



Corrina Robbins/ Mercy Corps

# **SUBSIST OR PERSIST?**

## **Assessing Drivers of Migration and Effects of Foreign Assistance Programs on Migration from the Northern Triangle**

### **› Executive Summary**

The surge in people traveling from the Northern Triangle region of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) to the United States' southern border has brought immigration to the forefront of U.S. political debate. A central point of contention in the current conversation is the impact that U.S. development assistance to these three countries has had on the underlying causes of migration. Policymakers are in need of data demonstrating whether this assistance has been effective.

In response to this need, Mercy Corps undertook a study, taking stock of existing research, along with observations from its current work in the Northern Triangle.

Since 2001, Mercy Corps has worked in Guatemala to alleviate poverty and improve security. This study closely examines two flagship Mercy Corps programs focused on rural agricultural development and urban gang violence prevention, and the ways in which they address drivers of migration from Guatemala. To help us better understand what these drivers are, the study also includes in-depth interviews with individuals who migrated to the United States, as well as insights from numerous research studies conducted on the causes of migration and the impacts of development aid.

This report aims to identify solutions rooted in evidence and research, examining who migrates, why they are migrating, and whether development programs can curb the flow of migration.

### **Key findings:**

**Foreign assistance programs are alleviating violence:** To address violence in the Northern Triangle, the U.S. government has invested heavily in a holistic approach to improve security through initiatives like the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). A rigorous evaluation by the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University recorded a 51% decline in reported murders and a 51% decline in reported extortions in the neighborhoods that had received programs through CARSI funding.

CONVIVIMOS, a citizen security program implemented by Mercy Corps in Guatemala and funded through CARSI, is also working to increase community resilience to urban violence. Working in 115 communities in six municipalities with some of the highest rates of homicide in Guatemala, the program targets "at-risk" youth to prevent their



engagement in violence. Participants interviewed frequently mentioned an increased hope in their future prospects and reported that they are less likely to migrate. Based on a sample survey, participants in the program have a greater desire to remain in Guatemala rather than migrate, compared to non-participants, at 68% to 42% respectively.

**Foreign assistance programs are increasing economic opportunity:** In addition to improving security, a big focus of the U.S. foreign assistance strategy in the Northern Triangle is on increasing prosperity by addressing the economic hardships that often lead to migration. This strategy had led to many documented economic improvements in the Northern Triangle:

- In Guatemala, USAID’s agricultural investments have resulted in 78,000 new jobs and \$160 million in sales.
- Between 2013 and 2017, similar programs in El Salvador yielded 26,500 new jobs and helped smallholder farmers increase sales by \$147 million.
- USAID has invested in projects in Honduras that have created more than 4,300 full-time jobs and lifted nearly 18,000 families—or roughly 90,000 people—out of extreme poverty since 2011.

A program survey with participants in AgriJoven, a USAID-funded program that creates opportunities for youth agriculture in Guatemala implemented by Mercy Corps, found a 30% reduction in thinking about migrating “all the time” or “very frequently”—a statistically significant change. Seventy-six percent of participants interviewed were confident that their lives in Guatemala would improve in the future.

**Economic hardships—including the effects of climate change on agricultural livelihoods—and violence are key drivers of migration:** In rural areas, increasingly extreme and variable climate conditions are reducing agricultural productivity, leading some to sell their land in an effort to finance migration to the U.S. Violence, chiefly gang and sexual violence, is prevalent and came up as a motivator for migration, particularly among urban youth and women. In reality, violence and economic instability feed off each other—insecurity stifles economic growth, while poverty and lack of opportunities create rife conditions for the emergence of gangs and other violent groups.

**People migrate out of desperation:** Most people migrating from the Northern Triangle countries are driven by a deep-rooted sense of desperation—a result of widespread violence and a severe lack of economic opportunities. Despite often being aware of the immense dangers and difficulties involved in the journey, many people still take a chance on a better life abroad because they feel they have no other options. Because of this sense of desperation, increased border security and restrictions on immigration are unlikely to dissuade people from migrating.

Although limited data makes it difficult to establish a direct link between U.S. foreign assistance and migration, the evidence that we do have demonstrates that U.S.-funded initiatives are improving lives in the Northern Triangle. These programs likely do contribute to curbing migration by addressing its root causes. There is a significantly stronger case to be made for continuing to invest in improving people’s lives in the Northern Triangle, rather than reducing or cutting funding for these programs.

## › Policy Recommendations:

1. Invest in more research from the Northern Triangle on migration
2. Continue to fund US foreign assistance programs that help communities address poverty and violence
3. Avoid tying all U.S. foreign assistance to specific migration outcomes
4. Improve program Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

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