Migration Narratives in Northern Central America

How Competing Stories Shape Policy and Public Opinion in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador

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Metropolitan Group
the power of voice

NATIONAL IMMIGRATION FORUM

RAND CORPORATION

MPI
MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE

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Executive Summary

The ways in which migration is woven into the fabric of northern Central American societies are both complex and changing. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are most commonly thought of as countries of emigration: nearly 3.2 million nationals of these three countries (10 percent of their combined population) were living in the United States as of 2019, and global remittance flows made up roughly one-fifth to one-quarter of each country's GDP in 2021. These Central Americans' movement has been driven by an interconnected web of factors, including uneven economic growth, political instability, violence, and increasingly, natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. Irregular migration has reached record highs across the region, instigating political crises in some places and drawing pressure from the United States and Mexico to double down on enforcement. Opportunities for Central Americans to move abroad through regular migration channels are scarce, but as policymakers increasingly frame migration management as a regional responsibility, there has been talk of expanding them, particularly for temporary work. At the same time, migrants from South America and the Caribbean (including Haitians and Venezuelans) have begun to cross through Central America in greater numbers, and more former emigrants are returning. These trends have created new challenges for countries with unevenly developed systems to conduct immigration enforcement, provide humanitarian protection, and reintegrate their own nationals.

A complex set of interconnected, yet sometimes contradictory, narratives has developed to explain what drives these diverse movements, and how to best manage them. A dominant undercurrent has been pressure on northern Central American countries to stem irregular movement to the north, both through enforcement as well as by addressing the "root causes" of migration—by now a common refrain in both bilateral agreements and multilateral forums such as the 2022 Summit of the Americas. Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei has said that the only way to stop irregular migration is not by erecting physical walls at borders but by building "walls of prosperity" in Central America. At the same time, narratives in many local communities portray emigration as an economic lifeline and source of pride, with opportunities at home often perceived as not comparable to those abroad, despite large development investments. The intersection of these narratives reveals some of the inherent contradictions and tensions in how societies view mobility, at times as a critical asset and at times as a destabilizing threat, something to be encouraged and facilitated or something to be prevented.

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Migration narratives matter because they both inform policymaking and shape public reactions to policies. Narratives—the stories people tell to interpret events around them—are rarely wholly positive or negative, nor are they fixed or permanent; instead, they form a complex ecosystem of multiple overlapping, often competing stories that can become salient at different times. For instance, in some places the media may propagate government narratives around the need to crack down on irregular migration, while people on the ground may see emigration (through regular or irregular pathways) as a rite of passage or a necessary

sacrifice—and thus a source of pride. These stories can have a major impact on whether policies deliver on their goals.

This study presents the findings of research conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, RAND Corporation, Metropolitan Group, and National Immigration Forum, which compared salient migration narratives within El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—as well as a selection of migration narratives from Mexico and the United States that relate to Central America—over the 2018–22 period. The research strives to better understand narrative patterns and contradictions, and how the stories told along the entire migration continuum—from predeparture to transit to emigration to return—interact with policy. The study examined more than 200 documents (including government policy documents, local and national media articles, and reports by international and nongovernmental organizations), supplemented with relevant background literature, public opinion polling, and data on migration trends. A comparative analysis of these three case studies reveals ten crosscutting findings:

1   **Narratives around emigration are often in conflict, with many migrants and their families seeing it as a critical lifeline while governments at times depict it as a destabilizing threat.** While emigration and the remittances migrants send are seen as a critical lifeline for families and communities facing poverty and insecurity, emigration is also framed as a symptom of the state's failure to provide for its own citizens and thus something to reduce through development investments. Some also portray emigration as a threat—both to individuals and society—due to the dangers migrants are exposed to but also because of the view that emigration can socially and economically destabilize countries of origin if talented workers leave and families are separated.

2   **Narratives around enforcement have become pervasive, with Central American governments caught between demands to restrict irregular migration and obligations toward their own citizens.** As migration crises in Central America have become more visible and prominent, a highly securitized policy narrative focused on enforcement and security has crystallized in the region, propelled in large part by U.S. pressure to reduce irregular migration. Politicians throughout the region have invoked migrant caravans to justify greater restrictions on migration, though these same caravans also gave rise to grassroots counternarratives urging solidarity and compassion for migrants as well as a countertrend of governments advocating more forcefully for the rights of their nationals abroad.

3   **Governments and migrant communities invoke core values such as honor and dignity in both positive and negative narratives around emigration.** Many Central American migration narratives emphasize core values, leaning on concepts such as pride, loyalty, sacrifice, and dignity. But these values are multidirectional: they are invoked both as a reason to leave (making a necessary sacrifice to provide for one's family) and a reason to stay (pride in one's community). Thus, honor and pride are used for competing purposes, both to encourage and discourage outmigration.

4   **Government narratives that aim to deter migration are often misaligned with migrants' own reasons for leaving.** Many messages seeking to deter outmigration (disseminated by both origin- and destination-country governments) utilize themes such as rule of law and pragmatism, telling people not to attempt irregular routes because they are dangerous and have little chance

of success. But these fear-based messages predominantly highlight short-term risks and are thus fundamentally mismatched with community narratives depicting migration as a critical lifeline and a necessary sacrifice to access long-term safety and economic opportunities. Messages seeking to deter outmigration also compete with difficult local conditions, with some people viewing irregular migration as less dangerous than the status quo.

5   **Government narratives about reducing outmigration by creating economic opportunities at home may oversell the scale and speed of development investments' success.** The pressure to effect change *quickly* may be placing unrealistic expectations on new development programs' ability to reduce irregular migration and create meaningful livelihood opportunities for would-be migrants in the short term. Research has shown that better conditions can initially lead to *more* migration, and development programs need community buy-in to shift the cost-benefit calculus around migration**.** Many government-sponsored programs are perceived as poorly designed, mismanaged, and unlikely to meet their goals, and few have involved civil-society actors (who understand the complexities of local conditions).

6   **Official narratives promoting legal migration opportunities clash with the fact that would-be migrants do not always see these as viable alternatives to irregular movement.** Despite the powerful economic incentives for both Central American and destination-country governments to facilitate legal labor migration, and recent political pledges to improve and expand regular migration pathways, Central Americans' legal options to move and earn money abroad are limited. The number of visas available remains vanishingly small compared to the demand for jobs abroad— and also compared to the scale of efforts to reduce or prevent irregular migration through increased enforcement.

7   **Narratives promoting the benefits of the "virtuous migration cycle" persist despite underinvestment in returning migrants' reintegration.** Ensuring that returnees can fully apply skills acquired abroad is a key component of supporting their contributions to their communities and maximizing migration's benefits. Yet, only a fraction of returning migrants have access to long-term reintegration services such as employment assistance, and many struggle to find jobs upon return. Investments in reintegration pale in comparison to the focus on enforcement or deterrence advanced by the United States and adopted throughout the region, and this underinvestment creates a gap in the much-touted "virtuous cycle" of migration.

8   **Overlapping crises—including COVID-19 and climate events—have both intensified and constrained mobility, but this is not always reflected in migration narratives.** Migration in the region has been deeply interlinked with "crisis," whether climate-related disasters (including prominent hurricanes); the pandemic; economic shocks and stresses; and violence and insecurity—each playing a role in both restricting and precipitating different kinds of movement. Yet at the same time, narratives about migration's drivers are mostly centered on immediate economic and social factors, such as jobs and crime, and less on external stressors—especially long-term ones such as climate change.

9   **Central American public opinion remains ambivalent and divided about migration, even as governments have moved toward greater restriction and enforcement.** Public attitudes toward migration coming *into* and *through* northern Central America are divided and sometimes

contradictory; for example, the same individuals who say they believe newcomers harm society may also voice support for migrants' access to health care, education, and the labor market. Some contradictions may reflect differences in how people think about issues in the abstract versus lived experiences, as well as different attitudes toward migrants of different origins, backgrounds, and migration intentions. But overall, these mixed views stand in contrast to the highly securitized policy narrative centered on enforcement that has crystallized in the region.

10 **Returnees trigger many of the same threat narratives commonly applied to international migrants.** Returnees to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have triggered some of the same threat narratives around security, public health, and even culture that in other contexts are typically associated with "foreigners" or other outgroups (especially ethnically or religiously different groups). It is noteworthy that instances of "othering" (which can manifest as fear, prejudice, discrimination, and even violence) that might elsewhere be classified as xenophobia have occurred in Central America among co-nationals.

The salient narratives analyzed in this report provide an important perspective from within Central America on several issues that are now at the center of major regional migration debates and policy efforts. Perhaps the largest is the debate around how to reduce irregular migration—a goal that hinges not just on whether governments and donors can create jobs, improve safety and infrastructure at home, and expand legal pathways abroad but also on whether these investments are actually changing how individuals think about and make migration decisions. Yet insights into how different narratives are received by the public are infrequently integrated into policy design processes. Messaging campaigns often outline a lofty vision of the future changes policymakers want to see but may fail to reflect short- and medium-term realities that resonate with people's lived experiences. For example, high-profile announcements of new bilateral partnerships to promote legal migration may not spark immediate behavioral change if only a few dozen visas are made available. At the same time, people's hopes for the future can influence their migration decisions even before changes fully materialize, such as if they trust their elected leaders to deliver on promised initiatives and can see signs of progress.

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Comparing narratives can also reveal important policy gaps or mismatches. As U.S. pressure on northern Central American countries to reduce irregular migration has ramped up, security narratives have crowded out other storylines. For example, even with an estimated 863,000 migrants returned to these countries from Mexico and the United States between 2018 and 2022, many have received little to no reintegration support, struggled to find work, and been characterized as threats or competition for limited resources—a lack of support for returning migrants that undermines the official narrative of encouraging a "virtuous cycle" of prosperity. As movements within and across northern Central America become both more complex and more contested, it is important to track how stories along the entire migration continuum intersect, contradict or compound each other, and how they influence both policy decisions and how policies are received by the communities they affect.

1   Introduction

The stories told within a society about migration and migrants paint a rich picture of how its members view the opportunities and challenges associated with the movement of people, and through what lenses. While northern Central America is primarily known for emigration to Mexico and the United States—with more than 10 percent of the combined population of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras living in the United States as of 2019[1]—it has also recently witnessed transit migration from South America and the Caribbean, as well as increases in the number of emigrants returning home. Different stories are told around the multifaceted impacts of these movements, which vary from temporary to permanent and occur through both legal and irregular routes. Mobility is portrayed at times as a critical asset and at times as a destabilizing threat, something to be encouraged and facilitated or something to be prevented.

This report analyzes three in-depth case studies—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras[2]—as well as a selection of migration narratives from Mexico and the United States that relate to Central America in order to illustrate how these narratives intersect, contradict or compound each other, and how they influence other narratives as well as policy decisions. Over the 2018–22 study period, irregular migration reached historic levels and political shifts (with new governments inaugurated across northern Central America and the United States) placed immigration enforcement and reducing irregular movement higher on the regional agenda. And at the same time, the profile of migrants in the region has become more diverse and complex: this is no longer a linear story of Central American individuals and families migrating north, but also one of highly visible caravans of hundreds or even thousands of Central Americans traveling together, many hoping to seek asylum in the United States; increasing numbers of unaccompanied children and South American and Caribbean transit migrants; and more Central American emigrants returning home at a time of increased attention for development investments to improve economic opportunities.

But not much is known about the stories that are told about different strands of migration and how they interact. The vast majority of studies of public opinion and narratives are unidirectional, focusing mainly on perceptions in migrant-receiving communities of foreigners. Much less work has been done in regions such as Central America that are experiencing long-standing patterns of outmigration to understand how narratives about multidirectional migration fit together and reinforce (or compete with) one another. As movements within and across countries and regions become both more complex and more contested, analyzing stories along the entire migration continuum—from predeparture to transit to emigration to return—is increasingly important.

Research has shown that narratives can be powerful in migration policy decision-making.[3] Narrative frames around migrants and migration—portraying newcomers as valuable contributors, passive victims, or

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1   Erin Babich and Jeanne Batalova, "Central American Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, August 11, 2021.

2   For these case studies, document collection and analysis was led by Alejandra Lopez for Honduras, Alejandro Vélez Salas for El Salvador, and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto for Guatemala.

3   See Christina Boswell, Andrew Geddes, and Peter Scholten, "The Role of Narratives in Migration Policy-Making: A Research Framework," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2011): 1–11; Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek, "Migration Narratives in Policy and Politics" (Ryerson University Working Paper No 2020/17, December 2020); Peter Thisted Dinesen and Frederik Hjorth, "Attitudes toward Immigration: Theories, Settings, and Approaches," in *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science*, eds. Alex Mintz and Lesley Terris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

threats, and migration as orderly or chaotic—may shape how policies are crafted and implemented, and condition members of the public to support more open or restrictive approaches. Analyzing how different actors frame stories about mobility thus provides important insights into how policy solutions are being discussed, sold, and communicated to constituents and how this matches (or diverges from) how the public views the benefits and challenges surrounding mobility. When narratives are in competition, this can shed light on some of the tensions and disconnects around how different actors view migration policy challenges and the proposed solutions, whether policy solutions (and rhetoric) are consistent with the challenges people are facing, and whether certain messages are likely to resonate with the public. In this sense, analysis of migration narratives represents a useful complement to traditional public opinion research.

BOX 1
What Are Narratives?

The **stories** people tell help them make sense of complex events they observe, hear about, or experience. These stories create threads that are easy to understand and that shape how people rank issues by importance, what solutions they consider, how they see opportunities and threats around them, and where they assign responsibility. The aggregate of these stories is a **narrative**, which creates a point of view on an issue. A common threat narrative—that emigration impoverishes communities that lose their best and brightest—is an example of drawing a causal relationship between migration and societal dynamics in order to explain a phenomenon that people are observing in their own lives (in this case, loss of livelihoods). The counternarrative—that emigrants are "heroes" who support their communities and demonstrate values of hard work—is another way to view the same type of migration, but through the lens of pride and dignity.

Narratives come from a range of actors within a society. They can be actively promoted by politicians or service providers (for example, through organized messaging campaigns or government speeches) or develop and take root in institutions, particularly those responsible for crafting and implementing policy, or within families and local communities. Narratives can spread in different parts of government (such as law enforcement institutions), the private sector (certain employers or industries), civil society (nongovernmental organizations or advocacy groups), and through informal social networks. Together, at all these levels, narratives interact with pre-existing beliefs to determine how people perceive opportunities and risks, particularly in times of crisis. Importantly, actively orchestrated narratives may not always cohere with "settled" narratives that have become engrained in the social fabric of a community or lodged within stories passed down through family networks.

Because narratives help people make sense of complex events, they often inform and shape policymaking—including by shaping public reactions to policy initiatives and political framing. They are often used at three critical points in the policy process: to set the policy context (situating migration in a nation's history or values); to define a problem or an opportunity (linking migration to a challenge or presenting it as a solution to a challenge); and to mobilize support for policy actions.

Sources: Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, Haim Malka, and Shelly Culbertson, *How We Talk about Migration: The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021); Christina Boswell, Andrew Geddes, and Peter Scholten, "The Role of Narratives in Migration Policy-Making: A Research Framework," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2011): 1–11; Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek, "Migration Narratives in Policy and Politics" (Ryerson University Working Paper No 2020/17, December 2020).

