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Recent Developments:

US Assistance to the Northern Triangle in the Balance

The recent impact-evaluation report of USAID crime and violence prevention programs in Central America and the unveiling of the Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle have garnered noteworthy attention in Washington D.C. in the closing stages of 2014. The region came to the forefront of national attention last year when President Obama described the massive influx of unaccompanied Central American minors crossing into the U.S. as a crisis situation. The Obama administration has responded to the increase in migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America with a number of measures, many focused on beefing up security as well as hardening borders throughout the region. This response has received both approbation from some in the political establishment and disapproval, particularly from experts in the dynamics of the grave security situation in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. These observers decry the lack of attention to the circumstances compelling so many children and families to resort to cross-border movement. The USAID prevention programs and the Alliance for Prosperity have been billed as responses to the root causes of youth migration from the Northern Triangle, and it appears through these initiatives, the U.S. may be poised to tackle decade-long socioeconomic issues and endemic violence and crime which plague the Northern Triangle countries.

On October 30th, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) presented an impact-evaluation report measuring the effectiveness of USAID's crime and violence prevention programs in Central America (see: *Are Crime and Violence Programs Working in Central America?*). Soon after, on the 14th November, Presidents Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador, Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala, and Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras outlined their strategy for promoting peace and prosperity in their region at the Inter-American Development Bank (see: *Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle*). The importance of these recent developments cannot be understated, as they are likely to define the conditions under which international development funds are delivered to the region in the short and medium term.

LAPOP's study outlines a number of positive findings. In USAID-assisted communities, there was a 51% reduction in the awareness of both extortion and murders, 25% fewer residents reporting awareness of illegal drug sales, and a 35% drop in citizens avoiding areas for fear of crime, for example. Directly pursuant to the unveiling of the impact-evaluation report, USAID published a press release affirming its achievements in quelling crime and violence in the region. In the release, the agency's methodology is alluded to as tried, tested, and proven successful. The press release goes further in calling upon the Central American governments, other U.S. government agencies, private sector partners, and multilateral organizations to unite in expanding and replicating USAID's community-based crime prevention approach.

The report's findings, while welcomed and positive, highlights community based violence reduction strategies, which, when well- designed and effectively implemented have generally been found to be more effective than national strategies in the region. However, in the highly complex security contexts of Northern Triangle countries, multifaceted domestic and international crime prevention programs are required, including broad based police and justice system reform. It is important to read the LAPOP report from a constructively critical viewpoint and ask hard yet necessary questions: are the Northern Triangle police institutions - notorious for human rights violations and corruption - well-suited and capable of implementing community crime prevention? How will these areas transition from foreign assistance to sustainable management of citizen security and accountable law enforcement systems? And critically, is the USAID model replicable and sensitive to conditions throughout the Northern Triangle?

Of chief concern is the lack of broad-based engagement with civil society. It is well-known that significant portions of the Northern Triangle citizenry continue to favor zero-tolerance policies toward violent criminals and drugs, in turn electing public officials who continue to pursue crackdown policing. The continuation of such *mano dura* policies is the least desired policy outcome. The current period is one of transition, in which crackdown policing must be replaced by more productive policies. In the meantime, USAID's call to action runs in the opposite direction of large sectors of Northern Triangle public opinion on how to address security issues. Engagement with credible actors throughout civil society in all three countries is of critical importance to building consensus around the type of crime and violence prevention measures that AID has been shifting toward.

The Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle was delivered in Washington as a response to an invitation by President Obama for the three implicated countries to present a joint development plan which in part addresses the uptick in migration of Central American children arriving in the United States. The Plan names four principal pillars: (1) creating economic opportunities, (2) fostering human capital, (3) addressing violence, and (4) strengthening institutions. The document also outlines goals to expand and develop the agriculture, textile, and tourism industries. Critically, if the Plan is deemed sound by U.S. officials, it can be expected that Washington will respond by offering significant financial, technical, and political support to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The Plan is worrisome on several levels. First, the very real problem of corruption and lack of accountability in the public sector is long-standing and pervasive in the Northern Triangle. Although there have been notable reforms and new oversight mechanisms in some National Ministries, and the extent of the problem varies between and within the three countries, investing significant resources in national governments which have done little to effectively address rampant corruption will almost certainly result in squandered funds, tensions between donor and recipient governments, and the continuity and worsening of social grievances. The Plan, which is light on the details and heavy on rhetoric, closely resembles economic development plans that were already in the works and implemented under previous administrations; plans, particularly in the case of Honduras and Guatemala which benefit the wealthy and powerful, rather than offering novel approaches to solving the region's problems of vast inequality and grave insecurity.

Second, there is great ambiguity regarding important foundations of the Plan. Questions about the initiative's total costs were dodged when presented at the Inter-American Development Bank's headquarters. This in itself ought to be a clear red flag for any economic development under consideration by U.S. government. Similarly, there are no mentions as to how funds would be appropriated between El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. While the nations have been able to cooperate in the promulgation of this plan apparently, they remain sovereign states with varied internal dynamics and regimes that have divergent political and economic philosophies.

The most worrisome aspect of this initiative has to do with the way in which the Plan came about in the first place. With little to no consultation with civil society groups in the region, the Alliance's Plan was presented in Washington before the Presidents of the region presented the document to their own populations. The lack of engagement, particularly in Honduras and Guatemala, with NGOs, church organizations, journalists, intellectuals, academics, ethnic minority representatives, campesino groups and business leaders in the construction of the Plan for Prosperity leaves many doubts as to whether it can in fact be implemented and whether it has sufficient buy-in from the most credible sectors of society. Civil society organizations and leaders - from academics to alternative media leaders to small business groups - expressed their dismay at yet another example of political leaders' apparent reluctance to inform and engage their citizenry in plans that will directly impact their lives. To build respect for the rule-of-law, accountability and democratic governance, governments in the region must cease the practice of withholding information or under-informing the public about actions underway. A critical and informed civil society is a crucial component of rebuilding the fragile institutions of the Northern Triangle and donor nations must insist on transparency in the roll-out of economic and political plans in the region.

Crisis situations - such as the violence and widespread insecurity in the Northern Triangle driving the displacement and forced migration of children and families - often provoke rushed and incomplete responses which are deemed failures in retrospect. A cautious approach to these situations may be politically difficult in donor countries, but is very much needed before significant commitments to the social and economic development of the Northern Triangle are made. The region is facing complex issues which are causing spillover effects and knocking at the door of the United States. This crisis will take time and a multifaceted approach to address. Rather than subscribing to vague plans which tell us how resolve the region's socioeconomic issues, we must remain open to dialogue with all stakeholders and civil society in particular.