to persons not of Mexican nationality, the main origins of whom are shown in the figure below.

Mexico: main nationalities of non-Mexicans who died from COVID-19, 2020

(Number of people)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Ministry of Health of Mexico, "Comunicado Técnico Diario COVID-19 MÉXICO", 15 June 2020 [online] https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/571118/Comunicado_Tecnico_Diario_COVID-19_2020.06.15.pdf.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Ministry of Health of Mexico, "Comunicado Técnico Diario COVID-19 MÉXICO", 15 June 2020 [online] https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/571118/Comunicado_Tecnico_Diario_COVID-19_2020.06.15.pdf and Ministry of Health of Costa Rica, "Centro de Prensa", 16 June 2020 [online] <https://www.ministeriodesalud.go.cr/index.php/centro-de-prensa/noticias/741-noticias-2020/1717-1796-casos-confirmados-por-covid-19>.

In the report “Latin America and the Caribbean and the COVID-19 pandemic: economic and social effects” (ECLAC, 2020a), the pandemic is described as unprecedented in the last century, and is expected to have various economic and social effects that are projected to translate into higher unemployment, lower wages and incomes, and increased poverty and extreme poverty, for example. The report also warns that the impact will be greater on groups with specific pre-existing vulnerabilities. These groups include migrants, along with older persons, unemployed youth, underemployed people, women, and unprotected informal workers.

The situation is critical for migrant women, girls and boys in particular, and in general, all people from relatively less developed countries, as their impoverishment is expected to increase and inequality is likely to worsen. These conditions, in the context of irregular migration, exacerbate other structural dimensions of inequality, such as gender or ethnic and racial inequalities (ECLAC, 2016).

Similarly, on the labour front, ILO (2020) warns that the employment crisis resulting from the response to COVID-19 could disproportionately affect certain groups, thereby aggravating inequality. These groups include people in less protected and poorly paid jobs, particularly young and older workers, women and migrants. Based on the analysis of poverty and migration, ECLAC (2019) has underscored the significant differences in the incidence of poverty among migrants and those who remain in their native countries. In Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica, migrants suffer from the highest levels of relative poverty compared to the native-born population.

Notwithstanding this trend, the initial drop in remittance flows up to April 2020 is a cause for concern in several countries. There also seemed to be a counter-cyclical effect in cases such as Mexico (Li Ng, 2020), but this issue will have to be assessed later.

1. Particularly vulnerable migrant groups

Among the groups that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—in addition to the undocumented or irregular migrants that have already been mentioned—are migrant women, children and adolescents, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons. Other vulnerable groups include those of specific nationalities, indigenous peoples and Afrodescendants.

In the case of migrant women, UNDP (2020) published a briefing note “The economic impacts of COVID-19 and gender inequality: recommendations for policymakers”, which warns that as women are at the forefront of action in health-care centres, social services, communities and households, the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic are likely to lead to deepening gender inequalities. As a result, the report underscores that policy responses must incorporate the gender perspective, since there are dimensions of poverty and inequality in the region that are directly related to this area.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to school closures, the provision of patient care at home and the implementation of quarantine measures, unpaid domestic work has increased. This is particularly relevant considering the overrepresentation of women—especially migrant women—in this type of work. Women are also overrepresented in sectors such as tourism, air transport, entertainment, cleaning and paid domestic and care work, which are among those most affected by COVID-19.

As suggested by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), ILO and ECLAC (UN-Women/ILO/ECLAC, 2020), for many migrant women, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, the options for entering the labour market are conditioned by a segmented labour market that discriminates against them because they are responsible for care. A large proportion of migrant women contribute to care needs in their countries of destination and are in turn forced to delegate to other women the care they would have provided in their countries of origin. This is a classic example of global care chains, which are formed as a result of the movement of people from poorer areas to wealthier areas. In general, women who migrate to perform domestic and care work experience higher levels of job insecurity than non-migrant workers, since, in addition to being women, they are also migrants.



In the case of migrant children, the effects of a crisis like this only deepen their suffering, as is the case for all particularly vulnerable groups. Within this framework, attention must be paid to the situation facing unaccompanied and refugee minors, who require comprehensive priority attention and who, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), represent half of the world's refugees (UNHCR, 2019). As has been described recently, the situation of deported children is also worrying.

The risks and vulnerabilities associated with migrant children occur throughout the migration cycle, and especially at the destination and during the return, as they are affected by the policies of expulsion and detention of those who accompany them, creating situations in which migration control appears to take precedence over the best interests of the child.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTI persons, who may face heightened discrimination both because they are migrants and because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. In this vein, IOM has warned about the difficulties people in this group face in accessing health services; the possibility of deepening stigmatization, discrimination, hate speech and attacks against them; and accessing work and livelihoods. This is particularly true for transgender and non-binary migrants, who are especially vulnerable to exploitation because of employment discrimination on the basis of gender identity or nationality. This opens a window for human trafficking organizations to exploit this vulnerability and actively seek out transgender and non-binary victims (Astles, 2020).

Hence, it is crucial to understand health as a universal right and to promote its access regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity; ensure that measures to reduce the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic include LGBTI migrants; prevent and sanction stigmatization and hate speech by politicians and public figures; adopt an approach that includes LGBTI migrants in the provision of shelters, support services and other measures to address gender-based violence; and provide training and instructions to border officials to avoid discrimination against LGBTI persons.

2. The situation of migrant workers in times of restricted movement

Irregular migrants may be affected to a greater extent, not only because of the conditions that hinder their access to benefits in the framework of government responses to the crisis, but also because they do not have a legal identity and are more exposed to the risks that arise when they distance themselves from institutions in order to avoid possible expulsion or migration sanctions.

Concern about migrant workers in the face of the pandemic is based on two scenarios. The first relates to the slowdown in the region's economic growth following the global financial crisis of 2007–2009. The period between 2010 and 2019, which ECLAC has called the “lost decade”, reflected the weakest growth in seven decades and affected especially manufacturing, construction and commerce (ECLAC, 2020b). Amid this backdrop, in 2020, the region is expected to record the greatest economic contraction since 1930, with a 9.1% decline in GDP, which is projected to weigh heavily on the labour market.

The second scenario relates to the immediate future, when the sectors most affected by the pandemic will likely be wholesale and retail trade, which account for the majority of low-wage and socially unprotected formal and informal workers. Effects on formal employment are expected to include reduced hours, lower wages and increased redundancies, while effects on informal labour are likely to be lower employment because of physical distancing measures and restricted movement, or reduced access to income compensation.

In a region where the significant structural heterogeneity of economies gives rise to high levels of inequality, these two scenarios provide compelling reasons for the disproportionate impact on migrants, since this group of people is concentrated not only in the sectors hit hardest by the crisis, but also in the segment of the production structure characterized by low productivity, high informality, and limited access to quality jobs and social protection. The loss of employment also has a direct impact on migrant workers' chances of gaining access to social rights and a range of services, and on their integration into the country of destination or transit: having a formal job means having a contract, and in turn having access to a residence permit, which is a necessary condition for social inclusion (Maldonado Valera, Martínez Pizarro and Martínez, 2018).

