



NOTRE DAME INITIATIVE FOR  
GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

# POLICY BRIEF SERIES

## Central America and Emigration:

Beyond the "Root Causes"



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From April to June 2019, the Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)—an integral part of the new Donald R. Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame—convened an interdisciplinary group of academics, development practitioners, and government officials from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the United States<sup>1</sup> to review the existing evidence, debate approaches, and consolidate guiding principles for current and future responses to the so-called “root causes” of emigration—migrant networks; poverty and inequality; violence; and, increasingly, climate change.<sup>2</sup>

Going beyond the standard problem and solution approach to these issues, a consensus was reached that the root causes of emigration cannot be separated from the context of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (together, “northern Central America”) as a region of incomplete transitions to democracy given political-military agreements (Honduras), or armed conflict (Guatemala and El Salvador).

As a part of these transitions, agreements among elites built during the democratic awakening of the 1980s and 1990s came up against economic structural adjustment processes. This debilitated the social contract that emerged from the peace accords (in Guatemala and El Salvador) and, therefore, disrupted the emergence of new social and political actors. The existing institutional framework did not allow for new actors to participate actively, and the economic and social transitions (economic globalization and democratic opening) were left unfinished, creating space for illegal economies.<sup>3</sup>

The interdisciplinary group’s overarching conclusion is that ***no programmatic or policy success to***



A group of interdisciplinary experts from across the U.S. and Central America at the first Central American Dialogues session, which was held in Antigua Guatemala in late April 2019. Source: Luis Ruuska, licensed use via ndigd.nd.edu.

***address root causes of emigration will be complete or sustained without increased democratic norms and practices, and inclusive social and economic models that recognize this context of transition.***

In other words, without systemic and structural change, the root causes of emigration will persist long after the current spike in migration has subsided. The following principles and recommendations elaborate on this conclusion to provide guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and academics in northern Central America, Mexico, and the U.S.

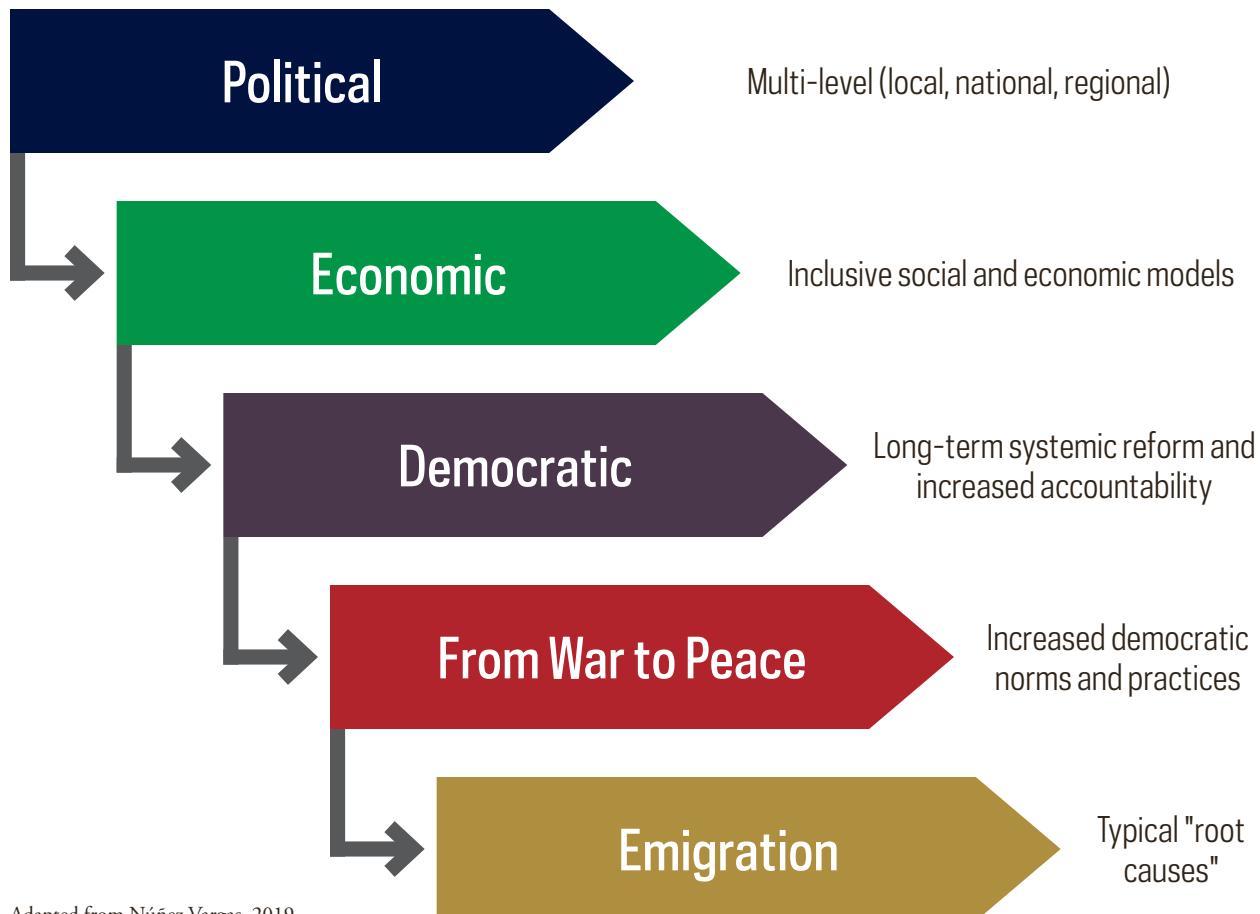
<sup>1</sup> See the Appendix for list of contributors.