The report begins by analyzing the regional migration context in which these narratives need to be understood, identifying three distinct periods of mobility (before, during, and after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic) and juxtaposing these with political shifts in each country. Then, it offers a crosscutting analysis of the multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing narratives that have emerged around migration in the three case-study countries. The report's final section offers a set of recommendations for policymakers and practitioners aiming to more effectively manage mobility across the region.

BOX 2
About This Study and Its Methodology

This report is a collaboration between the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), RAND Corporation, Metropolitan Group, and National Immigration Forum (NIF). It is a companion to a previous cross-regional study of migration narratives in five countries (Colombia, Lebanon, Morocco, Sweden, and the United States), entitled *How We Talk about Migration: The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power*.

The present study seeks to build a baseline understanding of salient migration narratives in northern Central America, with the goal of informing policymaking as well as public discourse and communication about why different narratives resonate, under what conditions, and when and why they shift. This analysis is based on an in-depth scan of more than 200 documents, including government policy documents, local and national media articles from a variety of sources, and reports by international and nongovernmental organizations, supplemented with country-specific and regional data on demographic and migration trends, public opinion polls, and literature on the historical and political contexts in each of the case-study countries.

The authors utilized keyword searches to uncover material pertaining to all aspects of migration (including immigration, transit migration, emigration, and return). They then developed a coding framework to ensure comparability, organizing the documents by migration category, the type of actor behind each narrative, and by theme. The authors collected and analyzed documentary data until no new themes emerged (i.e., reached a saturation point). Finally, they reviewed country-level findings for similarities and differences across cases, developing the key findings and recommendations presented in this report.

This approach was informed by other work on narratives. It allowed the researchers to collect and analyze narratives consistently across the case-study countries, while still generating unique data-driven findings. This study focused on narratives found in documents and text, but future research could expand this to other narrative arenas, including migrants' spoken narratives.

Sources: For examples of other narratives-focused studies, on whose methodology this report builds, see Anabela Carvalho, "Media(ted) Discourse and Society: Rethinking the Framework of Critical Discourse Analysis," *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 2 (2008): 161–177; Anna De Fina and Amelia Tseng, "Narrative in the Study of Migrants," in *The Routledge Handbook of Migration and Language* (London: Routledge, 2017), 381–396; Anuszka Mosurska, Aaron Clark-Ginsberg, Susannah Sallu, and James Ford, "Disasters and Indigenous Peoples: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Expert News Media," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 6, no. 1 (2023): 178–201; Anuszka Mosurska et al., "International Humanitarian Narratives of Disasters, Crises and Indigeneity," *Disasters* (2023).

2   Regional Context: Three Periods of Migration Trends and Policy Approaches

Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have long been countries of emigration, primarily to the United States through irregular channels, with movement often following episodes of civil conflict and political instability over the past several decades. The number of immigrants from these three countries who live in the United States climbed from 196,000 in 1980 to 3.3 million in 2019, at which point 6 percent all of Guatemalans, 8 percent of all Hondurans, and 22 percent of all Salvadorans were living in the United States.[4]

Economic factors (including low wages, unemployment, and insufficient income to cover basic necessities in communities of origin) are among the principal reasons Central Americans cite for emigrating, but a broader confluence of drivers—including climate disasters and their spillover effects on violence and insecurity—layer on top of one another and contribute to mobility decisions as well.[5] The devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in Honduras in 1998 and by the pair of earthquakes that struck El Salvador in 2001, for example, compounded the pressure to emigrate and would later become the basis for providing certain migrants from these countries with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in the United States.[6] Seeking protection from persistent crime, widespread gang violence, and political persecution has also been an important motivation for Central American migration, with more than 30,000 Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans receiving asylum between U.S. fiscal year (FY) 2001 and FY 2021, and thousands more whose cases are backlogged for adjudication.[7] At the same time, high demand for migrant labor, rooted networks of family and community ties in the United States, and uneven immigration enforcement practices have also contributed to Central American migration.[8]

Central American migration began to change significantly in composition and magnitude starting in 2012. Unaccompanied children traveling northward from these three northern Central American countries increased in both number and as a share of all migrants in the region, and this shift began to reshape U.S. and Mexican enforcement and protection policy responses between 2012 and 2014. And though most migrants apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border continued to be single adults, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran families began to represent notable shares of arrivals as well. By 2018, families made up nearly 40 percent of all migrant apprehensions at the border.

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4   Migration Policy Institute (MPI) calculations based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) and from Campbell J. Gibson and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990" (Working Paper No. 29, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 1999). Calculation of emigrant shares of each country's total population are based on UN Population Division, "International Migrant Stock 2019" (dataset, 2019).

5   Ariel G. Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action: The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration* (Rome, Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA: World Food Program, MPI, and Civic Data Design Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021).

6   Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is a status granted by the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security that allows nationals of designated countries to live and work in the United States temporarily due to unsafe conditions in their places of origin.

7   Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), "The Impact of Nationality, Language, Gender and Age on Asylum Success," updated December 7, 2021.

8   Randy Capps et al., *From Control to Crisis: Changing Trends and Policies Reshaping U.S.-Mexico Border Enforcement* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019).

TABLE 1
Northern Central American Countries' Immigrants, Emigrants, and Returning Migrants, 2019

Country	Total Population	Immigrant Population	Emigrants in the United States	Returns from the United States and Mexico
Guatemala	17,580,000	80,000	1,112,000	105,000
Honduras	9,750,000	39,000	746,000	109,000
El Salvador	6,450,000	43,000	1,412,000	37,000

Notes: Returns in this table count recorded events of migrants being repatriated by U.S. and Mexican authorities, not unique individuals. These numbers do not include instances of migrants returning voluntarily to each country.
Sources: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from UN Population Division, "International Migrant Stock 2019," accessed December 12, 2022; MPI Data Hub, "Countries of Birth for U.S. Immigrants, 1960-Present," accessed December 12, 2022; International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Retornos Norte de C.A. — Retornos 2019," accessed May 5, 2023.

Although it represents only a fraction of total flows, lawful labor migration from Central America has increased notably in recent years and will likely continue to grow. The United States issued approximately 9,000 H-2 visa for temporary work in agriculture and related industries to northern Central Americans in FY 2018. Four years later, in FY 2022, the number of H-2 visas issued to nationals of these three countries had increased to a total of 19,000.[9] Nearly half of Central American H-2 workers were from Guatemala, though the largest increase since FY 2018 has been in visas issued to Salvadorans (from less than 1,000 in FY 2018 to about 5,000 in FY 2022).

Since 2019, and following periods of heightened emigration, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have also witnessed increased transit and return migration. These trends have challenged their legal frameworks, migration institutions, and capacity to conduct enforcement and provide humanitarian protection. Migration policymaking systems are unevenly developed across the three countries, and they have evolved in reaction to recent shifts in migration, including movements that are increasingly hemispheric in nature. Overall, migration agencies are weakly institutionalized and have limited capacity to conduct immigration enforcement, which is instead mostly left to the national police and/or military. Despite the region's growing focus on humanitarian protection, asylum systems are also weak and depend on international assistance to aid and manage the movement of thousands of asylum seekers from across the hemisphere as they transit Central America.[10] Labor migration mechanisms are improving in Guatemala, but these are focused more on emigration than attracting migrants from other regions. And though all three countries have improved their mechanisms for receiving returning migrants, mostly in urban hubs, the infrastructure to help these migrants reintegrate into communities across these countries is severely underinvested in compared to the scale of need for such services.[11]

The subsections that follow take a closer look at how, during the 2018–22 period of study, Central American migration changed in volume and composition, presenting new challenges for governments and transit and receiving communities. While a host of complex and interrelated factors shaped migration patterns, these can be broadly divided into three periods: pre-pandemic mobility (2018–19), restricted mobility at the onset of pandemic (2020), and resurging migration as countries began to lift mobility restrictions (2021–22).

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9   MPI analysis of data from U.S. Department of State, "Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances by Visa Class and by Nationality: FY 1997-2022 NIV Detail Table," accessed May 15, 2023.
10   Andrea Domínguez and Sandy Pineda, "Migración recibió 962 solicitudes de refugio en Guatemala," *Prensa Libre*, January 2, 2023; Roman Gressier, "El éxodo Venezolano se hace un nudo en Guatemala," *El Faro*, February 27, 2023.
11   Andrew Selee et al., *Laying the Foundation for Regional Cooperation: Migration Policy and Institutional Capacity in Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).

A.   Pre-Pandemic Mobility (2018–19)

Partially because of uneven economic growth and rising political discontent, irregular migration from northern Central America ballooned in 2018–19, as did attention to policies to control migration. Starting in 2018, a series of highly visible migrant caravans captured major public attention, even though this mode of travel was only being used by a minority of migrants headed north (most migrants traveled on their own or with a smuggler[12]). Primarily composed of Honduran families disillusioned by perceived high levels of corruption, the lack of improvement in socioeconomic conditions, and high homicide rates, members of these caravans sought safety in numbers as they traversed Guatemala and Mexico and arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border, with most seeking asylum. This came at a time when Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández had just been sworn into office in January 2018 for a second term following a controversial re-election bid, and civil unrest and protests in the country were growing in frequency. In Guatemala, the decision by the Morales administration to terminate the international anti-corruption body (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG)[13] sparked similar pressures to migrate irregularly.

This move was considered by Guatemalans and international observers to be the beginning of backsliding on efforts to root out corruption. And in El Salvador, though homicide rates were falling, they were still high,[14] and irregular migration continued because the public had little hope in economic conditions improving and continued to lack confidence in elections.

Starting in 2018, a series of highly visible migrant caravans captured major public attention, even though this mode of travel was only being used by a minority of migrants headed north.

In Mexico, the government's response to the rise in irregular Central American migration, including caravans, was to institute heightened enforcement measures. Prior to leaving office in late 2018, the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto increased migration controls along the Mexico-Guatemala border and in the interior of the country to deter caravans.[15] In sharp contrast, the initial response of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration in January 2019 was to identify and regularize migrants, offering a humanitarian visa that granted a one-year legal stay in the country, during which time the visa recipients could apply for refugee protection. The Mexican government granted more than 11,000 humanitarian visas in February 2019 alone.[16] But rather than apply for humanitarian protection in Mexico, a large share of visa holders used the document to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. Within weeks, the López Obrador administration stopped issuing these humanitarian visas at ports of entry.

Following threats by Donald Trump's administration that the United States would impose tariffs on Mexican imports if the López Obrador administration did not increase its migration controls to reduce irregular migration, the two governments announced an agreement in June 2019 that resulted in enhanced interior

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12   Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action*.

13   Sofia Menchu, "Manifestantes ponen presión contra presidente de Guatemala en nueva jornada de protestas," Reuters, September 11, 2018.

14   At the time, there were about nine murders per day. See Seth Robbins and Hector Silva Avalos, "Homicide Drop in El Salvador: Presidential Triumph or Gang Trend?" InSight Crime, August 13, 2020.

15   CNN Español, "Peña Nieto advierte a caravana de migrantes: México no permitirá ingreso irregular y violento al territorio," CNN Español, October 20, 2018.

16   Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, *One Year after the U.S.-Mexico Agreement: Reshaping Mexico's Migration Policies* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2020).

enforcement in Mexico. Irregular migration fell gradually in the second half of 2019, and caravans became less common, less large, and less highly visible.

B.   *Restricted Mobility at the Onset of Pandemic (2020)*

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began less than a year after new presidential administrations took office in El Salvador and Guatemala, an enforcement-focused approach to migration management solidified across the region. Much of this was due to pressure from the United States. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele entered office in June 2019 with significant popular support, and Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei entered office in January 2020 after winning a low-turnout election, both seeking allyship with the Trump administration. Facing U.S. pressure, both governments increased efforts to stop migrant caravans and prosecute organizers throughout 2020.[17] Honduran President Hernández also targeted efforts against caravans at ports of entry and exit.[18]

A second driver of both irregular migration and efforts to control it during this period was the pandemic itself. In early 2020, governments in Central America (as in most of the world) quickly imposed travel restrictions. El Salvador imposed the strictest measures in the region, restricting use of public transportation, implementing curfews, limiting household trips to grocery stores, and imposing jail time for anyone not following the rules.[19] Guatemala also imposed recurring stay-at-home orders.[20] As the pandemic restrictions extended across Latin America, trade and production of goods fell, some small businesses were forced to shut down, and many people saw their livelihoods endangered; this pushed some to take up informal jobs, while others turned to migration.

Then in late 2020, a series of climate disasters struck Central America, compounding long-standing migration drivers as well as newer, pandemic-related economic pressures.[21] In November, Hurricanes Eta and Iota hit, leaving a trail of devastation in communities across the region, especially in Honduras and Guatemala. Together, the pandemic-era mobility restrictions, new economic pressures, and natural disasters significantly changed migration in the region. The restrictions sharply reduced but did not stop irregular migration throughout the region, and levels started to rise again toward the end of 2020.

C.   *Resurging Migration as Mobility Restrictions Lift (2021–22)*

A combination of factors starting in 2021 brought about another increase in irregular migration through Central America and Mexico and toward the United States. Some countries gradually eased COVID-19 travel restrictions as vaccination rates improved, facilitating some mobility in the region. At the same time, migration pressures had been building after a year of economic recession and uneven recovery in Central

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17   Cindy Cruz and EFE, "Nueva Caravana de migrantes sale desde el Salvador del Mundo rumbo a EUA," *La Prensa Gráfica, January 19,* 2020; Sofia Menchu, "Caravana con más de 2,000 migrantes entra a Guatemala, avanza rumbo a México," Reuters, January 16, 2020.

18   Delmer Martinez and Claudio Escalón, "Caravana de hondureños llega a la frontera de Guatemala, camino hacia Estado Unidos," *The Dallas Morning News*, December 11, 2020.

19   Eugenia Velasquez and Evelia Hernandez, "Bukele paraliza el transporte público y cierra más la economía," El Salvador.com, May 7, 2020.

20   Sofia Menchu and Elida Moreno, "Guatemala ordena toque de queda por coronavirus, Panamá reporta dos nuevas muertes," Reuters, March 21, 2020.

21   Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "La República de Honduras: 2020 Huracanes Eta e Iota - Llamado urgente de asistencia" (issue brief, February 3, 2021).

