

Evaluation of US Central America Strategy and Results Architecture



American University Diplomacy Lab Research Team

Rafael Cestero, Ingrid Fontes, Henry Gribbell, Derek Hill, Bijan Moore, Andres Villar, & David Wilbourne

May, 2021

Table of Contents

	Page #
1. Executive Summary_____	<u>3</u>
2. Introduction_____	<u>5</u>
3. Governance_____	<u>6</u>
4. Prosperity_____	<u>9</u>
5. Security_____	<u>14</u>
6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning_____	<u>17</u>
7. Improvements in Budgeting_____	<u>19</u>
8. Conclusions and Recommendations_____	<u>19</u>
9. Works Cited	

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of Research

This report was commissioned by the Department of State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs seeking a "meta-review" and analysis of the civilian assistance strategy and programs the United States Government directs toward Central America.

Focusing primarily on the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, this research aimed to assess how well the range of aid programs reviewed meet the goals delineated in the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America to identify gaps or clear areas for improvement. The research team gave a particular focus to how well the US strategy and programs address the causes of irregular migration.

Key Findings

Current aid is focused on three major categories: governance, security, and prosperity. The key findings are separated into these categories.

Governance: Major findings in governance include a need to develop a broad political framework including incentives and disincentives which can challenge corrupt and under-performing officials, while simultaneously building the capacity and abilities of local civil society groups to affect positive change. This should include negotiated and understood consequences for high-level bad actors, protection for and expansion of prosecutor offices at all levels of government, and training programs and "political cover" for local civil society organizations aiming to advance positive domestic agendas without corruption. These efforts should aim to create a more unified approach to shifting governance in the region away from corrupt practices and toward better representation and stewardship of public resources.

Prosperity: In terms of regional prosperity, data and expert analysis indicates that the most successful economic programs relate to job creation through the growth of the private sector, which appears to the researchers to differ in emphasis from programming this team was able to review that focused on skills training. The researchers recognize that pursuing job creation and private sector growth is typically hindered by corrupt governing bodies and the general lack of security. Achieving a GDP per capita threshold between PPP\$8,000-\$10,000 has credence in reducing irregular migration but contains a targeting problem. The calculus for determining economic aid distribution doesn't systematically factor financial inequality into the formula, preventing it from effectively accounting for inequality and thus the location and importance of the low-income populace. Economic inequality has a significant relationship with poverty reduction efforts and thus in countering irregular migration. Experts have argued to the researchers that programs that create incentives for locally spurred business and galvanize key stakeholders are one of the more effective ways of achieving sustainable job growth and reducing inequalities.

Security: On security, a range of experts indicate that place-based approaches have successfully reduced crime rates significantly more than nationwide programs. Because crime can be a primary push factor for some regions, these methods show significant promise for addressing the root causes of migration. Given the positive impact of place-based programming, this report recommends an expansion programming based on this approach. Special attention should be paid to

providing justice for gender-based violence, as this area appears to be currently under-supported despite being a pervasive issue.

MEL: This report also identifies several opportunities for improvement within the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) process. MEL is a vital component to the long-term sustainability of any assistance effort, and a crucial implication of this is that ensuring a robust MEL apparatus will increase the efficiency of efforts in all other pillars. Opportunities for improving monitoring, learning, and evaluation are clustered into four themes: bolstering baseline data collection, improving interagency collaboration on data, facilitating knowledge dissemination, and integrating novel technologies.

An additional broad conclusion relates to the development of **political will**, which, although difficult to quantify, is a factor essential to local capacity building for long-term success. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of both identifying and developing political will of national governments and key officials to achieve significant reform despite local resistance to change. However, despite the frequency with which it is discussed, it is not directly addressed by the U.S. assistance strategy. In solving the problems of corrupt governance, economic hardship, and local security the importance, according to experts, is not necessarily only the capability and capacity of the local populations to act, but the environment they face that may limit their freedom to pursue local options and incentivize out-migration over local engagement.

Recommendations

Regarding **governance**, this report recommends that the United States implement an enforceable framework for governance programming negotiated at a political level with the regional governments. Consequences for actors who act contrary to the understandings negotiated could include the removal of their ability to travel to the United States or to access their assets. This effort must be coordinated with the rest of the strategy aiming to engage more citizens in the range of programs and in the reform process. While the top-down approach on the elites may work for broad US objectives, local needs will be best met when the people have the means to collectively act in their interest and exert pressure on officeholders. The team understands that this will be a challenging set of tasks to carry forward.

In terms of **security**, this report recommends that the United States increase its use of place-based approaches. Many expert interviewees indicate that these approaches have been demonstrated to successfully reduce crime rates significantly more than nationwide programs. This can be very helpful to address violence as a “push factor” for communities. An example of a security place-based approach would be the Community Roots project in Guatemala that creates integrated municipal-level violence prevention plans and focuses on building trust between individuals and the justice system.

Additionally, the research team found that programs involving cognitive behavioral therapy for at-risk youth and their families have been cited to be increasingly effective in reducing levels of violence. Therefore, the team recommends similar programs should be explored or expanded by the US to implement into their strategy towards the Northern Triangle.

When addressing **regional prosperity**, data and expert analysis indicates that the most successful economic programs contain short-, medium-, and long-term solutions. By utilizing an inequality-adjusted GDP per capita formula, aid implementers will be able to target low-income groups more effectively and can utilize the GDP per capita threshold as a benchmark in migration reduction. Short-term strategies can take the form of quick economic relief by the way of cash transfers, and there can be longer-term strategies by increasing private sector engagement. The recommended approach involves support for local-originating business development through better partnership selection in areas with the highest inequality levels. The importance of creating long-term and sustainable economic growth has led the team to conclude that initiatives focusing on developing skills at the secondary education level, such as the Puentes program, is a promising area for further investment with important medium- and longer-term objectives. There are also short, medium, and long-term gains within programs like Puentes in El Salvador, as they create greater access to information from labor markets, engages with the private sector, and creates opportunities for at-risk youth in violent municipalities.

This report also finds opportunities to improve USG programs' **monitoring, evaluation, and learning** infrastructure in three keyways: collection of baseline data, dissemination of knowledge, and integration of novel technologies.

First, this report finds that a **lack of baseline data** hinders efforts to evaluate and plan programs. Accordingly, scaling programs aimed at improving data collection in target areas, such as *InfoSegura*, would thus bring multiple benefits. Expanding USAID's recent cooperation with Customs and Border Protection to receive more granular data on migrants' origins and characteristics would bring great benefits to the program planning cycle, as well.

Second, programs could improve **knowledge dissemination** by creating concise, 1–3-page summaries of MEL reports and by clustering evaluations by region and program function for periodic distribution to executive-level stakeholders.

Third, investigating the use of **geospatial methods for impact evaluation** could significantly decrease MEL costs for prosperity- and security-related programs. To maximize this opportunity, program data should be geotagged whenever possible, and USG should explore the use of **new technologies** like satellite imaging for long-term integration into MEL infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION

This report by an American University Capstone class was commissioned by the State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) with the purpose of providing a "meta-review" of the current U.S. Government (USG) assistance strategy toward Central America. The class group of seven seniors in the School of International Service, under the supervision of Ret. Ambassador Earl Anthony Wayne, worked with Jay Thompson of WHA to conduct this review from January to May 2021.

