



Corrina Robbins/ Mercy Corps

# **SUBSIST OR PERSIST?**

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

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# › Introduction: A Perennial Policy Challenge

With forced displacement and economic migration on the rise, immigration has become one of today's most contentious issues, sparking heated debates about human rights, international obligations and national interest.<sup>1</sup> In late 2018, as a caravan of migrants from the Northern Triangle region of Central America made its way to the United States, these debates, again, came to the forefront. A central point of contention has been the impact that U.S. development assistance to these countries has on the underlying causes of migration, raising questions about whether this assistance is ineffective and should be cut in favor of policies focused on tougher immigration restrictions. The ensuing political stalemate in the U.S. government over border security revealed a perennial challenge that many governments face: how to *effectively* and *humanely* address migration.

This challenge will remain if we fail to bring evidence to bear on policy decisions related to migration. Decision makers are increasingly forced to design diplomatic and programmatic responses to curb illegal migration absent clear evidence on what actually works. While migration is not a topic lacking in research, there is a marked gap between the growing body of knowledge and policies. Part of this is due to the shortage of empirical studies, which respond to questions that could help guide responses and investments. One specific area where more research on migration would be useful to development and policy actors is micro-level studies that explore both the push factors of migration and the impact of development interventions on those factors among individuals and communities targeted.

In response to this gap, Mercy Corps undertook a study, taking stock of existing research and observations from our work in the Northern Triangle. The empirical data contained in this policy report draws on qualitative research and surveys conducted in Guatemala from 2018-2019. Since 2001, Mercy Corps has been working in Guatemala, to alleviate poverty and improve security. This study closely examines two Mercy Corps programs focused on rural agricultural development and urban gang violence prevention and the ways in which they may be addressing 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 and were deported or returned to Guatemala. Complementing this new data are insights from numerous research studies conducted on the causes of migration from the Northern Triangle to the U.S. and the impacts of development aid on migration.

## Key Findings

### **By addressing economic hardships and violence, development programs can mitigate migration:**

Development programs in the region are showing promising results in increasing economic opportunities and improving people's sense of security. Survey research around Mercy Corps' work in Guatemala to improve citizen security (through an urban violence prevention program) and economic opportunity (through an agricultural development program) has shown that youth who were engaged in these programs were less likely to want to leave Guatemala. Amongst a set of participants in the agricultural development program, there was a 30% decline in youth who reported seriously considering migrating "all the time" or "frequently". Similarly, participants in the urban violence prevention program have a greater desire to remain in Guatemala rather than migrate, compared to non-participants, at 68% to 42%, respectively.

### **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 in search of new livelihood opportunities. 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.

### **The majority of migrants undertake great risks to reach the U.S. out of desperation:**

Making migration more difficult—through increased border security or restrictions on immigration— without simultaneously improving conditions in the Northern Triangle is unlikely to dissuade people from migrating. A deep-rooted sense of desperation is an underlying factor in the decision to leave. Despite often being aware of the dangers involved in the journey, our research finds that many migrants and potential migrants would still take the chance for a better life abroad because of this sense of hopelessness. However, if opportunities existed at home, the general view among interviewees was a preference to stay.

<sup>1</sup> Beaubien, J., 2017.

## Northern Triangle: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador



### Methodology

The Mercy Corps research team conducted a mixed-methods study on two flagship programs between 2018 and 2019, targeting participants of the rural *AgriJoven* project, and urban *CONVIVIMOS* project, as well as returned migrants not involved in Mercy Corps programs. Research methods included focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews and surveys.

The *AgriJoven* project evaluation took place between February and August 2018 and included two panel surveys conducted six months apart and eight focus groups. Youth from each of the 62 savings and loans groups in six geographic departments were surveyed on their participation the agriculture project and plans for their future. A mid-point survey yielded 634 respondents and the end-point survey yielded 599 respondents. We analyzed changes in attitudes and beliefs from the 416 respondents completing both surveys. Focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish with eight separate youth savings groups. In cases where youth preferred a different language, field technicians provided immediate translation. All FGDs

were audio-recorded and transcribed, qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo software.

Data on the *CONVIVIMOS* program was collected in February 2019 among six municipalities within the department of Guatemala, which houses Guatemala City. Ten key informant interviews with returned migrants and 10 focus group discussions were conducted. Focus groups were conducted with *CONVIVIMOS* program participants and non-program participants. Focus groups were separated by gender. Additionally, all 103 key informant and focus group participants completed a short survey on demographics, desire to leave Guatemala and exposure to violence. All FGDs and interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded and transcribed. Analysts pre-identified themes and coded each transcribed interview or discussion prior to aggregating information on each theme.

In addition to this primary data collection and analysis, researchers reviewed and summarized dozens of existing articles and research reports on the topic.

Often lost in debates about migration are personal stories. A mother trying to escape rural poverty with her children; a teenager fleeing from gang recruitment; an educated young man searching for better employment opportunities: each one of these stories represents a unique migrant experience. The multiplicity of reasons people decide to leave their home countries and their diverse experiences—at home, en route and in the places they move to—cannot be easily compartmentalized. Throughout this report, we make a conscious effort to include the voices of men, women, boys and girls in Guatemala who are the targets of policy decisions related to migration and, as a result, directly affected by them.

While migration will inevitably continue to present challenges for policymakers, this report aims to help shift the conversation away from increasingly polarized political views, towards identifying solutions rooted in evidence. It begins by

interweaving migrant’s stories with a historical account of migration trends from Central America (specifically the Northern Triangle) to the U.S., examining the evolution of who migrates, why they are migrating, and what has been done in response. Next, it explores, in more depth, how two key factors—violence and economic challenges—are contributing to recent waves of migration from this part of the world. From there we shift to address the question of how development interventions contribute to addressing the factors that push people to migrate. Centered on data from Mercy Corps’ Guatemala programs, this section looks at how development programs may be addressing the underlying drivers of migration in rural and urban settings of Guatemala. Finally, the report concludes with a discussion of policy implications that draw from the analysis and observations and makes recommendations on how U.S. policymakers can advance policies that effectively and humanely address migration from Central America.

# › Crossing the Desert: Trends, Aspirations and Experiences of Migration

*“I was left alone. I had run out of water and there came a point when I took off my shoes and my shirt. I couldn’t take the heat of the desert anymore. I dug through the sand to stick my feet into the cool earth. It was hard. I begged God: ‘God, get me out of here! I don’t want to die here, alone, in the Arizona desert! I don’t want to die here!’”<sup>2</sup>*

