



**Searching for Missing Migrants  
in Central and North America:**  
*Five Good Practices of Civil Society Organizations*

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# **Searching for Missing Migrants in Central and North America:** *Five Good Practices of Civil Society Organizations*





- The disappearance of a person in the context of migration has multiple profoundly negative impacts on the family and generates economic, psychological, legal and administrative needs.
- Given that hardly any official processes are in place to search for missing migrants and that those that exist are not entirely effective or accessible, the support and accompaniment provided by civil society organizations to families during the search process can be extremely helpful.
- Families of missing migrants should have the opportunity to participate significantly in all efforts related to the search for their loved ones.
- States urgently need to address the needs of families of missing migrants, guaranteeing their right of access to information, justice and reparation.
- This briefing highlights five good practices for the accompaniment of families of missing migrants during their search for their loved ones, developed by civil society organizations in Central and North America, and provides recommendations for all actors involved in supporting families of missing migrants.



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# INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of persons leave their homes seeking a better future, which has become virtually unattainable in their countries of origin. Economic hardship, lack of access to education and employment, structural violence, natural disasters, and political instability have driven people from around the world, but mainly from Central America and Mexico, to seek a new life in the United States of America.

Migrants who transit through Central America and Mexico often experience marginalization and vulnerability and, in the most tragic cases, do not survive the migration journey. Every year, hundreds of persons perish on their journeys across deserts, rivers, or remote areas on different migration routes in Central and North America. No one knows exactly how many migrants have disappeared or died in these regions. However, the records of the Missing Migrants Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) show that between 2014 and 2020, more than 3,400 women, men, boys, girls, and adolescents lost their lives while attempting to cross the border between Mexico and the United States, and close to 850 persons died while migrating through Central America. However, given the considerable challenge of collecting these data, the figures are only a minimum estimate of the actual number of lives lost during migration.

The disappearance of a person in the context of migration has profound emotional, social, economic, and legal impacts on the family. When a migrant ceases to communicate with his or her family, the families engage in a long search to find out the whereabouts of their loved ones. During the search and identification processes, they frequently encounter various legal and bureaucratic obstacles, navigating through a confusing and complex system that is usually inaccessible to most families of missing migrants. Given that hardly any governmental services are in place to guide and support families of missing migrants, families take on the search process themselves and, in many cases, are accompanied by civil society organizations that have filled the vacuum left by States.



## METHODOLOGY

This briefing highlights five good practices for the accompaniment of families of missing migrants during their search for their loved ones. The practices were developed by three civil society organizations in Central and North America: the Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico (SJM-M), the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law (Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho - FJEDD) based in Mexico and in several Central American countries, and the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial - ECAP) of Guatemala.

The organizations were chosen by mapping the active civil society organizations in the region that provide accompaniment services to families of missing migrants. The organizations were selected based on three criteria: 1) Implementation of specific search protocols; 2) the extent to which the search protocols consider the needs of families; and 3) the scope of the accompaniment services and social links with families.

In January 2021, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from each selected organization. Each organization appointed the persons to be interviewed: SJM-M and ECAP appointed the heads of their accompaniment programs for families of missing migrants. FJEDD appointed the head of the accompaniment programme in Honduras and two representatives from the headquarters in Mexico. During the interviews with the representatives from the organizations, five good practices were identified relating to the accompaniment of families during the search for their relatives gone missing in the context of migration.

These practices were selected due to their effectiveness in addressing the needs of families and their usefulness in managing the search processes. The objective of highlighting these practices is to recognize them as guidelines to be recommended to other organizations accompanying families during their search for missing migrants.

### GOOD PRACTICES TO ACCOMPANY FAMILIES DURING THEIR SEARCH FOR MISSING MIGRANTS:



A comprehensive psychosocial approach that responds to the needs of families



Open communication channels with families



Assessing the organizational capacity to support families



Links with committees of relatives of missing migrants



Seeking to strengthen families as social actors

# THE ROLE OF THE FAMILIES OF MISSING MIGRANTS

Since adopting the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in December 2018, 164 States have committed to “save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants” within the framework of Objective 8, and to “identify those who have died or gone missing, and to facilitate communication with affected families”. To this end, a priority task is to “establish coordination channels at a transnational level to facilitate the identification and the provision of information to families” (United Nations, 2019). However, to date, States have taken relatively few institutional actions relating to these commitments. In this context, mainly the families of missing migrants themselves, together with civil society organizations, have advanced the search processes.