This analysis utilizes interviews with approximately 20 development or regional experts, implementing partners, and government personnel. The interviews were structured with an introduction by the interviewee and then pre-received questions asked by the team of interviewers.

Interview questions were tailored towards the interviewee's expertise, but several recurring questions were asked regarding corruption and successful anti-corruption practices, labor training and a labor drain, and anti-violence programs. Much of the focus is centered on those countries in the region known as the Northern Triangle (NT). The team also reviewed a partial list of programming from State and USAID corresponding to the time period covered in the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Given the limited timeframe for this study, the researchers were not able to review every USG assistance program nor to have access to many valuable experts in and outside of the US government. They appreciate the generous cooperation provided by those working very hard to achieve good outcomes in the region.

Northern Triangle assistance is organized and overseen by U.S. agencies and administered by implementing partners. The U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America focuses aid into three primary categories that are seen as major migration "push factors" for Northern Triangle residents: governance, security, and prosperity. The working theory of the USG is that if these areas are addressed, then migration from this region will become more manageable, which will allow for a more stable Northern Triangle and a less burdened US immigration system.

Additionally, it is important to note that while there are the core root problems, two significant acute factors that worsen the situation. The first is the effects of climate change and natural disasters in the region. The region has been hit by several large-scale natural disasters in the past years which has increased the level of outward migration and climate change is cited as changing the livelihood possibilities in key areas such as in the highlands of Guatemala. The second acute factor is the ravaging effects of COVID-19. The region has unreliable health systems and is heavily dependent on aid and vaccination supply from the U.S. and other international donors.

Officials from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) have stated that a core challenge facing the current USG strategy and programs is their longevity and sustainability: as one official noted, "We can stand it up (a program) and pump money into a country [vis a vis foreign assistance programs], but we ultimately want the host nation to sustain it on their own." This review focuses on the ability of the existing assistance programs to meet the challenges outlined in the strategy while also developing the region's capabilities to face these challenges itself.

Given the time constraints on this project and limited team expertise in certain areas, the team was not able to explore all the vital topic areas to the depth with which they know would have been more beneficial.

GOVERNANCE

The issue of governance in the Northern Triangle countries is both a challenge to overcome and is a factor that hinders the implementation of other programs. Governance is connected to migration as a push factor, as many people in the region do not see their local or national governments as being capable of or even attempting to represent them and serve their needs.¹

¹ Dustmann and Okatenko, "Out-Migration, Wealth Constraints, and the Quality of Local Amenities"; Lanati and Thiele, "The Impact of Foreign Aid on Migration Revisited."

Corruption is a core issue of governance in the region. Examples include money skimming by officials and wide-ranging impunity for bad actors within and outside of government, as seen in the experiences of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), and the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption in Honduras (MACCIH). Not only does corruption reduce the capacity of the governments to act on behalf of their people, but it also reduces the confidence of the people in their government, which drives up a desire to leave. This corruption is challenging to confront due in part to its varied nature as well as the numerous factors that influence a government agent to disregard public responsibility. Motives range from extortion by violent actors seeking impunity themselves to desire for personal gain.

The existing United States Government programming to meet this portion of the strategy falls into four sub-objectives: the professionalization of the civil service, the improvement of fiscal accountability, the upholding of democratic values by governments, and the implementation of justice reforms. These objectives aim to address the causes of corruption, which stem from the influence of powerful individuals or of local gangs via extortion or other points of leverage. These incentives promote corruption through a variety of existing circumstances, including personal gain for bad actors, exploitation of a low loyalty to the governing system, and most significantly a general lack of recourse to alternative paths for those pressured to act corruptly or to tolerate corruption.

This report finds **three major conclusions regarding the confrontation of corruption** in this region.

First, at the highest levels of government, **politicians must be appropriately incentivized to act in service of their constituency**, rather than in service of their own interests or those of third parties such as influential elites or criminal organizations.

Second, around general political involvement, **existing civil society groups must be both capable and motivated to act in pursuit of positive domestic change**.

Third, **the population at large must develop a general trust of the governing bodies** to engage with them positively.

Each of these conclusions involves the development of incentives for various actors at every level of society. While existing programming does address components of these presently, such as the Fiscal Transparency Activity or Civil Society and Media, both of which occur in Honduras, more can be done to develop programs that confront these challenges more directly and with greater cohesion.

In the immediate term, the behavior of government officials can be handled through direct action at the political level by the United States. **An enforceable framework must be negotiated between the United States and regional governments** that establishes clear consequences for corrupt activity undermining the framework negotiated. Previous programs such as the CICIG and MACICH were successful at reducing impunity among political actors, though pushback from national elites as well as its limited framework demonstrates this approach's flaws. Ways to rectify this would be through a broader approach to engage with those in power. For example, one regional expert suggested methods to prevent elites from "feeling like elites", through financial asset freezes or travel restrictions to the United States. These solutions, approached through political offices, like that of the Vice President, would force an official to weigh options more seriously

when making the personal calculation to act corruptly or honestly and to hold to commitments negotiated with the United States.

In addition, **prosecuting corrupt officials or those pressing them to act corruptly has been demonstrated to raise the cost of this action.** A shortcoming of international programs such as CICIG, however, is that they take the initiative out of the hands of the local population, and once these programs end, so do the prosecutions. To account for this, **the prosecutorial elements at every level of the regional governments must be enhanced to carry out these high-level investigations and prosecutions.** A model for this could be Guatemala's Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity (FECI), a legacy of CICIG that remains in operation. In this area, one regional expert criticized past approaches which tend to "stovepipe" the anti-corruption efforts into the national justice offices. By instead reinforcing these offices at various levels, more prosecutions will be able to occur and professionals in this field will gain experience. Additionally, this will allow for a greater focus on local governing bodies in addition to national ones, which can have a more tangible and visible effect on the populations.

While higher-level political action is taking place, **ground-level engagement with civil society is also essential** to ensure longevity for these changes to the system. Interviewees have suggested that a well-organized and capable civil society is able to exert appropriate pressure on political figures to bring about positive change, even in corrupt systems. This approach is at the core of developing in-country capabilities to prevent changes from reverting after the international community disengages. One existing program previously mentioned is Civil Society and Media in Honduras, which promotes non-governmental organizations observing government activity. Other programs include Civil Society in the Eastern Region for El Salvador and Communities Leading Development in Guatemala. A core component of this type of aid, which these programs include, is the need for technical training, and given the different needs in each country, the current tailored approach for each country (or even subregion) is very valuable.

One element missing from broader programming is the concept of **political cover for actors that the United States supports.** This report recommends the establishment of a broader framework for providing political cover to in-country partners. This task is currently conducted at the embassy level, and while this level is most appropriate for determining which operators should receive this support and how to do it, a unified understanding of the need for this support should be disseminated to the US missions in this region and actively supported by senior officials in Washington. This will give civil society greater confidence when engaging with US embassies, which in turn will increase their effectiveness and engagement.