America. And public perceptions that the administration of newly elected President Joe Biden would be more welcoming of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border incentivized some irregular migration, including a caravan in early January 2021 that began in Honduras and was confronted by Guatemalan authorities near the Mexico-Guatemala border.[22]

In response to increased irregular migration, the Biden administration pivoted to an approach centered on regionally collaborative migration management, while maintaining certain enforcement policies, such as Title 42 expulsions, put in place by the previous administration. The new U.S. administration sought to reframe regional migration as a shared responsibility, calling for governments throughout the region to focus on addressing its root causes while also designing policies to reduce irregular migration in the short and long term.[23] In March 2021, the United States and Mexico signed a second joint declaration on migration management and cooperation.[24] The United States also launched a series of strategic cabinet visits to Mexico and Guatemala (and later Honduras), including a June visit by Vice President Kamala Harris, to send a message to would-be migrants that the U.S.-Mexico border was not open to irregular migration. However, despite the change in policy approach, irregular migration continued to increase in 2021, resulting at times in violent clashes between immigration authorities and migrants in Mexico and Guatemala.[25] More Central Americans were encountered and expelled in FY 2021 than in FY 2019, setting new records for both U.S. and Mexican enforcement.[26]

Record-breaking irregular migration continued in 2022 and simultaneously became more hemispheric in nature, with more migrants traveling from South America and the Caribbean through Central America and Mexico.[27] While migration from northern Central America continued, including several reported caravans in southern Mexico,[28] the mix of transit migrants in Guatemala and Honduras posed new migration management challenges for these countries, from needing to increase migration controls and removals to improving access to asylum. At the Summit of the Americas in June 2022, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras endorsed the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection—a nonbinding agreement with 21 signatories across the Americas focused on improving migration management. Notably, Guatemala and El Salvador lead two action committees on return and reintegration and on family reunification and alternative migration pathways, respectively. The administration of Honduran President Xiomara Castro, who entered office in January 2022 with a platform of rooting out corruption and improving local conditions, is a member of the committee on integration and support to help stabilize host communities, which was formed to follow up on the summit's commitments.[29] Castro's election sparked hope among

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22   Azteca Noticias, "Caravana Migrante se enfrenta a autoridades guatemaltecas" (YouTube video, January 17, 2021).

23   White House National Security Council, *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2021).

24   Mexican Presidency of the Republic, "Declaración conjunta entre México y Estados Unidos, 1 de marzo de 2021" (statement, March 2, 2021).

25   Expansión Política, "El INM suspende a dos agentes tras agresión a migrantes en Chiapas," Expansión Política, August 30, 2021.

26   MPI calculations based on U.S. and Mexican data on migrant encounters. See Government of Mexico, *Boletín Mensual Stadísticas 2021* (Mexico City: Mexican Undersecretariat for Human Rights, Population, and Migration, 2022); U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Southwest Land Border Encounters," accessed May 15, 2023.

27   Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, "Record-Breaking Migrant Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border Overlook the Bigger Story" (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, October 2022).

28   For example, seven caravans were organized in Tapachula, Chiapas, over the first five months of 2022. See EFE, "Parte desde el sur de México la séptima caravana migrante de 2022," Telemundo 52, May 10, 2022.

29   U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, "Lima Ministerial Meeting on the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection" (media note, October 6, 2022).

many Hondurans that conditions in the country may improve, but it remains to be seen whether those hopes affect citizens' migration decisions.[30]

3   Key Findings on Central American Migration Narratives

The shifts across the three periods described above illustrate both the diverse and changing tapestry of migration across the region, and how political priorities vary as new administrations come in, face new pressures, and different migration-related issues come to the fore. These changing mobility patterns and efforts to more effectively manage them have been accompanied by a similarly diverse range of ways people—from government leaders to local communities to the media—talk about migration.

The authors of this study examined more than 200 migration-related sources from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras across the 2018–22 study period to identify how different stakeholders employed migration narratives. Five broad, recuring themes emerged from this analysis. From most to least prevalent, these were: security and insecurity; economy and jobs; crises (including climate and COVID-19); national identity, culture, and social cohesion; and infrastructure. Notably, narratives about security and insecurity were the most common for all the stakeholder groups examined (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Most Common Types of Migration Narratives Employed by Different Stakeholders in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2018–22
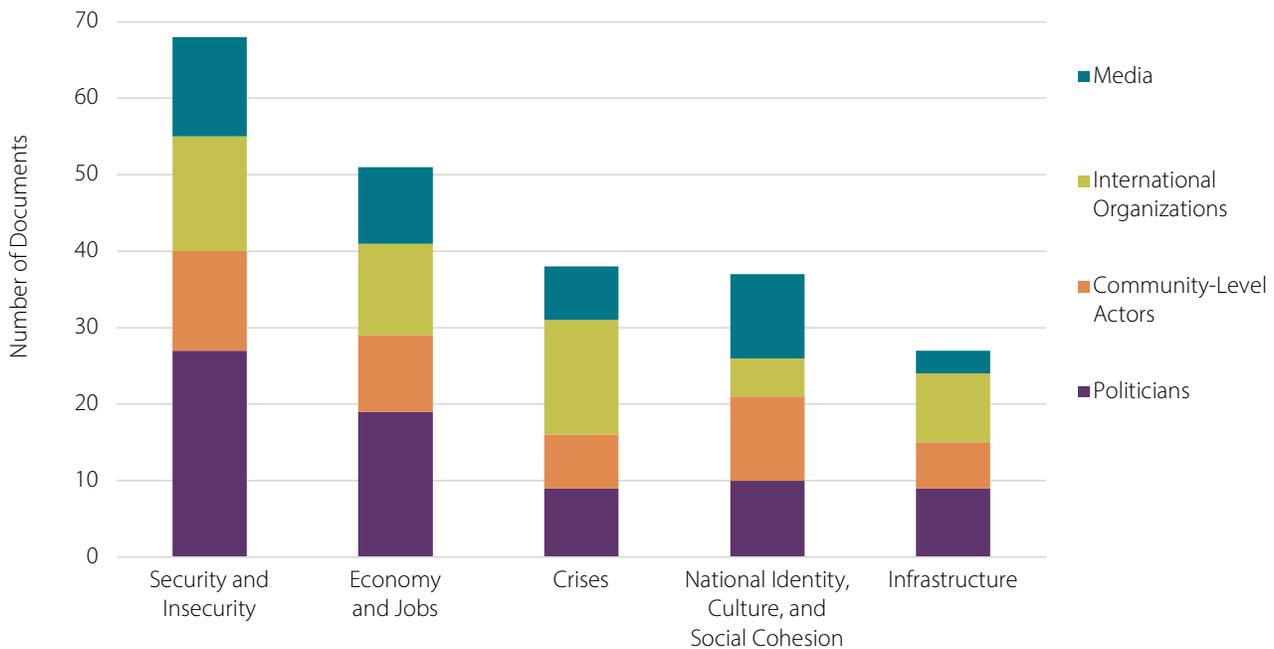
Note: In this figure, each document analyzed is counted once, according to its primary narrative type.
Source: Authors' analysis of 221 migration-related documents from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

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30   EFE, "Hondureños en EEUU piden a Castro acción contra la "crisis" migratoria," Swissinfo.ch, January 26, 2022.

It is also noteworthy, however, that no single narrative type dominated outright. For example, while there were several security narratives about emigration (that it could destabilize countries of origin, transit, and destination; and that it was a symptom of state failure), these coexisted with narratives of emigration being a tool of economic development and a source of pride for those able to support their families through remittances (with emigrants even being called "heroes" and "champions"). Immigration, transit migration, and return migration were similarly described through different value frames: immigrants coming into the country (whether returning nationals or foreign nationals, permanently or temporarily) were sometimes viewed as populations in need of compassion and support, and at other times as threats to social order, stability, or security. In terms of outmigration, there was wide variation in how sources described what prompts these movements and what other factors may change migration decision-making.

It is also noteworthy … that no single narrative type dominated outright.

Whether discussing emigration, transit, or return, the most salient narratives often speak to migration drivers, impacts, and management. Some of the most common narratives in northern Central America and examples of them are outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Salient Migration Narratives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2018–22

Narratives	Reinforcing Messages	Examples
Economy and Jobs Narratives		
Emigration is a critical lifeline.	▶ National economies rely on remittances. (All) ▶ Emigration opens economic opportunities that do not exist in the origin country. (All) ▶ Sending remittances during the pandemic was a form of transnational solidarity. (Guatemala) ▶ Return migrants bring skills and knowledge back to origin countries through a "virtuous cycle" of migration. (Guatemala)	*"Remittances sent by brothers abroad continue to be a lifeline for families and for the economy of our countries in the context of the pandemic."*[1] *"People emigrate because they want better job opportunities; when they cannot find these openings in their country, they believe that by leaving they can have that opportunity."*[2] *"[Working abroad] allows nationals to start a 'virtuous circle of regular migration,' since they can travel, work, and return to provide for their families."*[3]
Emigration destabilizes local economies.	▶ Emigration results in "brain drain" for origin countries. (All) ▶ Emigration feeds into the "cycle of dependency" on remittances. (El Salvador)	*"In the last two years, young professional women have emigrated due to the lack of job opportunities in the country."*[4]

TABLE 2 (cont.)
Salient Migration Narratives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2018–22

Narratives	Reinforcing Messages	Examples
Emigration is a failure of the state to provide opportunities.	▶ Countries must overcome the "root causes" of emigration. (All) ▶ Countries must build "walls of prosperity" to reduce emigration. (Guatemala) ▶ Central American governments cannot be trusted to properly implement development initiatives. (All) ▶ Past efforts to promote development remain mostly rhetoric and have done little to change the realities of would-be migrants. (Guatemala) ▶ If the country is secure, there is no need to migrate. (El Salvador)	*"People don't want to leave their homes or their families, but the lack of opportunities and security means they have to leave. If in El Salvador we give them more opportunities and jobs, people won't have to leave."*[5] *"The challenge is how to sustain growth over many years to recover jobs and stop migration by generating a wall of prosperity."*[6]
	National Identity, Culture, and Social Cohesion Narratives	
Emigration is a source of pride, honor, and dignity.	▶ Working abroad showcases the value of workers from your country. (Guatemala, Honduras) ▶ Emigrants are heroes and champions. (Guatemala) ▶ Emigrating is a necessary sacrifice. (All) ▶ Emigrants are fulfilling their "American dream." (Honduras) *Counternarrative:* ▶ A sense of belonging (arraigo) anchors people to origin countries. (All) ▶ People should build their future in their country. (Honduras)	*"It is about life stories, pain, humiliation, hardships suffered by migrants on the long and tortuous path that leads them in pursuit of their dreams, the so-called 'American dream.'"*[7] *"Other common reasons cited by respondents who did not want to permanently emigrate included … a sense of belonging (arraigo) to their communities or country (23 percent)."*[8]
Emigration destabilizes communities and families.	▶ Emigration erodes national/community identity. (Guatemala, El Salvador) ▶ Emigration disrupts family structures and/or the gender balance. (Guatemala, El Salvador)	*"…he fears the new generations will forget where they came from and the histories that marked their mothers and fathers."*[9] *"The tendency of the more educated sectors to have a greater migratory intention is accentuated in the case of women, therefore the 'brain drain' in these rural communities of Guatemala would have a significant female bias."*[10]

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Salient Migration Narratives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2018–22

Narratives	Reinforcing Messages	Examples
Emigration is a source of shame or something to be avoided.	▶ Migration is the "fault" of the origin country. (El Salvador)	*"A country that does not provide for its people becomes an exporter of people, and that is immoral."*[11]

	Security and Insecurity Narratives	
Migrants are a security risk.	*Immigrants* ▶ Borders must be secured to keep migration "safe, orderly, and regular." (All) ▶ Bad actors such as coyotes threaten the safety of migrants. (All) *Transit migrants* ▶ Caravans transiting during the pandemic posed a health risk. (Guatemala) *Returnees* ▶ Migrants deported during the pandemic are a health risk. (Guatemala) ▶ Returnees with tattoos are likely gang members. (All) *Counternarrative:* ▶ Migrants should not be criminalized for searching for better living conditions and opportunities. (Honduras) ▶ Rather than focusing on enforcement policies, migrants should be protected by the state. (Honduras)	*"We [the Guatemalan government] will locate, prosecute, and breakup… bands of criminals [coyotes] that unscrupulously take advantage of migrants' needs, that lie to them, that scam them, and set them on an onerous and dangerous journey."*[12] *"We understand that the United States wants to deport migrants… but what we don't understand is that they send us all flights contaminated [with COVID-19]."*[13] *"They treat us [returnees] like dogs, like if we are not from Guatemala… Mexico and the United States did not treat us like this. Being from Guatemala, this is not just."*[14] The National Forum for Migration in Honduras (FONAMIH) recommends: *"promot[ing] the flexibility and free movement of the Honduran caravan… in order to avoid reprisals and military restrictions in an environment in which the caravan moves in a peaceful walk that only seeks to express that it is not satisfied with their current living conditions and looking for a better future."*[15]

	Infrastructure Narratives	
Migrants are overburdening scarce resources.	▶ Improving infrastructure to accommodate transit migrants is an economic burden. (Honduras) ▶ Transiting migrants who are stuck in the country are overwhelming current services. (Honduras)	*"Every day more migrants are left adrift in Danlí, unable to leave the country. … Despite the fact that both shelters open their doors to all migrants 'stranded' in Danlí, the number of those who need these services is so great that the facilities are already overwhelmed. Every day, more migrants from different parts of the world continue to arrive in Danlí, as part of their route towards the 'American dream.'"*[16]

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Salient Migration Narratives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2018–22

Narratives	Reinforcing Messages	Examples
The state is not adequately supporting returning migrants.	▶ There is underinvestment in reintegrating temporary labor migrants when they return. (All) ▶ Civil-society organizations supporting return migrants are overwhelmed. (Guatemala) ▶ Deported migrants suffer from feelings of failure and "reverse culture shock." (El Salvador)	*"Reception of returning migrants is deficient in quality and openness. It counters the discourse of migrants as heroes… the government does not commit enough resources for addressing services to treat deportation trauma."*[17]
Crisis Narratives		
Governments need to restrict migration because of COVID-19.	▶ Borders must be closed to halt the spread of COVID-19. (All)	*"The United States, Mexico, and Guatemala, countries where the caravans from Honduras circulated, all stated that they would not permit their entry due to measures of prevention from the pandemic."*[18]
Climate crises beyond governments' control trigger forced migration.	▶ Without urgent international cooperation to address the effects of climate disasters, governments cannot deter emigration. (Honduras)	*"What we see now is that 98 percent of migrants apprehended at the [U.S.] southern border lived in zones devastated by [Hurricanes] Eta and Iota, which left over 2 billion dollars in damages in Honduras."*[19]

Notes: Many of the example quotes in this table were originally in Spanish and have been translated by the authors. The broader narrative analysis, as well as the examples, presented in this table are from the authors' analysis of 221 migration-related documents from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

1 Asociación Pop No'j, "COVID-19, Pueblos Indígenas y Movilidad Humana," accessed March 23, 2023.

2 Agencia EFE, "Falta de oportunidades laborales, primera causa de migración de hondureños," *La Prensa*, September 25, 2018.

3 Luis Carrillo, "Sube contratación de connacionales en el extranjero," *Diario de Centro América*, May 17, 2022.

4 Ruth Evelyn Cienfuegos Agreda, "Mujer y migración, una historia de violencia que contar en El Salvador," Centro de Investigación Para la Democracia, April 28, 2021.

5 Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele speaking on Fox News, "President of El Salvador Talks Immigration Crisis with Tucker Carlson" (YouTube video, March 16, 2021).

6 Guatemalan Social Communication Secretariate of the Presidency, "Presidente Giammattei Ratifica Proposito de Crear Muros de Prosperidad y Oportunidades papa Poblacion," updated July 7, 2021.

7 *El Heraldo*, "La dolorosa migración ilegal," *El Heraldo*, accessed March 24, 2023.

8 This statement is based on data from a 2021 UN World Food Program (WFP) household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, analyzed in Ariel G. Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action: The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration* (Rome, Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA: WFP, Migration Policy Institute, and Civic Data Design Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021), 22.