Families of missing migrants should have the opportunity to meaningfully participate in all actions related to their relatives' search, for two main reasons. Firstly, because the uncertainty regarding the fate and whereabouts of a loved one – the so-called “unresolved loss” or “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 2017) – has profoundly negative impacts on the families of missing persons. On the one hand, there are the psychological effects derived from the loss. For example, Robin Reineke, founder of the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, an organization involved in the search for and forensic identification of missing migrants in Arizona, United States, explained the following regarding her experience working with families of missing migrants in Guatemala:

“ I was struck by the difference between those whose loved ones had been identified and those who were still waiting. Even with the knowledge that the whole group had been lost in the desert, and that some had come home in coffins, the families of the missing were distraught – sickened by the condition of not knowing. You cannot grieve without a body, without certainty that the person is gone.” (University of Arizona, 2013)



On the other hand, the disappearance of a person generates economic, psychological, legal, and administrative needs in the families left behind (International Committee of the Red Cross - ICRC, 2015). Testimonies from relatives of missing persons collected by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (2013) show these effects:

“ The impact of the disappearance of our daughter cannot be easily described. Every night we think ‘where is she, what has become of her’, we have insomnia, at work we are unable to concentrate on what we have to do, there is constant anxiety as well as physical illnesses, but that doesn’t stop us in our fight”.

Secondly, because, according to the interviewed civil society organizations, families are those who have more and better information about the missing person. For example, if the birth date used by the missing person is different from the official birth date, or if the person uses a name that is different from their legal name. Both situations are associated with the context of irregular migration.

The interviewed civil society organizations consider the needs of the families and enable them to play an active role in the systematic (and, in many cases, personalized) search of their relatives. In this regard, Judith Erazo, Coordinator of ECAP’s Migration with Rights Programme, stated the following:

“ We believe that the phenomenon of missing persons is an important aspect to address with families. We are social psychologists; we are aware and know that loss and uncertainty cause great suffering”.

Despite their pain, the families wish to actively participate in the search – for example, by establishing contact with the relevant authorities or proposing search strategies – overcoming the limitations that their socioeconomic situation may entail. Thus, working together, families and organizations have developed comprehensive and effective processes to search for missing migrants.

And finally, open and transparent communication may help respond to the psychological needs of families, even in those cases where the search is unsuccessful. For example, according to the interviewed organizations, families wish to be updated regularly – even daily – on the search process. When this process is designed considering the needs of families and maintaining open communication channels, usually families are satisfied with the search process, even in those cases where their loved one is not found. Leslie Poblano, Coordinator for Psycho-Legal Assistance at SJM-M, said:

“ The responses of families are: thank you for all you have done because you told me about [the search], because I saw what you were doing, step by step, and I understand that sometimes [finding them] does not depend on you”.

## TEXTBOX 1:

### Families of missing migrants: searching for answers, the impact of the loss and recommendations to improve institutional responses to their needs

Between April 2019 and March 2021, IOM conducted a research project<sup>1</sup> to document the experiences of families searching for relatives who have gone missing during migration journeys. The research team interviewed 76 families in Ethiopia, Spain, United Kingdom, and Zimbabwe to understand and document families' experiences and challenges in searching for their missing loved ones. Based on the research project results, a set of recommendations were formulated for different actors (including governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations), which complement the good practices presented in this briefing. The recommendations were developed based on a participative assessment conducted with families of missing migrants:

- 1** Any intervention or effort to support families of missing migrants should be designed and implemented with an intersectional approach. Factors such as ethnicity, gender, age, migration status or socioeconomic status are intrinsic to how a person experiences and conduct the search.
- 2** States should establish a centralized institution or mechanism to enable families, regardless of their place of residence or migration status, to report the disappearance of their loved ones in a safe, accessible and confidential manner.
- 3** Organizations and institutions interacting with people on the move, or their families, should develop a code or protocol to support families of persons who disappear during their migration journey.
- 4** Support the creation of mechanisms that enable families of missing migrants to participate actively and effectively in the search processes (through establishing visas that allow them to travel to countries of destination to search for their loved ones or allow their participation from their home countries).
- 5** The strategies designed, and the data and evidence collected, by families of missing migrants and organizations supporting them should be recognized as valid; the investigation methods and/or tools developed by families should be incorporated into the search protocols.