The team's conclusion in the governance area is also the one that requires the longest time to realize. This involves a broad societal shift in the understanding of how government functions and who it functions for. According to papers citing polling and interviews with people familiar with this subject, the populations of these countries tend to harbor a deep distrust in their government and tend to see it as not willing to act in the interests of the population, preferring instead self-serving interest. This promotes disengagement with politics and drives up a desire to leave the country. However, disengagement gives greater power to those who subvert public interests. **By incentivizing the population to engage more with their political system, more scrutiny of bad actors will occur, making it more difficult to act corruptly.**

Current programming such as Fiscal Transparency Activity (Honduras) approaches this issue, but more is needed. One recommended method is **working with the governments in a greater capacity to establish visible social programs aimed to address the needs of the public. Through greater engagement on behalf of good government actors trust will be built and going forward more people will engage voluntarily with the government and will be willing to participate on essential issues.** Another recommendation is to **create public information campaigns** to inform the public about more activities that the government is doing, like Fiscal Transparency Activity. This widespread information campaign will reach a larger audience given that many people have not bought into the publicly funded programs, as much of the population do not pay taxes.² This type of goal takes a long time to accomplish, though, so the USG must **understand that a sustained effort over many years is vital to success.** This area also deals most directly with those that make the choice to migrate or stay, so while reforming the elements of government is important to solve the regional issues, the perceptions of those changes are what will ultimately alter people's decisions regarding migration.

PROSPERITY

Issues related to economic prosperity that drive migration in this region range from unemployment rates to negative perceptions of future economic prospects. In a landmark paper, **Creative Associates noted that in high migration municipalities in Guatemala, being unemployed makes someone two times as likely to migrate and that 71% of individuals migrating are coming from dire unemployment situations.**³ In the 18th publication of the series *International Migration: Economics and Politics*, Ronald Skeldon noted that migration is both the creator and product of perceptions of poverty. When migration in a region increases and contact between emigres and their community exists, local perception of their own level of poverty is likely to rise regardless of real changes. A higher perception of poverty in turn leads to more migration, resulting in a self-fulfilling cycle.⁴ The same effect holds true when individuals perceive a wealth disparity within their community, which has implications for the effects of economic inequality on migration.⁵

When reviewing the USAID programs focusing on employment and increasing economic prosperity in Guatemala, programs such as Feed the Future that work with coffee and other agricultural value chains appear to be increasing the resilience of farmers, and therefore increasing their economic output: when the program in Guatemala was last evaluated in 2013, areas with Feed the Future programs saw a 29% decrease in poverty and a 10.2% decrease in stunting of children due to malnutrition. Agriculture is a main source of economic activity for almost one-third of individuals in the Northern Triangle, and past USAID-funded programs like Climate, Nature, and Communities which focused on crop diversification and new farming methods had shown progress increasing economic prosperity.⁶

² Curtin, "Low Taxation Perpetuates Insecurity in Central America."

³ "Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk It All."

⁴ Skeldon, "Migration and Poverty."

⁵ Kafle, Benfica, and Winters, "Does Relative Deprivation Induce Migration?"

⁶ Sigelmann, "The Hidden Driver Climate Change and Migration in Central America's Northern Triangle."

Employability and workforce development programs, explained by USAID officials and in the evaluation of the Puentes program in El Salvador, **can be useful if they focus on intersecting issues and guarantee lasting impacts rather than focusing on output measures of how many individuals took part in the program.** Skills training has often been a focus of prosperity-aimed development projects seeking to improve human capital in-country. However, a report by the Wilson Center on U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle noted that job-training programs often fell short in connecting the necessary elements to ensure efficacy, for example by failing to adequately collect subsequent information regarding the application of training in the workplace and trainee job retention.⁷ **Post-course impacts need to receive more systematic attention rather than simple performance evaluations, a cross-cutting trend that will be further discussed in the section on MEL.**

Individuals familiar with prosperity promotion programs suggested that investing in skills development at the secondary education level could have a greater long-term ROI compared to the inherently short-term nature of occupational-skills training programs. (Ernst, 2020 pg. 69). The Puentes program in El Salvador gives training opportunities for youth to develop vocational skills and finish their education to receive better employment outcomes. The objectives of the program in El Salvador were to improve workforce readiness for at-risk youth in 15 high violence municipalities.⁸ The success of this program in El Salvador has led to a Puentes program to be started in Guatemala, where the scope of the project is expanded to 25 municipalities.⁹ This project is successful because it has increased long-term success in terms of employability in that 6,000 youths were employed, and combines the areas of security and prosperity as shown in the project evaluation for El Salvador.¹⁰ **Since unemployment is a large driver of migration, funding should be integrated into these programs in a way that creates both short and long-term impacts and combines areas of growth.**

An expert on economic development's relationship with irregular migration argued his conclusion that when a certain GDP per capita is reached, migration will decrease. **Once a country reaches PPP\$8,000-\$10,000 GDP per capita, there is an observed statistically significant decrease in migration.**¹¹ This range is debated, one interviewee from CSIS gave \$8,000 GDP per capita as the set threshold while the CGDEV says that \$10,000 GDP per capita is the minimum threshold to have a statistical reduction in emigration.¹² **This measure contains multiple imperfections, like how it does not take into account income inequality, however it does further demonstrate the strength of the relationship between prosperity and migration and the desirability of finding ways to enhance national prosperity.**

For numerous Central American countries, however, a large portion of national finances are concentrated in the hands of elites. This gives a country the statistical appearance of achieving the

⁷ Ernst et al., "US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014–2019."

⁸ Ugaz, Campuzano, and Murray, "Final Performance Evaluation Plan for Puentes Para El Empleo."

⁹ "Country Fact Sheet: El Salvador."

¹⁰ Ugaz, Campuzano, and Murray, "Final Performance Evaluation Plan for Puentes Para El Empleo."

¹¹ "Perspectives on Global Development 2017"; Clemens, "Does Development Reduce Migration?"

¹² Clemens, "Does Development Reduce Migration?"

GDP per capita threshold. However, the reality is that the low-income demographic often falls far below this line. The Gini coefficient is used to measure the level of income inequality; according to the World Bank, in 2014 Guatemala's value was 48.3, in 2019 Honduras and El Salvador's values were 48.2 and 38.8 respectively. The level of inequality in these countries has historically been higher than in the US, except for El Salvador in recent years.

Higher inequality rates in comparison to the U.S. suggests that emigration offers an even greater earning potential than the per-capita GDP comparison would imply, and therefore acts as a pull factor. Wealth inequality also acts as a push factor for irregular migration. A study on relative deprivation theory for the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* found a statistical correlation between the level of in-country wealth inequality and the propensity to migrate.¹³ This positive relationship was found to increase among “rural households, male headed households, households with more youth, and agricultural households”.¹⁴ All four demographic characteristics are highly prevalent in the Northern Triangle¹⁵ and thus the results of this study have significant implications for aid aimed at economic growth.

