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House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Root Causes of Forced Migration:
Food Insecurity and the Right to Food in Central America

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Distinguished co-chairs and commission members, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this timely hearing. I am honored to share the Inter-American Foundation's work promoting food security in Central America and have submitted full written testimony to be placed in the record.

The IAF is a U.S. agency that invests directly in community-based organizations making it possible for people to feed their families. In this role, we have become intimately familiar with grassroots food security challenges in Central America. Approximately 40 percent of our grantees are located in Central America, concentrated in northern Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador). Fifty-five percent of our Central American grantees address food security. Our portfolio directly contributes to the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. The IAF has also participated in the interagency Global Food Security Strategy implementation since 2017, sharing lessons from the field and contributing to its updated strategy for Fiscal Years 2022–2026.

Among a range of complex challenges, our grantees report that communities are reeling from the compounded effects of COVID-19's market closures, catastrophic natural disasters, and worsening environmental conditions. Many previously self-reliant families now struggle to feed themselves, their hard work of decades washed away by flooding or withered by drought. However, IAF grantees also report that many of their members have managed to survive by drawing from community resources and have been coordinating with local governments and civil society networks to address food security needs and monitor municipal humanitarian funding.

Hope is at the heart of the IAF's strategy in Central America. When young people lose hope for a future in their home countries, when parents lose hope that they can feed their families, they project their hopes onto migrating to countries where they believe they have better odds of survival. Our grantees revive that hope by showing people that their own communities can change for the better—that their children's lives can be better than their own.



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Food Insecurity as a Driver of Migration from Central America

Food insecurity, a critical issue in Central America for decades, has been exacerbated by the pandemic crisis, natural disasters, and climate shocks such as droughts and torrential rains. I will let other speakers paint this picture in more detail and focus specifically on the direct impact to local communities where IAF grantees are on the frontlines of community response.

When we contacted our grantees about the emerging COVID-19 crisis in April 2020, 80 percent named food insecurity as their greatest concern. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened food scarcity in Central America by cutting off production, processing, and markets, destroying livelihoods and disrupting supply chains. Food prices soared. Many people, particularly rural families and those from historically marginalized communities, could not generate income. People in cities and suburbs with limited access to food were forced to eat fewer meals per day or less nutritious, caloric meals.

Already struggling with the COVID-19 crisis, Central American communities were devastated by two consecutive Category-4 hurricanes, Eta and Iota, in November 2020. *Every single* IAF grantee in Nicaragua was impacted. In northern Central America, more than 90 percent of the IAF's Honduran grantees and approximately 60 percent of Guatemalan and Salvadoran grantees reported direct impacts from the storm, including significant crop losses, damage to water systems, loss of access to electricity and connectivity, severe health consequences from bacteria and toxins in floodwaters, and interruptions to IAF-funded projects in enterprise development, education, and training.

Disaster-related food insecurity has precipitated widespread migration and displacement across the region. The observations of our grantees bear out conclusions from institutions like the World Food Programme¹ that the impact of extreme weather and natural disasters plays out slowly over several years, as families pursue various strategies such as going into debt or selling tools or land prior to migrating when they run out of options. Families may also diversify their survival strategies, with some members staying on their farms while others move to urban areas or other countries. It may be some time before we appreciate the true magnitude of the impact of the recent disasters on migration patterns in Central America, but we are already hearing reports of increased out-migration from the region following these disasters.

The IAF Model

Congress founded the Inter-American Foundation in 1969 to propel the efforts of the people of Latin America and the Caribbean to make their own communities more prosperous, peaceful, and democratic. From the beginning, we knew that our efforts to improve people's lives would only be effective and sustainable if the people whose lives we seek to improve take ownership of that effort. For this reason, we support innovative initiatives led by community leaders in historically

¹ World Food Programme. (2017). Food Security and Emigration: Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Available from: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2017-food-security-emigration-why-people-flee-salvador-guatemala-honduras>



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marginalized and underserved communities. We amplify their impact and ensure sustainability of their efforts through small, multi-year grants, matched by their own cash or in-kind counterpart resources, and work with them as partners to strengthen their organizations.

Our distinct, bottom-up model promotes dignity, inclusion, and sustainable results by putting local communities in the driver's seat. We complement other U.S. government development efforts by strengthening organizations too small or remote to work with larger agencies. In addition, our nimble model allows us to respond quickly to changing conditions on the ground—like natural disasters—through adaptive management. Today, the IAF's active portfolio includes over 375 community-led projects in 26 countries.

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, the IAF has seen a significant increase in demand and urgency from grassroots agricultural groups and civil society organizations in the field to address food insecurity in recent years. Between Fiscal Years 2018 and 2020, the IAF experienced a **75 percent increase** in grant proposals to improve food security. To address more of these needs, we added \$14.3 million new funding to address food security in Fiscal Year 2020, bringing our total active food security portfolio to approximately \$59 million. Unfortunately, this still left approximately \$27 million in viable food security proposals unfunded.

