Honduras Strategic Assessment
Final Report

Latin America and Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response (LACLEARN)

July 2022

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Honduras Strategic Assessment
Final Report

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# ACRONYMS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BHA</td>
<td>Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>Organizaciones de Sociedad Civil?</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAF 2.0</td>
<td>Conflict Assessment Framework 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAFTA-DR</td>
<td>Central America–Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDCS</td>
<td>Country Development Cooperation Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>CICIH</td>
<td>International Commission Against Impunity</td>
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<tr>
<td>COPECO</td>
<td>Comisión Permanente de Contingencias (Permanent Contingency Commission)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPH</td>
<td>Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras (Association of Journalists of Honduras)</td>
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<td>CPS</td>
<td>Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, USAID</td>
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<tr>
<td>CVP</td>
<td>Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention, USAID</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOAG</td>
<td>Development Objective Agreements</td>
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<td>DOD</td>
<td>US Department of Defense</td>
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<td>DTO</td>
<td>Drug Trafficking Organization</td>
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<td>FNAMP</td>
<td>Fuerza Nacional Anti-Maras y Pandillas (National Anti-Gang Task Force)</td>
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<td>FOSDEH</td>
<td>Foro Social de la Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras (Social Forum of External Debt and Development of Honduras)</td>
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<td>FPIC</td>
<td>Free, Prior, and Informed Consent</td>
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<td>GBV</td>
<td>Gender-Based Violence</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<td>GOH</td>
<td>Government of Honduras</td>
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<td>GREAT</td>
<td>Gang Resistance Education and Training</td>
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<td>HAP</td>
<td>Humanitarian Assistance Projects</td>
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<td>HPN</td>
<td>Honduras National Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>IACHR</td>
<td>Inter-American Court of Human Rights</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labor Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO 169</td>
<td>Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention</td>
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<tr>
<td>INL</td>
<td>US Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOH</td>
<td>Juan Orlando Hernandez (former President)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAC</td>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
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<tr>
<td>LACLEARN</td>
<td>Latin America and Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGBTQI+</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Plus</td>
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<td>LIBRE</td>
<td>Liberty and Refoundation Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>MACCIH</td>
<td>Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAIE</td>
<td>Modelo de Atención Integral Especializado (Specialized Integral Assistance Model)</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMOP</td>
<td>Public Order Military Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSH</td>
<td>Partido Salvador de Honduras (Savior Party of Honduras)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCS</td>
<td>Strategy to Address the Root Causes of Migration in Central America</td>
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<td>SINAGER</td>
<td>Sistema Nacional de Gestión de Riesgos (National Risk Management System)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOC</td>
<td>Theory of Change</td>
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<tr>
<td>UFERCO</td>
<td>Specialized Fiscal Unit against Corruption Networks</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<td>USG</td>
<td>United States Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>VCAF</td>
<td>Violence and Conflict Assessment</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZEDE</td>
<td>Zonas de Empleo y Desarrolla Económico (Employment and Economic Development Zones)</td>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2021, the LACLEARN Task Order was tasked by USAID’s Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) Bureau with implementing a Strategic Assessment in Honduras. The assessment incorporates elements of the USAID Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF 2.0) methodology along with a new supplemental guide (referred to as the Violence Addendum)\(^1\) to analyze the dynamics of violence and the interrelation of citizen security and conflict. USAID expected that pairing these tools would allow for a robust strategic assessment with improved analysis of violence, crime, and citizen security. The fieldwork took place in May-June 2022\(^2\) to inform implementation of the 2020-2025 Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) by supporting USAID/Honduras’ efforts to ensure that changing contextual dynamics are reflected in programming and the implementation of all relevant United States Government (USG) strategies. USAID/Honduras will use this assessment to inform decision making, ensure conflict sensitivity across its portfolio, and identify opportunities to mitigate conflict and violence through its programming. The recommendations also support strategic collaboration between USAID, other USG agencies, and other donors supporting conflict-sensitive programming.

The assessment team collected data on five themes perceived as contributing to conflict and violence:

- Gender-based violence (GBV)
- Youth violence
- Corruption and state capture
- Culture of impunity and access to justice
- Land and natural resource exploitation

The team used key informant interviews and focus group discussions to collect perception data. Of nearly 330 respondents across nine departments,\(^3\) 53 percent identified as male, 45 percent identified as female, and 2 percent identified as non-binary or gender minorities. Perception data is important for understanding how grievances can transform into conflict or violence, and for identifying opportunities to build peace. Using this information, in combination with quantitative and qualitative data collected as part of a desk review, this report represents the assessment team’s findings and recommendations.

Detailed departmental snapshots capturing a more localized picture of conflict and violence dynamics can be found in Annex A. While the assessment team collected data in the central, eastern, southern, western, and northern regions, the team was unable to travel to Gracias a Dios. Security concerns that arose during the data collection period also limited the team’s access to some areas described in the report.

CORE SOCIAL PATTERN

The team spoke with approximately 330 individuals representing nine departments. From these meetings, one overarching social pattern emerged:\(^4\)

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\(^1\) The CAF 2.0 was developed to specifically assess dynamics of intra-state violent conflict. Other forms of non-conflict violence, e.g., gang violence, organized criminal activity, violent extremism, intimate partner abuse, etc. have traditionally been assessed separately. The VCAF is designed to analyze the relationships between violent conflict and other forms of violence and how they interact in a given context. This understanding informs integrated approaches to prevent violence and conflict and amplify dynamics of peace.

\(^2\) The period of data collection roughly overlapped with the milestone of the first 100 days of the Castro government.

\(^3\) Although the team was not able to travel into Gracias a Dios, they did meet with Miskito leaders in Tegucigalpa.

\(^4\) A social pattern is a high-level frame, within which specific dynamics of conflict, violence, and the factors that mitigate conflict and violence play out. It offers a brief encapsulation of the combined impact of the specific dynamics and mitigating factors.
Systemic exclusion and impunity perpetuate the normalization of inequality, violence, social fragmentation, and corruption at all levels of society and government, contributing to complete marginalization of vulnerable populations and a lack of socio-economic opportunities that leave most people without hope for any viable future in their country.

Based on this deeply entrenched core social pattern, the team concludes that in the short term, USG programming can contribute to addressing patterns that influence the decision to emigrate (but will not directly impact rates of migration). Evidence demonstrates that increases in income enable migration in contexts like Honduras. The team repeatedly heard from individuals who wanted training and other support, but for the purposes of finding better employment when they migrate. The dynamics (see below) that contribute to the decision to migrate require long-term systemic change and political will to undertake deep structural reforms and behavior change. An acute lack of justice and protection mechanisms for the majority of people without money and influence cuts across all of these dynamics and perpetuates fear, impunity, and the desire to escape violence.

DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT
Under the framework of the core social pattern (above), the team identified priority dynamics that perpetuate conflict and violence. These include:

1. Clientelism and a culture of impunity
2. Normalization of violence
3. Disputes over land
4. Climate change adaptation and resource scarcity
5. Closing civic space
6. Youth disenfranchisement
7. Latent public/private sector tensions

MITIGATING FACTORS
The team identified several mitigating factors that serve to limit the likelihood of widespread violence and conflict, but should be monitored for change.

HOPE – BUT NOT FOREVER
Hondurans voted in record numbers in the 2021 elections, with 68 percent of the population going to the polls. The election was a clear vote for change and a demonstration that many Hondurans still have some degree of faith in the electoral process. Based on campaign promises, expectations for the new government are very high. While many people told the assessment team that 100 days is not enough to determine whether the country will change, most raised concerns that the government was not taking clear steps towards fulfilling its promises. The most frequently raised issues were concerns with the Amnesty Law, perceptions of nepotism, and the experience/credentials of political appointees. Others pointed out that some campaign promises are being implemented, e.g., the repeal of the Employment and Economic Development Zones (Zonas de Empleo y Desarrollo Económico, ZEDEs) and the hourly wage law.

6 Mitigating factors are elements that have the potential to reduce the likelihood that violence and violent conflict will occur. They are not always things that work towards sustained peace, but rather those that dampen violence.
7 ZEDEs are special economic zones that grant zone administrators freedom to adopt their own taxation systems and legal regimes, subject to oversight by a national committee. They have been widely attacked as a threat to Honduran sovereignty.
Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities expressed hope for the Castro Administration to fulfill its promises for social inclusion after decades of marginalization.

The team heard repeatedly that people had a new wave of hope for change with the incoming administration but wanted to see it soon. There is a window of opportunity for the government to clearly signal its direction, and for President Castro to demonstrate her leadership and authority. Respondents were very clear, however, that this window will not stay open forever. Many suggested that if promised changes do not materialize in a year, people would take to the streets. Some offered even shorter timelines. The duration of hope as a mitigating factor largely depends on the government’s ability to demonstrate that it is taking concrete steps towards fulfilling its campaign promises and improving living conditions.

MIGRATION AND REMITTANCES
Many people, faced with few employment opportunities, choose to migrate from rural areas to big cities or to leave the country. The remittances that migrants send home alleviate pressure on the government to provide basic goods and services, e.g., the NINIS (Ni estudian Ni trabajan, or Don’t work and Don’t study) who stop working and studying when they begin receiving remittances. This reduces pressure on the state to foster job creation and access to quality education that is relevant for the job market. Since remittances account for 25 percent of Honduras’s gross domestic product (GDP) (approximately $5.4 billion dollars), there appears to be little incentive for the Honduran government to reduce irregular migration.

DEMONSTRATION WITHOUT REPRESSION
The new government has allowed, and (some respondents believe) even encouraged people to come into the streets and make their voices heard. For now, security forces are not using heavy-handed techniques to quell demonstrations, which offers a release valve and opportunity for people to make their voices heard.

GANGS
While gangs clearly emerged as perpetrators of violence, some such as MS-13 play a mediating function in areas where they are present. Gangs often want to avoid overt acts of violence that draw police attention.

AVOIDING INFLAMMATORY LANGUAGE
The team did hear from some independent media outlets that were working to avoid specific inflammatory language. It is also worth noting that individuals and media outlets that were once voices of opposition to the previous government are now part of the new government, thus reducing the number of critical voices in Honduran media.

TRAJECTORIES
Based on data collected by the team, there are some dynamics that have the potential to escalate into targeted protests or wide-spread acts of violence and conflict:
- Ideological polarization will continue to increase. People are closely monitoring the upcoming Supreme Court and Attorney General elections for any potential mismanagement.
- Disappointed expectations for change could escalate into localized or widespread conflict. Important tensions revolve around more meaningful political and economic inclusion of social and gender minority groups, the return of ancestral lands to Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations, and campesinos. The rising cost of food and perceived increases in violence are also dampening hope for change.
- Civic space will continue to experience pressure, with targeted aggressions against those who
raise their voices against powerful interests increasing without turning into broad-based violence.

- Most people will continue to experience deteriorating socio-economic conditions, increasing the likelihood of continued protests, violence, criminality, or migration while at the same time decreasing the legitimacy of the new government.

- Perceptions that general security is getting worse could lead to protests given the right triggering event, e.g., a killing by police forces reminiscent of the Keyla Martinez case or heightened violence between more established gangs and newer spin-offs competing for territory and drug sales.

- Intra-family and communal violence will continue unabated, including targeted attacks against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Plus (LGBTQI+) community and complete marginalization of and violence against women, especially in rural areas. Widespread violence will perpetuate cycles of violence.

- The impacts of climate change will continue to increase. Another natural event similar to Eta or Iota, rising prices of energy and agricultural inputs, scarcity of resources like water, and lack of a government response in the face of looming food insecurity all have the potential to trigger demonstrations.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following matrix offers an overview of the team’s recommendations. For more detail, please refer to the “Recommendations” section of the main report. The team identified recommendations that aligned with the Mission CDCS Development Objectives (DOs) and the Biden Administration’s Strategy to Address the Root Causes of Migration in Central America (or Root Causes Strategy, RCS). While references to the CDCS and RCS provide points of entry for programming, it is also important to note that many of the recommendations also align with cross-cutting Mission priorities e.g., combating corruption, empowering youth, and climate change adaptation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamic</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clientelism and culture of impunity</td>
<td>Increase transparency and accountability to decrease clientelism and improve access to justice.</td>
<td><strong>Leverage resources:</strong> Continue to leverage high level buy-in and government commitments to combating impunity. Coordinate USG messaging and commit to shifting resources when agreed-upon benchmarks are not met in the justice and security sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mission CDCS IR 2.4 and IR 3.1</td>
<td><strong>National-level programming:</strong> Promote political financing disclosures, increase incentives, and explore new ways to support professionalization of the civil service.</td>
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<td>Governance to reduce impunity improved</td>
<td><strong>Local-level programming:</strong> Identify, replicate, and contextualize successful initiatives promoting access to justice, reducing impunity, and supporting transparency and accountability at</td>
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<td></td>
<td>RCS Pillar II</td>
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8 In February 2021, protests broke out across Honduras after nursing student Keyla Martínez died in police custody in La Esperanza, Intibucá. The police immediately said that she had committed suicide; however, the autopsy revealed that Keyla had been murdered.
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<th>Dynamic</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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| Normalization of violence    | Raise awareness of human rights and the value of human life using highly contextual interventions, in consultation with communities including vulnerable populations, to foster long-term behavior change. | Leverage resources: Partner with other USG agencies to support the police in using survivor-centered approaches when responding to incidents of GBV. Identify programming opportunities to prevent violence in relation to extortion, especially in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and Choloma.  
**Local-level programming:** Work through new or existing USAID programming to engage the school community—students, teachers, parents, and local communities—to raise awareness of human rights and the protection of human life. Facilitate trauma-healing and other psycho-social support for families, especially young children, to counter the effects of witnessing and experiencing violence in the home and community. Integrate community-led consultations that engage vulnerable populations in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of activities. Identify, replicate, and contextualize successful violence reduction approaches, and models that promote access to services and protections for populations at risk. Pull back from approaches that are perceived as ineffective or exclusionary. Support radio programming in remote communities and develop programming around awareness of inclusion and access to rights of vulnerable populations. Expand contextually tailored messaging using Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok to reach the specific communities with access to relevant social media. As citizen security committees begin to form, work with them to create models of inclusive, |
| Mission CDCS SIR 2.4.4 and SIR 3.1.4 Protection of human rights increased | RCS Pillar V                                                               |                                                                                  |

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9 For more information concerning dynamics of violence and extortion, USAID is completing a regional extortion assessment (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) which will be available in September 2022. Contact the LACLEARN point of contact for access to the report.