Programs that specifically target economic growth often underestimate the significant effects of inequality on the validity of GDP per capita growth as a measure of poverty reduction. Aid effectiveness and MEL reports concerning economic loans and grants towards Central America tend to employ the growth rate of GDP per capita as the dependent variable according to a study on Inequality, Aid, and Growth in 20 Central and Southern American countries between 1992 and 2007 for the *Journal of Applied Economics*.¹⁶ While this is efficient for measuring these programs' overall effect, it contains a targeting problem often overlooked. According to a study, this practice makes it impossible to discern which aspects of the economic aid package benefit the growth rate of high-income versus low-income citizens.¹⁷ **In a region with high economic disparity, development programs need to employ an inequality-adjusted GDP per capita formula.** Doing so will help development programs to target more precisely who benefits from economic assistance. This can significantly contribute to the goal of reducing poverty as outlined by the Strategy for Engagement in Central America. The inclusion of inequality in economic formulas is also important as aid-inflows to Central America have decreased significantly as the region rises to middle-income status.¹⁸ This status is determined by the World Bank using GNI which omits consideration of inequality, further exacerbating the targeting problem.

The GDP per capita threshold has credence as a policy aim to reduce irregular migration but achieving a statistically significant change means requiring implementers to figure economic inequality into the aid targeting equation. This can be achieved by comparing overall GDP per capita growth in relation to that of the population with an income lower or equal to that of the ninth decile.¹⁹ When the authors of this study employed this formula in 20 Latin American

¹³ Kafle, Benfica, and Winters, “Does Relative Deprivation Induce Migration?”

¹⁴ Kafle, Benfica, and Winters.

¹⁵ “Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk It All.”

¹⁶ Tezanos, Quiñones, and Guijarro, “INEQUALITY, AID AND GROWTH.”

¹⁷ Tezanos, Quiñones, and Guijarro.

¹⁸ Castells-Quintana and Larrú, “Does Aid Reduce Inequality?”

¹⁹ Tezanos, Quiñones, and Guijarro, “INEQUALITY, AID AND GROWTH.”

and Caribbean countries, they found that the average 2008 GDP per capita average fell from \$7,418 to \$5,331.²⁰ A difference of roughly \$2,000 between the top 10% and the rest of the region has significant implications for how economic aid should be calculated. **The team believes that this formula should be employed by US development agencies to effectively address intra-national disparities that contribute to poverty and migration.**

Several interviewees noted that USAID programs targeted to foster the growth of the private sector have been previously very successful. According to USAID’s Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), programming in El Salvador is to be focused “on promoting private enterprise-driven development with private sector engagement”.²¹ However, a persistent challenge is that these economies are largely informal, which impedes the government’s ability to collect taxes, disempowers workers, and makes productivity difficult to measure. **One barrier to formalizing the economy is corruption: tax and other regulatory bodies routinely bar entry into the formal marketplace unless compensated. This creates a perverse incentive for small businesses to remain informal, which shrinks the tax base and decreases the government’s ability to provide adequate services.**

Utilizing the Economic Competitiveness Project in El Salvador can empower small businesses to move into the “formal” sector, increase private sector engagement, and globalize the market economies of the country. Mentioned in the Economic Competitiveness Project is the creation of development credit authority loan guarantees for small and medium enterprises in collaboration with private sector banks. In the quarterly report for the project, over 100 small and medium businesses became formalized.²² This project also links small and medium enterprises to the global economy, which addresses the US State Department’s prosperity goal of improving trade and transport within the region. **The team recommends programs that foster international trade and transport among the Northern Triangle countries, as the strategy notes, along with increasing private sector engagement to help formalize markets, as stated by an expert interviewee, be explored further.**

To meet the challenge of formalizing the economies a former USAID official shared some ways to incentivize local wealthy stakeholders with large amounts of capital to invest in their communities. He explained that despite the heightened financial risks, by tapping into their sense of local connection they could be influenced to invest in job-creating enterprises, which will contribute to the creation of a formal, taxable economy. He also emphasized the careful selection of these stakeholders by those attempting to incentivize them to develop these businesses. This task involves building interpersonal relationships over a long period to ensure that these actors are both personally invested in broad regional prosperity and that they have the means to accomplish this goal. These “good actors” would-be leaders of local industries already with an existing stake in the success of the locale. Vetting over time should be done to ensure they are not corrupt, if possible, and if they are selected to move forward then they can be worked with to ensure they are able to navigate political barriers that exist, something with which anti-corruption efforts and political pressure by the United States can help. **This long-term gradual approach develops**

²⁰ Tezanos, Quiñones, and Guijarro.

²¹ “El Salvador - Country Development Cooperation Strategy.”

²² Palladium International, “USAID ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS PROJECT QUARTERLY REPORT: 1st Quarter FY 2019: October – December 2018.”

gainful employment opportunities for workers and has the potential to bolster another kind of economic or political elite to challenge the status quo of corruption.

On the other hand, the team recommends further use of conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs as a short-term approach. CCTs can be an effective way in both reducing poverty and curbing migration by providing welfare programs conditional upon the receivers' actions. It is important to note that CCTs do not deliberately hand out money, but rather expect some degree of success from the receivers. Moreover, CCTs are expected to go through a screening process. For example, channeling funds to individuals through international or local non-governmental organizations would assess the funds being transferred. In fact, a spokesman for the USAID which administers foreign aid stated that CCTs in programs are already being used “to help people meet their basic needs” in the wake of severe hurricanes in Central America in late 2020.²³ Nevertheless, **when further assessing the effectiveness of CCTs, its disadvantage shares a common similarity with previous programs our team has come across, especially related to MEL. Some CCT evaluations mention how data is often limited and how there is a lack of rigorous evidence to conduct evaluations. Notwithstanding its limit, this near-term approach has the potential to both reduce poverty and curb migration in the region.**

The former AID official mentioned above, also highlighted that previous aid programs done in collaboration with the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES) were successful in creating jobs and expanding the private sector. Current USAID programming does not include FUSADES as an implementing partner, furthermore, agencies should consider FUSADES as a key ally in the region for economic and social development based on previous successful partnerships.

Lack of foreign investment is one of the factors that hinders the region’s economy to the extent that the Northern Triangle has the slowest economic growth rate in Central America. The El Salvador Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) states that USAID will support El Salvador’s government to “build its reputation among global financiers and investors by controlling expenditures, institutionalizing processes like results-based budgeting, implementing information technology systems that promote transparency, and removing hurdles to investment”.²⁴ Foreign investment is further hindered by security issues and concerns of gang-controlled territory, which causes investors to prefer other countries in Central America such as Costa Rica and Panama. Security and violence contribute to this, and so does the rule of law and corruption. **Nevertheless, the research team suggests focusing on investing as a long-term economic measure to address the prosperity of the region.**

To conclude, the goals for increasing prosperity must contain a range of short-, medium-, and long-term programs and key programs should target areas that have the highest inequality levels by adjusting the GDP per capita calculus in addition to pursuing programs in areas of most likely progress. The team recommends the use of conditional cash transfers that can be tied to a requirement of staying in the country as a short-term approach. A medium-term approach would include programs that focus on market formalization, job

²³ Hesson and Spetalnick, “EXCLUSIVE U.S. Considering Cash Payments to Central America to Stem Migration | Reuters.”

²⁴ “El Salvador - Country Development Cooperation Strategy.”

training, and secondary education opportunities for at-risk youth. These programs can bridge short and long-term solutions by giving sustained employment for young people in areas of high migration, connecting small businesses to global investors after the process of being “formalized”, and increasing private sector engagement. To make sure that places with the highest risk of migrating are receiving the assistance they need, our team recommends the implementation of an inequality-adjusted GDP-per capita procedure.

