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Stakeholder Perspectives on Addressing Migration Push Factors

Before

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Chairman Correa, Ranking Member Meijer, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Oversight, Management, and Accountability. My name is Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and I am a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, a non-partisan, independent research institution focused on practical and effective policy options for managing immigration.

Heightened levels of migrant families and children arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border are a symptom of a long-standing regional crisis in Central America, and no past U.S. policies—whether tougher or more humane—have effectively addressed the underlying root causes of migration. Thus, the Biden administration's resolve to engage with our regional partners to address these causes of irregular migration in Central America is encouraging. Particularly, the recent announcement by Vice President Harris to provide $310 million in increased U.S. assistance to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador prioritizes much-needed immediate humanitarian concerns resulting from the devastation of two hurricane landings in November and the persistent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which exacerbated the already-difficult conditions in these countries.[1]

Meeting the challenges of this crisis requires establishing a flexible, resilient, regional migration management system spanning from Canada to Panama. And laying the foundation for this type of system now can reduce boom-and-bust cycles of migration and help manage overlapping crises thousands of miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border.[2]

Addressing the root push factors of migration from Central America through investment and development is an essential pillar of this regional migration system and will be the focus on my remarks. Equally as important, however, to this regional strategy is creating temporary labor migration pathways, rebuilding humanitarian protection systems, and ensuring transparent and rule-based border enforcement.[3]

Notably, the relationship between migration and development assistance is complex. And literature suggests that reductions in outward migration take years of consistent and elevated assistance that develops broader economic and governance structures simultaneously with investment in community livelihood opportunities.[4] As such, development is more efficient at *shaping* how migration occurs—promoting legal over illegal migration—rather than deterring migration altogether.

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[1] U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "United States Announces Increased Assistance for the People of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras," updated May 3, 2021.
[2] Andrew Selee and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, "The Regional Migration Crisis Is in Central America: To Steam the Flow, the United States Needs to Invest in the Region," *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2021.
[3] Andrew Selee and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, *Building a New Regional Migration System: Redefining U.S. Cooperation with Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, November 2020).
[4] Susan Fratzke and Brian Salant, "Moving Beyond 'Root Causes:' The Complicated Relationship between Development and Migration," (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, January 2018); Michael A. Clemens, "The Emigration Life Cycle: How Development Shapes Emigration from Poor Countries," (Center for Global Development, Working Paper 540, August 2020); Richard H. Adams and John Page, "International Migration, Remittances, and Pov-erty in Developing Countries" (policy research working paper 3179, Poverty Reduction Group, World Bank Group, Washington, DC, December 2003); Robert E.B. Lucas, "Migration and Economic Development in Africa: A Review of Evidence," *Journal of African Economies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 337–95.

At a moment of great interest in addressing the root causes of migration and with the possibility of harmonizing regional investment efforts, I underscore the importance of leveraging existing research evidence and previous efforts under the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America to identify promising assistance and development programs that can shape irregular migration in the short term—grounded in the idea of instilling hope in the near term. To overcome design and implementation challenges, my remarks outline recommendations that can increase the success of these programs and contextualize how assistance and development fit within a more sustainable regional migration system.

The Drivers of Migration from Central America

Economic stagnation, persistent violence and insecurity, corruption, and a multitude of other factors intersect and influence migrants' decision to leave Central America for the United States. While some of these factors are widespread across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, others manifest differently across and within these countries.

Lack of employment opportunities in the formal market suppress economic growth in all three countries and propel workers to head northward. For instance, each year nearly 362,000 youth (ages 15-29) across the three countries enter a labor market that creates only approximately 127,000 new jobs.[5] This mismatch between labor supply and demand is particularly acute in Guatemala and Honduras, with younger populations and faster growth than in El Salvador. Furthermore, high poverty levels prevail in the three countries with more than half of Guatemalans and Hondurans and 40 percent of Salvadorans living in poverty, according to projections by the UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).[6]

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified these regional economic pressures in 2020 as GDP contracted by 3 percent in Guatemala and between 8 and 9 percent in Honduras and El Salvador.[7] And with large shares of workers employed in the informal labor sector, these economic pressures have especially affected already-vulnerable workers lacking access to benefits.[8] After falling in early 2020, migrant remittances bounced back midyear, providing a lifeline to insulate some of the pandemic's economic shock.[9]

In addition, persistent violence fuels real and perceived levels of insecurity in Central America. Despite dramatic decreases in the homicide rates in El Salvador and Honduras (36 and 43 per