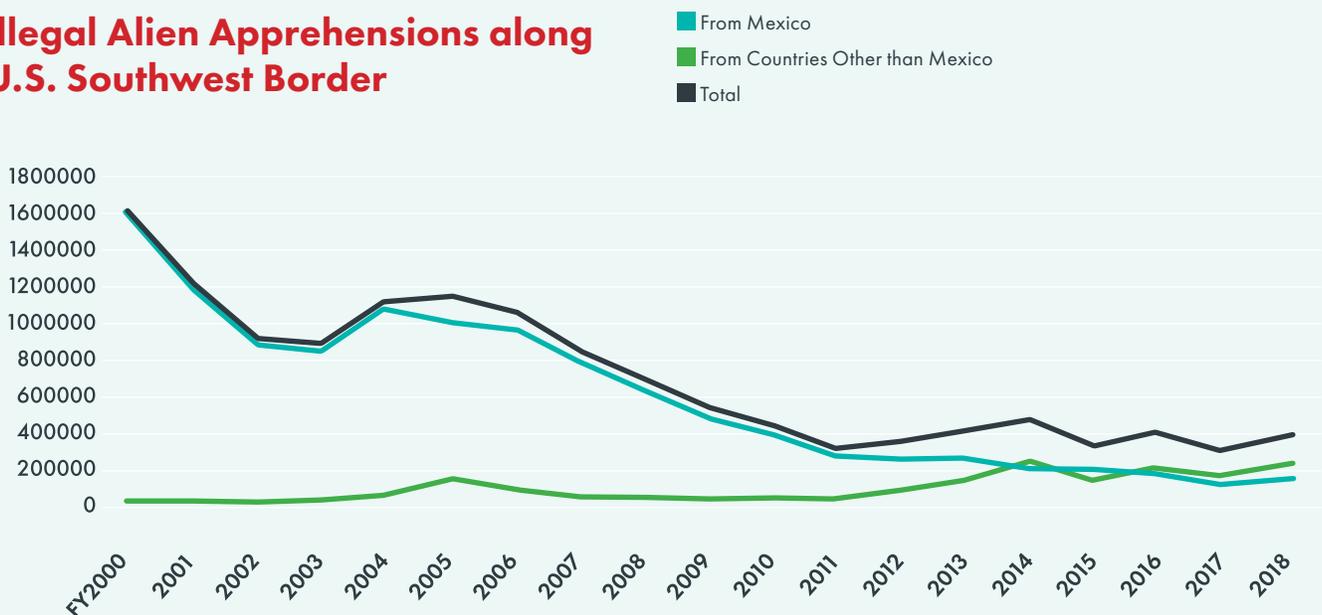
Every month, tens of thousands of men, women and children undertake on the perilous journey to cross the U.S. Southern Border. Many succeed and embark on a hopeful—albeit, often difficult—life in the U.S., while an unknown number of people perish along the way. While, periodically, the number of border crossings fluctuates, the ways in which migrants make the journey vary, and restrictions on entry evolve, one thing is constant: people continue to come.

In 2018, the situation along the U.S. southern border received much attention. In his address to the nation on January 8, 2019 urging Congress to fund a border wall, President Trump emphatically declared, “This is a humanitarian crisis. A crisis of the heart and a crisis of the soul.” Indeed, as young children, men and women arrived in dire need, tragic events unfolded in

the face of a chaotic and under-resourced response, including the death of two Guatemalan children under the age of 10. Despite the undeniable urgency of the current situation, migration from Central America has a long history with periods of growth and decline. Understanding this context better—as well as how current migration trends may differ from the past—is critically important to establishing an evidence base that can inform the current migration policy debate in the U.S.

Two key trends are significant regarding migration across the U.S. southern border: its decline over the years, despite a recent uptick, and the changing demographic makeup of who is migrating. Since the mid-2000s, the number of apprehensions of people illegally crossing the border has fallen. Before this point, starting in the mid 1980s, the average number of apprehensions hovered around 1 million people annually. In 2018, it was slightly under 400,000 people.<sup>3</sup> What partly explains this decline is the nationality of those migrating to the U.S. Until recently, Mexicans accounted for the largest immigrant group. As immigration from Mexico has dramatically decreased, it has steadily increased from three Central American countries, collectively referred to as the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.<sup>4</sup>

## Illegal Alien Apprehensions along U.S. Southwest Border



Source: U.S. Border Patrol <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-total-apps-other-mexico-fy2000-fy2018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Returned Migrant, Key informant Interview #2 . Villa Nuevo, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

<sup>3</sup> Qui, L., 2018

<sup>4</sup> Gonzales-Barrera, A., and Krogstad, J.S., 2018

The nature of migration from Mexico to the U.S. and from the Northern Triangle to the U.S. differ, importantly, by duration of stay. While, increasingly, migration from Mexico to the U.S. can be described as temporary, with more Mexicans crossing the border to return back home than entering the U.S. with the intention to stay, migration from Central America tends to be longer-term.<sup>5</sup> Interviews with recent migrants who had returned to Guatemala confirmed this: the average length of stay in the U.S. for most interviewees was above five years and, in many cases, above ten years. One reason for this longer stay and the desire for integration, as described by a Guatemalan migrant, is due to distance and the arduous journey involved: “The Mexicans...enter and leave like it’s their own home. [But] for the Central Americans...one comes from so far—it’s like five thousand kilometers that one travels. You suffer during that time, and you arrive there to work, not to be delinquent. You try to get ahead.”<sup>6</sup>

Historically, the push factors of migration from the Northern Triangle have also favored long-term immigration. The first major wave of immigrants from this region to the United States occurred between the 1960s-1980s as people fled civil wars in their countries (Guatemala 1960-1996; El Salvador 1980-1992). The number of immigrants from places like Guatemala almost quadrupled during this period.<sup>7</sup> As these conflicts ended in the mid 1990s, migration continued due to the economic devastation brought on by decades of war.<sup>8</sup> A third critical factor driving migration, which has become increasingly prominent in the past two decades, is growing insecurity created, in large part, by the emergence of street gangs such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (18th Street) gangs. This newer phenomena has made the Northern Triangle one of the most dangerous places in the world, where countries like El Salvador could claim to have the highest homicide rate outside of an active war zone in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

During these successive waves of migration, the U.S. became a prime destination for Central American migrants. For example, today, almost one out of six Salvadorians (or about 15% ) reside in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> This has created a strong and vital connection between the Central American diaspora and their families back home, which facilitates not only remittances but also the exchange of information about migration experiences. One cannot underestimate the importance of remittances in migration dynamics. In fact, remittances accounted for

half of all growth in the GDP of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.<sup>11</sup> In the face of steadily declining economic performances since 2008 remittances have become an economic lifeline for these countries.<sup>12</sup>

Aspirations related to migration, including perceptions of the U.S., are acutely shaped by what people hear from relatives and friends who have migrated. In our interviews, the majority of respondents had not migrated but almost everyone knew of someone who had. Overall, views of the advantages and disadvantages of staying in one’s country versus migrating were mixed. However, returned migrants were slightly more inclined to view leaving as advantageous, as compared to people who had not migrated. This is despite the fact that many returned migrants described, in harrowing detail, the risks involved in the journey and the low quality of life experienced in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> Migrants interviewed frequently described challenges with discrimination, exploitative and low-paying work, and social/cultural isolation. Negative return experiences and a continued lack of opportunities at home may help explain enduring aspirations to migrate. As one interviewee explained in describing his return after being deported from the U.S., “They just put us out on the street and told us we could go. No help, nothing. We left without any destination, without knowing anything. And I was scared and thinking to myself ‘now what am I going to do?’”<sup>14</sup>

The gap between people’s aspirations and their understanding of the realities seems to be greatest as it relates to the dangers involved in the migration journey. An acceptance of the risks and a determination to persevere despite likely challenges often precede the decision to migrate. According to one migrant, “When I migrated, I got into a bus and we were stopped by immigration officials. They took everything I had. They grabbed me and put me in jail for the first time and I said to myself even if I get caught two, three, four, five times I will do what I have to do until I find a way to pass. That was my way of thinking: what I can do, I’ll do. And I did.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to the possibility of being arrested, migrants face the very real threat of violence at the hands of those who smuggle them across borders. This is especially true of women who are particularly targeted by smugglers, who force the women to choose between being victims of sexual violence, being left behind, or both.<sup>16</sup>

5 Zong, J. and Batalova, J., 2018.

6 Returned Migrant Key Informant Interview #4. Villa Canales, Guatemala, Guatemala. February, 2019

7 Leggett, T., 2007.

8 Smith, J., 2006.

9 Though the rate has dropped since then it is still higher in 2018 than every country in the Western Hemisphere with the exception of Venezuela. Labrador, R and Renwick, D. 2018.

