

**TESTIMONY OF MARCELA X. ESCOBARI**  
**ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR**  
**BUREAU FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**  
**U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**  
**BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**  
**“Overview of U.S. Priorities in the Western Hemisphere:**  
**Opportunities, Challenges and the Path Ahead”**  
**FEBRUARY 3, 2022**

**Introduction**

Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on the Biden-Harris Administration’s strategy in Latin America and the Caribbean. We are grateful for this Committee’s strong interest in the region and ongoing, bipartisan support for our work.

I am honored to have been chosen by President Biden and confirmed by the Senate to lead USAID’s Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean. Like so many in the United States, I have deep family ties and history in the region. My commitment to its development extends beyond the personal, however, because I know that what happens in the region has a direct effect on what happens here at home. We must help our closest neighbors build more prosperous, healthy, free futures so that we all can see a brighter tomorrow.

I will be providing an update on our efforts on key challenges facing the region, including COVID-19, democratic backsliding, and climate change; how the Agency has pivoted to confront urgent and emerging needs; and how we plan to address the challenges we see ahead. In our work, we are prioritizing greater engagement with and ownership by local partners. We also understand our mission to be first and foremost to build local capacity- not only because it ensures the sustainability of our efforts, but also because it ensures our technology and know-how can be adapted to local contexts. Lastly, our ambition to make a meaningful change means we must leverage others - the private sector, other committed donors and our interagency partners - in pursuing a common vision, so that we can meet the growing sense of urgency that the realities on the ground demand.

Circumstances in Latin America and the Caribbean, always challenging, have become even more so since I served in this role five years ago. Democratic backsliding, the COVID-19 pandemic, and natural and manmade crises have plunged the region into the worst contraction in recorded history<sup>1</sup> and are also driving increasing numbers of people to migrate in search of a better life. USAID approaches these challenges with humility and the understanding that foreign assistance,

---

<sup>1</sup><https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062292>

no matter how generous, is only part of the equation- and most effective when paired with local political will. Yet we also recognize that we must be ambitious in our approach and fully leverage our expertise and influence to bring real progress to the region. With this mix of humility and ambition, I look forward to partnering with this Committee and learning from all of you as we work collectively to improve the lives of the citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Development Context**

COVID-19 is the most urgent and immediate threat to Latin America and the Caribbean and has resulted in backsliding on decades of development gains. With only eight percent of the world's population, Latin America and the Caribbean accounts for 30 percent of global COVID-19 deaths; and health systems overwhelmed by the demands of COVID-19 have been unable to maintain basic health services. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the economy of Latin America and the Caribbean shrank 7 percent in the year 2020. That was a much greater shock than any other world region (Middle East 2.8 percent, Sub Saharan Africa 1.7 percent, Emerging Asia 0.9 percent, Advanced Economies 4.5 percent, etc.). In addition, the contraction in the region was much greater than the 3.1 percent contraction of the worldwide economy that year. The shock in 2020 erased all of the region's economic growth between 2007 and 2019.

We are also seeing a concerning trend of democratic backsliding in some countries on the hard-fought but fragile progress made since the late 1980s. There are extreme cases, such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, where we need to support citizens as they confront blatant authoritarianism. But even in more established democracies, authoritarian tendencies have emerged, making centralization of power and concerns about constitutional infringements ever more prevalent. Authoritarian tendencies weaken constitutional checks, capture judiciaries, erode prosecutorial independence, close spaces for civil society, and silence independent media.

In addition, democracy has not always delivered, leading an alarming number of citizens in Latin America to lose confidence in democracy itself and providing a political opening for populist authoritarians to exploit. If we want democracy to deliver, we need to create the conditions for accountable and transparent institutions that facilitate economic and social progress. We must help strengthen the ability of governments to deliver basic services to their people. Similarly, we must remain committed to supporting civil society in the region to hold leaders accountable. Our goal must be for citizens to trust their governments and trust their freedom to change their governments – and in doing so, to help renew confidence in the rule of law and democratic principles.

### **USAID Response**

As we have for decades, USAID is proud to support local people seeking sustainable progress for their communities. Our ability to extend the hand of partnership to our neighbors will largely determine the course of the region's recovery from the pandemic. The stakes are profound, and USAID is committed to continuing and strengthening our partnerships so that the people of the region can recover and thrive.

***Addressing the Most Pressing Challenge: COVID-19***

USAID mobilized from the earliest days of COVID-19 to respond to the urgent health needs in Latin America and the Caribbean, and we continue our steadfast partnership in the face of this terrible pandemic. Under the Biden-Harris Administration, the United States, in partnership with COVAX or bilaterally, has provided more than 57 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to 29 countries in the region to date with no political strings attached. USAID is providing tailored, country-specific support, playing a key role in helping these governments turn vaccines into vaccinations. Our efforts include vaccine distribution and logistics planning; citizen education on disease prevention and increasing vaccine confidence; and training of healthcare workers on vaccine administration. And through targeted messaging in partnership with our State Department colleagues, we are ensuring that the citizens of these countries know that this assistance comes from the American people.