[5] Alicia Bárcena, "Diagnóstico, áreas de oportunidad y recomendaciones de la CEPAL" (presentation, Mexico City, May 20, 2019).
[6] El Economista, "Mayor impacto de la pobreza en El Salvador que resto de Centroamérica, Cepal," El Economista, July 16 , 2020.
[7] CEPAL, "América Latina y el Caribe: proyecciones de crecimiento, 2020-2021," updated December 2020.
[8] The average share of workers employed in the informal sector in the 2010-2017 period were: 74 percent in Honduras; 65 percent in El Salvador; and 63 percent in Guatemala. See Organización Internacional del Trabajo, *Diagnóstico sobre economía informal: Énfasis en el sector comercio de los países del norte de Centroamérica: El Salvador, Honduras y Guatemala* (Oficina de la OIT para América Central, Haití, Panamá y República Dominicana, 2020).
[9] Luis Noe-Bustamante, "Amid COVID-19, remittances to some Latin American nations fell sharply in April, then rebounded," updated August 31, 2020.

100,000 inhabitants, respectively), these remained among the highest in the world as of 2019.[10] Violence against women is particularly rampant in Honduras where the femicide rate is 6 per 100,000 women, compared to the world average of 2 per 100,000 women.[11] Violence in the forms of crime and extortion, moreover, is less visible but ever present in the three countries. Furthermore, annually one in five residents in the three countries report being victims of a crime, and one in ten residents in Honduras and El Salvador report experiencing extortion every year.[12]

The nature of violence varies from country to country, but it includes violence driven by international organized crime tied to drug trafficking (primarily in Honduras and parts of Guatemala), the consolidation of powerful gangs (especially in El Salvador and Honduras), and political conflict (especially in Honduras and parts of Guatemala). Domestic violence is also present within the region and is a common push factor among Guatemalan women.

Corruption is another important driving force behind migration. All three of the Central American countries rate among the most corrupt in the world on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, with Honduras and Guatemala ranking in the top 30 least trustworthy after expelling their international anti-corruption commissions in 2020 and 2019, respectively.[13] High-level corruption undermines people's faith in government, encouraging people to migrate. So does more mundane corruption among criminals, the police, and low-level public officials that makes life difficult on a day-to-day basis and contributes to the decisions of many to seek better lives elsewhere.[14] In Guatemala, for example, intention to migrate is 83 percent higher among victims of corruption than non-victims.[15]

The two storms that devastated Central America in November 2020 were harbingers of a final problem driving people away from the region: climate change. Longer periods of drought combined with more frequent hurricanes seem to be hitting farmers in the 'Dry Corridor' particularly hard and changing their way of life. Especially in Guatemala and Honduras, which have predominantly rural economies, these climate changes have augmented food insecurity among farmers. A recent study finds that decreases in precipitation are associated with increased emigration at department level, magnified further by higher homicide rates.[16]

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[10] The World Health Organization (WHO) considers a rate of 10 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants to be characteristic of endemic violence. According to preliminary data compiled by InSight Crime, homicide rates continued to fall in 2020: 37.6 per 100,000 residents in Honduras; 19.7 per 100,000 in El Salvador; and 15.3 per 100,000 in Guatemala. See Peter J. Meyer, "U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview," (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 2021); Selee and Ruiz Soto, *Building a New Regional Migration System*, pg. 6.

[11] For femicide rates in Latin America, see Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, "Femicide or feminicide," accessed May 2, 2021; for world average, see The World Bank, "Intentional homicides, female (per 100,000 female)," accessed May 2, 2021.

[12] Figures reflect latest Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey year publicly available in each country. See, Dinorah Azpuru, "Estudio de la cultura política de la democracia en Guatemala, 2019," Presentation for LAPOP Americas Barometer, revised August 2019; Daniel Montalvo, "Resultados preliminares 2019: Barómetro de las Américas en Honduras," Presentation for LAPOP Americas Barometer, September 2019; Vanderbilt University, "Análisis preliminar del Barómetro de las Américas de LAPOP: El Salvador 2018," Presentation for LAPOP Americas Barometer, updated September 2019.

[13] Transparency International, "Corruption Perception Index, 2020," accessed May 3, 2021.

[14] Selee and Ruiz Soto, "The Regional Migration Crisis Is in Central America."

[15] USAID, "Irregular Migration," updated May 4, 2021.

[16] Sarah Bermeo and David Leblang, "Honduras Migration: Climate Change, Violence, and Assistance," (Policy Brief, Center for International Development, March 2021).

