

Addressing the “Root Causes” of Irregular Migration from Central America: An Evidence Agenda for USAID

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Abstract

In recent decades, the number of people migrating irregularly from the three Northern Triangle countries of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has been increasing, putting pressure on the Biden-Harris administration to address the root causes of irregular migration and deliver “results.” Evidence suggests that these countries are undergoing a demographic and economic transition, hence emigration pressure will likely remain for the coming decades. Yet there is much an entity like USAID, the United States’ largest development agency, can do to moderate the short-run drivers of irregular migration such as violence, climate shocks, lack of economic opportunity, and inaccessibility of legal migration pathways. In this policy paper, we outline the available evidence within these areas that is directly pertinent to irregular migration and identify key evidence gaps to be filled by future research and evaluation. We conclude by outlining five recommendations for how USAID can ensure its work is evidence-based and contributes to new learning, supporting policymakers in this field for decades to come.

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Introduction

How to manage unauthorized, or irregular,¹ migration to the United States is a challenge that has vexed American policymakers for decades. In recent years, Central America, especially the three Northern Triangle countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—have come to dominate the discussion. After a drop in irregular arrivals brought on by the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic, apprehensions at the southern border have increased, making it clear that irregular migration will continue to challenge policymakers in the Biden-Harris administration.²

Addressing irregular migration is an important US policy objective. Like all countries, the United States needs to know who is crossing its borders and effectively manage those flows. Irregular migration can also exact an incredible human toll. It is dangerous and expensive for migrants and profitable for criminal elements like the smugglers and gangs who control informal migration routes.³ Furthermore, the apprehension and deportation processes used to address irregular migration are costly—to taxpayers, to migrants (who often make repeated, expensive, and dangerous attempts), and to the US economy, which may lose out on the labor it needs.

As one of its first acts, the Biden-Harris administration unveiled a proposal for the US Citizenship Act of 2021, which directs the federal government to open more legal options for migration from Central America, expand earned pathways to citizenship, and invest in addressing the “root causes” of irregular migration from the region—things like weak and unaccountable governance, crime and violence, and limited economic opportunity, all of which can be exacerbated by climate and environmental shocks (Meyer 2021; Clemens 2021; Bermeo and Leblang 2021; White House 2021d).

Democrats in both chambers of Congress introduced legislation mirroring the administration’s proposal in February 2021. Consistent with the high-level aims outlined in the Act, the Biden-Harris administration has also taken executive action to expand the availability of work and humanitarian pathways to individuals from Central America, improve

¹ This brief solely focuses on irregular migration. Many people from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras do migrate through regular family-based, employment-based, and humanitarian visas. However, the data indicates that irregular channels are generally more accessible. Since FY2015, apprehensions have constituted a majority of the migration from the three countries as captured in US government statistics (including citizens naturalized, temporary migrant visas issued, green cards issued, and asylum positively adjudicated).

² The end of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which required asylum seekers to remain in Mexico for the duration of their US immigration proceedings, and the current Title 42 policy which, citing COVID-19 health precautions, permits automatic expulsion of most adults, have been identified as potential reasons for the increase in apprehensions during 2021. The assumption is predicated on the closure of options for lawful entry pushing many to cross irregularly. It is also important to note that the composition of irregular migrants from Central America has changed, with an increase in unaccompanied children in 2014-2015 and later an increase in family units, both of which require special handling by law enforcement and other US agencies (Bolter 2021). In 2021, however, single adults again have been growing as a share of total apprehensions.

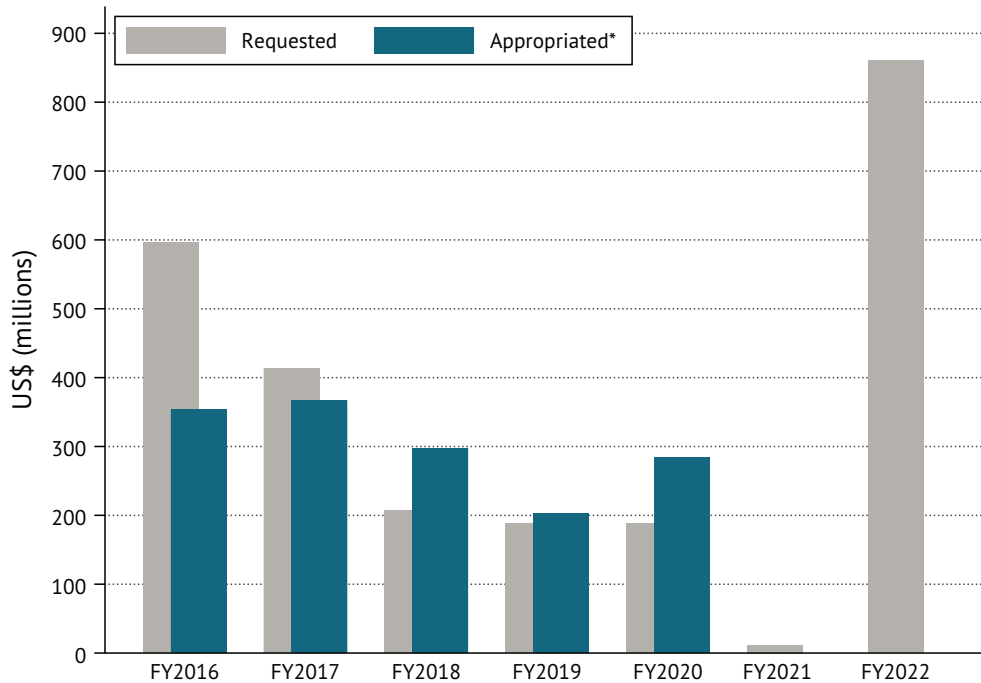
³ Many who succeed in their attempts to migrate irregularly do benefit from higher wages and/or family reunification, but these come at a higher cost than they would via regular migration pathways.

the processing and management of migrants in custody and in countries of origin, and create new initiatives and aid-financed programs that seek to address some of the challenges facing countries in the region.

And in July 2021, the administration released two guiding strategies outlining its approach to migration from Central America and Mexico. The Collaborative Migration Management Strategy identifies priorities for ensuring migration is safe, orderly, and humane, including the expansion of legal pathways (The White House 2021). The US Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America (Root Causes Strategy), introduced in 2021, outlines how the United States plans to use its foreign assistance, diplomacy, and policy tools to address specified root causes of irregular migration, some of which are detailed above (The White House 2021e).

To help achieve those goals, the Biden-Harris administration has pledged to invest US\$4 billion in Central America over the next four years, including US\$861 million in assistance in its first budget request to Congress—a marked increase above recent levels of assistance to the region.

Figure 1. Presidential requested funding vs. actual funding for foreign assistance to Central America, FY2016–FY2022



Note: *Appropriations data are only available through FY2020.

Source: Data for FY2016–FY2021 are from the supplementary tables in the Congressional Budget Justifications for the International Affairs Budget. Data for FY2022 are from the Summary of the President’s Discretionary Funding Request. Included in the analysis are Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Central America regional.

USAID manages most US foreign assistance in Central America and will therefore play a key role in implementing any increase in funding to the region. Given the high political profile of this work, the agency is likely to face scrutiny and pressure to demonstrate results.

The Biden-Harris administration, which has affirmed its commitment to evidence-based policymaking, appears well-positioned to take up such an approach (The White House 2021c). An interagency effort to craft a monitoring, evaluation, and learning plan for the Root Causes Strategy is currently underway and will help guide implementation of the strategy's commitment to "build on what works, and...pivot away from what does not work." As the agency that manages most of the funding to the region, USAID's role in implementing that strategy will be critical.

This brief, produced by the Center for Global Development (CGD) and Stanford University's Immigration Policy Lab (IPL), describes the current landscape of US assistance to the Northern Triangle and offers recommendations for an evidence agenda for USAID's programming in Central America.⁴ We outline evidence directly related to approaches that seek to address the "root causes" of irregular international migration and identify key evidence gaps that remain. While not an exhaustive literature review, we explore existing evidence on approaches that seek to address four main drivers and mediators of irregular migration: preventing violence, building resilience to climate shocks, expanding job access and economic security, and increasing legal migration pathways. We then explore a concrete set of steps USAID should take to ensure that its programming is evidence-based and invests in new learning.

USAID's engagement in Central America

From 2014 to 2020, the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America was the central policy framework for US assistance to the region (US Department of State 2019; Meyer 2019). Led primarily by the State Department and USAID but designed as a "whole of government" approach, the strategy had three core pillars: promoting economic prosperity (which includes investment in regional integration, education, and climate resilience); strengthening governance; and improving security. In the original version of the strategy, reducing irregular migration was more of an implicit goal, with objectives focused on building opportunities for people to live safe, prosperous lives in their home countries (US Department of State). A revised version issued by the Trump administration focused much more explicitly on reducing irregular migration (US Department of State).

⁴ This brief is based, in part, on a workshop held by CGD and IPL on May 5, 2021, with academics and policy practitioners. The workshop focused on understanding "what works" in addressing development and emigration from the Northern Triangle. The authors would like to thank the participants of the workshop for the ideas that fed into this brief, and for their review.

Box 1. The Alliance for Prosperity

The Alliance for Prosperity was an initiative led—and substantially financed—by the Northern Triangle governments in cooperation with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (Meyer 2019). The Alliance was announced in September 2014, and between 2016 and 2019, the three Northern Triangle countries allocated nearly US\$12 billion to advance the initiative’s objectives (IDB 2020). The US government’s direct contributions to the Alliance were minimal, but overall US investment in the region was intended to be complementary. The US Strategy for Engagement in Central America was intended to advance US interests in the seven countries in Central America; the Alliance for Prosperity reflected the priorities of the Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran governments. Like the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America, however, one of the Alliance for Prosperity’s goals was to address the structural drivers of irregular migration with a focus on strengthening state institutions and improving transparency, improving citizen security and access to justice, investing in human capital, and fostering economic activity (IDB 2014).

