

FIELD BRIEF: NECOCLÍ, COLOMBIA

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Necoclí, Colombia, 2023, Photo by Author

Migration in the Americas Project is a policy and research collective of the **University of Wisconsin-Madison** focused on assessing migration policy and developing ways to reduce risk and harm to make movement and residence safer for migrants throughout the Western Hemisphere.



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BRIEF FROM THE FIELD

I first traveled to Necoclí, Colombia in March 2023 as a member of an envoy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison to assess the situation on the ground for migrants in transit and the humanitarian support they receive.



I met with numerous humanitarian groups and university researchers to better understand the context and how researchers and policymakers might better address the situation. I recently returned from my second visit to the region in September 2023 and noted many similarities, yet also important changes. In this report, I'll discuss the persistent issues and changing dynamics of migration in the Colombian department of Antioquia, in the region of Urabá.

For readers new to the conversation, the region of Urabá, Colombia is a major transit zone for migrants moving north to seek residence in other countries of Central and North America. The region has approximately 550,000 residents. In 2023, it will also temporarily house over 500,000 people who are estimated to pass through (Rueda, 2023; Yates & Pappier, 2023). For many of these people, the village of Necoclí, Colombia will be one of the last stops before entering the Darién Gap region of Panama.

About twenty nongovernmental agencies and community-based groups work together in Necoclí to provide protection and prevention measures to people passing through.

In March, the groups were documenting anywhere between 400-1000 daily exits on boats from Necoclí to the Darién Gap region. Numbers dipped in May and June after the end of the Title 42 policies in what experts describe as a time when migrants were choosing to “wait and see” what the end of those policies would mean for their lives.



The **Grupo Interagencial Sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos** (GIFMM), a data and coordination collective amongst humanitarian groups in the region, reports that daily boat trips in Necoclí are now back up to the same levels that they were before Title 42’s end (GIFMM, 2023b). They suggest that anywhere between 1000-1500 people cross the bay daily. They also report that in comparison to July 2022, there has been a 67% increase in the number of minors between the ages of 6-17 making this journey and that they are seeing significant numbers of single women and women traveling with minors, on the beach in Necoclí and boarding boats (GIFMM, 2023b).

October 2023 reports suggest that the numbers of daily boat rides leaving Necoclí may be responding to efforts to increase regular migration pathways, especially for Venezuelan communities, but it is too early to tell if this is a long term trend or merely a lower point in the influxes and decreases of migration throughout the Americas (GIFMM, 2023a).

Basic Needs

I was impressed during both of my visits with the complex organizing and collaborative efforts to provide for migrants' protection, shelter, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and food and nutrition needs. In addition to providing services, humanitarian groups provide information about how to protect themselves and prevent harm. There are informative placards and banners at key locations near the boat docks and beaches. Most groups like the IOM, the Red Cross, HIAS, and UNICEF at work there also share important information on QR codes that can be saved and opened later so individuals have access to locations of medical assistance and basic subsistence stations along the journey. The organizations also offer WhatsApp phone numbers with 24-hour attendees that migrants can call or text at any point along the journey for information and assistance.

Even with the concerted efforts to address the needs of those in transit, there are significant challenges. Access to safe lodging in Necoclí remains a challenge, as those who do not have sufficient financial resources must set up camp and sleep on the beach, increasing their individual vulnerability to violence, theft, and other crimes. The humanitarian workers I spoke with expressed the desire to set up organized shelter, but efforts to do so had been negated by political officials who believed such efforts might encourage more people to transit through Urabá.

Food and clean water also remain challenges. Clean water is transported into the beach area of Necoclí, but when the large water containers run out, people must wait for the water truck to come again. Food is also provided by municipal partners and churches, but humanitarian groups regularly report that malnutrition is a pressing problem, especially for pregnant women and children.