With regard to physical distancing and quarantine measures, ECLAC estimates that the sectors in which most jobs will be lost will be trade, transport, business services and social services, in addition to informal activities. These sectors, comprising activities based on interpersonal contact, account for the largest share of labour migration in the region. The situation could be even worse if taking into account irregular migration, which is understood as a structural barrier to access to social protection and inclusion, and in some cases to formal employment. Irregular migrants could be affected to a greater extent, not only because of the conditions that hinder their access to benefits in the framework of government responses to the crisis, but also because they do not have the documents that would allow them to establish a legal identity, leaving them more exposed to the risks that arise when they distance themselves from institutions in order to avoid possible expulsion or migration sanctions.

Expulsions and migration sanctions, regardless of the context, are not justified by the health situation and instead go against efforts to control the spread of infection. Meanwhile, in an environment of restricted movement, countries must pay special attention to those who they determine must urgently return to their countries.

Beyond the effects of the pandemic on employment and the economy, there is a worrying social and humanitarian dimension closely related to the characteristics of migration in the region and the vulnerabilities throughout the migration cycle, which are exacerbated in times of crisis and reveal disadvantages linked to violence, racism or xenophobia that are not addressed by public policies. Likewise, the impact of the crisis on forced return processes and border closures is expected to affect mobility projects, weighing on living standards not only in migrant communities, but also among people residing in their country of origin.

With regard to the prospects of movement in the immediate future, there should be no speculation involving spurious associations between migration processes and possible economic growth estimates for the countries following the effects of the pandemic. The most likely scenarios indicate that migration projects for many populations would be temporarily suspended, but not expire immediately or in the future, given the strong component of forced migration in several recent flows in the region.

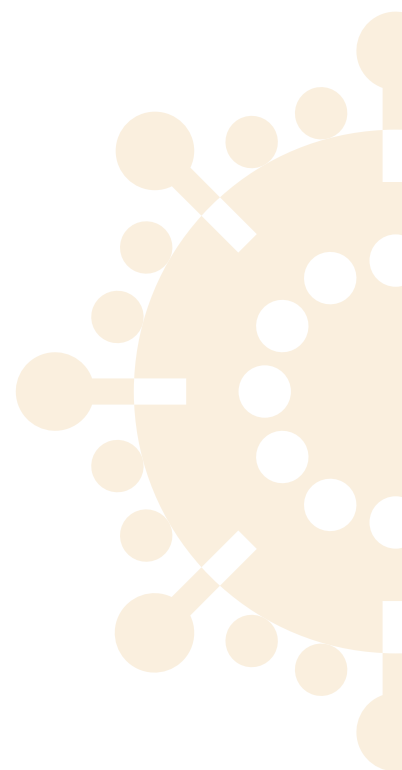
However, there are two sides to migration in times of pandemic, which result in a paradox. On the one hand, a large share of migrant workers are often shown to be those who are providing essential services for others (especially in terms of social reproduction), taking on roles in commerce, cleaning, delivery services, and even in health in the case of health personnel. In other words, they are accepted and the important role they play is acknowledged. On the other hand, these workers are exposed to xenophobia and racism, and are often accused of spreading the virus. The paradox stems from the fact that it is precisely the contribution of a flexible and unprotected migrant labour force, which is in the front line during the pandemic, that represents significant potential for post-pandemic economic reactivation. This lends weight to the discussion about a new development model that is genuinely egalitarian, inclusive and sustainable.

3. Living conditions: the problem of overcrowding

Beyond the incidence of income poverty, the analysis of multidimensional poverty underscores minimum needs with respect to a person's living conditions in different areas of well-being. One of the main problems facing migrants in the context of a pandemic is overcrowding. This is particularly relevant because people are the vectors of the virus, so crowded conditions contribute to its spread.

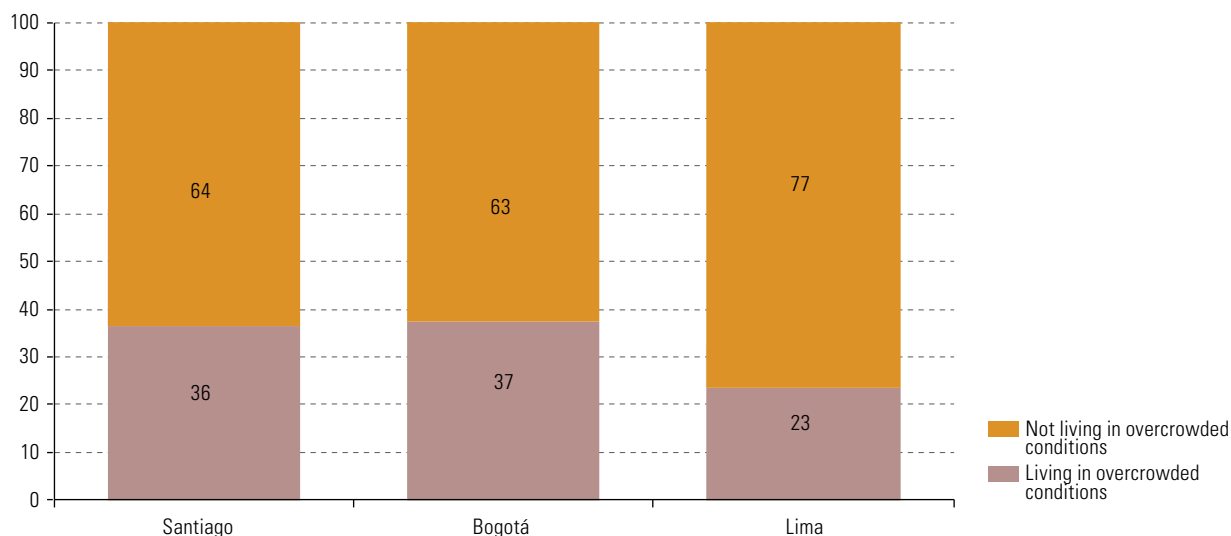
In the migration cycle, and especially during the transit and return stages, housing for migrants, such as transit hotels, shared apartments, migrant holding centres or migrant detention centres, are highly overcrowded spaces with poor structures, which represent a high risk of spreading the virus. In some countries, the release of persons in detention has proved useful in reducing overcrowding.

Indeed, overcrowding and the types of work that most migrants perform (involving interpersonal contact) are two of the central factors behind the overexposure of these persons. Widespread empirical research could show whether this overexposure is causing migrants to be overrepresented among those infected.