10 Terrazas, A., 2010.

11 Orozco, M., 2017.

12 Centroamérica y la República Dominicana: evolución económica en 2017 y perspectivas para 2018. 2018

13 Note: all but 1 returnee had migrated illegally to the U.S..

14 Returned Migrant, Key Informant Interview #7. Amatitlan, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

15 Returned Migrant, Key Informant Interview #9. Villa Canales, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

16 Returned Migrant, Key Informant Interview #4. Villa Canales, Guatemala and Convivimos Focus Group Discussion #8 Villa Nueva, Guatemala. Guatemala. February 2019

Despite these dangers, the profile of Central American migrants is shifting increasingly to more at-risk and vulnerable groups. In recent years, the number of under-aged children, particularly between the ages of 15-17 years, has dramatically increased, with the expansion of street gangs that chiefly target youth for recruitment and violence.<sup>17</sup> Researchers have also noted a recent “feminization” of emigration from places like Guatemala, where a growing number of young single mothers or heads of households are moving northward to support their families.<sup>18</sup> According to our interviews, a more recent trend is women traveling with young children due to the perception that this increases their chances of being allowed into the U.S.<sup>19</sup>

These new trends, coupled with persistent economic challenges and insecurity, present challenges for U.S. foreign policy in the region. This policy has been characterized, recently, by dwindling levels of foreign assistance and increased restrictions on immigration. Funding for foreign assistance to Central America through the 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act was \$92 million more than the President had requested, but still \$99 million less than what Congress had appropriated the previous year in FY2018. The bulk of the \$527.6 million in funds focused on economic growth, democracy and governance and improving security.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the current administration has pushed for measures to hasten deportations from the U.S.—e.g. the proposed end of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for over 300,000 special status immigrants and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program affecting over 700,000 undocumented immigrants—in addition to tighter border security.<sup>21</sup>

***Despite a twenty fold increase in funding for border security since the 1990s, the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. has ballooned from about 3 million in 1986 to 12 million in 2008.***

These measures, while failing to improve conditions in countries of origin, assume that simply increasing the difficulty of migration will make people less likely to come to the U.S. Yet, the accounts of many aspiring and actual migrants indicate that this is not the case. As one young man explained, “You put yourself at risk by traveling there [to the U.S.] but he who doesn’t take a risk, doesn’t win.”<sup>22</sup> What drives so many people to continue to aspire to migrate, despite the risks, is a deep-rooted feeling of hopelessness. Without addressing this, policies focused on deterrence are doomed to fail, in the long-term. Indeed, despite a twenty fold increase in funding for border security since the 1990s, the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. has ballooned from about 3 million in 1986 to 12 million in 2008.<sup>23</sup> An approach that focuses, first and foremost, on understanding and responding to the perennial drivers of migration from Central America—chiefly, insecurity and economic hardships—could change the incentives for people aspiring to leave their home countries. In the next sections, we examine these two drivers in more detail and evidence on the extent to which development assistance can effectively address them.



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17 Acuna, J., 2018.

18 Smith, J., 2006.

19 Returned Migrant, Key Informant Interview #3. Jalapatagua-VF, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

20 Meyer, P., 2019a.

21 Lind, D., 2018.

22 Community Focus Group, Discussion #10. Amatitlan, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019.

23 Massey, D., Durand, J., and Pren, K.A., 2016.



## From Guatemala and back again: Ivan's migration journey

Like so many illegal immigrants, "Ivan" experienced extreme difficulties in his quest to reach the promise of better employment opportunities in the United States. Unlike many, he managed to cross the southern border by scaling a seven-meter wall. Along the way, he was extorted, witnessed the regular rape and exploitation of female migrants by smugglers, and the suicide of a fellow migrant while in prolonged detention.

Ivan tried applying for a work visa to the U.S. but was denied. A caring family man, Ivan made the difficult decision to leave his family after he found himself working 12 hour days, 6 days per week while still being unable to provide for his wife and two young children. He didn't know what would await him on the other side. He was captured in the U.S. while trying to help a fellow dehydrated immigrant avoid a regular border checkpoint, just four months after arriving. Upon capture, he was stripped of a \$2,000 cash loan he was carrying to pay the remaining migration debt to his border smuggler. While in a detention

center awaiting deportation, Ivan witnessed a Honduran migrant commit suicide. "His faith was broken, they psychologically break you. I think their goal is that you don't try and return because you are psychologically destroyed, your mind is broken." Despite witnessing this and other traumas along his journey, Ivan would still return illegally. "Yes, I would because it is the only way someone in my situation can make it, it depends on your social class, and being in the lower class you have a hard time to even build a house, which is what you want most. But instead, over there you work just the same but the difference is that dollars there are converted into more here." Before he tries again, however, he has to repay the debt he accrued from his first border crossing. For now, he's found work painting political campaign messages for the upcoming elections, but the burden to pay off what is now a \$2,500 debt falls on his whole family, "my 9-year-old has to work too, maybe somehow, someone can help us in that sense."

# › Fear and Flight: The Cycle of Violence

*“The problem is that we are very scared because of the culture of violence that we have, and that is the pattern that we’re in. It’s all a cycle. It ends and then it starts again.”<sup>24</sup>*

*“You never expect a person to say, ‘I do not like him, he needs to die’ and then they go and kill him. They just leave the body and continue their life as if nothing even happened. And it’s hard to know what to do [about this] because nobody likes to leave his country. It hurts to leave your country, your customs. It hurts.”<sup>25</sup>*

A mention of the Northern Triangle most often triggers images of violence and insecurity. The region is one of the most dangerous places in the world with homicide rates that approach levels in war zones.<sup>26</sup> In recent years, homicide rates have started to decline—in part due to the plethora of efforts to tackle gang violence. For example, the homicide rate in Guatemala has dropped from a high of 45 per 100,000 people in 2009 to 22.4 per 100,000 people in 2018.<sup>27</sup> Yet violence continues to be significant and disproportionately concentrated in certain areas.<sup>28</sup> In a survey for this study, in the municipalities of Amatiñan, Jalpatagua, Villa Canales, Valle Nuevo, Mixco and Guatemala City the majority (57%) of people had been affected by violence. Of those who experienced violence the most common form experienced was gang violence (28%) followed by personal or domestic violence (16%).

Decades of violence permeate Guatemala’s social fabric. A brutal 36-year long civil war in which some 200,000 people were killed or “disappeared” has left many scars.<sup>29</sup> Torture, sexual violence, including rape, and extrajudicial killings were common during this period until the 1996 peace agreement. Even with peace, the lack of accountability for these crimes and a collective memory of this period has contributed to the normalization of violence, enabling newer forms, like gang violence, to emerge, and others, like gender-based violence, to persist.