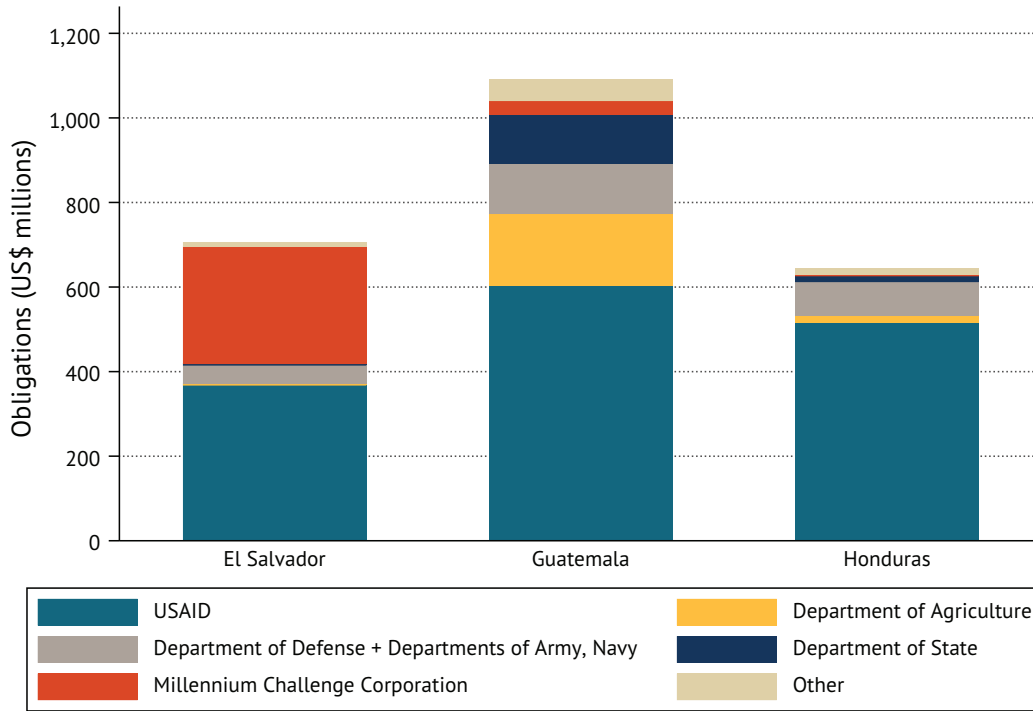
While the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America was initially somewhat oblique about its goals of reducing irregular migration, Congress has been more direct in linking foreign assistance to the goal of reducing irregular migration. Since FY2016, Congress has made assistance to the central governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras contingent upon the State Department’s verification that they are cooperating with the United States on irregular migration and seeking to advance governance, development, and violence prevention objectives.

The Biden-Harris administration has also made explicit that its approach to Central America will center around the goal of reducing irregular migration. But even with this shift in framing, the technical objectives—improving rights and governance, improving economic opportunities, and reducing crime and violence—remain broadly similar to those in the Strategy.

Between FY2016 and FY2021, Congress appropriated over US\$3.6 billion for the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America, with over 80 percent allocated to the three countries of the Northern Triangle. USAID manages over 60 percent of all US foreign assistance and 70 percent of US development assistance to the region.⁵

⁵ Foreign assistance includes both military and development assistance.

Figure 2. USAID is the implementing agency for most foreign assistance to the Northern Triangle, FY2015–FY2019

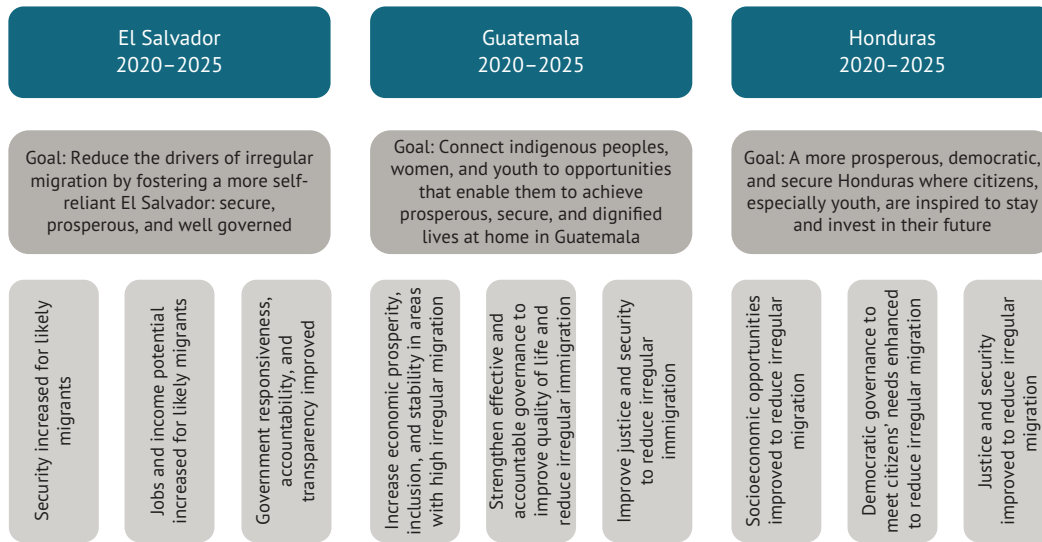


Source: Foreign Aid Explorer FY2015–FY2019 obligations.

In March 2019, the Trump Administration suspended most aid to the Northern Triangle in retaliation for a perceived lack of cooperation in stemming irregular migration to the United States (Sheridan and Sieff 2019). Eighty percent of USAID projects saw their objectives, services, geographic coverage, and/or number of beneficiaries cut (US Government Accountability Office 2021). Though funding resumed in 2020, the interruption was consequential. As of January 2021, USAID programs in the region were reaching fewer than half as many people as they did prior to the suspension (Meyer 2021).

As one of the two lead implementers of the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America, USAID’s country-level priorities reflect the broader strategy. The key objectives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as outlined in each USAID mission’s Country Development and Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), all revolve around governance, security, and economic growth. All three CDCSs also make clear that these objectives serve the overarching goal of reducing irregular migration. In addition to the mission-level strategies, the regional mission that operates out of El Salvador is in the process of developing a new regional development cooperation strategy that will be closely aligned with the Root Causes Strategy.

Figure 3. The goals and objectives of USAID’s CDCS for the three Northern Triangle countries



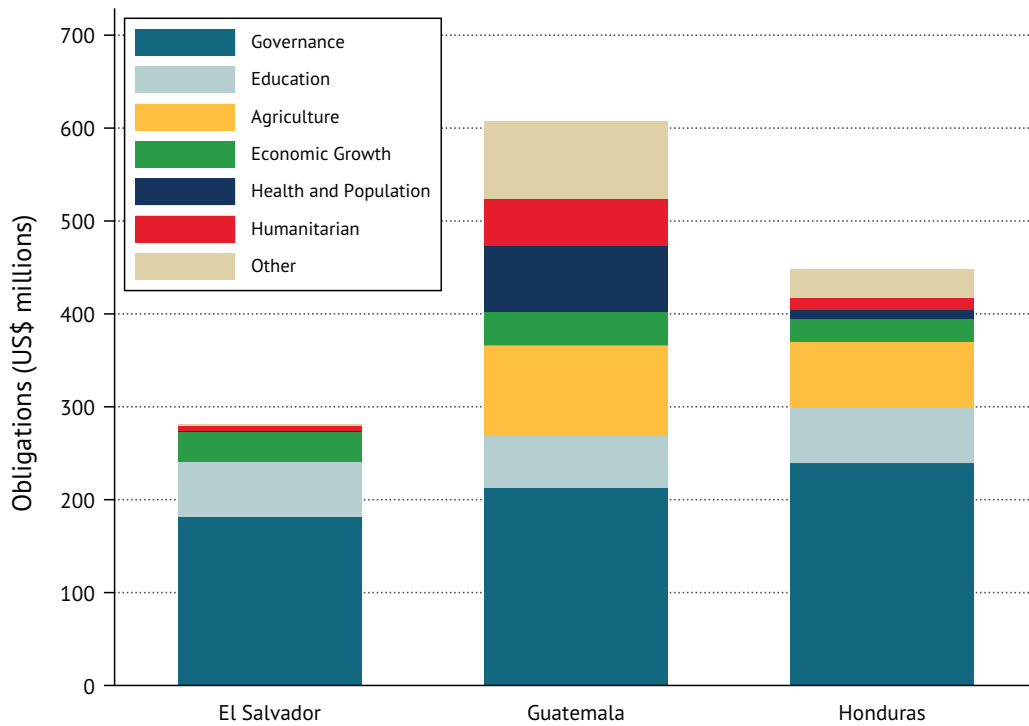
Sources: El Salvador CDCS, Guatemala CDCS, and Honduras CDCS. The development objectives for the Guatemala CDCS all refer to partnering with the government of Guatemala and other stakeholders.

While USAID’s CDCSs shed light on the missions’ sector priorities, they provide only limited insight into the distribution of emphasis across key sectors. For this, funding patterns can be more instructive. By sector, USAID’s programming in the countries of the Northern Triangle has focused largely on governance (including decentralization support, security system reform, and support to the judicial sector), followed by agriculture, education (particularly primary education), and economic growth (especially trade promotion, value chain improvements, and business development programs—with an emphasis on rural areas and resilience to natural disasters).⁶ The latter reflects a drive among donor governments to concentrate efforts in Central America’s Dry Corridor.⁷

⁶ Across the three countries, from FY2015–FY2019, private sector entities implemented 48 percent of the funds (88 percent of these were US-based implementers). NGOs (half US-based, half international or non-US based) implemented 23 percent of funds. Government implementers (93 percent US government) implemented another 17 percent of funds, and the rest (12 percent) went through church/faith-based, university/research, or multilateral institutions.

⁷ The Dry Corridor of Central America is a tropical dry forest region, stretching from along the Pacific coast from southern Mexico to Panama. The region experiences severe droughts and floods.

Figure 4. USAID’s assistance by sector, FY2015–FY2019



Source: Foreign Aid Explorer FY2015–FY2019 obligations.

The US regional and country-level strategies summarized above highlight how US efforts to address irregular migration from Central America have emphasized “development in place” interventions: those that seek to improve livelihoods and outcomes within the countries of origin. This approach has overlooked the beneficial role migration can play in improving economic outcomes within communities of origin, through financial, social, cultural, and technological transfers (Foresti, Hagen-Zanker, and Dempster 2018).⁸ Barriers to emigration prevent countries of origin from reaping these benefits (Clemens 2011).