9 Vilma Lainez, "Exrefugiados de Santa Marta celebran el retorno lejos de casa," Alharaca, January 18, 2022.

10 Catholic Relief Services, *Entre el arraigo y la decisión de migrar* (Guatemala City: Catholic Relief Services, 2020).

11 Bukele speaking on Fox News, "President of El Salvador Talks Immigration Crisis."

12 Saira Ramos, "Presidente Giammattei Lanza Advertencia a 'Coyotes'," Chapín en USA, March 12, 2021.

13 AFP, "Giammattei critica a Estados Unidos por envío de migrantes con coronavirus y ese país le responde," *Prensa Libre*, May 21, 2020.

14 Damià Bonmatí, "Guatemala promete ahora pruebas de coronavirus a los deportados. Pero llevaban tres meses sin tests para la mayoría," Telemundo, June 9, 2020.

15 National Forum for Migration in Honduras (FONAMIH), "En el Marco de la Caravana de Migrantes Hondureños" (press release, October 15, 2018).

16 *La Tribuna*, "Migrantes extranjeros colapsan albergues al no poder pagar multa," *La Tribuna*, March 30, 2022.

17 Luis F. Linares López, *N.°17 Investigaciones Laborales - Reincorporación Sociolaborales de los Migrantes Retornados* (Guatemala City: Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales, 2022).

18 France 24, "EEUU, México y Guatemala Cierran Puertas a Caravanas Migrantes por Pandemia," France 24, January 22, 2021.

19 AFP, "Llegada de Biden impuso migración, dice canciller de Honduras," *La Jornada*, April 9, 2021.

In their diversity, these narratives shed light on the complexities and some inherent contradictions in how these societies view migration. The subsections that follow examine common threads and differences and present the top ten findings that emerged from comparing the salient narratives across these three case-study countries.

Finding 1: Narratives around emigration are often in conflict, with many migrants and their families seeing it as a critical lifeline while governments at times depict it as a destabilizing threat.

Across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, there is widespread recognition that migrants earning money abroad and sending remittances home is a critical livelihood strategy and means of survival. But emigration is also frequently portrayed as a threat—both to individuals and society. This is due not only to the dangerous journey that many irregular migrants undertake and potential exploitation they may face at destination, but also because emigration of all kinds is perceived as having the potential to socially and economically destabilize countries of origin, as families separate and communities lose some of their most productive members. The ways in which different actors—from national politicians to donor agencies to community leaders—emphasize these threats or benefits provide an important window into how migration policies are designed and received.

The economic incentives to emigrate are powerful. Polls reveal that people increasingly see the lack of economic opportunities at home as an even bigger driver than violence or insecurity, and most emigrants cite economic reasons as their primary reason for moving abroad. For example, a 2018 survey by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) found that, on average, 74 percent of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador cited "economic reasons" as their main reason for migrating to the United States, compared to 41 percent who cited "violence or insecurity."[31] These economic reasons included unemployment and not being able to earn enough money to live on, cover one's family's basic needs, or repay debts. It should be noted, however, that while many migrants characterize their own motivations for leaving as economic, studies have pointed to the complex ways different factors—including violence and insecurity, natural disasters and climate change, and the pandemic—intersect with and amplify or create economic pressures to move.[32]

Remittances ... are seen as one of the most secure and important sources of income in communities facing economic and physical insecurity—the core reasoning behind many emigration-as-a-lifeline narratives.

Remittances, in turn, are seen as one of the most secure and important sources of income in communities facing economic and physical insecurity—the core reasoning behind many emigration-as-a-lifeline

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31 In this survey, 74 percent of migrants listed economic reasons as one of the main motivations behind their decision; this was slightly higher for Hondurans (75 percent) and Guatemalans (87 percent) than for Salvadorians (68 percent). Among those who said they migrated for economic reasons, half reported being motivated by unemployment in their home country (49 percent). See Graphs 9a and 9b in Emmanuel Abuelafia, Giselle Del Carmen, and Marta Ruiz-Arranz, *In the Footprints of Migrants: Perspectives and Experiences of Migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in the United States* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2019).

32 Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action.*

narratives. This coheres with what the evidence shows about remittance flows to northern Central America. Remittances made up more than one-quarter of GDP in Honduras and El Salvador (26.6 and 26.2 percent, respectively) in 2021, and 18 percent in Guatemala.[33] Remittances alone surpassed the official development assistance these countries received by more than 15 times in 2019.[34]

Moreover, remittances have remained stable even in periods of great volatility. The fact that remittances to Central America reached USD 33.7 million in 2020, exceeding the level in 2019 despite widespread pandemic-driven economic upheaval, shows the resilience of this income stream even in crisis.[35] While money transfers initially decreased in the first months of the public-health crisis as many migrants faced unemployment or decreased hours at their jobs, remittances soon recovered as migrants reduced their expenses, were able to find new jobs, dipped into their savings, and/or became eligible for pandemic-era aid in the United States.[36] Remittances during this period have been described as a form of "transnational solidarity," with migrants abroad committed to helping their families and communities back home despite the sacrifices it entailed.[37] An environment of uncertainty and crisis may have also made migrants want to save and remit *more* because they did not know what tomorrow would bring. Thus, emigration continues to be seen as one of the most dependable sources of livelihoods, despite its risks and even in situations of crisis or volatility.

However, Central American governments and some private employers have also portrayed irregular emigration as a threat to individuals, families and communities left behind, and to origin countries' national economies. One of the most acute fears is of brain drain—that these countries' "best and brightest" and most highly motivated are the ones who depart permanently, leaving impoverished communities with even less capacity to build and sustain livelihoods. Northern Central America is thought to be among the world regions with the highest levels of brain drain, with emigrants living in the United States much more likely to have completed a secondary education than their counterparts in countries of origin.[38] Consequently, there is a perception, especially in the private sector, that the emigration of qualified workers is leaving a gap in Central American labor markets, with domestic demand for workers in essential projects (e.g., construction) going unmet.[39] As powerful as remittances can be, the migration of working-age adults to study or work abroad thus poses an opportunity cost to countries of origin. Some feel that the benefits these countries reap from remittances are only a fraction of what they could achieve if these hard-working people had not emigrated and instead applied their skills in the local economy. Salvadoran President Bukele, for example,

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33   World Bank, "Remittance Flows Register Robust 7.3 Percent Growth in 2021" (press release, November 17, 2021).

34   Rodrigo Méndez Maddaleno, *Remittances in Central America: The Role of CABEI* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Central American Bank for Economic Integration, 2021).

35   Méndez Maddaleno, *Remittances in Central America*.

36   For example, El Salvador experienced a 40 percent drop in migrant remittances in April 2020 compared with April 2019, before these rebounded in the second half of 2020. See Luis Noe-Bustamante, "Amid COVID-19, Remittances to Some Latin American Nations Fell Sharply in April, then Rebounded," Pew Research Center, August 31, 2020; Manuel Orozco and Kathryn Klaas, *A Commitment to Family: Remittances and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiences of US Migrants* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2021).

37   Silvia Verónica Raquec Cum and Juan José Hurtado Paz y Paz, "COVID-19, Pueblos Indígenas y Movilidad Humana" (powerpoint presentation, Asociación Pop No'j, March 17, 2022).

38   Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz, *In the Footprints of Migrants*.

39   The Honduran president of the Chamber on the Construction Industry, for example, said that Honduras loses at least 100 qualified workers every day to emigration, especially construction workers, plumbers, and welders. See Hondudiario Redacción, "Honduras está perdiendo a los 'mejores' trabajadores con la migración: Chico," Hondudiario, July 26, 2022.

has described mass migration as "not profitable" for either country involved, saying "you want [Salvadorans] to produce *here*."[40]

There is also a sense that emigration exacts a socioemotional toll on communities and families left behind. In El Salvador, some communities perceive migration as rupturing the family structure (i.e., parents leaving their children with grandparents) and resulting in an irreparable loss of traditional values.[41] And in Guatemala, the wives of emigrants who take on new roles and responsibilities in their partners' absence have reported suffering from high levels of stress and sadness.[42] At the same time, wanting to reunite with family members in the United States can motivate some Central Americans to emigrate.[43]

> *Some feel that the benefits these countries reap from remittances are only a fraction of what they could achieve if these hard-working people had not emigrated and instead applied their skills in the local economy.*

More broadly, emigration is sometimes portrayed as shameful or a symptom of community or national failure. For example, Bukele has called emigration from El Salvador "immoral," saying the government has a responsibility to provide for its people and recognizing that it is not doing enough to ensure the necessary conditions exist for Salvadorans to stay in the country.[44] A Salvadoran local policymaker similarly noted that continuous emigration reflects the fact that El Salvador is not a "first-tier nation."[45] And Honduran President Castro has blamed the previous government for causing so many citizens to leave, saying "each caravan of migrants fleeing the dictatorship of more than a decade is a heavy loss for the country and for their families."[46] In such narratives, emigration is portrayed as a symptom of the state's failure to provide for its citizens or as a failure of development initiatives to improve local conditions, rather than as a legitimate adaptation mechanism. Migrants are depicted as being "forced" to leave, suggesting they lack agency or are victims of situations beyond their control.

Finding 2: Narratives around enforcement have become pervasive, with Central American governments caught between demands to restrict irregular migration and obligations toward their own citizens.

As large-scale irregular migration in northern Central America has become more visible, both in the region and in destination countries farther north, a highly securitized policy narrative around enforcement and security has crystallized. The language of enforcement has become pervasive in Central American

40 Charles Creitz, "Salvadoran President Tells Tucker: Mass Immigration 'Not Profitable,' 'Feeding on Dependency,'" Fox News, March 16, 2021.

41 Salvadorian Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES) and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Una Mirada a las familias salvadoreñas: Sus transformaciones y desafíos desde la óptica de las políticas sociales con enfoque de niñez* (San Salvador, El Salvador: FUSADES and UNICEF, 2018).

42 Meghan Farley Webb, "Transnational Migration's Psychosocial Impacts for Kaqchikel Maya Migrants' Wives," *Human Organizations* 77, no. 1 (2018): 32-41.

43 Rhina Guidos, "'I Was a Child Raising a Child': The Cost of Latin American Family Separation—and the Long Journey to Reunite," America – The Jesuit Review, August 18, 2022.

44 Voice of America, "El presidente Bukele: La 'inseguridad' es la principal causa de la migración en El Salvador," Voice of America, March 17, 2021.

45 Milton Rodríguez, "Diputados: Aumento de migrantes indica "no todo está bien" en el país," ElSalvador.com, July 19, 2022.

46 *Diario las Américas*, "Xiomara Castro en la ONU: 'Hondureños emigran por dictadura,'" *Diario las Américas*, September 20, 2022.

governments' rhetoric, policies, and institutions, propelled in large part by U.S. pressure to reduce and manage irregular movements. Migration "crises" such as the caravans have also been used to justify increased restrictions on migrants. In response to an approaching migrant caravan in March 2021, for example, the Guatemalan government issued a declaration authorizing the police to disband large groups and protests, arguing that caravans present a health risk to the public and authorities.[47] This mirrored enforcement-heavy rhetoric deployed by the United States and Mexico, with the Trump administration calling the caravans an "invasion."[48]

Pressure from the United States to halt the onward movement of irregular migrants has also created new fissures between these countries, with Guatemala and El Salvador positioning themselves as willing to combat these movements (though to different degrees) while Honduras generally has not.[49] In 2021, for example, the Guatemalan foreign minister openly criticized the Honduran government's lack of cooperation to stop a caravan from leaving Honduras and instead using its security forces to accompany migrants to the border.[50] This externally driven division between actors who are and are not willing and able to increase enforcement has chipped away at the nascent building blocks of regional solidarity. For instance, before the pandemic, these countries had made progress toward bolstering the implementation of regional mobility and trade agreements, including through the Central America Free Mobility Agreement (C4). Though the

Northern Central American governments have also faced pressure to adopt migration-management language that is often used by actors abroad when discussing these countries' nationals.

C4 agreement allows nationals of these three countries and Nicaragua passport-free travel, Guatemala implemented pandemic measures with additional requirements to deter migrants from transiting through the country, affecting Hondurans primarily.[51] The increased attention to irregular migration, including in the form of migrant caravans, has thus exposed the vulnerabilities in the relationships among the three countries.[52]

Northern Central American governments have also faced pressure to adopt migration-management language that is often used by actors abroad when discussing these countries' nationals and that is now enshrined in various multilateral documents, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration.[53] For example, Guatemalan officials have emphasized that migration should be safe, legal, and orderly, and thus justified investing in securing the country's border and trying to crack down on smugglers and coyotes.[54] Language around how to manage the irregular entry of Hondurans and Salvadorans has

47   EFE, "Guatemala anuncia un estado de prevención por posible caravana migrante," Swissinfo.ch, March 29, 2021.
48   Voice of America, "Trump to Migrant Caravan: 'Our Military Is Waiting for You!'," Voice of America, October 29, 2018.
49   ZV, "1,043 Hondureños de la Caravana, Retornados a sus Hogares: Migración," *La Tribuna*, October 5, 2020; Salvadoran General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners, "Vamos Detrás de los Coyotes" (press release, August 15, 2019); Agencia EFE, "El Canciller Hondureño ve un Propósito Político Detrás de las Caravanas de Migrantes," *Qué Pasa*, February 5, 2021.
50   Sandra Sebastian, "Guatemala Troops, Police Break up Caravan of Weary Migrants," Associated Press, January 18 2021.
51   International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Estudio sobre la relación entre movilidad de personas, desarrollo económico e integración comercial en Centroamérica* (San Jóse, Costa Rica: IOM, 2021).
52   Kevin Sieff, "Guatemala Says It's Working with the United States to Tighten Borders, Break Up Migrant Caravans," *The Washington Post,* June 5, 2019.
53   United Nations, "Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: Intergovernmentally Negotiated and Agreed Outcome," July 13, 2018.
54   Guatemalan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Comunicado oficial" (press release, October 28, 2018).

become couched in terms of protecting national security and ensuring order and safety.[55] Yet at the same time, this securitization narrative has been applied selectively and unevenly. For instance, Honduran police have recently increased arrests of Cuban and Haitian migrants travelling irregularly while targeting Honduran caravan organizers relatively less.[56] Pressures around enforcement have also become stronger without countries necessarily having the capacity to return people humanely; this can be seen clearly in the controversy over the Guatemalan government returning people to Honduras without first confirming their nationality.[57]

On the other hand, the amount of attention paid to migrant caravans and the onset of the pandemic also gave rise to counternarratives urging solidarity and compassion for those on the move, as well as a countertrend of governments advocating more forcefully for the rights of their nationals abroad. In Guatemala, civil society and international organizations actively spoke out against government measures that overtly pathologized both returnees and transit migrants as spreading COVID-19. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched a campaign to combat discrimination and stereotypes against Guatemalan returnees in 2020.[58] And migrant aid organizations such as Casa Migrante and Fundación Avina responded by calling for unity and a human rights-based response.[59]

In addition to enforcement measures, development interventions are also increasingly being implemented with the stated purpose of reducing irregular migration by addressing its "root causes." The narrative around emigration as a threat and a source of shame for Central American governments feeds into government efforts to prevent it. This messaging can be seen in Bukele's description of migration as "our fault" and emphasis on improving country conditions so that "no one has to emigrate."[60] Such statements feed into the characterization of migration as a maladaptation that can and should be overcome with domestic development. Similarly, most international organizations working in northern Central America are increasingly focused on improving local conditions in order to reduce irregular outmigration.