The advent of street gangs is the most recent manifestation in this long history of violence. Two dreaded, rival gangs—MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street—are responsible for much of the violence that plagues the Northern Triangle, today. The roots of these

gangs in the Northern Triangle is a story of failed immigration policies. Having originated in Latin American neighborhoods in the U.S. for protection against other gangs, groups like MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street were exported to the Northern Triangle when convicted members were deported back home as part of the “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996.” Between 1998-2005, the U.S. deported nearly 46,000 convicts to Central America, many of whom ended up occupying the highest ranks of MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>30</sup>

Not surprisingly, the areas where gangs thrive are poor, marginalized neighborhoods. In these places, MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street have wrenched control from government and law enforcement authorities, leaving inhabitants defenseless against extortions, the influx of drugs, and forced recruitment. Gang violence tends to be targeted. The primary victims are those thought to be rival gang members, and to a lesser extent, members of communities controlled by rival gangs. Because the average age of gang members is between 12-24 years, the large majority of those affected by this type of violence are youth.<sup>31</sup>

“There has always been violence, but it was not so bad before because you did not hear about the gangs,” explains one focus group participant. “That was a different time when people emigrated, like my brother...more than anything to give their family a better life, not because of violence.”<sup>32</sup> Things are changing. Though economic drivers cannot be discounted, increasingly people who are migrating from the Northern Triangle are fleeing violence and insecurity.<sup>33</sup> The spike in child migrants under the age of eighteen attests to the rise of violence-induced migration. Between 2011 and 2016, close to 200,000 under-aged children arrived seeking asylum in the U.S.<sup>34</sup> In a groundbreaking study, Michael Clemens established a strong causal relationship between violence in communities of origin in the Northern Triangle and child migration to the U.S. Analyzing data from all children apprehended in the U.S. from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras between 2011 and 2016, the study finds that every ten homicides in the region led to six children migrating to the U.S.<sup>35</sup>

24 Convivimos Focus Group Discussion #2. Amatiñan VF, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

25 Returned Migrant, Key Informant Interview #6. Guatemala City, Guatemala. February 2019

26 Robbins, S., 2018.

27 Proctor, K., 2018 ; Carranza, C., and Dalby, C., 2019.

28 For example, some municipalities such as Amatiñan have rates as high as 104 homicides per 100,000 (Ibid)

29 The Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016.

30 Keating, J., 2017.

31 Seelke, C., 2010.

32 Community Focus Group Discussion #9. San Miguel Petapa, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

33 Martine, S. 2018.

34 Clemens, M. and Gough, K., 2018

35 Clemens, M. and Gough, K., 2017

Gang violence is mostly an urban phenomenon—none of those interviewed in rural areas mentioned it as a driver for migration—but other forms of violence are prevalent, including gender-based violence, sexual violence and domestic violence. Guatemala, for example, has one of the highest femicide rates in the world: on average two women are murdered every day.<sup>36</sup> In one harrowing account, an interviewee described the story of a female acquaintance who was brutally killed and dismembered for not paying extortion money. The niece that witnessed the killing was forced to flee out of fear of retribution.<sup>37</sup> The perpetrators of the vast majority of such cases do not get convicted. This violence which disproportionately affects women and members of the LGBTI community may be linked to an uptick of these groups migrating from the Northern Triangle.<sup>38</sup>

Whether violence is actually experienced or simply viewed as a threat, it forces people to flee. Researchers often differentiate between crime victimization (experiencing crime and violence) and crime avoidance (changing one's behaviors due to the fear of violence). In our FGDs, perceptions of insecurity were markedly high (mentioned in all discussions), regardless of whether participants had actually experienced violence. Though some studies show that individuals with firsthand experience of violence are more likely to migrant than individuals with just a perception of insecurity,<sup>39</sup> others studies conclude that crime avoidance and perceptions of insecurity are some of the strongest predictors of migration among youth in the Northern Triangle.<sup>40</sup> As the latter study indicates, crime avoidance and perceived insecurity are widespread: over half of the surveyed population expressed "some" or "a lot" of fear of being a victim of homicide.<sup>41</sup> Avoidance behaviors include avoiding public transport, keeping children at home, changing jobs, moving neighborhoods and considering emigration. For a large number of people, particularly those in neighborhoods overrun by gangs, such behaviors are part of everyday life.

Crime and violence generate significant costs. For example, gang extortion of local communities is rampant, affecting everyone from shopkeepers to bus drivers. From 2008 to 2017, the extortion rate in Guatemala quadrupled.<sup>42</sup> Those who are most vulnerable pay the highest price, according to interviewees: "The locals are always marginalized and that is what has led people to leave....Because, man, there is so much extortion! A lot of people say they can't work, they can't have a small business, because every day, they [the gangs] basically take even their tortillas; they ask them to pay them money."<sup>43</sup>

Extortion is just one example of how violence and economic challenges are intertwined. More generally, violence and underdevelopment reinforce one another. In 2017, the cost of crime in Guatemala roughly equaled 3% of the country's GDP.<sup>44</sup> Violence and insecurity impede investment and increase security-related costs, nationally, in addition, to their toll on affected individuals and communities. At the same time, economic hardships can create conditions that support violence. For example, research finds that relative deprivation and unemployment are linked to a greater likelihood of engagement in crime and violence in the Northern Triangle.<sup>45</sup> This interconnectedness implies that motivations for migration may also result from a mix of violence and economic-related conditions. As described by one interviewee: "Some migrate to help their family and some migrate for violence too. Here you experience all of it. The violence and poor economy go hand in hand."<sup>46</sup>

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36 Horizons, 2018.

37 Community Focus Group Discussion #9. San Miguel Petapa, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019.

38 Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) and Migration Fact Sheet. 2017.

39 Hiskey, J. Malone, M., and Orces, D., 2004.

40 Raderstorf, B. et al. 2017.

41 Ibid.

42 Espinoza, E., 2018.

43 Returned Migrant, Key Informant Interview # 10. Amatitlan, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

44 Jaitman, L., 2017.

45 Serrano-Berthet, R. and Lopez, H., 2011.

46 Convivimos Focus Group Discussion#8. Villa Nueva, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

# › Despair and Survival: The Curse of Poverty, Diminishing Opportunities and Discrimination

*“One day I had just 10 quetzales [approximately \$1.25] to survive that day, and I thought, ‘what am I going to give my children?’ I went out to the market not knowing what I could even buy for 10 quetzales. I was in despair. I think it’s in that despair that people make decisions [to migrate]. And I said to myself, if I find work, even if it’s to clean houses I would go. I would go, even with a university degree.”<sup>47</sup>*

A national survey in Honduras in 2015 of over 1,500 people revealed that of respondents with a family member who had migrated in the last four years, 77.6% did so to search for better economic opportunities.<sup>48</sup> That economic factors play an important role in migration from the Northern Triangle should come as no surprise. The real and perceived disparities in living conditions, work opportunities, income and social services between the Northern Triangle and the United States is a huge incentive for migration, particularly for those who find themselves teetering between poverty and survival in rural areas. Desperate for a fair chance to get ahead, many venture northward, encouraged by the success of those who migrated and made something of themselves.