10 For example, Ciudad Mujer, run by the GOH has GBV programming for women but is widely perceived as excluding male victims, perpetrators, and members of the LGBTQI+ population, reducing overall effectiveness.
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<th>Dynamic</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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| Disputes over land | Prevent land disputes from arising and increase options for peaceful dispute resolution. | **Leverage resources:** Coordinate with other USG agencies to integrate messages of adherence to ILO Convention 169 and respect for human rights when meeting with Honduran counterparts.  
**National-level programming:** Work closely with Indigenous and Afro-descent populations, the National Congress and other stakeholders to facilitate passage of a Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) law as contained in International Labor Organization 169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169). Engage national and international private sector actors to adopt and adhere to FPIC.  
Improve protections for human rights and environmental defenders.  
**Local-level programming:** Strengthen the capacity of land titling entities, environmental licensing bodies, municipalities, ombudsmen, local judges, magistrates, and prosecutors to apply and enforce ILO Convention 169, including compliance with the protocol of FPIC.  
Work with businesses, communities, and authorities to strengthen peaceful land dispute resolution mechanisms and improve education and oversight of business compliance with human rights standards. Support an increased government (civilian) presence in areas experiencing high rates of land disputes.  
Work with relevant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to support social auditing of resolution of land disputes and promote peaceful advocacy and engagement in human, environmental, and labor... |
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<th>Dynamic</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rights. Where possible, integrate contextually appropriate messaging about women's rights to hold land. Together with the private sector and other actors, identify and disseminate existing successful models where communities and the private sector have promoted inclusive, mutually beneficial projects.</td>
<td>Leverage resources: Continue working with USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and the Government of Honduras (GOH) to develop a plan for areas likely to experience high food insecurity. Strengthen USAID and US Department of Defense (DOD) coordination for emergency response and preparation. Collaborate with DOD's Humanitarian Assistance Projects (HAP) for broader USAID disaster preparedness and climate risk reduction efforts. Support donor efforts to pass the 2009 water law regulation(^\text{11}) and create instances to promote its implementation.</td>
<td>Climate change adaptation and resource scarcity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen disaster preparedness and response. Improve management of scarce resources.</td>
<td>Leverage resources: Continue working with USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and the Government of Honduras (GOH) to develop a plan for areas likely to experience high food insecurity. Strengthen USAID and US Department of Defense (DOD) coordination for emergency response and preparation. Collaborate with DOD’s Humanitarian Assistance Projects (HAP) for broader USAID disaster preparedness and climate risk reduction efforts. Support donor efforts to pass the 2009 water law regulation(^\text{11}) and create instances to promote its implementation.</td>
<td>Strengthen disaster preparedness and response. Improve management of scarce resources.</td>
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<td>Mission CDCS IR 1.3 Vulnerability to key shocks and stresses decreased RCS Pillar 1</td>
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<td>National-level programming: Work with the Permanent Contingency Commission (Comisión Permanente de Contingencias, COPECO) to facilitate the development of operational level protocols in response to emergency situations under the new National Risk Management System (Sistema Nacional de Gestión de Riesgos, SINAGER). Assist with improving information systems related to hydrology, and soils in order to inform national decision-making about land use. Support COPECO’s efforts to mainstream climate risk actions as a prevention tool by increasing communities’ adaptive capacities.</td>
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<td>Regional: Improve flood mitigation infrastructure in the Sula Valley where restoration, strengthening,</td>
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\(^{11}\) The General Water Law of 2009 (Ley General de Aguas) created a new National Water Authority (Autoridad Nacional de Agua), which was envisioned to centralize water policy in Honduras. However, the 2009 law lacks a reglamento - a legal document outlining the implementation guidelines and principles and the creation of the water authority is pending.
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<th>Dynamic</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>and refurbishment is urgently needed.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Local-level programming:</strong> Strengthen water boards(^{12}) and municipal water authorities in improving efficient water allocation, maintaining water quality, protecting water sources, and resolving water-use disputes at the local level. to inform water allocation, maintain water quality, and protect water sources.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Look for opportunities across Mission programming to support or create cross-sectoral partnerships and other fora to manage and mitigate climate change and resource stresses.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Closing civic space</strong></td>
<td>Improve state and non-state protections for actors under threat. Cultivate space for diverse opinions and voices.</td>
<td><strong>Leverage resources:</strong> Explore opportunities to work with the Regional Human Rights and Democracy project or other regional anti-corruption mechanisms to improve state protection capacity. Use findings from the forthcoming Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA) to understand and inform responses to patterns of digital violence and digital divides.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mission CDCS SIR 2.4.4 and SIR 3.1.4 Protection of human rights increased; SIR 2.3.3 Civil society and media strengthened RCS Pillar III</td>
<td><strong>National and/or local-level programming:</strong> Contextualize and improve non-state protections for individuals and organizations under threat for challenging power or documenting abuses of power.</td>
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<td>Explore the feasibility of creating an independent civil society protection mechanism and support existing organizations protecting those under threat.</td>
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<td>Expand violence observatory tracking of violations against human rights defenders, journalists, and others under threat.</td>
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<td>Support civil society initiatives to monitor ethical standards and neutral content of media coverage.</td>
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<td>Integrate fact checking into journalist training.</td>
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<td>Facilitate opportunities for emerging media, train journalists and editors on ethics, and strengthen the Ethics Board of the Association of Journalists of Honduras (Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras, CPH).(^{13})</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\(^{12}\) *Juntas de Agua* are community associations present in most communities.  
\(^{13}\) All Honduran journalists must be members of the Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras (Association of Journalists of Honduras).
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamic</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth disenfranchisement</td>
<td>Engage and empower youth in all aspects of social, economic, and political life</td>
<td><strong>Support advocacy and creation of legislation protecting against harm in digital spaces, including GBV. Support designated response units with technical assistance and resources.</strong></td>
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|                         | Mission CDCS IR 1.1 Youth and children are better educated and more productive members of society and IR 3.2 Risk of delinquent behavior reduced. | [**Leverage resources:** Encourage the GOH and private sector investment towards tangible actions in formal and informal education. Collaborate with DOD small grants programming to improve education infrastructure.]
|                         | RCS Pillars I and IV                                                      | Look for opportunities to partner with other donors to build a contextualized approach to sexual and reproductive health and alcohol and drug abuse. When feasible, integrate elements of health and positive behaviors (e.g., don’t use alcohol and drugs) into existing activities.  |
|                         | **National and local-level programming:** Involve youth as agents of their own change. Cultivate youth leaders and engage youth as implementers, visionaries, and monitors of youth-focused activities. Be intentional about engaging young women and girls who have special needs and risk being exploited or overlooked. | Work at multiple levels of entry, e.g., education policy and budgeting, investing in school infrastructure, working with families and communities, etc. to return students to school. Focus workforce development and employment activities as much on job placement at a fair wage as on skills matching with private sector need and training. |
| Public/private sector tensions | Foster conditions for dialogue and support the development of a common agenda | **Leverage resources:** Encourage GOH and private sector discussions to alleviate tensions and agree upon common objectives. |
|                         | Mission CDCS IR 2.1 Private sector effectiveness                         | **National-level programming:** Work with private sector representatives inside and outside of the government to identify champions who support partnership and foster constructive communication between the private sector and the Government of Honduras. |

of Honduras - CPH). This requirement, established by law in 1979.  
https://medialandscapes.org/country/honduras/organisations/journalist-associations
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<th>Dynamic</th>
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<td>Improved RCS Pillars I and II</td>
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<td>Identify a neutral international actor with credibility to facilitate and mediate a dialogue process and the creation of a common agenda between sub-sectors within the private sector. Support the unification of demands and a private sector common agenda. Work with government counterparts to support negotiations.</td>
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<td><strong>Hope... but not forever</strong></td>
<td>Capitalize on hope for change</td>
<td>Support President Xiomara Castro’s leadership in areas such as education, health, poverty reduction, women’s rights and GBV. Identify opportunities to work with President Castro on key anti-corruption initiatives and other high-profile projects and pair these with an energetic GOH communications strategy. Create spaces for dialogue between the government and Indigenous populations and Afro-descendants, private sector actors, and women’s rights and LGBTQI+ advocacy groups.</td>
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<td>Migration and remittances</td>
<td>Track the role that migration and remittances play in mitigating violence and social conflict</td>
<td>Explore options for designing activities that encourage investment of remittances.</td>
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<td><strong>Operational and management recommendations for the Mission</strong></td>
<td>Integrate conflict and violence sensitivity across the Mission strategy and program portfolio Mission CDCS Strategic Approaches and Principles</td>
<td>Ensure the Mission is applying a conflict sensitive lens to Mission programming. Allow for mid-course adjustments in response to changes in dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace by integrating conflict sensitivity into ongoing Mission processes, e.g., portfolio or PMP reviews. Consider hiring an Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants advisor within USAID, establishing an Indigenous peoples’ advisory board or group, and/or</td>
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<td>CLA, gender and social inclusion, integrated programming</td>
<td>having an internship program for Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants.</td>
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<td>Insert language into Development Objective Agreements (DOAGs) identifying key actions by relevant government counterparts on priority issues to enhance accountability.</td>
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<td>Ensure that implementing partners conduct due diligence processes when partnering with NGOs and advocacy organizations, not just private companies. Develop a Mission order on due diligence to clarify who USAID is supporting and avoid reputational and performance risk.</td>
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<td>Improve coordination between USAID activities working in the same zones and coordination between USAID activities and those of other organizations.</td>
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<td>Consult with communities to identify shared goals and support sustainability. When feasible, use resources available within the community.</td>
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<td>Consider longer activity time horizons (beyond five years), and/or long-term monitoring and evaluation for projects seeking to create systemic change.</td>
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**INTRODUCTION**

Honduras has held a strategic position in US foreign policy for the last 50 years. Trade and investment linkages have deepened as a result of the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) in 2006. The country has hosted US military bases since the 1980s and continues to collaborate with the US militarily today. Honduras has experienced more than a decade of political instability, punctuated by the 2009 coup that removed President Manuel Zelaya (husband of current president Xiomara Castro) from office, the 2017 electoral protests, political corruption scandals, and human rights abuses.

This instability, increasing extreme poverty levels, and high crime and violence in the country fueled the stream of migrants and asylum seekers that has led US policymakers to focus greater attention on underlying conditions in Honduras and their implications for the United States. The unprecedented number of encounters with Honduran migrants recorded in the last 10 years by the US Border Patrol has been a recurring policy issue during the last three US administrations, aggravated by growing food insecurity issues, continued high levels of impunity and insecurity, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and two major natural disasters in 2020.
Political instability and increasing authoritarianism throughout Central America contribute to Honduras’ strategic geopolitical position. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele’s administration has debilitated fundamental rights such as freedom of assembly and expression, initiated arbitrary arrests, and restricted communication. This has led many Salvadoran gang members to flee the country for Honduras and Guatemala. In Nicaragua, the recent political instability and politically motivated arrests is further limiting the spaces for political participation. In Guatemala, additional setbacks to democratic stability have ensued following changes within the Attorney General’s office as well as the recent refusal of the national congress to swear in a constitutional court judge in violation of the law.

A wave of hope for change swept over Honduras following the election of President Xiomara Castro in November 2021. The peaceful electoral process and inauguration are landmark moments in Honduras’ democratic history. It is the first time Honduras has stepped outside a bipartisan government (National and Liberal parties); it is the first time since its creation in 2011 that the Liberty and Refoundation (LIBRE) Party has won a presidential election; and it is also the first time a woman has been elected president in Honduras. This election set a new record for voter turnout, with 68.1 percent voter participation and 1,796,723 votes counted.

Honduras is considered a strategic ally in a region rife with instability, human rights violations, press censorship, and overt hostility to the USG. President Castro has championed a direct fight against corrupt practices in government and taken immediate steps to pursue open collaboration with the USG.

However, the Castro administration has hired advisors from Ecuador and Venezuela, raising concerns about the direction of her administration within its first year. Many people who met with the team believe that ex-President Mel Zelaya, who was deposed in the 2009 coup, exerts a great amount of political power in the current Administration. The team frequently heard concerns that former president Zelaya is more concerned with changing the constitution than with addressing practical problems.

**Election of Xiomara Castro and the LIBRE Party**

General elections in November 2021 ushered in Honduras’s first elected female president on a wave of popular support. Xiomara Castro, running for a second time, was elected on promises to restore democracy, promote women’s and Indigenous people’s rights, and eliminate pervasive corruption and organized crime.

However, before she was even inaugurated, Castro’s LIBRE party suffered a significant setback. An unforeseen division within the party emerged during the installment of the Congressional Executive Board. President Castro tried to uphold a political accord forged with the Savior Party of Honduras (PSH), and other small parties including Partido Anticorrupción (PAC) and Honduras Humana. Under the terms of accord, PSH would hold the presidency of Congress if the LIBRE party won the elections. However, almost half of LIBRE congressional representatives, led by Jorge Calix and Beatriz Valle (two high profile LIBRE members), established an alliance with the National Party to elect Calix as President of Congress.

Castro labeled these 18 congressional representatives from LIBRE “traitors,” producing violent reactions from other LIBRE representatives and supporters against the faction supporting Calix. Amid scuffles in the congressional chamber and protests from Castro supporters outside the assembly, Calix was sworn in as temporary President. At the following assembly, Luis Redondo (PSH) was sworn in as temporary President without having the required votes. This conflict potentially weakened Castro’s positioning as the political leader of the country, unveiled a split within the LIBRE party and the approach of addressing political conflicts using polarizing speech. This heightened polarization continues to play out in both traditional and social media.
The legislative crisis was resolved after Manuel Zelaya called on the LIBRE party leadership, including Calix, to accept Redondo as the President of Congress. This meeting took place in the presidential residence, but President Castro was absent. Castro was later reported to have tested positive for COVID-19. Subsequent political statements and other public appearances by former president Zelaya have raised concerns about his role in the new government and executive interference in the legislature. The team heard frequently from people who believe that Zelaya is the one controlling the presidency, not Castro.

On January 27, 2022, President Castro appointed Ramón Sabillón to the position of Minister of Security. Mr. Sabillón had spent the previous five years in exile. In 2014, as chief of police, he oversaw arrests of the Valle cartel’s top leadership and was subsequently forced to leave the country due to threats on his life. Sabillón has declared his intention to continue extraditing traffickers in his new role.14

Once out of office, former President Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH) lost the political immunity being president had given him. On February 15, 2022, within minutes of receiving an extradition request from the USG, police surrounded the former president’s home and removed him in chains. The action was visible and widely publicized, surprising many in a country where powerful elites are accustomed to operating with impunity. JOH is accused of colluding with drug cartels to facilitate shipping tons of cocaine into the US in return for financial support for the National Party. US officials assert that during his time in office, Honduras transformed into one of the largest drug transshipment hubs in Latin America, with cartels penetrating the highest levels of government.15 On March 28, the Supreme Court unanimously ratified the extradition request, and JOH was extradited to the US on April 22, 2022.

The 2021 elections that brought Xiomara Castro to power were largely peaceful. High voter turnout and transparent broadcasting of preliminary votes engendered confidence in the results. However, the lead-up to the elections was fraught with violence and intimidation. A reported 68 candidates participating in local and national races were killed in 2021. Of these, almost half were affiliated with the National Party. Assassinations peaked in March 2021, coinciding with the primary elections and leaving 19 people dead.16

The lead-up to the elections also saw an increase in state welfare voucher distribution during the campaign and pressure on public employees to attend National Party rallies. Messages, memes, photos, and videos disseminating accusations, insults, and attacks, and undermining the right of voters to make an informed choice, were spread on social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Honduras Verifica, a fact-checking organization, identified 180 Facebook accounts able to spread over 400 disinformation messages every day. Although Facebook tried to remove inflammatory accounts, new ones were created daily. At the same time, more than 300 bot accounts on Twitter promoted narratives about the three main presidential candidates.17

Castro came to power promising to construct a “socialist and democratic state”, but also reached out to the business community promising to strengthen rule of law, avoid tax increases, and promote investment. She committed to addressing deeply entrenched corruption and organized crime, and to working with the United Nations (UN) to create a new international commission against impunity and corruption.18

14 Insight Crime. 01/31/22. “New Minister, But Security Challenges Await Honduras President.”
18 Speck, Mary PhD.
THE FIRST 100 DAYS

While many noted that President Xiomara Castro moved quickly and decisively against former administration officials, she has demonstrated much less enthusiasm for holding her allies accountable, leading to uncertainty about her intentions to clean up corruption. For example, the controversial Amnesty Law approved by Congress protects members of the Zelaya government (2006-2009) and LIBRE activists. The administration justifies the Amnesty Law asserting that charges of corruption initiated by the National Party against LIBRE government officials and activities were politically motivated.