SECURITY

Security concerns in the Northern Triangle range from large-scale narcotics trafficking to local community-level violent crime. The issue of security has severe effects on the population [creative study], their mindset, and their ability to develop a stable and prosperous economy. The gangs’ significant influence on the region can be attributed to extortion practices, violence, and territory control which reinforces impunity flowing from weak justice and governance systems. The economic instability and weak job market are significant factors that allow gangs to be further established in the region and lead to more individuals migrating. These factors have made the Northern Triangle’s homicide rate rank consistently among the highest in the world, with El Salvador having 52 homicides per 100,000 people, followed by Honduras with 40 and subsequently Guatemala with 22.²⁵ The team’s research strongly indicates that programs must be locally based and those focusing on violence must specifically target communities and groups that are the main cause.

INL officials interviewed for this report expressed optimism that capacity building of police in El Salvador has been particularly effective. Combined with building the capacity of judges, prosecutors, and investigators, coordinating with the Department of Justice, and providing in-country individual mentoring on cases, there have been successes in indicting corrupt individuals and curbing the homicide rates within the country. An example that INL officials mentioned was the indictment of fourteen of MS-13’s highest leadership earlier this year. Additionally, INL officials stated that working with the Navy and coastal police has also shown signs of success, pushing narco-trafficking further offshore and integrating useful strategies for targeting interventions.

However, these areas of success still leave a very demanding security and justice agenda ahead.

According to the “Building a Better Future” independent task force by the Atlantic Council, local authorities have no effective mechanisms to address social issues, such as a lack of healthy community outlets brought on by economic hardship, that push Central American youth to join illicit activities or to reduce gangs’ influence in the area.²⁶

Many of the experts the team consulted suggest that place-based programs targeted in communities with high levels of gang violence have proven more successful than nationwide approaches in addressing patterns of crime and violence. According to an assistance overview report by the US Global Leadership Coalition, there were higher declines in homicide rates in

²⁵ CLAVEL, “InSight Crime’s 2017 Homicide Round-Up.”

²⁶ Negroponete, Atlantic Council of the United States, and Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, *Building a Better Future*.

neighborhoods where USAID and the State Department had targeted programs (66% in El Salvador and 78% in Honduras) than areas that experienced a general decline in homicides (42% in El Salvador and 23% in Honduras).²⁷

Some examples of these place-based programs include violence interruption, cognitive behavioral therapy, and community policing. Additionally, an earlier meta-review of USAID security programs in the Northern Triangle concludes that security should always be connected with development and prosperity and that strategies that actively engage with local knowledge are likely to be more effective.²⁸ A recent study using municipalities in the United States with high levels of gang activity concluded that place-based strategies with aims to build trust and community collaboration can help reduce gang shootings and violence by up to 43%.²⁹ If translated to the Northern Triangle and more widely deployed, **the researchers concluded that the use of community collaboration and local focus could be successful in decreasing gang violence.**

An example of a program that focuses on both security and prosperity and has worked at a place-based level is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for gang members and their families. Within a recent meta-review of USAID security programs, amongst 23 program reviews, CBT was noted as having a strong impact on decreasing violence combined with strong evidence backing its validity.³⁰ **Given the strong potential impacts of CBT programming, the team recommends running additional pilot programs and expanding existing efforts.** On the other hand, experts consulted argue that the security programs that are not actively targeting specific communities, gang members, and the root causes of violence are not as effective in producing measurable results. For example, USAID's Violence and Crime Prevention Project in El Salvador has implemented Youth Outreach Centers to promote youth development, that while having a positive effect on the young people's lives, it does not address out-migration as 42% of poll respondents of the centers mentioned that they still intend to migrate within three years.³¹

Violence perpetrated by gangs is a primary driver of out-migration.³² For example, gangs operate in 94% of municipalities in El Salvador and have a network of an estimated 400,000 people. INL officials explained that there are only 25,000 police and 13,000 military officers, leaving these forces immensely outnumbered by gang members. Gangs permeate society and control access to areas that are within their territory, which increases the corrupt behavior of gangs as they utilize bribes and extortion to further their own agendas. Government officials are not removed from this phenomenon either. If government officials and their families are not subject to intimidation and threats from gangs, oftentimes they are contributing to corrupt behavior. Expert interviewees argued that the poor situation across the region negatively affects efforts to increase economic prosperity and good governance.

²⁷ "U.S. Assistance To Central America Promotes Security, Economic Development, and Rule of Law."

²⁸ Abt and Winship, "CAM - What Works In Reducing Community Violence."

²⁹ American University's Countering Gang Violence Task Force, "Diplomacy Lab Countering Gang Violence Report."

³⁰ Abt and Winship, "CAM - What Works In Reducing Community Violence."

³¹ Roth and Hartnett, "Creating Reasons to Stay?"

³² "Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk It All."

Gender-based violence is an additional ongoing concern within the region that causes hundreds of thousands of women and their children to migrate to the United States. Experts stated that out of any demographic within the Northern Triangle, “Honduran women are the most prone to migrate.” In 2016 alone, 65,000 women fled the Northern Triangle due to violence against them.³³ A panel discussion that included one of the expert interviewees explained that many women had been fleeing their homes because reports of sexual violence were under-reported and less likely to be dealt with unless very severe. In 2018, 10,000+ cases were brought to the Honduran court (28 cases per day) that involved gender-based violence and within the Northern Triangle in 2017 only 75,000 cases were reported.³⁴ Women and their families, like many in the region, lack faith in their governments, security, and judicial structures that are supposed to keep them safe from violence. El Salvador and Honduras have two of the highest femicide rates internationally and it is seen that there is a lack of programs addressing gender in these two countries.

Guatemala has six U.S. programs that focus on women and girls, El Salvador and Honduras have three each, and there is one regionally focused program. One of the expert interviewees said that even though domestic violence is explicitly brought up in the Biden Administration's updated Citizenship Act of 2021 and within the USG strategy on Central America, there should be a quicker response in the form of place-based strategies combined with the longer process of legislation. **A way for a quicker response to be realized is through programs that build positive relations between women and their local justice systems.** The 2020 US Department of State Human Rights Report notes in Honduras, there are two UNDP-operated centers in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa (two very high migration municipalities), “where women could report crimes, seek medical and psychological attention, and receive other services”.³⁵ **The team recommends translating programs and centers like this to other municipalities in the Northern Triangle, as they would be beneficial. The expert also suggested that part of USAID funding in programs could also be used to branch the local and national goals and create awareness campaigns on gender-based violence.**

An additional issue with data on GBV is that it is often a motivating factor in an individual's decision to migrate but is underreported. Most data on reasons for migration is collected at the point of entry, usually by the United States Customs and Border Protection. The officers recording reasons for migration are generally male and speak limited Spanish. This presents an issue for the validity and reliability of data. The culture in Central America surrounding domestic and gender-based violence is highly passive toward reform and discourages victims from speaking out: one study on attitudes towards spousal violence in the Americas found that on average, one in four condone spousal violence.³⁶ In Guatemala alone, 53.9% of individuals condone violence against a wife who is perceived to be neglecting her household duties.³⁷ Women are discouraged from talking about GBV, much less reporting it and so the likelihood of listing it as a reason for migration to a CBP officer is very low. A senior private sector development expert

³³ Ziff, “Nowhere to Turn.”