In light of that untapped opportunity, some experts have argued that development actors like USAID should play a greater role in actively facilitating internal, regional, and international legal migration. Indeed, there is global precedent for development agencies to actively lead in interagency efforts to promote legal migration. For example, Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Germany’s Development Agency (GIZ) both fund and lead the implementation of legal migration channels.

⁸ For example, the World Bank reports that personal remittance flows to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were 24.1 percent, 14.7 percent, and 23.4 percent of GDP in 2020, respectively. This was higher than total merchandise exports (US\$) in El Salvador in the same year; total remittances received was roughly equivalent to merchandise exports (US\$) in Guatemala.

However, opening new legal channels for nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to migrate to the United States has, until recently, been largely absent from US policy conversation. This is despite evidence, outlined below, that the expansion of legal channels can advance the US goal of reducing irregular migration and enable critical access to the migrant labor upon which segments of the US economy depend (Clemens and Gough 2018).

This has started to change. Recent developments point to a new appreciation for the role of legal migration in countering irregular movement. A chief goal of the Collaborative Migration Management Strategy is expanding legal pathways. In addition, in 2021, the Biden-Harris administration set aside 6,000 H-2B temporary guest worker visas to nationals from the Northern Triangle countries.⁹ USAID, which has facilitated H-2 visa programs in the Northern Triangle since 2019, supported the expansion of these efforts through interventions that, for example, connected applicants with US businesses, worked with ministries of labor, and informed migrants of temporary worker rights and responsibilities (USAID 2021c). At the country level, USAID/El Salvador's CDCS outlines a goal of facilitating 5,000 worker visas during the strategy period (2020–2025), which is a broader and more ambitious vision for the agency than in years past.

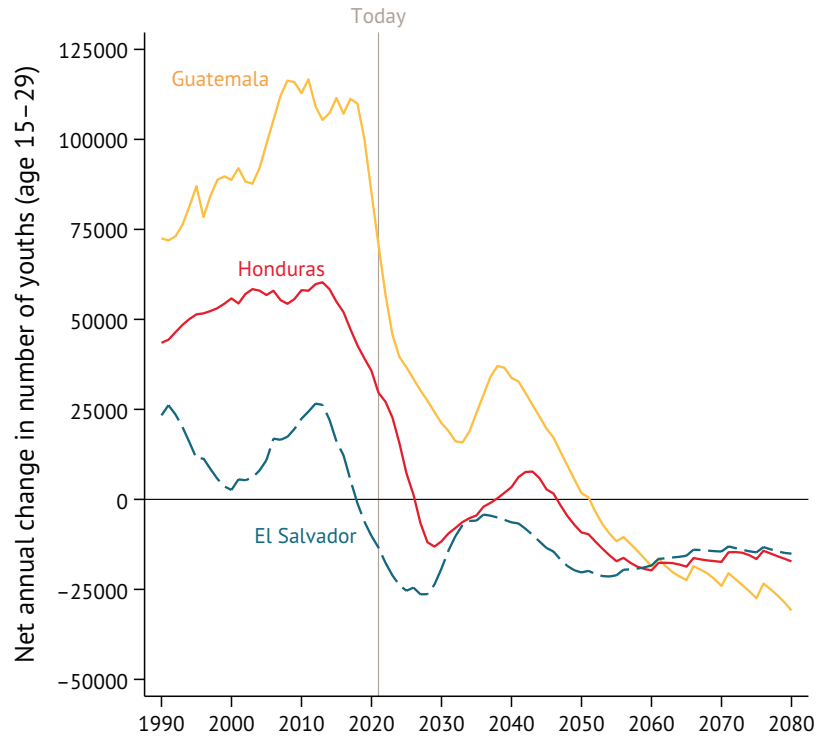
Even with these recent developments, there is still scope to explore how USAID might expand its role in advancing these objectives further. Of course, USAID is not the only agency with a role to play in expanding legal pathways; responsibility cuts across multiple US agencies—including, in addition to USAID, the Department of Labor, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, the US Department of Agriculture. This points to the importance of getting interagency coordination on these issues right.

Demography, development, and irregular migration in Central America

As Clemens and Graham (2019) point out, one of the most important forces driving migration is demography. Central America's youth bulge—a result of declining child mortality while fertility rates remain high—has, over the last decade or so, created a surge of young workers into a labor market that cannot accommodate them. A similar increase in young people unable to find jobs in Mexico between the 1950s and early 2000s was a primary driver of increased irregular migration to the United States. But at the tail end of the youth bulge in Mexico, irregular migration to the United States dropped. Given the demographics in the Northern Triangle countries, Clemens and Graham anticipate migration trends from this region will behave similarly over the next 10 to 15 years.

⁹ There was little detail on how to facilitate the fulfillment of such a quota, and the special H-2B allotment period for 2021 ended on July 8 with fewer than 6,000 visas issued to nationals from the countries of the Northern Triangle. Remaining slots from the Northern Triangle set aside were opened to nationals from any country.

Figure 5. Fewer Youth Emigrating: Demographic Projections in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 1990–2080



Source: Demographic projections from UN Economic Commission for Latin America.

In addition to demography, changes in migration demand are also linked to economic development—but not in the way many theories of change—including USAID’s—presuppose. Each country faces its own specific circumstances, but evidence from Clemens and others show that, in general, emigration *rises* with economic development.¹⁰ This emigration “hump” rises until GDP per capita reaches around US\$10,000 at purchasing power parity (PPP) and declines thereafter (Clemens and Mendola 2020). The research in this area shows that as skills and aspirations rise among the population of low- and middle-income countries, up to a point, people are more motivated and financially able to seek opportunities elsewhere. Only when economic activity begins to catch up with skills and aspirations (around that PPP\$10,000 GDP per capita mark) do fewer people choose to emigrate. As a point of reference, GDP per capita in the Northern Triangle countries ranges from around PPP\$6,000 in Honduras to around PPP\$9,000 in El Salvador and Guatemala.

This would suggest investment in interventions that improve long-run economic development within Central America (for example, improving education and skills, or addressing governance and rule of law reform) is likely to *increase* emigration—at least until the countries of the Northern Triangle reach this economic “hump.” So, while programs that

¹⁰ Within low-income countries, richer people are more likely to emigrate. And as economies grow, more people are more likely to emigrate (Clemens and Mendola 2020).

seek to improve development outcomes may have intrinsic value, expectations that they will engender a reduction in irregular emigration are likely misplaced.

That said, if we think about emigration from the Northern Triangle tracing this economic “hump,” the curve is not smooth. There are various factors that lead to short-term spikes in irregular emigration pressure, which cause rates to move above and below the line at different intervals. These short-term spikes—driven by factors like insufficient rainfall, spikes in violence, job losses—can cause political concern and knee-jerk policy responses. Some of the factors driving these sudden increases can be targeted through aid interventions. But while it may be politically expedient to focus primarily on short-term outcomes, the nature of irregular migration trends demands a long-term strategy and response.

The push to deliver results—but what results?

The recent rise in apprehensions at the US southern border has increased pressure on USAID to “deliver results” in advancing the Biden-Harris administration’s Central America strategy. At her 2021 confirmation hearing, USAID Administrator Samantha Power was asked repeatedly about how the agency’s engagement in Central America could be more successful, and the main message from a 2019 congressional delegation to the Northern Triangle was that USAID and its implementing partners needed to improve how they communicate results.

But what do “results” mean in this context? Because USAID invests primarily in projects that seek to improve in-country conditions, the agency has typically sought to measure things like improvements in economic and social development, as well as institutional capability.

What about irregular migration? For a number of years, USAID has partnered with—and in some cases provided financial support to—US agencies’ or external organizations’ efforts to collect and report data on border encounters, returnees, and migration intentions. Missions in the Northern Triangle countries have also helped develop more sophisticated measures of people’s migration intentions. The agency uses these data for things like planning and context monitoring.

But there has been less investment in understanding programmatic impact on these variables. The “Results Architecture” for the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America did not include “reducing irregular emigration,” for example, among its objectives or sub-objectives (US Department of State 2019). Within the last five years, there have been few efforts to assess programmatic impact on irregular or regular migration. For instance, of the 30 final evaluation reports posted since 2015 assessing USAID programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, only seven discuss migration at all and these do so only in contextual ways (e.g., migration history or plans of program participants, migration as a cause of attrition of program participants, reasons people migrate).¹¹

¹¹ Source: USAID’s Development Experience Clearinghouse. 80 percent of these evaluation reports were performance evaluations; 20 percent were impact evaluations.

On the other hand, USAID’s recent results frameworks for the region are more explicitly focused on irregular migration, and each country strategy commits to measuring the extent to which the interventions carried out under the strategy help reduce irregular migration to the United States. In addition, the USAID missions in these countries are tracking a consistent set of indicators on program participants’ migration experiences, attitudes, and intentions. These are intended “to assess the impact of relevant programs on migration,” though the agency is also clear that these are not performance indicators and have not set targets for their achievement.¹²

There are a few plausible factors behind USAID’s limited attempts to measure its programs’ direct impact on emigration.

1. There can be a **tension between short-term and long-term goals**. USAID programs seek to influence migration decisions *through improvements to development outcomes*. But, as previously described, increased development (i.e., more economic opportunities, higher skill levels) does not necessarily translate into lower rates of emigration. Using reduced migration as a measure of success could therefore end up jeopardizing programs that, on their development merits, were otherwise successful.
2. A complex array of interacting factors influences decisions to migrate, and **narrow, programmatic interventions cannot fully address these interlinkages**. The impact of any development intervention on migration is often non-linear and dependent on a wide range of other, often fluid, dynamics. Our existing conceptual and methodological tools aren’t well equipped to measure this complexity (Czaika and Godin 2021).
3. Several important drivers of migration, including demographic structure, fall **outside the scope of what foreign aid could reasonably be expected to influence**, making it hard to discern the impact of a given, targeted intervention. Irregular migration outcomes also reflect the political will of Northern Triangle governments and ruling elites to facilitate remittances, increase border security, and promote legal channels.
4. Measuring irregular emigration rates is **complex, costly, and time-consuming**. Many irregular migration outcomes of interest would require long-term tracking of the people a development program reached, far beyond the conclusion of the project. There may not be sufficient funding, buy-in, or capacity to commit to such an effort.