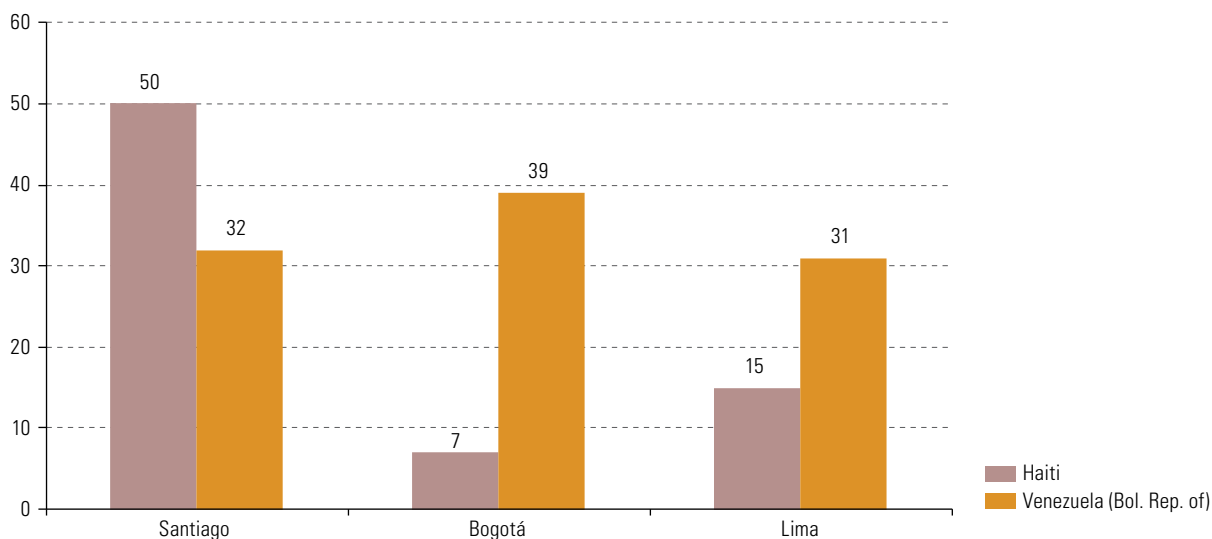
The information from the most recent censuses is fairly illustrative of the overcrowding of the migrant population in capital cities (see figures 2 and 3). Chile's 2017 census shows that, on average, one third of migrants living in Santiago live in overcrowded conditions. In three districts (Pedro Aguirre Cerda, Estación Central and Recoleta), more than half of migrants are in this situation. Of the people living in overcrowded conditions, those originating from Haiti and Peru account for the highest levels of overcrowding, at 50% and 42%, respectively.⁴

Figure 2
Santiago, Bogotá and Lima: recent migrants, by overcrowding conditions, around 2018
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the national censuses of Chile (2017), Colombia (2018) and Peru (2017).

Figure 3
Santiago, Bogotá and Lima: migrants born in Haiti and in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela living in overcrowded conditions, around 2018
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the national censuses of Chile (2017), Colombia (2018) and Peru (2017).

⁴ The threshold factored into the calculation is a value greater than two persons per fourth bedroom in each household. This is a measure of the density of occupancy of the dwelling, which may reflect different levels of severity. Overcrowding always implies deficiencies in a number of dimensions of family life, which may be more or less serious depending on sociodemographic conditions, especially those of migrant populations that are in the process of settling in the country of destination.

In Colombia, the 2018 census shows that 37% of foreign-born residents of Bogotá live in overcrowded conditions. The case of Venezuelan nationals stands out, as 39% of them live in overcrowded conditions. The municipalities where overcrowding of migrants is greatest are Cota (51.3%), Facatativá (47%) and Tocancipá (46%).

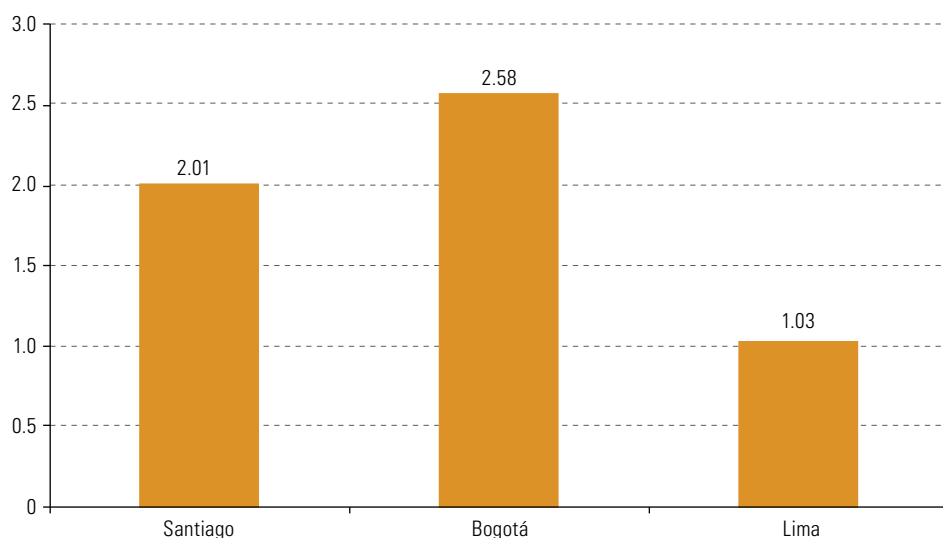
Lastly, Peru's 2017 census indicates that, on average, 23% of migrants resident in Lima live in overcrowded conditions. Of these, Venezuelan nationals stands out with an overcrowding rate of 31%.

In comparative terms, there are relative differences across the capitals in terms of overcrowding, both among long-term and recent migrants. Generally speaking, high levels of overcrowding are observed in the three cities. In the case of recent migration, higher levels of overcrowding are observed in Santiago and Bogotá than in Lima, where there appears to be less difference between nationals and migrants.

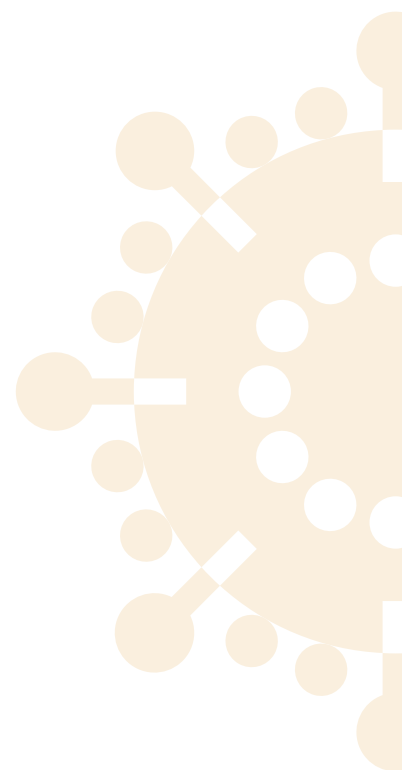
Figure 4 and maps 1 to 6, which compare the ratio between the overcrowding rate among migrants and the overcrowding rate among non-migrants in the three cities on the basis of national population censuses, show that overcrowding is markedly higher among some immigrants, particularly those who are recent arrivals. The trend towards a higher ratio is clear and, in some territories, the overcrowding rate in migrant households is up to three times higher than among nationals.

