

CASE STUDY

MEXICO 2021-2024 / MIGRATION CRISIS

CONTEXT / SETTLEMENT	SHELTER TYPE	SUPPORT METHODS
CRISIS Migration crisis		
PEOPLE DISPLACED 58,903 ind. with irregular migration status in 2021-24 (25,094 in 2021; 18,019 in 2022; 10,453 in 2023; and 5,337 in 2024)*		
SITE OCCUPANCY 128% capacity in 2021 (at the start of the project), 420% in 2022, 215% in 2023 and 124% in 2024**		
PROJECT LOCATION Reynosa, Tamaulipas		
PEOPLE SUPPORTED BY THE PROJECT 39,600 individuals		
PROJECT OUTPUTS Migrant centre built in phases, including perimeter fencing, toilets, tents (later upgraded to timber shelters), common areas, playground and offices. 30 timber shelters constructed. 15,847 hygiene items distributed. 7,200 ind. have crossed the border from Mexico to the U.S. regularly.		
SITE DENSITY 5.1 m ² per person on average across the site		
DIRECT COST USD 34 per household (construction costs)		

United States

REYNOSA

MEXICO CITY

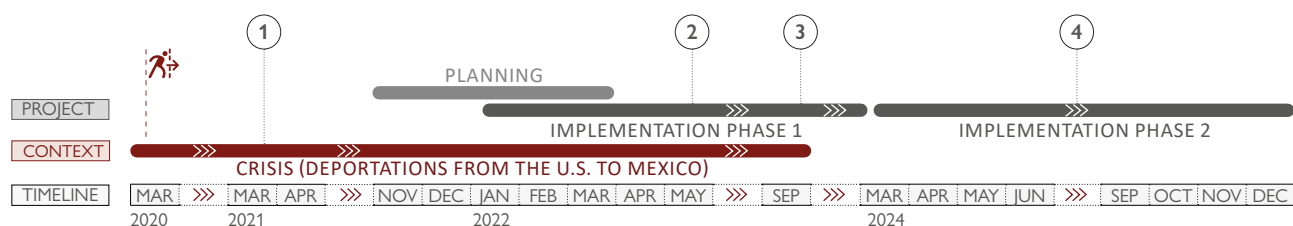
Project Locations

PROJECT SUMMARY

The project aimed to provide safe and dignified accommodation for migrants requiring extended stays in northern Mexico, in the context of large-scale migration flows toward the United States. The intervention focused on the progressive development of a planned shelter site through the provision of construction materials and technical support, enabling improved living conditions and site organization. A key feature of the project was the active participation of migrant residents in construction and site management, which fostered a strong sense of ownership, shared responsibility, and contributed to improved psychosocial well-being through engagement in meaningful daily activities.

* Secretaria de Gobernacion and IOM Mexico, interactive dashboard on Mobility and Migration.

** IOM Mexico monthly site occupancy monitoring.



Mar 2020: Announcement of the implementation of Title 42, a border restriction between Mexico and the U.S. aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. Under this measure, the U.S. expelled people entering by land, to Mexico and other countries.

1 Mar 2021: A makeshift camp sprung up in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, where more than 2,000 people (mostly from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) settled after being deported from the U.S.

2 May 2022: Movement from the spontaneous encampment in Plaza de la República to the Senda de Vida II centre.

3 Sep 2022: Entries were permitted under a new immigration process that stabilized the situation. Of the over 2.2 million people deported to Mexico via the U.S. southwest border from Mar 2020, 60.3% were Mexicans, followed by people from Northern Central America at 34.3%; South America accounted for 3.5%, and the Caribbean for 1.7%.

4 Jan 2022 - Dec 2024: Phased construction of the migrant centre, with restrictions on leaving the perimeter for security reasons, requiring remote technical oversight.



In challenging conditions, the project provided safe shelter to nearly 40,000 migrants deported from the U.S. after the enforcement of border restrictions.

CONTEXT

Mexico has long been a transit country for people on the move toward the United States, but since 2018 the profile of migration shifted, with larger numbers of families, women, and children on the move. This shift has changed needs profiles, amplifying requirements for safe shelter, protection services, and dignified living conditions.

In March 2020, a border restriction known as Title 42 was implemented in the US in the context of COVID-19, triggering mass expulsions to northern Mexico. As people remained stranded for prolonged periods in border cities, spontaneous settlements grew, particularly in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Urban insecurity and pandemic-related constraints compounded the challenge, calling for shelter solutions that were adaptable, progressive, and feasible with limited on-site technical supervision.

