SYSTEMATIZATION OF EXPERIENCE

HOSPITALS SENSITIVE TO HUMAN MOBILITY

April 2025 | Bogotá

CoNexo
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Transforming Health Institutions with a Human Centered, Migrant-Inclusive Approach

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Introduction: A Challenge Turned Opportunity

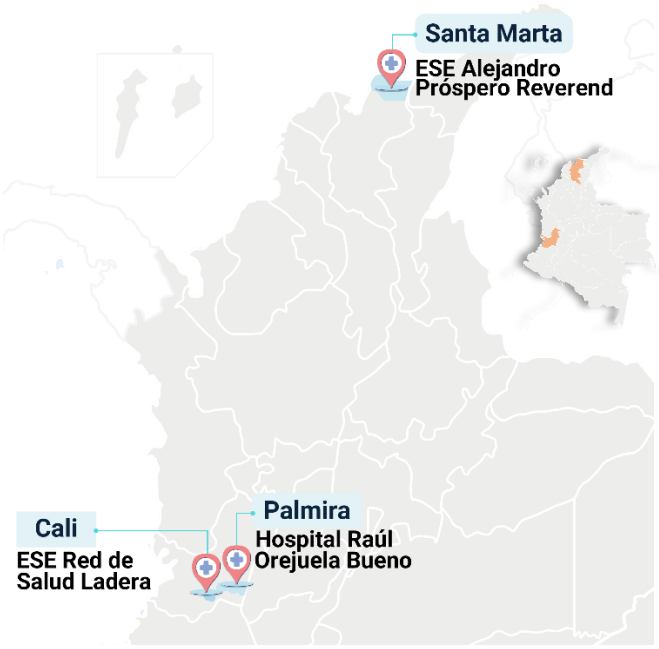
In Colombia, increasing flows of human mobility—particularly Venezuelan refugees and migrants—have posed significant challenges to the health system at national and local levels. Public hospitals, already operating under considerable pressure, often require technical support to implement strategies that respond to the specific needs of this population by adapting care pathways, raising awareness of migrants' rights, and mechanisms for dignified and inclusive service delivery.

In response, the CONEXO Project, implemented by the *International Organization for Migration (IOM)* with financial support from the *Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)*, developed the "Hospitals Sensitive to Human Mobility" strategy. This initiative aimed to strengthen institutional capacities to address migrant health needs, while fostering a culture of empathy, dignity, and inclusion across hospital settings.

The strategy was implemented in 2024 - 2025 in three public hospitals, each facing distinct challenges (see Graphic 1):

- ESE Red de Salud Ladera in Cali
- Hospital Raúl Orejuela Bueno in Palmira
- ESE Alejandro Próspero Reverend in Santa Marta

Graphic 1. Cities and Hospitals Engaged in Inclusive Health Transformation



Each intervention adopted a *differential approach*, recognizing the strengthening needs of each hospital, as well as the dynamics of migratory flows in each territory. Collaboratively defining with each hospital, the actions to be implemented within the framework of their quality management process, with the aim of enhancing both user care and institutional culture.

Graphic 2. Migrants assisted through the CONEXO project at the three prioritized hospitals in 2024

Migrants assisted through the CONEXO project at the three prioritized hospitals in 2024	People attended	Number of Services Provided
ESE Red de Salud Ladera, Cali	335	2.432
Hospital Raúl Orejuela Bueno, Palmira	188	1.255
ESE Alejandro Próspero Reverend, Santa Marta	367	3.219
Total	890	6.906

This brief systematizes the implementation process of this strategy—highlighting key actions, lessons learned, and recommendations to support replication in migration and human mobility contexts.

What Does It Mean to Be a Hospital Sensitive to Human Mobility?

In the context of increasing human mobility, being a hospital "sensitive to human mobility" goes far beyond opening the doors to migrant patients. It represents a profound institutional culture shift—one that acknowledges the lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and rights of migrants, and transforms healthcare delivery to ensure dignity, empathy, and equitable access for all.

This sensitivity must extend beyond delivery of health services. It must be present at every stage of the patient's journey: from reception and administrative processes to specialized clinical care. It involves breaking down barriers, reducing stigma, and creating spaces where migrants feel safe, seen, and respected—regardless of their migratory status.

For healthcare professionals involved in the strategy, this transformation began with deep personal and professional reflection.

"Being sensitive doesn't just mean knowing a migrant needs healthcare—it means recognizing everything they've lived through to get here. Behind every patient is a story of loss, fear, and hope. Our job is to make sure that their time in our hospital is not only a medical experience, but a human one."

