



Root Causes of Forced Migration: Food Insecurity and the Right to Food in Central America, Thursday, September 23, 2021

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For: Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

I want to thank Congressman McGovern and Congressman Smith for calling this hearing and giving Save the Children the opportunity to testify about this issue that affects the lives of millions of children and their families in Central America.

The support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance has been invaluable in mitigating the impacts of recurrent drought, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the two back-to-back hurricanes.

Save the Children addresses the root causes of migration in communities of origin, as well as the humanitarian needs of migrants and other highly vulnerable populations in Central America. From 2016 – 2020 we reached nearly 1.5 million migrants and potential migrants, including over 500,000 children. We currently have 16 food security and livelihoods projects in Central America, representing approximately \$29.5 million in programming. Approximately half of these programs are humanitarian, while the rest are longer-term development efforts.

Save the Children has developed a comprehensive \$130 million response plan to address the root causes and humanitarian needs of children and their families in Northern Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. border. This plan focuses on the strategies deemed necessary to address the issues and capitalizes on our continuous and long-term work with local civil society and governments to propose actions that work.

Targeted cash transfer assistance to the most vulnerable.

One of the most effective ways that we fight hunger and child malnutrition in the region is through targeted cash transfer assistance to the most vulnerable families, usually combined with nutritional counseling based on the first 1000 days principles. Evidence has repeatedly shown that this is a modality of choice for addressing food insecurity and other

humanitarian needs, during recurrent droughts and emergencies, as well as in development settings.

The evidence on the effectiveness of cash is well-documented by the CALP, the Cash Learning Partnership, <https://www.calpnetwork.org/> which includes ourselves and other major INGOs. One of the critical elements of the Root Causes Strategy is to encourage economic growth in the most deprived areas of Central America. Cash transfers stimulate local economies and local agricultural production as people make purchases close to home. In some contexts, commodities are necessary to provide life-saving assistance. In others, a market-based approach is more appropriate to help keep local food prices stable and support local farmers.



In emergency contexts, multipurpose cash transfers through debit cards or vouchers that can be redeemed at stores enable families to obtain food and support local markets and farmers. Cash transfers are used to purchase essential food, medicines, livestock and seeds for future crops. Evaluation of a recent USAID-funded Save the Children project revealed that the prevalence of moderate-to-severe hunger was reduced by 60% in targeted communities after cash transfer programming. (*"Protegua" Final Report, Save the Children/Guatemala, Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs/USAID*)

In one recent example of the impact of cash vouchers, a young mother in Nicaragua whose community was ravaged by Hurricane Eta told us how our cash vouchers program enabled her to buy much-needed food for her two children, while nutritional supplementation helped lift her underweight daughter out of the acute malnutrition danger zone. This young woman, like so many in the region, was already in an extremely precarious situation due to the price increases related COVID-19 lockdowns when the hurricanes hit.

In development programs, cash transfers are combined with livelihoods strengthening to increase income-earning potential while simultaneously providing information to influence household investment decisions. In a six-year project funded by USAID/Food for Peace that included cash transfers, livelihoods development, water and sanitation and other proven interventions, rates of poverty and child malnutrition in Guatemala improved dramatically. The final evaluation showed a significant reduction of 29 percentage points (from 44% to 15%) in the prevalence of poverty (people living on less than US \$1.25/day). The percentage of children receiving a minimum acceptable diet more than doubled (from 22% to 47%). (*Lesson Learned/Final Report, Western Highlands Program of Integrated Food Security & Food Actions (PAISANO), Save the Children, USAID/Food for Peace, 2018.*)

Integrated, multi-sectoral approaches are key to success.

Our food security and livelihoods programming is integrated with other interventions designed to address children's rights, strengthen gender equality, protect children from violence, improve nutrition and

provide economic empowerment of adolescents and youth.

It is important to note that the limited access to schooling either due to displacement or prolonged Covid-related school closures exacerbates the crisis of food security and is in itself an emergency. In the region, most children are still totally or partially out of school and many will drop out permanently due to the need to work. Save the Children has been able to adapt school-feeding programs funded by the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education program in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. However, these critical programs are most successful when schools are open.

Functioning secondary schools are also vital to youth livelihoods development, work which is an important complement to food security initiatives. These programs ensure that adolescents and youth learn civics and responsibility as well as solid skills and can contribute effectively to society, rather than joining gangs or falling into the hands of traffickers or coyotes who promise them passage to the U.S.

Save the Children also works to provide technical assistance and policy advice to national governments on child- and gender-sensitive social protection programs to institutionalize longer-term cash-transfers designed to lift children out of poverty and to ensure that they also have the means to attend school.

**Recommendations:**

Save the Children urges Congress and the Administration to strengthen support for economic empowerment for adolescents and youth. This, along with the creation of protective environments, including access to schooling are important investments and should accompany food security interventions in order to create lasting change. Child-sensitive social safety nets that alleviate poverty, provide incentives for continued education and programming that is protective of children are vital longer-term investments.

It is critical that Congress show bipartisan leadership in support of strong humanitarian assistance and integrated development programs designed to address root causes. In light of the recurring and layered crises that the people of Central America are facing, life-saving humanitarian assistance coupled with smart development programming has never been more important.