REALITY AND PERSPECTIVES OF HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION MECHANISMS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPANISH COOPERATION

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Acronyms

AECID	Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation
CAN	Andean Community
CAPRADE	Andean Committee for the Prevention and Attention of Disasters
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CBPF	Country-based Pooled Funds
CDEMA	Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CEPREDENAC	Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America and the Dominican Republic
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CIDI	Inter-american Council for Integral Development
CMRE	Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs
CRID	Regional Disaster Information Center
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
DSD-OAS	Department of Sustainable Development (OAS)
ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
GIFMM	Inter-Agency Group on Mixed Migration Flows
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
HTF–IDRM	High-Level Task Force for Integrated Disaster Risk Management
IACNDR	Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IECAH	Institute of Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Action
IICA	Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture
INDM	Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation
INSARAG	International Search and Rescue Advisory Group
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MecReg-SICA	Regional Mechanism for Humanitarian Assistance in the Event of Disasters of the Central American Integration System
MERCOSUR	Southern Common Market
MIAH	Meeting of the International Mechanisms for Humanitarian Assistance
MIRPS	Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OAH	Humanitarian Action Office
OAS	Organisation of American States
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
PROSUR	Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America
R4V	Regional Inter-agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela
REDHUM	Humanitarian Information Network for Latin America and the Caribbean
REDLAC	Regional Group on Risks, Emergencies and Disasters for Latin America and the Caribbean
RMAGIR	Meeting of Ministers and High Authorities on Integral Disaster Risk Management
RMRP	Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan
RMWG	Working Group on Refugees and Migrants
ROLAC	Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean
SICA	Central American Integration System
UNASUR	Union of South American Nations
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, sanitation and higiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

Executive Summary

Humanitarian needs in Latin America and the Caribbean have increased significantly in recent years, in a scenario in which the region is not only affected by disasters caused by natural hazards, but also by urban violence, armed conflicts and large-scale migratory flows. Given this scenario, the region has implemented a significant number of humanitarian coordination mechanisms promoted by actors such as OCHA and regional integration initiatives, among others. However, it is striking that many of these mechanisms have failed to consolidate in a region that needs them to address the emergencies and humanitarian crises that affect it.

Seeking to recommend Spanish cooperation on ways to improve humanitarian coordination in the region, this report analyses the current situation of the mechanisms already in place and explores the trends and prospects for their evolution. In general terms, the report identifies that, in the face of significant changes in the humanitarian situation, OCHA has lost importance in coordination, while UNHCR and IOM have gained prominence as a result of the response to the migration crisis in Venezuela. Furthermore, most of the mechanisms proposed in multilateral fora have been left to the mercy of the vagaries of the regional political panorama, as changes in government tend to have a strong impact on the participation of states in such mechanisms. In turn, states continue to opt for bilateral humanitarian coordination, and few of them have the capacity or determination to assume a leadership role in this area. Finally, civil society organisations and NGOs are slowly making inroads into coordination mechanisms, and there is now an opportunity to make further progress on this challenge.

Recommendations for Spanish cooperation include leading advocacy initiatives in favour of regional humanitarian coordination; promoting localisation and deepening more horizontal relations with the region; supporting the emergence, consolidation, and coordination between humanitarian civil society fora; strengthening humanitarian training processes at the regional level; promoting the incorporation of the triple nexus; and establishing multi-year funds.

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I. Introduction

International humanitarian action has undergone significant changes in recent decades. The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), held in 2016, marked some progress in defining common criteria for action and, although many of the agreed proposals are being implemented very slowly, the entirety of the so-called "humanitarian system" is adapting to new situations and improving its mechanisms for predicting, anticipating, coordinating, and responding to crises. The Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region has remained far from the dominant trends in the humanitarian sector, its role in the WHS was very limited, and while international cooperation flows at the global level have increased over the last ten years, those destined for the region have decreased comparatively. For example, while the region received an 8.1 per cent share of official development assistance in 2011, by 2020, this figure had fallen to a 6.6 per cent (OECD, 2022). Only the Venezuelan migration crisis and, to a lesser extent, the situation in Haiti and some large-scale disasters such as Eta and Iota have prompted humanitarian responses of a significant scale. Even the serious humanitarian situation in Colombia has become invisible, with humanitarian funding being reduced to worrying levels. Nevertheless, there is some consensus among the interviewees that, despite the states' financial difficulties in the region, the regional component of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic was positive.

However, according to OCHA's Global Humanitarian Overview 2022, the last two years have seen a sharp increase in needs in Latin America and the Caribbean (OCHA, 2021). Five years ago, Haiti was the only one with a Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) in the region, while now there are six: Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras and Venezuela. In Haiti, for example, a 43% of the population is in need of humanitarian aid. The UN foresees that humanitarian needs in the region will multiply in the coming years due to multiple factors, including the effects of climatic migrations or as a cause of violence, disasters caused by natural or socio-natural phenomena, growing inequality and social setbacks, and the effects of the pandemic generated by Covid-19.

In this context, despite the implementation of various humanitarian coordination mechanisms in Latin America and the Caribbean over time, except for the Venezuelan migration crisis, these mechanisms are not contributing to the strengthening of humanitarian action in the region. That is obviously important at the regional or sub-regional level. But it is also important for international cooperation and humanitarian action actors seeking to increase the effectiveness and impact of their work by supporting coordination initiatives. Therefore, given that the LAC region is traditionally a priority for Spanish cooperation, both official and non-governmental, analysing trends in this area is relevant at this moment in time.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse the current situation of humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the LAC region, exploring trends and perspectives in its evolution and proposing some possible initiatives for the Spanish cooperation agencies' support, specifically the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID by its acronym in Spanish) and its Humanitarian Action Office (OAH by its acronym in Spanish). As this is a first study on the subject, its scope is limited and it does not delve into some aspects such as the role of donors in coordination, the in-depth analysis of humanitarian funding in the region, among others, which would merit further study.

The study is divided into five sections. The first section briefly outlines the methodology used for the research; the second section provides a concise summary of the context under which regional humanitarian coordination has been developed; the third section presents a mapping of the most relevant formal humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the region; the fourth one analyses trends and future prospects of existing mechanisms and coordination dynamics; and the fifth section suggests a series of recommendations for Spanish cooperation in this field.

II. Methodology

In conducting this study, we have applied a primarily qualitative research method. That included a literature review regarding the state of humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the LAC region, and 17 semi-structured interviews.

The literature review consisted on consulting academic articles, reports from international agencies, records of meetings of the main humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the region, among others. Issues such as the current situation of the main humanitarian coordination mechanisms in LAC, the role of cooperating countries in promoting these spaces or the role played by civil society organisations, among others, were tackled.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve into the experiences, understand the perceptions and gather the recommendations of a wide range of actors involved in humanitarian coordination in the region, including people within the UN system, members of NGOs, aid agencies with a presence in LAC and staff of national risk management agencies. A semi-structured script was used for these interviews, but space was given for interviewees to emphasise the elements they considered most relevant, while trying to avoid inducing or biasing responses.