- María Alejandra Guerra, Humanization Program Lead, ESE Red de Salud Ladera

The strategy also required hospitals to reconfigure how services were delivered. As one health leader put it:

"We used to think attending to migrants was an act of goodwill. Now we understand it is a duty of the health institution. Being sensitive means adjusting our processes so no one is left behind, regardless of their migration status."

- Dr. Magaly Reyes Ortiz, Humanization Lead, Hospital Raúl Orejuela Bueno

This new mindset also involved proactively identifying and mitigating barriers faced by migrants in accessing to health care, such as fear of discrimination, lack of documentation, or unawareness of rights. This proactive stance is summarized powerfully by another practitioner:

"Sensitivity means anticipating those barriers. Not waiting for migrant patients to ask about their rights, but ensuring that from the moment they arrive, they know they will be cared for, respected, and accompanied."

- - Ana Cristina Oliveros, IOM Nurse, Santa Marta

Healthcare provided to a migrant woman at the ESE Alejandro Próspero Reverend, Santa Marta. © IOM 2024

In short, a hospital sensitive to human mobility is not only a place where care is provided—it is a place where care responds to the realities of migrant people. It is an institution that recognizes diversity, responds with humanity, and acts with purpose to guarantee equal access and dignity for everyone.

How Was the Strategy Implemented? From Diagnosis to Institutional Change

The implementation of the "Hospitals Sensitive to Human Mobility" strategy followed a structured five-phase process (see Graphic 5). Each phase was designed to guide hospitals from understanding their internal realities to embedding a long-term, migrant-inclusive approach into their organizational culture.

Graphic 3. Strategic Flow

Phase 1: Initial Diagnosis
– Understanding Institutional Realities

The first step involved conducting a comprehensive institutional diagnosis in each participating hospital. Using a tailored instrument with 43 indicators across five strategic areas—I. strategic planning, II. human talent management, III. migrant information and response, IV. healthcare assistance, and V. service quality—the diagnosis identified existing strengths and key gaps in delivering care to migrants.

The tool was applied through participatory sessions involving staff from all levels, including

administrative and clinical personnel. Importantly, the diagnosis was not framed as an audit, but as an opportunity for collective reflection and improvement.

"The success of this strategy began with a humanizing approach. We created a friendly process where staff didn't feel evaluated, but empowered to reflect and propose solutions."

- Jenny Escobar, IOM Consultant

Phase 2: Action Planning
– Building Tailored Solutions

Based on the diagnosis results, each hospital co-designed an action plan that responded directly to its unique needs. These plans included updates to internal policies, creation of migrant-specific care pathways, and staff training activities.

For example, Hospital Alejandro Próspero Reverend in Santa Marta revised its humanization policy to explicitly include the differential approach, while ESE Red de Salud Ladera and Hospital Raúl Orejuela Bueno focused on strengthening its administrative systems to ensure timely and respectful care.

"It was initially a challenge to figure out how to care for migrant patients effectively. But the action plan gave us the tools to improve service quality and respond to specific needs."

- Dr. Magaly Reyes Ortiz, Humanization Lead

Phase 3: Training and Technical Support – Building Capacity Through Experience

A central component of the strategy was training hospital staff in key areas such as human rights, dignified treatment, sexual and reproductive health with a differential and psychosocial approach, including the provision of psychological first aid.

One of the most impactful methods was the "Migration Museum," an experience that fostered empathy among staff by highlighting the barriers and emotional challenges encountered by migrants throughout their journey.

Jornadas de información en salud, Santa Marta. © OIM 2024

Graphic 4. Hospital staff trained

Hospital staff trained	Men	Women	Total
ESE Red de Salud Ladera, Cali	2	21	23
Hospital Raúl Orejuela Bueno, Palmira	16	33	49
ESE Alejandro Próspero Reverend, Santa Marta	13	64	77
Total	31	118	149

"We included breathing and relaxation exercises—not just to train staff, but to care for them too. Only through self-care can quality care be provided."

- Aura María Acuña, IOM Psychosocial Professional

The training was complemented by continuous on-site technical support to ensure the sustainability of practices learned. IOM professionals supported hospitals throughout the entire process, providing ongoing assistance to ensure the effective integration of the tools and methodologies learned into routine practice.

Phase 4: Monitoring and Evaluation
– Tracking Progress and Adjusting Course

Evaluation was conducted both mid-way and at the end of the strategy. Hospitals used the original diagnostic tool to measure institutional progress.

Notably, ESE Red de Salud Ladera increased its sensitivity score from 83% to 98%, reflecting not only improved policies and processes for healthcare, but also a shift in attitudes among health personnel.