Finding 3: Governments and migrant communities invoke core values such as honor and dignity in both positive and negative narratives around emigration.

Many migration narratives in northern Central America invoke core values—concepts such as pride, loyalty, sacrifice, and dignity. But these values are multidirectional: they are invoked both as a reason to leave and a reason to stay. For example, the concept of honor can be seen in narratives that both encourage and discourage outmigration. In places where emigration narratives are linked to national identity, working abroad can be seen as honorable. The Guatemalan Ministry of Labor, for instance, contends that temporary workers in Canada have an opportunity to demonstrate how "trustworthy" and "reliable" Guatemalan

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55   KS, "Alerta en Guatemala tras posible caravana migrante procedente de Honduras," TN8, April 12, 2022.

56   EFE, "Detienen en Honduras a medio centenar de migrantes cubanos y dos 'coyotes'," EFE, March 26, 2022.

57   Gressier, "El Éxodo Venezolano se Hace un Nudo en Guatemala."

58   United Nations, "La OIM lanza campaña contra la marginación de los migrantes retornados a Guatemala durante la COVID-19," UN News, September 11, 2020.

59   Paula María Ozaeta, "Cómo los Guatemaltecos Retornados Reconstruyen su Vida (y Negocios) en el País," *Prensa Libre*, November 9, 2019; Cristosal, *Situación de los Derechos Humanos de las Personas Retornadas* (Guatemala City: Cristosal, 2020).

60   Voice of America, "Bukele: La migración de salvadoreños 'es nuestra culpa'," Voice of America, July 1, 2019.

workers are.[61] Similarly, the Honduran Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs describes how temporary labor programs will showcase the value of Honduran workers for their "responsibility" and capacity to contribute.[62]

However, there is also a powerful counternarrative that remaining at home and *not* emigrating is a sign of national pride and loyalty to one's country or community. This is reflected in rhetoric employed by some domestic jobs training programs. For instance, through the Dignified Employment Program established in 2022 with EU financial support, the Guatemalan government maintains that providing professional training to vulnerable populations (e.g., returnees, women, and youth) helps them take up dignified employment opportunities, with access to services and protections in the formal labor market, and that this consequently reduces their need to migrate irregularly and binds them to Guatemala's social fabric.[63] Following a similar logic, the Programa Valentina (a job training program run by civil society and implemented in coordination with IOM and the Guatemalan government) seeks to equip youth and women with soft and technical skills and help them find jobs in the formal labor market that encourage them to excel and proudly contribute those skills to the local society.[64]

This sense of pride can also be seen in community rhetoric. In all of three Central American countries examined, a localized sense of belonging (*arraigo*) serves as a counter to migration pressures by anchoring people to their communities of origin.[65] This taps into a powerful sense of belonging within local community and/or Indigenous networks. In both Guatemalan and Honduran Indigenous communities, feelings of being tied to ancestral lands discourage individuals from leaving, particularly in older generations.[66] This sense of *local* belonging may or may not overlap with *national* pride, however. In some cases (as for many Indigenous groups), individuals may have both a strong sense of local belonging and feelings of distrust toward state or federal governments, making it difficult for government entities to tap into this sense of belonging as a country-wide strategy.

> *In all of three Central American countries examined, a localized sense of belonging (arraigo) serves as a counter to migration pressures by anchoring people to their communities of origin.*

Finding 4: Top-down government narratives that aim to deter emigration are often misaligned with migrants' own reasons for leaving.

Government narratives that seek to deter emigration from Central America, primarily disseminated by the United States, also invoke a series of core values—including adherence to rule of law, pragmatism, and even

61   Guatemalan Ministry of Labor and Social Security, "Otros 12 guatemaltecos migran de forma regular, ordenada y segura a Canada" (press release, February 2020).

62   Honduran Ministry of Labor and Social Security, "Gobierno confirma acuerdo de trabajo temporal legal en España" (press release, June 1, 2021).

63   Josselinne Santizo, "Gobierno e Intecap impulsan el empleo digno," *Diario de Centro America*, January 31, 2022.

64   Guatemalan Ministry of Labor and Social Security, "MINTRAB y OIM trabajan juntos para prevenir la migración irregular" (press release, June 2019).

65   Andrew Selee, Luis Argueta, and Juan José Hurtado Paz y Paz, *Migration from Huehuetenango in Guatemala's Western Highlands: Policy and Development Responses* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2022); Ayuda en Acción, *Migraciones: Estudio sobre medios de vida y factores psicosociales que fortalecen el arraigo* (Honduras: Ayuda en Acción, 2022).

66   Ayuda en Acción, *Migraciones*.

pride—to persuade people to stay in their origin countries. But these messages, which often use fear-based language, do not always cohere with the values local communities express around the *need* for emigration.

Across the case-study countries, there are many examples of narratives depicting outmigration as a necessary sacrifice and a duty migrants undertake for their families and communities: a "price to pay" to save their lives.[67] International organizations such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) have noted that for youth and adolescents who are particularly vulnerable to gang violence and recruitment, "fleeing is often the only viable option to survive."[68] In Guatemala, the local community group Asociación Pop No'j describes most migrants as being "expelled" from their communities of origin due to structural problems such as poverty and a lack of basic services,[69] invoking a language of inevitability. A study of Indigenous Lenca women in Honduras found that they have a "love/hate" relationship with migration, recognizing the dangers it can pose while also viewing it as the most feasible way to improve their economic outcomes.[70]

These narratives are rooted in "life or death" rhetoric that reflect people's perceived lack of alternatives, and their willingness to assume enormous risks for the possibility of long-term safety and opportunities. In contrast, many deterrence campaigns focus on short-term challenges (such as the difficulty of the route) or invoke values (respect for rule of law, national pride) that do not match up to the sense of urgency communities attach to the factors driving people to leave.

Many formal campaigns and rhetoric to deter irregular migration from northern Central America rely on one (or more) of the following four distinct narrative frames:

1 **Pragmatism.** Some U.S. government deterrence campaigns emphasize the difficulty of entering the United States without authorization and the low probability of receiving asylum. This includes messages describing how elevated levels of enforcement make it difficult to enter the country outside of legal channels, hoping to persuade migrants not to come illegally because they will be turned back.[71] Some home-grown campaigns have used the same approach. For instance, Honduran Ambassador to the United States María Dolores Agüero warned Honduran migrants in 2019 that their chances of obtaining asylum in the United States were slim.[72]

2 **Fear-based messages.** Many campaigns emphasize the high risks of the journey itself, describing the dangerous terrain and the possibility of violence or even death at the hands of smugglers. For instance, the digital Say No to the Coyote campaign designed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection says "Don't put your family at risk of being scammed or even killed." These messages, disseminated on mobile devices and social media, direct would-be migrants to websites depicting the "harsh realities"

67 Olga Odgers-Ortiz, "The Perception of Violence in Narratives of Central American Migrants at the Border between Mexico and the United States," *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 36, no. 1 (2020).

68 UNICEF, "COVID-19, Children on the Move and Other Crises in Mexico and Central America" (issue brief, Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal, UNICEF, December 2022).

69 Asociación Pop No'j, "Compartiendo experiencias en el acompañamiento a niñez migrante," accessed May 15, 2023.

70 Pablo Lamiño Jaramillo et al., "A Love-Hate Relationship: An Ethnographic Study of Migration with Lenca Women in Rural Honduras," *Migration and Development* 11, no. 3 (2022).

71 For example, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, during a public address in Guatemala City, urged would-be migrants not to come to the United States because they would be turned back. See Sabrina Rodriguez, "Harris' Blunt Message in Guatemala: 'Do Not Come' to U.S.," Politico, June 7, 2021.

72 Denia Leon, "Canciller Hondureña: Migrantes tienen pocas posibilidades de asilo en EEUU," Honduras.360, January 19, 2019.

of migration.[73] Some campaigns originating in Central America similarly highlight reasons not to trust coyotes. For example, Guatemala's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release in 2021 calling on citizens to not be persuaded by the "wrong message from unscrupulous people who promote irregular migration."[74] And the IOM-supported campaign Piénsalo 2 Veces (Think Twice About It) aims to inform people about the dangers of trafficking, false information, and exploitation by urging them to "think twice" and "don't be fooled" if something "seems too good to be true."[75]

3   **Respect for rule of law.** Some messages underscore the illegality of irregular border crossings. For example, a series of U.S. government social media posts include the caption "The coyote lied to us: Entering the USA illegally is a crime. Say no to the coyote."[76] Other messages attempt to invoke feelings of responsibility to obey the law; for instance, the request that "just as the United States respects your borders and your sovereignty, we insist that you respect ours."[77] Within the region, Guatemalan President Giammattei has justified increasing enforcement at the Honduran border by criticizing the neighboring country for allowing foreign migrants to enter without a passport, saying it "violates international law."[78]

4   **National pride.** Other campaigns aim to invoke a sense of pride in would-be migrants' home country to anchor them to their communities of origin. For example, one U.S. State Department campaign displayed billboards in Honduras with the message, "Your heritage, your future: Honduras is your home, build your future here."[79]

These campaigns should be analyzed not just in the context of what they are trying to achieve, but also how they are likely to be perceived and understood. While many campaigns use the language of "care" to deter irregular migration,[80] the different values invoked by these messages may not all resonate with their target audiences and may compete with other values expressed at the community or individual level, such as honor and dignity (as described above).

One notable mismatch is that fear-based messages disseminated by governments—which predominantly highlight short-term risks—are unlikely to counter narratives depicting migration as a critical lifeline and a "life or death" decision. The language of "necessary sacrifice" acknowledges and accepts the risks inherent to irregular migration, which are sometimes seen as less dangerous than the status quo, and it assigns a greater value to the potential long-term gains that migration can offer. Indeed, poverty rates in Honduras

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73   U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "CBP Launches Digital Ad Campaign 'Say No to the Coyote' to Warn Migrants about Smuggler Lies" (media release, May 11, 2022).

74   Guatemalan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "COMUNICADO DE PRENSA" (press release, August 17, 2021).

75   IOM, "En el Norte de Centroamérica se teje una red de más de 100 líderes juveniles que informan sobre migración con la campaña 'Piénsalo 2 veces' de la OIM" (press release, November 8, 2022).

76   Anna Giaritelli, "Biden Administration Runs Ads in Central America Asking Migrants Not to Come," *Washington Examiner,* May 11, 2022.

77   Conor Finnegan, "Pence to Immigrants: 'If You Can't Come Legally, Don't Come at All,'" ABC News, June 27, 2018.

78   TN23, "Giammattei reafirma compromiso contra el coyotaje y migración irregular," TN23, October 31, 2022.

79   Q Costa Rica, "U.S. Erects Billboards in Central America Telling Would-Be Illegal Immigrants to Turn Cack," Q Costa Rica, February 27, 2020.

80   This pattern has also been observed with Indigenous populations and natural disasters. See Anuszka Mosurska, Aaron Clark-Ginsberg, Susannah Sallu, and James D. Ford, "Disasters and Indigenous Peoples: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Expert News Media," *Nature and Space* 6, no. 1 (2023).

(59.2 percent),[81] Guatemala (52.4 percent),[82] and El Salvador (26.9 percent) [83] in 2020 demonstrate the significant economic pressures facing would-be migrants. And despite recent decreases, homicide rates in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (38.6, 17.6, and 16.6 per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively, in 2021) remain notably high.[84] In their daily lives, approximately

One notable mismatch is that fear-based messages disseminated by governments … are unlikely to counter narratives depicting migration as a critical lifeline and a "life or death" decision.

40 percent of Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans felt unsafe in their neighborhoods in 2021.[85] Messages that seek to deter irregular outmigration by highlighting its risks, in other words, compete with difficult local conditions that may ultimately be more influential when people make decisions about whether to migrate.

Finding 5: Government narratives about reducing emigration by creating economic opportunities at home may oversell the scale and speed of development investments' success.

The leaders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have deployed various strategies to address the root causes of migration by developing economic opportunities at home—often with support from the United States and Mexico. However, there are open questions as to how these strategies are being received on the ground. Some of the narratives identified as part of this analysis suggest these strategies may not change the decision-making calculus around migration, both because new programs are usually too small in scale to decisively overcome perceived opportunity deficits and because members of the public do not always trust their governments to implement programs that are well managed and can deliver results.

Efforts to reduce outmigration by investing in community development proliferated in all three countries over the study period, often accompanied by vocal government campaigns. Guatemalan President Giammattei, for instance, has said that the only way to stop irregular migration is not by erecting physical walls at borders, but by building "walls of prosperity in Guatemala,"[86] repeatedly calling on all of Central America and Mexico to do the same.[87] The idea is that by improving local conditions and infrastructure so they can provide access to prosperity, these investments would make people less likely to emigrate. Purposefully invoking the symbolism of a wall also serves as a counterpoint to the enforcement-laden language coming from the United States and reframes the narrative as a need to create opportunities rather than physical barriers.[88]

81   Honduran National Statistics Agency, "Hogares en Situacion de Pobreza" (fact sheet, July 2021).
82   World Bank, "Guatemala: Panorama general," updated October 4, 2022.
83   World Bank, "El Salvador: Panorama general," updated October 4, 2022.
84   InSight Crime, "Balance de InSight Crime de los homicidios en 2021," InSight Crime, February 1, 2022.
85   Mariana Rodriguez, ed., *Cultura política de la democracia en Guatemala y en las Américas 2021: Tomándole el pulso a la democracia* (Nashville, TN: LAPOP, 2021).
86   Guatemalan Social Communication Secretariat of the Presidency, "Presidente Giammattei Ratifica Proposito de Crear Muros de Prosperidad y Oportunidades papa Población," updated July 7, 2021.
87   Luis Carrillo, "Centroamérica unida, por el desarrollo humano," *Diario de Centro América*, June 11, 2021.
88   Tom Phillips, "El Salvador to Escalate Its Security Crackdown after Death of Police Officers," *The Guardian,* June 29, 2022.

In El Salvador, the government has argued that its Territorial Control Plan, a multiphase strategy that aims to take back control from gangs and improve security starting in the country's most marginalized neighborhoods, has reduced the pressure to emigrate.[89] Declaring that El Salvador is on course to become the safest country in the Americas,[90] the Bukele administration has presented its "war on gangs" as the leading cause of a sharp drop in homicide rates in the country (from 41.2 per 100,000 residents in 2019 to 17.6 per 100,00 residents in 2021).[91] Under its second phase, the plan aims to invest in technical training and employment programs to disincentivize youth from joining gangs, with an initial target of 100,000 adolescents in 17 municipalities with high crime exposure.[92]

Honduran President Castro has also focused on generating economic opportunities to tackle the primary drivers of migration. Honduras's 2022–26 governance plan seeks to generate mass employment opportunities for youth and other vulnerable groups, implement an economic model designed to grow microbusinesses in social industries that provide dignified jobs, and foster private investment over the long term.[93] Reducing insecurity and corruption are also priorities for the Honduran government. However, after a year in office, it is too early to assess the extent to which the Castro administration has been able to implement these commitments.