III. Context

Latin America and the Caribbean has suffered from the humanitarian consequences of numerous natural disasters that chronically affect them due to its high exposure to certain hazards resulting from its geographic location, their extreme vulnerability to these, and the lack of capacities to face them. The region, as a whole, is among the most prone to hurricanes, typhoons, tropical storms and earthquakes. According to OCHA data, between 2000 and 2019, 152 million people in the region were affected by 1,205 disasters. Of these, a 45% were floods, and a 27% were storms (OCHA, 2019).

As a result, for decades, disaster response issues have formed an important part of national public policies and those of the different regional and sub-regional organisations. The region has also been very active in the area of disaster risk reduction (DRR) and risk management mechanisms, and has played a somewhat leading role in the discussions of the Hyogo (2005) and Sendai (2015) Frameworks for Action (HPG, 2016), with most countries in the region having fairly developed mechanisms in this area.

The recurrence of certain disasters in the region has led to the mobilisation of significant resources since the emergence of international humanitarian assistance mechanisms. Perhaps the key milestone was Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998, which has been followed by major international responses to disasters in the Caribbean, Central America and South America. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti was the other milestone in the humanitarian response to the region. The response to Covid-19 should also be mentioned. However, other chronic disasters, such as droughts in the so-called Central American Dry Corridor, or in certain regions of South America, have generated little international response. The numerous "small" extensive-type disasters that are frequent in the region and that, in aggregate, generate large impacts have neither produced significant international responses.

Regarding armed conflicts or complex crises, the region began receiving significant international humanitarian aid after the wars in Central America in the 1980s (Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador) and, to a lesser extent, after the following post-war reconstruction situations. Subsequently, only the prolonged conflict in Colombia and the complex situation in Haiti generated international humanitarian responses on a bigger scale (HPG, 2016).

In this brief chronological overview, it should be mentioned that in the 21st century, migratory phenomena derived from violence, the effects of the climate crisis, extreme poverty and political, institutional and social instability have led to major humanitarian crises, first in the Central American region and Mexico, and more recently in Venezuela, which have also generated relevant international actions [1].

However, in global terms, in 2021, the region received only the 2.64% of international humanitarian funding distributed through the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) (OCHA, 2021). For some donors, such as Spanish cooperation, LAC remains a priority area, but other countries have gradually abandoned or reduced their work in the region from a humanitarian perspective.

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[1] Surprisingly, there is little work on the history and evolution of humanitarian action in the LAC region. Neither is there much academic interest in the subject. The 2016 compilation of the Humanitarian Policy Group with IECAH (HPG, 2016) contains an interesting analysis. More recently, the journal, Revista Internacional de Cooperación y Desarrollo (International Journal of Cooperation and Development) has published a Dossier "Humanitarianism in Latin America: Past and Present" (Gómez & Lucatello, 2020).

IV. The main humanitarian coordination mechanisms in Latin America and The Caribbean

This section summarises 14 of the most relevant formal humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the region. Most of these mechanisms emerged in the last decade of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, although new mechanisms have also surged in recent years resulting from the humanitarian crises due to migration and forced displacement in the region and the emergence of new regional integration initiatives.

4.1. OCHA-led Mechanisms

Since its creation, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has put in place a number of different mechanisms in the region that have had various ups and downs. These are summarised below.

4.1.1. Meeting of International Mechanisms for Humanitarian Assistance (MIAH)

The Meeting of International Mechanisms for Humanitarian Assistance (MIAH) is an initiative promoted by ROLAC, OCHA's office in Latin America and the Caribbean, in order to promote humanitarian dialogue among regional actors. Its central objective is to facilitate the exchange of information and good practices among participants in order to strengthen the joint planning and facilitation of humanitarian access in the region.

The first meeting of the MIAH took place in Mexico in 2008 and was the result of a Mexican and Canadian initiative (MRECIC, 2019). Since then, this mechanism has held meetings on average every year in different countries of the LAC region. The last meeting took place in Argentina in 2019, before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The chairmanship of this mechanism rotates among the participating countries, which in turn host the meeting.

4.1.2. Regional Group on Risks, Emergencies and Disasters for Latin America and the Caribbean (REDLAC)

REDLAC was created in 2004 in Panama to strengthen cooperation in disaster preparedness, reduction, and response in the LAC region (Gómez, 2009). Currently, more than 40 humanitarian organisations, including international cooperation agencies, organisations of the United Nations system, and civil society organisations, as well as some donors, participate in this space. OCHA-ROLAC is in charge of coordinating the group, which meets regularly every month and extraordinarily when required. REDLAC has ten sectors: CASH, Education, Food Security, Gender, Logistics, Nutrition, Protection, Shelter Coordination and Management, WASH, and Housing. It counts with an intersectoral coordination board.

In general terms, both OCHA's mandate and its efforts to promote humanitarian coordination through these mechanisms are valued in the region. Both REDLAC and MIAH have made important contributions to bring together different actors in the humanitarian sector and facilitate the exchange of experiences at the regional level, despite the fact that MIAH has lost effect since 2019, as will be analysed later.

4.2. Mechanisms belonging to multilateral integration projects

The LAC region has promoted various regional and sub-regional integration initiatives that, in some cases, have incorporated references or structures linked to humanitarian issues, especially in disaster response.

4.2.1. OAS - Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR)

The General Assembly of the Organisation of American States (OAS) created the IACNDR in 1999 through resolution AG/RES. 1682 XXIX-O/99. The IACNDR serves as the main forum in the Inter-American system to discuss and agree on strategies to reduce risks associated with natural disasters [2] (ISDR, 2006). Such a committee has a twofold objective. On the one hand, to propose policies and strategies to guide member state decisions through sustainable development measures. On the other hand, it has the mission to design coordination modes for regional response to natural disasters in order to make the deployment of national and international assistance more efficient.

The IACNDR initiative arises from the agreement within the OAS to understand security from a multidimensional perspective, where transnational crime, terrorism, extreme poverty, and disasters, among others, are considered security threats (Olaya, Godoy, & Mejía, 2007).

The committee is composed of the Chair of the OAS Permanent Council, the OAS Assistant Secretary-General, the President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the General Director of the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), the Secretary-General of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History, the General Director of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), the Executive Secretary of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CIDI) and is chaired by the Secretary-General of the OAS.

The IACNDR has three working groups:

1) Assessment and development of vulnerability indicators.
2) Natural Disaster Reduction Financing
3) Emergency Preparedness and Response

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[2] We use the term "natural disasters" because that is how it is used in the agency's documents. However, we believe that this term should no longer be used, as disasters are not natural: the hazards that cause them can be.

4.2.2. OEA - Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM)

The INDM is an initiative of the OAS Department of Sustainable Development, which created this network in 2007 in order to provide mechanisms to exchange knowledge and experiences in disaster risk management. Additionally, it provides mechanisms to coordinate efforts between the different components of the Inter-American system and other state and international organisations, financial institutions, and donors. It also has among its functions to follow up and support the implementation of IACNDR decisions and coordinate the implementation of the Inter-American Strategic Plan for Vulnerability Reduction, Risk Management and Disaster Response Policies (Department of Sustainable Development - OAS, 2006).

The INDM has a five-member Board of Directors, selected among the members of the IACNDR. It is co-chaired by the DSD/OAS's Chief of the Natural Disasters Division and a Member State representative, who is elected by the OAS's members.