Guatemala is a prime example of rural poverty and urban underemployment converging to create a situation of desperation. About half of the population (49.7%) lives in rural areas, and 40% are of indigenous ancestry.<sup>49</sup> Fifty-four percent of the population lives in poverty and 13% lives in extreme poverty. Guatemala has the worst level of child malnutrition in the Western Hemisphere, with half of all children under five being chronically malnourished.<sup>50</sup> Unemployment is markedly low (only 2.7%, officially). However, much of what is documented as employment (70%) is informal work, in which wages are typically low and unstable.<sup>51</sup> The agriculture sector plays a big role in the economy, particularly in rural areas. It accounts for 31% of the labor force.<sup>52</sup>

Progressively, climate change and land tenure issues have exacerbated poverty in rural areas, triggering migration.

The World Bank Group estimates that climate migration will increase in the coming decades, and Latin America could see up to 3.9 million climate migrants by 2050.<sup>53</sup> Within the Northern Triangle, both Honduras and Guatemala are among the top 10 countries in the world threatened by climate change.<sup>54</sup> A study undertaken by the World Food Program (WFP), focused on the causes of migration from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, notes that migrants increasingly come from rural areas, as evidenced by the fact that most returned migrants are from rural areas. These areas—particularly the drought-prone Dry Corridor—have experienced increased climate variability and extreme climate events. These same departments have the highest rates of food insecurity.<sup>55</sup> According to the WFP study, there is a strong, positive link between the number of immigrants presented to Mexican immigration authorities and the effects of El Niño on agriculture in the Central America region.<sup>56</sup> Our interviews in rural Guatemala echo these findings. According to one young farmer, “Before, our grandparents and parents planted in the open field. But the climate has changed and, now, that doesn’t produce enough crops.”<sup>57</sup>

Access to arable land compounds the effects of climate change. Land distribution in Guatemala is amongst the most unequal in the region, with less than 2% of farms comprising 52% of arable land, and 45% of all holdings smaller than 0.7 hectares in size.<sup>58</sup> In recent years, as large multinational companies have sought to expand commercial agriculture (most notably the cultivation of palm oil) in places like Guatemala, many smallholder farmers have resorted to selling their land.<sup>59</sup> Natural disasters, such as drought in the Dry Corridor region and the outbreak of coffee rust disease in 2012, which significantly decreased production, have also increased land sales out of desperation.<sup>60</sup> It is common for people to use revenues from these sales for their migration journey.<sup>61</sup> Interviewees from rural areas generally see migration as an opportunity to gain money to reinvest in agriculture and increase land ownership: “I go. I work a little bit and buy 2 to 3 acres of land. I return, and then I will have

47 Community Focus Group Discussion #7 . Mixco, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

48 Kausha, L., 2016.

49 FAO, 2014.

50 USAID, 2019.

51 Latin America Post, 2018.

52 CIA World Factbook, n.d.

53 Rigaud, K. et. al., 2018.

54 S. Kreft, et. al., 2014.

55 Famine Early Warning System Network, 2019.

56 World Food Programme, 2017.

57 AgriJoven Focus Group Discussion #2. San Miguel Ixtahuacan, San Marcos, Guatemala. May 2018

58 FAO, 2014.

59 Menchu, S., 2019.

60 Seay-Fleming, C., 2018

61 Menchu, S., 2019.

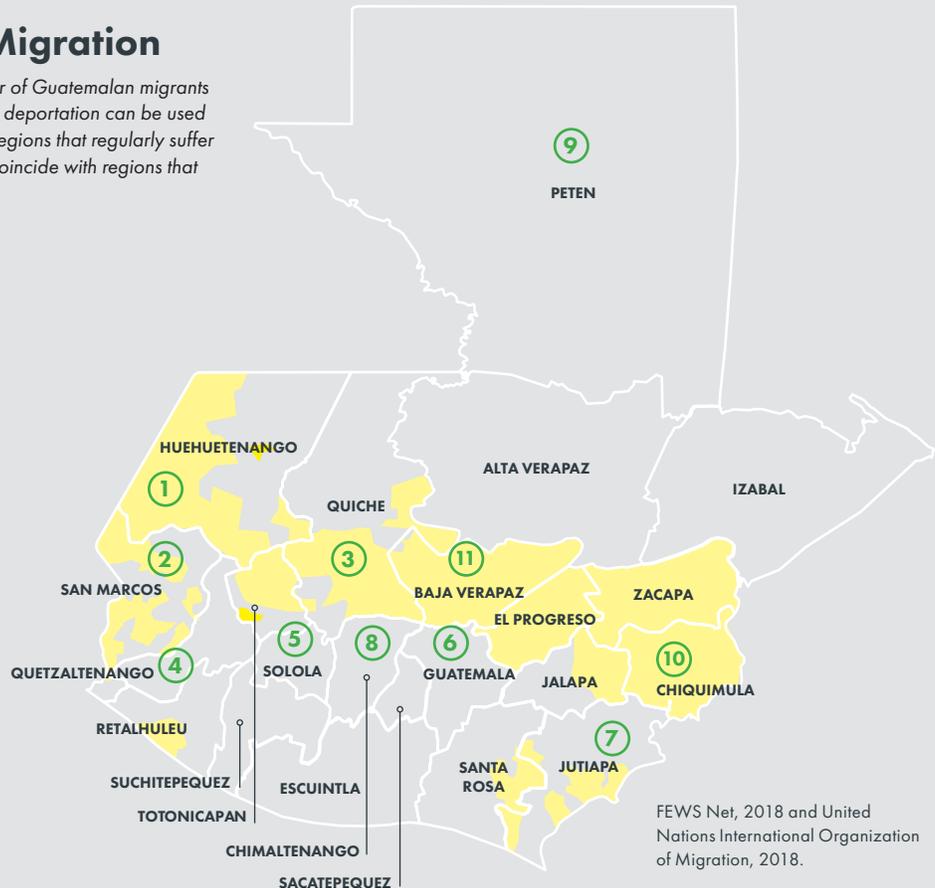
# Food Insecurity and Migration

While it is impossible to know the exact number of Guatemalan migrants and their department of origin, official data on deportation can be used as a good proxy for determining their origin. Regions that regularly suffer from elevated rates of food insecurity largely coincide with regions that have the highest number of deported migrants.

March-May 2018  
Food Insecurity Phase: Stressed

## Ranking of departments with high migration to the U.S., as per deportation rates

- 1 Huehuetenango
- 2 San Marcos
- 3 Quiche
- 4 Quetzaltenango
- 5 Solola
- 6 Guatemala
- 7 Jutiapa
- 8 Chimaltenango
- 9 Peten
- 10 Chiquimula
- 11 Baja Verapaz



FEWS Net, 2018 and United Nations International Organization of Migration, 2018.

twice what I had before to work.”<sup>62</sup> When they fail to find success through migration, many return to work on commercial farms, at times for wages below the national minimum wage.<sup>63</sup> The inability to adopt better agricultural and irrigation practices, or diversify crops in the first place has hindered many from adapting to changing conditions, safeguarding assets and avoiding crises.