<sup>2</sup> Congressional Research Service, 2019; Orozco, 2018; Runde & Schneider, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Núñez Vargas, 2019.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*Graphic 1: Central America Transitions*



Adapted from Núñez Vargas, 2019.

## Principle 1: Commit to a Long View and Act Now

Responses to the root causes of emigration in northern Central America should fit into a long-term strategy and the context of democratic transition and consolidation, but they should also have clear and measurable short- and medium-term objectives. Despite promising initiatives and programs to address economic and security needs, any short-term gains will continue to be undermined without real democratic processes that produce inclusive social and economic models.

An example of preference for short-term stabil-

ity with the potential to cause larger problems in the long-term are the disputed 2017 elections in Honduras, where the incumbent won and was recognized by the U.S., despite constitutional concerns and vote-counting irregularities that led the Organization of American States and the European Union to call for new elections. Prior to the election, there was a promising drop in homicide rates, an increase in national and international investment, and an ever more active civil society.

U.S. support for the incumbent in the disputed election and ensuing unrest continue to threaten those gains as they have disaffected civil society, erased gains in trust in government, and affected the Honduran government's legitimacy, thus reducing confidence in democracy.

Shortsighted actions and lack of political will sustain exclusive social and economic models that fill the void when democratic processes fail. In the context of transition to democracy in Central America, political and economic elites are privileged above consensual and participatory legislative initiatives and programs. The exclusive model imposed by elites focuses on increased investment, economic growth, and deficit reduction; which are often in competition with decent work, decent housing, safety, education, and quality health for the majority of the population.

This is the result of decades of economic reforms—especially privatization of services and deregulation supported by international actors that

served to bolster and entrenched elites, consolidating both their wealth and power within the region. This model also relies on the irregular exportation of labor and receipt of remittances as a means of generating some level of economic dynamism, mainly through consumerism and service-intensive workforce markets, enabling elites to consolidate their political and economic power. The results of this model can be witnessed in the relatively steady overall growth of northern Central American economies that, concurrently, have levels of poverty and inequality. Results are also apparent in the faltering support for democracy in the region as the post-civil war democratic transition ages another decade without delivering tangible benefits for the majority.