Each OAS member state designates a state institution as a focal point. This focal point represents all state institutions, private and civil society organisations at the network. In turn, CEPREDENAC, CDEMA, CAPRADE and CRID play the role of regional focal points. Finally, the INDM has a Technical Secretariat, in charge of implementing the decisions of the Board, and an Advisory Group, which includes specialists from the IACNDR and donors and is responsible for providing programmatic advice.

4.2.3. UNASUR HTF - IDRM

Five of UNASUR's Sectoral Councils have, among their functions, actions directly linked to risk management and action in emergencies and humanitarian aid: Defence, Health, Social Development, Infrastructure and Planning, and Economy and Finance (UNASUR, 2015, p. 26).

In order to mainstream humanitarian coordination, in 2013, in Paramaribo, and through Resolution 4/2013, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (CMRE) of UNASUR created the High-Level Working Group for Integrated Disaster Risk Management (HTF– IDRM). The main function of this group is to contribute to risk management in member countries through coordinating policies and strategies focused on prevention, risk reduction, preparedness, response, and reconstruction. Therefore, this space serves to coordinate mutual cooperation between States and to exchange experiences.

This committee is made up by representatives of the various state risk management entities and civil protection agencies of each nation. The chair of the committee rotates among the members.

4.2.4. CARICOM - Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA)

Formerly called CDERA, the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) was created in 1991 by CARICOM to coordinate risk management and humanitarian response to disasters in the Caribbean (CDEMA, 2022).

Its main tasks involve mobilising and coordinating disaster relief; mitigating the immediate consequences of disasters affecting participating countries; providing disaster relief packages to support post-disaster recovery efforts; providing information on disasters in the region to international actors and non-governmental organisations; strengthening the response mechanisms of member states; and promoting the adoption of risk reduction practices and policies.

The agency is ruled by three main mechanisms:

1) The Council: Made up of the heads of government of the member countries or those delegated by them. It is responsible for defining the agency's main policies.
2) The Technical Advisory Committee: Composed by the National Disaster Coordinators and representatives of regional organisations specialised in areas such as technology, meteorology and seismology. It is in charge of the technical and programmatic matters of the agency.
3) The Coordination Unit: It is headed by the executive director and deals with long-term mitigation issues in four areas: education, research and information; finance and administration; preparedness and response; and mitigation and research.

4.2.5. CAN - Andean Committee for the Prevention and Attention of Disasters (CAPRADE)

CAPRADE was created in 2002 by the Andean Community of Nations (CAN) members to tackle natural and anthropogenic disasters in the Andean region. Its main objective is to contribute to reducing the risk and impact of these disasters through coordinating strategies, plans and policies among member countries (CAPRADE, n.d.).

Its tasks include coordinating efforts to integrate the concept of risk management into development plans; fostering research and regional exchange of knowledge on risk management; promoting the articulation of common systems for monitoring and assessing disaster attention and mitigation actions, among others.

Its organizational structure is made up of representatives of the risk management entities of each of the member countries, the foreign ministries, or the entities that fulfil the same role in each State. CAPRADE's presidency is rotating and is exercised by the country that is currently holding the presidency of the Andean Presidential Council. In turn, the General Secretariat of the CAN acts as the technical secretariat of CAPRADE.

4.2.6. SICA - Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America and the Dominican Republic (CEPREDENAC)

In 1993, the Central American Integration System (SICA) members created CEPREDENAC under the figure of a Specialised Secretariat to promote coordination in disaster response in Central America and the Caribbean. Its creation was finally ratified by all SICA members in 1995.

The main mandate of CEPREDENAC is to facilitate regional integration in the recording and systematisation of information on disaster prevention, mitigation, response, impact and recovery. In addition, it promotes coordination with other sub-regional, regional and international mechanisms in this area (CEPREDENAC, 2022).

CEPREDENAC's structure has a Council of Representatives, which in turn has a Presidency. The Council is the highest decision-making body. The decisions of the Council are implemented by the Executive Secretariat, which is also responsible for administrative and financial matters. Finally, CEPREDENAC also has National Commissions and Technical Commissions, which arise according to the moment's requirements (SICA, 2022).

4.2.7. MERCOSUR – Meeting of Ministers and High Authorities on Integral Disaster Risk Management (RMAGIR)

Los The member countries of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) created the RMAGIR to replace the former REHU (Specialised Meeting for Socio-natural Disaster Risk Reduction, Civil Defence, Civil Protection and Humanitarian Assistance) (MERCOSUR, 2019, p. 4).

The objective of RMAGIR is to give advice to member countries on high-level disaster risk management measures and policies. Its tasks include setting sub-regional priorities on integrated disaster risk management, proposing supranational policies, and promoting the exchange of information, experiences and innovation.

MERCOSUR has been creating several bodies within the RMAGIR. In 2016, it approved the creation of the Technical Commission of Hydrometeorological Service. In 2017 the Technical Secretariat was created, which is in charge of implementing the decisions of RMAGIR.

4.2.8. PROSUR - Working Group for the thematic area Disaster Risk Management and Resilient Development

One of the most recent humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the region is the Working Group for the thematic area Disaster Risk Management and Resilient Development, created by the member countries of the Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America, PROSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru) in 2019. Its objective is to foster the collaboration of sectors and institutions responsible for the development, operation, sustainability and resilience of services and critical infrastructures to tackle disaster risk issues.

So far, the Working Group has formed four sub-groups:

1) Research, development, innovation, and entrepreneurship for resilience: Aims to promote spaces dedicated to research, development, innovation and entrepreneurship in disaster risk management.
2) Resilient Critical Infrastructure: Seeks to articulate the different institutions of the member countries in order to collaborate in the area of critical infrastructures facing the risk of disasters.
3) Resilience and Cross Border Risk Reduction: Focuses on identifying border areas in which there is potential to develop local coordination mechanisms to implement joint risk management and humanitarian actions.
4) Mutual Assistance: Seeks to strengthen existing mechanisms to coordinate humanitarian assistance among member countries.

The presidency of the group is pro tempore, and rotates among PROSUR member countries (PROSUR, 2021a).

4.2.9. CELAC - Climate Adaptation and Integrated Disaster Response Fund

During Mexico's pro tempore presidency in 2021, the country raised the need to create a fund for adaptation and response to natural disasters within the framework of CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States). This initiative was approved at the 22nd Meeting of Foreign Ministers held in Argentina in January 2022. The fund's resources will be assigned to countries needing humanitarian assistance after a disaster, and a coordination mechanism will be created between the national authorities of CELAC members for this purpose.

The fund will be administered by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and will receive contributions from CELAC members and extra-regional actors. Initially, the fund will start with a total of USD 3.7 million (ISDR, 2022).

The incorporation of humanitarian coordination elements within regional and sub-regional integration projects shows that the different countries in the region find this desirable. However, the fact that a country participates in three or four of these regional projects creates risks of duplication of functions and attrition of agencies involved in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. In many cases, as discussed in the next section, several of these mechanisms have become irrelevant due to regional political dynamics.

4.3. Ad hoc mechanisms on migration and refugee issues

The Venezuelan migration crisis has led to the creation of various ad hoc mechanisms that have rapidly gained recognition at the regional level. The response to other crises of this type, and especially the migration in Central America and Mexico, has, so far, not generated a similar response.