The Castro government has stated that it inherited a financial crisis from the previous government. Despite this, Congress approved a national budget increase of 17 percent in FY 2022-2023, 52 million lempiras more than the prior year. The Ministry of Finance announced that the government will use funding from the international reserve to cover any shortfalls. The new budget increases funding for education, health, and defense. The defense budget, which represents military spending, remains a higher priority than the security budget, which funds the Honduran National Police (HPN). The National Electoral Council also received a significant budget increase in a non-election year, heightening speculation that the government may be preparing for a national assembly and referendum to eventually rewrite the constitution, which was part of Castro’s campaign. Despite these budget increases, many government institutions still had not received their funding transfers when the assessment team was conducting fieldwork (May-June 2022).

The new government is implementing a demilitarization policy and shifting the management of prison security and combating gangs from the military to the HPN. Although the demilitarization of public security is fundamental to restoring democracy, the bandwidth of the HPN has suffered due to the prolonged financial crisis, personnel shortages, and a wave of retirements. Significant changes to the leadership and structure of the HPN in the early days of the new administration have produced tensions that the new leadership will have to manage to maintain control and citizen trust.

Police are being redistributed in an attempt to manage these new responsibilities without commensurate increases in resources. With a limited number of police to manage increasing responsibilities, community police are being withdrawn, including from communities with high crime and violence rates, contributing to the perception that security is getting worse. The new government also announced that formerly purged police were now able to reapply to the police force. The Public Order Military Police (PMOP) continues patrolling in rural and urban areas to supplement HPN capacities.

In April 2022, Castro fulfilled a campaign promise to repeal the ZEDEs law. While this move was welcomed by many respondents, the repeal does not mean that the existing ZEDEs will be dissolved. Instead, they continue to operate. The repeal of the law also has to be ratified by the National Congress. There are also concerns among some respondents about this repeal because of its impact on foreign investment and questions of legality.

While some controversial executive orders were eliminated, e.g., the hourly wage law, others have been signed, e.g., the law strengthening the Specialized Fiscal Unit Against Corruption Networks (UFERCO).

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19 Ibid.
Another discrepancy has been the utilization of the controversial Partida Confidencial del Poder Ejecutivo (or confidential fund) managed by the Executive and allegedly used for corrupt purposes during the previous administration. The Castro administration changed its name to Partida de Servicios Financieros de la Administración Central (or Central Administration Financial Services Fund, a discretionary fund). At the time of the report writing, there was no apparent system of public auditing for the fund. Further, it was announced that congressional representatives will be allowed to use legislative funding for development projects which raises concern as this practice was utilized by members of Congress during the previous governments and was perceived to build patronage networks and engage in corruption.

**Criminality**

Honduras has become infamous for its criminal dynamics over the last 15 years. With support from the international donor community, Honduras has successfully reduced overall homicide rates and implemented strategic changes in key national institutions over the last decade. For example, the Support Mission Against Corruption and Impunity (MACCIH)\(^{21}\), was responsible for prosecuting cases against 113 people during its four-year timeframe.\(^{22}\) However, challenges in access to justice, trust in the justice system and security actors, reducing impunity, and consistent access to reliable and public statistical information remain.

The country is located in the middle of a major trafficking corridor for a range of criminal markets. It is both a source and a transit point for trafficking of individuals exploited for sex and labor who are bound for the United States or closer destinations in Mexico and Central America. Honduras also has an arms-trafficking market driven by demand from gangs, criminals, and private security firms. The availability of arms is credited as one of the main reasons for the country’s high levels of violence.

Illegal logging by local loggers, landless farmers, drug traffickers, cattle ranchers, and others, with help from corrupt authorities, is believed to account for more than half of the country’s timber industry. Mahogany and cedar are particularly valued and often trafficked along with drugs for sale in China and the United States. The logging market is the heart of criminal activities in Honduras, making it among the most dangerous countries in the world for environmental defenders.\(^{23}\) The penetration of corruption and drug trafficking in the exploitation of natural resources heightens the likelihood of violence. Respondents noted that media attempts to cover illegal logging and clientelism have led to threats, harassment, and assassinations. As a result, many journalists self-censor to protect themselves.

Cocaine and cannabis are at the center of the drug market in Honduras. There is increasing evidence of local cocaine production and the involvement of both current and former senior level officials at all levels of government in the illegal industry. Organizations working as middlemen between Mexican traffickers and Colombian producers move cocaine through Honduras from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala to the United States. New laboratories and plantations are emerging in Honduras in an effort by local criminal

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\(^{21}\) In January 2020, the mandate of the Organization of American States (OAS)-supported MACCIH was allowed to expire by the Honduran government.


\(^{23}\) Ibid.
In March 2020, a publication by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement at the State Department described Honduras as “...exploited by drug traffickers for the transit of cocaine destined for the United States and precursor chemicals used to produce illicit drugs”. The United States estimates that approximately four percent, or 120 metric tons (MT), of cocaine shipments from South America made a first stop by air or sea in Honduras in 2019, although a larger amount is estimated to have transited Honduras by land after making a first arrival in other countries. The Department of Gracias a Dios is a hotspot for drug trafficking by land, sea, and air due to its remoteness, limited road infrastructure, and minimal government presence. Drug trafficking organizations take advantage of these vulnerabilities, which make detection and interdiction difficult.  

On the North Coast, insecurity is driven by narco-trafficking activity and routes that span from the East, in Gracias a Dios, along the coastline towards the Guatemalan border and through Colón, Atlántida and Cortés departments. Organized criminal networks have displaced Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino groups from their land to establish clandestine airstrips and coca and cannabis plantations. Recently, a state of emergency was declared by the president after three police agents were killed in an ambush in the department of Colón. The HPN attributed the murders to organized criminal networks.

The remote mountains of the Copán department serve as an operations center for organized criminal activity and house many of the estimated 200 clandestine airstrips in Honduras. Many important criminal organizations have been disbanded in the past ten years, but they have not entirely disappeared. For example, remnants of the Los Valle drug trafficking organization continue to operate. Similarly, with the extradition of JOH, many respondents expect that the next generation of the Hernandez family will step in to take over criminal activities.

In the western region, while there is a significant presence of international organized crime, the levels of crime and violence are somewhat contained to the border areas with Guatemala and El Salvador, where organized criminal enterprises focus on safeguarding narco-trafficking routes and other strategic locations.

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24 Ibid.
25 US Department of State, 2020, p. 159

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Regional Context: The Nexus of Organized Crime, Violence, and Land

Respondents described how organized criminal groups have occupied Maya Chortí lands in Copán for money laundering and to secure movement across borders. Traffickers purchase the land at inflated prices and threaten people who refuse to sell. As a result, some people have sold their land, even when it is held under collective title and they have no right to sell as individuals. Loss of these lands impedes access to water sources and weakens Maya Chortí community cohesion.

The team heard about a long history of violent land disputes in Colón, linking agro-industry, tourism projects, and drug trafficking. Over time, these unresolved conflicts have given rise to criminal gangs, private security forces, and communities that use violence to hold land. Criminal organizations collude with local authorities and security forces, allowing powerful families, companies, and international investors to act with impunity, and raising the vulnerability of campesino and Afro-descendant communities.

Respondents reported that in La Moskitia, lands purchased by organized criminal groups, ostensibly for cattle ranching, often serve as bases of operations for landing strips to move drugs. Larger operations may have as many as 20-30 armed guards. There are many targeted killings and no protection in this area. People who speak out against, or witness, violence in La Moskitia are hunted down, even when they flee to other parts of the country.

Gangs contribute to urban crime, violence, and homicide rates in the northern and central regions of Honduras. The two biggest gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18, are deeply entrenched in the peri-urban areas of Tegucigalpa, the Sula Valley (San Pedro Sula, Choloma, El Progreso, La Lima), Tela and La Ceiba. Their criminal economy derives from extortion, drug dealing, and outsourcing services for organized criminal networks. When called upon, they also allegedly engage with political actors as armed disruptors.

The department of Cortés, including the city of San Pedro Sula, recorded the most massacres in Honduras—three or more people killed—in 2021. A wave of massacres associated with drug seizures in the North, along with gang disputes and/or revenge killings, led to 14 massacres in Cortés, leaving 41 people dead.

One of the most important transformations in gang structure during the last 15 years has been their involvement in and control of illicit drug markets in neighborhoods and communities. This has increased their financial resources and introduced more sophistication into organizational structures and gang involvement with politics. The team repeatedly heard that MS-13 is engaging less in extortion and more in selling, and sometimes manufacturing, drugs. In parallel, the relationship with communities has evolved since gangs offer—and also force—residents to engage in drug sales, which then becomes a source of income for families in highly vulnerable territories. San Pedro Sula is an MS-13 stronghold where the gang controls the trafficking and sales of expensive, potent

Violence in the Transport Sector
MS-13 and Barrio 18 are very active in the transit sector which includes bus drivers, inter-urban bus drivers, taxi drivers, and motorcycle taxis. Transportation is now one of the most vulnerable professions, witnessing more than 2,000 drivers killed. As drivers cross multiple territories, they face extortion and threats in each area that they enter.

Violence in the transport sector is highly gendered. The victims are all male, leaving their families without support. In the absence of other viable livelihoods options, many of these families choose to migrate.
mixed cannabis. Called “krispy,” it offers MS-13 a source of income beyond extortion. The fight for the control of territories between gangs has transformed into a fight to control illicit drug markets on the streets. At the same time, this change also increases potential engagement with politicians and authorities, especially the police and military, heightening the risk of collusion and political-criminal relationships.

Gangs are also expanding in the South, and to a limited extent, the West, bringing with them extortion, money laundering, and services offered to other organized criminal networks. In the East and South, particularly around the department of Olancho, criminal dynamics mostly center around narco-ranching (a criminal activity which entails illegal clearing of land for cattle ranches, airstrips, and roads) to facilitate money laundering and maintain control over trafficking routes along the Nicaraguan border and the Pacific coast. In the South, Choluteca continues to be a focal point for trafficking humans and contraband across the Nicaraguan border.

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**Regional Context: Organized Crime and Gangs**

In Copán and Lempira, where large gangs (MS-13 and Barrio 18) are not as prevalent, the team heard about different relationships between small, local gangs and organized criminal networks. In some places, people explained that organized crime doesn’t like competition, so they eliminate gang members before they become an issue. In other places, people described a relationship where gang members provided services to organized criminal groups including protection, hitmen, collecting extortion fees, and other tasks.

Respondents in Cortés agree that gangs are responsible for most of the violence, but they note that their relationship with other organized crime networks is also very influential. They attribute recent massacres to a reorganization of organized criminal networks and gangs in attempts to reclaim or acquire new territory in light of the perceived reduction in security force presence in the department.

The crime and violence in La Ceiba, Atlántida, is attributed to MS 13 and Barrio 18. The city is also connected to drug trafficking routes in Colón and Gracias a Dios.

Olancho serves as a major transit point for illegal logging, drugs, and endangered wildlife from the Rio Platano biosphere in Gracias a Dios. Despite this, respondents highlighted that the department has much less gang presence or small-scale crime than other parts of the country because the organized criminal networks do not tolerate competition.

In Tegucigalpa, MS-13 and Barrio 18 play a role in both perpetrating and moderating violence. MS 13 and Barrio 18 are using increasingly sophisticated business models. Rather than compete with smaller gangs, they are “subletting” territory to these gangs to extort in return for a fee. Numerous respondents identified increases in violence and crime, as gangs and criminal organizations take advantage of the poor transition of responsibilities from the military to the less-resourced HPN.

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30 https://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/como-ms13-paso-pandilla-callejera-mafia-honduras/
**Migration and Remittances**
Statistics from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reveal that over 319,000 Hondurans, more than any other nationality, were apprehended along the US-Mexico border during the fiscal year 2021.\(^{31}\) For Honduras, emigration provides the main source of foreign exchange, surpassing coffee production and maquilas. Family remittances increased 850 percent from 2000–2020,\(^{32}\) and today represent about 25 percent of the country’s GDP. Despite this, remittances are generating large profits for private banks rather than alleviating poverty.\(^{33}\) Governments have not been able to create a policy to incentivize the investment of remittances into impoverished communities and groups under social risk. Most remittances are used for primary consumption, and households save very little. According to the International Development Bank, in 2016, one of every six Hondurans benefited from remittances.\(^{34}\) The team heard about people who stop working, even if they have a good job, when they begin receiving remittances. Interviewees described these people as NINIs – *Ni estudian Ni trabajan* (Don’t work and Don’t study).

A survey of secondary students conducted in June 2021 revealed that more than 55 percent intend to migrate when they finish school. Multiple drivers fuel the desire to emigrate, including hope for better jobs, reuniting with families, escaping violence and discrimination, and instability at home.\(^{35}\)

Food insecurity has been exacerbated by repeated hurricanes and cycles of drought related to climate change. Expansion of crops such as African Palm, which has led to the displacement of some Afro-descendant and campesino populations, and extractive industries, have also contributed to climate change and loss of livelihoods. Unable to make a living from their land, subsistence farmers often move first to cities and then leave the country to escape urban violence.\(^{36}\)

Poverty, violence, and impunity are considered important push factors, particularly for women and those who identify as LGBTQI+. Facing discrimination, exclusion, and violence, 59 percent of Honduran migrants are female. The lack of women’s shelters leads thousands of women and girls to migrate seeking safety. More than one-third of Honduran families are headed by women, many of them single mothers. They struggle to provide for their families given deep gender inequities. Thirty percent fewer women than men participate in the labor market, and with the exception of certain private sector industries (for example, maquilas), women who are employed earn 30

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\(^{32}\) SwissInfo (2021) Las remesas recibidas por Honduras crecen un 36,2% entre enero y julio. [https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/honduras-remesas_las-remesas-recibidas-por-honduras-crecen-un-36-2---entre-enero-y-julio/46861504


\(^{34}\) IDB (2016) *La población receptora de remesas en Honduras.*
[https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/La-poblaci%C3%B3n-receptora-de-remesas-en-Honduras-Un-an%C3%A1lisis-de-sus-caracter%C3%ADsticas-socioecon%C3%B3micas.pdf]

\(^{35}\) Speck, Mary PhD. December 2021. “Amid Democratic Disillusionment, Can Honduras’ Historical Election Bring Change?”
percent less than men.\(^{37}\) For many in the highly stigmatized LGBTQI+ community who fear for their safety, migration to urban areas or emigration are perceived to be the only options.

The Biden administration offered a new approach to addressing irregular migration from Northern Central America and has signaled support for newly elected President Castro. US Vice-President Harris traveled to Honduras for the inauguration and the US Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America (RCS) articulates the Biden-Harris Administration’s commitment to establishing humane, fair, and orderly migration by improving security, governance, human rights, and governance in Northern Central America. There is no clear Honduran government policy to incentivize its population to stay in the country by creating income-earning opportunities and access to financial support.

**Perceptions of the USG and USAID**

Perceptions of US government foreign policy and the work of USAID were largely positive, with some caveats and suggestions. Many viewed the US government as being one of the few external forces able to effect change on the GOH. They identified the extradition of JOH as an example, noting that it is unlikely that he would have faced justice in Honduras. People who met with the team frequently expressed the belief that the US and the international community have an obligation to accompany Honduras in eradicating drug trafficking and corruption, believing that Honduras cannot or will not do this alone. The team also encountered a perception, particularly in the West, that it is the role of donors and NGOs to provide for the people of Honduras when their own government fails to do so, tacitly alleviating pressure on the GOH to find solutions.