As a result, there is limited evidence on the extent to which development programs targeting “root causes” affect irregular emigration. Still, improving understanding in this area is needed

¹² The questions are: 1. Number of beneficiaries enrolled in programs in the reporting period; 2. Number of returned migrants receiving US Government assistance; 3. Percentage of individual beneficiaries who are returned migrants; 4. Percentage of beneficiaries with a household member who has migrated; 5. Percentage of enrolled beneficiaries who drop out due to migration to the US; 6. Percentage of beneficiaries who express intention to migrate in the next 3 years; 7. Percentage of beneficiaries who plan to stay in their country of residence. Source: El Salvador CDCS.

to foster better informed, less assumption-based policy conversations about development goals, migration goals, and the interlinkages between them. In the months ahead, USAID will need to confront the four constraints above and identify (and invest in) what the agency can measure itself, along with the longer-term evaluation efforts it can support.

What works in addressing the “root causes” of irregular migration

As USAID implements and seeks to refine its country strategies for the Northern Triangle, it should be guided by evidence and invest in new learning. This section summarizes the current state of evidence that is immediately and directly pertinent to international, irregular migration from the region. We structure our evidence review to focus on some of the primary causes of irregular migration: violence, lack of economic opportunity, and inaccessibility of legal migration pathways. Our summary considers evidence that uses causal inference methods to identify the causal impacts of a program or policy and includes relevant non-causally identified studies where those can provide additional insights not otherwise available.

Only a sub-set of these studies focus explicitly on measuring irregular migration, and we have indicated where this evidence exists. However, research focused on other substantive outcomes is valuable for its insights into the intermediate steps along the causal chain (as described in the next section). If, for instance, violence is a root cause of irregular migration, and reducing violence is hypothesized to reduce demand for irregular migration, then it is important to understand the evidence on the extent to which selected interventions might successfully reduce violence and thereby the irregular migration that occurs as a result. Measures of irregular migration from particular regions should thus be considered as one of many dependent variables in multiple hypothesis testing used to evaluate development programming.¹³ This is not a systematic review of the evidence, nor an exhaustive list of the approaches available to tackle these causes.¹⁴

For each topic, we identify certain approaches that evidence suggests are most promising, those for which evidence is mixed, and those that have been shown to be ineffective. We focus primarily on evidence generated in Northern Triangle countries and draw on research from elsewhere when appropriate as relevant to international migration. In an effort to guide future learning agendas, we recommend areas where research is crucially needed. Given this review is non-exhaustive, we recognize research may be warranted in areas not listed here.

¹³ For a brief summary of common methods for multiple hypothesis testing in impact evaluations, see Stein (2019).

¹⁴ The literature that was reviewed and presented at a CGD-IPL workshop in May 2021 served as the basis of that which is included here. Evidence cited in the initial papers referenced was included, as well, if the study was comprised of an experimental evaluation, rigorous causal evaluation, or representative descriptive statistics in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras. A majority of the literature included was published in English. A more targeted evidence review is necessary to capture the universe of the literature on each theme included.

Additional research may also be useful where there is a nascent body of evidence; evaluation is useful not only for filling research gaps but also for testing interventions within particular contexts, measuring the effects of differences in implementation, and for replicating results.

Violence prevention

	Approach	Evaluation Conducted in Northern Triangle Context	Evaluates Outcomes on Irregular Migration
More promising approaches	Focused deterrence	✓	
Approaches with mixed evidence	Gang truces	✓	
	Community policing	✓	
	Criminal procedure reform		
	Hot-spots policing		
Less effective approaches	Repressive tactics	✓	
Research gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent measurement of migration in violence prevention programs • How to change the incentives for extortion and engaging in violence 		

Gang activity increased in the Northern Triangle countries in the late 1990s, spurred largely by the deportation from the United States of immigrants with criminal records (Sviatschi 2020). Although the effect of violence on domestic displacement has been well studied in Latin America (Engel and Ibáñez 2007; Ibáñez and Vélez 2008; JIPS 2015), there is little quantitative evidence on the effect of violent crime on international migration. An important reason for this evidence gap is that violence often varies greatly at the subnational level, but common sources of international data on migrants almost never identify their subnational place of origin. Data sources identifying locality of origin and destination, however, do exist and should not just be used for planning purposes, but also integrated into learning agendas more widely.¹⁵

This poses a complex challenge. Many who are displaced internationally due to insecurity are fleeing generalized conflicts. However, gang violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras tends to be interpersonal conflict, often only affecting individuals or families with relatively lower levels of education and fewer economic resources (Melnikov, Schmidt-Padilla, and Sviatschi 2020; Kalsi 2018). Such threats cause many to move within their own country (CONADEH 2018; MCDF 2018; Hernández Bonilla 2017); however, networks among gang members can make internal displacement precarious, resulting in international emigration.

¹⁵ Please see USAID (2020a), IOM (2021), and Sellers (2020) for examples of subnational data relating to migration in the region.

Clemens (2021) shows that a combination of crime and economic determinants in particular municipalities caused more minors to emigrate to the United States. According to Clemens' findings, "across wide portions of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, rising violence does more to explain rates [of arrivals of unaccompanied children] than the local economic setting."

Interviews with children who emigrated from or were deported back to El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras find that roughly half of respondents were originally internally displaced due to violence (Khashu 2010; UNHCR 2014; IOM 2017; Casa Alianza 2020). Poll data across Central America find a strong individual-level association between stated emigration intent among youths and recent experience or witness of crime victimization (Hiskey, Malone, and Orcés 2014).

The results chains that USAID has proposed to use to assess outcomes in the Root Causes Strategy can be calibrated with localized data to tailor interventions to validate interventions in different sub-national areas or with specific demographic groups. For example, USAID/Honduras used subnational data in its community attachment analysis (USAID 2020b). This is a critical step to localize efforts through analysis of sub-national data. But if irregular emigration figures factor into the selection of a program location *ex ante*, such statistics should also be considered *ex post*. Here, we focus on the literature surrounding violence reduction programming in the security and justice sectors¹⁶ and corresponding findings on irregular migration.

More promising approaches

Focused deterrence: An approach that has shown significant promise is focused deterrence, or "conditional repression." Unlike other heavy-handed approaches by law enforcement, focused deterrence approaches target priority crime problems and involve direct, and often regular, law enforcement interaction with particularly prolific and/or violent offenders. The objectives of these interactions are both to communicate that there will be certain and swift repercussions for criminal activity and to provide incentives, including the provision of social services, for compliance with the law. Focused deterrence is a narrow programmatic strategy that focuses on high-risk behavior, rather than high-risk individuals and has been studied extensively (Lessing 2015a; 2015b; Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan 2018). According to the review conducted by Abt and Winship (2016), of all interventions the authors analyzed, "focused deterrence has the largest direct impact on crime and violence, by far."

Yet, focused deterrence is a difficult strategy to execute. It requires time-intensive, focused attention to individuals who may commit high-risk behavior. It requires inter-agency coordination among national law enforcement, social services, and community stakeholders

¹⁶ For a complementary review of civil society programming for violence prevention, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or community-based education, please see Knox et al. (2021) and Campie, Tanyu, and Udayakumar (2019).

in participating countries (and could be supported by US agencies such as USAID or the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs), a responsive criminal justice system, and capacity to provide social services expeditiously. Further, the strategy focuses on solely on preventing *lethal* violence, which discounts other common and detrimental gang crimes, such as sexual assault and extortion.

Approaches with mixed evidence

Gang truces: Some argue that the most significant reduction in gang violence over the past two decades in El Salvador came from the decision to negotiate a gang truce, covertly facilitated by the Salvadoran government. However, a recent report by the Foundation for the Study of Rule of Law (FESPAD) cites an increase in disappearances and mass graves over the same period, suggesting that the reduction in recorded homicides may have simply resulted from a shift to more covert killings (FESPAD 2021). The truce also had the unintended impact of increasing extortion. The supposed decline in violence did translate to less child migration (Sviatschi 2018). But Sviatschi contends that truces without transparency mechanisms do not work in the long run, as their covert nature undermines public confidence in the integrity of political institutions.

Community policing: Many recent proposals, such as those described in the 2020 Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission report, highlight community policing as an effective mechanism in the region to reduce crime and improve public confidence in law enforcement institutions. These measures have been shown to have some success. In Honduras, for example, Ungar and Salomón (2012) report that people who lived in areas in which a community policing program had taken place reported increased security (34 percent), decreased violence (23 percent), and improved community relations with law enforcement (14 percent). “Pacifying Police Units” (UPPs) in Brazil have shown success, evident in mixed-methods research, in reducing fatal police shootings by more than 40 percent and bringing down general levels of crime (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo 2020).

However, Blair, Alvarado, and Hameed (2020) highlight the complexity of such programs, which often fail to change police officer incentives and lack strong implementation. In their study of local community policing programs in Brazil, Colombia, Liberia, Philippines, Uganda, and Pakistan, the authors find no impact on any of the desired outcome variables, including crime victimization, perceptions of insecurity, or citizen cooperation with police. While the authors are explicit that the programs did not backfire, Abt and Winship (2016) juxtapose the level of public investment into such programs with the lack of strong evidence for their efficacy. It is worth noting that other forms of policing also regularly fail to yield cost-effective reductions in violent crime or increased cooperation with police authorities (Tyler 2011; Mummolo 2018).

Criminal procedure reform: In some parts of Latin America, there has been a shift in criminal procedure from an inquisitorial system, in which court procedures are primarily oriented around written documents presented to a judge, to an adversarial system, which is based on oral trials in public courtrooms (Hinojosa and Meyer 2019). These reforms

have had partial success in Mexico, leading to reductions in the use of violence and torture by the police force (Magaloni and Rodriguez 2020). On the other hand, criminal procedure reforms in Honduras were followed by increased violence, with state actors killing more people in the street (Ungar 2011); similar perverse effects occurred in Venezuela (Hausman and Kronick 2021).

“Hot spots” policing: “Hot spots” policing has been shown to have had some success, in Philadelphia for example (Braga, Papachristos, and Hureau 2014). However, there has been limited evaluation of such programming in Latin America. Blattman et al. (2017) show that hot spots policing displaced crime in Bogotá. In that context, hot spots policing, a place-based initiative, effectively reduced crime in the areas where the program was implemented but triggered a “balloon effect,” in which negative externalities simply shifted to other locations rather than abating altogether. Collazos et al. (2021) find a decrease in car thefts because of hot spots policing in Medellín, but no statistically significant effects on any other crimes.