4.3.1. Quito Process

The Quito Process is an intergovernmental initiative, basically political in nature, which emerged in 2018 to coordinate actions to address the Venezuelan migration crisis. Initially, eleven countries participated, but to date, it is made up of Paraguay, Panama, Mexico, Guyana, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Chile, Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Argentina. With its creation, it is expected to strengthen coordination between states, articulating efforts with international organisations, and channelling international cooperation (Quito Process, 2022).

Currently, it covers ten working areas: asylum, counselling centres, Covid-19, education, gender equality, socio-economic insertion, child and adolescent protection, family reunification, human trafficking, and HIV-AIDS.

Each one of these areas has a lead country and the support of a specialised UN agency in each case. In addition, the pro tempore presidency of the Quito Process rotates among its members.

4.3.2. Regional Inter-agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V)

In 2018, the UN Secretary-General designated IOM and UNHCR as the lead coordinators of the response to the Venezuelan refugee and migration crisis.

lThat led to the creation of the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants in Venezuela (R4V), which serves as a coordination space for 17 countries in the LAC region. It currently has 192 partners across the region, including civil society organisations, national and international NGOs, UN agencies, among others (R4V, 2022).

The tool for coordinating the efforts of partner organisations is the "Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan" (RMRP), from which coordination responsibilities are derived and common objectives are established.

The platform is integrated by eight national and sub-regional platforms: Brazil, Caribbean, Central America and Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Southern Cone. These platforms are usually called GTRM, although, in the case of Colombia, it is called GIFMM. It is also divided into nine thematic sectors: WASH, Education, Food Security, Health, Humanitarian Transport, Integration, Nutrition, Protection, and Shelter. Each of the regional platforms has a UNHCR focal point and another one from IOM, and the sectors have, as their point of contact, representatives of organisations specialised in each of them.

4.3.3. Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS)

The MIRPS is an initiative launched in 2017 and consolidated in 2019 to implement the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework for Central America. It involves Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and El Salvador. The MIRPS aims to coordinate shared actions to protect people displaced by violence in the region, to mobilise support and raise funds from donors, and support participating states in fulfilling their commitments in this field (MIRPS, 2021a).

Currently, the MIRPS has working groups on reception, processing, and admission of persons in need of protection; internal displacement; local governance; and labour market access and vocational training (MIRPS, 2021b). The pro tempore presidency rotates among member countries.

The scope of the MIRPS focuses on the following specific areas (UNHCR, 2022):

1) Building national asylum systems.
2) Establishment of reception mechanisms in countries of transit.
3) Improving conditions for return in countries of origin.
4) Addressing structural causes of forced displacement and violence.
5) Expansion of third country solutions for people from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras in need of protection.
6) Partnerships to improve effectiveness and holism of response.
7) Support to other regional coordination mechanisms.

The creation of R4V and the Quito Process shows that there has been a clear recognition by both state actors and civil society organisations of the need to address the migration crisis in Venezuela in a joint manner.

The process of setting up such mechanisms has not been free of controversy, which will be addressed in the following section, but it signifies an important advance in coordination at the regional level. While R4V initially had a strong humanitarian focus, led by UNHCR and IOM, there is now a greater balance with development and durable solutions. The arrival on the scene of the MIRPS represents an incipient effort to assign greater weight to the issue of migration and forced displacement in Central America by the region's governments.

4.4. Other coordination mechanisms

Currently, civil society organisations play a relevant role in humanitarian coordination at the regional level and actively participate in the mechanisms set up or led by OCHA and other UN agencies (UNHCR and IOM in the case of R4V). However, there is no regional or sub-regional mechanism led by civil society organisations to take the lead in humanitarian coordination in the LAC region. Instead, there are various initiatives of a more or less formal nature underway which cover different issues and which emerge under very specific contexts linked to sub-regional realities.

Currently, there is the LAC RMD Coalition, coordinated by Save the Children and Plan International, and composed of 22 organisations, including Acción contra el Hambre, the Norwegian Refugee Council, OXFAM, Médicos del Mundo, among others. This coalition aims to promote state compliance in humanitarian preparedness and response for the protection of refugees, migrants and displaced persons. They do this by mobilising common messages on priority protection issues and strengthening exchange and joint actions among coalition members (LAC RMD Coalition, 2022).

In addition, both Colombia and Venezuela have Humanitarian Forums that bring together several local and international NGOs, and in Peru and Nicaragua, efforts in the same direction are taking place. These national fora have initiated efforts, supported by ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies), to strengthen their mutual links and exchange good practices, but such spaces are essentially still informal.

Finally, we should mention the coordinating role of humanitarian efforts by some global donor bodies and, in particular, the European Commission's DG ECHO. Some of DG ECHO's regional programming mechanisms incorporate allusions to coordination, and in the case of some countries, such as Colombia, this has been very relevant. The case of US humanitarian aid, through various instruments, could be considered along the same lines [3].

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[3] It is beyond the scope of this report to analyse these efforts from outside the region.

V. Trends in coordination and future perspectives

Given the existence of a multiplicity of coordination mechanisms and the significant changes in humanitarian needs in the region, this section analyses the observed trends and future perspectives of the above-mentioned humanitarian coordination mechanisms. The current mechanisms' circumstances, challenges, and prospects described below are largely based on the outcome of the interviews conducted with the experts interviewed for this study.

5.1 The challenge of adapting to a new humanitarian scene

One of the main challenges for humanitarian coordination in Latin America and the Caribbean has been adapting to the new humanitarian realities imposed by climate change, the persistence of chronic crises, and the aggravation of certain complex situations, including violent conflict.

The great majority of mechanisms put in place in the region give particular emphasis to the response to disasters produced by natural phenomena that have traditionally affected the different countries. For example, in Central America and the Caribbean, CEPREDENAC and CDEMA have achieved a significant level of preparedness to respond to the mid-year hurricane period. There is also sufficient experience on coordinating humanitarian response in case of earthquakes.

However, several of those interviewed for this study stated that the humanitarian coordination mechanisms currently in place in the region still lack the capacity to respond to increasingly common phenomena and emergencies due to climate change. For example, Argentina has recently faced fires of unprecedented magnitude due to the drought experienced by the region in recent years. According to some people who have participated in the response to this emergency, Argentina did not turn to multilateral humanitarian coordination mechanisms such as RMAGIR because they did not feel that they had the expertise and capacity to provide Argentina with adequate tools to address the humanitarian crisis caused by the fires. In other cases, countries do not make international appeals for assistance or use regional coordination mechanisms because they believe it constitutes an acknowledgement of their weakness.

This also happens with complex emergencies that are not necessarily the result of disasters, but rather of armed violence and economic crises in the region, or the sum of several of these variables. For example, humanitarian needs generated by violent phenomena such as the fight between gangs and organised crime in Central America, or the armed conflict in Colombia, do not tend to be addressed from a regional or sub-regional humanitarian coordination perspective. In these cases, mechanisms such as REDLAC have been useful for sharing information that can facilitate the actions of humanitarian civil society organisations and allow them to deploy humanitarian assistance in a timelier manner. Interviewees, however, suggested that REDLAC has been able to pay more attention to long-term crises and to formulate more forceful responses to address them, as in the case of the ongoing humanitarian needs in Haiti.