This is a reality which local governments are familiar with and poses a clear risk as a source of infection, further heightening vulnerabilities. However, they often lack the tools to address it.

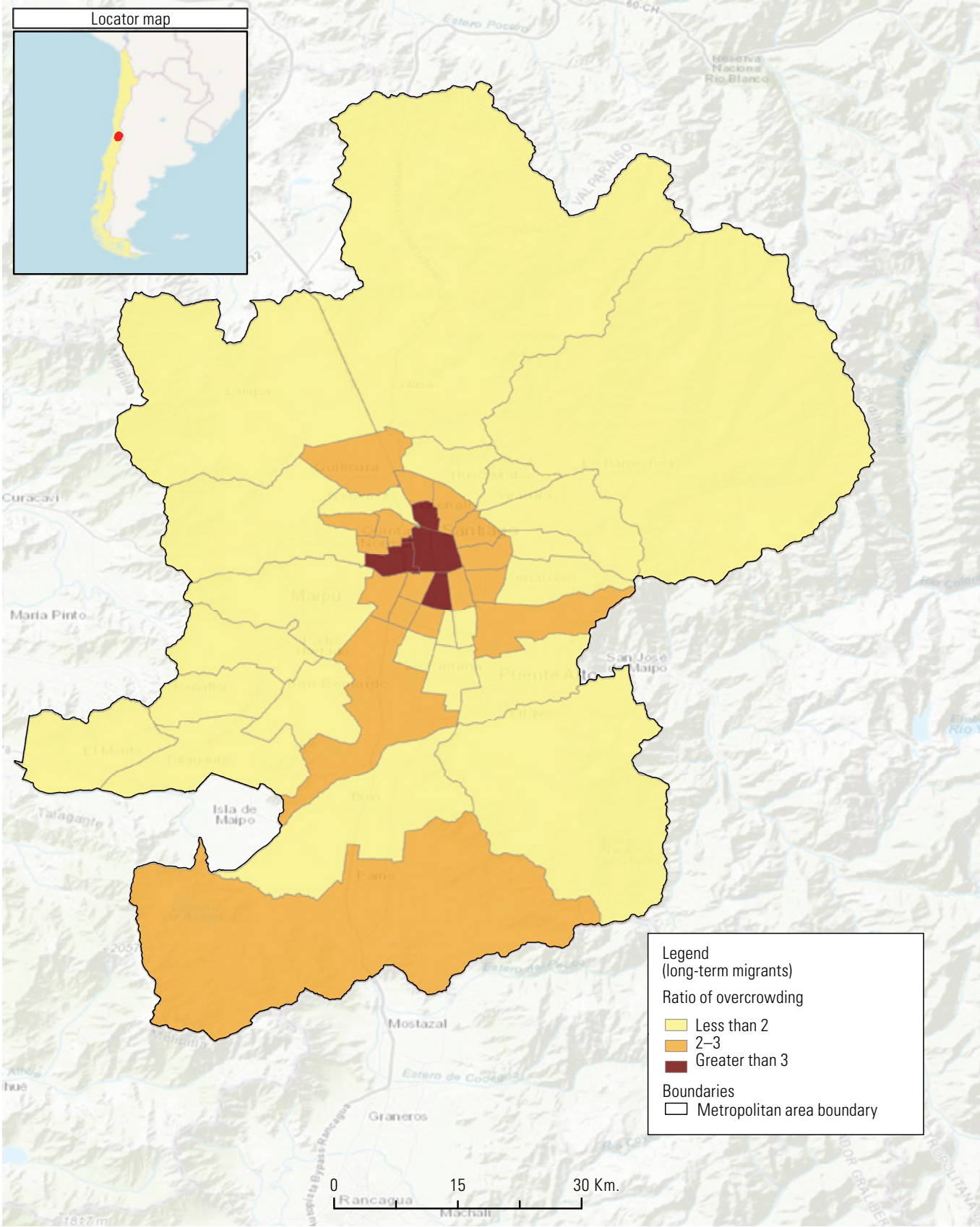
Figure 4
Santiago, Bogotá and Lima: ratio between overcrowding rate among migrants and overcrowding rate among non-migrants, around 2018



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the national censuses of Chile (2017), Colombia (2018) and Peru (2017).



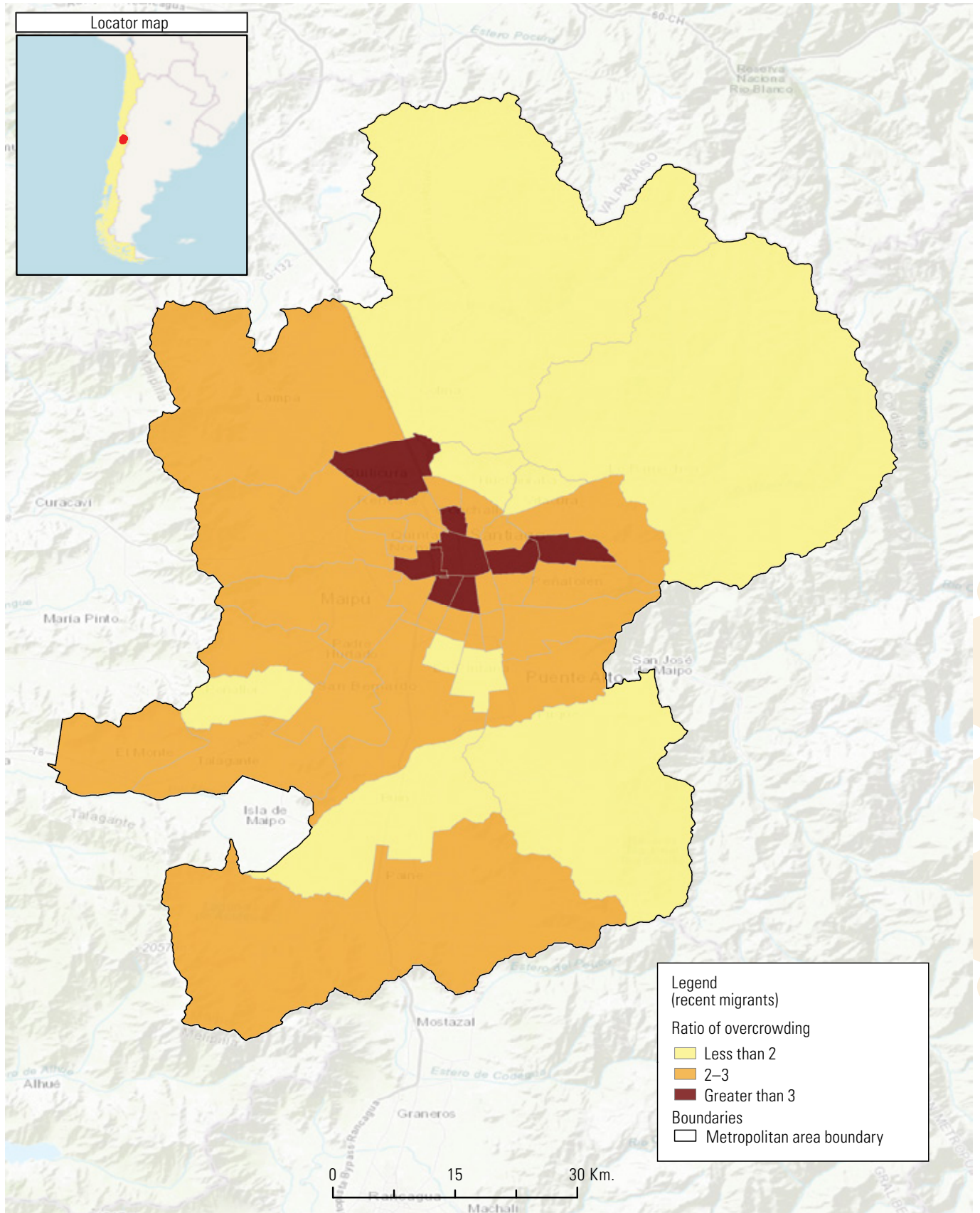
Map 1
 Santiago: ratio of overcrowding between long-term migrants and the non-migrant population, 2017