<sup>1</sup> The reports of this project can be accessed at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/publications>.

# PARTICIPATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SEARCH FOR MISSING MIGRANTS

This section describes the work of the three interviewed civil society organizations that support families of missing migrants in their search for their loved ones who have disappeared during their migration journey in Central and North America. IOM's Missing Migrants Project conducted interviews with the Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico (SJM-M), the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law (Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho - FJEDD) and the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial - ECAP), intending to document their accompaniment, advice and support services for families during the search for their missing migrant relatives. These services are examined below, highlighting the five identified good practices.

“If there is will, missing migrants can be found” – Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico

## GOOD PRACTICES:



A comprehensive psychosocial approach that responds to the needs of families



Open communication channels with families



Assessing the organizational capacity to support families

The Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico (SJM-M) is a Catholic organisation that has been responding to the needs of migrants in Mexico for 20 years. The services are focused on influencing justice processes to restore the dignity of migrants. The spiritual accompaniment services distinguish SJM-M from other organizations. However, SJM-M provides services to all migrants, regardless of their religious beliefs.

SJM-M contends that the Mexican State is responsible for responding to the needs of migrants. Therefore, initially, the direct provision of services to migrants and their families was not part of the objectives of this organization. However, as with other services of SJM-M, their support searching for missing migrants<sup>2</sup> started as a result of families in Mexico and Central America articulating this specific need.

Within the context of violence in Mexico that resulted from the so-called war on drugs,<sup>3</sup> in 2006 SJM-M began to receive requests to search for migrants who had disappeared in Mexico during their journey towards the United States. Many families did not know how to activate the search for their loved ones and turned to their parish priest for assistance. Some of the parishes were part of the Jesuit Network, which extends to remote areas in Central America with populations in vulnerable situations and high migration rates. Given that SJM-M was one of the few Jesuit organizations addressing matters related to migration in Mexico at the time, the members of the Network began to ask for support in search processes.

At that time, SJM-M did not have a strategy to conduct missing migrants' searches; however, the organization had direct communication with migrant shelters in Mexico and began to enquire about migrants reported as missing through them.

“ For those who work in the organization, it was very clear from the beginning that the search was a need of families; they needed to know what had happened to their relatives”,

said Leslie Poblano, Coordinator for Psycho-Legal Assistance at SJM-M.

For five years, SJM-M conducted ad hoc searches for missing migrants, which helped establish the organization's knowledge of the migration routes where migrants usually went missing and strategies to search for and find them effectively. During that same period, the Documentation Network of Migrant Defence Organizations (Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes - REDODEM),<sup>4</sup> began to get involved in the searches too. SJM-M is part of the REDODEM, which is currently composed of 25 independent canteens, residences, shelters and homes for migrants located

in 16 states of Mexico (mainly in the country's southern and central regions). The Network holds a register of the sociodemographic characteristics of migrants who visit their care centres, as well as information on their mobility patterns and records of the crimes, violence, and violations of the human rights for which they are victims . This register has become essential for the search processes conducted by SJM-M.

In 2011, SJM-M formalized their Programme to Search for Missing Migrants, which systematized their search strategy. The steps of the program are: 1) receiving the case (only if presented by direct relatives of the missing person or organizations accompanying them in their search, such as committees of relatives of missing migrants); 2) searching in assistance centres (such as shelters and hospitals), detention centres (including migration stations in Mexico and migration detention centres in the US), prisons and occasionally, mortuaries; and 3) closing the case once the search process has been completed, either because the person has been found or because the organization has exhausted all its means to carry out the search.

Once the search process has concluded, SJM-M can refer migrants who have been found and their families to other organizations that are able to provide additional support; for example, for asylum applications, voluntary return or repatriation of remains. If a migrant is not found, SJM-M informs families about other organizations and institutions that can continue accompanying them; for example, organizations that use forensic methods to search for and identify missing persons.