We are also partnering with countries to treat those affected. For example, we work with health ministries to minimize the risk of transmission and prevent and control infections in healthcare facilities, including through the donation of personal protective equipment for health care workers. We train and equip rapid-response teams to better track and record cases. We help countries to provide the public with reliable, verifiable information that keeps citizens informed about how best to protect themselves and each other. Along with training health professionals to ensure they are able and equipped to manage COVID-19 cases, we have also provided oxygen support throughout the region to treat patients in the most dire need.

For example, as with other countries in the region and the world, in Honduras, USAID provided training to help more than 2,600 health workers care for COVID-19 patients, including patients with severe COVID-19, improving the quality of care offered in hospitals, triage centers, and other health centers across the country.

***Supporting the Defenders of Democracy***

USAID advances United States efforts to promote democratic values and practices throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. This includes supporting civil society, independent media, and human rights activists in oppressive environments like Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, as well as in other countries struggling with corruption and challenges to democracy and human rights.

In northern Central America, Administrator Power has repeatedly and publicly called out government actions that undermine accountability and the rule of law. In El Salvador and Guatemala, USAID has shifted assistance away from public prosecutor's offices and increased support for watchdog groups as a consequence of attorney generals' lack of independence and commitment to combating corruption. We will continue to work with our interagency partners to promote accountability, support civil society and independent media, and confront democratic backsliding.

COVID-19 sadly has been used by certain leaders in the Americas to silence political opposition forces, undermine institutional checks and balances, censor journalists, and threaten civil society. For example, we have seen evidence of leaders in multiple countries criminalizing speech and retaliating against members of the press.<sup>2</sup> These practices have extended in many countries' efforts to hide corruption in COVID-19 related procurement and limit civil society's capacity to monitor the appropriation of funds. USAID's partners support civil society in preventing government fraud and abuse as well as responding to human rights violations.

### ***Building Hope and Opportunity to Address the Root Causes of Irregular Migration***

With six million Venezuelans fleeing catastrophe, hundreds of thousands of Central Americans arriving at our southern border, and growing numbers of Haitians, Nicaraguans, and other peoples seeking a better life outside of their countries, it is clear that the challenge of irregular migration is widespread and shared across our hemisphere. The movement of people driven from their homelands, whether they are fleeing oppression, seeking safety, or are in search of opportunities to feed their families, not only strains our borders, but also has consequences for the entire region. USAID is working with countries throughout the region to address the migration challenges that we all face.

Under the Biden-Harris Administration's *U.S. Strategy to Address the Root Causes of Migration in Central America* and *Collaborative Migration Management Strategy*, USAID is working with partners in civil society, government, and the private sector to address the drivers of migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. USAID builds partnerships in the region to provide economic opportunity, fight corruption, protect human rights, strengthen citizen security, promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and combat gender-based violence. For example, USAID's support for small and medium-sized enterprises in El Salvador has helped create nearly 1,500 jobs since July 2021, generated nearly \$37 million in new sales and exports, and \$12 million in private sector investment.

USAID also is supporting efforts to expand access to legal pathways for migration by building the capacity of the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to transparently recruit workers from their countries and match them to seasonal work opportunities in the U.S.,

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.trust.org/contentAsset/raw-data/676eafe2-34b8-414f-aca1-6d6e20112eba/file>

leading to more H-2B temporary guest worker visas from these countries and helping address critical temporary labor needs in the United States. Last year, Vice President Harris announced USAID's Guatemala Entrepreneurship Development Initiative, which co-invests with the private sector to create and promote investment in Guatemalan entrepreneurs and innovators, and the *MujerProspera* Challenge to advance gender equality and women's economic security. Ultimately, we seek to foster hope and opportunity so that the people of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras can confidently see a future in their home communities.

To assist in the response to the Venezuela regional crisis, USAID is providing both humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance to meet needs in Venezuela and across the region. Support to refugees and migrants includes humanitarian assistance; socio-economic integration; access to economic opportunities; health, education, and water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance; protection, including in response to gender-based violence experienced in host countries and along the migration route; and support to host governments and communities to address the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in their countries.