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the 2017 national census of Chile.

Map 2

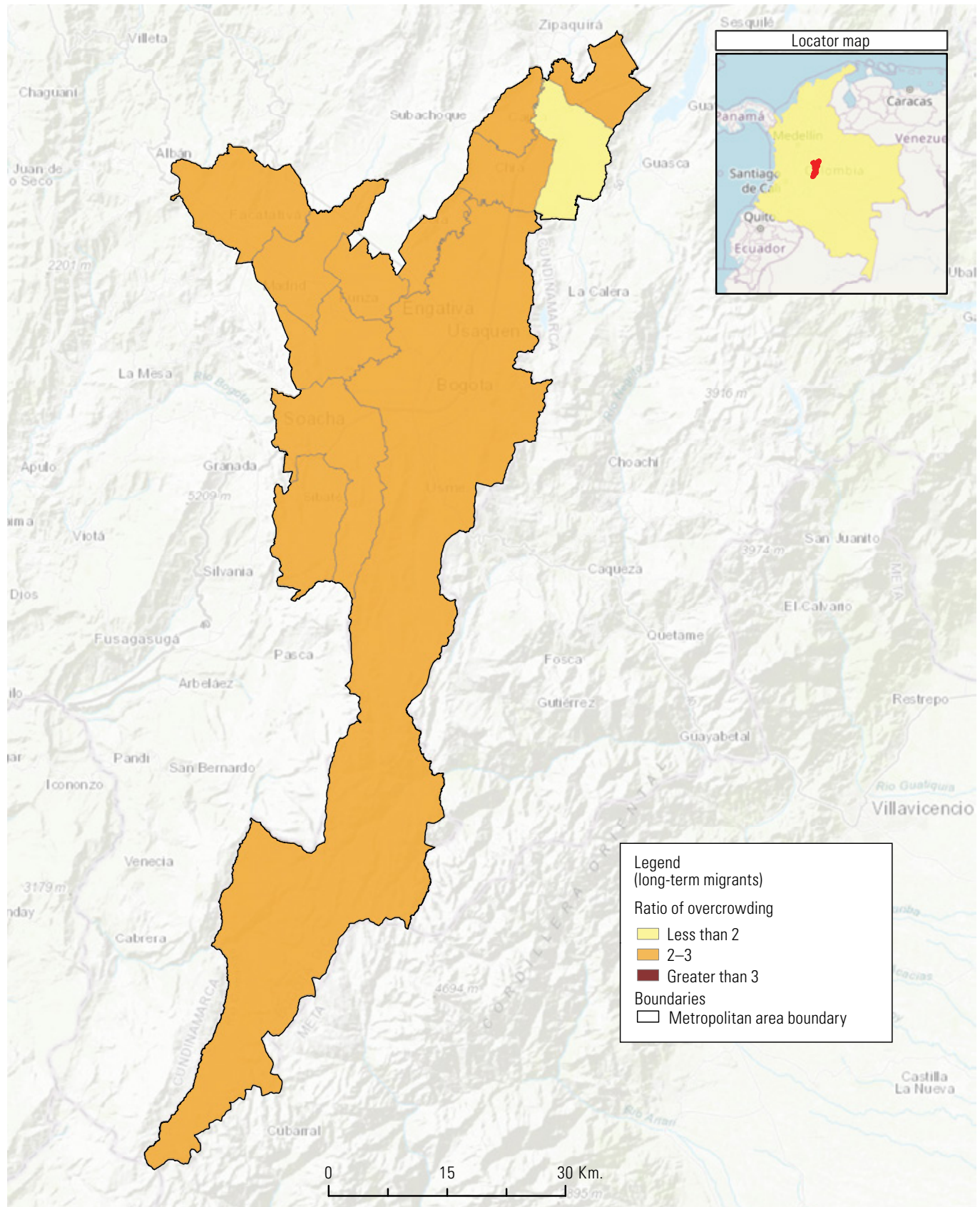
Santiago: ratio of overcrowding between recent migrants and the non-migrant population, 2017



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the 2017 national census of Chile.