Respondents frequently pointed to perceived inconsistencies in US government foreign policy. Instances that arose repeatedly throughout interviews include frustration with US government support for JOH despite knowing the extent of corruption and abuse happening under his leadership. Some pointed out that extraditing JOH, but not other high-level government officials who participated in, or were complicit with, the abuses felt more like a politically motivated action than a real effort to address structural corruption. Other instances included lack of US government objection to the 2009 coup or the 2017 election, while at the same time running anti-corruption programming and supporting free and fair elections. Some noted that because the US government is so focused on stemming migration, other pressing needs, such as extreme poverty and lack of basic services, don’t receive the attention they deserve. Similarly, some questioned the US Government’s focus on combating the flow of drugs, and were unaware of corresponding investments in the US to suppress demand.

Most people who spoke with the team had some level of familiarity with USAID and recognized the importance of USAID’s significant investments in Honduras. In the West, there was generally less familiarity with USAID activities, although some perceived that they catered more to men and noted that women have more difficulty participating because their husbands may not permit it.

People pointed out specific USAID projects that they feel have been particularly effective and contributed to positive change. The most frequently mentioned were the Dry Corridor Alliance, social auditing work, Procelaque, Transforming Market Systems, GENESIS, and BHA’s disaster response. However, many also highlighted that despite all of the international community’s investment in Honduras over many years,

something is not working. They point to a lack of deep structural change or movement of critical development indicators.

While respondents appreciated USAID’s investment in development, they raised concerns that most of the money appears to go to international implementers rather than directly benefiting local systems, organizations, and communities. Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations widely perceive that they are not consulted or engaged in USAID activities because implementers work directly with municipalities and the goals of the municipalities often don’t align with their goals and worldview. At the same time, some municipalities and municipal associations, also known as “mancomunidades,” believe that USAID funds should go through them to seamlessly align with local priorities. People who spoke with the team conveyed a widespread perception that USAID funding goes directly to municipalities, where it risks being politicized or lost due to corruption. They requested more direct consultation with communities when a project begins and throughout implementation.

Many people who met with the team also had suggestions for USAID to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions. These included, when possible, using local technical experts, from the community or the municipality depending on the perspective of the respondent, rather than bringing in external consultants. They believe that external consultants, both Honduran and international, arrive without understanding the local context or worldviews of the community and bring their own goals for the project that often do not align with community goals. Lack of consultation with communities from the beginning was of great concern for the Indigenous and Afro-descendant individuals and organizations that met with the team.

Some also had comments directed towards implementing partners concerning the sustainability of interventions. They described how once a project finishes, so does the initiative. When implementers and consultants leave, they take with them the knowledge, methodologies, and capacities rather than transferring these to community members, which limits sustainability. Several highlighted a perceived lack of communication between USAID activities and implementers working in the same geographic area, which becomes confusing for local partners. They also frequently noted that longer term interventions (5+ years) would better support sustainable development.

Local organizations seeking USAID funds remarked on the complexity of the application, management, and reporting requirements. Some commented that USAID should be mindful of the way activities are structured so that they do not exclude local organizations in favor of international implementers, or force local organizations with different objectives and visions to work together. They noted that these situations have the potential to compromise the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions.

**METHODOLOGY**

In 2020, USAID/Honduras requested a strategic assessment of current trends with the potential to contribute to violence, violent conflict, or peace. After delays due to the COVID pandemic, the assessment fieldwork took place May - June 2022 and is intended to inform implementation of the 2020 – 2025 CDCS by supporting USAID’s efforts to ensure that changing contextual dynamics are reflected in programming and strategy. USAID/Honduras will use this assessment to inform decision making, ensure conflict sensitivity across their portfolio, and identify opportunities to mitigate conflict and violence through its programming.

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38 The period of data collection roughly overlapped with the milestone of the first 100 days of the Castro government.
The assessment team included representatives from USAID/Honduras, the Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention (CVP), and local and international consultants hired by the LACLEARN project. This multidisciplinary team was carefully selected to pilot a Violence Addendum to USAID’s Conflict Assessment Framework 2.0 (VCAF39) developed in 2020. Understanding that different types of violence and violent conflict cannot be understood in isolation, the VCAF expands the CAF 2.0 analytical framework to better account for non-conflict violence at multiple levels of entry. The VCAF principles can be used at a national or even regional level to assess dynamics of transnational organized crime, at a sub-national level to address violent conflict, and at a very local level to assess community and interpersonal violence.

The team conducted key informant interviews and focus group discussions, collecting perception data in nine departments (refer to map for data collection locations). Of the nearly 330 people that met with the team representing nine departments,40 53 percent identified as male, 45 percent identified as female, and two percent identified as non-binary or gender minorities. Key informants and focus group participants represented diverse political views and segments of society, including populations that USAID does not routinely hear from.

As such, respondents included: NGOs, civil society, media outlets, journalists, security forces and police, youth, women, religious leaders, indigenous leaders, mayors and municipal staff, mancomunidades, national-level institutions, private sector (i.e., businesses, chambers of commerce, informal sector), implementing partners, farmers, human rights and environmental defenders, former prison inmates, LGBTQI+

39 The CAF 2.0 was developed to specifically assess dynamics of intra-state violent conflict. Other forms of non-conflict violence, e.g., gang violence, organized criminal activity, violent extremism, intimate partner abuse, etc. have traditionally been assessed separately. The VCAF is designed to analyze the relationships between violent conflict and other forms of violence and how they interact in a given context. This understanding informs integrated approaches to prevent violence and conflict and amplify dynamics of peace.

40 Although the team was not able to travel into Gracias a Dios, they did meet with Miskito leaders in Tegucigalpa.
community, communities impacted by violence, academics, and political parties. In each department, the team attempted to interview a cross-section of informants, collecting diverse perceptions and ground truthing the available information.

To preserve the rich data collected in each department, this report also includes departmental snapshots (Annex A). Each snapshot includes information specific to the department and is organized to mirror the structure of the main report by discussing dynamics of violence and conflict and mitigating factors. Trajectories and programmatic recommendations are included in the main body of the report. While the team believes that the assessment represents a valid representation of department perceptions, it is important to recognize the limitations of the abbreviated data-collection timeframe41 and scope.

The team collected perception data along the following lines of inquiry prioritized by the Mission:
- Gender-based violence (GBV)
- Youth violence
- Corruption and state capture
- Culture of impunity and access to justice
- Land and natural resource exploitation

This report represents analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. When reviewing this report, it is important to keep in mind that it offers findings, conclusions, and recommendations related to how the people interviewed perceive their reality. These perceptions are shaped by the environment and inherently linked to an interplay of identities, interests and incentives, dominant narratives, social norms, and values, and the perceived performance of formal and informal institutions within this environment. Therefore, this assessment should be understood as a snapshot in time gathered primarily from perception data, versus a robust quantitative analysis.

**CORE SOCIAL PATTERN**

Across interviews and focus group discussions, one core social pattern repeatedly emerged. A pattern of systemic exclusion and impunity normalizes violence and allows corruption to flourish at all levels of government and society. This leads many people to lose hope that they can meet their basic needs and aspirations in Honduras, contributing to internal and external migration.

The deeply entrenched nature of this social pattern, and the dynamics of conflict and violence that are perpetuated in this context will take both time and political will on the part of the GOH to bring about reforms and behavior change. While in the short term, USG programming can contribute to addressing patterns that influence the decision to emigrate, the team concludes that it will not directly impact rates of migration.

Global research demonstrates that improved economic growth does not immediately deter migration. Rather, emigration escalates when incomes rise. As GDP per capita increases, so does migration. This relationship slows at around $5,000 and reverses after approximately $10,000. In low-income countries, people preparing to migrate have 30 percent higher incomes than average, 14 percent of the higher income

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41 Data collection was conducted simultaneously by three sub-teams over the course of two weeks.
stratification are attributed to more years of education. The team repeatedly heard from individuals who wanted training and other support, but for the purposes of finding better employment when they migrate.

The effect of economic growth on migration increases in societies with high levels of income inequality. Honduras had in 2019 the fourth-highest level of income inequality (Gini index of 0.482) in the LAC region. Sustained economic growth rates for Honduras indicate that emigration will likely continue to rise, at least in the short-term.

**VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS**

Within the framework of the core social pattern, the team used systems mapping to identify relationships and patterns that perpetuate and mitigate violence and conflict. An acute lack of justice and protection mechanisms for the majority of people without money and influence cuts across all of these dynamics and perpetuates fear, impunity, and the desire to escape violence. These include perceptions of:

1. Clientelism and a culture of impunity
2. Normalization of violence
3. Disputes over land
4. Climate change adaptation and resource scarcity
5. Closing civic space
6. Youth disenfranchisement
7. Latent public/private sector tensions

The elements in *italics* indicate strategic points of leverage that appeared in multiple parts of the system. Although they are described in separate sections below, it is important to acknowledge that these dynamics inter-relate and cannot be considered in isolation from each other.

**CLIENTELOISM AND A CULTURE OF IMPUNITY**

Clientelism, corruption, and a culture of impunity, emerged as a theme across virtually all interviews. While President Xiomara Castro promised to combat entrenched state corruption, some of her early actions have raised questions. The most frequently mentioned were the passage of the Amnesty Law, which effectively offers immunity to members of Manuel Zelaya’s former administration, and her appointment of family members and Manuel Zelaya’s close associates to serve in her government, e.g., placing Jose Zelaya, Manuel Zelaya’s nephew, in the position of Minister of Defense. Respondents did, however, support repeal of the Secrets Law, hoping that it will lead to more transparency and accountability.

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*Respondent Perceptions of Culture of Impunity:*

*Justice is for those who can pay.*

*People do not file complaints because there is no effective protection for victims and no penalty for the perpetrator.*

*The authorities are the biggest enemy of the people.*

*The police and justice sector do not seem to function. When the police come, you don’t know if they are there to help or cause you harm.*

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42 Center for Global Development. August 18, 2020. “New Research Confirms that Migration Rises as the Poorest Countries Get Richer.”

43 The Amnesty Law was passed to facilitate the release of human rights activists and civil society leaders who suffered criminalization after the 2009 coup.
Corruption is entrenched in state institutions and is considered a main source of financing for the political system. According to the Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perception Index, in 2021, Honduras was the fourth most corrupt country in the Americas, behind Haiti, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Reporting by the Foro Social de la Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras (FOSDEH) that has been echoed by Ricardo Zúñiga, the Biden administration’s special envoy for Northern Central America, shows that money lost to corruption represented 12 percent of the country’s GDP in 2020, or approximately 3 billion dollars. Many respondents question whether President Castro is able or willing to introduce deep structural reforms required to combat corruption, or if the administration’s priorities are more focused on punishing the former government.

People who met with the team described the many ways that government and political party clientelism affect their access to basic services, jobs, land, and justice. Many people working in government ministries and agencies are being fired to create jobs for LIBRE party supporters. Public offices are being emptied and entire staff, including technical experts, fired, crippling institutional capacity. Many interviewees noted that new people being installed often do not have the skills to fill these roles, leaving institutions with severely depleted technical and managerial capacity, and virtually no institutional memory. It also means starting over and building new relationships in municipalities, with the police, or in other government offices.

This culture of clientelism exacerbates feelings of exclusion by the majority of the population. Combined with widespread impunity, clientelism also perpetuates opportunities and incentives for corruption.

Respondent Perceptions of Corruption:
The government is reproducing bad practices. If someone is not a member of LIBRE then they will not have access to a job. Clientelism continues.

Corruption is a cancer. It can't be eradicated in four years. It's all about nepotism with the families.

The PMOP and the police collude with gangs. They smoke and buy marijuana from the gangs and end up extorting and recruiting for the gangs.

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45 Proceso Digital (2021) Corrupción le arrebató a Honduras $3 mil millones durante la pandemia, dice Ricardo Zúñiga: https://proceso.hn/es-de-especial-interes-de-euuu-la-prosperidad-y-democracia-de-honduras-ricardo-zuniga/
Regional Perspectives: Impacts of Clientelism and Corruption

Many people living in Tegucigalpa described the high number of people living in extreme poverty and without access to basic services as a breach of the social contract between the government and citizens. In addition to lack of funding and poor infrastructure, many blame mismanagement and corruption for this widespread exclusion.

In Colón, although Garifuna and Pech communities supported Xiomara Castro in the election, they do not feel that the new administration is changing the dynamics of exclusion that they have felt for decades. Many feel that the new government used Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations to win the election, but they do not have any interest in addressing Indigenous needs. As one leader stated, “they only invited us to dance as part of a cultural festival.”

Since JOH is from Gracias, the department of Lempira is closely associated with the National Party. In both Lempira and Copán people told the team about how their friends and family members are losing their jobs to make room for LIBRE Party employees.

As perceptions of exclusion and corruption increase, more protests erupt. Protest leaders emerge and are targeted either for killing, criminalization, or co-optation by government, political party members, or the private sector. The team heard diverse expression of these dynamics, from a mayor actively seeking out opposition voices and trying to hire them as “community liaisons” at high salaries, to leaders in the transport sector in Tegucigalpa being either co-opted or killed, to the killing of Berta Caceres in Intibucá. Once these leaders are effectively removed, social movements are weakened and clientelism continues to flourish.

A widespread perception of a complete failure of the formal justice system (police, Public Ministry, and judiciary) to perform for anyone without political influence perpetuates a culture of impunity and dissuades the majority of the population from filing complaints and reporting acts of violence to local law enforcement. Several people told the team that reporting an act of violence or a crime is considered counterproductive. If the perpetrator seeks revenge, victims of extortion or domestic violence may be killed for reporting the crime.

In the 2021 Rule of Law Index, Honduras ranked 136 out of 139 countries surveyed globally. Its score has declined since 2016. Honduras has one of the most corrupt and least effective criminal justice systems in the world. According to LatinoBarometro 2020, Honduran trust in their judiciary ranked among the lowest in Latin America, with only 16 percent of respondents expressing trust in the institution.

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Respondent Perceptions of the Police:
The national government doesn’t understand the living conditions of the national police. It is widely recognized that police are understaffed and under resourced. Living conditions are deplorable, and police have to pay for their own cell phones and data plans for use at work. How are they going to implement community policing activities?

Narcos and gangs have infiltrated the police. People don’t trust them.

We are more afraid of the police than the criminals.

In some cases, when two events occur at the same time, the police have to prioritize responding to the most serious incident because they do not have the resources to respond to both.

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There is widespread distrust of the executive, Congress, the judiciary, and security forces. Despite signing a number of international treaties against organized crime and passing national laws to combat corruption and criminal activity, Honduras has been unable to implement these measures, which many attribute to efforts to protect the interests of political and economic elites.\textsuperscript{48} State actors facilitate illicit markets not only by protecting them and turning a blind eye, but also by rejecting measures that, if effectively implemented, could strengthen their country’s capacity to fight organized crime. These include robust accountability mechanisms, crime prevention and victim support programs, and good governance.\textsuperscript{49}

The GOH is preparing to launch Citizen Security Committees. The committees will include citizens and police, using the community policing model, which facilitates discussions and collaboration while enhancing intelligence-led policing interventions. Although the operational functioning of the committees has yet to be defined, a few raised concerns that these committees may be co-opted for political and even surveillance purposes. The first two Citizen Security Committees will be formed in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. However, based on country trends, they will likely face budgetary, training, and resource challenges, as well as risk of politicization. If the committees are not functional or appear to be co-opted, perceptions of impunity at the local level could worsen. Community members expressed concern over the transparency of selection processes and possible implications of exclusive and opaque decision-making on community safety and resource allocation. However, in some areas like Olancho, people also expressed feelings of cautious optimism about the committees.

**Normalization of Violence**

In 2020, Honduras had the highest rate of femicide in Latin America. Honduras reported 227 femicides in 2020—a rate of 4.7 per every 100,000 women, according to the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean. The Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras (CONADEH) estimated that between 2006 and 2020 approximately 6,266 women died in violent circumstances: 90 percent of these deaths have gone unpunished.