SITUATION BEFORE THE CRISIS

Before March 2020, Mexico was already experiencing significant migratory flows. In 2020, approximately 1.2 million migrants were in the country. Tamaulipas was a primary arrival area for those planning to cross into the United States. Reynosa itself faced high levels of insecurity: conflict among criminal groups shaped urban dynamics, as these actors competed for territorial control in one of the state's largest urban centers.

SITUATION DURING THE CRISIS

During the crisis, about 2,000 individuals lived in a spontaneous settlement in Reynosa. Families cobbled together makeshift shelters of plastic, cardboard, and wood, with limited access to basic services: only 18 shared sanitation facilities, no electricity, and no potable water.

The mass expulsions under Title 42 intensified overcrowding, lengthened stays, and placed additional pressure on scarce resources. Protection risks increased due to violence, territorial control by criminal groups, and restricted mobility.

OVERALL SHELTER RESPONSE

The humanitarian response was coordinated with a local shelter management as part of a broader inter-agency effort to expand accommodation capacity in Reynosa. Needs assessments, including routine shelter occupancy monitoring, highlighted severe overcrowding and critical gaps.

Strategy choices centered on relocating people from informal settlements to planned sites and expanding capacity through phased development. This guided programming decisions such as progressive site planning, the provision of construction materials, and the prioritization of protection, dignity, and core services (water, sanitation, healthcare).

PROJECT DESIGN

The project was framed as an emergency response with a strong protection lens, replacing precarious conditions in spontaneous encampments with a planned site designed to host up to 2,000 people in safer, more dignified conditions. Given prolonged displacement, insecurity, and restricted operational access, the team adopted a hybrid approach: immediate accommodation in emergency tents, coupled with transitional wooden housing units designed for family occupancy.

Tents were prioritized at the outset to meet urgent needs, but their limitations in privacy, durability, and climate performance required more suitable options for longer stays. Alternatives such as prefabricated modules and more permanent construction systems were considered and ultimately, wooden shelters were selected for their local availability, the ease of construction with non-skilled labor, compatibility with progressive development, and overall cost-effectiveness in a constrained setting. The family units were of approximately 16.50 m², aiming to achieve minimum standards for habitability, ensuring ventilation and structural safety.

Security constraints, limited market accessibility, and the need to ensure consistent quality led for the organization to choose the direct delivery of construction materials (in-kind modality).

The site layout integrated functional zones, shelter areas, sanitation facilities, medical services, kitchen and dining areas, child- and youth-friendly spaces, and a designated commercial area that was developed progressively to respond to evolving needs.



Largely implemented by the migrants themselves, the project used a phased approach, mostly because the site had been occupied before completion.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The planned site was built on land donated by municipal authorities to a local organization managing the accommodation service. Implementation included site preparation, temporary accommodation installation, basic infrastructure construction, and the development of community spaces, followed by the gradual replacement of tents with wooden shelters. Activities proceeded while the site remained fully occupied, requiring continuous adaptation of sequencing and safety measures to ensure uninterrupted services.

Construction and daily operations unfolded in parallel. Close coordination between site management and resident work teams allowed progress despite intermittent access restrictions and insecurity around the site. Material delivery and timelines required flexibility, with phased implementation and prioritization of critical works to expand infrastructure and shelter stock without disrupting site functionality.

Average stays ranged from four to six weeks, but the site functioned with a continuous flow of residents. Over roughly 36 months, the cumulative reach was estimated at around 39,600 people, with allocation prioritizing households with heightened vulnerabilities, especially families with children.

Due to insecurity and COVID-19 restrictions, continuous on-site technical supervision was not feasible. The team therefore established a remote-support model anchored in predefined technical guidelines, initial training of on-site teams, frequent communication with local coordinators, periodic visits, and milestone-based verification. Construction was primarily carried out by migrant residents organized into supervised work teams, which both sustained the build process and fostered community engagement and ownership.



To increase comfort, safety and habitability, the organization provided timber shelters to accommodate part of the migrant population at the centre.



The photos show the site in the early stages of the centre (above, July 2022) and after the construction of the timber shelters (below, April 2023).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement was central to both design and implementation. Affected populations actively contributed to construction, maintenance, and daily site management. Migrant residents were organized into work teams handling assembly of wooden housing units, basic infrastructure works, and incremental site improvements under local supervision. Residents also supported essential services, like cooking, cleaning, security, childcare, and operated an internal market, drawing on existing skills and offering structured roles.