Map 3

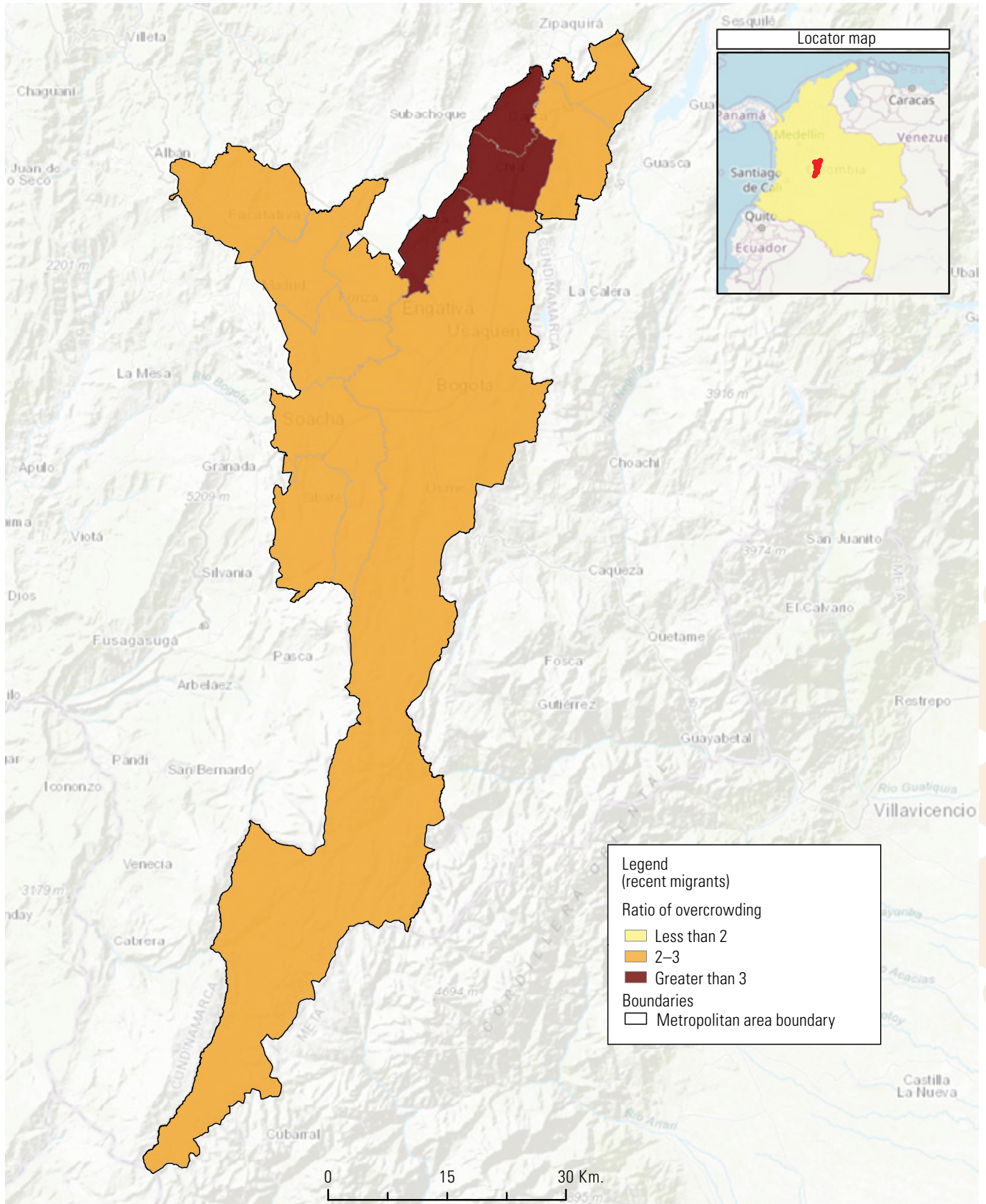
Bogotá: ratio of overcrowding between long-term migrants and the non-migrant population, 2018



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the 2018 national census of Colombia.

Map 4

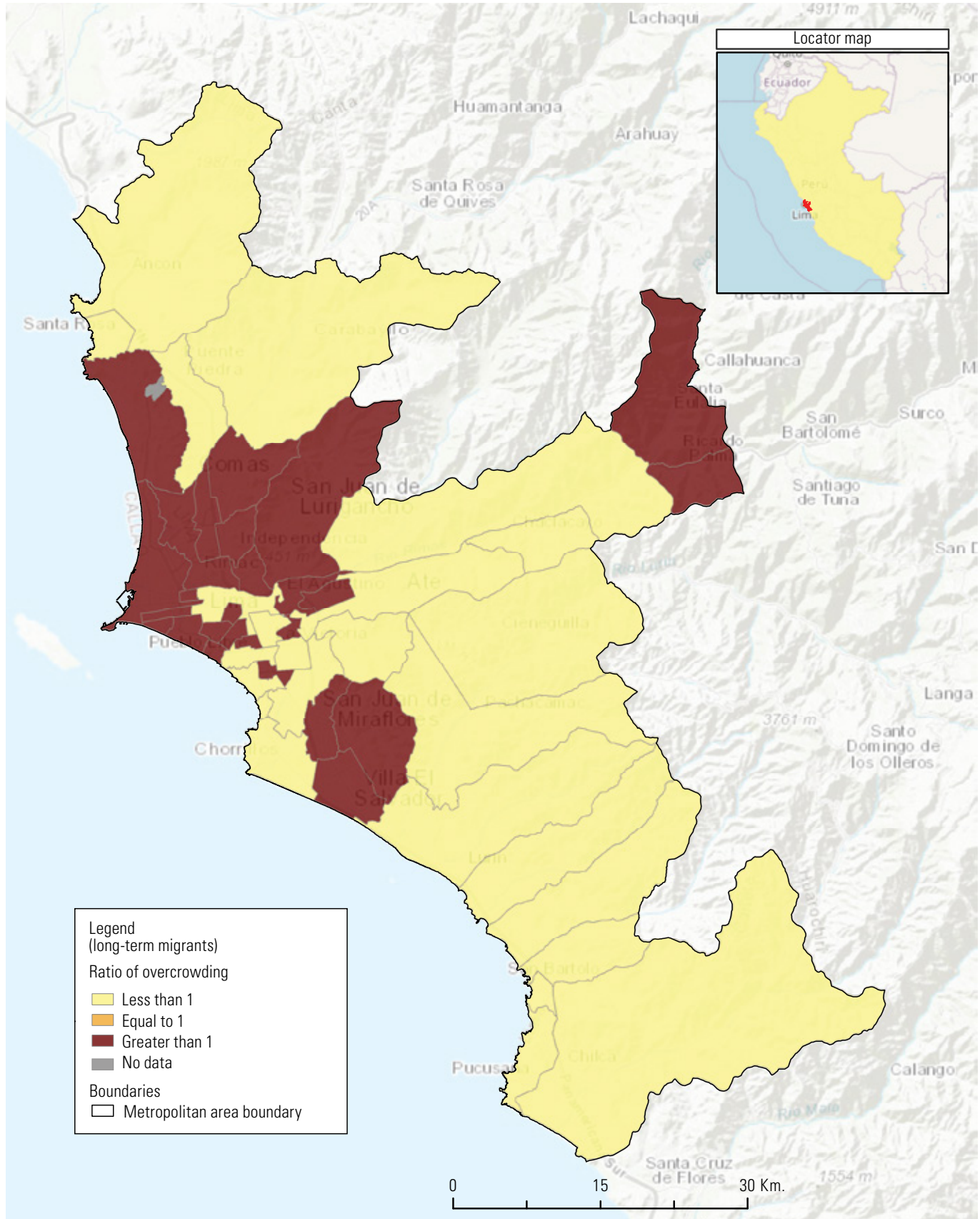
Bogotá: ratio of overcrowding between recent migrants and the non-migrant population, 2018



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the 2018 national census of Colombia.