Promising U.S. Assistance and Development Programs

As aforementioned, for assistance and development efforts to reduce migration flows requires years of continuous investment. But by targeting violence prevention and food security programs in communities with high emigration rates and focusing on at-risk youth, these efforts have the potential to reshape illegal migration flows in the short-term. [17] Therefore, as the U.S. government considers increasing assistance and development programs to address the root causes of migration in the region, identifying and expanding promising programs can mediate some migration flows.

Evaluation of U.S. assistance programs is limited, but the latest results from fiscal year (FY) 2019 broadly demonstrate that community-oriented programs focused on job creation and workforce development, especially among youth, may have promising effects in the short-term. That year, USAID programs contributed to the creation of nearly 30,000 jobs and 17,000 at-risk youth completed work force development programs, the majority in Guatemala. Approximately 39,000 youth (ages 10-29) at risk of violence, primarily in Honduras, trained in social and leadership skills through governance-oriented programs. These programs are associated with an increase in local public confidence to prosecute and convict homicide perpetrators in Guatemala and Honduras, though confidence levels fell in El Salvador. Trust in police also increased to nearly 30 percent in Guatemala and Honduras but decreased in El Salvador.[18] Other exogenous factors may account for the difference in results in El Salvador.

Another example of promising programs are Model Police Precincts (MPP) sites targeting high-crime geographic areas, which employ a community-oriented and problem-solving approach to policing with the aim to reduce crime and improve citizen relations with the police. In these sites, the number of homicides decreased between FY 2018 and FY 2019 in El Salvador (29 percent) and Guatemala (8 percent), though homicides increased slightly (4 percent) in Honduras during the same period.[19] Other research notes that U.S. support for expanded application of trauma-informed interventions for communities reduced violence indicators.[20]

More specifically, existing USAID programs in each country point to promising practices. In Guatemala, a Puentes Project supports 25,000 youth in 25 municipalities in the Western Highlands with high migration rates to complete their education and find new or better employment, partially by helping private sector employers expand their businesses and hire trained youth. Another program, Feed the Future, seeks to improve agricultural incomes, improve resilience, and enhance nutritional outcomes for small farmers and their families by providing technical assistance and training on best practices and supporting diversification of

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[17] Peter J. Meyer, *Honduras: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 2020), pg. 19; Michael A. Clemens, "Violence, Development, and Migration Waves: Evidence from Central American Child Migrant Apprehensions," (Center for Global Development, Working Paper 459, July 2017).

[18] U.S. Department of State and USAID, "Progress Report for the United States Strategy for Central America's Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation," accessed May 2, 2021.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Jeff Ernst, Kelly Josh, Eric L. Olson, Kristen Sample, and Ricardo Zúñiga, *U.S. Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014-2019: Promoting Success by Learning from the Past,* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, Latin American Program, December 2020).

income-generating value chains, while working with government to implement rural development, agricultural, and food security policies.[21]

In Honduras, Empleando Futuros seeks to provide vocational training to at least 7,500 at-risk youth in urban neighborhoods, linking them to jobs with the expectation that at least half of them obtain a job or improve their current employment. A former violence prevention program, Proponte Más, invested in providing family intervention therapy and risk-reduction services to a minimum of 2,000 youth and their families in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Choloma, Tela, and La Ceiba to prevent them from engaging in crime. To strengthen communities' resilience to economic shocks, a U.S. and Honduran government initiative seeks to generate employment in rural areas and improve watershed management and nutrition to decrease poverty and undernutrition in western Honduras, moving 10,000 families out of extreme poverty and reducing stunting of children below age five by 20 percent in targeted communities.[22]

Largely focused on prevention, protection, and prosecution, U.S. assistance in El Salvador generally targets the urban hubs of San Salvador, San Miguel, and Santa Ana which account for most of the irregular migration and insecurity in the country.[23] Aligned with government efforts to establish 55 municipal prevention councils, a former program aimed to expand municipal-led, community-based crime and violence prevention to 114 communities in 20 high-risk municipalities, supporting youth centers and municipal prevention centers nationwide. Like capacity training programs in Guatemala and Honduras, Bridges for Employment sought to improve technical and soft skills of Salvadoran youth to obtain new jobs and promote linkages between private sector needs and training centers to reduce youth vulnerability to gang recruitment. Additionally, a Justice Sector Strengthening program aided the Supreme Court, Prosecutor's Office, Public Defender's Office, and the National Police to improve investigation techniques and inter-institutional coordination and establish efficient systems and procedures to facilitate access to justice.[24]

Challenges to Successfully Addressing the Region's Migration Factors

Orienting targeted, community-based assistance and development programs to address the root causes of migration is not enough on its own to produce short- and long-term results. Under Democratic and Republican administrations, the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America has confronted significant challenges both in its design and implementation that have limited its efficacy and presented an incomplete response to migration flows.