Of the 650 cases of missing migrants that the organization received from 2011 to 2019, approximately 450 have been found, most of them alive. This high number of migrants who have been found is closely related to the strict conditions of SJM-M to accept cases of missing migrants. First of all, the SJM only takes on cases of people who went missing in the context of migration (the organization does not cover cases of missing linked to other contexts such as natural disasters or conflict). SJM mainly receives cases of families from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The geographical distance and the lack of knowledge of the Mexican legal framework make it difficult for families from these countries to search for their loved ones by themselves. Secondly, loss of contact must have occurred less than a year ago. This is due to the fact that SJM has observed that its searches are more successful for persons who

<sup>2</sup> The Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico (SJM-M) refers to them as “persons in migration situation”.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see [www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/criminal-violence-mexico](http://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/criminal-violence-mexico).

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see <https://redodem.org/>.

have gone missing recently, even hours previous. And thirdly, that they only conduct “searches for living persons”;<sup>5</sup> meaning that the search does not involve forensic investigation other than attempts to find the missing migrant in mortuaries.

After having conducted search processes for years to find missing migrants, SJM-M observed that they had more success in finding missing migrants who were alive. Therefore, the organization decided to use its resources for what they called “the search for living persons”. For families whose loved ones went missing a long time ago or who are presumed dead, SJM-M accepts their cases, but carries out limited searches only. They inform the families of this and provide information about other organizations that can support them in their search. The reflective process through which SJM-M assessed its capacities and decided to focus only on one type of search is valuable, as it recognizes the different needs of families and decides to prioritize those families that SJM-M can support more effectively.

For SJM-M, families have a leading role in the search for their missing relatives. Therefore, the organization always seeks to ensure that there is complete clarity with them regarding the search process. Before engaging in a search, SJM-M explains to families what actions can be taken and what will happen once they have been completed. In addition, families are informed about the actions implemented and the results achieved throughout the search process, and through the means of communication that are most accessible to them. Regarding the role of families, Leslie Poblano stated the following:

“ At SJM-M, we are only a tool. Families are the principal actors [during the search]; we only support them. We have never wanted to take the lead or be the public face. We simply are someone supporting the [families of missing migrants] because we are [in Mexico] and therefore, we can facilitate the search for them”.

Thanks to the close accompaniment during the search process, most families feel satisfied with the process even when their relatives are not found, because it demonstrates the efforts of the organization and the family has access to all information related to the search. This shows that accompaniment during the search process can be essential because it allows families to manage the emotional impact of the disappearance of a loved one. In this regard, Leslie Poblano explained:

“ The result is one aspect, but it is not as important as the process; because in some cases when the body has been found and has been identified through DNA testing, families do not believe that these are their children, as they were neither accompanied nor informed throughout the process”.

For most cases managed by SJM-M, migration detention or imprisonment has been the main reason for the loss of contact between the migrant and the family. Although migrants have the right to communicate with their families when they are in detention centres in Mexico and the United States, this right is not always ensured. In this regard, Leslie Poblano stated:

“ If people were aware of their rights before migrating, they could demand their rights; if people were aware of their rights, at least it would be easier for them to communicate. One of the main problems is a lack of knowledge of the rights you have simply because you are human, regardless of where you are”.

According to SJM, its high success rate is irrefutable evidence that it is possible to find missing migrants in Mexico, when the necessary resources, appropriate processes, and the willingness to search for the missing migrants are present.

<sup>5</sup> In Spanish, SJM-M refers to this as *búsqueda en vida*.

# In Search of the Truth - Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law

## GOOD PRACTICES:



A comprehensive psychosocial approach that responds to the needs of families



Links with committees of relatives of missing migrants



Seeking to strengthen families as social actors

Tragically, it is common for migrants to become victims of crimes or serious human rights violations – such as disappearance, extortion, torture, and execution – on their migration journey through Mexico. The Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law (FJEDD) defends the rights of migrants who fall victim to crimes in Mexico and their families, focusing on strategic litigation in Mexico and the accompaniment of families in their search for their loved ones.

