ACADEMIC INITIATIVE FOR VENEZUELA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION PROCESS – #IATV

ONE OF THE LEGACIES OF THE CONTADORA GROUP

CENTRAL AMERICAN EXPERIENCE 1983–1995: DIPLOMACY, PROTECTION, AND REINTEGRATION WITH A TERRITORIAL APPROACH

February 2026

01 STARTING POINT: A REGIONAL CRISIS WITH THREE FACES (WAR, DISPLACEMENT, AND ECONOMY)

In the 1980s, the Central American region experienced internal armed conflicts and political violence that produced refugees, internally displaced persons, and large-scale repatriations, in addition to sustained economic deterioration. The crisis had a regional dimension (cross-border flows), a domestic dimension (internal displacement and the collapse of services), and an international dimension (the Cold War, external financing, and geopolitical competition). The response that consolidated between 1983 and 1995 combined three layers:

- Political-diplomatic management to reduce the war and create conditions for agreements.
- A normative and principles-based architecture to protect those who fled or were unable to return.
- Operational programs linking humanitarian assistance with reintegration and local development.

The relevance of this combination lies in the fact that no single layer could solve the problem on its own: without diplomacy there were no safe returns; without protection, returns were forced or precarious; without reintegration and development, return or local integration was not sustainable.

02

THE DIPLOMATIC LAYER: THE CONTADORA GROUP AS A MECHANISM OF POLITICAL DECOMPRESSION

The Contadora Group was created as a multilateral initiative promoted by Mexico and joined by Colombia, Panama, and Venezuela to promote peace in Central America, at a time when local conflict had become a matter of regional security. Its technical importance was not to "implement projects," but to create a stable political channel capable of producing documents, commitments, and negotiation sequences.
Within that logic, the group promoted instruments that sought to organize the field: commitments to peace, democratization, regional security, and economic cooperation, in addition to monitoring mechanisms. The Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation (1984) is the clearest example of this attempt to articulate verifiable commitments.

This diplomatic layer did not replace direct negotiations among the countries in conflict, but it did help create an environment in which, later on, the Esquipulas II Agreement (1987) consolidated as a regional turning point, with explicit goals of reconciliation, democratization, elections, and the treatment of affected populations.

Operational lesson: when the problem is regional (human flows and security), a permanent regional mechanism is needed to "sustain" the political conversation and produce cumulative instruments. Without it, migration and humanitarian measures remain fragmented and reactive.

03

THE PROTECTION LAYER: THE CARTAGENA DECLARATION ON REFUGEES AND THE EXPANSION OF THE DEFINITION

In 1984, delegates from Latin American countries adopted the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, a non-binding document that established a regional protection standard and a form of political coordination around asylum and refuge. Its most influential contribution was the expanded definition of a refugee, incorporating as reasons for flight: generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights, and other circumstances that seriously disturb public order.

Technically, the expansion does two things:

- It reduces the individual evidentiary burden in mass contexts, because the risk may be contextual (it does not depend solely on individualized persecution)

- It allows responses at scale (accelerated recognitions, group-based approaches, simplified procedures), without abandoning the principle of non-refoulement.

04

THE "CARTAGENA PROCESS": INSTITUTIONALIZING PERIODIC REVIEWS AND EXPANDING REGIONAL SCOPE

The declaration did not remain merely a "text": it evolved into a permanent forum (the so-called Cartagena Process), with periodic meetings and decennial declarations that expanded its scope and practical commitments (including Caribbean countries in later stages). In public policy terms, this created continuity and regional "institutional memory."

The practical usefulness of that continuity can be observed when a country uses the expanded definition to resolve administrative backlogs: for example, decisions in Brazil that recognized an objective situation of serious human rights violations and enabled large-scale processing and decisions regarding asylum seekers from Venezuela (including decisions documented by the national authority).

Operational lesson: a regional standard works better when it has a mechanism for updating (meetings, action plans, follow-up) and when it is translated into procedures (not only principles).

05

THE OPERATIONAL LAYER (I): CIREFCA AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT

CIREFCA (the International Conference on Central American Refugees) was designed to resolve a typical bottleneck: even with political agreements and protection norms, a "durable" solution requires material conditions (land, housing, services, employment, documentation, local security, coexistence).
In its technical logic, CIREFCA was an explicit attempt to:

- move from "assistance" to durable solutions (voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement to a lesser extent);
- link return/integration with rehabilitation and development;
- coordinate multiple actors (states, multilateral agencies and cooperating partners) under a regional framework.

This architecture was recorded in documents of the inter-American system and the United Nations system, which show its emphasis on coordination, monitoring, and the humanitarian-development link.