³⁴ Ziff.

³⁵ “HONDURAS 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT.”

³⁶ Pak, “One in Four Condone Spousal Violence, Though Attitudes Vary across Countries and Individuals in the Americas.”

³⁷ Pak.

noted that the most significant barrier to formulating effective strategies targeting GBV is the consistent inaccuracy of data.

To conclude, security must be viewed from different perspectives, but with judicious detail. The USG needs to focus on providing more assistance in reporting cases of GBV as the motivation for migration. One promising solution to this problem is to increase migrants' initial access to Immigration Legal Assistance charities. In a panel hosted by the Inter-American Dialogue and the Seattle International Foundation, Corie O'Rourke an immigration attorney at the Ayuda Foundation noted that many female migrants will initially give a "fluff answer" as the reason for migration but eventually reveal it was violence based when further asked.³⁸ **Coordination between these services and the CBP can help to increase the validity of data about GBV which is essential to effectively addressing this issue at its root. Place-based and evidence-focused strategies are most effective, and the team recommends they be implemented through cognitive behavioral therapy for gang members and their families, community policing and collaboration, and capacity building for law enforcement. Programs focusing on violence towards businesses and men should not be lessened, but the issues of gender-based violence across the region need to be addressed, which requires improving the validity of data collection on reasons for migration and restoring the relationship between women and their local judicial systems.** Specific programs that would be able to help with gender-based violence are the Youth and Gender Justice program and Community Roots project in Guatemala, which highlight the importance of community collaboration and building trust (in this case between women and the judicial system).

MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING

This section of the report focuses on the methods of evaluation that the United States Government relies on to inform its approach to the region. A common perception held by outside experts and presented in research documents reviewed for this report is that USG evaluation infrastructure prioritizes "output" over "outcome" -- for example, counting the number of people a program trained as opposed to the impact of that training on their employment. In MEL vocabulary, these refer to prioritizing "performance" evaluations over "impact" evaluations, with the former measuring how efficiently the implementing partner delivered the aid and the latter measuring whether the aid had its intended effect. Interviewees across both State and USAID acknowledged that in the past, MEL programs have indeed been guilty of prioritizing performance over impact but expressed optimism that in recent years there has been a renewed focus on using quality metrics.

Baseline Data

An area that continues to affect the quality of evaluations, however, is the limited availability of baseline data. A 2016 meta-review found that 40% of foreign assistance evaluations had limitations on their data collection methods,³⁹ and interview findings echoed that evaluations are frequently less useful because they do not have adequate baseline data. This can seriously limit

³⁸ Ziff, "Nowhere to Turn."

³⁹ "FROM EVIDENCE TO LEARNING: Recommendations to Improve U.S. Foreign Assistance Evaluation."

one's ability to view progress on assistance program objectives: in the security area, for example, it will inevitably be difficult to tie violence reduction programs, which take place in limited areas, to national homicide rates. The corresponding opportunity is that better linking data collection in host countries can yield benefits both for those countries themselves and for USG evaluation. Several programs have already begun to capture this opportunity, such as *InfoSegura*, which was designed to help law enforcement agencies use common metrics and link together their datasets. This has the dual benefit of helping law enforcement agencies observe best practices elsewhere and giving US programs baseline data for multiple cities against which to evaluate program impact.

Baseline data collection can also be improved here in the United States in a more important way. The revision to the Northern Triangle strategy has placed a renewed focus on limiting irregular migration. However, while programs have seen many local successes, the planning cycle still suffers from a lack of visibility into migration patterns. Operators in the region obviously have a broad idea of areas with the highest migration -- the Guatemalan highlands are a commonly used example. However, this review could only identify one public study (Creative Study (Saliendo Adelante))⁴⁰ that collected highly disaggregated data on reasons for migration. **If limiting irregular migration is a goal, it is in the interest of all parties for foreign assistance agencies and bureaus to collaborate more closely with Customs and Border Protection** to understand 1) from which regions most migrants are coming, and 2) their reasons for migrating. USAID began a collaboration to this end through a memorandum of understanding signed with CBP in March 2020 and considering the benefit such coordination would bring to all parties involved in foreign assistance, the team believes it is advisable to scale it.

Knowledge Dissemination

Even once evaluations are completed, however, there remain barriers to their use in planning programs. Even the process itself of evaluating programs seems to stimulate learning: one survey showed 90% of evaluations are said to influence future decisions or actions.⁴¹ However, of those who responded so, 72% were themselves directly involved in evaluating programs.⁴² Thus, **it seems that while evaluations are valuable for learning within teams, they frequently fail to reach the broader audience necessary to maximize their potential.**

Interviewees and research alike point to two factors that might facilitate broader evaluation use: preparation of executive summaries and clustering of findings by region and program type. First, MEL reports are typically over 100 pages long. This level of detail is important -- without a rigorous methodology, an evaluation loses its usefulness -- however, it ultimately limits its usage among executives who balance numerous priorities. We received widespread feedback that to be useful, **MEL reports should be summarized into 1-3 -page documents and should contain actionable language.** Second, while evaluations may have valuable insight for other practitioners in the region, they are rarely used by those outside their country or region. Thus, **there is a significant opportunity for learning by clustering evaluation findings. First, having evaluations grouped by region would give another valuable tool to executive-level officials**

⁴⁰ "Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk It All."

⁴¹ "FROM EVIDENCE TO LEARNING: Recommendations to Improve U.S. Foreign Assistance Evaluation."

⁴² "FROM EVIDENCE TO LEARNING: Recommendations to Improve U.S. Foreign Assistance Evaluation."

for referencing program successes and failures. Second, grouping evaluations by program function would allow practitioners to share best practices more easily -- for example, having programs focused on preventing gang violence in El Salvador easily have access to evaluations for gang violence programs in Honduras (or elsewhere in the world).

Integration of Novel Technologies

Finally, **there are opportunities to increase the cost efficiency of evaluation using novel technologies.** The method that was discussed with the most optimism has been **geospatial methods for impact evaluation.** These types of evaluations will not be useful for all programs: since they require a spatially targeted intervention, they will be most suitable for prosperity- and security-oriented programs (rather than governance programs, which are more frequently national). However, a well-designed geospatial impact evaluation can be conducted for as little as 10% of the cost of a randomized control trial, the current standard method for impact evaluation. With such potential cost savings, there are several key steps USG entities should take to maximize their value.

First, all program data should be geotagged when possible. Frequently, programs can be evaluated using geospatial methods, but the key factor, location, is not collected when treatments are assigned. **Second, there should be an increased focus on linking datasets in-country.** Programs such as *InfoSegura*, as well as broader use of surveys, such as the health surveys the US periodically conducts, would help to that end. **Finally, investigating the use of satellite technology could yield significant benefits.** New methodologies have recently been developed to identify agricultural output (geospatial report), GDP, and other sorts of indicators at an extremely granular level, even rivaling that of field surveys. Investing in this capability could substantially decrease costs for impact evaluations for a broad array of agriculture- and economic development-oriented programs.

