

Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ

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*Unceded Territory:
Traditional land of the
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Written Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration
regarding Global Forced Migration

Submitted by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada
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Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. While our work began in 1920 in assistance to Mennonite refugees fleeing the former Soviet Union, today MCC supports programming in roughly 60 countries, caring for the lives and futures of uprooted and other vulnerable people; providing water, food and shelter in times of hunger, disaster and conflict, as well as education and income generation opportunities; and working with communities to prevent violence and promote sustainable peace. Last year alone, MCC supported over 300,000 people on the move, including the forcibly displaced. Given our nearly 100 years of experience serving vulnerable populations around the world, including people on the move, through disaster relief, community development, and peacebuilding, MCC welcomes the opportunity to share our experiences and recommendations around global forced migration, and expresses our appreciation for the work of this committee.

Committee members may be more familiar with MCC Canada's work on refugee resettlement, as MCC helped resettle one third of Canada's Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) refugees in 2017 alone. My colleague, Brian Dyck, MCC's Migration and Resettlement Program Coordinator, and President of the Sponsorship Agreement Holder Association, is well known for leading this work and has appeared before this committee in the past. Resettlement work in Canada and Canada's role as a leader in encouraging resettlement globally and strategically is of vital importance. MCC consistently hears from our partners internationally, however, that addressing the root causes of forced migration must be part of a sustainable approach, alongside resettlement.

MCC believes that migration is normal. People have always been on the move and the sharing and exchanges that happen when different people meet is a space of possibility. Migration becomes a concern when people see no choice but to flee. Part of MCC's work internationally involves supporting alternatives for people who are forced to migrate, along with addressing push factors. Because of our international partners and programs, and work with uprooted peoples worldwide, MCC is well-positioned to provide insight into addressing some of the root causes around forced migration.

While MCC works with partners on the theme of migration and disaster response in the Middle East (Syria and Lebanon) and in Africa, along with other areas, MCC's most coordinated regional work around migration currently takes place in Latin America. I recently relocated to Canada after several years of supporting MCC's migration work in this region. I will share several of the key issues push factors causing forced migration, the work of MCC partner organizations in response, and then share several recommendations to the Canadian government that can be also used in other contexts of forced migration.

From the 7 million (and growing) internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Colombia to the increasing number of asylum seekers from Central America in Mexico to the growing numbers of refugees coming from Africa and the Middle East using Latin America as a jumping point to go north, migration impacts almost every aspect of life for the majority of Latin Americans. There are many geographical locations where migrants pass through on their way somewhere else; many local populations themselves face threats of forced migration; and migrants are forcibly returned or deported back to the region. MCC partners with local organizations in many of these contexts, specifically Central America, Mexico and Colombia, who keep us informed of migration trends right as they unfold.

Increasingly, we are hearing reports that migration in the region is forced by hostile environments that are seedbeds for violence. These include: severe socio-economic inequality; illicit economies coupled with corruption and weak/unresponsive institutions; and rising levels of militarization.

According to the Gini coefficient, Latin America is the most unequal region in the world (0.79), especially in access to land. In 2016, Oxfam reported that more than half of the region's productive land is held by the top one percent of the largest farms. This high concentration of land is coupled with a growing economic dependence on extractivism: agro-industries; mineral resources; and hydrocarbons. The increased use of productive land for extractivism has led to a decrease in local food production and access to safe water, factors which encourage migration, especially when combined with threats of violence over control of land and development. While

Colombia holds the record for the highest numbers of IDPs in the world, internal displacement is increasing in Central America and in Mexico. Internal displacement often signals a coming increase in international migration.

This inequality destabilizes the region by contributing to the growth of illegal economies and elites with ties to organized crime and corruption, fueled by illegal mining, human smuggling, and drug trafficking. Even when organized crime is not a direct driver of violence, it may indirectly impact violence by corrupting state institutions and reducing access to security and justice mechanisms, along with other basic services such as health and education, also push factors in migration. High unemployment and exclusion also drive youth gang membership, leading to micro trafficking, extortion and increased urban violence. In turn, migration itself fuels instability: in border regions, the illegal economy around migration has become more profitable than drug trafficking.

The increased militarization of armed and police forces to combat organized crime, combined with the unresponsiveness of state institutions to human rights violations, only exacerbates violence. “Firm hand” (mano dura) security policies have led to extrajudicial killings of young men and a crack down on non-violent protest. Latin America is the most dangerous place in the world to be a human rights and/or environmental defender. In Colombia, armed groups have killed over 190 community leaders, many Indigenous, so far in 2018 alone, as armed actors rush to fill the power vacuum left behind by FARC demobilization. Militarized borders and routes, especially around Mexico’s borders with Guatemala and the United States, contribute to increasing migrant deaths and disappearances, as migrants and asylum seekers take lesser known routes to avoid official detection and end up in the hands of cartels or extreme desert conditions. Civil society groups report the deaths of over 500 people in 2018 alone; thousands more are missing.