For example, in Colombia, which has demonstrated admirable leadership and compassion in welcoming the nearly 2 million Venezuelans who have chosen to remain in country, USAID is providing more than \$118 million in non-humanitarian assistance to support a number of longer-term programs, including a migrant registry and tracking system; a migration observatory that will enable local authorities to track efforts to help Venezuelans and host communities; an anti-xenophobia messaging campaign; meals for school children; mobile healthcare units; employment and entrepreneurship opportunities through the private sector; and aid to help people avoid labor exploitation.

### ***Promoting Democracy and Stability in Haiti***

For decades, Haiti has faced significant challenges, including natural and man-made disasters. In 2021 alone, Haiti grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, the aftermath of the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, and a 7.2 magnitude earthquake in August. Just last week, Haiti experienced two significant aftershocks in Nippes, approximately 10 miles from the epicenter of the August quake. The country continues to suffer from high unemployment, lack of government capacity, weak service delivery, widespread poverty, food insecurity, and unrelenting gang violence. More than 4.3 million people in Haiti are food insecure and since June, 1.5 million have been affected by gang violence, with 19,000 displaced.

The United States' commitment to Haiti remains unwavering. USAID focuses on meeting the needs of all Haitian people by supporting an increase in the stability, resilience, and economic viability of the country. In the long term, we are promoting economic growth, job creation, and agricultural development; providing basic health care and education services; building the resilience of local civil society; supporting electoral processes; and improving the effectiveness

of government. In the near term, we are helping Haitians recover from natural disasters, combating food insecurity, and supporting the reception and reintegration of returned migrants.

And we continue to look for ways to enhance our impact and sustainability. We are pleased to have helped build the organizational capacity of more than 800 local organizations, several of whom are now effectively competing for direct awards from USAID and other donors. USAID recently created a new unit within our Mission in Port-au-Prince specifically dedicated to enhancing our partnerships and engagement with Haitian civil society, faith-based, and diaspora organizations. Consistent with Administrator Power's vision, we recently issued a solicitation for a \$15 million Civil Society Strengthening activity – open exclusively to local partners– to strengthen the capacity of Haitian civil society to drive local, inclusive solutions to Haiti's development challenges.

While we are clear-eyed about the challenges ahead, USAID is pleased to have supported efforts that have transformed Haitians lives for the better. At the same time we recognize that long-term stability and prosperity will not be achieved until the root causes of the current economic and political paralysis in Haiti are addressed.

### *Adapting to and Mitigating Climate Change*

While the region is vulnerable to climate change, it is also home to some of the planet's most important environmental assets. USAID works with partners throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to implement ambitious emissions reduction measures, transition to renewable energy, build resilience against the impacts of climate change, promote the flow of capital toward climate-positive investments, and support natural climate solutions. This includes protecting the region's magnificent tropical forests and other critical ecosystems in order to reduce the large share of global emissions that comes from deforestation, land degradation, and agriculture.

For example, in Brazil, we are focused on preserving the integrity and conservation of the county's Amazon ecosystem over the next 20 years while also improving the well-being and socioeconomic status of rural and Indigenous communities living in the Amazon region. As threats increase, it has become clear that new and innovative strategies are needed to sustain people's livelihoods and conserve biodiversity. For these reasons, USAID is seeking new approaches, partnering with both Indigenous communities and the private sector to find solutions that help create a new sustainable economic model for the region.

In the Caribbean, we are helping countries better predict weather patterns and coordinate the response to climate change through support to the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre. With funding from USAID and in partnership with national governments in the Eastern and Southern Caribbean, the Centre is now the Caribbean's most extensive repository of information and data on climate change specific to the region, which in part enables it to provide

climate change-related policy advice and guidelines to CARICOM member states. For example, the Centre's experts have supported vulnerable island states to design programs and navigate the complex funding process of the Green Climate Fund and other international resources. As a result, the region has secured approximately \$55 million to date and continues to use the Centre to leverage internal and external resources to build its resilience to climate change.

### ***Strengthening Disaster Response and Delivering Humanitarian Assistance Regionwide***

USAID maintains a network of disaster experts throughout the LAC region and deploys teams on a moment's notice when disaster strikes. We coordinate with relevant U.S. Embassies, national disaster management authorities, and humanitarian partners to prepare for potential storms during the Atlantic Hurricane Season, assess damage after a disaster, and provide additional emergency assistance as needed. We also maintain emergency relief items and food supplies ready for deployment at our warehouses in Miami, Florida, Houston, Texas, and other strategic locations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

For example, in 2021, USAID provided more than \$169 million in humanitarian assistance and fielded Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs) in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to respond to humanitarian needs exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19, consecutive years of drought, and back-to-back hurricanes in late 2020. USAID also provided assistance to mitigate the impacts of future disasters in the region. Following the devastating Haiti earthquake last summer, USAID deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team and provided more than \$55 million in life-saving humanitarian assistance. After last week's aftershocks in Nippes, USAID is working with the Government of Haiti to assess needs on the ground. USAID also continues to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance for vulnerable people in Venezuela, Venezuelan migrants and refugees, and host communities in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. Since Fiscal Year 2017, the United States has provided more than \$1.69 billion in humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance to help Venezuelans in Venezuela, those who have fled, and the communities so generously hosting them.