This participatory approach enabled construction to continue despite limited external access, reduced dependence on external labor, and improved cost-efficiency. It also strengthened ownership and shared responsibility, improving facility maintenance and site functionality over time, contributing to psychosocial well-being and reinforced social cohesion.

SAFETY AND HABITABILITY MEASURES

The project directly addressed risks linked to extreme heat, overcrowding, and inadequate sanitation evident in the initial spontaneous settlement. Improved spatial organization reduced congestion and enabled safer circulation across functional areas. Transitioning from improvised shelters to wooden units enhanced climatic protection and habitability, while ventilation measures helped reduce exposure to heat. Expanded WASH facilities reduced health risks associated with overcrowding and limited services. While broader environmental and security risks remained outside the intervention, the mentioned measures tangibly improved safety and overall habitability.

MAIN CHALLENGES

- Security constraints limited mobility for both residents and technical staff, restricting access to the site and reducing the feasibility of continuous in-person supervision. To address this, the team combined remote technical support with periodic site visits and delegated on-site supervision.
- Construction took place while the site was already occupied, which slowed progress and created operational complexity. Phased construction was therefore used to maintain safety, avoid disruption to essential services, and allow implementation to continue while residents remained on site.
- Pandemic-related restrictions affected logistics, causing delays in material transport and reducing the availability of technical personnel. The project mitigated these constraints by prioritizing locally available materials and strengthening local implementation capacity.
- High population turnover created constant pressure on capacity and planning, requiring flexible allocation strategies and the combined use of temporary and transitional shelter solutions. Although these challenges extended timelines and required continuous adaptation, they also fostered innovations in phased construction and remote monitoring.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The use of locally available materials limited transport needs. Phased construction made resource use more efficient and minimized waste. Transitioning from short-lived temporary options to more durable wooden units reduced frequent material replacement. In sum, the chosen measures improved resource efficiency within the constraints of an emergency response.

OUTCOMES AND WIDER IMPACTS

The project transformed an informal settlement into a planned site capable of accommodating up to 1,760 people in significantly improved conditions. The shift from the previous improvised shelters improved access to basic services, enhanced spatial organization, and the establishment of community and support facilities collectively elevated the standard of living.

Beyond the physical improvements, the participatory approach strengthened social cohesion, improved psychosocial well-being, and enhanced operational sustainability through shared responsibilities in construction and site management. At a broader level, the experience proofed a phased and progressive shelter approach that was feasible in a complex urban context marked by insecurity, limited access, and high turnover.



Beyond the family tents that were provided in the first phase, the project improved the general site infrastructure and included common areas and facilities.



A key for the project success and the site sustainability was the direct engagement of the residents, who contributed to construction, maintenance and management. This was essential both to foster a sense of ownership and also to enable the organization to manage the project remotely due to security and access restrictions.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

STRENGTHS

- ✓ **The project adapted effectively to a highly complex context** by combining phased construction with active community participation, allowing operations to continue despite insecurity, limited access, and fluctuating occupancy. This model sustained implementation and upheld protection and service standards in a challenging environment.
- ✓ **Involving migrant residents directly** in construction and site management reduced labor costs, accelerated timelines, and fostered ownership and responsibility for the shared space, improving maintenance and overall site sustainability. Coordination between humanitarian actors and local management supported context-sensitive decisions and timely adjustments throughout implementation.

WEAKNESSES

- ✗ **Earlier consideration of site-related protection risks** could have improved residents' mobility, access to services, and opportunities for self-reliance.
- ✗ **Completing more preparatory works** before occupancy, where feasible, would have reduced operational complexity, safety concerns, and implementation delays.
- ✗ **Stronger quality assurance arrangements**, including clearer supervision protocols and verification milestones, could have supported more consistent construction standards under access constraints.



FURTHER READING ON SHELTER PROJECTS

On the Venezuela migration crisis: [SP 9TH ED. / A.13 ECUADOR / 2020-2022](#); and [A.11 VENEZUELA / OVERVIEW](#).

On the migration crisis in Europe: [SP 15-16 / A.41-42 GERMANY](#); [SP 17-18 / A.25 FRANCE](#); [SP 9TH ED. / A.21 GREECE](#).

LESSONS LEARNED

- Site selection critically affects protection outcomes and residents' access to services and opportunities; safer locations can reduce risk and support greater mobility and self-reliance.
- Sequencing matters in occupied sites: where occupancy precedes completion, phased construction must be tightly coordinated with daily operations.
- Remote supervision can sustain progress under access constraints but requires robust protocols, milestone-based verification, and periodic site visits to maintain quality.