The majority of the families accompanied by FJEDD live in Central American countries and are searching for relatives who have gone missing in Mexico. In line with this, FJEDD has offices in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador to address the phenomenon from a transnational perspective. In countries of origin, FJEDD collaborates with associations of relatives of missing migrants, which are the first point of contact for families. The partners of FJEDD include the Committee of Relatives of Missing Migrants of El Progreso (COFAMIPRO) in Honduras; the “Amor y Fe” Committee of Relatives of Missing Migrants (COFAMIDEAF) in Honduras; the Committee of Relatives of Missing Migrants of Central Honduras (COFAMICENH); the Association Committee of Relatives of Deceased and Missing Migrants (COFAMIDE) in El Salvador; and the Association of Relatives of Missing Migrants of Guatemala (AFAMIDEG). FJEDD has played an important role in establishing and strengthening the organizational and legal capacities of committees, focusing on strategic litigation and advocacy at the transnational level.

The committees have the task of receiving cases presented by families of missing migrants, documenting them and deciding how to respond. Depending on the case, some of them are referred to FJEDD for legal action. According to FJEDD, the accompaniment that the committees provide is essential for enabling families to present their claims and to seek to advance the investigation and search processes for their missing relatives.

According to FJEDD, families of missing migrants usually are unaware of their rights. They are not familiar with the legal framework of the State of Mexico and the institutional structure of federal, local and municipal authorities. Therefore, reporting and following up on cases of disappearance is an almost insurmountable challenge for them. For this reason,

“we seek to provide them with legal and advocacy tools, through training processes, to allow them to get familiar with the laws of Mexico and their countries that are relevant to their cases, so that they can advocate with the authorities and know what they can demand”,

expressed Claudia Pinto, FJEDD Country Coordinator in Honduras. In addition, the families have multiple vulnerabilities. According to Marisol Méndez, Rule of Law Coordinator at FJEDD, most of the relatives of missing migrants searching for their loved ones are women, sometimes elderly women, indigenous women or women living in rural areas, who do not speak Spanish and who have

chronic and degenerative diseases or illnesses derived from the disappearance of their loved ones. Therefore, establishing links with a committee is essential to strengthen families as social actors in the search for their missing relatives and the search for truth and justice.

Furthermore, FJEDD also directly receives cases of missing migrants when they have been victims of massacres or other serious human rights violations. In such situations, FJEDD documents the cases, decides on the legal actions, and offers accompaniment to the families. The accompaniment includes supporting families to formally report the disappearance, securing psychosocial support for them and providing them with tools to strengthen their knowledge of the legal framework of Mexico and their home countries. Thus, although FJEDD accompanies families in the formulation of formal reports, the organization seeks to enable families to actively participate in the investigation and search processes to “break the trend of non-participation and the inability to advance their legal cases”, as stated by Fabienne Cabaret, FJEDD’s Coordinator of Comprehensive Defence. In this way, families can lead their own search processes.

Moreover, FJEDD has played a key role in the litigation of several cases related to massacres of migrants in Mexico, advocating that they are addressed legally as macro-criminality situations. In addition, the organization conducts criminal investigation and strategic litigation to enable victims and their families to gain access to truth, justice and reparation. FJEDD also accompanies families in forensic identification processes as part of the Forensic Commission in Mexico, a multidisciplinary body composed of authorities, committees of families and civil society organizations.

## TEXTBOX 2: The External Support Mechanism for Search and Investigation

Individual disappearances of migrants in Mexico can be reported through the External Support Mechanism for Search and Investigation of the Attorney General’s Office (FGR, Spanish acronym). This tool was created by the Government of Mexico in 2016 “*with the objective of facilitating access to justice for migrants and their families, searching for missing migrants, investigating and prosecuting crimes by or against migrants.*” (FGR, 2018). The Mechanism is stipulated in the General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons, Disappearances Committed by Individuals and the National Missing Persons System<sup>6</sup> and the Organic Law of FGR.<sup>7</sup> It works as a transnational coordination channel that facilitates families being able to report crimes or human rights violations from their home countries and the process of follow up through Mexican embassies and consulates, so that families do not need to travel to Mexican territory to make such claims. The Mechanism, the first such instrument globally, was created after years of political advocacy led by FJEDD and the committees of relatives of missing migrants and after repeated recommendations by various international organizations, such as the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. One of the most significant challenges currently faced by FJEDD and families of missing migrants is that the Mechanism requires a stronger operational mandate from the Mexican authorities part of the Mechanism, such as the Attorney General’s Office and the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: [www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LGMDFP\\_200521.pdf](http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LGMDFP_200521.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Available at: [www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LFGR\\_200521.pdf](http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LFGR_200521.pdf).