Less effective approaches

Repressive tactics: Historically, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have relied on *mano dura* policies, which prioritize repressive tactics from the military (rather than domestic law enforcement) toward violent civilian actors (Wolf 2017). State actors who carry out *mano dura* policies may dismiss procedural rights and act in a more discretionary (and often extralegal) way, taking the law into their own hands. The United States has provided training for *mano dura* policies to militaries and police in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as extensive funding and weaponry (US Government Accountability Office 2020). But descriptive and mixed-methods analyses show that these policies, in fact, increase state violence and fail to reduce gang violence (International Crisis Group 2017; Ávila and Antillano 2017; Lessing 2015a; Muggah and Aguirre Tobón 2018; Castillo and Kronick 2020). Even when looking at the street level in El Salvador, areas prioritized for *mano dura* policies under the Plan Control Territorial did not experience a reduction in gang violence in comparison to others that had not been prioritized (International Crisis Group 2020).

Research gaps

There is currently very little evidence on **how to change the economic incentives for extortion and the incentives to engage in violence**. More broadly, even a strong existing evidence base does not imply that any single crime reduction tactic will guarantee success. This scarcity of evidence suggests that evaluation will be critical to understand the extent to which programs are succeeding and how they are (or are not) achieving results. **Granular data, commitment from partner security forces and prosecutors, and causal program evaluation are all essential if such programs are to be properly implemented and evaluated.**

Further, there is a need for **increased measurement of migration ex ante within violence prevention programs**. Both origin *and* destination identifiers for individuals

who migrate, available at a municipal level and with minimal attrition across time, yield the most explanatory value.

Development

Policies to improve socioeconomic conditions and build resilience to climate shocks can help diversify people’s options and shift the way they perceive trade-offs between irregular migration and other choices. In the context of multiple market failures, structural challenges such as climatic risks, inequality, violence, and institutionalized corruption imply that lifting one constraint alone, such as offering more information, cash, or training, will often not be enough to deter irregular migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras. Certain policies may incentivize irregular migration, despite intending the opposite. Hence, as with violence reduction programming, there is an immediate need to test the effects of various approaches, and interactions among them, on irregular migration and other outcomes.

The research on socioeconomic initiatives is not very robust in Central America, but evidence from other low- and middle-income countries can offer insights into how certain mechanisms can potentially temper the near-term need to emigrate without papers.

We present the following evidence with the understanding that insecurity is a compounding factor in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that may not be present in other contexts.

Resilience to climate shocks

	Approach	Evaluation Conducted in Northern Triangle Context	Evaluates Outcomes on Irregular Migration
More promising approaches	Humanitarian aid		
	Index insurance schemes		✓
Approaches with mixed evidence	Access to financial markets		✓
Less effective approaches			
Research gaps		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How technical assistance affects distressed migration • How conditions on investments reduce household vulnerability 	

The compounding effects of desertification and sudden-onset climate events such as hurricanes are ravaging rural areas in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, with each country experiencing high levels of food insecurity in certain areas (IPC 2021). The evidence on how climate shocks impact irregular migration varies widely across contexts; De Longueville et al. (2020) find that *perceptions* of changes in rainfall predominated in migration decisions over actual changes (or lack thereof) in rainfall in West Africa. Schutte et al. (2021)

show that political violence has more predictive power in a non-causal, machine-learning prediction framework of asylum migration to the European Union than drought and temperature anomalies.

Within this variance, however, migration driven by weather is higher in countries more reliant on agriculture (Cai et al. 2016; Feng, Krueger, and Oppenheimer 2010; Thiede, Gray, and Mueller 2016). In the Northern Triangle, climate events have been shown to result in lower wages per hour, not just in the agricultural sector but also in non-agricultural sectors (Ibáñez, Romero, and Velásquez 2021). When subsistence farmers experience a decrease in their crop yields, they sometimes migrate to survive given that they grow what they eat and do not have formal employment (ibid). Some poor households have used seasonal migration to insure themselves against food insecurity (Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak 2014). And natural disasters, such as hurricanes, are increasingly a major driver of emigration from countries around the world to the United States (Mahajan and Yang 2020).

More promising approaches

Humanitarian aid: In instances of extreme heat stress, there is a promising role for humanitarian aid. Climate shocks such as flooding generally yield large relief efforts. Dreher, Fuchs, and Langlotz (2019) show that aid reduces refugee flows to a donor country when the share of humanitarian aid coming from the donor country exceeds nine percent of total official development assistance (ODA) receipts in a longer-term period. On the other hand, heat stress consistently increases long-term migration yet rarely yields humanitarian aid (Baez et al. 2017; Mueller, Gray, and Kosec 2014), suggesting a potentially missed opportunity for impact. Immediate food assistance to households that depend on subsistence farming can also be constructive in reducing distress migration.¹⁷

Index insurance schemes: Index insurance schemes hold promise for providing collateral against unexpected climate events. There is growing evidence to suggest that insurance mechanisms can mitigate adverse impacts of risk, including those related to climate, on the welfare and productivity of small rural farmers (Carter and Lybbert 2012). The way insurance is offered seems to matter, however. Casaburi and Willis (2018) compared standard crop insurance products, which require payment up front, to an approach in which the buyer of a crop offers insurance and deducts the premium from farmers' revenues at harvest time. The take-up rate of the latter scheme was 72 percent, compared to five percent for the standard product, with the largest difference among poorer farmers.

Munshi and Rosenzweig (2016) study how informal insurance mechanisms shape migration decisions in India, finding that men from households facing higher rural income risk—and thus who benefit more from the insurance network—migrate less; however, such findings

¹⁷ “Distress migration” is emigration from rural areas that is involuntary but not the result of an acute traumatic event, as forced migration is commonly defined (FAO 2016). Such migration, if international, is often undertaken irregularly.

may not apply to El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, as migration rates from India are comparatively low. Del Valle, de Janvry, and Sadoulet (2020) show that Mexico’s indexed disaster fund, Fonden, significantly facilitated recovery in municipalities after disasters, but do not evaluate the impact on emigration. Further research on such index insurance schemes is needed in the contexts of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Approaches with mixed evidence

Access to financial and insurance markets: Improved access to financial and insurance markets for low-income individuals or households may reduce distress migration. Subsistence farming households often cannot depend on financial or insurance markets to compensate for income loss and resort to costly strategies such as selling assets, changing agricultural practices, and expanding the use of children for labor (Jayachandran 2006; Aragón, Oteiza, and Rud 2021; Hornbeck 2012). However, Kleemans (2015) shows that credit provision reduces the need for distress migration and increases the opportunity to invest in migration in the long term.

Research gaps

Material and technical assistance: Investments in material upgrades like irrigation and technical assistance in the form of drought-resistant seeds have been shown to increase resilience to negative weather shocks. Programs that worked to reduce deforestation in Uganda (Jayachandran et al. 2017) and to facilitate water storage within soil in Niger (Aker and Jack 2021) were effective in changing practices to be more resilient to weather-related shocks. However, evidence on whether these measures reduce distress migration is practically non-existent.

Evaluating technical assistance initiatives in relation to distress migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras will be critical areas of future study. Also needed is additional research on **the extent to which conditioning investments on material and technical assistance helps reduce household vulnerability or facilitates their ability to adapt.**

Cash transfers

	Approach	Evaluation Conducted in Northern Triangle Context	Evaluates Outcomes on Irregular Migration
More promising approaches			
Approaches with mixed evidence	Conditional cash transfers	✓	✓
Less effective approaches			
Research gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to improve quality of service provision in coordination with cash transfers • Which modalities of cash transfers work best for different circumstances and outcomes 		

There has been growing attention on the benefits of cash transfers for a wide range of development outcomes, from higher school enrollment to improved food security to reduced poverty (UNICEF 2021; Seidenfeld 2016; Skoufias and Di Maro 2006). During the COVID-19 pandemic, cash transfers entered the spotlight as an important social safety net mechanism; they are quick to deploy and can be distributed with minimal person-to-person contact where digital payment systems are strong (Gelb and Mukherjee 2020). But by lifting liquidity constraints, cash may also increase migration (Bryan and Morten 2019).

Approaches with mixed evidence

Conditional cash transfers: As noted above, there is a large and growing body of evidence, synthesized in a number of meta analyses, that demonstrates the impact of cash transfers on a range of development outcomes (McIntosh and Zeitlin 2020; Bastagli, Hagen-Zanker, and Sturge 2016; Pega et al. 2017; Baird, de Hoop, and Özler 2013). There is a very strong evidence base that cash transfers are effective as a social safety net and can increase investments in human capital in the short run (Fiszbein et al. 2009).

The evidence is more mixed on the longer-run effects (Molina Millán, Barham, et al. 2019), with a number of studies suggesting that the benefits are not sustained after the transfer ends (Blattman, Fiala, and Martinez 2018; Haushofer and Shapiro 2016; Fafchamps et al. 2014; Brudevold-Newman et al. 2017). Other studies show more sustained benefits (Blattman, Fiala, and Martinez 2014; De Mel, McKenzie, and Woodruff 2013). Research shows that cash transfers overwhelmingly are not used for temptation goods (Evans and Popova 2014) or to increase leisure (Banerjee et al. 2017). In addition, cash transfers, with their low overhead and administration costs, are among the lowest-cost ways to transfer value to a program participant, making it an important benchmark for the cost-effectiveness of other interventions pursuing similar outcomes (Blattman and Niehaus 2014).

Despite the promise of cash transfers for household or individual welfare, cash transfers have also been shown to increase migration, both internal and international, which is in turn associated with development gains.

In a study done in Nicaragua, on the border with Honduras and El Salvador, Macours, Premand, and Vakis (2012) found that households that received a conditional cash transfer and a productive investment grant were able to diversify their incomes, which helped households protect themselves against weather shocks after the end of the intervention. Some households received a conditional cash transfer and vocational training to smooth shocks, which led to national and regional migration; 12 years later, there was an observed sustained impact on income diversification. Early evidence from a conditional cash transfer program in Mexico shows that the program increased migration to the US for work (Angelucci 2015) but reduced US migration in total (Stecklov et al. 2005).

Looking at within-country migration, a ten-year impact evaluation of a conditional cash transfer program in Nicaragua revealed similar development results regarding temporary

internal migration (Barham, Macours, and Maluccio 2018). And a small, conditional subsidy program in Bangladesh led to a large increase in seasonal migration from rural to urban areas within the country. In the Bangladesh study, the authors argue that the observed migration yielded larger welfare returns than other promising development interventions (Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak 2014).