The culture of impunity and deeply entrenched machismo that exists at all levels of society has led to a widespread normalization of violence and lack of respect for human life. Violence has become a social norm and fact of daily life. Individuals living with a disability are at even greater risk, being almost four times more likely to suffer physical and emotional violence than their peers.\textsuperscript{50}

Fear of violence contributes to both internal migration to bigger cities and emigration. Those who do not migrate seek alternative protection mechanisms to escape violence. For members of the LGBTQI+ community that may mean becoming “invisible” to avoid harm, or in the worst cases, committing suicide. In some cases, people hire gang members or members of barras that offer protection.

The team heard about many instances of violence routinely being used to resolve minor disputes, exert control, and achieve goals. Vulnerable populations are left with no access to protection or


\textsuperscript{50} USAID/Honduras. February 2020. Analysis of Gender and Inclusive Social Development.
justice creating a culture of fear in communities. Many people, particularly in rural areas of the West, described violence against women, children, Indigenous populations, and members of the LGBTQI+ community as socially accepted norms in their conservative societies. Sexual violence is perceived as common, and even accepted as a man’s right by some in more remote areas of the West. Alarmingly, respondents described increases in incest and early pregnancies (as young as age 9), attributed to the pandemic, social acceptance of sexual violence, and increased alcohol and drug use. Several people who met with the team described how the church sometimes perpetuates these dynamics of machismo and violence by advising women and children to submit to the will of the men and pray for change, even if it means suffering repeated acts of violence.

Respondents frequently described situations where women are trapped in cycles of domestic abuse. Only 8.2 percent of women in Honduras hold deeds of title in their own name (as compared to 30 percent of men). Another 5.4 percent are co-owners, but the majority, 86 percent of women, are non-property owners. Consequently, women have less access to credit than men because they have no property to offer as security. This effectively means that many rural women are beholden to their spouses who own the land, and therefore the means of production and profits. In the West, the team repeatedly heard about women unable to escape domestic violence due to lacking a means of generating an income.

Many people who spoke to the team raised concerns because children are exposed to violence at a very early age. According to some, because there are no controls, children see graphic and violent images in the media. They often witness intrafamily violence and sexual abuse and consequently perceive this as a social norm. Children may also be exposed to seeing dead bodies on the streets or overtly displayed through print and social media. All of this exposure at an early age normalizes violence and the understanding of impunity for perpetrators. Some children even aspire to be gang members or part of organized crime for the glamorous lifestyle and power that are associated with gangs.

Many also blamed the church for stoking stigmatization, criminalization, and violence against LGBTQI+ populations. Events that advance LGBTQI+ rights in Honduras or other countries often trigger violent backlash against the LGBTQI+ community, e.g., the legalization of gay marriage in Chile. Respondents also described violence, intimidation, and aggressive language used by some members of the print media when reporting on news involving the LGBTQI+ community.

Highly stigmatized, transgender women and rights activists face increased risk for gender-based violence. The Lesbian Network Cattrachas reported 373 violent deaths among LGBTQI+ between June 2009 and March 2020, of which 111 were trans femicides. In the department of Atlántida, respondents noted a rise in the targeting and extortion of women and trans sex workers by gangs. Some people described how many trans sex workers have resorted to paying criminals to protect them against gangs forcing them to sell drugs for them. Police were characterized as being complicit in these gang activities.

Violence permeates all levels of government and society. Women face many barriers in political and public life, including violence within their own political parties. In the nine months leading up to the most recent elections, civil society organizations reported increased political violence against women, including femicide, affecting all three major political parties. In the most recent elections, only two LGBTQI+ congressional candidates declared their sexual orientation versus seven in 2017. LGBTQI+ groups assert that discrimination, marginalization and high levels of electoral violence discourage many potential candidates from participating.\(^52\)

Violence is an accepted way of resolving disputes even at the highest levels of government. Before President Xiomara Castro was even inaugurated, violence broke out in the National Congress over a dispute between two factions of the party for control of the legislative branch. The violence spread to supporters of both factions waiting outside and received coverage in the national media.

The team also heard about increased use of social media to perpetrate aggressive digital attacks on high profile women, including politicians and journalists. Circulation of compromising photos of women in the digital space is becoming a more frequent tactic of cyber abuse. Respondents highlighted that attacks against women in digital forums were particularly graphic and personally targeted compared to those perpetrated against men.

People described how there is no protection from family and community violence for vulnerable populations. People generally fear going to the police or consider reporting acts of violence as a waste of time, and possibly even counterproductive. The team spoke to women who described how the police frequently try to get the victim to drop charges against the abuser, especially if it is a spouse or other family member.

Although the HPN has hired more women, this does not automatically mean that coverage is improved. For example, the police station in Gracias covers 28 municipalities. Although there are a number of women on the force, they are all located in the town of Gracias because none of the other municipalities have police facilities, such as separate sleeping areas and bathrooms, able to accommodate them.

In many remote communities, there is no police or justice system presence, and victims need to pay for transportation to another city to file a complaint. Those who do move forward with a report in larger cities may have access to an integrated service for survivors of gender-based violence, known as Modelo de Atención Integral Especializado (MAIE). However, this service does not exist in many parts of the country.

Furthermore, tools within the MAIE intended to avoid revictimization, like the use of the Gesell Chamber, are not functioning properly, according to respondents. In addition to a widespread distrust of the police, Public Ministry, and courts, there are systematic disincentives for reporting acts of violence.

### Regional Perspectives: Normalization of Violence

In **Atlántida**, people in Tela and La Ceiba described how survivors of violence identifying as transgender women are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses perpetrated by the police and military.

The team heard that hitmen are for sale and active in several cities in **Olancho**, including Catacamas and Dulce Nombre de Culmí.

In **Intibucá**, some described how the coffee harvest every year places women and children at increased risk of abuse. When coffee is harvested, from October-May, children don’t go to school. Instead, they go with their parents to pick coffee. People come from far away for work, many of them bringing alcohol and drugs. In this environment, increased levels of violence and lack of protections render children and women highly vulnerable to abuse.

In the **Colón**, delinquency is relatively low because it is kept in check by criminal networks. However, people reported that other types of violence including repression, armed confrontations, and killings of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino leaders are perceived as a normal part of daily life.

In reaction to violence and the failure of the formal justice system to protect them, respondents described how communities are becoming more fragmented as people try to protect themselves. Some people choose to migrate, and others in light of the failure of formal justice systems, take other approaches to resolving disputes outside of formal legal channels. As a result, there is no unified demand for justice and accountability, further fueling a culture of impunity and allowing widespread violence to continue unchecked.

Within some communities, there is a perception that self-protection is the only alternative. For example, in Garifuna communities the use of communal security boards is a widespread practice. These boards are meant to both address the security issues of the community in line with the cultural practices as well as substitute for the lack of police presence and responsiveness in these areas. However, respondents shared that some of the boards employ violence to counter violence and/or situations of land encroachment as their means of defense. Others noted that they are dominated by men, and do not provide support, or even acknowledgement, to issues of GBV.

Violence impacts virtually all aspects of life in many of Tegucigalpa’s poorest neighborhoods and neighborhoods, which are highly contested between different gangs. For example, respondents of one neighborhood explained that the informal curfew had been reduced from seven pm to five pm because of increasing violence. The curfew represents times when people feel unsafe leaving their homes or walking in the streets. In San Pedro Sula, respondents talked about how people don’t value human life anymore. Someone can be killed for very little money, and possibly even to return a personal favor. Homicides have

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53 Gesell Chambers use one way mirrors and audiovisual equipment to facilitate the documentation of testimony for survivors and witnesses of sensitive crimes like interfamily violence, sexual abuse, or sexual assault. This enables psychologists and other trained professions to provide support while minimizing revictimization.
become so routine that they are barely remarkable.

Although gangs are not as prevalent in the West, people in both Gracias and Santa Rosa de Copán noted that detention centers housing gangs from other cities are drawing an increased criminal presence. When gang members are transferred, their relatives and criminal associates often relocate to the area. Some people correlate this increased presence with an increase in violence and suspect that gang members are ordering crimes from prison. In some cases, the team heard of situations where gang members had entered a community with the intent to seize control, and the community fought back through violent means.

In Olancho, people described how narco-culture and violence are considered increasingly normal. Criminal networks have assumed responsibility for security in some areas where the state is absent: for example, Trujillo in Colón. They are perceived to work together with the police to control common crime, run gangs out of town, or kill gang members or criminals who may be moving into their territory. In the West, the team heard instances of organized criminal networks, and sometimes communities themselves, killing outsiders identified as suspected gang members.

Throughout data collection, the team frequently heard perceptions that security is getting worse. Respondents cited several factors that they believe are contributing to increased violence, including government moves to demilitarize security by transferring responsibilities from the military to the police, e.g., prison oversight and the National Anti-Gang Task Force (Fuerza Nacional Anti Maras y Pandillas, FNAMP). Some noted that even though responsibilities had been transferred, there was not a corresponding budget transfer to the police to assume these new obligations.

Many see the potential return of purged police as another indicator that the administration is not fulfilling its campaign promises to reduce corruption. Some have suggested that the returned police are already engaging in extortion. At the same time, the administration has removed many police, including some high ranking, experienced officers, who were perceived as linked to the last administration. Some people expressed frustrations about having to forge new working relationships with the police, many of whom lack experience. A few felt that the government’s recent actions indicated that they would not be as tough on crime as the prior administration was and suggested that an approach like Nayib Bukele’s mano dura approach in El Salvador would be more effective.

The team also heard about how violence impacts economies and businesses. There is a perception, particularly in urban areas, that extortion is getting worse, even forcing some small businesses to close. Some reflected that in the past, only larger, more successful businesses were subject to extortion, but now everyone is. They also attribute a rise in extortion to increasing gang fragmentation, e.g., the Illuminati and M1, which split from Barrio 18. Now, instead of paying extortion to just one group, a business may have to pay several groups at the same time.

In the West of the country, while there are complaints of increasing extortion, it appears to have less impact on the private sector than in other parts of the country. In the West, the team heard more about the economies that arise around the presence of organized criminal networks. These include demand for services that stimulate business and create jobs. In some cases, business owners complained that businesses established for money laundering undercut their legitimate business, but they still recognized
the contributions of organized criminal enterprises to employment and the economy.

**DISPUTES OVER LAND**

Land insecurity and contestation surfaced as a central dynamic contributing to both social conflict and violence in all regions included in the assessment. The team heard repeatedly about how a history of unequal distribution of productive lands, lack of respect for collective titles, and seizures by organized criminal networks leave Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations and campesinos feeling robbed of their land. Land disputes manifest differently depending on the context and actors involved. In some cases, they involve Indigenous peoples and ancestral lands, while others involve contestation between agricultural communities and private sector interests over productive land use, natural resource management, and damage to the environment.

Several common threads emerged, including widespread and clear linkages between land insecurity and corruption, impunity, and frequent involvement of organized criminal networks seeking to secure access to trafficking corridors. Criminal networks have encroached on bioreserve land in La Moskitia for years because there is no state presence to stop them. These patterns are now replicating in other areas, e.g., some Maya Chortí in Copán have been told to get off their land or be killed by organized criminal groups. In Celaque National Park powerful families own coffee plantations that operate on protected lands owned by the municipality.

There are no courts dedicated to land disputes in Honduras. As a result, communities, the government, and the private sector file administrative and legal actions at the local level, which opens opportunities for corruption. Many respondents noted an absence of impartial mediators with the authority and credibility to arbitrate disputes. In addition, some noted underlying institutional barriers to peaceful resolution of disputes, e.g., a lack of transparency in arbitration proceedings and records. The need for effective dispute mechanisms is further highlighted by confrontations between nongovernmental organizations, the media, and private sector interests. In some cases, organized criminal groups offer above-market prices to buy land or just threaten owners until they give up their property. In these situations, landowners have no recourse other than to leave.

In Honduras, land title is frequently unclear. Some business owners feel that they were robbed of their land with land reform, and they still claim the rights to it. In other cases, individuals living on collective land “sell” land to someone else, even though sale of collective land is prohibited by individuals. There are many recorded incidents in which double titles exist.

There are nine culturally distinct peoples living in Honduras, of which seven are Indigenous and two are Afro-descendant.54 It is estimated that Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples represent about 8 percent of the country’s more than 9 million inhabitants. Although Honduras has signed the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, otherwise known as ILO 169, the convention is rarely applied, creating mistrust of the government by Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations and contributing to conflict. One of the most common shortcomings is a lack of adherence to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)55 that is

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54 These Indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples include people belonging to the Miskito, Tawahka, Maya Chortí, Nahuas, Pech, Lenca and Tolupán groups. Afro-Honduran people are made up of Garifuna and English-speaking Blacks.

55 For more information on FPIC, see: https://www.fao.org/indigenous-peoples/our-pillars/fpic/en/
required when projects are undertaken on Indigenous and Afro-descendant lands.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples expressed her "deep concern about the generalized environment of violence and impunity suffered by many Indigenous communities in the country." Noting that a fundamental problem facing Indigenous peoples is the lack of full recognition, protection and enjoyment of their rights over their ancestral lands, territories and natural resources, the United Nations Special Rapporteur said that "even in cases where Indigenous peoples have titled lands, they are threatened by overlapping third party claims on Indigenous lands; for development projects in the extractive and energy sectors, model cities, tourism and protected areas."

According to the Law on Concessions, the state has ownership of resources on the land and is able to grant concessions to businesses without FPIC as happened in Santa Barbara with the Agua Zarca hydro-electric project and Guapinol where mining activity was allowed to move forward in the Carlos Escaleras National Park. The team also heard of instances where a mayor or patronato had illegally sold land and pocketed the profits.

During her campaign, President Xiomara Castro promised a more inclusive approach to engaging Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations in governance. Now, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are demanding that the government reestablish ancestral property rights of lands currently owned by powerful individuals and national and international companies. When the team met with individuals and organizations representing Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, none of them felt that they had received the expected level of response from the new government. Some speculated that since the northern private sector is considered an important ally of President Xiomara Castro, it is unlikely that she will act against them on issues of land.

Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and farmers who spoke with the team understand that change takes time, but many indicated that 100 days is sufficient to demonstrate political will to enter dialogue about their demands. The Pech continue to await the government’s response to their requests for culturally contextual education and health services, and there is a perception that the government is sending mixed messages about its willingness to support land conservation in the face of cattle ranching and African palm.
Land conflict also weakens communal structures, culture, and identity, leaving communities more fragmented and vulnerable. For example, the Lenca, the Maya Chortí, and the Miskito have multiple organizations (six, two, and two respectively) claiming to represent them. These organizations have split apart based on perceptions of corruption or mismanagement and are unable to come together to form one cohesive voice for the community. Forces in the community both for and against development are unable to unite and resolve their disputes.

In the West, the team repeatedly heard narratives voiced by non-Indigenous populations that perpetuate and attempt to rationalize the current situation. It was not uncommon to hear people in Copán talk about how the Maya Chortí don’t want to work the land, and that the government already gave the Maya Chorti some land and people just sold it again, either to criminal networks or private interests. In Intibucá and Lempira, the team heard perceptions that because the Lenca are less educated, they don’t have proper values.

There is widespread distrust in the efficacy of justice operators at the local level (police, Public Ministry, and the courts). Respondents noted that in many cases, local authorities fail to respond to legal filings. In others, legal rulings are delivered to evict people or payoffs are made for favorable rulings. Without power or influence, Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations and campesinos have exhausted their options with the formal system for redress. With no alternative options for justice, people give up, enabling further land encroachment, or organize protests against companies or the state, further dividing communities as a consequence.