As attention has shifted to regional and coordinated approaches to managing migration, these investments and programs to address local migration drivers often rely on support from international organizations and/ or donor governments. The program Creando Mi Futuro Aquí (Creating My Future Here) in Honduras, for example, is a U.S.-funded partnership with Honduran public and private sector stakeholders that seeks to provide education, career preparation, and employment to more than 500,000 youth at risk of migrating irregularly.[94] Similarly, in Guatemala, the Ministry of Labor and the IOM have developed programs that facilitate job training and youth employment, with the explicit goal of providing dignified economic opportunities as an alternative to irregular emigration.[95]

89   Diario La Huella, "Ricardo Cucalón: 'la migración ilegal está bajando y se debe al Plan Control Territorial," Diario La Huella, September 20, 2019.
90   FRANCE 24 Español, "Estamos en camino de ser el país más seguro de América," Nayib Bukele en la ONU" (YouTube video, September 20, 2022).
91   A 2020 report by the International Crisis Group casts doubt on the assertion that the Territorial Control Plan was the sole driver of decreasing homicide rates, which did not necessarily correspond with the municipalities in which the initiative was implemented. See International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020); InSight Crime, "Balance de InSight Crime de los homicidios en 2021."
92   René Gómez, "Presidente Bukele lanza la segunda fase del Plan de Control Territorial, denominada 'Oportunidad,'" *La Prensa Grafica*, July 2, 2019.
93   Partido Libertad y Refundación Libre, *Plan de Gobierno para la Refundacion de la Patria y la Construccion del Estado Socialista y Democratico* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Partido Libertad y Refundación Libre, 2021).
94   DAI, "Honduras—Creando Mi Futuro Aquí," accessed March 28, 2023.
95   Guatemalan Ministry of Labor and Social Security, "MINTRAB y OIM trabajan juntos."

To date, however, such development programs have not proven to be effective in curbing migration out of the region.[96] The Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity, announced in 2014 by the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras in collaboration with the IDB, was a high-profile regional initiative that is widely considered to not have met its goal of addressing the "structural causes of migration."[97] In FY 2016, the U.S. Congress earmarked USD 750 million in assistance for these countries to complement the plan's efforts, but a 2019 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office on U.S. aid to Central America found that "limited information is available about how U.S. assistance improved prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle."[98]

Thus, the key questions are not just how many programs have been announced and how much money has been pledged, but also how are these investments and accompanying information campaigns being received and are they changing the cost-benefit calculus around migration. The critical hurdle all these programs must surmount is persuading people that new investments will take hold—even if results do not materialize immediately. Yet many of these programs suffer from perceptions that they are poorly designed, mismanaged, and unlikely to meet their goals. Questions remain about the sustainability of new funding across electoral cycles, as policy priorities change and there may be less political will to transparently implement programs that a previous administration agreed to. Above all, there is the question of whether publics trust their federal governments to deliver results locally.[99] This doubt is reflected in a 2019 statement by the mayor of the Guatemalan municipality of Joyabaj, describing the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity as something that "remained only words" with minimal follow-through from the national government in terms of meaningful investment.[100] And in El Salvador, youth groups have organized "reverse caravans" marching from the Guatemala-El Salvador border to the capital, calling on the government to invest in real integration projects that alleviate poverty and reduce migration.[101]

> *The critical hurdle all these programs must surmount is persuading people that new investments will take hold—even if results do not materialize immediately.*

The fact that civil-society actors have not been at the forefront of the creation and implementation of development programs contributes to the lack of public confidence in Central American governments'

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96   Because of the nature of migrant decision-making and the complex relationship between migration and development, development assistance is not a reliable tool for reshaping migration patterns—and can in some cases increase migration over the short term. Numerous studies have found that as countries become richer and their citizens have more resources at their disposal, emigration increases, at least initially. And while greater employment opportunities may decrease the likelihood that an individual will migrate in some contexts, this is not always the case (for instance, if the opportunities are tied to short-term development projects). Investments in broader governance structures that can boost stability and security (and thus economic growth) may yield more alternatives to emigration in the long run, but these benefits can take years or decades to accrue. See, for example, Susan Fratzke and Brian Salant, *Moving Beyond "Root Causes": The Complicated Relationship between Development and Migration* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018).

97   Inter-American Development Bank, "Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle," accessed March 28, 2023.

98   U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *U.S. Assistance to Central America: Department of State Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2019).

99   Jeff Ernst et al., *US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014–2019: Promoting Success by Learning from the Past* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2020); Eugenia Sagastume, "Guatemala a la espera tras escasos resultados del Plan Alianza para la Prosperidad," Voice of America, October 10, 2019.

100 Sergio Morales Rodas, "Migración desde municipios que fueron priorizados en el PAPTN no se detiene," Prensa Libre, May 31, 2019.

101 AFP Español, "'Caravana al revés': jóvenes salvadoreños claman por apoyo para no migrar" (YouTube video, October 10, 2021).

ability to meet the needs of would-be migrants. A Guatemalan think tank has argued that development strategies such as the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity have "pushed to the side the obligation to build a plan agreed upon by society, including the migrants themselves."[102] Some observers have also noted that certain government-led job creation programs are at cross purposes with other societal goals. For instance, civil-society groups have critiqued the implementation and evaluation of a Mexican development program in El Salvador that subsidizes farmers to use agroforestry techniques; while the official government evaluation touted the program as "the greatest employment initiative in the history of the country," several environmental organizations questioned the program's effects on ecosystem restoration.[103]

Finally, narratives around reducing outmigration by creating economic opportunities at home may oversell the scale and speed of their success. Governments trying to attract donor money may place unrealistic expectations on the ability of these programs to reduce irregular migration in the short term and to create meaningful livelihood opportunities for would-be migrants and their families; this sets programs up for failure from the start and can undermine public trust in them when the promised results do not quickly materialize. In fact, long-standing research suggests that improvements in local conditions may promote additional migration in the short term—a point that political leaders in Central America and elsewhere frequently omit—and real economic opportunities may take a generation or longer to materialize.[104]

Finding 6: Official narratives promoting legal migration opportunities clash with the fact that would-be migrants do not always see these as viable alternatives to irregular movement.

Central American governments have tried to promote regular migration via temporary labor pathways[105] to the United States, Canada, Mexico, and even farther afield to incentivize a "virtuous cycle of regular migration" that allows migrants to safely return to their families and invest money earned abroad in local economies.[106] But despite the powerful economic incentives on the part of both destination and origin countries to facilitate legal migration, the scale of efforts to expand or improve opportunities for Central American migrants to legally move and work abroad remain limited.[107]

Governments have redoubled political commitments to improve and promote regular migration pathways—as in the June 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection—but the number of visas available to Central Americans remains small compared to the demand for jobs abroad and also

102 Sergio Morales Rodas, "Plan Alianza para la Prosperidad no logró frenar la migración hacia EE.UU," Prensa Libre, June 10, 2020.

103 An internal government evaluation reported that, out of 10,000 participants in El Salvador, 55 percent had considered migrating before joining the program, compared to only 0.6 percent after the program's initiation. See Mexican Presidency of the Republic, "México y el Salvador duplican inversión a programas para campesinos y jóvenes: presidente AMLO" (press release, May 6, 2022); Jan Hogewoning, "Sembrando Vida's Questionable Impact," Mexico Business News, July 4, 2020.

104 Michael A. Clemens and Hannah M. Postel, "Can Development Assistance Deter Emigration?" (CGD Brief, Center for Global Development, Washington, DC, February 2018); Hein de Haas, "Turning the Tide? Why Development Will Not Stop Migration," Development and Change 38, no. 5 (2007): 819–841.

105 Many of these labor opportunities are short-term jobs where workers only participate once. For example, the United States' H-2B work visas processed through El Salvador's Ministry of Labor in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy only allow one-time participation.

106 Luis Carrillo, "Sube contratación de connacionales en el extranjero," Diario de Centro América, May 17, 2022.

107 Cristobal Ramón, Investing in Alternatives to Irregular Migration from Central America: Options to Expand U.S. Employment Pathways (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021); Cristobal Ramón, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, María Jesús Mora, and Ana Martín Gil, Temporary Worker Programs in Canada, Mexico, and Costa Rica: Promising Pathways for Managing Central American Migration? (Washington, DC: MPI, 2022).

compared to the scale of efforts to reduce or prevent irregular migration. Canada, for instance, has pledged to accept up to 4,000 refugees from the Americas by 2028 and to promote an existing temporary labor pathway for thousands of Guatemalan agricultural workers and hundreds of Honduran workers. Similarly, Spain has agreed to double the number of work visas available to Hondurans; however, as the program currently offers just 250 visas annually, the impact of this change is anticipated to be limited.[108]

Many Central American governments have taken steps to promote temporary labor pathways to destinations in North American and elsewhere (such as Spain, Germany, and Italy) to encourage their nationals to pursue these regular routes instead of irregular ones, as a necessary step toward a "virtuous cycle of economic growth."[109] The Guatemalan government passed legislation that provides financial support to workers who have secured contracts abroad, including by eliminating taxes on the purchase of plane tickets and income earned abroad, explicitly recognizing that the lost tax revenue is less than what emigrants send to the country in remittances.[110] In 2022, the Salvadoran government signed a three-year memorandum of understanding with its Italian counterpart to send Salvadoran agricultural workers to Italian farms, though it has not yet been implemented.[111] Finally, as part of the circular migration agreement the Honduran government negotiated with Spain in 2021, Hondurans do not have to pay taxes to the Spanish government while working in that country.[112]

Both the government and media have highlighted the benefits of these legal routes (e.g., using the slogan #JuntosVamosPorMas or "We go farther together"), but so far the take-up and long-term impact of these programs are unclear. In certain parts of Guatemala and Honduras, there is some awareness of legal labor migration pathways to countries such as Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Spain among workers in particular industries (forestry and agriculture, for example). But these are often perceived as too complicated to access and insufficient in scale to meet the demand for emigration. For example, the Temporary Work Abroad Program (Programa de Trabajo Temporal en el Extranjero) in Honduras facilitated the legal employment of only 2,000 workers in the United States between 2019, when the program started, and 2021.[113] And while IOM has tried to raise awareness of opportunities in southern Mexico, bureaucratic

In certain parts of Guatemala and Honduras, there is some awareness of legal labor migration pathways ... [b]ut these are often perceived as too complicated to access and insufficient in scale to meet the demand for emigration.

108 Trevor Hunnicutt, Dave Graham, and Matt Spetalnick, "Biden Unveils Migration Plan, Capping Americas Summit Roiled by Division," Reuters, June 11, 2022.

109 For example, Honduras has launched a pilot project with Germany, which will provide 100 visas in health-related sectors with training prior to migration. See Javier Flores, "Alemania abre 100 plazas de trabajo para hondureños," El Herlado, October 21, 2021. See also Salvadoran Ministry of Labor, "Salvadoreños podrán ir a trabajar a Italia," updated June 14, 2022.

110 Guatemalan Congress, "Normativa también fomenta la migración regular," updated July 22, 2022.

111 Government of El Salvador, "Italia abre las puertas a los trabajadores salvadoreños, gracias al Programa de Migración Laboral del Gobierno" (press release, June 16, 2022); Kevin Rivera, "Salvadoreños podrían trabajar en México, España e Italia," Diario El Salvador, March 1, 2023.

112 Honduran Ministry of Labor and Social Security, "Nuevo grupo de hondureños viajará a España para trabajar de manera temporal y legal" (news release, January 18, 2022); Government of El Salvador, "Italia abre las puertas a los trabajadores salvadoreños"; Honduran Ministry of Labor and Social Security, "Más de 2 mil hondureños trabajan de forma legal en EEUU bajo el Programa de Trabajo Temporal en el Extranjero" (news release, December 10, 2021).

113 Honduran Ministry of Labor and Social Security, "Más de 2 mil hondureños."

barriers often make it easier to work abroad illegally than to apply and receive an employment visa.[114] In El Salvador, the Bukele government launched the Programa de Migración Laboral (Labor Migration Program) in 2019 to promote legal pathways to the United States and Canada, but the program has only placed 6,000 migrants so far even though more than 40,000 have applied.[115]

As a whole, the number of visas accessible to Central Americans seeking to work abroad and return to their country of origin fall significantly below demand in the region. For the Salvadoran and Honduran populations, researchers estimate that fewer than five visas are available for every 10,000 residents.[116] U.S. authorities encountered irregular migrants from the three study countries approximately 521,000 times at the U.S.-Mexico border in FY 2022 alone, seeking safety and greater opportunities for themselves and their families.[117] Thus, even despite recent expansions in legal pathways, these programs represent a viable alternative for only a small fraction of would-be migrants, and as a result the programs' design and messaging remain out of step with the reality on the ground.

Finding 7: Government narratives promoting the benefits of the "virtuous migration cycle" persist despite underinvestment in returning migrants' labor market reintegration.

One piece often missing from discussions about promoting legal migration is what happens when migrants return to their countries of origin. Investments to ensure that workers returning after the completion of their visa contracts, as well as others who are repatriated by destination-country immigration authorities, are able to reintegrate into their communities of origin are essential to maximizing the benefits of migration. Failing to invest in migrants' reintegration upon return, much like failing to protect them as they travel and while in destination countries, can prevent the money and skills they gain abroad from fully contributing to a "virtuous cycle" of development.

While in official statements, governments and development organizations acknowledge that leveraging returnees' skills is critical to long-term economic development, this rhetoric is often not reflected in the scale of reception and reintegration services. From January 2018 through December 2022, Mexican and U.S. immigration authorities repatriated approximately 863,000 Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran migrants to northern Central America.[118] Most returning migrants receive basic reception services (e.g., food, hygiene kit, subsidized transportation), but only a fraction have access to long-term reintegration services, such as employment assistance (e.g., job boards, skill certification) and psychosocial services. For example, the Salvadoran Directorate General for Migration registered about 11,000 Salvadoran returnees in 2020, but

114   IOM, "Lanzan campaña en México para fortalecer los derechos laborales y la regularización de personas migrantes guatemaltecas," updated February 22, 2022.

115   The Labor Migration Program started in 2019 for U.S. employment pathways and in 2021 for those to Canada. Placements to the United States were temporarily paused in 2021 when the U.S. government placed the Salvadoran minister of labor on its list of corrupt and undemocratic actors. Placements resumed that same year when the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry took over the Labor Migration Program. See Jaqueline Villeda, "Más de 6,000 salvadoreños han viajado a EE.UU. y Canadá con visas de trabajo," *El Mundo,* April 15, 2023; Gabriela Villarroel, "4,900 salvadoreños han optado por Programa de Migración Laboral," *La Prensa Gráfica*, May 9, 2023.

116   Michael A. Clemens, "Pathways for Labor Migration from Northern Central America: Five Difficult but Necessary Proposals" (policy paper 274, Center for Global Development, Washington, DC, November 2022).

117   MPI calculations based on data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Southwest Land Border Encounters."