# Dignifying Disappearance - Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP)

## GOOD PRACTICES:



A comprehensive psychosocial approach that responds to the needs of families



Open communication channels with families



Seeking to strengthen families as social actors

The Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP) is a non-governmental organization based in Guatemala that promotes and develops psychosocial<sup>8</sup> training, awareness-raising and advocacy with individuals, groups or communities that are survivors of socio-political violence and serious human rights violations (ECAP, 2021). ECAP provides accompaniment services to relatives of missing migrants, understanding the term “missing migrants” as those migrants with whom all communication has been lost during their migration journey through a country other than their country of origin and whose whereabouts are unknown (ECAP, 2020a). Inter-, multi- and pluricultural principles<sup>9</sup> are implicit in ECAP’s work, and have been developed with a comprehensive human rights and gender-based approach. ECAP’s mission focuses on strengthening social and political subjects, contributing to recovering the historical memory and the search for justice. ECAP promotes the full participation of indigenous peoples, women and families of migrants in processes that affect their lives.

Based on its experience working with families of missing migrants, ECAP published the Minimum Guidelines from a Psychosocial Perspective for

Processes to Search for Missing Migrants in 2020. This is a set of nine guidelines containing a series of basic concepts, ethical guiding principles and good practices applicable to the search for missing migrants.<sup>10</sup> The guidelines were designed as a working tool for all actors involved in search processes and a tool that enables families of missing migrants to demand their rights. The guidelines result from a broad social consultation process conducted in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua between 2016 and 2019.

Regarding the process to develop the guidelines, Judith Erazo, Coordinator of ECAP’s Migration with Rights Programme, stated the following:

<sup>8</sup> The Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (ECAP) defines the term “psychosocial approach” as the understanding of behaviours, attitudes, emotions and thoughts of individuals or groups based on their historical, social and ideological environment. The psychosocial approach places the individual at the centre, considering his or her historical, cultural and political development in order to understand, describe and accompany the processes of assistance during the search (ECAP, 2020b).

<sup>9</sup> ECAP constantly works with actors such as indigenous peoples. This has led them to implement a work dynamic that “promotes the building of intercultural and multicultural relations” (ECAP, 2020b).

<sup>10</sup> The nine guidelines include recommendations on good practices regarding the following: 1) reporting a disappearance and/or requesting a search; 2) searching for missing migrants; 3) access to justice and truth; 4) finding and identifying missing migrants; 5) dignified notification; 6) repatriation of human remains; 7) return of migrants; 8) the right to comprehensive reparation; and 9) differentiated approaches. Each guideline specifies the obligations of States based on the corresponding International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law (ECAP, 2020a).



We began by conducting an assessment with families, [with the objective of documenting] what had been their initial actions, [where they had gone. We conducted assessments in five countries [...] with relatives to identify their search processes, what they had done, what was happening to them, how was the assistance they received from the officials, what institutions they approached, and what were the main problems they encountered. After these assessments, we carried out this work with associations and committees [of relatives of missing migrants] in each country, and then did another round to discuss the proposal, and that is how the guidelines emerged.”

The guidelines were designed to help families of missing migrants get familiar with national and transnational mechanisms to search for persons who go missing during their migration journey. The guidelines were developed following a popular education approach,<sup>11</sup> and have been published in an accessible format (easily readable and with concepts that are easy to understand), using illustrations to strengthen the understanding of ideas that are relevant to families, such as their rights and the obligations of States relating to cases of missing migrants. Thus, they are an essential tool that allows families of missing migrants to search for their loved ones in an orderly and systematic manner and following the legal system.