Fractured communities unable to find formal, positive resolutions to legal land disputes are mobilized by NGOs or seek out NGO resources for advocacy and amplified protests, and other actions against private companies and the state. While many NGOs genuinely exist to offer support, some people raised concerns that there are some NGOs that try to manipulate development projects by refusing to participate in mediation or negotiation efforts, or by moving “supporters” from one conflict to the next to demonstrate popular support.

When the state or businesses begin to feel threatened by NGO advocacy efforts, they may resort to intimidation, acts of violence, harassment of community members, and bribes to decision makers. These actions attract media engagement, which often focuses on sensationalism, and heightens attention to the issues, further politicizing contestations over land ownership and deepening community fragmentation. Increased politicization opens the door to more land encroachment by those in power, or migration, and further legal action for those without. Some Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, like the Garifuna of San Juan, have elevated their claims to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR). Historically, the IACHR has ruled against the government of Honduras, but their recommendations are never implemented, serving as a perverse incentive for more land encroachment.

Some speculated that land occupation has become an industry for opportunists looking for profit. They
described how individuals move onto a piece of land when they see someone surveying, in anticipation of getting a payoff from the developers as the project progresses. The team heard from some respondents that these situations seem to be increasing in occurrence after the new government took office, using the LIBRE party flag under the pretext of social justice.

Private Sector Perceptions of Land Disputes:
The dynamics are complicated. People are occupying land and police won’t evict them, fearing being accused of human rights abuses. Companies are afraid to protect their own assets. The UN has “watchdogs” protecting land invasions in the name of human rights. When this happens, businesses need to hire high priced lawyers and human rights advisors to avoid being accused of human rights violations. It is becoming systemic in the agro-industry and mining sectors.

Regional Context: Land Disputes

Land disputes in Atlántida are often linked to Afro-descendant ancestral communal land titles. These titles often restrict sales of land to members outside of the community. Disputes arise when multiple land titles are filed for the same piece of land, and when municipalities sell land to tourism companies. In Copán, some Maya Chortí are selling their land and migrating, even though the land is held under communal title and cannot legally be sold.

Respondents in Olancho described different dimensions of disputes over cattle lands. There is a perception of increasing activity by organized criminal networks purchasing cattle lands to house clandestine airfields. At the same time, cattle ranchers are encroaching on forest land, most of which is protected natural reserves.

When development projects arise, municipalities in Intibucá reportedly use town hall meetings to present a project to the community to satisfy FPIC requirements. This falls short of the comprehensive consultations required under ILO169, leading to conflict with Lenca communities.

In Choluteca, civic activism over land is a contentious issue. Many families depend on employment opportunities created by mining and agro-industry, and communities are split on how to best respond to the damages (environmental and social) created by these businesses.

In Copán, the presence of organized criminal networks has reportedly driven up land prices, especially in the border areas, and pressure to sell. If owners refuse to sell, they are subject to harassment and may even be killed.

Conflicts in Colón are pitting farming communities against powerful palm oil companies. Some respondents described the complicity of justice institutions and security forces with national companies owned by prominent wealthy families, leaving farming organizations dealing with the consequences of impunity.
CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AND RESOURCE SCARCITY

Honduras has a high vulnerability to climate change effects. Across interviews, the team repeatedly heard concerns that natural disasters and other weather-related events, such as recurrent droughts and/or hurricanes, could overwhelm the government’s ability to respond. The most frequently raised concerns were looming food insecurity and fear of another significant weather event in the areas hit hardest by Eta and Iota. Many of the promised government rebuilding resources never reached the people, and critical flood control infrastructure is urgently in need of repair.

In exploring the root causes of migration, researchers are raising awareness of linkages between migration, climate change, and violence. Statistical analysis indicates that reductions in rainfall are associated with increased emigration, and that this effect is magnified when levels of violence are higher. During the last decade, Honduras has experienced repeated droughts leading to increased food insecurity, especially for subsistence farmers living in the Dry Corridor (southwest region), with some areas experiencing more than 70 percent annual crop loss.56

Data demonstrate that there is a strong link between decreases in rainfall in a department and apprehensions of families from the same department in the US the following year. Prolonged drought in the Dry Corridor therefore contributes to increased apprehensions. When homicide rates are higher, the relationship between rainfall and apprehensions is even greater, calling into question the idea of distinguishing between the migrants escaping violence and those leaving because of climate change. Migration increases when income increases, however, in the case of prolonged and recurrent drought in the Dry Corridor, a shock (single event) can also trigger migration.57

Respondents in all regions highlighted a lack of GOH disaster preparedness, contributing to perceptions of heightened vulnerability to food insecurity and future weather events. Climate change intensifies these dynamics, and the effects of climate change contribute to decisions to migrate and heighten the risk of social conflict.

In addition to the stress of drought, the 2020 weather events, Eta and Iota, severely damaged infrastructure and increased food insecurity. Together, they caused more than $10 billion in damage, killed at least 98 people, and displaced 175,000 more.58 According to the Governmental Report on Damage and Loss Assessment of the Hurricanes (2020), small farmers suffered the greatest crop losses, with 84 percent of losses concentrated in six departments: Yoro, Cortés, Colón, El Paraíso, Choluteca, and Atlántida. The national economy is highly dependent on agriculture and its related activities, which account for 12.9 percent of GDP. Agriculture is an important source of income (35.6 percent of total exports value),

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57 Ibid.
employment, and food for 35 percent of the economically active population, especially Indigenous populations. The team repeatedly heard from small-holder farmers that with the rising costs of fertilizer and other inputs, farming is no longer viable. Many of these farmers are now consumers rather than producers, compounding concerns about impending food insecurity.

Climate change also contributes to resource scarcity. For example, irregular rainfall patterns combined with the lack of water storage capacity in communities may result in less water available for community use and rationing. Several people described how mismanagement of resources like water and energy is leading to scarcity and unequal distribution. Most people placed at least some of the blame for these failures on corrupt government officials at all levels and the dynamics between government and the private sector that influence how resources are managed.

Honduras has abundant water resources. Lack of urban planning has led cities such as Tegucigalpa to consider heavy water rationing, increasing the cost of living and giving rise to protests. Contributing to this situation, increasing deforestation in water producing areas has significantly increased soil erosion and sedimentation of rivers and streams, dried up streams, reduced the storage capacity of reservoirs, and reduced biodiversity.

Honduras has rich forest resources, with the highest proportion of forest cover of any Central American country. However, data from the Global Forest Watch (2021) estimates that from 2002 to 2020, the country lost 35 percent of its forests, water resources, subsistence agriculture, and rainforest ecosystems. Deforestation is fueled by forest conversion, forest fires, the collection of fuel wood, and illegal logging. Members of environmental movements have been threatened, intimidated, and killed for campaigning against deforestation.60

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Regional Context: Mismanagement of disasters and resources

The department of Choluteca relies heavily on agriculture. People explained that even though there is enough water, distribution heavily favors private sector interests (production) at the expense of human consumption. They project that droughts will continue, driving more migration.

The effects of Eta and Iota are still felt in Cortés. In some areas, people have not returned to their houses, and respondents expressed concern that the infrastructure mitigating flood damage needs critical repairs.

Olancho suffers from inconsistent access to power. The department draws energy from the Pataca III hydroelectric dam, but some respondents raised fears that climate change and illegal logging will further impact watersheds and access to energy. Although much of Olancho is rural, in urban areas, lack of access to water places pressure on local officials and contributes to conflict.

Tegucigalpa faces many natural hazards, but respondents were most concerned with the local government's inability to manage water distribution in the city.

In Gracias a Dios, Eta and Iota highlighted the lack of state presence, capacity, and support for La Moskitia. This void was reportedly filled by community organizations, the international community, and in some cases, organized criminal networks, who for a price, helped provide essential transportation services to community members in need.

In Lempira, Intibucá, and Copán, many people who spoke with the team described how they had to stop farming due to the high price of fertilizer and other inputs and projected imminent food insecurity in the West.

Closing Civic Space

The 2020 UNHCR annual report highlighted that “following the electoral crisis of 2017 and the subsequent social conflict, the High Commissioner’s Office observed a progressive shrinking of civic space in Honduras. This trend continued, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding curtailment of several rights, especially freedom of movement” (UNHCR, 2021). In October 2021, only one month before the general election, Congress passed reforms criminalizing social protest, and discouraging demonstrations by limiting the basic freedoms of assembly, association, and movement. They also amended the law on money laundering, weakening the Public Prosecutor's ability to investigate corruption.61 Media workers and journalists reporting on corruption and crime are often censored or attacked, leading many to self-censor out of fear.62

In January 2022 alone, three human rights defenders were killed in Honduras. These included Pablo Isabel Hernandez, an Indigenous leader from the Lenca community and environmental defender living in San Marcos de Caiquín, department of Lempira; Thalia Rodriguez, a transgender human rights defender killed in Tegucigalpa; and Melvin Geovany Mejia, a member of the Tolupán Indigenous community and territorial defender found dead in Morazán, department of Yoro.63 According to Global Witness, Honduras ranks as

the second most dangerous country for environmental defenders in the world.64

Throughout the country, there is a widespread perception that it is dangerous to be an investigative journalist, human rights activist, or environmental defender. Speaking out against the government or LIBRE party was also perceived as not well tolerated. People described the Human Rights Protection Mechanism, under the Ministry of Human Rights, as not functioning, rendering people under threat without access to effective protection or recourse.

Respondents talked about how the media has been constrained in its coverage of the new government. Voices that were once critical are now part of government and have remained largely silent. Some pointed to the government’s approach of selectively awarding advertising to certain media outlets as a way of negotiating and controlling voices of the press. Many of those who do speak out, particularly on issues of corruption, organized crime, and other sensitive topics fear for their safety and that of their families, leading some to leave the country. This is especially true for journalists living and working in areas outside of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, where they do not have access to early warning systems and other protection resources.

Likewise, the team heard speculation that civil society organizations have been largely silent because they transitioned from being voices of opposition under the previous administration to voices of support for the current government. Some civil society activists have been hired directly by the government. As such, civil society has largely stopped confronting government and LIBRE party actions and decisions.

At the same time, NGOs are also increasingly facing constraints that range from proposed restrictive legislation to diminished human and financial resources as donors such as the EU, the Swiss, and the Germans leave Honduras.

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Regional Perspectives: Closing civic space

In Olancho, the team heard about journalists who cover illicit dealings, such as logging or narco-trafficking, being threatened or even killed. One example is the assassination of journalist Pedro Arangel Canelas in Dulce Nombre de Culmi. Two years later, there is still no individual or organization that has been charged with his death.

The LGBTQI+ community in the West is invisible. In interviews throughout Intibucá, Copán, and Lempira, a few people acknowledged that LGBTQI+ individuals exist, and that they are often exposed to violence. The majority, however, were adamant that there was no LGBTQI+ community, attributing this to the “conservative” social norms in the West. To protect themselves, LGBTQI+ individuals hide, move to bigger cities, or migrate; some commit suicide.

In Cortés, the team encountered a general perception that independent media is becoming increasingly scarce. Most of the media who were in the opposition are now pro-government, with some very vocal journalists and influencers accepting government positions. As a result, checks and balances on the administration have diminished.

People who spoke with the team in Lempira explained that violence is frequently tied to land disputes. They cited the murder of Indigenous leader and human rights activist Pablo Hernandez, who was shot nine times in San Marcos de Caiquín. No one has been charged with the killing and some suspect that he was killed by hired assassins.

In Tegucigalpa, the team heard perceptions that the new government is increasingly trying to sideline civil society; this is allegedly an attempt to create direct relationships with the broader population.

DISENFRANCHISED YOUTH

Youth came out to vote in the last election, electing to work within the system to promote change. Despite that, many Honduran youth feel that the system has failed them. Most of the youth that met with the team described the challenges of accessing education and job opportunities. Given economic stagnation and the lack of available jobs, some respondents indicated that migration will continue unabated. Other respondents envisioned more youth and unemployed people looking to the illicit economy to make a living.

Youth described barriers to accessing education including being unable to cross invisible gang borders in San Pedro Sula, Choloma, La Ceiba, and limited availability of schools locally. In many departments in the West, including Intibucá and Copán, education often stops at sixth or ninth grade. Children who wish to continue their studies must leave their families and communities to travel to secondary schools elsewhere in the department. Indigenous and Afro-descendant respondents described how education is devoid of cultural and linguistic applicability for children and youth in their communities.

Jobs in the formal sector are very hard for youth to attain. Youth who spoke with the team indicated that even those with a university degree struggle to find a job. Several had stories about applying for jobs and the first question asked of them being, “which party did you vote for?” Many noted that employers want experience before they will hire, creating a vicious cycle for youth seeking jobs for the first time. At the same time, the team heard from some private sector representatives that they could not find skilled labor to fill open positions, with some even describing the perceived lack of human capital in Honduras as a detriment to foreign investment. This led some youth and private sector respondents to remark on an
apparent mismatch between job skills being offered to Honduran youth and the needs of employers.

Youth struggle to survive (meet their basic social, physical, and economic needs) and achieve their aspirations. Youth whose parents have migrated may have child and elder care responsibilities that make pursuing an education or a career even more challenging. Limited oversight of youth in cases of migration, GBV, and widespread exclusion from basic services, including sexual and reproductive health, contribute to rising rates of early pregnancy. The team heard of instances where pregnant underaged adolescents avoid seeking medical care and refuse a hospital delivery, sometimes leading to fatal complications. They hope that by not going into the medical system, they can avoid participating in a required investigation into sexual violence.

Although many Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities practice subsistence agriculture, it is difficult for youth to access land. Even when they can, the team heard about Pech, Lenca, and Garifuna youth who no longer want to farm. They prefer a more reliable income which leads many to migrate to urban areas or leave the country. Indigenous and Afro-descendant youth are often stigmatized, with some respondents describing them as criminals, lazy, or uneducated.

Although many youth remain resilient in conditions of adversity, faced with an insecure environment and lack of education and licit job opportunities, many youth turn to migration, illegal economies, or the informal economy. As the licit options fail to provide the social, physical, and economic security that youth are seeking, and after making repeated attempts to access services, this eventually leads to an increased sense of frustration, injustice, and powerlessness. This causes some to lose hope and disengage from formal political, social, and economic systems. They may turn to violent and risky behaviors that lead to stigmatization, criminalization, and victimization. There is a perception that, as in the rest of the population, alcohol and drug use among youth is increasing.

These dynamics of exclusion empower violent actors to engage disaffected youth, further degrading their physical, emotional, and economic security. This perpetuates youth exclusion from basic services, jobs, land, and justice, and heightens youth beliefs that the state has failed them.
Regional Context: Youth

**Tegucigalpa** offers few employment options for youth regardless of socio-economic background. Educated youth rarely find job opportunities to apply their education in a meaningful way. Youth from poor, high-crime neighborhoods face stigmatization by employers who worry that hiring these youth will increase their risk of being targeted for extortion.

High levels of stigmatization and criminalization of Pech youth make it difficult to get a job in Trujillo, **Colón**, and contribute to the decision of many youth to migrate.

Rather than being in school, the team observed many Maya Chortí children, mostly female, roaming the streets of **Copán Ruinas** and entering hotels and restaurants to sell corn husk dolls and seed necklaces made by their mothers to tourists. Unable to sell their crafts at the asking price, they offer a discount and sing the Honduran national anthem in Maya Chortí. In addition to missing school, these children are placed at increased risk of trafficking and other abuses.

In **Atlántida**, youth living in peri-urban areas controlled by gangs are subject to discrimination from employers and criminalization by police. At the same time, in their neighborhoods, children and youth are actively recruited by gangs and criminal organizations. Either driven by desperation or under threat that they or their families will be killed, youth have little choice but to join.