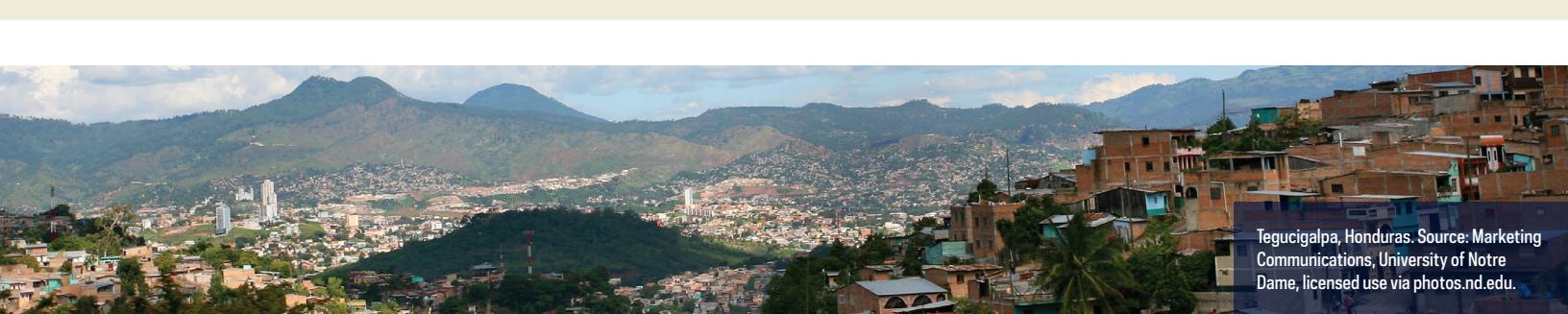
**Table 1: Results of Exclusive Social and Economic Models**

	Remittances as % GDP	Economic Growth (Annual %)	Poverty (% Population <\$5.50/day)*	Inequality (Income Share Highest / Lowest 10%)	% Change in Preference for Democracy (1997-2017)
<b>El Salvador</b>	20.4	2.3	29.0 (2017)	29.1 / 2.5	-31
<b>Guatemala</b>	11.2	2.8	48.8 (2014)	38 / 1.7	-12
<b>Honduras</b>	18.8	4.8	50.4 (2016)	37.7 / 1.3	-29
<b>Latin America and Caribbean (Average)</b>	1.5	1.7	24.0 (2015)	N/A	-12
<b>United States</b>	.03	2.2	2.0 (2016)	30.6 / 1.7	N/A

Source: World Bank (latest available year). <https://data.worldbank.org>; *Latinobarómetro* (2017). <http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>. \*Threshold of the poverty headcount rate defined by the World Bank to make comparisons for the LAC region. <http://www.bancomundial.org/es/topic/poverty/lac-equity-lab1/poverty>.

## Principle 1 Recommendations:

- Foreign donors, as well as national and local governments in the region, should focus on approaches that are progressive, accumulative, systemic, evidence-based, and that support institutional reforms over successive democratically elected administrations. This will require multi-sector pacts at the national level to provide a shared vision and to monitor progress.
- The U.S. government should support the strengthening of democratic institutions in northern Central America, promote improved electoral management to ensure free and fair elections, and value good governance and democratic principles over short-term stability.
- National and local governments in the region should develop multi-year plans and budgets.
- The U.S. government should establish minimum multi-year budgets and foreign assistance with certifiable benchmarks to demonstrate commitment to results in the long run. The United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act is a good step in this direction.



Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Source: Marketing Communications, University of Notre Dame, licensed use via photos.nd.edu.

## Principle 2: Think Locally and Act Regionally

Even when emigration and economic or social trends from the region are clearly correlated—as they were during the aftermath of the 2008 recession and the spike in unaccompanied minors of 2014—there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The primary emigration driver reported by individuals varies by month and year, and from municipality to municipality.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that even when policies and programs deliver jobs or better security, another emigration driver often replaces the previous problem as the primary concern.

The shifting of emigration drivers is especially

apparent in internal displacement, where individuals seek security inside their country of origin before they consider emigrating. For example, 23% of individuals in high-crime neighborhoods of Honduras have considered moving within the country to escape violence,<sup>5</sup> and in nearly 5% of households in El Salvador at least one person is internally displaced due to violence.<sup>6</sup> Now in new, unfamiliar locations, these individuals are often in need of employment but lack the social network of their previous neighborhood. Economic needs then overtake security needs as the primary driver of onward emigration in these cases.