Map 5

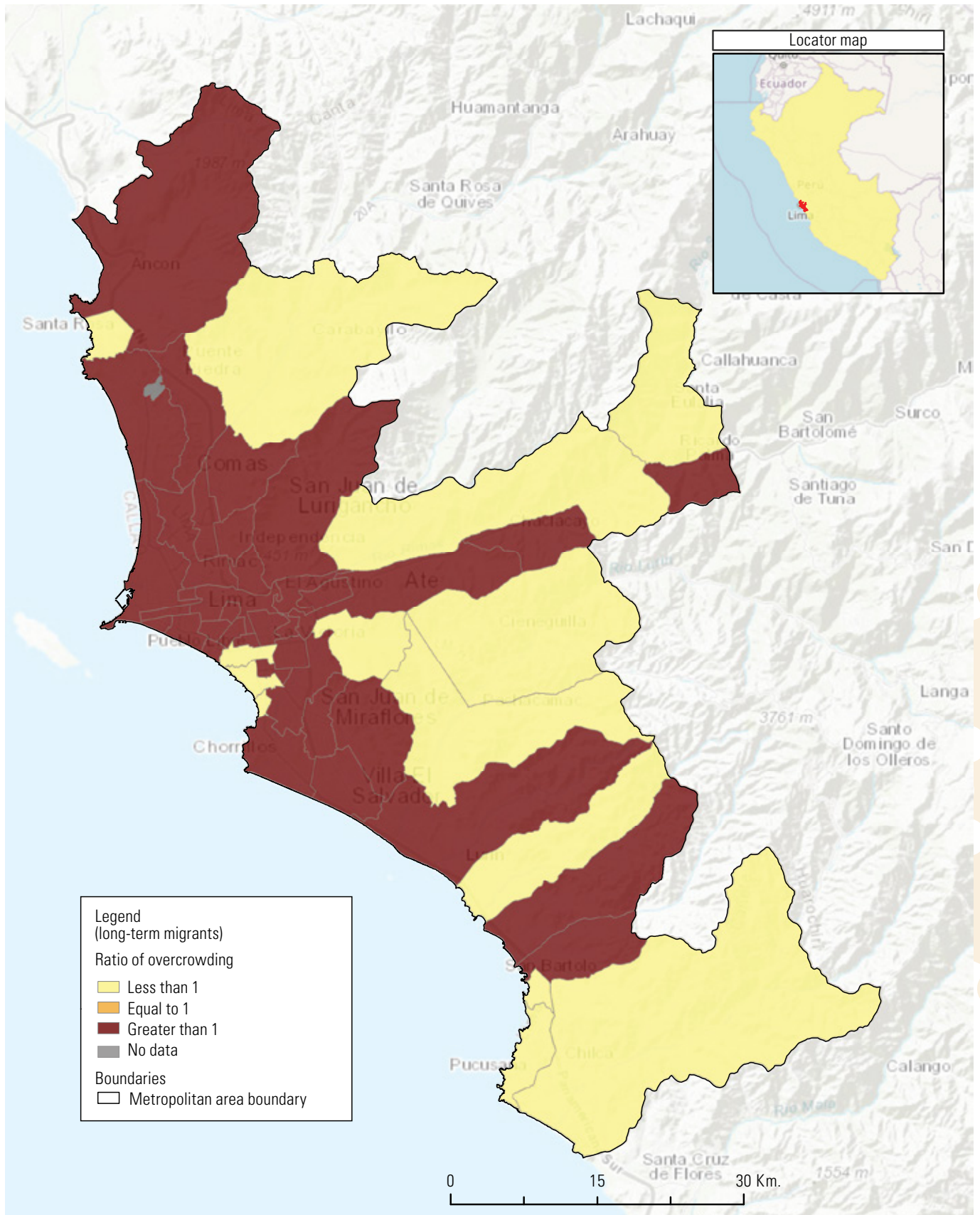
Lima: ratio of overcrowding between long-term migrants and the non-migrant population, 2017



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the 2017 national census of Peru.

Map 6

Lima: overcrowding ratio between recent migrants and the native population, 2017



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of microdata from the 2017 national census of Peru.

C. National and local measures to assist migrants

The data are limited given the short time that has elapsed since the start of the pandemic and should therefore be analysed with caution.

The governments of the region, in line with the recommendations of international agencies and various demands from civil society, have been taking action to assist migrants both in the form of migration and border management initiatives and social policy measures relating to health or social protection. The regulatory frameworks for migration and visa schemes often serve as enabling elements for social policies. In other words, access to these policies is largely conditioned by elements of migration management, which may either determine the conditions of eligibility or delay or obstruct the issuance of permits and/or visas.

This section summarizes some of the measures or actions implemented by the countries of the region in the short time since the beginning of the pandemic, grouping them into three main categories:

- (i) Border management initiatives, which include the different measures to control or close borders, at times even to returning nationals.
- (ii) Migration management initiatives, which seek to modify the normal procedure for obtaining documents, by using certain management elements, either to expedite processes or to extend the validity of residence permits.
- (iii) Social policy actions that aim to protect to migrants. In some cases, social policy initiatives implemented by countries can be extended to migrants. However, analysis of all these initiatives shows that they apply only to persons in a regular migration situation and some contain additional conditions regarding the length of residence. There are also initiatives that combine migration management and social policies, such as those aimed at providing support to returned nationals.

1. Border control measures⁵

In the area of border control, countries took steps to order the closure of borders, establishing requirements and procedures or recommendations to regulate access to national territory. According to information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile, the government decreed the temporary closure of designated points of entry and exit of foreigners, except for those legally resident in the country. All persons arriving from abroad were issued a “COVID-19 immunity passport” upon the completion of a health affidavit and undergoing a health check. Similarly, Colombia suspended the entry of foreigners into the national territory as well as the disembarkation of arriving or connecting passengers on international flights. A protocol was also implemented for screening persons falling within the category of suspected cases and those with whom they were in contact.

The Government of Jamaica issued interim guidance on the coronavirus for travellers. The measure was intended to provide information on prevention and preparedness for the new coronavirus for individuals travelling to countries affected by COVID-19 and those returning to Jamaica from such countries. Similarly, Uruguay issued recommendations for returning travellers from countries experiencing sustained transmission of COVID-19, and the Ministries of Health, Foreign Affairs and National Defence agreed on a protocol for a humanitarian corridor to evacuate individuals from the port of Montevideo to the airport.

Costa Rica launched a protocol for a response to the COVID-19 crisis at airports, seaports and land border crossings and issued biosafety guidelines governing ground transportation across Central America and the quarantine at home of nationals, residents and diplomats entering the country.

Other countries that imposed border closures include: Argentina, which prohibited the entry of non-resident foreigners who had transited through “affected zones” in the 14 days

⁵ Information obtained from the web pages of various countries’ ministries of foreign affairs, the Ibero-American Network of Migration Authorities (RIAM, 2020) and the COVID-19 Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2020c).

prior to arrival; Guatemala, which restricted entry to nationals only; and the Plurinational State of Bolivia, which closed its borders and suspended international flights, allowing entry only to Bolivian nationals and foreign residents. Brazil eventually closed its land borders to prohibit the entry of individuals from neighbouring countries, Cuba suspended overseas travel, El Salvador closed its airport to passenger flights and Paraguay banned the entry of non-resident foreigners.