**PUBLIC-PRIVATE SECTOR TENSIONS**

The private sector, particularly international and large national businesses owned by the country’s small but powerful elite, is closely associated with JOH and the National Party. The LIBRE party and the current administration successfully leveraged perceptions of private sector exploitation and self-interest to garner support during the campaign. Many respondents from the private sector remarked on the inexperience of the new government and perceptions that the LIBRE party is fomenting polarizing, anti-private sector narratives. This contributes to significant uncertainty, and some private sector respondents told the team that investors are holding off on investing to see what happens. Others have declared their intentions to take their investments elsewhere in the region.

Early actions by the Castro administration to assert greater control over the private sector are contributing to significant uncertainty in the country’s investment and business climate. Examples of actions by the new government that have cooled investments include the repeal of the Hourly Wages Law, banning of new ZEDEs, and the potential nationalization of the energy sector. Outside of the private sector, though, many respondents cited the repeal of the hourly wage and ZEDEs legislation as positive actions taken by the government in fulfilling its campaign promises.

These policy decisions intended to regulate the unequal distribution of capital are exacerbating public-private sector tensions. In some cases, actions taken in the name of protecting workers, e.g., eliminating the hourly wage law, have yielded unintended consequences, for example, causing employers to eliminate part-time positions and pushing hourly workers into the informal economy where they have even fewer protections.

With increasingly polarizing rhetoric and actions taken to curb the private sector, investors are more tentative and businesses are facing an increasingly constrained environment. Should the relationship deteriorate, the government of Honduras runs the risk of losing investment, thereby reducing job creation, and potentially spurring even greater flows of migration. Government actions like efforts to nationalize
the energy sector may increase price shocks and contribute to business failures. Energy is already unreliable, and respondents predict that if the government takes over the energy sector, the provision of energy will worsen. While widespread violence as a result of these tensions is not imminent, repercussions of these tensions promise to contribute to wider expressions of social conflict and polarization.

Extortion is having a crippling effect on businesses. Virtually everyone who met with the team agreed that extortion by gangs and organized criminal groups is increasing, in some cases forcing businesses to shut down. Although respondents in the West agree that extortion is getting worse, businesses in this area appear to be less vulnerable than those in other regions visited by the team.

The perception that extortion is worse under the new administration also undercuts public-private sector relationships and impacts economic growth. Based on discussions with the business community, they have yet to find an effective means of combating extortion and are left with no other option than to pay or close their business. The team also heard of instances when gangs and organized crime established businesses for money laundering. In some cases, they threaten legitimate businesses to reduce competition, e.g., burning buses, and in other cases they set prices so low that the private sector cannot compete and has to close businesses.

As investment is curtailed due to extortion or uncertainty, the economy becomes more constrained, contributing to frustration in the private sector and impacting costs of services and limiting job creation. Lack of tax revenue reduces the government’s ability to pay employees and provide services, increasing perceptions of lack of engagement by government actors at all levels. The private sector, represented by chambers of commerce and industry associations, wants dialogue with the government and has offered proposals for concrete change. However, based on respondent information, the government appears unwilling to meet with business leaders and listen to concerns.

To have their voices heard, the transport sector and public employees are taking to the streets to protest. Some of these protests, e.g., blocking roads, are having a significant impact on people’s daily lives. The government has not violently cracked down on protesters, and protests serve as a release valve. At the same time, the government is choosing to negotiate individually with different sectors, which further fragments the voice of the business community. Narratives in traditional and social media coming from the government and the LIBRE party continue to demonize the private sector. This narrative, combined with lack of government response to invitations to dialogue, further deepens distrust between the public and private sectors.

The polarization in the country along political party lines decreases the space for collaboration. Respondents highlighted a pressing need to identify a path forward balancing the government’s desire for private sector accountability without excessively constraining the market. While this dynamic impacts economic growth, these public-private sector divides are also having an impact on social cohesion and good governance. Public-private sector partnerships have the potential to advance the fight against corruption, adherence to international human rights best practices in community consultation, and peaceful mediation of disputes with sectors of the Honduran economy such as the transportation, energy, and dairy sectors, all of which have been involved in recent protests.
Private sector respondents pointed out that strong business-enabling environments can serve as a means of government accountability and provide social benefits in the communities where they work. Innovations from the private sector, if constructively engaged, can help governments overcome pressing challenges such as transparency and corruption. The ZEDEs were heavily criticized by opposition voices during the former administration and during the 2021 campaign; consequently, the Castro Administration immediately acted to repeal the ZEDEs law. Some people described opportunities to adopt technologies used by businesses in the ZEDEs. These technologies have the potential to help the government provide more transparency and accountability in procurement processes, decreasing opportunities for corruption.

Regional Context: Growing public-private sector tensions

In Tegucigalpa, small business owners and potential investors cited the unpredictability of the business environment and increasing hostility as reasons for taking their larger investments to Guatemala and the US rather than investing domestically. Even businesses wanting to contribute to social responsibility have found the government unwilling to constructively engage with them.

Olancho suffers from limited and inconsistent access to energy. The new government is threatening to nationalize and renegotiate the terms that govern the energy sector. Respondents found this particularly concerning for the potential impacts on local businesses if energy becomes less reliable and costs increase. Those that cannot afford the increased prices will likely turn to wood for energy.

In Cortés, particularly San Pedro Sula, the private sector is strong and highly organized. They support the new government and are willing to work in partnership, but the private sector is growing increasingly concerned about the government’s ability to create consensus. Recently, the private sector representing different industries, which have not traditionally worked together, are now joining with chambers of commerce to present a concrete set of recommendations and priorities.

In Copán, there is a strong demand for government support to small-scale agricultural producers by providing inputs for production. Respondents predict that if crop production is not supported, there will likely be food shortages in the months ahead.

MITIGATING FACTORS

Mitigating factors are elements that have the potential to reduce the likelihood that violence and violent conflict will occur. They are not always things that work towards peace, but rather those that dampen violence. The team identified several mitigating factors that should be monitored for change.

Migration and Remittances

Facing few licit employment opportunities, many people choose to migrate from rural areas to big cities or to leave the country. The remittances that migrants send home alleviate pressure on the government to provide basic goods and services. Since remittances account for 25 percent of Honduras’ GDP (approximately 5.4 billion dollars), there appears to be little incentive for the Honduran government to reduce irregular migration. Currently, migration and remittances returned to Honduras serve as a release valve that prevents conflict from erupting and alleviates demands on the GOH to provide basic services.

Private Sector Respondent Perspectives:
There is a systematic campaign by Libre officials to stigmatize the private sector. Some officials are attacking business using social media. They are trying to establish the private sector as the common enemy.
Remittances also mitigate currency devaluation for the poorest Hondurans. During the pandemic, the middle class shrank and poverty increased. Remittances offered a buffer for families living in poverty.

**HOPE – BUT NOT FOREVER**

Hondurans voted in record numbers in the 2021 elections, with 68 percent of the population going to the polls. The election was a clear vote for change and a demonstration that many Hondurans still have some degree of faith in the electoral process. Based on campaign promises, expectations for the new government are very high. While many people told the assessment team that 100 days is not enough to determine whether the country will change, most raised concerns that the government was not taking clear steps towards fulfilling its promises. The most frequently raised issues were the Amnesty Law, nepotism, and the inexperience of political appointees. Others pointed out that some campaign promises are being implemented, e.g., the repeal of the ZEDEs and the hourly wage law. Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities expressed hope for the Castro Administration to fulfill its promises for social inclusion after decades of marginalization.

The team heard repeatedly that people continue to hope for change under the new government, but they want to see it soon. There is a window of opportunity for the government to clearly signal where it is going, and for President Castro to demonstrate her leadership and authority, quieting concerns that her husband, Manuel Zelaya, is the one in control. Respondents were very clear, however, that this window of hope will not stay open forever. Many suggested that if promised changes do not materialize in a year, people would come into the streets. Some offered even shorter timelines. The duration of hope as a mitigating factor largely depends on the government's ability to demonstrate concrete steps towards fulfilling its campaign promises and improving living conditions.

**DEMONSTRATION WITHOUT REPRESSION**

The new government has allowed, and some believe even encouraged people to come into the streets and protest. For now, security forces are not using heavy handed techniques to quell demonstrations, which offers a release valve and opportunity for people to have their voices heard.

**Gangs**

While gangs clearly emerged as perpetrators of violence, some, like MS-13 may also play a mediating function in areas that they control. Gangs often want to avoid overt acts of violence that draw police attention to them.

**Avoiding Inflammatory Language**

The team did hear of some media outlets that were working to avoid specific inflammatory language. In addition, individuals and media outlets that were voices of opposition under the previous government, now form part of the new government, reducing critical voices.

**TRAJECTORIES**

Based on data collected by the team, there are some dynamics that have the potential to escalate into targeted or wide-spread acts of violence and conflict. Other conflict and violence dynamics will remain but are not likely to lead immediately to widespread acts of violence. Unrelenting escalating violence in

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65 ZEDEs are special economic zones that grant zone administrators freedom to adopt their own taxation systems and legal regimes, subject to oversight by a national committee. They have been widely attacked as a threat to Honduran sovereignty.
families and communities is a chronic issue that manifests in smaller-scale acts of violence such as domestic abuse, extortion, sexual violence, targeting of vulnerable populations, and assassinations. The result is that violence becomes normalized and an accepted way of interacting within families and communities, leading to many unnecessary deaths and injuries.

A conflict assessment represents a snapshot in time. Trajectories represent how the team projects the dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace will unfold in the future. Trajectories include both trends, and potential triggers, which are events that may ignite grievances and spark violent conflict, or open opportunities to reduce violence and conflict. The triggers listed below represent possibilities identified by the assessment team. Triggers are often difficult to predict, and other unforeseen triggers may emerge.

**Trajectory: Worsening ideological polarization could escalate into localized or wide-spread acts of violence**

**Trend:** Increasing political polarization and stigmatizing, or even criminalizing, individuals and organizations that do not agree with the Castro administration.

Many respondents noted a perceived increase in cycles of political polarization under the new government. They offered examples of government representatives and the LIBRE party very publicly using highly divisive language in speeches and social media. Examples included labeling members of the LIBRE party who did not vote for Redondo in the National Congress as “traitors” and escalating hostile rhetoric against the media, civil society, and the private sector.

The most frequent concern was the perception that this government considers everything that came before it as bad, to be thrown out or criminalized. Examples feeding into this feeling include prosecutions and extraditions of corrupt National Party members while sheltering members of the LIBRE party from similar charges with the passage of the Amnesty Law.

**Potential Triggers** (in sequence): These triggers are considered cumulative. While the first two alone are likely insufficient to spur country-wide protests and violence, the team heard concerns from several people that allowing protests to continue unchecked may be the government’s approach to creating an excuse for a crackdown and suspension of the constitution.

- Particularly in larger urban areas, people are watching the **upcoming elections for Supreme Court, beginning in July, and the Attorney General, in May 2023**. Respondents indicated that these elections are considered a litmus test, particularly in urban areas, for the government and the LIBRE party’s commitment to accountability and transparency. Perceived irregularities or interference in these elections could lead to protests, particularly in areas around the capital and urban centers, and erode confidence in the government.

- **If the International Commission against Impunity (CICIH) does not come or is perceived as compromised**, it could lead to protests in urban areas. As part of her campaign promises, President Xiomara Castro vowed to work with the UN to recreate an international commission to investigate corruption and impunity – similar to MACCIH, which ended in 2020. Some respondents raised concerns that the request for the CICIH sent to the UN has not been published, leading them to believe that the request was framed in a manner that could compromise the scope and independence of the commission, for example limiting corruption investigations to the last administration.

Many people who met with the team wondered when the CICIH would begin, and some suspect that it may never be created. There is speculation that the government may already be doing damage control to mollify CICIH supporters in the event that there is no CICIH,
e.g., the recent strengthening of UFERO to demonstrate political will to combat corruption internally.

- **If the government holds a referendum to create a new constitution** – Unlike the triggers mentioned above, the suspicion that the government is not suppressing protests in order to engender enough chaos to justify a crackdown and suspend the constitution was identified by many as a tipping point where protests against the government may turn violent.

  **Trend:** Government and LIBRE party narratives vilifying capitalism and the private sector

  **Potential Trigger:** Decreases in energy reliability and/or increase in costs

In places like Choluteca, some respondents shared concerns that increasingly populist rhetoric coming from the government and the LIBRE party will be used to justify encroachment on private sector interests, including potentially paving the way for nationalization in sectors such as energy. This contributes to growing private sector concerns about their ability to do business under the new government.

**If energy contract negotiations are unsuccessful, and energy is nationalized,** consumers could experience energy that is less reliable.

  **Trajectory:** Disappointed expectations that government will fulfill election promises could spark demonstrations and counter demonstrations

Most people who met with the team agreed that it was too early to pass judgment on the performance of the new government, but many raised concerns that with a few exceptions, e.g., repealing ZEDEs and hourly wage laws, the new government is not visibly delivering on its campaign promises.

  **Trend:** High expectations as people wait for campaign promises to be fulfilled

  **Trend:** Brewing concern that the actions of the government and the LIBRE party do not fulfill campaign promises.

President Xiomara Castro was elected by appealing to diverse interests of multiple stakeholder groups and those who wanted to punish the National Party. Now these stakeholders are expecting concrete and visible changes promised during the campaign. This is creating divides within the LIBRE party, but also creating problems for the new government, because the interests of these different groups are often contradictory, e.g., those of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino populations that are in opposition to the expectations of the private sector.

Most respondents pointed out that they are not seeing reduced corruption, and many cite examples of past corrupt practices being replicated, e.g., nepotism in political appointments. It should be noted, though, that some actions of the government, like passage of the Amnesty Law, while distasteful to many, did not bring people into the streets. Many people are still hoping to see the change that they voted for.

  **Potential Triggers:**

- **Security forces crack down violently** on protesters, or other violations of human rights
- Lack of action by the government to be more inclusive of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations (specific trigger not yet evident)
- No changes in the gender agenda or **changes in the gender agenda** that spark backlash and protests from conservative groups
● Another highly publicized corruption scandal in the health sector
● If current ZEDEs are not dissolved.

President Xiomara Castro promised to fight for equity, reduce femicide, decriminalize abortion in certain circumstances\textsuperscript{66}, and approve the use of emergency contraceptive pills, banned since the 2009 coup. But there are some very strong political interests standing in the way of these reforms. Only eight of the 35 cabinet members, or 22 percent are women, not dissimilar to the balance of cabinet appointments under the previous administration.\textsuperscript{67} Similarly, of 298 municipalities in Honduras, only 23 (8 percent) have female mayors. One success in introducing more women in governance has been the appointment of women to senior roles within the National Police. Forty percent of National Police directorates, departments, and precincts are now women-led.\textsuperscript{68}

The President is also running up against challenges in her own government, which includes the more conservative Partido Salvador de Honduras (PSH). The decree for removing the ban on emergency contraceptive pills was drafted by the initial transition team. President Castro could issue the decree by executive order. However, this would require the cooperation of the Minister of Public Health.

Indigenous populations and Afro-descendants are not seeing the increased inclusion and participation in government promised during the campaign. There are hopes that the Directorate of the Indigenous and Afro-Honduran People will be elevated from a department to a ministry. In addition, Indigenous people, Afro-descendants, and campesinos are expecting the government to return lands. Under land reform in 1997, the government committed to buying and returning 15,000 hectares of land. Little of this has been returned, including land seized previously from drug traffickers (about 10,000 hectares). Overall, the Lenca who met with the team had a more positive outlook on the new government, possibly because former President Zelaya was working on issues of land reform before the coup. Like other Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups, they are expecting dialogue with the new government.