Programs and activities funded under the U.S. strategy often lack rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to understand their direct effects on promoting prosperity, enhancing security, and improving governance—as well as their subsequent effects on migration flows. A 2019 Government Accountability Organization report, for instance, documents that "evaluations were conducted unevenly across agencies and sectors" and the existing evaluation plan "does not include a plan for evaluations of projects conducted by agencies other than State and

[21] USAID, "USAID/Guatemala Country Fact Sheet," updated April 2020.
[22] USAID, "USAID/Honduras Country Fact Sheet," updated August 2018.
[23] USAID, *Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) FY 2020-2025,* updated on March 24, 2021.
[24] USAID, "USAID/El Salvador Country Fact Sheet," updated July 2018.

USAID."[25] In other instances, project implementers did not collect vital data to assess progress toward the objectives. Additional transparency and reporting of these indicators, beyond the individual program's achievements, is necessary to isolate the impact on migration flows, particularly in the short term.

A second key challenge in levering U.S. assistance and development to address the root causes of migration is the related and compounding effects of political will and resistance to anticorruption and good governance reforms, particularly considering the varying levels of cooperation across the three Central American countries.[26] This challenge proved significantly difficult to overcome under previous efforts to couple the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America and the Plan of Alliance for Prosperity in Central America, through which the three countries committed to a five-year investment of $22 billion to create incentives for people to remain in their own countries, but lacked transparency to evaluate project accomplishments.[27] In the next phase of the U.S. strategy led by the Biden administration, the withdrawal of international anti-corruption agencies from Guatemala and Honduras, and more recently an overhaul of the Constitutional Court and the Attorney General in El Salvador, pose significant doubts of political will to enact reforms in the region.

One option to bolster political will in the region is to reexamine and restructure the layered conditions on foreign aid that these Central America governments must meet to disburse assistance under the U.S. strategy. For example, the Secretary of State must certify that individual governments are addressing 16 different issues of congressional concern prior to releasing 50 percent of assistance approved by Congress.[28] To maintain continuity among programs deemed effective in reducing irregular migration, Congress should consider lowering requirements to disburse key types of assistance—like humanitarian and food security programs—while increasing requirements for other types of assistance to leverage political will. Still, balancing investment priorities and withholding criteria, which at times has included requirements to step-up migration management, in practice requires careful consideration to avoid counterproductive delays in program implementation as has occurred in previous iterations of the U.S. strategy.

At the same time, the United States government and international organizations can tackle these challenges by incorporating actors from civil society and the private sector into the design of these programs to foster a sense of co-responsibility and subsequently raise government accountability. Following the promising model of community-level assistance programs that leverage existing resources across government institutions, establishing this multi-dimensional approach to addressing the factors of migration may lead to more sustainable results.

Conclusions

Breaking the boom-and-bust cycles of migration flows at the U.S.-Mexico border and in the region requires a steadfast and long-term commitment to changing the conditions propelling

[25] U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *U.S. Assistance to Central America: Department of State Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security* (Washington, DC: GAO, September 2019), pg. 25.
[26] Ernst et al., *U.S. Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014-2019.*
[27] Peter J. Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Review Service, November 2019).
[28] Ibid.

migrants to leave Central America. Yet, tailored, community-based assistance and development programs that focus on violence prevention and food security for at-risk populations can reshape irregular migration from Central America in the near term. To build successful programs, governments, policymakers, and program implementors should consider the following recommendations:

1. Assistance programs that provide financial support or skills training while simultaneously strengthening local opportunities are best positioned to lessen irregular migration flows;

2. Building in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in the design of programs promotes sustainability of successful programs and flexibility to amend them if they are not efficient for particular populations;

3. Adjusting country-specific withholding requirements to disburse key types of assistance quickly can strengthen continuity and build on program results; and

4. Incorporating actors from civil society and the private sector in the design of programs fosters a sense of co-responsibility and raises government accountability.

Through a combination of smart development assistance and investments that support governance measures in the region, the United States can help alleviate deep-rooted economic stagnation, violence, crime and promote local resilience to climate change in Central America. But even in the best-case scenario, development assistance alone is not enough to reduce irregular migration. Rather, assistance programs should be considered complementary to the other pillars of an effective regional migration system. Laying a foundation that promotes efficient and fair asylum systems, legal employment pathways, and immigration enforcement based on rule of law is the best combination to promote safe, legal, and orderly migration. Under this regional system, migration management is the responsibility of every country, and as institutional capacity improves, the region will be better equipped to respond to changes in migration flows.