Lastly, as seen in ECLAC (2020c), Mexico is a special case as the government limited the number of crossings on its land border and suspended passage for “non-essential” reasons indefinitely, but did not ban flights. This is also the case in Nicaragua, where the government does not appear to have implemented measures such as border closures or entry restrictions.

2. Migration management measures

Some of the migration management measures gathered from the information published on countries’ official websites range from measures related to the documentation process to those aimed at facilitating the return, repatriation and, on occasion, reinsertion of nationals.

With regard to measures relating to the regularization and documentation process, Chile has extended the validity of identity cards issued to foreigners in an effort to safeguard public health. This benefits documented individuals who are already in possession of residence permits. The main difficulty is for those who have yet to submit their application or are awaiting permits.

Meanwhile, actions to facilitate the return of nationals have been taken in Argentina, Chile and Ecuador, where only repatriation flights have been allowed; in Mexico, through a citizen repatriation programme that aims to reintegrate repatriated Mexicans; and in Peru, which passed a resolution that includes guidelines for the granting of economic assistance and the repatriation of nationals abroad. Some countries have established concrete provisions for return, as is the case of El Salvador and Costa Rica, the latter having issued general guidelines to its embassies and consulates as well as for nationals living in China, for example.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of new migration management initiatives have been adopted in several other regions to create mechanisms facilitating regularization or access to legal identity by means of a visa or residence permit. Specifically, Portugal granted temporary residence rights to all migrants and asylum seekers whose applications are in process; France extended the validity of all residence permits for three months in March; Italy gave migrants engaged in agricultural or care work the opportunity to apply for residence permits; and Spain allowed migrants without work permits to be employed as seasonal farm workers.

3. Social protection measures

By and large, Latin America and the Caribbean does not have a history of implementing social protection measures specifically geared to all migrants, although it is widely acknowledged that many of them are experiencing greater difficulties during the pandemic. However, Colombia’s guidelines for the detection, prevention and management of COVID-19 cases among the country’s migrant population (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020) is a landmark document in terms of actions aimed at migrants in the region. While it is likely that other countries have also implemented similar initiatives, none have been published to date.

It is highly recommended that, in the spirit of the priority measures on the protection of all migrants contained in the Montevideo Consensus, the emergency actions implemented by countries to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic should be effectively extended to all migrants, without the conditionalities of residence or regular migration status. In this regard, ECLAC has proposed the provision of an emergency basic income for six months, equivalent to the poverty line, to cover all those who will be living in poverty in 2020. This would entail an additional expenditure of 2.1% of regional GDP. New cash transfers have



been announced and implemented by various countries in the region: the Plurinational State of Bolivia created the *Bono Familia*; Argentina implemented the Emergency Family Income; Brazil adopted an emergency grant for independent or informal workers; and Chile adopted the *Bono de Emergencia COVID-19* for the most vulnerable population groups. However, as mentioned above, there is no evidence that these measures are being extended to all migrants. This would suggest that some migrants are excluded from all emergency social protection measures to supplement income.

D. Recommendations for policy guidance

Social protection benefits, and especially those related to health care, geared towards migrants must be provided unconditionally and universally, including for migrants in an irregular situation, who often do not even appear in the administrative records of public services. In this regard, they must draw upon both the Montevideo Consensus and the ECLAC proposal on advancing towards universal social protection systems.

As established in the Montevideo Consensus, the processes relating to international migration should be dealt with from a long-term perspective, which implies adopting sustainable regulations, policies and agreements that support migration governance. In addition, the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, ratified by an overwhelming majority of the countries in the region, has begun, which promotes a sustainable approach.

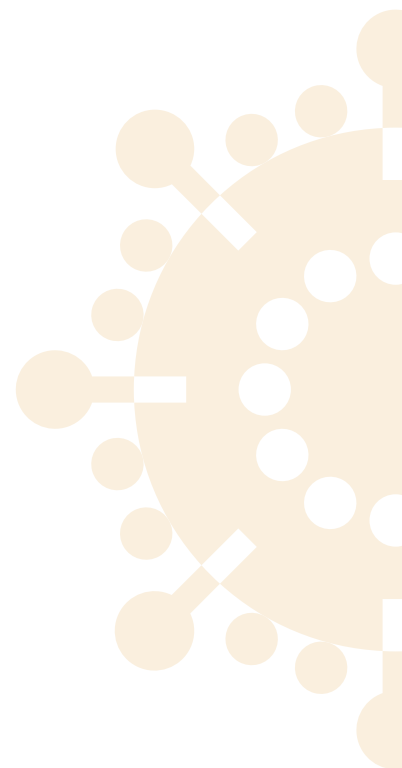
However, it is imperative to adopt and strengthen gender, ethno-racial, generational, territorial and cross-cutting human rights approaches in all initiatives and policies (ECLAC, 2019). This is imperative in the context of the current pandemic —the direct and indirect effects of which are still unknown, as are the measures to deal with them— either through increased social spending or through the implementation of countercyclical initiatives involving some type of public debt. ECLAC affirms the need for measures to increase countries' fiscal space and to create favourable financial conditions through policy proposals for economic recovery with a people-centred approach. In the specific case of actions geared towards migrants, social protection benefits, and especially those related to health care, must be provided unconditionally for the whole population, including for migrants in an irregular situation, who often do not even appear in the administrative records of public services.

Given that the pandemic is a problem that affects the population as a whole and, more particularly, vulnerable populations who are at increased risk before, during and likely after the pandemic, recommendations must be formulated and experiences shared to guide the public policies intended to provide the special protection needed for these populations to exercise their rights. This is important because, historically speaking, social protection systems have not been designed with the migrant population in mind, be it regular or irregular (ECLAC, 2019) and this poses major institutional and coverage challenges, more so in times of pandemic. In this regard, ECLAC (2017) has proposed advancing towards universal social protection systems, seeking to integrate the contributory and non-contributory components, along with labour market regulation and the establishment of care systems.

The perception that migrants are somehow overexposed to the virus and account for most of the cases has given rise to various stereotypes that blame migrants for the spread of infection or claim that they refuse to comply with health regulations or do not understand them. Consequently, migration has now been associated with COVID-19, a misconception often fuelled by the media and by the silence or pointed statements of some political authorities, leading to a rise in nationalist, racist and xenophobic discourse. The confluence of racism and xenophobia is the most serious source of vulnerability affecting migrant populations, and particularly those from relatively less developed countries, who are forced to migrate, have limited resources or belong to certain ethnic or racial groups. The atmosphere of hostility and fear is an obstacle to achieving social inclusion; hence the importance of taking prompt action. Strengthening the commitment to the priority measures of the Montevideo Consensus and other human rights initiatives is a matter of urgency.

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