For many, the first option when the situation at home is untenable is not to migrate to another country, but rather to migrate to where there are perceived opportunities in one’s country—usually urban areas. Across Central America, urbanization is rapidly increasing. Within the next generation, it is estimated that 7 out of 10 people will live in cities and the region’s urban population will double by 2050.<sup>64</sup> The exodus towards urban areas, as discussed in interviews, is driven by the search for employment: “To find a job, you graduate but there are no jobs. So you go to the capital.”<sup>65</sup> However, many underestimate the difficulties of finding opportunities in

urban areas where the demand for jobs outpaces the supply and competition is high. According to youth interviewed in urban areas, many are left out and forced to migrate further: “If a person who studied can’t find work, imagine how much worse it is for a person who did not study. There are almost no possibilities for them. In my opinion, this, more than anything, is what drives people to migrate.”<sup>66</sup>

Discrimination and preferential treatment were mentioned as significant barriers to formal employment in urban areas. Urban youth, often fortunate enough to receive an education but deprived of adequate opportunities, feel compelled to migrate to seek employment, just as their less educated counterparts. To find work, personal connections can be more important than competency: “To get a job, you have to elbow your way in. You cannot get in by your résumé. In most companies it is like that...they no longer call unless you know someone inside that recommends you.”<sup>67</sup> In addition to this, interviewees described various forms of discrimination that

62 AgriJoven Focus Group Discussion #8. San Andres Semetabaj, Solola, Guatemala

63 Menchu, S., 2019.

64 World Bank Group, 2016.

65 AgriJoven Focus Group Discussion #6. Uspantán, El Quiché, Guatemala. May 2018

66 Community Focus Group Discussion #7. Mixco, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

67 Community Focus Group Discussion #10. Amatitlán, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

make it more difficult for minorities, women, and people from marginalized communities to find work. For example, referring to people from a poor neighborhood with a high rate of crime and violence, one interviewee described that, "...If you apply for a job and you say I'm from Villa Lobos in Zone 12, the first thing they say is 'we'll call you back', which means they will not call you, because this area is practically blacklisted."<sup>68</sup> Among women, several complained of a *machismo* culture in work settings where sexual harassment is common. One interviewee, speaking of a 17-year old friend's experience, described the injustice of not only having to endure harassment but also paying the consequences for reporting it:

*"One day this man comes up and slaps her butt. She stared at him and he said don't say anything, and threatened that if she did he'd take it out on her. She was scared but she still stayed a week longer and the man kept harassing her. She didn't want to leave because she needed the job. She finally told and they fired him because it's the law and it could get out. But because she told the truth, she was also dismissed."*<sup>69</sup>

Faced with poverty, limited employment opportunities and discrimination in the workforce, many who struggle to subsist in their country take a chance on a better life elsewhere. Many migrants confessed that the pressure to provide, not only for oneself but also for one's family, was a key reason for leaving. A sense of frustration and despair because of the inability to secure a decent standard of living often triggers the decision. The 17-year old woman who was fired from her job after being sexually harassed decided to migrate in the U.S. to support her family, only to be raped by her smugglers along the way. As another returned migrant described: "There are times when you reach your limit. When you don't even have enough to pay a light bill, you don't even have enough to pay a bill for electricity or water. These are urgent because you have children. Oh, how this starts to suffocate you! And then you get the urge to go."<sup>70</sup>

Yet, the realities of life abroad are also challenging, and if there were greater opportunities at home, many people may not be compelled to leave. Several people interviewed articulated a preference for life in one's homeland rather than in a foreign land: "I would not like to be in a place where I do not know many people. I would like to be in a land where I was born and if I ever get a chance to be someone in life, then I want to form the future of my country."<sup>71</sup> The problem, however, is getting a fair chance to "be someone".

***"There are times when you reach your limit. When you don't even have enough to pay a light bill, you don't even have enough to pay a bill for electricity or water. These are urgent because you have children. Oh, how this starts to suffocate you! And then you get the urge to go."***



Corrina Robbins/ Mercy Corps

68 Convivimos, Focus Group Discussion #8. Villa Nueva, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

69 Convivimos Focus Group Discussion #8. Villa Nueva, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

70 Returned Migrant, Key Informant Interview #1. Jalpatagua-Jutiapa, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

71 Community Focus Group Discussion #6. Guatemala City, Guatemala. February 2019.



Corrina Robbins/ Mercy Corps

## › Restoring Hope: Can Foreign Assistance Programs Alleviate Migration Drivers?

*“A lot of people don’t believe in us. They think that youth are only good for making a ruckus...yelling in the streets, putting graffiti on the walls. But we want to show them that we have the ability to do productive things. Fortunately, we are succeeding and people are starting to believe in us.”<sup>72</sup>*

—AgriJoven participant speaking of how the program is empowering youth to succeed

*“It has helped us a lot because, as young people, they have given us the courage to say, yes, we have opportunities. They have taught us that in spite of everything they are there for us.”<sup>73</sup>*

—CONVIVIMOS participant speaking on feeling cared for by program staff

Illegal migration is a consequence of many institutional failures and structural challenges that have left a large number of people from developing countries behind. Though many would agree it is a problem, there is no consensus on how to deal with it. Intuitively, tackling the root causes of migration—so that people do not feel compelled to leave—is the most effective and humane way of curbing illegal migration. It is a point echoed by acting Secretary of Homeland Security, Kevin McAleenan, who in 2017 said: “Supporting the efforts of the Northern Triangle governments to enhance their economic and security environment will serve to address the push factors that drive migration...<sup>74</sup>” Yet, questions remain about what types of

foreign aid interventions can effectively support government efforts to address migration in the Northern Triangle, and what evidence we have to prove it.

In the policy world, there is growing thirst for evidence, and for good reason: data on what works needs to justify policy actions and donor investments. When it comes to migration, there has been much scrutiny around foreign assistance to the Northern Triangle and its effects on migration to the U.S. Though the objective of these investments is not solely to reduce migration, with growing attention on the “migration crisis” along the U.S. southern border and the continued influx of migrants from the Northern Triangle, foreign assistance has come under threat.

Empirically, it is extremely difficult to make a direct causal link between U.S. foreign assistance and migration to the U.S., based on available data, for a number of reasons. First, while curbing illegal migration may be an implicit goal of development, security and humanitarian programs in the Northern Triangle, to date, such programs are often not intentionally designed to influence migration and therefore are not required to measure, monitor and report changes in migration. Secondly, even if programs measured migration outcomes, to attribute changes in such outcomes directly to programs would be difficult given the various other factors that influence migration decisions.<sup>75</sup> Lastly, truly understanding

<sup>72</sup> AgriJoven Focus Group Discussion #8. San Andres Semetabaj, Sololá, Guatemala. June, 2018

<sup>73</sup> Convivimos Focus Group Discussion #8. Villa Nueva, Guatemala, Guatemala. February 2019

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Attributing changes in migration to programs would not be impossible, nonetheless, with a carefully designed randomized control trial.

programs' impact on migration requires measuring changes in actual rates of out-migration. But, because out-migration is a relatively rare occurrence amongst individuals—that is, most people targeted or involved in programs may be “at-risk” of migrating but may never actually migrate—it may be unlikely to detect effects on out-migration. As a result, researchers typically use proxy measures such as intentions and desires to migrate or apprehension and deportation numbers. Despite these constraints, with what information is currently available, there are ways to infer how programs funded by U.S. foreign assistance may be influencing migration. The drivers of migration from the Northern Triangle are relatively well understood. In this study, economic challenges and insecurity came up as two key drivers. Demonstrating the impact of foreign assistance programs on economic and security outcomes, therefore, can make a strong case for the utility of these investments in curbing illegal migration by addressing root causes.