Cash transfers conditioned on uptake or continuance of education have shown some success. In El Salvador, Ambler, Aycinena, and Yang (2015) evaluated a program that matched remittances with a cash grant to be used for educational purposes. This led to more school expenditures by the household. For each dollar received—25 percent from migrant remittances and 75 percent from matching grants—educational expenditures increased by US\$3.72. Additionally, the matching funds led to fewer youth in the labor market and better school attendance.

Cash transfers that are conditioned on continued education can also increase international migration in the long run. A 13-year impact evaluation of a five-year conditional cash transfer program in Honduras found that non-indigenous recipients of the cash benefit had gone to school longer (educational gains were far more limited for indigenous children), and they were then more likely to emigrate, with the probability of international migration increasing from 3 to 7 percentage points (Molina Millán, Macours, et al. 2019).

In a cash-for-work program in Comoros, there was also an increase in migration as a result of a conditional cash transfer. One person in the household participated in the cash transfer program and worked to earn the cash benefit, while another household member could migrate with those earnings (Gazeaud, Mvukiyehe, and Sterck 2019).

Some programs bundle cash transfers with complementary interventions like productive assets or training, as noted in the Nicaragua example above. Worldwide evidence on ultra-poor programs shows that bundled packages that include cash and other interventions can successfully put the poorest households on sustained pathways out of poverty (Banerjee et al. 2015; Bandiera et al. 2017).

Research gaps

More evidence is needed on **how cash transfers can be used to facilitate safe, legal migration; whether—and which—complementary interventions might amplify the effects of cash; whether different modalities of cash transfers have different effects; and the best methods to improve the quality of public services** whose uptake or continuance is required as a condition of cash transfers. Increased evidence is also needed on **how to reduce incentives among young parents receiving such transfers to migrate.**

Labor market access

	Approach	Evaluation Conducted in Northern Triangle Context	Evaluates Outcomes on Irregular Migration
More promising approaches	Initiatives that help workers access different labor markets		
Approaches with mixed evidence	Vocational training	✓	✓
	Rural public works programs		
Less effective approaches	Temporary wage subsidies		✓
	Search and matching programs		
Research gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkages between labor market programs and irregular/regular emigration decisions • New models of rural public works programs in Central America 		

Irregular migration is often used, particularly by young people, as “a coping mechanism” for high levels of unemployment (Dibeh, Fakh, and Marrouch 2018). However, jobs are difficult to create, particularly through foreign assistance programming. While improving the general socioeconomic conditions of a country is beyond the scope of what foreign assistance may be expected to influence, USAID often does operate various programs that seek to create job opportunities, particularly for youth, with the goal of reducing intention to migrate irregularly.

Yet policies that have provided vocational training, wage subsidies, and job search assistance appear to be much less effective than policymakers assume (McKenzie 2017). Many evaluations find no significant effects on either employment or earnings, with little to no evidence on the impact on irregular migration. The most vulnerable and marginalized may not easily get “trickle down” formal sector jobs because they have fewer complementary assets. Further, the most vulnerable populations may live in areas where “medium-skill” job creation is particularly difficult, although it is important **to identify and target exceptions among sectors in which there may be lower barriers to job creation.**

More promising approaches

McKenzie (2017) reviews the evidence surrounding active labor market policies (ALMPs) and their effectiveness, looking at three different categories of traditional ALMPs: those that address labor supply, those that address labor demand, and those that attempt to harmonize the two—the last of which being the most promising. **Interventions that help workers access different labor markets and overcome sectoral and spatial mismatches** were found to be the most fruitful for potential employees and employers alike. Spatial mismatches arise when people with the same skills have starkly different employment opportunities solely based on where they are located. Some successful screening and matching interventions facilitated the communication of job opportunities in a different location (Jensen 2012) or subsidized job searches in another part of a city (Abebe et al. 2016). International migration

has been shown to incur large gains for those seeking new opportunities. Gibson and McKenzie (2014) show that sending seasonal workers to New Zealand increased per capita incomes in Tonga and Vanuatu by more than 30 percent. Clemens and Postel (2017) show that working temporarily in the United States raised the value of agricultural workers' labor by approximately 1400 percent. Sáez (2013) discusses the process that governments in both sending and receiving countries can use to facilitate such movement. However, when efforts solely focus on the worker side, efforts may fall flat. Beam, McKenzie, and Yang (2016) conducted several interventions in the rural Philippines to facilitate more international migration and were unsuccessful in generating employer demand abroad.

Approaches with mixed evidence

Vocational training: The ALMP category that encompasses programs addressing labor supply often aims to increase the employability of workers through vocational training. The standard model in the *entra21*, *Jovenes* and *Juventud y Empleo* programs combines classroom training with on-the-job training. Of the evaluations reviewed, McKenzie found that “for every 100 people offered vocational training, fewer than three will find a job that they would not have otherwise found.” USAID’s A Ganar workforce development program in Guatemala and Honduras generated similar results; while A Ganar youth in Honduras had higher wages than the control group of their peers (roughly US\$0.1 per hour on average), the program had no significant impact on the employment rate or hours worked in either country (USAID 2018). However, Maitra and Mani (2017) evaluate a program, which only cost US\$39 per person trained (through NGO provision), that increased the participants’ income by 96 percent. The women in their sample were unlikely to be formally working and had very low earnings, so the relative increase is small in absolute terms but significant to the participants. Promoting self-employment through training and grant funding does reduce emigration on average, but it takes time for that reduction to occur, and the magnitude of the reduction is modest (Giambra and McKenzie 2019).

Rural public works programs: Rural public works programs have been shown to reduce seasonal migration even if the monetary incentives are not as strong in the rural sectors (Imbert and Papp 2020). Further, road construction in India facilitated the movement of workers out of agriculture (Asher and Novosad 2020). While this finding could be potentially interesting for thinking about subsistence farmers who experience a decrease in crop yields due to climate change, it is also worth noting that the study did not find improvement in income or assets and only small gains in employment. Thus, programming must go beyond trainings and offer sustainable employment, not solely through positions created for the public works initiatives but also through the program’s management.

Less effective approaches

Temporary wage subsidies: The third ALMP category that McKenzie reviews includes programs addressing labor demand. Offering a temporary wage subsidy to lower the cost to a firm of hiring the worker is one method that has been tried to increase demand for labor by firms. But whether the subsidy is provided to the employee in the form of a

voucher or to the employer to incentivize hiring a candidate, it appears that once the subsidy ends, the intended benefit quickly dissipates (Groh et al. 2016; De Mel, McKenzie, and Woodruff 2016).

Search and matching assistance programs: Within the third ALMP category of harmonizing labor supply and demand, search and matching assistance programs are often proposed, including resume workshops, labor exchanges, and skills matching between firms and workers. Results for these programs also appear to be null, with very few direct hires occurring through many of these initiatives and a substantial share of job offers being turned down by jobseekers (McKenzie 2017). The only evaluation in McKenzie’s review that found a significant improvement in employment was of a project that provided experienced recruiting services to young women in rural villages in India at the start of the business process outsourcing boom, which increased employment by 2.4 percentage points over three years (Jensen 2012).

Dammert, Galdo, and Galdo (2015) evaluated whether providing information about job vacancies to registered job seekers through a public service provider in Peru improves employment, either through non-digital or digital means (via text message). They found that the services speed up the job search process for participants for a month, but after three months, the control group catches up.

Groh et al. (2015), Abebe et al. (2016), and Bassi and Nansamba (2017) developed evaluations to test various soft and hard skills that firms find difficult to observe but highly valuable, such as skills in math, creativity, teamwork, attendance, and communication. The test conducted by Groh et al. (2015) resulted in more than 1,000 matches between firms and workers. Young people rejected an opportunity to interview for a job 28 percent of the time, and when a job offer was received, they rejected the job offer or quit shortly thereafter 83 percent of the time. Only nine hires lasted one month. Less than 5 percent of the job matches made in the test conducted by Bassi and Nansamba (2017) resulted in a worker being hired, and “very few workers” hired were still employed at the firm at the time of follow-up.

Abebe et al. (2017) tests the impact of job fairs, which bring firms and workers together. After 1,007 people were invited to job fairs, only 606 people attended, only 76 job offers were made, and only 14 people were ultimately hired. Results from Beam (2016) similarly show that only two of 685 attendees at a job fair were working for employers that attended the fair 10 months later. Yet, attendance at the job fair itself seemed to be productive—attendance at the job fair caused a 10.6 percent increase in formal sector employment, as compared to a 7.7 percent increase among the control group.

Research gaps

While there has been quite a bit of research on the effects of labor market access programs on job placement and retention—and there is considerable research that demonstrates that increased income can increase emigration—there is little research on the **effects of labor market access programs on decisions to emigrate.**

Foreign aid can serve as a pull factor for internal migration, which may substitute for irregular international migration (Lanati, Sanfilippo, and Santi 2021). Migration decisions appear to be mostly influenced by the presence of aid-supported projects in recipient districts, rather than their size. With the introduction of rural public works projects, the positive welfare effects of foreign assistance may manifest themselves not only through a rise in economic opportunities, but also in improved access to public services in recipient districts. Even so, **while rural public works programs appear promising, specific modalities would require further study.**

Expanding legal pathways for migrant workers and encouraging their use¹⁸

	Approach	Evaluation Conducted in Northern Triangle Context	Evaluates Outcomes on Irregular Migration
More promising approaches	Providing information on legal rights and working conditions		✓
Approaches with mixed evidence			
Less effective approaches	Information campaigns to discourage migration		✓
Research gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to inform potential migrants of available pathways • How visa access and prevalence impact irregular migration 		

With more human capital or better connectivity, we should expect people to seek out better opportunities where they are available (Clemens and Mendola 2020). There is a very long history of seasonal migration for agricultural work. And considering that internal and international displacement frequently occurs because of negative shocks like extreme weather events or upticks in gang violence, legal migration channels must also be seen as a viable development strategy. If carefully planned, migration can be a viable strategy for households to geographically diversify risk or escape untenable conditions in the short run (Mahajan and Yang 2020). There can be increased micro and macroeconomic gains when legal pathways are a viable alternative to irregular pathways (Orrenius and Zavodny 2015; Kaushal 2006).