Other regional and sub-regional mechanisms, such as those forming part of integration initiatives, lack the competencies to address humanitarian challenges in protecting communities affected by such violence. According to some interviewees, this is partly due to the fact that governments in the region consider such issues to fall into a more politically sensitive category.

Something similar has happened with the growing migration crisis that the region is facing. The incessant and growing migratory flows from Central America and the Caribbean to Mexico and the United States, now added to the exodus from Venezuela, have led to a situation that has overwhelmed any capacity of the coordination mechanisms existing a few years ago. In the absence of such spaces, and with particular emphasis on migration from Venezuela, as well as on the Central American crisis, three major regional coordination initiatives have emerged since 2017 to fill the existing gaps in a subcontinent that was not used to deal with such a magnitude of cross-border flows.

The first initiative is the Quito Process, which emerged as a political space for dialogue in response to the migration crisis generated by the difficult conditions in Venezuela, and which has gradually added countries and created technical working groups that have successfully promoted joint coordination initiatives for the response. However, due to the forum's more political than humanitarian nature, there has been little space to deepen coordination at higher levels on issues such as regularisation; and any significant political change in member countries may weaken this mechanism in the medium term.

The second initiative is R4V. This platform, led by UNHCR and IOM, has succesfully brought together over 192 organisations of various kinds from 17 countries to coordinate the response to the crisis with a focus on coherence and consistency, which in itself is a commendable result. It now publishes an annual Refugee and Migrant Regional Response Plan (RMRP), which updates key data collected in each country, highlights key challenges and developments by country and thematic area, and defines the annual response strategy. This strategy has enabled international cooperation resources to be channelled in a more efficient and organised manner. That is a major step forward in terms of humanitarian coordination by key actors assisting refugee and migrant populations in the region.

Since its launch, R4V has successfully built national and sub-regional platforms that aim to link up with existing humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Despite this, it has had difficulties articulating with the existing humanitarian coordination architecture in the case of Colombia. Colombia is a country which, due to its internal armed conflict, has a robust Humanitarian Country Team led by OCHA, and the arrival of R4V (called GIFMM by its Spanish acronym, Inter-Agency Group on Mixed Migration Flows, in Colombia) increased the risk of duplication of efforts and lack of coordination at the national level. According to persons from the humanitarian sector in Colombia, including donors, members of international organisations, and members of civil society, coordination between the two spaces through what has been termed the back-to-back system, has helped to mutually leverage the meeting spaces of the participating organisations, which has mitigated burnout and duplication of efforts (Rey, Abellán, & Gómez, 2022).

At the local level, local GIFMMs have also made significant progress in linking up with existing bodies through the unified command posts.

Despite this, some interviewees for this study noted that the existence of the GIFMM has made coordination more complex in certain circumstances. In particular, it has left some gaps in the definition and ownership of response in cases where, for example, refugees and migrants are simultaneously victims of conflict or are affected by disasters. With the GIFMM only being established in 2018, more time is needed to harmonise the existing coordination spaces in a scenario as complex as Colombia's, which faces a new humanitarian situation not seen before in its history.

Finally, the third initiative is the MIRPS, which, since its creation in 2017, has shown significant advances in the case of migration in Central America and Mexico. For example, it has opened spaces for discussion among member countries in order to share experiences on strengthening the processes of reception, processing and admission of persons in need of protection. In addition, it has conducted capacity-building and technical knowledge-building activities on migration and protection for several local governments in member countries. The MIRPS has also shown interest in opening channels of dialogue with civil society and has held consultations and working sessions to build a Regional Dialogue Mechanism among MIRPS Civil Society Organisations (MIRPS, 2021b).

5.2. The declining importance of OCHA compared to UNHCR and IOM

As new humanitarian challenges increase, the role of OCHA, the UN agency in charge of humanitarian coordination has, according to most sources, been diminishing in the region. In recent decades, OCHA-ROLAC had stood out as one of the main humanitarian actors in the region in promoting coordination, both between states and between international and local NGOs, as well as UN agencies. For example, in 2003, ROLAC launched REDLAC, which brings together more than 40 entities, including UNICEF, WFP, IOM, OXFAM and Plan International, with the participation of guests such as AECID, ECHO, and USAID. Initially, REDLAC was born with a greater emphasis on disaster preparedness and response but gradually became involved in aspects related to prevention as well (Weiss, 2008, p. 10).

REDLAC, according to most interviewees for this study, has been and continues to be a fundamental mechanism for sharing humanitarian information across the region. The implementation of REDLAC has allowed regional aspects of humanitarian response to disasters to gain greater attention from the global headquarters of member organisations. It has also served as a space to adjust the cluster system and to rethink humanitarian action from a Latin American perspective.

Apart from REDLAC, ROLAC also played a fundamental role in the creation of REDHUM (acronym for Red Humanitaria) in 2007, an inter-agency humanitarian website that was supported by Spanish and Swiss cooperation, among others, although it has now lost relevance and has been de facto replaced by Humanitarian response. In general terms, those interviewed with whom REDHUM was discussed positively valued this space, as it enabled the proliferation of guides, good practices, and reports in Spanish, at a time when humanitarian debates mainly took place in other languages and therefore excluded Latin America from these spaces.

In order to foster greater coordination among states in the LAC region, OCHA also promoted the creation of the MIAH meeting, which intended to bring together the different civil protection and civil defence institutions in the region for annual discussions to exchange good practices. Some interviewees highlighted that such a mechanism succeeded in achieving relevant coordination objectives. For example, they noted that, through this forum, some countries had the opportunity to exchange knowledge on risk management and incorporate innovations in humanitarian response operations. The MIAH also led to the arrangement of joint exercises, among others.

Despite the significant role that OCHA has played in the region, its role has decreased in recent years, especially since the internal reforms and budget reductions since 2017 (Oakford, 2017). This situation has led OCHA to cut back its operations in countries such as Colombia, to stop focusing with such determination on promoting inter-state regional coordination spaces such as the MIAH meeting, and to limit its participation in other spaces such as CEPREDENAC or CDEMA. In addition, UN resources for humanitarian affairs in the region tend to fluctuate against a greater budget allocation due to the emergence of challenging and more mediatic humanitarian situations, as in the case of Syria and Ukraine. Although most of those interviewed recognise OCHA's positive response to the Covid-19 pandemic, to serious crises such as those resulting from hurricanes Eta and Iota, and in opening humanitarian spaces in Central American migration and in the internal Venezuelan crisis, there is also a general consensus that a certain setback has taken place.

The most significant example of OCHA's diminished role in its ability to coordinate humanitarian issues in the region came in 2018 when the UN Secretary-General gave UNHCR and IOM preference over OCHA in coordinating the R4V platform, created to provide a cohesive response to the Venezuelan migration crisis. This platform has been one of the centrepieces for coordinating the response among 192 partners from 17 countries.

At sub-regional, national and local levels, R4V has established links with governments to channel funds and structures for coordinated responses among actors in the field. Central to this has been the development of the RMRP, the annual plan that has defined individual responsibilities for common objectives in the different local RMWGs. This has enabled R4V to be recognised as the central platform for humanitarian coordination on the issue of Venezuelan migration. In general terms, the perception of those interviewed is that, in a very short time, R4V has established itself as a robust mechanism that can even serve as an example for other regions of the world. It is especially noteworthy that, in this space, UNHCR and IOM have managed to achieve a degree of harmony that, although some interviewees say it took a long time, is rarely seen when responding to other migration crises in different latitudes. In addition, local RMWGs have also achieved positive levels of articulation with local authorities.

