

Congressional Staff Briefing on the Impact of U.S. Foreign Assistance in Central America

Good afternoon. Thank you to Interaction and the Basic Education Coalition for hosting us and inviting World Vision to convey the urgency and impact of our work on the lives of children and their communities in the Northern Triangle. My name is Lanre Williams. I am Director for Child Protection and Education at World Vision and my team works to ensure program quality and impact for a global portfolio of programs, funded by the US government and private donors.

World Vision is a Christian relief, development, and advocacy organization working in 100 countries with children, families and communities to address the root causes of poverty and injustice. Specifically, in Central America, World Vision has worked for nearly 45 years with strategic public and private sector partners, and faith leaders to respond to the needs of children and youth. Our work focuses on violence prevention, workforce development, and child protection in both rural and urban settings, creating hope at home for children and families.

Research in the Northern Triangle shows that homicide rates among people aged 19 or younger have been steadily rising since 2008. Youth homicides in the region are now over 20 per 100,000 – that’s four times the global average. The risk of violence is not only from gangs. World Vision’s research in the sub-region found that up to 31% of children don’t feel safe in their own homes. The result is a social normalization of violence within the family, between peers, and in the community.

Countries in the Northern Triangle have the highest rates of poverty across the region. Per the UN, the population living in poverty in Central America is made up by mostly children and teenagers. In 2016, almost half of all children under 15 were poor, and a quarter of those were living in extreme poverty. One in five youth aged 15–24 in Latin America is out-of-school and not working.

US government foreign assistance primarily supports non-governmental organizations, like World Vision, other charitable organizations, and private contractors that carry out projects for USAID and the State Department to address these root causes of migration.

WV currently implements over \$127 million in programs funded the US government in the Northern Triangle. One example is the Puentes project in Guatemala. The project started in 2017 and is slated to run until 2022. The project’s goal is to reach 25,000 youth in the Western Highlands of Guatemala with soft skills such as communication, higher-order thinking, intrapersonal skills, and positive self-concept; and to build basic work and life-readiness competencies. With community volunteers, business mentors and project staff, youth learn soft skills and then are coached to develop a life plan that the project supports

them to pursue. So far, more than 9,600 youth have completed the training and created a life plan. For the first time ever for some of these youth, they are invited to dream about a future where they return to formal education, seek vocational training, enter formal employment, or start a business in their local communities.

At a recent graduation from the soft skills training portion of the project, one young woman told us *“One of the things I liked most about this course was that it helped me get to know who I am and to realize that I have many skills, which could be turned into opportunities for a business or a job”*. The Puentes project is giving young people reasons to stay and build their lives in their home countries; and equipping them with the skills and resources to do so.

Also in Guatemala, the Community Roots project is a \$40 million project that started in 2016 and will run until December 2021. The project’s overall goal is to support efforts by the government of Guatemala, civil society, private sector and community actors to address the underlying causes of violence and migration, primarily targeting children and youth aged 8-24 from disadvantaged communities. To date, the project has established and trained 79 violence prevention commissions to promote and sustain integrated violence and migration prevention initiatives. The mayor of one of the towns where we work noted: *“With the support we’ve received from the Community Roots Project, we have seen a change in our municipality. Proof of this is that no homicides have been reported for the past 40 days, a huge milestone for this [municipality].”*

In El Salvador, WV implements the Juvenile Justice Systems Strengthening Project that aims to improve the capacity of the Salvadorian judicial system to administer alternative sentencing for children in conflict with the law, and to reduce recidivism. In Honduras, the Futuros Brillantes project focuses on withdrawing children from child labor back to school, supporting their households with livelihood support, and working with the government to strengthen support for enforcing labor laws. At the start of the project, 60% of beneficiary children were engaged in child labor; with a year left to go on the project, that figure is down to 35%.

Across all three Northern Triangle countries, evidence of the positive impact of foreign assistance is indisputable. In communities where USAID has programming, homicide rates have plummeted by 78 percent¹. Since 2011, USAID Programs in Honduras have increased 97 percent of incomes and lifted over 89,000 people out of poverty. In El Salvador, USAID programs have created 22,000 jobs, and increased transparency and accountability in the government. And in Guatemala, USAID programs have increased incomes of rural workers, created 20,000 jobs, and reduced judicial impunity.²

¹ This is according to an analysis done by the US global leadership coalition (USGLC).

² These are from an analysis shared with us by Interaction.

It is clear to those of us who work on these programs and to our field colleagues, many of whom are from the target communities, that the US government-funded projects are addressing the root causes that contribute to migration, that they are effective, and are delivering results. Ending programming early will mean that children, youth, and their families will lose the intended benefits of hope and real opportunities to improve their lives and invest in their local communities. We hope the administration will continue funding to the Northern Triangle countries and work in a collaborative manner with organizations such as World Vision to reach scale and impact.