The evidence does show that **migration promotes long-run development** through increased earnings for workers, a portion of which is often transferred as remittances

¹⁸ This section focuses on legal pathways for migrant workers; it does not address migration processes for refugees and asylum seekers, which are governed by different policy processes, those of which often begin only after irregular migration has already taken place. We focus on employment-based (EB) pathways due to the relative inaccessibility of these legal pathways for those in the region without a college degree or family member legally residing in the United States. EB pathways with dependent eligibility offer a legal alternative to irregular migration to both individuals and their family members.

to relatives in the country of origin. Real earnings gained from migration are very large: purchasing power-adjusted wages are 3.226 and 3.643 times larger for typical workers from Guatemala and Nicaragua, respectively, who move to the US as compared to equivalent workers who are still in the home country (Clemens, Montenegro, and Pritchett 2016).

Central American households use migration by younger members as a strategy to **cushion themselves from negative income shocks with remittances** (Molina Millán 2015), and this tends to protect poor children in these households from negative shocks that might harm their physical growth (Carletto, Covarrubias, and Maluccio 2011) and cognitive development (Macours and Vakis 2010). Households in the Northern Triangle that receive more remittances from family members working abroad invest relatively more in education, food, and housing (Edwards and Ureta 2003; Adams and Cuecuecha 2010; Ambler, Aycinena, and Yang 2015), as well as in formal savings instruments at banks (Anzoategui, Demirgüç-Kunt, and Martínez Pería 2014). But, like other forms of cash transfers, remittances may also increase migration by helping people afford the journey.

Emigration also has been found to push wages up by reducing the labor supply in source communities in Mexico (Mishra 2007) and Honduras (Gagnon 2011). But this does not necessarily mean that higher incomes in origin countries are associated with reduced migration. Capital constraints are binding for many low-income potential migrants, not only in the direct costs of migration but also in the acquisition of tangible and intangible assets that facilitate migration—such as education and access to international social networks. Thus, migration to the United States is associated with relatively greater wealth among poor Salvadoran households (Halliday 2006), relative labor-market success in Nicaragua (Funkhouser 2009), and greater disposable income among Mexican households (Angelucci 2015). The literature finds similar patterns around the world (e.g. Bazzi 2017; surveyed in Clemens 2014).

The **monetary returns of international and national migration** are often underestimated by policymakers and migrants alike. Gibson et al. (2015) show that despite this underestimation, there were significant returns to immediate family members of migrants through substantially higher consumption, durable asset ownership, savings, and dietary diversity. While family members sometimes underestimate returns as well (Baseler 2020), this may be less likely in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras as the returns to migration are quite evident in the form of remittances, particularly given their share of GDP in the three countries.

Development gains would likely be greater if Central Americans had the opportunity to move through legal pathways rather than by irregular means. The number of people moving, and their potential employment gains, would increase, thereby increasing remittances. And the costs incurred through accessing a legal employment pathway can be cheaper or comparable to those incurred by undertaking irregular migration (for example, through payments made to smugglers) (Greenfield et al. 2019). Here we explore the evidence behind efforts to deter irregular migration and expand legal migration.

More promising approaches

Providing information on legal rights, working conditions, and alternatives: Accompanying a legal pathway approach with interventions that provide workers information on their legal rights and expected working conditions at their destination can help improve their experiences. Rural-to-urban migrants often have imperfect information on work conditions, leading to suboptimal conditions particularly in the manufacturing sector of countries of origin (Boudreau, Heath, and McCormick 2021). Shrestha and Yang (2019) found that providing migrant Filipino domestic workers in Singapore with information on their legal rights improves their reported working conditions. In addition, information campaigns focused on key security measures to take during the journey can help migrants move more safely (Schans and Optekamp 2016; Weiss and Tschirhart 1994).

Less effective approaches

Information campaigns to discourage migration: Information campaigns that detail the risks of migrating irregularly have not been shown to deter potential migrants from undertaking the journey. One recent study found that Hondurans’ “views of the dangers of migration to the United States, or the likelihood of deportation, do not seem to influence their emigration plans in any meaningful way” (Hiskey et al. 2018). Another recent study showed that information on the death risk of migrating actually increased likelihood of migration, given that potential migrants had overestimated the risk (Bah and Batista 2020).

Research gaps

There is less research specifically on information provision in the Northern Triangle countries. Strong migration networks and return migration a priori should reduce information asymmetries. However, further evidence is needed on how legal pathways, and their processing times, impact tradeoffs for migrants in security and expense during the migration journey. Further evidence is needed on the possible (mis)perceptions of both national and international migration. **Information provision can be properly evaluated to contribute to this literature.** Once alternative legal migration pathways are opened, it will also be necessary for their presence to be communicated effectively to potential migrants and to evaluate the impact of this information provision on migrants’ decision-making.

How USAID can harness and advance the evidence relevant to its investments in Central America

When USAID releases its new learning agenda early in 2022, one of the priority questions is expected to be how USAID can better use data and evidence to address the drivers of migration. Understanding current barriers to evidence use is an encouraging step that will help ensure the agency’s investments in the Northern Triangle region are grounded in evidence and conducted in a way that creates opportunities to build the evidence base. There is a rich body of evidence from which the agency can draw, but our understanding of how

aid programs can advance development objectives and address irregular migration pressures remains far from complete.

USAID has a strong base from which to build. Over the last decade, the agency has instituted a highly regarded evaluation policy, ramped up its investment in evaluation, generally improved the quality of its evaluations, and established various organizational units to help implement its renewed focus on evidence (USAID 2016; Hageboeck, Frumkin and Monschein 2013; Velez 2020). Thanks in part to these efforts, Results for America consistently recognizes USAID as one of the top federal agencies for evidence and data use (Results for America 2019).

However, room for improvement remains. Though USAID conducts more evaluations than it did a decade ago, impact evaluations, which measure changes attributable to a program, remain rare. Impact evaluations that include cost analysis have been rarer still (Velez 2020), though this is set to change with new cost analysis requirements tied to impact evaluations (USAID 2021). Still, low investment in these areas suggests USAID is missing opportunities to understand its impact—and the opportunity cost—of its interventions.

Of course, impact evaluation is not the only valid evaluation approach—and indeed, in many cases it is inappropriate or infeasible (Gugerty and Karlan 2018). Well-designed observational studies and repeated panel surveys can build critical knowledge where randomized control trials (RCTs) cannot be implemented. And other types of performance evaluation can yield valuable learning about contribution (rather than attribution) and process. What is most important is ensuring the right methodology for the question being asked and ensuring rigorous design and implementation of the chosen methodology. In practice, however, the quality of USAID-funded evaluations remains mixed (US Government Accountability Office 2017; Velez 2020)—both for performance and impact evaluations.¹⁹

USAID is also inconsistent in the extent to which it uses evidence to inform its programming (Rose 2020). While the evidence case for an intervention is presented to senior management as part of the review process for most large programs, it is unclear how the relevance and strength of the presented evidence is evaluated, how the evidence case is weighed relative to the many other criteria presented for consideration, and what expectations are for addressing any deficiencies.²⁰

USAID missions in each of the three Northern Triangle countries have identified learning agendas as part of their country strategies and elaborated performance management plans (PMP) that outline how the missions will generate and use data and evidence.²¹ USAID is

¹⁹ For example, a GAO study that reviewed both impact and performance evaluations done in FY2015 found that a quarter of USAID's evaluations didn't meet quality criteria (US Government Accountability Office 2017). A study that looked at impact evaluations conducted between FY2012 and FY2019 found that fewer than half were of at least acceptable quality (Velez 2020).

²⁰ A "Senior Obligation Alignment Review" (SOAR) process is required for actions over US\$50 million or as requested by the administrator or an assistant administrator (though there are some exceptions).

²¹ El Salvador features prominently in the analysis below since it is the only mission of the three with a publicly available PMP.

also working with the State Department and other agencies to develop an overall monitoring, evaluation, and learning plan for the administration-wide Root Causes Strategy.

Given the current state of evidence generation and use at USAID—its successes and its gaps—what should USAID—and its interagency counterparts—keep in mind as it implements and periodically revises its monitoring, evaluation, and learning strategies? Below are five recommendations to strengthen the ability of USAID to reflect and promote learning in the Northern Triangle.²²

Box 2. Types of evidence and their uses

USAID invests in and uses a range of different kinds of evidence. Understanding their differences is key for knowing what each can say about “results.”

“Monitoring and evaluation” (M&E)—and increasingly “monitoring, evaluation, and learning” (MEL)—refer to efforts to gather information about program results.

Performance monitoring is the ongoing collection of quantitative data (performance indicators) or qualitative information to gain insight into whether implementation is on track and whether basic objectives are being achieved. Performance indicators typically include outputs (e.g., farmers trained) and outcomes (e.g., hectares under improved cultivation).

Evaluation is, according to USAID’s [evaluation policy](#), “the systematic collection and analysis of information about the characteristics and outcomes of strategies, projects, and activities as a basis for judgments to improve effectiveness, and timed to inform decisions about current and future programming.” Evaluation has two main purposes: accountability and learning.

Performance evaluations seek to answer questions like the following: What has the program achieved? How was it implemented? And how was it perceived? These evaluations often compare outcomes before and after the program but don’t include a counterfactual to attribute observable changes to the specific intervention. Done well, their findings can be valuable for program management and design.

Impact evaluations measure the change in outcomes that are directly attributable to a particular intervention. Impact evaluations use experimental methods (RCTs) or quasi-experimental designs to construct a counterfactual that controls for other factors that might have affected outcomes in addition to the program.

Source: Rose (2020).

²² This is a non-exhaustive list of actions related to strengthening an evidence-based approach to programming in the Northern Triangle. A particular area for further exploration is how USAID can improve the capture of data relevant to measuring migration motivations, intent, and action.

Seek evidence for the steps along the causal pathway, including key assumptions

Theories of change often have causal pathways based on multiple, sequential hypotheses and assumptions about how impact happens. These theories help those designing or funding a program think through the steps of how an intervention might lead to a given outcome, given context constraints and assumptions. For the causal story to hold, it's important to interrogate the relationships all along the causal chain.