Operational lesson: the problem is not solved "with status"; it is solved with local capacity to absorb population (services, housing, employment, human security, documentation). Status is an enabling condition, not the final solution.

06 THE OPERATIONAL LAYER (II): PRODERE AS A MODEL OF TERRITORIAL AND NON-DISCRIMINATORY REINTEGRATION

INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN AND FINANCING

PRODERE (Development Program for Displaced Persons, Refugees, and Repatriates in Central America) operated between 1989 and 1995 as a regional program for peace consolidation and development, with a central feature: it was an interinstitutional initiative of the United Nations.

Its structure, in functional terms, was as follows:

- Main donation from Italy, with conditions of regional scope and joint work among agencies.
- UNDP as co-financier and partner.
- UNOPS (originated as a project services office for UNDP and formalized as UNOPS in 1994) with overall implementation.
- Participation of technical agencies: WHO, ILO, UNHCR, and cooperation with other actors such as WFP, UNICEF, and the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights.

What matters here is not the “list,” but the consequence: it was a program governance structure that required coordination of decisions, budgets, and components under a single territorial framework.

TECHNICAL APPROACH: TERRITORY, NON-DISCRIMINATION, AND RAPID RESULTS

The operational approach of PRODERE can be summarized as follows:

- Non-discrimination + territory: working with entire communities (affected and receiving), avoiding schemes that supported only returnees/refugees and left out those who suffered “without leaving.” This reduces social conflict and improves local legitimacy.

- Participatory methodology: participatory action so that communities could decide priorities, with an initial focus on concrete results.

- Realistic sequence: in contexts of distrust, first “visible things” (basic services and infrastructure) and then more sophisticated productive components.

FIVE PROGRAMMATIC OBJECTIVES (REPLICABLE CORE)

The declared operational objectives of the program were:

1. promote human rights;
2. achieve local consensus on human development;
3. lead the reintegration of repatriates;
4. restore basic services (health, education, housing);
5. reactivate the local economy (income and employment).

This combination is important because it integrates protection + local governance + economy, preventing “return” from becoming an administrative event without sustainability.

CONCRETE INSTRUMENTS: LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, DOCUMENTATION, AND PRODUCTIVE INTEGRATION

Among the most replicable instruments are:

- Local economic development organizations/centers that provided productive information (crops, prices, regulations, subsidies) and acted as a social and community learning hub.
- Employment and entrepreneurship components with support from the ILO.
- Rapid and targeted solutions facilitated by UNHCR.
- Actions for documentation/identification as a prerequisite for access to rights and programs.

SCALE, EVALUATION, AND LEGACY

An approximate reach of hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries across six countries has been reported, with strong activity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, as well as interventions related to flows toward Costa Rica, Belize, and Honduras. In terms of evidence governance, the program included an independent evaluation chaired by Óscar Arias and with the participation of specialized entities, which reinforced its legitimacy.

Operational lesson: the value of PRODERE was not “implementing projects” but demonstrating a reintegration engineering: coordination rules, territorial focus, local economic instruments, documentation, and sequences of results.

07

INTEGRATION: WHAT MADE THE EXPERIENCE ROBUST (AND WHAT MAKES IT TRANSFERABLE)

If the Contadora Group + the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees + CIREFCA + PRODERE are integrated, a clear pattern emerges, useful for any transition involving massive migration:

1. A regional political framework to reduce conflict and sustain commitments.
2. A protection framework that allows decisions at scale, without improvisation.
3. A periodic forum/process to update standards and translate them into practice.
4. A humanitarian-development bridge for durable solutions (not “permanent camps” or failed returns).
5. Territorial programs with economic instruments, services, documentation, and local governance.

This pattern avoids two frequent errors: (i) reducing everything to political negotiation without social policy; (ii) reducing everything to humanitarian assistance without productive reintegration.