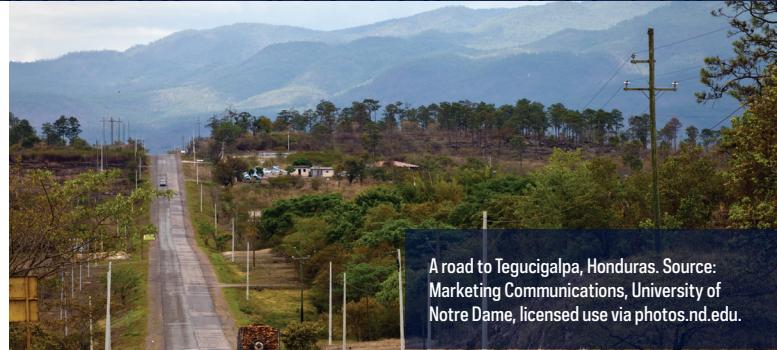
<sup>4</sup> Latin America Public Opinion Project (2018); Rivero, E. & Hare, T. (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Cristosal El Salvador, 2018.

Meanwhile, regional and global forces are also at play. The governments of northern Central America alone cannot change the flow of narcotics or face organized crime in the region, especially since the corrupting influence at local and national levels is substantial. Concurrently, the frequency and strength of natural disasters and the increasing prevalence of disease and drought that devastate crops is a consequence of a regional and global lack of response to climate change, to which these countries contribute, but cannot slow or stop alone. These challenges require a coordinated response at the regional and global level that address structural and multi-causal issues that cannot be fixed with local or even national programs alone.

Positive steps in regional coordination include the Regional Integrated Framework for Protection and Solutions to Migration (MIRPS), for the assistance of migrants needing international protection; the Central America Regional Integration System (SICA), and Plan Alianza para la Prosperidad (“the plan”), to which the governments of northern Central America have dedicated \$7.7 billion from 2016-18 to



A road to Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Source: Marketing Communications, University of Notre Dame, licensed use via photos.nd.edu.

increase economic opportunities, security, and trust in government.<sup>7</sup> However, SICA has little influence beyond its primary focus on commerce, and the plan has been criticized as little more than a laundry list of programs that governments were already doing or wanted to do. These regional collaborations serve as a start, a potentially useful evidence base for what may work to regulate emigration, and increase political will for real reform. For example, the local consultative aspects of the plan in Guatemala show promise and may contain especially relevant lessons in decentralization and local participation. This reform should be demanded and supported by other governments, inter-governmental organizations, and multilateral institutions in the region (U.S., OAS, IDB, etc.).