However, as mentioned above, some interviewees highlighted that one of the problems with the emergence of R4V in the scene is the possible duplication and confusion of tasks with REDLAC, ROLAC, and the Humanitarian Country Teams coordinated by OCHA. In this regard, it was repeatedly mentioned that the Secretary General's decision to delegate leadership of the response to the Venezuelan migration crisis to UNHCR and IOM caused significant friction with OCHA, which has been relegated to a secondary plane on this issue, despite the fact that it already had significant experience in coordination in the region, while UNHCR and IOM had none.

There is a widespread feeling that the decision to exclude OCHA from leadership on this issue was a missed opportunity to use the humanitarian country teams (HCTs) already established in the region, which have historically worked relatively well.

This decline of OCHA, exacerbated by the fact that UNHCR and IOM have become more prominent, has led many actors involved in humanitarian coordination in the region to see OCHA as no longer playing a central role in responding to humanitarian emergencies; but rather as being merely on the side-lines. This perception has practical consequences, such as civil protection agencies losing interest in the coordination mechanisms promoted by OCHA. An example is the decline of MIAH meetings, which met for the last time in Argentina in 2019. Many interviewees appreciated the role that the MIAH meeting played since 2008 but felt that such a space had already lost its relevance when the pandemic started, and any immediate possibility of holding face-to-face meetings was blocked. Discussions are currently ongoing to revive this mechanism, especially now that mobility restrictions due to the pandemic are disappearing. However, few actors involved are seeking to take specific steps in this direction.

5.3. Mechanisms for integration initiatives in the swing of regional politics

La Most of the humanitarian coordination mechanisms analysed in this study are part of broader regional integration initiatives. In contrast to Europe, where the EU has established itself as the major continental integration project, there is an extensive proliferation of regional and sub-regional integration projects in the LAC region, which, in turn, are significantly more limited in scope than the EU. That has led to the proliferation of inter-governmental humanitarian coordination initiatives in the region, which often overlap with each other. For example, a country such as Bolivia participates in the mechanisms of the CAN, the OAS, and UNASUR.

However, unlike the European Union, most regional integration initiatives in Latin America experience moments of strength and decline in very short periods, strongly determined by the agitated political back-and-forth in the region and other causes such as relatively low levels of interdependence (Pelfini, 2013). Such is the case of UNASUR, created in 2008 and launched in 2011, which at the time brought together all the countries of South America, but by 2022 only Venezuela, Bolivia, Guyana and Suriname remain active. Since 2018, Colombia, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Uruguay and Paraguay, all with governments that politically opposed the Maduro regime in Venezuela and considered that UNASUR was now responding to the Venezuelan agenda, have suspended their participation or withdrawn from the organisation. Given this scenario, UNASUR's High-Level Task Force for Integrated Disaster Risk Management, created in 2013, has lost any relevance it might once have had.

After leaving UNASUR, the vast majority of countries joined the regional integration project PROSUR, which since 2019 has created the Working Group for the thematic area of Disaster Risk Management and Resilient Development. This group has so far shown little progress. That same year it approved its sectoral plan, and there was only a virtual meeting in mid-2021, during Colombia's pro tempore presidency, in which just Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Peru implemented the four subgroups considered by the working group (PROSUR, 2021b). The leftward shift of countries such as Argentina, Peru and Chile in the last three years is likely to weaken the operational capacity of this forum.

According to the vast majority of people interviewed for this study, this situation is similar to those faced by several other humanitarian coordination mechanisms attached to regional and sub-regional integration projects. For example, CAPRADE, created in 2002 and part of the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), was more relevant several years ago because of a significant investment by European cooperation. However, its regional importance and weight in humanitarian coordination has been decreasing in line with the slight decline of the CAN itself. This decline is the result of several reasons, mainly the prevalence of the particular interests of each government in power over the sub-regional integration process (Blanco, 2014).

At the same time, MERCOSUR has immersed itself into a deep crisis, evidenced by the lack of sub-regional coordination in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Bono, 2021). Gradually, the integration project's progress has diluted due to the group's confrontations and tensions; caused by some of its members' quest for trade diversification. In this context, the Meeting of Ministers and High Authorities for Integral Disaster Risk Management has not met for more than a year now, and some people interviewed for this study, who belong to the civil protection institutions of these countries, stated that there is currently little will to use such a mechanism for humanitarian coordination.

While regional integration projects in South America have not led to the establishment of sufficiently robust humanitarian coordination mechanisms, the story is relatively different in Central America and the Caribbean. In these sub-regions, CEPREDENAC, as part of the Central American Integration System, and CDEMA, of the Caribbean Community, have been most prominent. Members of international organisations and from international cooperation agencies interviewed for this study emphasised that both mechanisms have achieved greater relevance in humanitarian coordination and disaster risk management.

For example, according to several people interviewed, CEPREDENAC played an important coordination role responding to the emergency caused by hurricanes Eta and Iota at the end of 2020. Through this space, the Regional Mechanism for Humanitarian Assistance in the Event of Disasters of the Central American Integration System (MecReg-SICA) was activated to trigger coordinated actions in prevention, mitigation, response and recovery. This measure made it possible to coordinate, with great agility, several member and associated states, which were able to mobilise humanitarian assistance and rescue teams to hard-hit countries such as Honduras (SICA, 2020).

According to the interviewees, the main reason CEPREDENAC and CDEMA are not strongly affected by political changes in Central America and the Caribbean is that, unlike South America, this sub-region deals with an annual cycle of natural phenomena that usually impacts several countries at the same time. That has led, for example, to an intensification of work prior to the hurricane season and a greater appreciation of the need to share updated and timely information on natural phenomena that impact at the same time several members of these sub-regional integration initiatives. That has enabled the consolidation of a more stable bureaucracy within the committees or technical secretariats, which in turn generates greater stability within these mechanisms when faced against regional political pulses.

Finally, the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction, created by the OAS General Assembly in 1999, has managed to remain relatively active, although with limited scope. An important success has been facilitating greater coordination of institutions that are part of the Inter-American system, such as the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Pan American Health Organization (OAS, 2014).

However, several powerful countries in the region, such as Mexico and Argentina, have questioned the OAS' role due to the US' preponderant role inside the organisation. Both countries have tried in recent years to shift the coordination of regional affairs in favour of CELAC, a forum that had lost relevance with the temporary shift to the right of several nations, including Argentina, in the last decade (Camhaji, 2021). This integration space, however, still faces the great challenge of moving from rhetoric to action in terms of humanitarian coordination and disaster risk management. Mexico and Argentina have already called for an intensification of CELAC's work in this field, but it will take time to see how these intentions materialise.

Generally, these examples show that humanitarian coordination mechanisms attached to larger integration projects tend to subordinate to the region's changing political back-and-forth. Apart from CDEMA and CEPREDENAC, other coordination mechanisms such as CAN's CAPRADE or MERCOSUR's RMAGIR have suffered strong impacts as member countries leave these fora or as changes of administrations cease to prioritise such spaces.