For example, Guatemala's country strategy suggests that if (a) USAID partners with the government and others to improve government functioning, then (b) service delivery will improve, and then (c) people will have less incentive to migrate. In this case, understanding (a)'s impact on (c) requires understanding the relationships between (a) and (b) and (b) and (c).²³

But while these hypothesized causal relationships may seem intuitive (as the example above does), they're also often testable. Causal research—either from prior studies or as part of a new evaluation—is important at each stage in the causal pathway to confirm or prompt a rethink of intuition. An example from El Salvador's CDCS illustrates why this is important. It is assumed, for instance that:

“[I]f El Salvador improves economic opportunities and better prepares Salvadorans to take advantage of those opportunities, then jobs and income potential for likely migrants and their family units will increase and incentives to migrate irregularly to the United States will be reduced as Salvadorans lead more prosperous lives at home.”

While there is intrinsic value to improving economic opportunities, the causal linkage with irregular migration is more tenuous—and as evidence shows, it may even point in the opposite direction, at least in the short-run (Clemens and Mendola 2020).

With the political imperative to address irregular migration, couching projects in terms of their impact on this phenomenon may help secure their approval. However, raising expectations for irregular migration effects that may be intuitive but aren't well supported by evidence may set USAID up for future challenges in communicating its results, even if the story about the project's *development* outcomes is positive. USAID should be explicit about its migration goals in program design, choose program components that aim to achieve those goals, then test those theories of change.

Where hypotheses along the causal pathway don't have strong evidence to support them, evaluation, especially impact evaluation, becomes important to test a theory of change. Measuring intermediate causal outcomes can help answer questions of “how” higher level outcomes were achieved—or help identify where the theory breaks down. However, a recent

²³ This is just an example. Guatemala's PMP and accompanying evaluation plan aren't publicly available, so it is unclear whether the mission intends to test this set of hypotheses.

review of USAID’s impact evaluations found they rarely tested these intermediary causal steps and recommended that the agency’s evaluations more consistently do so (Velez 2020).

To help development professionals frame how to think about evidence along the causal pathway, evidence “gap maps,” summarized information about the breadth and strength of evidence for particular interventions and outcomes, can be a useful tool. The Productive Migration unit of the United Kingdom’s former Department for International Development (now the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office) developed a theory of change framework that uses a color-coded “stoplight system” to indicate the strength of the evidence underlying the various causal assumptions. At a glance, it is easy to tell where research backs up an approach, where research goes against the approach, and where there is evidence is more limited. The tool serves as an entry point into thinking about how to invest in evaluation or where a proposed approach merits rethinking. It goes beyond a technocratic view to identify where certain approaches, which are unsupported by evidence but must be pursued out of political imperative, can benefit from creative thinking.

Ensure evaluation methods respond to the questions being asked

Assessment methods should fit their purpose. In a sample of USAID evaluations from FY2015, one in five had a mismatch between evaluation design and the questions being asked (US Government Accountability Office 2017). Since then, USAID has taken steps to ensure selected evaluation methodologies are appropriate for the type of intervention and the goals of the study, including revising its operational guidance to draw a finer distinction between performance and impact evaluations and to encourage impact evaluations when staff want to know about the outcomes of a particular intervention.

Missions in the Northern Triangle countries should ensure that their plans for evaluation match their learning agenda. The current version of El Salvador’s PMP raises some questions. The document identifies 11 planned evaluations, all of which are performance evaluations and contribution analyses. Yet some of the mission’s priority questions appear to ask about the impact of a particular intervention, for example: “To what extent have USAID crime and violence prevention activities led to a change in real and perceived security in the targeted areas?” “What type of workforce development interventions have the highest results in short- to medium-term job placement?”

High-quality performance evaluations can yield valuable information about what the program achieved, how it was implemented, and how it is perceived. And contribution analyses can provide valuable insights into the degree to which USAID interventions might plausibly have contributed to the outcomes observed. But answering more definitively whether USAID’s interventions led to change, or which types of interventions yield the highest results, requires greater use of experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

With USAID’s shift to greater adaptive management—which is well reflected in the Northern Triangle missions’ strategies—it will also be important to apply the innovative monitoring and evaluation approaches that USAID has been exploring to enable greater learning during

implementation.²⁴ Methods could include things like iterative experimentation and parallel A/B testing (Valters, Cummings and Nixon 2016). Attention to speed is also important. Rapid impact evaluation methodologies and reliance, where possible, on preexisting data sources (e.g., administrative data) rather than specialized surveys can help ensure evidence is timely enough to enable adaptive learning.

Seek opportunities for replication (within and across missions)

One important barrier to evidence use in program design is skepticism about the relevance of past studies to the current program. Staff are right to be concerned that findings from a single study or from studies in different countries might not be generalizable to the context in which they're operating. For instance, the literature review above notes that research on how informal insurance mechanisms shape migration decisions comes from India, a country that differs from the Northern Triangle countries in many ways, including in having lower emigration rates. Identifying limitations from studies outside the Northern Triangle is important, as is replication.

Replicating tests of similar interventions across different contexts can help to strengthen the evidence base. Since the three Northern Triangle missions share similar development objectives, there may be opportunities for replication across missions. Leveraging these opportunities will require close coordination—perhaps with the assistance of USAID/Washington—along with a commitment to confront the incentives that tend to limit replication, including the preference by researchers to tackle new and novel (and hence more academically relevant) questions.

Develop evidence with local partners to reflect their priorities

Evaluations are often driven by donors and their research partners, leaving local policy and decision-makers largely out of the design, implementation, and use of results (Manning, Goldman and Hernández Licona 2020).

USAID missions in the Northern Triangle countries—and those supporting evaluation from USAID/Washington—should ensure approaches to evaluation integrate key decision-makers in the Northern Triangle and create a culture of meaningful partnership with local actors at all stages, from planning to implementation to dissemination.²⁵ These kinds of partnerships can help integrate the priority learning needs of communities and governments, time the evaluation so it is relevant for policymakers' decision-making timelines, improve the design of questionnaires, and integrate local context into assumptions and implementation.

²⁴ USAID's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning Innovations Program (MERLIN) brings together a consortium of partners to test new and innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluation, including rapid, iterative testing.

²⁵ A smaller federal international development agency, the Inter-American Foundation, often works in this way.

It may not always be easy, as it requires capacity and coordination (and often extra time) to consistently engage at design, implementation, and dissemination stages. But trading off speed for more relevant, usable, results seems a worthwhile calculation to make.

USAID could also consider supporting longer-term evidence-to-policy partnerships with Northern Triangle government actors (Tadesse 2021). Typically, partnerships between researchers and policymakers are oriented around discrete policy questions that are planned in advance. However, in fluid environments, evidence needs can change quickly; when they do, policymakers often seek to build upon existing partnerships. Supporting longer-term research partnerships with governments that include capacity development as needed and attention to power structures (who defines the questions, determines the methodologies, etc.) can strengthen engagement with funders like USAID on evidence needs, advance evidence-based policymaking, and establish a foundation that can be repurposed to meet new evidence demands as contexts shift.

Build evidence use and generation into the procurement process

The three Northern Triangle missions should carve out a central role for evidence in any new award solicitations. For interventions that don't have a strong evidence base, more flexible award types should be used to allow for experimentation and testing. Indeed, USAID's evaluation policy encourages impact evaluation of any "new, untested" approach. A more expansive view of what meets these criteria may be warranted. As the preceding section illustrates, there are plenty of interventions seeking to address "root causes" of irregular migration that aren't "new" per se (i.e., USAID or others have done them before) but which have limited or contradictory evidence on the relationship between the intervention and the outcome of interest. These should be treated as experimental: start small and test before scaling up investment. Bids should be judged, in part, on how well they identify evidence gaps and carve out opportunities to test them.²⁶

Where the evidence base is stronger, solicitations should clearly reflect the state of evidence and include incentives to do so. For contracts, the responsibility to propose interventions with a robust evidence case lies with USAID; for grants, USAID can require bidders to demonstrate how their proposal reflects the existing body of evidence—and can then evaluate proposals in part on bidders' ability to do so. Incentive funding to include an evidence plan can also be a component of the procurement process.

²⁶ USAID's Democracy, Rights and Governance Center has, in the past, been an agency leader in incorporating evidence generation into its work. There should be opportunities to reinforce and expand this focus in the Northern Triangle.

Conclusion

As people from the Northern Triangle continue to arrive at the US southern border, there is increasing pressure on the Biden-Harris administration to deliver “results.” Many Americans are looking to the administration, and to USAID in particular, to influence the “root causes” of migration from the region and, in doing so, reduce irregular migration. Yet it is often unclear exactly which evidence-based actions USAID should prioritize, and how they should measure the effectiveness of these actions.

This paper has attempted to review the large body of evidence that exists showcasing the link between interventions, outcomes, and emigration rates within three broad themes: violence prevention, certain aspects of development, and legal pathways. As outlined above, there are substantial gaps in our knowledge as to how these factors interact and the impacts they have, including on irregular migration. USAID, as a top donor to the region, is well placed to contribute to this knowledge base through strategic investments in rigorous and high-quality evaluations, including impact evaluations, and the dissemination of their findings.

USAID should be held to account for its attempts to integrate the available evidence base into how it selects, designs, and procures programs throughout Central America. Yet existing evidence also cautions placing too much stock on the impact even the most successful development interventions can have on irregular emigration rates. Interventions that improve education, skills, and opportunities are intrinsically valuable, but they may serve to increase irregular migration over the short- to medium-term. Other interventions that seek to address drivers such as violence, climate change, and job loss can reduce short-term spikes in emigration but are unlikely to have an impact on the overall trajectory. This is largely driven by factors that are both outside of USAID’s control and difficult to measure.

This suggests that while USAID should seek to measure the impact of its interventions in Central America on some migration-related measures (such as emigration rates), the success of these interventions should not be judged on the increase or decrease in border apprehensions. Emigration rates could be measured as part of impact evaluations, but the result of this measurement should not be included as core performance indicator. As USAID/Guatemala’s strategy pointedly notes, “The results of long-term development will not be reflected in short-term migration trends.”

It will be important for USAID to employ a careful strategic communications strategy, one that emphasizes the impact of successful efforts to influence long-term drivers of irregular emigration from the region, while measuring (though downplaying) the impact of efforts to influence short-term spikes. As it does, USAID should demonstrate its accountability to overseers with a commitment to ground its programs in evidence and evaluate its work. Not all approaches will be successful. But a clear commitment to using evidence—and expanding the evidence base—will help the agency respond credibly to those with a strong interest in USAID’s success in Central America.

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