## Principle 2 Recommendations:

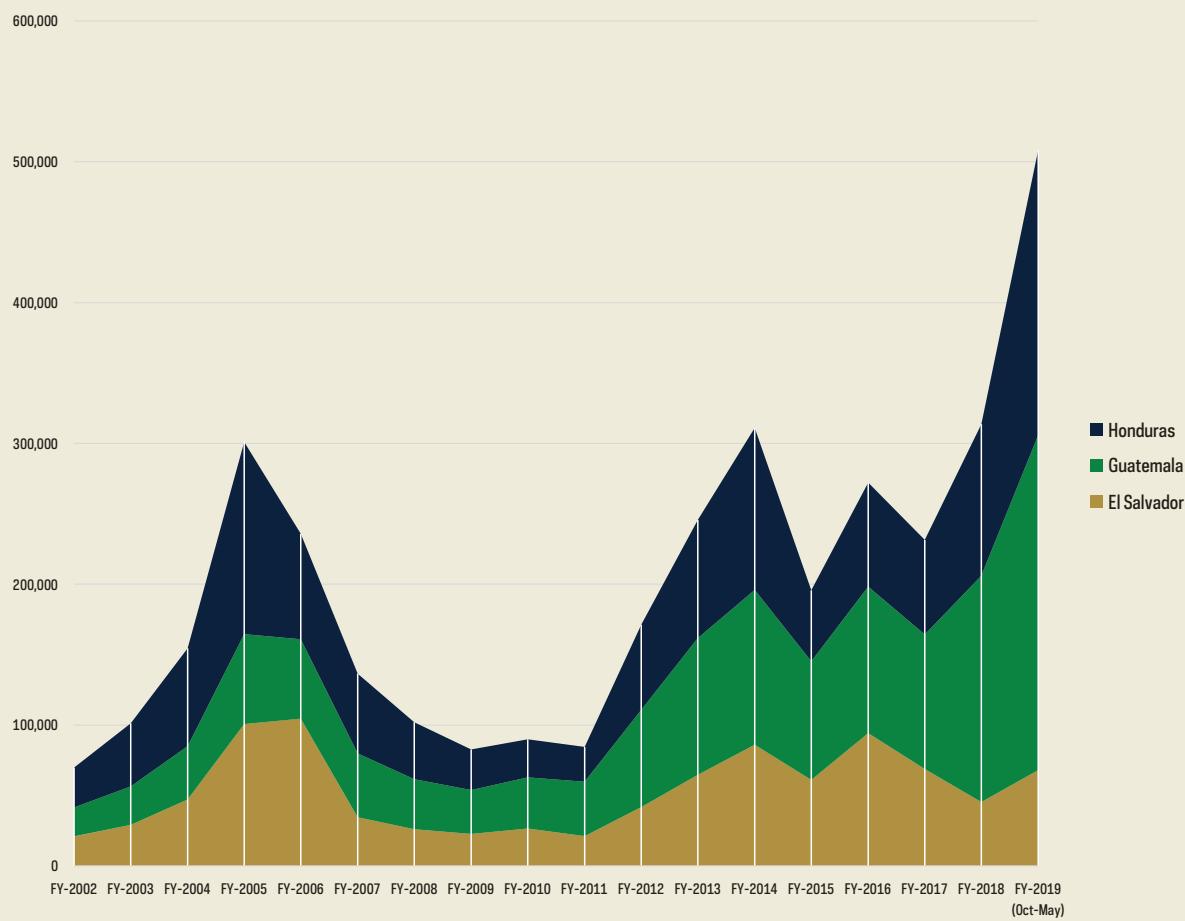
- The narrative in the U.S. and the region should change from one that focuses on immigration to a narrative based on the defense of human rights, the promotion of inclusive development, and the strengthening of democratic institutions to serve citizens.
- The governments of the region, the U.S. and Mexico should create a viable national and regional system to meet demand for labor that respects international agreements on migration, asylum, internal displacement and refugees and protection of human rights.
- Regional governments should strengthen MIRPS to increase the protection framework for displaced persons and refugees; strengthen SICA to increase integration on social and economic policy; and strengthen Plan Alianza para la Prosperidad, incorporating a long-term view with short-term objectives, aiming to create opportunities for social and economic inclusion that have sustainable and long-lasting impact.

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Research Service, 2019.

## Box 1: Emigration in Context:

- The estimated number of emigrants from northern Central America leaving their home countries peaked near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at 750,000 people per year emigrating from the region (Acosta, Almeida, Gindling, & Lao Pena, 2017). This was followed by an overall decline in emigration, with annual emigration falling below 100,000 during the recession and its aftermath. Recently, there has been a noticeable increase. Within the last half year, the number of emigrants is estimated to have reached 257,043.
- Adjusted for population size, Honduras currently has the highest emigration rate, with an estimate of 2,340 per 100,000 inhabitants, while Guatemala and El Salvador have 1,776 and 1,562 emigrants per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively (Leutert & Spalding, 2019).

### *Total Emigration from Northern Central America (2002-2019)<sup>8</sup>*



<sup>8</sup> Leutert & Spalding, 2019.



## Principle 3: Demand Accountability

In most cases, new policies to address the emigration drivers of poor governance, insecurity, and limited economic prosperity is not necessarily warranted. Rather, regional governments should prioritize complete implementation of existing policies, including execution and effectiveness of social services spending.<sup>9</sup> Given the centrality of strong institutional capacity, effective rule of law and good governance to the success of any initiative, accountability measures must focus on re-legitimizing the state and reducing state capture through enforced anti-corruption measures in both the public and private sectors.

Regional and civil society oversight and leadership is key to increasing accountability to improve democratic governance, increase transparency, and combat criminality and violence. This makes the position of the U.S. especially important when elections or international bodies are at risk of disappearing or being neutralized. For example, in 2018, when the Guatemalan government failed to renew the mandate of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) that has successfully worked with Guatemalan prosecutors

to promote fiscal, political, and social accountability through strategic litigation, the response of the U.S. government was equivocal when it should have been in support of CICIG.