IMPROVEMENTS IN BUDGETING

While the intricacies of the budgeting process go far beyond the scope of this report, one interviewee who is highly familiar with the process for assistance programs suggested two areas for improvement, which the research team wanted to flag. **Two major criticisms of the current process are that it creates an artificially narrow timeframe for the programs to succeed and that it provides for very little adaptability once a program is in place.**

First, the nature of the process from program inception to Congressional approval and on the ground implementation results in a short lifespan for programs that may need extensive time before success is seen. Second, the drawn-out, years-long process from the initial funding request to the reception and allocation of funding often prevents implementers from quickly responding to successes or failures and adapting programs to achieve better results.

The team believes that these shortcomings could be rectified through a well-conceived engagement and dialogue between the relevant agencies and key Congressional committees. The team can see how this kind of constructive dialogue could allow for those creating the budget to have a clearer picture of what is necessary for aid success in Central America, for example.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Governance

The research team has distilled certain conclusions related to each area of the strategy and has developed recommendations where possible to meet the needs of those conclusions. In the area of governance, the USG approach should be divided into three categories: political and government action, support for civil society, and broad societal motivation. Each of these categories targets a different level of required action to meet the challenge of prosecuting corruption, which is vital to ensuring the longevity and effectiveness of all forms of assistance. **At the level of national governments, those in power must be appropriately incentivized to act in the best interest of their countries and disincentivized from aiding private influential actors or acting corruptly out of self-interest.** This is best accomplished at the political level, with high-level USG officials negotiating directly with national leaders to **develop a framework to combat political corruption that includes both positive and negative incentives.** Such a framework would increase the ability of aid programs to achieve better outcomes within the countries and would make it easier to require national and local judicial reforms to increase regional prosecution capabilities and hopefully to achieve better results, while also creating an expectation of swift personal consequences for corrupt officials in the form of personal sanctions and asset freezes which the USG could impose through existing tools. As prosecutorial offices are ensured political support through the expected leverage from the USG, prosecutions should be expected to rise and the pressure to act honestly will begin to become a norm from within the country rather than from outside sources.

To ensure that **civil society actors** from relevant countries and even sub-regions can exert the appropriate political influence to bring about positive change, aid programs must continue to engage with these groups. **Programs should continue to assist in the development of technical capabilities in the areas of organizational management, community engagement, and government accountability action. In a much broader sense, a uniform regional understanding of the need for political cover must be developed by United States missions in each county.** This cover will allow local actors to affect change without fear of retribution from corrupt officials. By developing these organizations, local self-governance capacity will grow over time, increasing the capabilities of people in the region to confront complex governance challenges themselves.

The broadest conclusion centers on the general population and its civic engagement. Presently widespread distrust in public institutions disincentivizes participation, which makes actions easier for corrupt officials, which creates a negative feedback loop. **Action must be taken to develop a sense of connection between the people and the institutions that represent and serve them.** While reforms are taking place within government and while civil society grows, it's necessary to develop the connection between the two with capabilities, information, and education campaigns. Our team recommends increasing transparency on the use of public money. Additionally, functional development programs, like the Fiscal Transparency Activity, which shares government updates with citizens, will demonstrate that the government is beginning to act in the interests of the people. A particular subject to include is the **successful prosecutions of corrupt police and government officials.** This will create a sense of capability and initiative in the community. Each

of these levels of engagement has a different timeline, with actions being accomplishable at different time periods and results panning out over years. The most near-term recommendations involve the political interactions between regional officials and the USG, while civil society capacity building will require more time to take effect. The longest-term recommendation involves the societal shift in the perception of government, which will require a minimum of multiple years of engagement after triumphs have been realized in the areas of capacity building and successful prosecutions.

Prosperity

Conclusions in prosperity are centered around an understanding of one of the motives for those in the Northern Triangle to migrate as well as one of the major deterring factors against productive investment. First, the research team has concluded that a sound metric regarding the inflection point of the decision to migrate is the GDP per capita when adjusted for localized inequality. Between PPP \$8,000 and \$10,000 migration tendencies decrease dramatically, indicating that those who achieve this metric feel secure enough to remain in place. Second, the team reaffirmed the notion that the lack of security and the rule of law are fundamental reasons that investors take their money elsewhere.

This report recommends three actions over the short-, medium-, and long-term, as well as a general adjustment in where programs are targeted. When designing and selecting programs, **it is important to target areas with high out-migration potential**. Therefore, areas that have either low inequality-adjusted GDP per capita or areas that have been affected by other hardships should receive most of the programming focus to ensure migratory tendencies are confronted with incentives to remain. **In the short term, specific programming should be centered on getting spendable cash in the hands of people facing economic hardship**. If possible, cash transfers to high-risk areas with the stipulation that the recipients stay in-country will improve the ability for people to meet their immediate economic needs, driving down the immediacy of the perceived need to migrate. **In the medium term, an increase of job training programs centered on specific occupational skill development or general secondary education will best prepare the workforce of the region for future job opportunities**. These programs need to be accompanied by thorough evaluations for effect, such as knowledge transfer or job retention information. A more skilled workforce will also act as a greater incentive for investment going forward. **The long-term recommendation involves the gathering of investment itself**. A focus should be placed on those of means within the countries who can be incentivized to invest in job-creating enterprises through appealing to a sense of national or regional pride as well as by creating more certainty and rule of law in the local investment environments. Additionally, as other elements of the strategy for development succeed (i.e. security and governance), barriers to investment will be reduced, making attracting international and domestic actors more feasible.

Security

This report concludes in security that place-based strategies are most effective at reducing violence, programs overall are more potent when they have the appropriate latitude to fulfill their mandate without political interference, and there is a significant need for an increase in the attention paid to gender-based violence. Place-based strategies such as cognitive behavioral therapy for at-risk youth or criminals have a demonstrated effect on reducing

crime in targeted areas, and an increase in the number of these programs will greatly improve general capacity. Connecting place-based programs such as community policing to national-level initiatives aimed at improving police accountability or reducing impunity for corrupt and criminal actors is also a way to give these highly specific programs much-needed scale.

While these programs are occurring, be they for gender-based violence, community policing, or general violence reduction like with the crime of extortion, **programs will be severely weakened without appropriate political cover.** These programs impact the perpetrators of violence and gangs in ways that incentivize pushback, and corrupt political leaders may be pressed to discontinue these programs as a result. To ensure that these programs are permitted to carry out their mission, political cover from good-faith local politicians or US Embassies will be effective. This is similar to the ‘cover’ needed for civil society organizations to flourish. Finally, **programming to handle the widespread gender-based violence in the region is imperative to address this significant motivator for migration. In addition to greater amounts of data collection to better understand the issue, specific programming to connect victims of GBV and other forms of violence to appropriate justice institutions will be effective at both resolving specific cases while also developing a sense of community-oriented conflict resolution through faith in justice systems.** To achieve this end, reforms in policing along the lines of community-based policing will be necessary to ensure that bad officers who themselves commit crimes are not responding to these sensitive subjects, while also increasing the capacity of the police to handle these severe cases.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

While not related directly to specific programs in the USG strategy, the topic of insufficient monitoring and evaluation practices was prevalent in numerous interviews. This research team has concluded that **in addition to the need for more data on evaluation overall, the style and presentation of the evaluations must change as well.** Presently programs are assessed through output measures, for example, how many people attended a job training session, or how many sessions were conducted. For a more definitive understanding of the reality of the region that can better inform future programming and budgeting, **evaluations must focus on impact** instead, such as how many people that attended a job training session were able to acquire or retain employment.