5.4. The prevalence of bilateral cooperation

The previous section shows that the region currently has an abundance of regional and sub-regional mechanisms to facilitate inter-state coordination to deal with humanitarian situations that go beyond sharing information and promoting common practices, but also deepen efforts to handle emergencies jointly. However, such mechanisms are often weak due to the constant political changes in the region. In any case, as other authors have argued, bilateral aid continues to be the preferred mechanism for Latin American governments to support each other in this type of situations (Gómez & Lucatello, 2020, p. 4).

The preference of states in the region for bilateral humanitarian assistance mechanisms is a fact that this study has confirmed through several interviews with high-level members of civilian protection or defence institutions and international organisations. For example, of the 94 regional missions of Argentina's White Helmets Commission between 2003 and 2013, the 61 per cent were the result of bilateral agreements with aid recipient states. In contrast, the White Helmets Commission has made greater use of multilateral mechanisms for its extra-regional missions. In the same period, only 34 per cent of the 26 extra-regional missions were bilateral, while the remaining 66 per cent consisted of multilateral missions (Colombo et al. 2014).

According to those interviewed for this study, states in the region tend to prefer bilateral mechanisms for coordinating aid for several reasons. First, they offer greater agility to quickly mobilise resources and personnel to areas where disasters have occurred. For example, as Olaya, Godoy and Mejía (2007, p. 6) note, instruments created within regional and sub-regional institutions have advanced at a slower pace than shared problems.

Given this scenario, and especially given the complexity of reaching consensus on emerging threats, states are opting to act unilaterally or, at most, bilaterally.

Secondly, some interviewees stated that several countries see bilateral coordination on humanitarian issues as an opportunity to strengthen friendly ties with their strategic partners responding to geopolitical calculations. That, moreover, is something on which the literature on this topic coincides (Aguilar, 2012, p. 96). One of the most prominent cases is Mexico's humanitarian aid directed to the region. According to Prado and Velázquez (2013, p. 126), Mexico's humanitarian aid has been essentially bilateral and has mainly been directed towards the countries with the greatest geostrategic value in the region. For example, Mexico offered eight million dollars to Haiti, and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the 'Mexico Alliance for Haiti' initiative to build infrastructure in the Caribbean country after the 2010 earthquake. Honduras, Cuba and Guatemala have also been significant recipients of humanitarian aid in response to Mexico's international agenda priorities.

Brazil is another country that has stood out for its capital investment in bilateral South-South humanitarian cooperation, following geopolitical interests and seeking to open up a space for itself as a regional power. However, this is changing due to the period of political instability during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency.

There is also the case of Cuba as an actor that provides humanitarian aid, well known in the region for its medical missions in countries with no clear ideological affinity. According to Cocco Beltrame (2016), although Cuban international solidarity responds to a profound conception of solidarity between peoples, it is not free of foreign policy calculations. For example, although the humanitarian assistance provided by Cuba has not necessarily resulted in short-term economic returns, it has strengthened ties of solidarity that turned into support for Cuba in multilateral organisations. Such is the case of the work carried out by Cuba in several African countries and, especially, in the aid provided after the earthquakes in Chile, Peru, Nicaragua and El Salvador between the 1960s and 1980s (Cocco Beltrame, 2016, p. 118).

According to Ayllón (2015), this commitment to South-South cooperation in the humanitarian field, as in other spheres, is also strongly affected by the political reality at the domestic level. In this sense, the commitment to bilateral coordination offers more malleable structures for states to offer humanitarian aid depending on the political situation and the foreign policy interests of the government in power. Such variability, especially in a region with such high political upheaval, favours much more short-term bilateral action over a medium- or long-term commitment to humanitarian coordination through multilateral mechanisms. In any case, these actions show a degree of confusion, which is quite widespread in the region, between mere emergency aid and assistance based on humanitarian principles and respect for conventional international frameworks in this area. Following the WHS agreements on this issue and the defence of principle-based humanitarianism, it would be desirable to stimulate the debate on this issue in the region.

5.5. Regional Leadership Perspectives for Humanitarian Coordination

To understand how to counter the trend of bilateral coordination and advocate for multilaterally coordinated humanitarian action in the region, this study explored through interviews which countries are able and intend to take a leading role in promoting and strengthening the coordination mechanisms observed above. The results of this enquiry yielded varied and contradictory versions regarding the role some states can play, depending on their diplomatic strength, regional interests, and accumulated experience in humanitarian matters.

One country repeatedly mentioned was Argentina, which, given its role as a middle-income country with significant influence in South America and, especially in some sub-regional integration initiatives, can assume a more leading role. The creation of the White Helmets Commission almost 30 years ago has given Argentina extensive experience in the deployment of humanitarian operations, both in the region and globally; an element which, according to some interviewees, also provides the country with solid tools useful to foster greater coordination of humanitarian issues in the region. Additionally, the recent creation of the Agency for International Cooperation and White Helmets, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship, can be seen as the country's attempt assign more weight to international cooperation in humanitarian matters. Finally, during the pro tempore presidency of CELAC in 2021, Argentina has given some importance to the issues of coordination and disaster risk management. However, others have pointed out that, despite this accumulated experience, Argentina's foreign policy, especially humanitarian policy, tends to vary greatly depending on the government in office.

In the case of Brazil, the other country with significant weight in South America, which in the past showed interest in playing a regional leadership role and in promoting multilateralism to face shared challenges with neighbouring countries (Soares de Lima & Hirst, 2006), there is no evidence that it is currently interested in assuming such a role again. According to the interviewees, that is also a case where foreign policy shifts strongly depend on the government in power. Current trends, which seem to favour Brazil's isolationism from regional problems, limit any short-term perspective of Brazil as an actor promoting multilateral coordination on humanitarian issues.

As mentioned above, Mexico has made a significant commitment to South-South cooperation in Central America, North America, and the Caribbean; and seeks to play a leading role in the region. Furthermore, the current government, as in the case of Argentina, has aimed to strengthen CELAC as a forum to coordinate regional issues, including humanitarian coordination and disaster risk management. However, according to some interviewees, the Mexican government has recently excessively turned inwards, especially with regard to chronic humanitarian challenges in Central America and Mexico itself, such as migration and urban violence.

Finally, we have the cases of countries with less regional weight at the political level, but with certain comparative advantages in humanitarian matters. Such is the example of Panama, a country that has established itself as an operational hub of great regional significance; since the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot was established there, as well as different agencies relevant to regional humanitarian coordination.

In this sense, Panama's role as a Hub can be further developed by serving as a centre for training in humanitarian coordination for personnel from other countries in the LAC region and by consolidating information exchange mechanisms in risk management and disaster response.

Apart from Panama, there is also the case of Colombia, a nation that, due to its long experience of armed conflict and humanitarian needs, has managed to consolidate a significant knowledge of humanitarian coordination and its articulation with other elements of development, human rights, and peacebuilding. The Colombian state has developed institutions capable of providing reparation and humanitarian assistance to millions of the armed conflict's victims; and some interviewees highly value its institutional framework and experience in risk management and civil defence. In addition, the Humanitarian Country Team and clusters in Colombia are seen as positive examples for the region, and the back-to-back system now also offers the opportunity to serve as a laboratory for good practices in humanitarian coordination in highly complex scenarios. However, beyond the experience gained over decades, some interviewees questioned Colombia's capacity and intention to export this know-how.