The IAF's Strategy in Central America

Our portfolio in Central America comprises 153 grants representing \$101.9 million² in community-led development activities. Over half (55 percent) of these grants focus on food security. In Central America, the IAF invests in community-led efforts that address the multiple, overlapping root causes of irregular migration and strengthen people's lasting ties across nearly 2,700 communities concentrated in areas of high and medium out-migration. Central Americans are navigating widespread poverty and unemployment, hunger and malnutrition, chronic violence and insecurity, and corruption in one of the regions of the world most vulnerable to extreme and changing weather. Over two-thirds of our grantees in northern Central America (68 percent) work in areas with gang or organized crime presence. For many IAF grantees, improving food security is a story of overcoming adversity on these various levels.

For example, women participants in an IAF grant in western El Salvador experienced multiple challenges, including gender-based violence and crossing gang-dominated territories, in order to build viable small livestock businesses, raising their family incomes by 20–30 percent on average. They also managed to cultivate fruit and vegetables to improve their families' diets using nutrient-depleted soil. In interviews, the women credit their emerging success with helping young people find the hope to stay.

The IAF's strategy in Central America hinges on strengthening people's **resilience** and **rootedness**, with a special focus on historically marginalized communities, including youth,

² Including counterpart resources from grantees



women, indigenous people, and African descendants. Young people, particularly vulnerable to crime and pressures to migrate, represent 50 percent of program participants.

We strengthen **resilience** by partnering directly with smallholder farmer associations, cooperatives, grassroots groups, and nonprofit organizations to improve sustainable agriculture, promote food security, create durable income-generating opportunities and enterprises, and develop community-led disaster mitigation plans.

We foster **rootedness** by working with community leaders who understand the myriad factors ranging from threats of violence to loss of livelihoods that are making life untenable for residents. By intensifying the enduring local ties of people vulnerable to migration pressures, we improve the chances that they will decide to stay. Many of our grantees pursue multiple strategies at once, such as:

- Improving livelihoods and creating viable enterprises for economic stability
- Encouraging participation and confidence in transparent, democratic processes; and
- Promoting strategies to prevent violence and protect human rights.

In summary, IAF grants typically address multiple drivers of migration, including food insecurity, guided by the very community members who are most susceptible to migration.

Results and Lessons Learned

Today, we would like to share five time-tested and mutually reinforcing approaches the IAF and local grantees have employed to give Central Americans hope for a future free from hunger. We have been pleased to share these lessons across the Global Food Security interagency.

1) Invest in community-led crisis response

As we and others have described, natural disasters threaten food security and have become leading drivers of out-migration in Central America. Our experience has shown that local organizations rooted in the communities they serve are often best positioned to identify and address acute food security-related issues in crisis settings. While the IAF is not a humanitarian aid agency, we drew on our nimble funding process to provide grantees the flexibility to pivot existing resources during recent disasters. This enabled them to address emerging community needs. IAF grantees drew on their relationships with local and municipal governments to coordinate emergency food assistance to the most vulnerable families. In one example, over 10,000 young people trained by an IAF grantee in social oversight of public funds began monitoring municipal humanitarian funding in southern Honduras to identify gaps and reduce corruption and partisan practices in food and medical supply distribution. We also provided \$21.7 million in supplemental funding in response to COVID-19 in Fiscal Year 2020. In Central America, two-thirds of these grants went to food production, immediate food aid and food access, and agricultural market expansion. Similarly, in response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota, we provided nearly \$2.2 million in supplemental funds to Central America. Three-quarters (75 percent) of grantees used this disaster recovery funding to improve immediate food security and lay the groundwork for addressing longer-term needs such as developing working capital and storage solutions for the next agricultural cycle.



2) Build community-led disaster resilience

With Central America one of the regions of the world most severely impacted by accelerating, unpredictable natural disasters—from floods and droughts to landslides—the IAF has learned that building local resilience is key to maintaining food security. We invest in community-led approaches that anticipate and mitigate disasters through activities such as:

- Developing inclusive disaster mitigation and recovery strategies;
- Fostering community-based protection of natural resources and reforestation;
- Improving water access, management, storage, and irrigation;
- Creating seed banks and planting seeds that withstand extreme weather; and
- Diversifying and improving sustainable agricultural production with techniques such as live barriers to prevent erosion and the use of covered structures.³

For instance, one Nicaraguan association of cooperatives had been broadcasting weekly weather reports and advice to improve coffee producers' productivity; it began sharing timely advice to help farmers adjust to changing conditions during the pandemic and Hurricanes Eta and Iota.

3) Tackle food security comprehensively

While there is no silver bullet for addressing food security challenges in Central America, the IAF has learned that working with local organizations that simultaneously address the availability, accessibility, and adequacy of food in local communities yields better results. IAF grantees comprehensively reduce hunger by:

- Making food more **available** for consumption or sale by improving sustainable agricultural production and natural resource management. For example, a nongovernmental organization has used IAF funding to reach 25,000 people across Honduras with drought-resistant, high-yield native corn and bean seeds. Farmers using these seeds have increased their corn and bean yields by 50 percent and reduced their post-harvest loss by 30 percent.
- Making food more **accessible**—economically and physically—both by strengthening local markets and distribution systems, as well as by enhancing food storage infrastructure. These Honduran farmers have also improved their drying and storage systems, extending their access to corn and beans to ten months out of the year. They used their reserves to provide emergency food aid to hundreds of vulnerable families and maintain fair prices while other suppliers raised food prices. Sustainable agriculture grants can make food more physically and economically accessible, as families often consume fruit, vegetables, fish, and chickens and sell their surpluses.
- Making diets more **adequate** in terms of nutritional content, quantity, and safety. For example, another IAF grantee in Honduras has trained community promoters to spread information about sustainable household gardening and nutrition. Over 600 families in 16 communities now consume a more diverse, nutritious diet that includes adaptations of traditional recipes featuring their own fruits and vegetables, such as green papaya tacos.