Foreign development and economic interventions may also inadvertently cause harm in these complex scenarios. Improvement in macro-economic indicators does not mean that inequality has decreased. Foreign investment does not necessarily help those who are the most vulnerable. Throughout the region, however, MCC works with local partner organizations who seek to address the root issues and resulting violence. The examples I will share represent only a very small sampling of this diverse and creative work.

On the Caribbean coast of Colombia, partner Sembrandopaz accompanies over 40 different displaced and returned farming communities in a reconciliation and human rights project. Divided because of the conflict, Sembrandopaz specifically works to bring youth from these communities together through sport for leadership development and peacebuilding skills such as mediation and non-violent conflict resolution. In a parallel process, community leaders have formed a non-violent reparations and advocacy process to collectively work for their rights to stay on their land and develop alternative economic projects.

In Guatemala, the Pastoral de la Tierra, the social development arm of the Catholic church in the San Marcos area, works with Indigenous communities at risk of displacement due to extractive projects, especially large-scale gold mining. Using permaculture and traditional Indigenous practices, the project brings together groups from different communities to learn from each other and develop alternative economic strategies. At the same time, community leadership and organization is strengthened as the communities come together to advocate for environmental protections and informed and prior consent.

Anti-corruption work in Honduras led by civil society organizations, including the Association for a More Just Society, is working to use evidence-based trackers to monitor government contracts and spending in education and health, as well as training parents in documenting and reporting local level corruption in municipal educational institutions. Through their work, they have seen improvements in the Honduran education system, including an increase in the number of days children spend in the classroom.

Voces Mesoamericanas, located in the southern Mexican border state of Chiapas, is part of a network of organizations, including in Central America, that monitor border violence and document human rights violations inside detention centres. This network also documents internal displacement and can provide early warning signs of areas where conflict may be likely to break out and where migration flows may increase.

In response to these contextual dynamics and migration push factors, Mennonite Central Committee offers the following recommendations to the Canadian government, not only for Latin America, but in all areas where forced migration is taking place:

1. Increased investments in conflict prevention and mediation initiatives.
2. A do no harm lens, to ensure that Canadian development projects do not exacerbate conflicts, inequality or food insecurity.
3. Partnerships with diverse actors, with an emphasis on local organizations.
4. Continued leadership in the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact for Refugees.

We encourage increased investments in conflict prevention and mediation initiatives, especially through local projects and organizations that support human rights defenders, local documentation, integration, and peacebuilding initiatives across sectors and faiths. Effective conflict analysis can help predict patterns of violence and windows of vulnerability; identify those people with the means and motivation to instigate violence, those most at risk of being pulled into violence, and those uniquely placed to prevent violence from spreading; and determine what interventions might curtail violence before it occurs. Mediation places an important role in ensuring that the migration population does not contribute to increased instability in the region and also builds long-term community. In all these situations, consulting with local organization who know their context will provide valuable information. When mapping drivers of conflict, it is also crucial to identify the strengths and capacities that already exist at a local level (even in fragile contexts) and can be leveraged to build sustainable peace.

We also encourage the government to integrate a conflict sensitivity lens (i.e. “do no harm”) across all humanitarian and development programming to ensure government, NGO, and private sector actions do not inadvertently exacerbate conflict dynamics or exacerbate socio-economic inequalities. Building upon the peacebuilding policies and practices of the department’s humanitarian and development programming, Canada’s foreign affairs agenda should focus on resourcing non-military means of addressing insecurity around the globe. Indeed, we believe Canada has a valuable role to play in promoting and implementing policies that build sustainable peace. MCC encourages Canada to increase diplomatic efforts around conflict prevention and strengthen non-violent alternatives to use of force.

MCC encourages Canada to engage in partnerships with diverse actors (i.e. civil society, NGOs, research groups, academics, practitioners, youth networks, ecumenical groups etc.) at all stages of program planning and implementation, with a particular focus on supporting grassroots partners, enhancing local solidarity networks, and promoting mechanisms for cooperation between actors on different levels. Especially in situations of protracted displacement, such as Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria, provide more opportunities for funding, recognizing the important role that local organizations play in meeting the needs of IDPs and other forced migrants. Recognize the burden placed on already strained state and regional institutions by new migrant flows and increase aid commitments.

MCC encourages greater cooperation and work between the IRCC and Global Affairs to build both department’s capacities for responding creatively to the full array of complex international issues facing our world today, especially in the development-humanitarian-migration nexus. We encourage Canada to continue to show leadership on the implementation of both the Global Compact on Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees, bringing in a root causes, mediation, and prevention lens to these global agreements. We encourage Canada to continue leading in supporting refugee resettlement at home and globally, such as the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative through the UNHCR, and work with the UNHCR in general on resettlement policy.

Canada is known for our collaborative approach and has influence within global bodies and among decision makers; we encourage Canada to continue to play a leadership role, including addressing the root causes of forced migration worldwide. Mennonite Central Committee thanks the Committee for this opportunity to share.

