

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
September 23, 2021

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Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony to this committee.

The World Food Programme (WFP) is the largest humanitarian organization fighting hunger in more than 80 countries around the world. This is work that we are able to do thanks to the generosity of the American people and to your support.

In WFP's work, we face the interconnected problems of hunger, insecurity and migration as a daily reality. And we see how the climate crisis is combining with conflict and now COVIDs economic impact to deepen hunger and make our work harder. As our Executive Director, David Beasley, has been highlighting – these factors have plunged 300 million more people into hunger and food insecurity. Without stepped up action and support, we risk a hunger pandemic following in the wake of the global health pandemic.

Central America has been experiencing late rains and droughts, interspersed with excessive rains and severe storms, flooding and landslides. I traveled to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador in May and was able to see and hear first-hand how Hurricanes Eta and Iota delivered a one-two punch in November 2020 that people are still struggling to recover from. Not just because of the direct impacts of the storm but how they come on top of and worsened pre-existing social stresses, tensions and inequality.

According to WFP projections, over the last five years, more than 2 million people left their homes in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in the hope of a better life elsewhere – 80 percent to the US. There are now 8 million food insecure people in Central America – almost 4 times the number of food insecure people in 2018.

According to WFP surveys, roughly half of the food insecure population in these countries wants to migrate to the United States. This is almost double the rate as compared with food secure segments of the population. Economic reasons (low wages, unemployment and insufficient income to meet food and basic necessities) are both the driving factor to leave and also the major impediment for starting the migration journey.

Many of these problems are familiar to the region and have long driven migration. Sudden climate shocks can be the tipping point that pushes people who are reliant on marginal lands and livelihoods over the edge.

In connecting the dots between climate, migration and food security, today's Food Systems Summit (FSS) that is happening on the margins of the UN General Assembly, and President Biden's Executive Order of February 4, 2021 on climate change and migration, together represent a pivotal moment in the broader discourse on food security. Too often, we have seen the global humanitarian and development system working in disparate and disconnected ways.

The default response has often been to reduce the phenomenon of migration to a matter of economics or security. Instead, we need to better understand the complex reality that drives people to leave their homes and take concrete action to address the root causes.

At WFP, we recognize the link between food insecurity and migration and have a suite of successful programmes that increase access to nutritious food, generate employment, build resilience, and support school children.

Across Central America, we do this in several ways:

- We provide food vouchers and cash to buy food to people affected by storms – last year we reached 750,000 people affected by the Tropical Storm and Hurricanes (Eta and Iota)
- We are working with the private sector, other UN partners (e.g. ILO, IOM) and government to support youth and returnees with job trainings, internships and future job opportunities. This includes a special focus on helping women develop basic digital and technical skills like training as chefs or in hospitality management, entrepreneurship, among others.
- WFP works with partners and supports Governments to provide school meals for children, reaching 1.3 million children in Central America and sourcing food locally from small farmers, ensuring an outlet for local produce and increasing farmer income.

Right now, WFP is supporting 2 million people in the dry corridor of Central America with food assistance, and we have the potential to scale up to reach 8 million people in light of growing need. In order to do this, we would need USD \$1.7 billion over five years.

Our work with government and communities in these countries helps give people a reason to stay, feed their families, and invest in a better future.

All the diverse programs I have highlighted, whether school feeding, rural livelihoods, women's empowerment have one thing in common. They all put people – their needs and aspirations – at the center. This is the essential condition of success.

If we are to create a sustainable remedy to the interconnected problems of hunger and migration, we need to support people to enjoy their rights, to build their livelihoods and ultimately hold governments accountable to respect, protect and enable them to fulfill their rights.

Placing rights of the center of our work means developing programs built on the idea of access to food and to means of production and livelihoods.

Without the ability to feed themselves and their families and build livelihoods in their homelands, the migrant flows and the headlines about caravans will roll on and they will, undoubtedly, get worse.

At WFP, we recognize that the people we serve play a critical role in identifying and solving the problems they face. To help people, we must listen to them, understand their needs and aspirations, and work with them to achieve these.

We must first address hunger if we are to address the interconnected problems of climate and migration. But we have to do it in the right way. And this requires putting rights, accountability and people at the center of our work.

Thank you.