Servicios de salud oral, ESE Alejandro Próspero Reverend, Santa Marta. © OIM 2024

"The diagnostic allowed us to identify internal weaknesses and strengthen quality and humanization—not only for migrants, but for all patients."

- María Alejandra Guerra, Humanization Program Lead

Phase 5: Institutionalization
– Embedding the Differential Approach

The final phase focused on ensuring the long-term sustainability of the strategy. Hospitals incorporated migrant-sensitive practices into their internal processes, institutional policies, and care pathways. These processes were presented to the health secretariats to facilitate their continued engagement and technical support, particularly regarding migrant health system enrollment.

"What mattered most was seeing hospitals stop seeing migrant care as a burden—and start seeing it as a professional and ethical responsibility."

- Ana Cristina Oliveros, IOM Nurse

Lessons Learned: What Worked, What Was Hard, and What We Learned

The implementation of the "Hospitals Sensitive to Human Mobility" strategy generated valuable lessons about what drives success—and what challenges must be overcome—when promoting inclusive and migrant-sensitive healthcare in public institutions.

Institutional Leadership is Key to Sustainability

In hospitals where leadership teams were fully engaged, the changes introduced during the strategy became embedded and long-lasting. By contrast, when senior leadership was absent or passive, the impact of trainings and structural adjustments remained limited.

Strong institutional buy-in allows migrant-sensitive practices to evolve from pilot projects into institutional norms.

All Staff Must Be Involved—Not Just Clinical Personnel

One of the most impactful lessons was the importance of including non-clinical staff—such as receptionists, administrative teams, and user service personnel—in training activities. These teams are often the first point of contact for migrants, and their empathy and awareness can significantly shape a patient's experience.

Participatory and experiential workshops were most effective when they included all levels of hospital staff.

Experiential Learning Creates Long-Lasting Impact

Activities like the "Migration Museum" proved far more powerful than conventional lectures. When staff are placed in the shoes of migrants, they develop not just knowledge, but empathy—and this emotional connection translates into real behavioral change.

Dynamic, context-adapted methodologies increase engagement, understanding, and retention.

Staff Turnover and Workload Pose Serious Challenges

In many hospitals, high staff turnover and excessive workloads made it difficult to ensure consistent

participation in training sessions. To address this, flexible scheduling and off-site training spaces were introduced in some areas—helping to improve attendance.

Future strategies should account for operational realities and adjust training models accordingly.

Migrant Sensitivity Benefits host communities

Perhaps the most transformative lesson was this: when institutions improve differential care for migrants, the quality of care improves for everyone. The strategy helped hospitals move from seeing migration as an external issue to recognizing it as an integrated part of their social mission.

Culturally sensitive care is not only ethical—it is efficient, inclusive, and future-ready.

Registro para atención en salud a mujer migrante, Cali. © OIM 2024

Conclusions: Transforming health care, one hospital at a time.

The "Hospitals Sensitive to Human Mobility" strategy has demonstrated that transforming institutional responses to migration is not only necessary—but entirely possible. Through structured diagnostics, participatory action planning, participatory training, and ongoing technical support, three hospitals in Colombia have taken concrete steps to build more inclusive, responsive, and human-centered systems of care.

This transformation was not about adding services. It was about reimagining the hospital experience—for migrants and for all. It required listening deeply, reflecting honestly, and acting collectively.

Although challenges remain—such as institutional turnover, limited resources, and broader policy gaps—the strategy left a strong foundation for change. Most importantly, it showed that hospitals can go beyond clinical care to become agents of dignity, empathy, and social inclusion.

As human mobility continues to evolve, so must the systems that welcome and serve mobile populations. Health institutions must not only adapt—they must lead.

IOM's Commitment and Way Forward

As part of the CONEXO Project and its broader mission in Colombia, IOM reaffirms its long-term commitment to strengthening inclusive public health systems that are responsive to the realities of migration.

Specifically, IOM will:

- Continue supporting institutional transformation through technical assistance and capacity building in other migration-affected territories.
- Facilitate cross-sector collaboration between health institutions, local governments, and civil society to integrate a differential and sensitive approach in the care of the migrant population.
- Advocate for integration of policies that incorporate migrant-sensitive health strategies aimed to guide a more inclusive and effective health response.
- Document and disseminate best practices, contributing to regional and global learning on migrant-inclusive health systems.
- Place human dignity and empathy at the center of healthcare programming, aligning with the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus.

Through these ongoing efforts, IOM remains committed to saving lives and protecting people on the move, driving solutions to displacement and facilitating regular migration pathways, ensuring that every person, regardless of status or origin, has access to dignified, inclusive and high-quality health care.