Health Challenges

The difficulties of the journey also mean significant health and wellness concerns. People come to the medical stations for insect and animal bites, lesions, fractures, in addition to the infections common in the area including dengue, malaria, influenza and Covid. Headaches, respiratory issues, and dental pain are commonly reported symptoms. Those in transit also seek treatment for chronic diseases including hypertension, diabetes, and HIV. Medical staff services also report alarming cases of sexual violence, malnutrition in pregnant women and children, and patients with severe depression, trauma, and suicide ideation. Workers in the health sector also spoke about the challenges of treatment, including insufficient access to rapid tests for common illnesses, access to materials and staff necessary for treatment, and insufficient monitoring of emergent tropical infections. To be clear, the organized efforts of agencies and offices at work in Necoclí is impressive, but the needs continue to surpass what the system can adequately address.



Economic Changes

Anytime there is a significant influx of people to a new place, there will be economic changes. Perhaps one of the most dramatic aspects of changes to the region have been the complicated and ever-shifting economic dynamics emerging in Necoclí and the region of Urabá (Turkewitz, 2023). Walking up and down the beach where boats dock to pick people up and take them across the bay to Capurganá or Acandí, sellers line the road, ready with wares marketed as necessary goods for crossing the Darién Gap. Infant sized rubber boots, life preservers, and even what is billed as “snake repellent” are all available to those with means to pay. But these sellers are just the tip of iceberg in understanding how migration creates economies. Criminal organizations started to get in the migration business of the region in concerted ways around 2021, and reports suggest that migrant smuggling is a multi-billion dollar industry in many countries throughout the Western Hemisphere (Forero, 2023; Jordan, 2022). Criminal organizations are central actors in the system of human movement: they control tickets on boats, who stays in which shelters and hotels, and—on the other side of the bay of Urabá—which routes migrants might take to get through the jungle. The volume of people moving through the region has driven up hotel prices, so locals now rent out their regular homes in Necoclí and live elsewhere, and it has propelled a flurry of new construction, including supposedly a new airport (Turkewitz, 2023).

Technological Infusion

Technology is now a primary element that shapes the migration experience in Necoclí and beyond. It is rare to see a person in transit without a cell phone in their hand or a plastic protector hung around their neck to keep the phone protected from water. Charging stations and hotspots at humanitarian aid stations ensure that people have enough battery for the next leg of the journey, and they also provide migrants a moment to connect with their loved ones. The affordances of digital technologies in migration crisis contexts extend beyond the facilitation of intimate connectivities. Those in transit forward WhatsApp audio messages with instructions to others in route, use QR codes for information about upcoming shelters and humanitarian aid stations, and photograph found bodies in jungle spaces to help officials locate the deceased, and families recover their loved ones. Humanitarian organizations at work in Necoclí have adapted to the infusion of technology in the migration experience by offering essential information that can be accessible with QR codes, WhatsApp phone numbers that they can text and talk to real people regarding their issues and questions, and digital maps with information about aid stations. Technology also facilitates collaboration and coordination amongst humanitarian groups. While in the field we observed the extent that humanitarian workers use WhatsApp groups, audio messages, and phone calls to share information and respond to time-sensitive issues. We also observed the way humanitarian workers' ability to respond to migration crises now involves participating in virtual meetings with collaborators elsewhere to share information, and well as coordinate and expand efforts.

Digital technologies also facilitate the monitoring, deception, and violent exploitation of displaced people. Registrations on webpages and apps—increasingly necessary to access regular immigration pathways—potentially create records for future monitoring and tracking. Those with basic information literacy skills are disadvantaged as technology becomes a primary filter for access to regular migration programs.

Digital technology is also central to the experience of misinformation, violence, and extortion. Tik Tok and WhatsApp groups are rife with information that, if followed, might lead migrants to precarious contexts. And bad actors use Google Translate to communicate “dinero, dinero, dinero,” in different languages, forcing migrants to pass over whatever cash they have.

Conclusion

We will continue to summarize our observations and post updates to the dynamics and trends we see while in the various contexts of migration crisis that the Migration in the Americas Project is working in.

The **Migration in the Americas Project** is focused on analyzing migration policy and developing ways to reduce risk to make movement and residence safer for migrants throughout the Western Hemisphere. We will continue to assess the implementation of these and other options for regular migration and share information as it becomes available.

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