Accountability extends to having the political will to seek meaningful reform in the security and penal sectors. There is a tendency to treat security threats from drug trafficking, gangs, and common offenders the same, though increased security aid and mano dura enforcement have failed to produce a sustained reduction in violence. Meanwhile, weak judicial capacity leads to long pretrial detention and rights infringements among the incarcerated population (especially among youth). Incipient rehabilitation and reinsertion programs show promise, including the Second Chances program financed by the U.S. government in El Salvador, but are not yet widely accepted or available to all gang-involved youth. Accountability in the justice sector should include a reduction in impunity and compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) on arbitrary arrest, pretrial detention, and incarceration.

<sup>9</sup> Acosta, Almeida, Gindling, & Lao Pena, 2017.

## Principle 3 Recommendations:

- International cooperators, the U.S. government, regional governments and civil society should protect, support, and strengthen the fight against corruption and state capture by backing and supporting concrete initiatives like CICIG and the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) as models of national-international cooperation to uphold accountability and prosecute corruption in all sectors.
- The U.S. government should maintain funding levels for good governance and economic growth at FY2018 levels (41%) or higher.<sup>10</sup>
- The U.S. government should use funding established for security and rule-of-law efforts (32% of FY2018 funding) for increased violence prevention, rehabilitation/reinsertion, and restorative justice among gang-involved youth instead of focusing on transnational crime, in accordance to ICCPR standards.
- With a view toward long-term stability, the U.S. government should impose sanctions pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (P.L. 114-328) when necessary.

## APPENDIX 1: CONTRIBUTORS

This policy brief was developed through the contributions of dozens of individuals representing a diverse array of organizations in the U.S. and across Central America.

The Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD) would like to recognize the following individuals for participating in Session One of the Central America Dialogues Conference Series—which was integral in laying the foundation for this policy brief—and/or for their assistance in developing or editing this document. NDIGD would also like to recognize the contributions of individuals who are not listed below, either for personal or security-related reasons.

- **Anabella Amado Alemán**  
Universidad Rafael Landívar

- **Leticia Antonieta Salomón Álvarez**  
Centro de Documentación de Honduras (CEDOH)
- **Úrsula Roldán Andrade**  
Universidad Rafael Landívar
- **Natalia María Ortíz Barrientos**  
Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo (INCEDES)
- **Silvia Irene Palma Calderón**  
Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo (INCEDES)
- **Carlos Javier Echarri Cánovas**  
Consejo Nacional de Población, México
- **Orlando Wesley Mejía Castaneda**  
Dexis Consulting Group (Honduras)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

- **Rev. Ismael Moreno Coto, S.J.**  
Radio Progreso / Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación (ERIC)
- **Laura Regina Andrade Cruz**  
Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas
- **Susan Cruz**  
Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia
- **Michael Danielson**  
University of California–Washington, D.C. Program (UCDC)
- **Viceministerio Axel Romero García**  
Ministerio de Gobernación, Guatemala
- **Mario José Sánchez González**  
Universidad Centroamericana de Nicaragua
- **Abby Beatriz Córdova Guillén**  
University of Kentucky
- **Tom Hare**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)
- **Yolanda Ines Zapata Henry**  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Honduras)
- **Alberto Franco Hernández**  
Universidad Rafael Landívar
- **Jonathan Hiskey**  
Vanderbilt University
- **Camila Antelo Iriarte**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)
- **Eric L. Olson**  
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- **Rodolfo Rubio Pérez**  
Universidad Rafael Landívar
- **Hugo Rolando Noé Pino**  
UNITEC, la Universidad Global de Honduras
- **William Pleitez**  
FOMILENIO II de El Salvador
- **Juan Posada-Burbano**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)
- **Tom Purekal**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)
- **Verónica Elizabeth Reyna Ramos**  
Servicio Social Pasionista (SSPAS)
- **Estela Rivero**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)
- **Lissette Vásquez Rojas**  
Fundación Myrna Mack
- **Alberto Mora Román**  
Proyecto Estado de la Región
- **Luis Ruuska**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)
- **Salvador Stadthagen**  
Creative Associates International
- **Lucía Tiscornia**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)
- **Clara Guardado Torres**  
Independent Consultant
- **Eduardo Núñez Vargas**  
National Democratic Institute
- **Clara Villatoro**  
Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD)

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NOTRE DAME INITIATIVE FOR  
GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

**ndigd.nd.edu**

3150 Jenkins Nanovic Halls  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556 USA

(574) 631-2940  
[globaldevelopment@nd.edu](mailto:globaldevelopment@nd.edu)



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