This shift in method only solves part of the issue regarding the lack of available information, as in addition to gathering more, the presentation must be updated as well. Impact evaluations must be made readily available in a centralized and easily searchable database that provides concise and important information in easily digestible formats. All parties that might find this information useful from Congressional committees to USG agents to implementing partners should have access to this information, and information sharing should be promoted between agencies within the USG. To assist in this task of altering the evaluation process and dissemination methods, **new technologies should be utilized, such as geospatial tools and statistical predictive software.** These systems, as well as others designed to ease the accessibility of this information, will provide low-cost opportunities to greatly increase the United States government’s understanding of the region across all subject areas, increasing its ability to affect positive change efficiently.

General

This report concludes generally that **an increase in cooperation between aid-providing agencies of the United States government is vital** to ensure that the objectives of the engagement strategy in Central America are met. In addition, the team also concluded that program design requires a more holistic approach targeting all levels of society, from the top levels of government to the lives of everyday citizens. These steps, along with better initiatives to ensure realization of best practices within the US government and between agencies and Congress, will help support an increase in program success as well as better programming designed to achieve US interests in the region.

The team appreciates the hard and excellent work underway by dedicated professionals to achieve good results in line with US strategy and objectives in Central America. They hope this “meta-review” from an outside perspective will be of value in this important endeavor.

Works Cited

- Abt, Thomas, and Christopher Winship. “CAM - What Works In Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review And Field Study For The Northern Triangle,” February 2016. <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1862/cam-what-works-reducing-community-violence-meta-review-and-field-study-northern>.
- American University’s Countering Gang Violence Task Forc. “Diplomacy Lab Countering Gang Violence Report,” n.d.
- Castells-Quintana, David, and José María Larrú. “Does Aid Reduce Inequality? Evidence for Latin America.” *The European Journal of Development Research* 27, no. 5 (December 1, 2015): 826–49. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ejdr.2014.67>.
- CLAVEL, TRISTAN. “InSight Crime’s 2017 Homicide Round-Up.” *InSight Crime* (blog), January 19, 2018. <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/2017-homicide-round-up/>.
- Clemens, Michael A. “Does Development Reduce Migration?” *International Handbook on Migration and Economic Development*, December 26, 2014. <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/edcoll/9781782548065/9781782548065.00010.xml>.
- “Country Fact Sheet: El Salvador.” USAID, 2020.
- Curtin, Christina. “Low Taxation Perpetuates Insecurity in Central America.” COHA, July 19, 2011. <https://www.coha.org/low-taxation-perpetuates-insecurity-in-central-america/>.
- Dustmann, Christian, and Anna Okatenko. “Out-Migration, Wealth Constraints, and the Quality of Local Amenities.” *Journal of Development Economics, Land and Property Rights*, 110 (September 1, 2014): 52–63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2014.05.008>.
- “El Salvador - Country Development Cooperation Strategy.” USAID, March 24, 2021. <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1862/el-salvador-country-development-cooperation-strategy>.
- Ernst, Jeff, Kelly Josh, Eric L. Olson, Kristen Sample, and Ricardo Zúñiga. “US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014–2019: Promoting Success by Learning from the Past (No. 42),” December 2020. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/us-foreign-aid-northern-triangle-2014-2019-promoting-success-learning-past-no-42>.

- “FROM EVIDENCE TO LEARNING: Recommendations to Improve U.S. Foreign Assistance Evaluation.” The Lugar Center & The Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network. Accessed May 2, 2021. <https://www.thelugarcenter.org/assets/htmldocuments/TLC%20MFAN%20Evaluation%20Study%20Final%20112017.pdf>.
- Hesson, Ted, and Matt Spetalnick. “EXCLUSIVE U.S. Considering Cash Payments to Central America to Stem Migration | Reuters.” Accessed May 2, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/exclusive-us-considering-cash-transfers-central-american-countries-stem-causes-2021-04-09/>.
- “HONDURAS 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT.” United States Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2020.
- Kafle, Kashi, Rui Benfica, and Paul Winters. “Does Relative Deprivation Induce Migration? Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa.” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 102, no. 3 (2020): 999–1019.
- Lanati, Mauro, and Rainer Thiele. “The Impact of Foreign Aid on Migration Revisited.” *World Development* 111 (November 1, 2018): 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.06.021>.
- Negroponte, John D, Atlantic Council of the United States, and Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center. *Building a Better Future: A Blueprint for Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 2017. http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Building_a_Better_Future_web_0504.pdf.
- Pak, Lauren. “One in Four Condone Spousal Violence, Though Attitudes Vary across Countries and Individuals in the Americas,” 2016, 9.
- Palladium International. “USAID ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS PROJECT QUARTERLY REPORT: 1st Quarter FY 2019: October – December 2018.” USAID, January 2019.
- “Perspectives on Global Development 2017: International Migration in a Shifting World.” Text. OECD. Accessed May 2, 2021. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/perspectives-on-global-development-2017_persp_glob_dev-2017-en.
- Roth, Benjamin J., and Caroline S. Hartnett. “Creating Reasons to Stay? Unaccompanied Youth Migration, Community-Based Programs, and the Power of ‘Push’ Factors in El Salvador.” *Children and Youth Services Review*, Unaccompanied Immigrant Children: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Needs and Responses, 92 (September 1, 2018): 48–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.01.026>.
- “Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk It All.” Creative Associates International, n.d.
- Sigelmann, Laura. “The Hidden Driver Climate Change and Migration in Central America’s Northern Triangle.” American Security Project, September 2019. <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Ref-0229-Climate-Change-Migration-Northern-Triangle.pdf>.
- Skeldon, Ronald. “Migration and Poverty.” *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 17, no. 4 (November 30, 2002): 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.18356/7c0e3452-en>.
- Tezanos, Sergio, Ainoa Quiñones, and Marta Guijarro. “INEQUALITY, AID AND GROWTH: MACROECONOMIC IMPACT OF AID GRANTS AND LOANS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN.” *Journal of Applied Economics* 16, no. 1 (May 1, 2013): 153–77. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1514-0326\(13\)60007-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1514-0326(13)60007-0).

- Ugaz, Jorge, Larissa Campuzano, and Nancy Murray. "Final Performance Evaluation Plan for Puentes Para El Empleo." USAID, March 2019.
https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WPV3.pdf.
- USGLC. "U.S. Assistance to Central America Promotes Security, Economic Development, and Rule of Law," April 2021. <https://www.usglc.org/us-assistance-to-central-america/>.
- Ziff, Tamar. "Nowhere to Turn: Gender-Based Violence in the Northern Triangle and Its Impact on Migration." The Dialogue, August 9, 2019.
<https://www.thedialogue.org/analysis/nowhere-to-turn-gender-based-violence-in-the-northern-triangle-and-its-impact-on-migration/>.