

Testimony of Mark Lopes
Deputy Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean
U.S. Agency for International Development
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
June 25, 2014, 2:00 p.m.
“Children Migrating from Central America: Creating a Humanitarian Crisis”

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sires, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss what the U.S. Government, in particular the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is doing and can do in the future to help curb the influx of unaccompanied children from Central America arriving to the U.S. border. As stated in our new mission statement, USAID partners to end extreme poverty and to promote resilient, democratic societies while advancing our security and prosperity. In line with this mission USAID’s programs remain committed to addressing the root causes of insecurity and lack of opportunity in the region, and I am happy to discuss these programs with you today.

Pending final Congressional approval, USAID expects to implement up to \$150 million in this fiscal year to address the root causes of crime and violence in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Of this amount, approximately \$50 million is specifically designated programs for at-risk youth. Through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), we are investing in opportunities for youth and their communities and strengthening the institutions charged with administering justice to keep people safe. Our services for at-risk youth, job training, community policing, safe urban spaces and juvenile justice programs complement the youth-focused cultural and educational programs as well as the law enforcement and interdiction activities led by our inter-agency partners.

As Vice President Biden announced last Friday, USAID is launching a new five-year \$40-million program this summer in Guatemala to improve citizen security. This program will target hotspot communities for migration, poverty, and extreme violence to reduce the risk factors for youth involvement in gangs and help mitigate the push factors for potential migration to the United States.

In El Salvador, USAID is carrying out a new five-year \$25-million crime and violence prevention program that will open an additional 77 youth outreach centers in addition to the 30 already in existence. These centers offer services to at-risk youth who are susceptible to gang recruitment.

In Honduras, USAID funds 40 youth outreach centers in hotspot communities like San Pedro Sula with more to come over the next year. These programs are part of a scaling-up of prevention programs, which reflects recognition by our government as well as governments in the region that more financial and intellectual resources are required to have a lasting impact on the root causes of violence and criminality. Many governments in the region now have prevention-oriented strategies in place. USAID's programs are designed to support those strategies and provide examples of programs that are successful, so that the region's governments can expand and scale-up programs to have a country-wide impact.

Recently, President Hernandez of Honduras publicly committed to allocating 30 percent of the funds collected through Honduras' new Security Tax to support prevention programs. President Hernandez has already provided \$600,000 of a \$1 million pledge to expand the network of youth outreach centers across the country.

USAID's CARSI programming complements our traditional development programs aimed at creating jobs in rural and urban communities, improving early grade literacy, improving food security, and investing in small and medium sized businesses.

In Guatemala, for example, USAID will invest nearly \$25 million in a new program to improve access to and quality of education for under-served populations, including rural indigenous girls and boys in 900 rural schools, and educational and vocational training opportunities for 2,000 out-of-school youth.

As part of our Feed the Future work, in Honduras USAID has contributed \$24.5 million to the new Dry Corridor Initiative, a multi-donor and Government of Honduras initiative to promote sustainable agricultural development of the country's southwest border area. Through this work we aim to lift 50,000 families out of extreme poverty, reduce stunting of children under 5 by 20 percent, and improve more than 280 kilometers of rural roads, providing market access to thousands and improving economic prosperity.

USAID also continues to successfully utilize partnerships, as part of our new model of development, with companies and other private sector leaders to promote youth engagement and prevent youth from joining gangs. In the last several years, USAID has leveraged approximately \$40 million for partnerships with companies, local organizations and governments working with at-risk youth in the Northern triangle countries of Central America.

For instance, in El Salvador USAID is partnering with Microsoft to provide computer software and training for youth at outreach centers in 13 high-risk municipalities. Through this partnership, about 25,000 youth will have access to training. In addition, Microsoft will establish over a dozen technology academies that will provide youth participants with a path to certification in specialized computer training and competitive labor skills.

To ramp up these efforts, the Vice President recently announced an open call to the private sector – companies, private foundations and NGOs – to join forces with USAID to co-fund innovative partnerships, through USAID’s Global Development Lab, which will be designed to increase educational and economic opportunities for at-risk youth in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Our prevention efforts are designed both to have an immediate and measurable impact, but more importantly to prove concepts and demonstrate that such investments can pay dividends beyond their cost. USAID has tested a range of approaches that were used both in the United States and around region. Now that preliminary findings from a three-year impact evaluation provide statistically significant evidence that crime rates are lower and public perception of security higher in the areas in which we work, we are working to scale up the most promising approaches. More importantly, we are looking to the governments in the region to adopt the most successful of these efforts and incorporate the lessons learned or the programs themselves into their efforts.

USAID has already begun to expand our efforts to create safe spaces for youth to retreat from violence and receive valuable job training. Today, we have a network of 120 outreach centers in violent communities across the region. In Honduras alone, tens of thousands of youth vulnerable to the lure of crime received assistance through 40 such centers operating in four of the country’s most violent cities.

Mr. Chairman, USAID is well positioned to help address the long-term drivers of insecurity and social, economic and environmental challenges in the region. However, a sustained and long-term impact at the national level is only possible when our successes are incorporated into the work of the governments in the region.

Limited donor resources alone are insufficient to incent the kind of transformative change needed to create widespread opportunity over the long run. The affected governments in the region, along with multilateral development banks and others in the donor community, must also prioritize investments – beyond crime prevention and law enforcement -- that address the root causes of the migration phenomena we are seeing today.

Only by working together to keep children in school, train out-of-school youth for higher education or jobs, connect small farmers to local and regional markets, and create entry points for historically marginalized groups will the region become more secure and prosperous for the long term. This has been and will continue to be a principal focus for USAID, and will continue to benefit citizens throughout the Americas.

Thank you and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.