## Evidence of Impact on Violence and Migration

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). Since 2008, CARSI has provided seven nations in Central America, including Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, with assistance “to address security challenges and the underlying social and political factors that contribute to them.”<sup>76</sup> In 2014, the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University undertook a rigorous evaluation to measure the effect of CARSI programs on security in the region. The multi-year four nation (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Panama) Randomized Control Trial (RCT) included more than 27,000 survey participants living in 197 neighborhoods, in addition to 840 qualitative interviews and 44 Focus Group Discussions. The study found that “in several key aspects the programs have been successful.” Most importantly, the evaluation recorded a 51% decline in reported murders and a 51% decline in reported extortions attributable to the program in the neighborhoods that had received programs through CARSI funding, across the four countries.<sup>77</sup>

CONVIVIMOS is a citizen security program implemented by Mercy Corps in Guatemala and funded through CARSI. Though it was not part of the aforementioned evaluation, it is also showing promising signs of improving community resilience to violence and addressing root causes of migration.

Working in 115 communities in six municipalities with some of the highest rates of homicide in Guatemala, the program focuses on community and local government capacity strengthening, and targets “at-risk” youth to prevent their engagement in violence.

As the program completes its final year (of five), FGDs with CONVIVIMOS youth participants reveal how it has, to date, affected their lives. Among CONVIVIMOS participants, the top three changes most frequently mentioned were increased hope in livelihood prospects, increased hope in educational prospects and increased social connections. Many youth in the program spoke about how these changes in their outlook have helped raise their self-esteem and sense of hope: “[CONVIVIMOS] helped me overcome myself because when I came here, I was in a very delicate situation...they helped me a lot to find myself and to say, I’m not like this. I have to keep going because I’m worth it.”<sup>78</sup>

Interviewees also mentioned changes within their communities, through the program’s engagement with municipal governments and local community structures. Through CONVIVIMOS, a total of 8 municipal-level violence prevention policies have been adopted. Each policy has dedicated municipal funding for carrying out violence prevention activities, getting local governments to commit to investing in reducing violence. In select cases, these efforts have led to improved perceptions of security: “CONVIVIMOS has shown us a lot in the community—in how to grow as a community, change as a community—in the little while that the program has been going on. The people say the community is better, so why am I going to leave? There is not so much violence, [because] we’re eradicating it. Thank God that things are stable now, so why leave?”<sup>79</sup>

**...the evaluation recorded a 51% decline in reported murders and a 51% decline in reported extortions attributable to the program in the neighborhoods that had received programs through CARSI funding, across the four countries.**

A small survey comparing CONVIVIMOS participants to non-participants further supports that the program may be changing people’s aspirations towards migration. A greater proportion of CONVIVIMOS participants than non-participants indicated that they did not want to leave

76 Meyer, P. and Seelke, C., 2015.

77 Berk-Seligson, S. et. al. 2014

78 Convivimos Focus Group Discussion #8. Villa Nueva, Guatemala, Guatemala. February, 2019

79 Convivimos Focus Group Discussion #3. Guatemala City, Guatemala. February, 2019



Corrina Robbins/ Mercy Corps

Guatemala, at 68% to 42%, respectively. This difference is statistically significant indicating that one's desire to leave Guatemala is associated with participation in the CONVIVIMOS program.<sup>80</sup>

Though promising, these results are only preliminary, as the CONVIVIMOS program is still underway. Moreover, there is limited evidence, to date, that CONVIVIMOS has tangibly improved security outcomes. The current assessment indicates, rather, that the program has been more successful at changing young people's attitudes about their future prospects at home, in a positive way. Evaluations of other non-USG violence prevention programs in the Northern Triangle, however, demonstrate improvements in violence and truancy-related outcomes including attitudes and behaviors related to gender-based violence among young men, decreased participation in prison violence and decreased drug abuse.<sup>81</sup> While more research is needed, these studies and the LAPOP evaluation of CARS, support a growing body of evidence that violence prevention programs may help address drivers of migration, particularly among vulnerable youth.

## Evidence of Impact on Economic Conditions and Migration

In addition to improving security, a big focus of the U.S.'s foreign assistance strategy in the Northern Triangle is on increasing prosperity by addressing economic hardships that often lead to migration. Poverty reduction and resilience are central in this strategy with an emphasis on supporting rural food security through agricultural development and improving adaptation to climate change. The strategy also focuses on

promoting access to education, private sector investment and regional trade.<sup>82</sup>

To date, this strategy has documented many economic improvements in the Northern Triangle. In Guatemala, USAID's geographically targeted agriculture investments in areas of high poverty and out-migration have resulted in 78,000 new jobs and \$160 million in sales. Between 2013-2017, similar programs in El Salvador yielded 26,500 new jobs and helped smallholder farmers increase sales by \$147 million, in addition to mobilizing more than \$19.6 million in private sector financing for small business growth. Responding to the needs of returned migrants who cited lack of economic opportunities as a primary motivation for seeking to illegally migrate again, 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.<sup>83</sup>

There are relatively few evaluations of economic development programs in the Northern Triangle that examine impacts on migration. One RCT of the USAID-funded *A Ganar* program—a workforce development program targeting at-risk youth between the ages of 16-24—in Honduras and Guatemala, however, did attempt to understand the relationship between employment training and migration. The program offered a 7-9 month training curriculum focused on improving technical skills for employment. Surprisingly, the impact evaluation found that *A Ganar* participants in Honduras were 35% more likely to attempt to migrate than non-participants. There was no relationship between being in the *A Ganar* program and migration in Guatemala. Further analysis revealed that in Honduras, having a better job was associated with less

80 This analysis unable to tell us about the direction of the relationship—that is if CONVIVIMOS led to a decrease in desires to leave Guatemala, or if the program attracted participants who were more likely to be connected to their communities.

81 Littlefield, N. and Sample, K. 2017.

82 Meyer, P., 2019b.

83 USAID, 2018a

migration. The evaluation concludes that one of the key reasons why program participants in Honduras were more likely to attempt to migrate is because the program helped increase participants' abilities and confidence while failing to create more opportunities for them. Naturally, without meaningful opportunities to utilize their new skills, youth may be further incentivized to migrate to places where they can.<sup>84</sup>

While less rigorous than the *A Ganar* RCT, Research on *AgriJoven*, a USAID funded program in Guatemala, implemented by Mercy Corps, provides another perspective on how a program focused on improving economic prospects may influence migration outcomes. The two-year program, which targeted youth between the ages of 15-24 in the poor Western Highlands of Guatemala, aimed to improve access to finance and agricultural technology, and strengthen community ties to prevent youth migration.<sup>85</sup> Through *AgriJoven*, more than 1,000 youth formed savings and loan groups, which were trained to adopt agricultural innovations such as integrated-pest management practices and improved seeds that increase productivity. Mercy Corps also facilitated formal partnerships between these youth groups and exporters and companies that source from farmers.<sup>86</sup>