Even as we respond to disasters, USAID works year-round to reduce the risk and impact of future disasters throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. We work with local governments and humanitarian organizations in the region to develop emergency and evacuation plans; train national disaster response organizations and first responders; and educate vulnerable communities so they know what to do when the next storm hits. Ultimately, we seek to enable countries to better prepare for and respond to emergencies as they arise.

### ***Fostering Inclusivity, Sustainability, and Adaptability***

In all of our work, USAID seeks to empower local people to take charge of their communities' development and ensure that our programs will have a positive impact that will last long after our work is done. As Administrator Power laid out in her vision for USAID's future, "...we have to

broaden our coalition to allow people from more diverse backgrounds and partners of all kinds to participate in our mission. We must make aid more accessible. ... [W]e must shift our thinking to be more focused on the voices and needs of the most marginalized. We must make aid more equitable. And...in confronting some of the biggest challenges of our time—COVID-19, climate change, growing authoritarianism—we must listen to what our partners in the countries where we work are asking of us. We must make aid more responsive.”<sup>3</sup>

USAID is committed to deepening our investment in local organizations and engaging proactively with women and young people. For example, in 2021, Administrator Power announced *Centroamérica Local*, a five-year initiative to empower local organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to address the drivers of irregular migration to the United States. Under this new initiative, USAID intends to invest up to \$300 million, subject to the availability of funds, toward engaging, strengthening, and funding local organizations to implement programs to advance sustainable and equitable economic growth, improve governance, fight corruption, protect human rights, improve citizen security, and combat sexual and gender-based violence. This is the kind of initiative that we seek to replicate in order to have the greatest impact possible, and is the first step in USAID’s renewed Agency-wide effort to promote localization worldwide.

Throughout the region, USAID is also promoting inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups. For example, in Colombia, USAID strengthens civil society organizations, defends Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Peoples’ rights and their territories, promotes inclusive economic and environmental projects, supports cultural heritage, and combats racism and discrimination, in order to ensure that all Colombians can take part in the country’s journey toward peaceful prosperity. We are working with the Government of Guatemala to foster dialogue among the Guatemalan central government, Indigenous Peoples, and the private sector; reduce social conflict; and increase investments and economic opportunities, so that all Guatemalans can find hope and opportunity in their home communities. And in Peru, we are working with indigenous communities and women to protect precious natural resources, particularly tropical forests.

### **Conclusion**

Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify. As you can see, USAID is undertaking vital work throughout Latin America and the Caribbean on behalf of the American people, and our efforts are more important now than they have ever been before. We remain committed to working with the people of the region to build a brighter, more hopeful future. And, we cannot do that without partnering with all of you.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/speeches/nov-4-2021-administrator-samantha-power-new-vision-global-development>



**Clearance Page for AA/LAC Escobari Written Testimony - HFAC**

**Drafted:** SLockwood, LAC/SPO

<b>Cleared:</b>	MEscobari, AA/LAC	clear w/edits	1/26/22
	PNatiello, SDAA/LAC	clear w/edits	1/25/22
	BFeinstein, DAA/LAC	clear w/edits	1/25/22
	MGuilarte, DAA/LAC	INFO	1/25/22
	EJacobstein, LAC/FO	clear w/ edits	1/25/22
	RCintron, LAC/SPO	INFO	1/25/22
	DManning, LAC/SA	Clear	1/24/2022
	BCollins, LAC/CAR	Clear	1/24/2022
	THublin, LAC/CAM	clear	1/24/22
	RDeMar, LAC/Cuba	Clear	1/24/22
	RKnight, LAC/RSD	Info	1/25/22
	MCamilleri, NTTF	clear w/edits	1/25/22

COVID TF (COVID mentions)

BHA (HA mentions)		
BHA/ALAC SWilcock	Info	1/24/2022
BHA/G3PC/USESP KMcKennna	Clear	1/24/2022

DDI (Climate Change)

ACTF/DD: JLewis.	clear	
DDI/GenDev: Jamie Small	Clear	
DDI/DRG: Mickie Mitre	INFO	
DDI/ID: NEnerson	Info	
BRM: MTranphung	Clear	1/24/2022
GC: BMcPherson	Clear	1/26/2022
LPA/LEG CLO: SAcostaCox	Clear	1/26/2022
LPA/LEG: Ccole	Clear	02/01/2022