ECAP emphasizes that the staff from governmental institutions involved in searching for missing migrants should have sufficient and relevant information about and awareness of the cultural context of the victims and their families (ECAP, 2020b). Additionally, families of missing migrants should play a central role in the search for their missing loved ones. They should not be seen merely as beneficiaries of the organizations that provide accompaniment services during their search, but as change agents with the ability to have an impact in their immediate environment. The accompaniment that ECAP provides to families includes psychosocial support, promoting mental health and training on processes to search for missing migrants. According to Judith Erazo, one of the main achievements of ECAP has been the following:



When we see that families are empowered, that they can manage pain and uncertainty – and I am saying “manage” because it does not go away, but if they can manage it better, they can continue with their lives in a relatively normal way – to us, that is the most important achievement.”

<sup>11</sup> Popular education is a teaching methodology grounded in notions of class, political struggle, that understands the learning process as a transformative and participatory construction of knowledge, rooted in participants' life experiences.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thousands of migrants have disappeared in Central America and Mexico during their northbound migration journeys on the continent. When a migrant ceases to communicate with their relatives, the family initiates a long search process, often encountering legal and bureaucratic obstacles. In addition, families have to navigate through a confusing and complex system that is usually inaccessible to most of them.

This briefing clearly shows that the accompaniment of families and the search processes conducted by civil society organizations can be indispensable for the families of missing migrants. It highlights the strategies for the accompaniment of families of missing migrants searching for their loved ones developed by three civil society organizations in Central and North America: the Jesuit Migrant Service - Mexico (SJM-M), the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law (Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho - FJEDD) based in Mexico, and the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team (Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial - ECAP) of Guatemala.

These organizations' search and accompaniment strategies and practices are of immense value, as they have been formulated and systematized together with families of missing migrants. The practices are based on the recognition that searches belong to families and that civil society organizations are only instruments to help them along the way. Families are the main actors in the search from the beginning. Of the strategies implemented by the three organizations, the following can be highlighted as good practices:

- 1 Implementing a comprehensive psychosocial approach that responds to the needs of families resulting from the disappearance of a relative, implemented by ECAP. This is evidenced by the extensive consultation process they undertook with families of missing migrants to develop the guidelines for the search process.
- 2 Maintaining open and continuous communication channels with families they are accompanying and using the means that are most accessible to families, including instant messaging apps, social networks and telephone. SJM-M implements this to build a relationship of trust with families and to ensure full transparency during the search process.
- 3 Adjusting the assistance provided to support families of missing migrants based on assessing prior cases and organizational capacity, as implemented by SJM-M when they decided to focus on “the search for living persons”.
- 4 Collaborating with committees of relatives of missing migrants, which accompany families more closely, as implemented by FJEDD.
- 5 Strengthening families as social actors in the search for truth and justice. This practice is promoted by all three organizations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerge directly from the analysis of the strategies applied by the three interviewed civil society organizations. The recommendations can be put into practice by any entity, whether official or not, that is involved in accompanying families in their search for missing migrants:



Allow and enable families to be the main actors in the search processes. Participation should be meaningful and based on recognizing their dignity. Instead of being perceived as beneficiaries, families should be recognized as active agents and partners.



Harmonize and publish an anonymized version of the data collected on missing migrants to make this information available to other organizations, strategic actors and decision-makers. This information is beneficial for developing strategic plans and informing political advocacy processes conducted by these actors.



Strengthen transnational cooperation among all actors involved in search processes to search for missing migrants in a coordinated, efficient and effective manner.

The three recommendations below are specifically aimed at national governments in Central America:



Simplify and expedite the process to report and follow-up on cases of missing migrants, avoiding excessive prolongation of cases and ensuring significant participation of families.



Train government officials who have direct contact with families of missing migrants, considering the psychosocial needs of the families, to ensure effective communication between the parties and dignified treatment of families, based on respect for the human rights of missing migrants and their families.



Facilitate access to free and easily available means to enable families – particularly those living in remote areas – to obtain information about the search for their loved ones in an expedited manner.

The disappearance of a person in the context of migration has multiple profoundly negative impacts on the family and generates economic, psychological, legal and administrative needs. States need to urgently address the needs of families of missing migrants, guaranteeing their right to access information, justice and reparation.

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