In 2018, as *AgriJoven* came to an end, Mercy Corps undertook surveys and FGDs with youth participants to document how the program affected them. This included a panel survey with 416 youth participants who were asked how often they thought about migrating within a six month interval.<sup>87</sup> By the end of the program, there was a 30% reduction in thinking about migrating "all the time" or "very frequently"—a statistically significant change.<sup>88</sup> While this change only shows a trend among program participants, further analysis illustrates how this change may be attributable to the program. Analysis of the survey data found an inverse relationship between the length of time participating in the program and frequency of thinking about migrating — meaning that the longer youth had participated in the program the lower their intentions to migrate were. Qualitative interviews and FGDs with *AgriJoven* participants also help us better understand the change in migration aspirations. For most participants, the desire to migrate stemmed from the perception that they lacked economic opportunities at home: "It's a miracle that not all of us are

there (the U.S.) because the reality is that agriculture does not provide for us."<sup>89</sup> However, with time, the program helped to change this view. It gave participants more confidence in their future by facilitating new opportunities in agriculture and creating a sense of belonging through the connections made in savings and loan groups. During the two-year project, youth collectively saved \$125,431.27 and provided 147 loans totaling \$115,123.04 to group members for agriculture use<sup>90</sup>. As one youth explained: "Now there are groups that are supporting us...so now we can stay and fight to have a better future."<sup>91</sup> Another youth added that "...being in a group is motivational. Maybe you can't do things on your own but being in a group provides more strength than being on your own."<sup>92</sup> The end of program survey confirmed that 76% of those interviewed were confident that their future in Guatemala would be better than the present, with youth participating in the program for a longer duration showing higher confidence levels compared to those first starting the program.<sup>93</sup>

The divergent findings between the *A Ganar* and *AgriJoven* program evaluations raise an important point about the relationship between economic development and migration: it is dynamic rather than linear. In the short-term development may actually increase migration. Clemens argues that emigration rates generally rise with economic development until countries reach upper-middle income, and only thereafter falls.<sup>94</sup> Despite these macro trends, at the individual or micro level, the lack of opportunities and harsh economic conditions is a common motivation for migrating. For development programs to effectively address this driver, what is critical is that they take a long-term approach and focus on creating opportunities that can meaningfully change people's lives. For instance, short-term vocational training programs may lead to more migration, whereas programs that improve access to credit, create new jobs and/or facilitate market linkages may keep people rooted. Accordingly, Clemens concludes that: "if it focuses on long-term, sustainable interventions tackling unemployment and instability, it [development aid] can ultimately contribute to reducing the pressure for irregular migration. However if development interventions are focused on short-term "wins" based on a misguided understanding of what drivers irregular migration, migration pressures will continue to build."<sup>95</sup>

84 USAID, 2018b.

85 USAID, n.d.

86 Feed the Future, 2017.

87 While the project was originally funded by USAID for two years, an additional year of programming was added through Mercy Corps funds. Participants remain active and have coordinated a self-organized network of youth groups.

88 A Paired T-Test was performed to assess how youth's thoughts on migrations changed overtime. There was a significant change  $p=0.000$  in the frequency of thoughts between midline and endline evaluation.

89 *AgriJoven* Focus Group Discussion #5. Santa Maria Nebaj, El Quiche, Guatemala. May 2018

90 *AgriJoven* Quarterly Report, April-June 2018. Feed the Future Partnering for Innovation, August 2018

91 *AgriJoven* Focus Group Discussion #6. Uspantán, El Quiche, Guatemala. May 2018.

92 *AgriJoven* Focus Group Discussion #5. Santa Maria Nebaj, El Quiche, Guatemala. May 2018

93 There was a statistically significant relationship between number of cycles of participation and confidence for the future. ANOVA variance between all groups  $P=0.048$ . Further Two-Sample T-test showed youth participating in 4 or more cycles to be more likely to report confidence in the future than those participating only one cycle. ( $P=0.040$ )

94 Clemens, M., 2014.

95 Clemens, M. and Gough, K., 2019.



Corrina Robbins/ Mercy Corps

## Potatoes and Savings: Bertha's journey to agriculture success

At 21-years old, "Bertha" has become a leader within her community of San Miguel Ixtahuacan, San Marcos. She comes from an agricultural community that cultivates potatoes using traditional farming techniques.

Bertha first began saving her money in 2017 after joining the AgriJoven youth project. Early on she took responsibility as one of two key holders for the group's savings and loans lockbox and soon held the distinction of having amassed the largest savings among her group. Besides starting a new habit of regularly saving, Bertha learned about good agricultural practices and how to use biological pest control techniques through her group's potato demonstration plot. Already a farmer, her interest was further sparked after seeing the improved quality and subsequent increased selling price of potatoes. Bertha took charge in replicating these same techniques in her family's land and took out a 8,800 quetzales loan (about \$1,190) from the AgriJoven youth group to purchase supplies including biological

fertilizer and pesticides for her half-hectare of potatoes. Thanks to these new agricultural practices, Bertha was not only able to receive a higher price for her potatoes, but the potatoes were also of high enough quality to be sold to up-scale restaurants, a market she previously couldn't access. Bertha's comrades saw her leadership skills and elected her president of the youth group.

Bertha's upward trajectory didn't just end with learning about good agricultural practices. When she first joined the youth group, Bertha was not in school and didn't consider a university degree as important. Through attending the group's workshops and presentations, Bertha realized the the importance of continuing learning. She took it upon herself to enroll at the local university and expects to graduate at the end of the year with a certificate in business administration- a skill set that when coupled with her agricultural experience she hopes will lead to better crop outcomes and higher profits.



Miguel Samper/ Mercy Corps

## › Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This report seeks to shed light on the evolving push factors of migration from the Northern Triangle and evidence on the likely effects of foreign assistance programs on migration outcomes. We do not argue that development aid by itself will be able to curb illegal migration. Indeed, it goes without saying that development aid is just one tool, along with diplomacy, security assistance, trade and economic policies, that can influence conditions in the Northern Triangle. Nor do we argue that security and economic conditions are the only drivers of migration. Corruption, governance, social norms and many other factors may also play a role, though security and economic conditions are the most prominent push factors that our study finds. Notwithstanding these caveats and limitations to the data available to examine the direct link between U.S. foreign assistance and migration, the evidence that we have makes a stronger case to continue investing in improving conditions in the Northern Triangle that drive migration. Recommendations to the U.S. Government:

**Invest in more research.** The Department of State and USAID should invest in additional targeted research to better understand the relationship between foreign assistance and migration outcomes. Building on the LAPOP evaluation of CARSI programming, the U.S. could explore partnerships with implementing partners, research institutions and universities to build a broader evidence base to inform policymaking.

**Continue to fund US foreign assistance programs that help communities address poverty and violence.** The Department of State and USAID should continue funding development assistance programs that align with the pillars of the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America: 1) promoting prosperity; 2) enhancing security; and 3) improving

governance. Investing in programs that have a measurable impact on the poverty, insecurity, and grievances that drive many to migrate can both affect migration decision-making and contribute to broader stability in the Northern Triangle.

**Avoid tying all U.S. foreign assistance to specific migration outcomes.** U.S. development objectives in the Northern Triangle are broader than the reduction of migration outflows. Not all development programs should or will be able to address migration, and there will always be migration push or pull factors that are exogenous to US foreign assistance programs. Until more research is done to understand the possible impacts of assistance on migration intentions, there is a risk that tying all programs only to migration outcomes could limit the ability of development programs to address systemic root cause of migration such as insecurity and poverty.

**Improve program Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E):** When migration is an expected outcome in a program, USAID and the Department of State should work with implementing partners to provide standard metrics for measuring and assessing changes attributable to programs. USAID and the Department of State should avoid using migration related metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of development assistance not designed to address migration.

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