³ IAF-supported covered structures for vegetable cultivation may have reduced crop loss from Eta and Iota by an estimated 60 percent in some areas.



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As a result of diet diversification approaches like this, one faith-based IAF grantee reports that approximately 1,000 children have gained weight over their grant period.

4) Develop sustainable sources of local income

Developing sustainable sources of local income—including making agriculture profitable—is a critical part of a multifaceted strategy to increase food security and reduce migration, particularly among underserved populations facing limited economic opportunities, such as women, youth, African descendants, and indigenous communities. Women and youth with an IAF-funded Guatemalan farmers’ association earn an average of 25 percent more than conventional coffee by selling specialty youth-led and women-led brands of Fair Trade coffee. Increased income means increased purchasing power to improve household diets. The association also strengthens the skills of the next generation of coffee producers by providing young people with high school and university scholarships and integrating youth into its organizational leadership at all levels, encouraging more youth to build their livelihoods in their home communities.

One IAF-supported farmers’ association has found success growing non-traditional vegetables, including sweet peas and oyster mushrooms, for sale in a department in Guatemala where malnutrition has stunted the growth of over half of children under five.⁴ Indigenous farmers with the association have exceeded their projected vegetable production by 28 percent by adopting organic fertilizers and increased their incomes by pickling and canning otherwise unsellable vegetables. As a result, farmers enjoy increased incomes to support their families and supply local consumers with food. The association has also trained young people for employment in the local tourism sector, most of whom continued their studies locally. Less than 2 percent expressed interest in migrating from the area and none have migrated to other countries, despite the Western Highlands of Guatemala having the highest emigration rates in the region.

5) Strengthen community support systems

Building community support networks is critical to navigating food insecurity, particularly in remote and underserved populations that may not be able to access aid or markets in times of crisis. IAF grantees maintain strong relationships with public and private sector partners, buyers, and consumers that enable them to negotiate fair prices and maintain market access during crises for greater income stability and food security.

For example, partnering with community savings and loans associations enabled farmer organizations in our Honduras portfolio to offer short-term safety nets and loan forbearance to farmers unable to reach markets and sell products during the pandemic. These associations also provided capital to farmers left without income for materials and supplies to replant and rebuild when Hurricanes Eta and Iota destroyed their crops. More broadly, savings and loan associations foster a culture of savings among members. Finally, farmers have developed shared storage and collection facilities, giving them more access to grains and seeds. Some farmers have jointly

⁴ In Sololá, 50 percent of children under 5 exhibit stunting due to malnutrition. Available from <https://www.wfp.org/countries/guatemala>



rented or bought plots for farming, as well as sharing seeds, knowledge of local crops, and even food as needed.

Conclusion

Converting despair to hope can be profoundly difficult, but we have seen many families becoming more food secure and positive about their prospects in communities where the IAF works. Grant participants in Chiquimula, Guatemala, state that their improved food security has reduced their interest in risking international migration: in a representative comment, one said, “Why would we leave if we are fine here and have the food we need, without being apart from our families?” I want to close by sharing one particularly moving grantee example.

In the high out-migration department of Francisco Morazán, Honduras, intense droughts have left farmers with seven consecutive years of disappointing harvests. However, by learning a sub-Saharan African water storage technique known as “sand dams” from an IAF grantee, farmers have tripled their access to water, gaining an additional 3–5 months of water access each year. Where families previously got one harvest of corn or beans, they now get two harvests of both corn *and* beans. At least a third of these families have sold their surplus for additional income. When Hurricanes Eta and Iota drove nearly half (42 percent) of Francisco Morazán residents into acute food insecurity, these farmers did not have to rely on emergency food assistance. While they lost their second harvest, they had a larger-than-normal first harvest thanks to sustainable cultivation techniques, improved soil health, and access to water, and could store their food effectively. They had extra food to share and sell.

More incredibly, young people who lost their jobs in nearby cities due to COVID-19 have been moving their families back to rural Francisco Morazán. Drawn by the increased access to water from the IAF grant described above, young people have resettled there and embraced the potential for making a living through agriculture using the innovations the IAF grantee has been promoting. While this trend is too new to say anything definite, it indicates that these young people are happy to live in Honduran villages if they can envision a good life there. That is what hope can do.

I would like to thank Congress for its ongoing bipartisan support of our work in Central America. Our thanks go out to the Commission, as well, for committing to studying what works. We appreciate the opportunity to present to you today.