118   MPI calculations based on administrative data of Central American migrant repatriations from Mexico and the United States, as consolidated by IOM. See IOM, "Retornos Norte de C.A.," accessed May 16, 2023.

data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs show fewer than 600 benefited from the reintegration program El Salvador es tu Casa (El Salvador Is Your Home).[119] The reintegration supports that do exist are concentrated in large metropolitan areas. Job placement programs run by Guatemalan government agencies have been criticized for mostly targeting the small minority of returnees who live in large cities and have specific skills (such as English language proficiency) while being inaccessible to those in rural and Indigenous communities[120]—despite the fact that such areas are among those with the highest rates of emigration.[121]

But although there is widespread acknowledgement that resources to support returnees' reintegration are insufficient, governments are not investing in this area at the same scale as they are in enforcement or deterrence measures. In Guatemala, the National Council for Attention to Migrants (CONAMIGUA), the government entity responsible for assisting migrants and their families, spent less than one-third of its annual budget in 2021, citing internal approval delays and restrictions on spending funds for services abroad as the reasons for the unspent funds. In practical terms, this means there is an important gap in the aspirational "virtuous cycle of migration" if communities of origin cannot capitalize on the hard and soft skills that migrants bring home.[122]

El Salvador has the most developed reintegration support infrastructure of the three case-study countries, with a relatively comprehensive network of municipal workstations (*ventanillas*) for returned migrants. However, the reach of government services remains limited.[123] One of the country's flagship initiatives is the Job Skills Certification Project, which is supported by IOM and seeks to fill a critical need by certifying the skills of returnees in sectors such as construction and tourism. Yet the government reported that it had only served 89 returnees from 2020 through March 2021.[124] In Honduras, the government, private sector, and international organizations have invested in various programs to facilitate the labor reinsertion of returning migrants. Yet, these are limited to serving beneficiaries in the hundreds, rather than the tens of thousands who have returned.[125] Across all three countries, civil-society organizations have stepped in to fill gaps left by government underinvestment in reintegration services, despite these organizations' significant funding constraints and a frequent lack of coordination between actors.

Migrants themselves are keenly aware of these service limitations. For example, a 2021 Plaza Publica survey showed that slightly less than half of Guatemalan deportees (49 percent) were able to find jobs within six months after returning,[126] and the experience they acquired abroad was often not utilized or recognized by

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119 Melissa Paises, "El Estado salvadoreño sigue sin garantizar una reinserción integral a los migrantes retornados," GatoEncerrado, May 6, 2022.

120 Jeff Abbott, "Guatemalan Deportees Find Little Hope at Home," *Foreign Policy,* September 1, 2022.

121 Sarah Bermeo, David Leblang, and Gabriela Nagle Alverio, "Root Causes of Migration from Guatemala: Analysis of Subnational Trends" (policy brief, Duke University, Center for International Development, Mach 2022).

122 Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas, Luis Argueta, and Randy Capps, *Sustainable Reintegration: Strategies to Support Migrants Returning to Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019).

123 Paises, "El Estado salvadoreño"; Ruiz Soto, Dominguez-Villegas, Argueta, and Capps, *Sustainable Reintegration*.

124 Salvadoran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Cancillería facilita la certificación de habilidades y competencias laborales de compatriotas migrantes retornados" (news release, March 16, 2021).

125 The Honduran government provides referrals to reintegration services at its three Centers for Returned Migrant Care (CAMRs), providing services to 38 percent of all returnees from 2016 to 2021. And in partnership with the Norwegian Refugee Council and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), CAMRs also provide services to forcibly displaced populations. See Proceso Digital, "Inauguran Centro de Atención al Migrante Retornado en San Pedro Sula," Proceso Digital, May 10, 2022.

126 Elaine K. Denny et al., "Encuesta a deportados: solo quieren volver a huir del país," Plaza Publica, July 23, 2021.

their employers.[127] A 2019 IOM study on Honduran returnees found similar results: 50 percent of returnees were unemployed and 73 percent reported not receiving assistance upon entering the country.[128] Moreover, only slightly more than half reported receiving any kind of assistance from institutions designed to help returned migrants (civil society, church, or government programs for returnees). Associations of Guatemalan returnees have expressed dissatisfaction with the capacity and bureaucratic barriers of the government agencies responsible for skill certification, and similar critiques exist in Honduras as well.[129] Many returnees also face stigma if they are perceived as having been unsuccessful in their attempts to work abroad.[130] Not only do these conditions mean that countries cannot capitalize on the new skills and experiences of their returning nationals, but they may dissuade some emigrants from choosing to return at all, as they may fear reliving the same poor economic conditions that motivated them to migrate in the first place.

The stark mismatch between government language around regular migration as a "virtuous cycle"[131] and underinvestment in reintegration services that would support such a cycle has prompted criticism. For example, Honduran returnees interviewed for the 2019 IOM study criticized government declarations as being publicity stunts and reintegration efforts as amounting to no more than brochures, without substantial changes in guidelines for supporting returning migrants.[132] And while the Guatemalan government has passed incentives to encourage workers to seek legal means to earn money abroad, the government has also been criticized for not supporting returnees.[133]

The stark mismatch between government language around regular migration as a "virtuous cycle" and underinvestment in reintegration services that would support such a cycle has prompted criticism.

Notably, while some Central American politicians have spoken about the importance of reducing pressures to emigrate and of enticing emigrants to return and apply their skills domestically,[134] achieving these aims will be difficult without similarly ambitious investments in their reintegration. And without meaningful job opportunities at home, the prospect of workers abroad returning *en masse* can generate anxiety in an origin country's public due to fears that this could aggravate job competition and increase unemployment, rather than improve the country's economic situation.[135] Thus, for emigration and return to become a more constructive adaptation strategy, better systems for reintegration—and public trust in their efficacy and sustainability—are much needed.

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127 Paula María Ozaeta, "Cómo los guatemaltecos retornados reconstruyen su vida (y negocios) en el país," Prensa Libre, November 9, 2019.

128 IOM, *Estudio sobre Reintegración: Migración y Ciudades – Honduras* (La Libertad, El Salvador: IOM El Salvador, 2019).

129 Amílcar Salazar Méndez, "Van 28 mil guatemaltecos devueltos a su país en 2022," Milenio, May 17, 2022.

130 IOM, *Estudio sobre Reintegración*.

131 Carrillo, "Sube contratación de connacionales en el extranjero."

132 IOM, *Estudio sobre Reintegración*.

133 Salazar Méndez, "Van 28 mil guatemaltecos devueltos a su país en 2022."

134 In El Salvador, for example, President Bukele has described migration as building a "cycle of dependency" whereby migrant remittances are primarily used as a survival mechanism to meet basic needs and incentivize additional emigration, but they are not enough to spark the kind of meaningful development the country really needs. See Creitz, "Salvadoran President Tells Tucker."

135 Gene Palumbo and Azam Ahmed, "'Va a ser un caos': El retorno de miles de migrantes genera angustia e ira en El Salvador," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2018.

Finding 8: Overlapping crises—including COVID-19 and climate events—have both intensified and constrained mobility, but this is not always reflected in migration narratives.

Migration narratives are often deeply interlinked with "crisis," defined as acute and often sudden shocks with negative impacts on households, communities, cities, and states. During the five-year period analyzed in this study, crises included hurricanes, floods, and other climate-related disasters, accelerating in part due to a changing climate; the COVID-19 pandemic; economic shocks and stresses; and violence and insecurity, often gang-related. These crises ranged in scope and impact; some were relatively localized, confined to a specific population or geographic area (such as gang violence in the informal settlements of Tegucigalpa, Honduras), while others were larger or even global in scope (the pandemic, for example). And many crises layered on top of one another, reinforcing vulnerabilities. For instance, UNHCR noted that COVID-19-related mobility restrictions and lockdowns made victims of gang violence easier to target,[136] and humanitarian actors described how the pandemic hindered the response to hurricanes in Honduras in 2020.[137]

These crises have both accelerated and decelerated migration, sometimes at the same time. For example, the two hurricanes that struck Honduras in quick succession in late 2020 have been described as "ignit[ing] what was already a tinderbox of discontent, with many planning to depart once the opportunity arose."[138] But at the same time, the devastation compromised many of the resources necessary to migrate. Thus, even as climate change has accelerated hurricanes, floods, and other environmental crises that frequently trigger mobility, they also had the effect of "trapping" some populations in place.[139] Similarly, the onset of the pandemic led many northern Central Americans to temporarily postpone their plans to migrate irregularly;[140] even as the pandemic exacerbated the underlying economic and social conditions that provoke irregular migration in the first place.

Crisis-driven migration is often framed as maladaptive, a last-ditch effort to survive that resulted in increased risk in exchange for limited opportunities. Crisis-driven rural-to-urban migration is one example of maladaptive migration: instead of moving to cities and thriving, migrants may find themselves in high-risk, limited-opportunity informal settlements and slums, which are themselves prone to natural hazards as well as violence, eviction, and insecurity and have only limited service and livelihood options.[141] In some cases, however, crises are also cast as "opportunities"—disruptions of the status quo that could result in longer-term positive change. Discourses around "building back better" and recovery after emergencies exemplify this perspective,[142] framing the post-disaster period as a window of opportunity for transformative and sometimes radical change. These framings can be seen clearly in governmental reactions

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136 UNHCR, "Families on the Run: Why Families Flee from Northern Central America?" accessed March 28, 2023.

137 Olivia Acosta, "Being Prepared: Responding to Two Powerful Hurricanes in the Midst of a Pandemic," International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, February 2021.

138 Ben Carson and Jeffrey Hallock "Intersecting Crises: Pandemic and Hurricanes Add to Political Instability Driving Migration from Honduras," *Migration Information Source*, June 10, 2021.

139 Sonja Ayed-Karlsson, Andrew W. Baldwin, and Dominic Kniveton, "Who Is the Climate-Induced Trapped Figure?," *WIRES Climate Change* (2022); Kayly Ober and Rachel Schmidtke, *Two Years after Eta and Iota: Displaced and Forgotten in Guatemala* (Washington, DC: Refugees International, 2023).

140 U.S. Congressional Research Service, "Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy" (In Focus brief, U.S. Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, December 12, 2022).

141 E. Lisa F. Schipper, "Maladaptation: When Adaptation to Climate Change Goes Very Wrong," *One Earth* 3, no. 4 (2020): 409–414.

142 Wesley Cheek and Ksenia Chmutina, "'Building Back Better' Is Neoliberal Post-Disaster Reconstruction," *Disasters* 46, no. 3 (2022): 589–609.

to the COVID-19 pandemic[143] and to hurricanes, but they can also be part of individual and family narratives around migration: a move prompted by crisis resulting in new opportunities for life and livelihood in a new location.

Despite the complexity of such crises and the varying degrees to which migrants and communities were able to cope with them during the study period, narratives about why people migrate mostly centered not on crisis but on more immediate economic and social factors, such as jobs and the economy. This makes investment in mitigation more challenging and leaves unchecked larger global processes such as climate change as well as marginalized groups' limited access to power structures and resources, both of which are well-recognized, deep-seated drivers of vulnerability[144] but systemic in cause and politically costly to address. In effect, this depoliticizes crisis and removes it from its very human and institutional roots.[145] For instance, some actors' labeling of Hurricanes Eta and Iota as "natural disasters"[146] downplays the crumbling infrastructure, limited livelihood opportunities, marginalization and neglect, and other issues shaping populations' vulnerability to hurricanes and their potential mobility impacts.

Because narratives about migration and crisis often do not focus on their deeper, underlying causes, this raises questions about whether adaptations will fully account for the complexity of these situations.

In summary, crisis narratives related to migration are narratives of contradiction and complexity, of forced and inhibited movement. And while the layered nature of crises in the region has strained resources and provoked further hardship, in some cases crisis has also been portrayed as accelerating adaptation and transformation. However, because narratives about migration and crisis often do not focus on their deeper, underlying causes, this raises questions about whether adaptations will fully account for the complexity of these situations.

Finding 9: Public opinion remains ambivalent and divided about migration, even as governments have moved toward greater restriction and enforcement.

Public attitudes toward migration coming into and through northern Central America are divided and sometimes contradictory, and shifts in them are far from unidirectional. Migration has spurred competing impulses to restrict or expand newcomers' access to benefits and services, and publics have wavered on whether migrants are a net cost or benefit to receiving communities. Notably, the same population may

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143 White House, "Report on the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root causes of Migration in Central America" (press release, April 19, 2022); António Guterres, "Building Back Better Requires Transforming the Development Model of Latin America and the Caribbean," United Nations, accessed May 4, 2023.

144 Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Nnatural Hhazards, Ppeople's Vvulnerability and Ddisasters: Second edition,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003); James Lewis, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Versus Disaster Risk Creation (DRC)," *CICERO (Center for International Climate and Environmental Research – Oslo) PloS Currents Disasters* (June 21, 2012).

145 Note that depoliticization is common in disaster narratives. See, for instance, Mosurska, Clark-Ginsberg, Sallu, and Ford, "Disasters and Indigenous Peoples."

146 See, for example, Amnesty International "When It Rains It Pours: The Devastating Impact of Hurricanes Eta and Iota in Honduras," updated December 13, 2020.

simultaneously hold both positive and negative views—for example, that newcomers harm society, but that immigrants should be able to access health care, education, and the labor market.[147]

In northern Central America, the question of who *exits* a country's territory is generally more politicized than who *enters*. Thus, in recent polls, immigration did not rank among citizens' top concerns, though this may change as transit migration rises in the region. Instead, top responses in 2018 and 2020 to the question "What is the most important concern facing your country?" clustered around three issues: financial wellbeing (including unemployment, low wages, poverty, inequality, and inflation); crime and gang violence; and the country's political situation (including concerns about corruption), as shown in Table 3. For nearly half of all respondents in each of three case-study countries, economic concerns ranked highest in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and height of its economic disruptions. The share of respondents in each country whose top concern was crime decreased between 2018 and 2020, while the share most concerned about corruption and the political situation increased or remained roughly the same. Crises—including the pandemic and climate change—were not prominent in these polls. Notably, even when the number of COVID-19 cases was growing in October and November 2020, less than 10 percent of respondents said COVID-19 was their top concern. Environmental concerns were mentioned by less than 1 percent of respondents in 2018, and less than 2 percent in 2020 (even with the addition of "global warming" as a category in the survey).

TABLE 3
Most Salient Public Concerns in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2018 and 2020

	El Salvador		**Guatemala**		**Honduras**	
	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020
Economics (e.g., jobs, poverty, prices)	27.0%	44.0%	32.4%	44.6%	48.8%	45.2%
Crime/violence	60.5%	24.4%	35.7%	13.8%	21.7%	4.9%
Corruption/the political situation	7.9%	12.7%	16.8%	16.0%	17.9%	29.1%
Education	1.5%	1.2%	4.2%	3.3%	3.8%	3.8%
Health	0.3%	2.7%	1.8%	7.3%	2.6%	5.2%
COVID-19	n/a	8.6%	n/a	8.0%	n/a	4.2%
Other	2.8%	6.2%	9.0%	6.8%	5.1%	7.9%

Notes: The authors grouped responses into thematic categories (e.g., the category "climate" included the responses: climate change, pollution, energy concerns, and global warming; the category "crime" included: terrorism/guerrillas, crime and public safety, violence/gangs, intra-family violence, and drug consumption). The table shows specific responses (or clusters) that received more than 3 percent in any year or country. Responses that were less than 3 percent across all three countries and both years are grouped together in "other"; this included issues such as immigration, climate, infrastructure, and basic services.
Source: Authors' compilation of results from Latinobarómetro 2018 and 2020 survey waves in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, accessed via Corporación Latinobarómetro, "Latinobarómetro – Documentos – Documentos de resultados," accessed March 28, 2023.