Some interviewees highlighted that a common feature in all these countries that hinders the emergence and consolidation of long-term regional leadership in humanitarian issues is the difficulty of consolidating a professionalised public service that remains after governments change. The government changes in the great majority of countries in the region mean a rupture of processes due to the replacement of a large part of the personnel hired by the state, which implies that people trained during the previous years leave their positions to make room for new personnel, generally selected based on political rather than technical criteria (Weiss, 2008, p. 23). This trend has a particular impact on middle- and high-ranking state officials, given that the positioning in international affairs usually responds more to the individual interests and sensibilities of the person holding the post than to a long-term foreign policy strategy.

5.6. The role of civil society organizations in regional coordination

As mentioned above, the region lacks formal regional civil society mechanisms for humanitarian coordination. For example, in the case of the Southern Cone, civil society organisations have a certain strength and solid articulation at the local level but lack mechanisms for sub-regional coordination. According to some interviewees, this is due to several reasons. Firstly, the Southern Cone countries have stronger governments, whose civil protection institutions and ministries are better situated to play a leading role in coordination with neighbouring countries. Secondly, as a sub-region that has not traditionally faced phenomena that affect several countries simultaneously, as is the case in Central America, there are fewer incentives to create permanent mechanisms to foster dialogue and coordination of civil society organisations at the sub-regional level. However, it is worth noting that the increased risks caused by droughts and fires on the triple border between Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina could significantly alter these incentives, which could begin to foster more communication between civil society organisations in the Southern Cone.

Central America and northern South America have shown significant progress in this area. The LAC RMD Coalition has shown evidence of the interest of civil society organisations in sending coordinated messages for the attention of the refugee, migrant and displaced population and creating communication channels with other relevant humanitarian actors.

For example, in 2021, it led a High-Level Meeting with Civil Society in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants, and in 2022 it opened a dialogue with the pro tempore presidency and the Technical Secretariat of the Quito Process to generate opportunities for collaboration.

Moreover, ICVA has made a significant commitment to foster sub-regional coordination spaces. Some advances are the joint meetings and events between the Humanitarian Forums in Colombia and Venezuela, which have resulted in the creation of directorates of the different organisations in both countries, a joint database, and even WhatsApp chats to coordinate activities and operations in the field. Although these advances are still essentially informal, it is expected that with the formation of the Humanitarian Forums in Peru and Nicaragua, the possibilities of structuring regional mechanisms for humanitarian coordination led by civil society will expand.

In all cases, several interviewees emphasised that the coordination spaces in which civil society organisations participate are mainly occupied by international organisations, such as the LAC RMD Coalition. The concept of localisation continues to be a matter of debate; and the lack of agreement has not allowed this concept to be applied in greater depth in the region. Paradoxically, according to sources consulted, those currently leading this debate in the region are international organisations. That has meant that many local organisations have been overshadowed in humanitarian coordination activities. For example, the leading organisations in the regional clusters have their headquarters in Brussels, London, or New York. However, there are also smaller-scale cases in the region, such as Red Clamor (which articulates the pastoral work carried out by Catholic Church organisations on migration, refugee, and human trafficking issues) or Coalición por Venezuela (which brings together Venezuelan civil society organisations) that show strong local leadership.

Overall, although there are no robust and formal mechanisms for inter-agency humanitarian coordination at the regional or sub-regional level of civil society organisations (apart from migration and refugee issues), this study shows that there are possibilities and efforts in this direction. These civil society organisations recognise the value of coordination and are interested in addressing complex debates within the sector, such as localisation and the triple nexus.

VI. Recommendations for Spanish cooperation

In general terms, those interviewed for this study considered that Spanish cooperation currently plays, and can play, a key role in promoting and facilitating humanitarian coordination at the regional level. Despite being a modest humanitarian donor compared to US or European Commission cooperation, Spain has a significantly important role in the LAC region due to close historical and cultural ties and relevant experience in these tasks. In this sense, even if it does not have large amounts available, it does have diplomatic strength and "soft power" significant enough to be considered one of the most influential donors in the region. Below are a series of recommendations for Spanish cooperation as a whole:

1) **Leading advocacy initiatives in favour of regional humanitarian coordination:** Due to Spain's diplomatic weight in the LAC region, Spanish cooperation can assume a leadership role in advocacy in international fora in the United Nations and the European Union for the promotion of humanitarian coordination. This implies actions to re-strengthen OCHA in the region, urging governments to redouble their commitment to existing mechanisms and advocating for principle-based humanitarian approaches, as was reaffirmed at the World Humanitarian Summit.

2) **Promoting localisation and deepening more horizontal relations with the region:** The LAC region, where a large part of the countries are middle-income, actively seeks to establish more horizontal relations in which international donors assume the role of partners rather than donors. Without denying that the region still requires international cooperation resources, in recent years, some traditional donors have reduced or altered their role as they have perceived the economic progress achieved at the regional level. In this sense, there is a window of opportunity for Spanish cooperation to contribute building a leadership role for actors in the region, promoting coordination mechanisms, and facilitating spaces for the exchange of knowledge and good practices in a horizontal manner with other regions.

3) **Supporting the emergence, consolidation, and coordination between civil society humanitarian fora:** The civil society, and particularly NGOs, can and should play a more prominent role in humanitarian coordination at the regional level. The emergence and proliferation of NGO humanitarian fora in various countries offer the opportunity to consolidate national spaces with communicating vessels at the regional level. Currently, both diplomatic and financial support from Spanish cooperation can contribute to open new fora in countries with growing humanitarian needs. Clearly, the role of Spanish humanitarian NGOs and, more generally, of those international humanitarian NGOs with a presence in Spain and the LAC region is fundamental in this regard.

4) Strengthening humanitarian training processes at the regional level: Although training on disaster response or even DRR has been developed in the region, training on legal aspects, humanitarian principles, quality and accountability initiatives, Grand Bargain or coordination is practically non-existent.

There are several challenges that hinder the dissemination of knowledge on humanitarian action and coordination in the region, such as the lack of programmes on this subject offered by academic centres, the difficulty in accessing documents that are not translated into Spanish, among others. A commitment from the Spanish cooperation to strengthen training processes in the region, including technical efforts or the distribution of guides translated into Spanish, would help to consolidate a critical mass in this area and generate greater knowledge regarding the new humanitarian challenges at the regional level.

5) **Promoting the appropriate incorporation of the triple nexus approach:** The new humanitarian landscape in the LAC region shows the need to adopt new tools to address chronic challenges beyond disasters caused by natural phenomena, such as urban violence, armed conflict, and migration due to political and economic causes. The triple nexus approach can play a relevant role in unifying cooperation efforts in humanitarian, development and peace issues that generally occur in a disjointed manner and in broadening the range of actors involved in attending to the region's humanitarian needs.

6) **Establishing multi-annual funds:** One of the challenges pointed out by those interviewed to give continuity to the efforts to strengthen existing mechanisms is the difficulty of accessing medium- and long-term funds, as projects tend to have a duration of one or a maximum of two years. In this sense, Spanish cooperation could consider incorporating more flexible criteria to allow investment in longer-term projects.

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