08

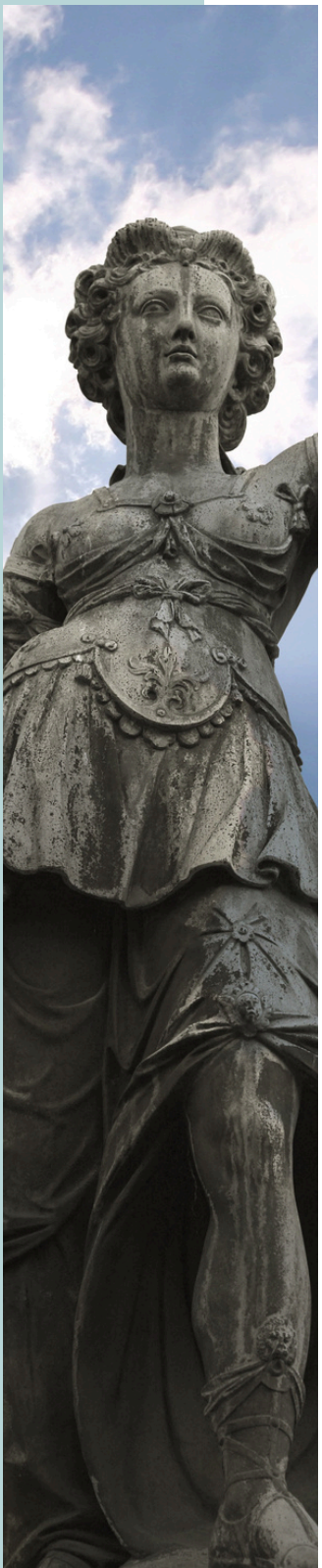
FINAL CHAPTER: APPLICATION TO VENEZUELA (TRANSITION AND MIGRATION MANAGEMENT)

FUNCTIONAL DIAGNOSIS (WHAT PROBLEM NEEDS TO BE SOLVED)

The Venezuelan case combines: sustained population outflows (mixed migration), asylum applications in some countries, documentary irregularity, pressure on local services in receiving cities, and political tensions among states. In a transition (whether gradual or rapid), the regional system will simultaneously face:

- protection (non-refoulement, status, regularization);
- return management (voluntary, safe, and phased);
- local integration (for those who do not return soon);
- institutional reconstruction (civil registry, identification, social security, labor market);
- financing and coordination (avoiding duplication and “island projects”).

09 TRANSFERABLE LESSONS IN THE FORM OF POLICY DECISIONS (WHAT A REGIONAL BLOC WOULD DO “TOMORROW”)



A STABLE REGIONAL MECHANISM OF THE “CONTADORA/PROCESS” TYPE

It is not about copying acronyms, but about creating a permanent regional mechanism with a dual mandate:

- political (interstate coordination, reduction of frictions, cooperation agreements);
- operational (aligning standards, data, financing, and programs).

That space must produce “packages” of verifiable commitments (mobility, documentation, access to services, employment, border cooperation), not only communiqués.

FULLY USE THE CARTAGENA STANDARD AND ITS DEVELOPMENTS

The expanded definition allows coherent responses when there is evidence of a generalized deterioration of public order or massive human rights violations. This facilitates:

- accelerated procedures and a reduction of backlogs;
- group decisions when the context justifies it (as experiences in Brazil have documented).
-

For the region, the key point is to harmonize minimum criteria to prevent the burden from shifting in a disorderly manner among countries (the “funnel” effect).

A "VENEZUELAN CIREFCA": A FORMAL HUMANITARIAN–DEVELOPMENT BRIDGE

A sustainable response requires a regional framework that connects:

- regularization/status

with

- housing, health, education, employment, and municipal strengthening.

That bridge must come with rules for coordination among cooperating partners, measurable targets, and monitoring mechanisms. That was the operational core of CIREFCA.

A "VENEZUELAN PRODERE": TERRITORIALITY, NON-DISCRIMINATION, AND LOCAL ECONOMY

The most useful replication of PRODERE for Venezuela is not a program "only for Venezuelans," but territorial programs in receiving and return municipalities, with three rules:

- Non-discrimination: intervene at the level of the entire community (migrants + host population), in order to reduce social conflict and improve sustainability.
- Rapid results in basic services, followed by productive instruments (employment, entrepreneurship, local value chains).
- Documentation as infrastructure: identity and documentary regularity as a prerequisite for rights, formal employment, and access to programs.

DATA GOVERNANCE: THE COMPONENT THAT TODAY DEFINES EFFECTIVENESS

Unlike the 1980s–90s, today coordination depends on interoperable data. A minimum regional package should include:

- shared registration standards (identification, family composition, needs, skills);
- territorial dashboards of service capacity;
- traceability of support (to avoid duplication and corruption);
- independent evaluation with public criteria.

WHAT CHANGES IN A VENEZUELAN TRANSITION

With the transition, two simultaneous scenarios emerge:

- Returns: they will increase, but they will not be total or immediate; they require security, documentation, livelihoods, and reintegration.

- Integration: it will continue to be necessary for millions for years.

Therefore, the central lesson from Central America is simple: not to choose between return or integration as if they were mutually exclusive options. A system is needed that manages both, with solid protection and a policy of territorial development.