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147 For example, in the 2020 Latinobarometer, the vast majority of Hondurans surveyed (81.9 percent) agreed that immigrants should have the same access to health care, education, and housing as citizens, even as half (49.7 percent) also said that the arrival of immigrants has "harmed" them or their family. See Corporación Latinobarómetro, "Latinobarómetro – Documentos – Documentos de resultados," accessed March 28, 2023.

Such polling results suggest that crises are often mediated through people's everyday experiences. Just as complex, intersecting drivers of migration may shape the environment in which people decide to move but migrants may attribute their decision to a single, overarching reason (such as economics), immigration and its impacts are also often folded into other aspects of people's lives. Therefore, migrants entering or transiting through these three countries may trigger anxiety around how newcomers might affect crime and jobs—issues consistently among the top three concerns for most citizens—even if respondents do not name migration on its own as their most pressing concern.

Attitudes toward migration also diverge depending on the type of migration and migrants' legal status and background. For example, the same population may have considerably different views of transit migrants, permanent immigrant arrivals, and returnees. Nationality also frequently plays a role (migrants from within the region versus those from farther afield, such as Venezuelans, Haitians, and Cubans), as does ethnicity and race (culturally or religiously similar versus ethnically different populations, and White or mixed-race groups versus Indigenous or Afrodescendent groups.[148]

Public opinion polls sometimes capture seemingly contradictory sentiments, which at times reflect differences in how people think about issues in the abstract versus when faced with more concrete or familiar situations. For example, while a majority of respondents (63 percent of Salvadorans and 56 percent of Hondurans in 2020) said they felt "positive" about welcoming immigrants from outside of Latin America, when asked specifically about Haitians, the level of support shrunk significantly in both countries.[149] Survey respondents may also have more trouble digesting things at a macroeconomic level, such as estimating the overall impact of immigration on the economy, compared to observing how immigration may be affecting their individual economic prospects.[150] For example, in both countries a significant proportion of respondents (68 percent of Salvadorans and 48 percent of Hondurans said they think immigrants are good for the economy), yet at the same time, 53 percent of Salvadorans and 56 percent of Hondurans reported thinking immigrants will compete for local jobs.[151]

Public opinion polls also only capture one moment in time, and it is not always clear how external events are affecting people's responses. For example, the share of Hondurans who said they believed that immigrants hurt them or their families fell considerably, from 79 percent in 2018 to 50 percent in 2020.[152] The survey, however, cannot tell us what is driving this change—whether it reflects a true softening of attitudes, or simply the fact that immigration had become a less salient concern and receded from the headlines. In Guatemala, conversely, the share of respondents who said they believe that immigrant arrivals harm them

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148 Although beyond the scope of this study, there is a long scholarship on the links between skin color and national identity formation, political power, and socioeconomic status in Central America. See, for example, Observatorio de Racismo en México y Centroamérica, "Como me ven, me tratan: el perfilamiento racial en la migración," updated March 6, 2023.

149 According to the 2020 Latinobarometer, 63.3 percent of Salvadorans and 56.3 percent of Hondurans think it is "positive" or "somewhat positive" to receive immigrants from outside Latin America. However, that proportion shrinks when asked specifically about Haitians (going down to 42.3 percent support from Salvadorans and 37.8 percent from Hondurans). MPI analyses of individual country survey data from Corporación Latinobarómetro, "Latinobarómetro – Documentos – Documentos de resultados."

150 For example, in the 2020 Latinobarometer, nearly half of Honduran respondents (48.1 percent) agreed that immigrants are good for the country's economy, yet 55.9 percent worried that "immigrants are coming in and competing for our jobs." MPI analyses of individual country survey data from Corpoación Latinobarómetro, "Latinobarómetro – Documentos – Documentos de resultados."

151 MPI analyses of individual country survey data from Corporación Latinobarómetro, "Latinobarómetro – Documentos – Documentos de resultados."

152 MPI analyses of individual country survey data from Corpoación Latinobarómetro, "Latinobarómetro – Documentos – Documentos de resultados."

increased from 63 percent in 2018 to 74 percent in 2020, which is perhaps a function of the difference in visibility of the caravans (and pressure to address them) in Guatemala compared to Honduras.

Finding 10: Returnees trigger many of the same threat narratives commonly applied to international migrants.

Many of the threat narratives around immigration identified in this study do not distinguish between nationals versus non-nationals. Returnees to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have triggered some of the same threat narratives around security, public health, and even culture that are often associated with "foreigners" or other outgroups (especially ethnically or religiously different groups, even if they come from the same country). It is noteworthy that instances of "othering"—which can manifest as fear, prejudice, discrimination, and even violence, and in other contexts may be classified as xenophobia—are being deployed for co-nationals.

Previous research shows that threat narratives around immigrants typically coalesce around three core pillars: economics (including competition for jobs and the distribution of resources), public health and security (concerns about crime or immigrants spreading communicable disease), and culture (fears of newcomers eroding local culture and norms).[153] While it is clear that threat narratives can be activated by different groups at different times, what has been rarely studied is the conditions under which *returnees* are "othered" and spark these same perceptions of threat.

> *Returnees to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have triggered some of the same threat narratives around security, public health, and even culture that are often associated with "foreigners" or other outgroups.*

In all three case-study countries, this study revealed instances of returnees being perceived as security threats. This manifests most clearly in narratives around threats to physical security, including that returning migrants have gang ties and increase crime. For instance, deported migrants with tattoos returning to El Salvador have been stigmatized and viewed as having ties to gangs.[154] Such narratives marking returnees as security threats can lead to discrimination and hinder their reintegration.

Returnees are also included in threat narratives linking migration and public-health concerns. In Guatemala, sources described violent outbursts against returning migrants because of fears they were spreading COVID-19, including municipal authorities barring buses carrying returnees from entering the capital city.[155] These fears were exacerbated by disputes between the Guatemalan and U.S. governments regarding which country was responsible for treating and providing safe quarantine opportunities for returnees who tested positive for the virus.[156] In 2020, a Guatemalan civil-society organization issued a press release pleading with

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153 See Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, Haim Malka, and Shelly Culbertson, *How We Talk about Migration: The Link between Migration Narratives, Policy, and Power* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).

154 RedLAC, "Integration and Reintegration in the North of Central America and Mexico" (Snapshot No. 10, Norwegian Refugee Council, September 2020).

155 Prensa Libre, "Coronavirus: por qué prohíben el ingreso de buses con migrantes a Quetzaltenango," Prensa Libre, March 31, 2020.

156 *The Guardian*, "Guatemala Calls US 'Wuhan of Americas' in Battle over Deportees," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2020.

the country's government to design campaigns against misinformation and programs to support returnees to reduce the violence and stigma they face.[157]

Certain economic threat narratives (for example, fears that newcomers compete for jobs or burden the economy) were mostly focused on non-nationals. But others (including newcomers putting pressure on infrastructure and concerns over the distribution of resources) were applied to both foreign migrants and returning nationals. In Honduras, for example, some felt that transit migrants presented a security threat, especially Haitians stuck in border cities who cannot afford to pay immigration authorities to enter the country irregularly, and others showed concern about the strain they place on local shelters and services.[158] Yet, in other places, returnees were also depicted as contributing to overcrowding and strain on already limited infrastructure.[159]

Finally, in some cases returnees sparked fears of cultural dilution or erosion—something typically associated with different ethnic, linguistic, religious, or national groups.[160] In El Salvador, for example, one of the arguments against emigration centers on fears about the potential impact on Salvadoran society of returning migrants who are too far removed from the country's traditional customs and history.[161]

4   Conclusions and Recommendations

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are facing new migration realities. As they transition from being primarily countries of emigration to experiencing more complex, multidirectional movements—with people traveling into, through, out of, and returning to their territories—they must grapple with how these movements are framed in stories and interpreted via narratives, and how these narratives influence public and policy responses.

Policymakers in each country have vacillated between two competing priorities: encouraging regular emigration and discouraging irregular migration. While emigration and the remittances it yields are portrayed as a means of empowering populations mired in poverty and insecurity, emigration is also described by some as a symptom of a state's failure to provide for its own citizens. It is thus often discussed as something to be reduced or prevented through foreign investment and domestic development, rather than a legitimate adaptation mechanism. Central American countries are also experiencing increasing pressure from transit and destination countries, namely Mexico and the United States, to regulate the irregular movement of their nationals, even as Central Americans have relatively few legal opportunities

157 Soy USAC, "CSU hace un llamado a atender la crisis que afecta a migrantes en el país," updated April 20, 2020.

158 Oscar Ortiz, "En aumento la migración irregular que atraviesa por Honduras," Voice of America, September 22, 2023; El Heraldo, "Trojes despachó a 5,000 migrantes haitianos que estuvieron varados por un mes," El Heraldo, June 2, 2021; Waldo Serrano, Ligia Toledo, Donaldo Hernández, Tomás Guevara, "Miles de migrantes venezolanos varados se acumulan en Centroamérica," Voice of America, October 26, 2022.

159 Mariana Contreras, "El Estado no otorga suficientes recursos para atender a los niños deportados," Veinte 20 es Noticia, February 12, 2020; International Federation of Red Cross And Red Crescent Societies, "Country Operational Strategy: El Salvador, Central America and Mexico Migration Crisis" (emergency appeal, September 2, 2022).

160 Shamit Saggar, Will Somerville, Rob Ford, and Maria Sobolewska, *The Impact of Migration on Social Cohesion and Integration* (London: Migration Advisory Committee, 2012); Alex Mesoudi, "Does Immigration Really Harm Cultural Identity?," Geographical, November 26, 2021.

161 Palumbo and Ahmed, "'Va a ser un caos.'"

to move and work abroad—the alternative pointed to by both origin- and destination-country leaders. In short, political rhetoric is split between discussions of how to improve local conditions and address "root causes" to stem outmigration, and messages encouraging those who do want to leave to go through legal labor channels, though these are clearly insufficient to meet demand.

Analysis of how different narratives *interact* offers a useful complement to traditional public opinion research, especially where there are conflicts between narratives deployed to different audiences—for instance, national government leaders may embrace positive narratives about their own citizens who move abroad in public speeches yet employ enforcement-focused rhetoric around migrants from neighboring countries who come into or move through their territory. This type of analysis also shows the tensions between narratives and counternarratives deployed by different actors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, some governments embraced a narrative around returnees posing a high risk for public health (thus justifying increased mobility restrictions), while civil-society actors invested in massive counternarrative campaigns to dispel these beliefs and create solidarity. Finally, it shows the relative importance of narratives along different parts of the migration continuum, with outsized pressure to address migration that crosses into higher-income countries, and comparatively less pressure to think creatively about transit migration or invest in the final phase of the cycle: return.

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In addition, insights into how different narratives are *received* can be a critical, yet often overlooked, tool to inform policy design. The salient narratives analyzed in this report provide an important perspective from within the region on several issues that are now at the center of major regional migration debates and policy efforts. Perhaps the largest of these is the debate around how to reduce irregular migration—which hinges not just on whether governments and donors can create jobs, improve safety and infrastructure at home, and expand legal pathways to move abroad, but also on how Central American publics view these investments and whether they are able to change the calculus around migration. Policy campaigns often project into the future and outline a lofty vision of the change they want to see, but they may not accurately take stock of how messages are received on the ground and whether they are shifting people's perceptions of risks versus opportunities. The political enthusiasm around high-profile announcements of new bilateral partnerships to promote legal migration, for example, may not cohere with how Central Americans perceive these opportunities—especially if migration programs are open to only dozens or hundreds of individuals, or pathways are perceived as difficult to access. What is often missed during the policy development process is a frank assessment of whether the assumptions policymakers make about what is driving migration cohere with how migrants and communities themselves frame these movements.

As countries come together around a set of shared migration goals—namely, ensuring that migration is safe, orderly, and regular—policymakers have talked about building systems to ensure that migration can yield a "virtuous cycle" of benefits for receiving countries, migrants, and the family members and communities left behind. Regional mechanisms, such as the Los Angeles Declaration, are an important opportunity for Central American governments to evaluate and redesign their policy priorities. To do this, however, policymakers need to think about how policies are being received on the ground.

This analysis of migration narratives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras points to three principles for how to leverage narratives to improve evidence-informed policymaking:

1 **Understanding how narratives are received by different actors is key to effective policy development.** At a time when significant investments are going into bridging the opportunity differentials between northern Central American countries and their higher-income neighbors in order to reduce outmigration, *perceptions* around change are almost as important as change itself. Even though most of the investments in job creation or expanding legal pathways are modest in scale (and the benefits of development investments may take a generation or more to materialize), these investments might still be able to nudge behavioral changes *if* publics believe that meaningful change is on the horizon. This may be less about the size of new investments and more about whether members of the public trust their elected leaders to deliver these programs and can see concrete signs of progress (for instance, if a significant proportion of applicants are able to complete the visa process). The findings in this report underscore the need for more research not just on how new policies are implemented, but how these initiatives are shifting the cost-benefit calculus of would-be migrants.

2 **Policies that seek to change migration behavior may not succeed unless they are rooted in a deeper understanding of community narratives around migration decision-making.** Policies may not fully achieve their intended aims when there is a mismatch between messaging and reality. Fear-based deterrence messages are unlikely to be effective when people perceive irregular migration as their most viable lifeline, and thus have already accepted its dangers as a "necessary sacrifice." Deterrence messages based on pragmatism or invocations to follow rules, meanwhile, do not match the intensity and life-or-death nature of people's reasons for moving in the first place, and thus are unlikely to resonate. Messaging intended to dissuade irregular movement can also cause uncertainty. One of the major effects of announcements of restrictive, deterrence-focused policies is to increase uncertainty, which under certain conditions can actually spur *more* migration. Migrants may double down on plans to either move across borders or to remain within a country irregularly because they see a closing window to earn much-needed income.

3 **National narratives are sometimes deeply influenced by the way migration is framed at the regional and even global levels—thus, meaningful reforms should take into account how these narratives intersect.** As demonstrated by the Global Compact on Migration, multilateral agreements can have a clear influence in how governments envision and expect migration to occur (i.e., safely, orderly, regularly). But this influence goes both ways: discussions within regional forums such as the Summit of the Americas, the Regional Conference on Migration, or the Central American Integration System could be enriched by a greater understanding of how migration narratives are formed and deployed, and which ones have the most currency on the ground.

Examining the narratives that surround different forms of mobility in northern Central America sheds light on a gap that sometimes exists between the stories told by actors in positions of power (whether politicians, international organizations, or the media) and those within communities. Political pressure to curb irregular migration—especially during election campaigns—may fail to take into account the life-changing role migration can play as a unique source of stable livelihoods in areas rife with political, economic, social, and environmental uncertainty. Political rhetoric around harnessing the benefits of migration, meanwhile, may not cohere with the difficulties migrants face upon return, given returnees garner only a fraction of the attention (and investment) as policies targeting migrants crossing borders into higher-income countries. And efforts to channel migration aspirations into legal pathways abroad or livelihood opportunities at home depend not just on the design of these programs but also on how opportunities are perceived relative to risks. While there is a strong link between the stories people tell and the actions they take, more research is needed to understand how this plays out in migration decisions in the region and how policymakers can better understand and respond to these dynamics.

Examining the narratives that surround different forms of mobility in northern Central America sheds light on a gap that sometimes exists between the stories told by actors in positions of power ... and those within communities.

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