



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Root Causes of Migration: Food Insecurity and the Right to Food in Central America**

**Thursday, September 23, 2021**

**10:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon**

**Virtual via Cisco WebEx**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning and welcome to today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on hunger and the right to food in Central America. I will introduce our witnesses shortly, but would like to thank them now for their work and for taking the time to join us today.

As we meet, the first-ever United Nations Food Systems Summit is underway in New York, as part of the 76<sup>th</sup> session of the U.N. General Assembly.

As someone who has worked for years to draw attention to the problem of global hunger, I am thrilled that the Summit is happening. The devastating consequences of wide-spread hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity are finally getting the high-level attention they deserve – as estimates of the number of hungry people in the world in 2020 have soared as high as 811 million.

While the Summit looks at the global situation, our focus today is on hunger and food insecurity in one region, Central America, and specifically in four countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Why Central America?

One reason is solidarity: hunger in Central America has increased almost four-fold since 2018. These are neighboring countries that are reeling from the COVID pandemic, two hurricanes and the after-effects of drought.

A second is pragmatic. The World Food Programme has found that hunger and food insecurity are among the reasons that Central Americans are compelled into irregular migration in an attempt to better their lives – sometimes even to save them.

More than 700,000 people left the Northern Triangle in fiscal year 2019, with the majority bound for the United States. The number dropped dramatically the next year due to the pandemic.

But this year the numbers are increasing again. Customs and Border officials apprehended or expelled more people from the Northern Triangle during the first half of fiscal year 2021 than during all of fiscal year 2020. And that's not counting those escaping the disastrous political crisis in Nicaragua.

We are all aware that the people fleeing north from Central America face great risks along the way, including kidnapping, extortion and death.

We've all seen the disturbing reports of mistreatment of migrants on both sides of the U.S. southern border, and those who enter the U.S. may not be able to regularize their status.

Too often people tragically exhaust their savings and go into deep debt for nothing. Those who do resettle abroad take their knowledge, skills and work ethic with them, and their home countries are left worse off by their departure.

This is why it is so important to address the root causes of forced migration from Central America. Those causes are many and inter-related, from terrible governance to climate change; food insecurity is not the only problem. But when millions of people don't have enough to eat, when malnutrition is chronic in some areas, it's clearly part of the problem.

Fortunately in Central America, we have a lot to work with in the effort to end hunger and ensure food security.

First, a wealth of organizations and institutions dedicated to ending hunger are working in the region.

The U.S. government is a major provider of both emergency and non-emergency food assistance through programs I strongly support, including the McGovern-Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program, Food for Peace, both the agricultural development and child nutrition projects of Feed the Future, and Food for Progress. More than \$563 million has been provided since fiscal year 2014, with the largest share going to Guatemala. Our first panel today will discuss what programs like these have accomplished, what has been learned and what more can be done.

Central America has also benefitted from the presence of the U.N. World Food Programme, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020 in a clear sign of the growing recognition that hunger is an obstacle to political stability. We are very pleased to have a representative of WFP with us today to describe the work they are doing and the lessons learned, and to offer their recommendations to Congress.

Some of the most creative and cost-effective efforts to combat hunger have come from the non-governmental sector working closely with small producers and grassroots communities. We know the key role that civil society plays in the effort to transform long-standing structural obstacles to food security.

On our third panel, two civil society organizations will describe their strategies to prevent food insecurity by strengthening livelihoods and addressing market failures. Both are members of the Alliance to End Hunger, a diverse coalition of secular and faith organizations working together to fight hunger around the world.

The second factor that favors the region is that the countries of Central America have all ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the San Salvador Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights.

That means they have formally recognized the fundamental human right to be free of hunger.

It means the governments have accepted the obligation to make sure that food:

- is available;
- satisfies dietary needs;
- is safe;
- is culturally acceptable, and
- is economically and physically accessible.

It means that the governments are called upon to provide an enabling environment in which people can produce or procure adequate food for themselves and their families.

The right to food gives us a framework for making sure we are addressing all aspects of food insecurity.

Hunger is a terrible thing. As a Catholic I was taught from an early age that feeding the hungry is an ethical imperative. [As Pope Benedict affirmed in 2009 and Pope Francis has echoed](#), that imperative means that “[it] is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience

that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.”

For those of us committed to ending hunger, including all the organizations testifying today, the question is what more we can do to help the governments of Central America, together with civil society, meet their obligations and fulfill their citizens’ right to food.

I turn now to Co-Chair Smith for his opening remarks.