The ZEDEs also present a problem for the new government. One early act of this government that was widely supported was the repeal of the ZEDEs. In practice, however, they continue to function, including PROSPERA, which is built on Garifuna land. If the government shuts down the ZEDEs, they will likely face massive lawsuits brought by international corporations that have invested substantially in these projects.

Trajectory: Deteriorating socio-economic conditions for most people could lead to an increase in protests, violence, criminality, and migration and decrease government legitimacy.

Trend: Costs of food, fuel, agricultural inputs, and other necessities are rising. People are questioning the government’s strategy for managing rising costs.

Trend: Demonstrations are increasing. This could be due to many factors including general dissatisfaction, receding fears of the pandemic, and clear indications by the government that they do not intend to crack down on peaceful demonstrators.

Trend: Public sector employment is highly politicized, leaving many who previously supported the National Party unemployed and current public servants tied to the new government.

\textsuperscript{66} The President promised to decriminalize abortion under three circumstances: when the mother’s life is in danger, when the fetus is not viable, and in cases of rape.

\textsuperscript{67} Under President Hernández, of the 17 ministerial positions, five were occupied by women (29%)

\textsuperscript{68} Hernandez, Vienna. March 8, 2022. “President Xiomara Castro’s Debt to the Women of Honduras.”
**Trend:** Migration to urban areas and emigration will continue as people struggle to find work.

The total costs of the basic basket of food are rising, along with the costs of agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizer. The people who met with the team recognize that some of these rising prices are linked to the war in Ukraine, but at the same time, they want to see a government strategy for addressing what many believe is looming widespread food insecurity. The team heard from many subsistence farmers in the West that they can no longer engage in production because of the high costs of inputs. This effectively turns many producers into consumers, increasing their vulnerability to food shortage.

As socio-economic conditions continue to deteriorate, it is likely that migration from Zona Sur will increase. Similarly, widespread economic deterioration beyond Honduras will also impact Choluteca as migrants continue to arrive from South America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Without increases in the Government of Honduras’ response capabilities, these migrants will remain particularly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

**Potential Triggers:** These incidences have the potential to lead to spontaneous or controlled acts of violence. These triggers work together. The more that come to pass, the higher the likelihood of demonstrations and possibly violence.

- Significant increase in **food prices**
- Increased **cost of energy.** In some areas of Cortés, like Choloma, respondents reported that protests over the high costs of fuel and electricity are already happening.
- Devaluation of currency, thereby **reducing purchasing power** could trigger violence in urban areas
- Cuts in **fuel subsidies**
- Lack of **resolution of government contracts for public sector employment.** While the team was conducting field work, there were significant demonstrations by LIBRE supporters demanding that the Minister of Health resign because he is PSH rather than LIBRE. At the same time, there is widespread dissatisfaction among health workers because the former government promised jobs to health workers who worked through the pandemic as first responders, but the new government is replacing them.

**Trajectory:** Family and community violence will continue to rise unabated. Widespread violence will perpetuate cycles of violence.

**Trend:** Intra-family and sexual violence increased during the pandemic and is perceived to still be rising. This includes an increase in violence against children.

**Trend:** Violent attacks on LGBTQI+ continue to increase

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**Violence Perpetuates Cycles of Violence**

Exposure to violence in childhood and youth typically leads to violent behaviors in the future. Violence contributes to mental health impacts for both the victim and perpetrator. Direct mental health problems may include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety disorders, and addiction disorders. Exposure to interpersonal violence also increases a lifelong vulnerability to a broad range of emotional, behavioral, and physical health problems, which in turn indirectly affect economies by stunting development, furthering inequality, and eroding human capital.

**Stopping Youth Violence in Latin America: A Guide for the Health Sector.**
USAID. April 2021. p. 29
Trend: Violence is described as “cultural” or “normal.” It is a widely accepted means of resolving family, community, and even legislative conflicts.

Trend: Vulnerable populations, for example migrants, are being targeted in areas like Choloma.

Trend: Almost complete failure of justice operators (police, Public Ministry, and courts) at the local level, rendering vulnerable populations completely marginalized and without access to any form of justice.

Trend: Lack of protections and loss of faith in the justice system leave victims unwilling to report acts of violence.

Research supports the idea of cyclical violence, or violence begetting cycles of violence. This is true not only for victims, but for members of their families and communities who may also require support in the aftermath of violent events. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which locked abusers in the same space with victims, is credited with a rise in familial and sexual violence. High levels of violence in families and communities and against vulnerable populations (migrants from other countries, LGBTQI+, women and children) will continue.

There is no particular trigger that will lead to widespread visible violence or social conflict, but rather violence is occurring at every level, every day. A normalization of violence and desensitization to the value of human life perpetuates and escalates this cycle. Sustained societal violence leads to widespread trauma that is passed from one generation to the next, impacting people’s ability to lead healthy and productive lives.

Trajectory: The impacts of climate change and tensions over scarce resources will continue to increase.

Trend: Perception that there is no government strategy for addressing immediate concerns of increasing droughts and looming food insecurity.

Trend: There is little investment in repairing the damage from Eta and Iota, and flood mitigation systems are not being maintained.

The department of Cortés is now considered even more vulnerable to extreme weather events than in 2020. The effects of Eta and Iota are still being felt, and lack of repairs to existing flood mitigation infrastructure compounds vulnerability.

Potential Triggers:

- Extensive damage caused by a natural event.
- Recurring drought without government investments in water management and equitable distribution solutions.

Trajectory: Civic space will continue to close and targeted acts of violence against human rights defenders, environmental defenders, journalists, and others who speak out or act against powerful interests will continue.

Trend: Perception that anyone who speaks out or acts against the new government, the LIBRE party, or powerful interests is criminalized and victimized. This contributes to increased self-censorship by the media and civil society.

Trend: Increasing use of digital space to target individuals, high-profile women in particular.
While many respondents noted that the government is no longer violently cracking down on demonstrators, the team heard about many instances of independent media and defenders of human rights and the environment being threatened and forced into exile or even killed; exact culprits remain unknown.

Many respondents perceive that space for expressing opinions that are not pro-LIBRE or pro-government continues to close. This is a combination of fear, self-censorship, and the diminishing space for, and capacity of, NGOs to effectively conduct social audits and advocate for change. Some noted that following the elections, there is no real organized opposition party to LIBRE. The National Party is still reorganizing and recovering from its electoral loss.

Some speculate that if the government fails to address growing concerns about security, rising costs, and limited economic opportunities, civil society and the media may become more vocal with their criticisms. The government response may include further intimidation tactics, for example, mobilizing motorcycle collectives in Tegucigalpa and Olancho to threaten critics.

Potential Triggers: The triggers listed below are likely to contribute to targeted acts of violence intended to silence individuals and send a message. These triggers may increase conflict between government and civil society but not necessarily lead to a widespread violent response.

- More extreme voices in Congress, the government, and the LIBRE party prevail and pass laws that increasingly constrict civic space, e.g., laws that impact the freedom of the press, or increasing restrictions on NGOs.
- Isolation and criminalization of independent media and NGOs leads to targeted acts of violence and/or forced exile.
- Increasing use of digital space by government and criminal organizations to attack journalists, high profile women in government, and the media.

Trajectory: Perception that general security is getting worse could trigger protests and open the door to more acts of violence.

There are indications that the police are becoming increasingly politicized. The new police chief removed high-ranking officials and those promoted under the previous government. Although additional responsibilities were given to the police, including gang control and prisons, there was no corresponding increase in their budget. Combined with an uncoordinated transition of responsibilities to the police, reallocation of responsibilities has led to the perception that there is a “security vacuum” because the military are no longer on the streets and the police have been overwhelmed with new responsibilities.

**Trend:** Perceptions that overall security is worsening under the new government.

**Trend:** Many people interviewed raised concerns about the return of formerly purged police into the force and significant turnover in the police force.

**Trend:** Shifts in gang leadership and contestations with smaller spin-off gangs over territory and drug
sales are causing violence to increase.

A few people also pointed out more frequent and intense acts of violence in areas that were formerly considered safe.

**Potential Triggers:** The triggers linked to perceptions of worsening security have the potential to spark protests or acts of violence.

- **Violence in the penitentiary system.** Recently, inmates from Barrio 18 killed six of their own gang members inside a high security prison in Santa Rosa.69
- **Killing of security personnel** by criminal organizations, e.g., recent killings of police in Colón and Olancho.
- **Abuse of power by police,** e.g., the killing of Keyla Martinez70 or a scandal involving police linked to corruption or human rights violations.
- Heightened violence between MS-13 and Barrio 18 and newer spin off gangs due to **competition for territory and drug sales**
- **Massacre** could trigger a retaliation
- **Act of violence going viral**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the dynamics of conflict and violence and anticipated trajectories discussed above, the assessment team offers the following recommendations aligned with the Mission CDCS Development Objectives (DOs) and the Biden Administration’s Strategy to Address the Root Causes of Migration in Central America (or Root Causes Strategy – RCS). While references to the CDCS and RCS provide points of entry for programming, it is important to note that many of the recommendations can also be addressed as issues that cut across Mission programming e.g., combating corruption, youth, climate change adaptation.

The following matrix offers an overview of the team’s recommendations organized by the identified dynamics of conflict and violence. Simply put, the purpose of each recommendation is to either interrupt relationships that contribute to increased conflict and violence or amplify relationships that counter them. Further detail about each recommendation follows.

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<tr>
<th>Dynamic</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clientelism and culture of impunity</td>
<td>Increase transparency and accountability to decrease clientelism and</td>
<td><strong>Leverage resources:</strong> Continue to leverage high level buy-in and government commitments to combating impunity. Coordinate USG messaging and commit to shifting resources when agreed-upon benchmarks are not met in</td>
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69 [https://www.register-herald.com/region/6-gang-members-killed-in-honduras-prison/article_12d1b2e0-b356-5c4e-bddc-c5424f3b3ceb.html](https://www.register-herald.com/region/6-gang-members-killed-in-honduras-prison/article_12d1b2e0-b356-5c4e-bddc-c5424f3b3ceb.html)  

70 In February 2021, protests broke out across Honduras after nursing student Keyla Martínez died in police custody in La Esperanza, Intibucá. The police immediately said that she had committed suicide, however, the autopsy revealed that Keyla had been murdered.
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<td><strong>Dynamic Objective</strong></td>
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<td>improve access to justice.</td>
<td>the justice and security sector.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mission CDCS IR 2.4 and IR 3.1 Governance to reduce impunity improved</td>
<td>National-level programming: Promote political financing disclosures and increase incentives and explore new ways to support professionalization of the civil service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCS Pillar II</td>
<td>Local-level programming: Identify, replicate and contextualize successful initiatives promoting access to justice, reducing impunity, and supporting transparency and accountability at the local level.</td>
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<td><strong>Normalization of violence</strong></td>
<td>Leverage resources: Partner with other USG agencies to support the police in using survivor-centered approaches when responding to incidents of GBV.</td>
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<td>Raise awareness of human rights and the value of human life using highly contextual interventions, in consultation with communities including vulnerable populations, to foster long-term behavior change.</td>
<td>Identify programming opportunities to prevent violence in relation to extortion, especially in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and Choloma.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mission CDCS SIR 2.4.4 and SIR 3.1.4 Protection of human rights increased</td>
<td>Local-level programming: Work through new or existing USAID programming to engage the school community—students, teachers, parents, and local communities—to raise awareness of human rights and the protection of human life.</td>
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<td>RCS Pillar V</td>
<td>Facilitate trauma-healing and other psycho-social support for families, especially young children, to counter the effects of witnessing and experiencing violence in the home and community.</td>
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<td>Integrate community-led consultations that engage vulnerable populations in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of activities.</td>
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<td>Identify, replicate, and contextualize successful violence reduction approaches, and models that promote access to services and protections for populations at risk. Pull back from approaches that are perceived as ineffective or exclusionary72.</td>
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71 For more information concerning dynamics of violence and extortion, USAID is completing a regional extortion assessment (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) which will be available in August 2022.

72 For example, Ciudad Mujer, run by the GOH has GBV programming for women but is widely perceived as excluding male victims, perpetrators, and members of the LGBTQI+ population, reducing overall effectiveness.
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<td></td>
<td>Support radio programming in remote communities and develop programming around awareness of inclusion and access to rights of vulnerable populations. Expand contextually tailored messaging using Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok to reach the specific communities with access to relevant social media. As citizen security committees begin to form, work with them to create models of inclusive, transparent, nonviolent, and accountable practices and responses to local needs. Understand the different roles that the churches can play locally or nationally, as potential advocates for peace, but also in perpetuating dynamics of exclusion and machismo, further marginalizing and fueling violence against women, children, and LGBTQI+. Account for this in all programming working with faith-based partners to avoid contradictory messaging.</td>
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<td>Disputes over land</td>
<td>Prevent land disputes from arising and increase options for peaceful dispute resolution. <strong>Mission CDCS IR 1.2; IR 2.4 and IR 3.1</strong> Governance to reduce impunity improved RCS Pillars II and III</td>
<td><strong>Leverage resources:</strong> Coordinate with other USG agencies to integrate messages of adherence to ILO Convention 169 and respect for human rights when meeting with Honduran counterparts. <strong>National-level programming:</strong> Work closely with Indigenous and Afro-descent populations, the National Congress and other stakeholders to facilitate passage of a Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) law as contained in International Labor Organization 169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169). Engage national and international private sector actors to adopt and adhere to FPIC. Improve protections for human rights and environmental defenders. <strong>Local-level programming:</strong> Strengthen the capacity of land titling entities, environmental licensing bodies, municipalities, ombudsmen, local judges, magistrates, and prosecutors to apply and enforce ILO Convention 169, including compliance with the protocol of FPIC.</td>
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<td>Work with businesses, communities, and authorities to strengthen peaceful land dispute resolution mechanisms and improve education and oversight of business compliance with human rights standards. Support an increased government (civilian) presence in areas experiencing high rates of land disputes.</td>
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<td>Work with relevant NGOs to support social auditing of resolution of land disputes and promote peaceful advocacy and engagement in human, environmental, and labor rights. Where possible, integrate contextually appropriate messaging about women’s rights to hold land.</td>
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<td>Together with the private sector and other actors, identify and disseminate existing successful models where communities and the private sector have promoted inclusive, mutually beneficial projects.</td>
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**Climate change adaptation and resource scarcity**

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<th></th>
<th>Strengthen disaster preparedness and response. Improve management of scarce resources.</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Mission CDCS IR 1.3</td>
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<td>Vulnerability to key shocks and stresses decreased</td>
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<td></td>
<td>RCS Pillar I</td>
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<td><strong>Leverage resources:</strong> Continue working with BHA and the government of Honduras to develop a plan for areas likely to experience high food insecurity.</td>
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<td>Strengthen USAID/DOD coordination for emergency response and preparation. Collaborate with DOD’s Humanitarian Assistance Projects (HAP) with broader USAID disaster preparedness and climate risk reduction efforts.</td>
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<td>Support donor efforts to pass the 2009 water law regulation(^3) and create instances to promote its implementation.</td>
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**National-level programming:**

Work with the *Comisión Permanente de Contingencias* (COPECO) to facilitate the development of operational level protocols in response to emergency situations under the new *Sistema Nacional de Gestión de Riesgos* (SINAGER). Assist with improving information systems related to hydrology, and soils in order to inform national decision-making about land use.

Support COPECO’s efforts to mainstream climate

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\(^3\) The General Water Law of 2009 (la Ley General de Aguas) created a new National Water Authority (Autoridad Nacional de Agua), which was envisioned to centralize water policy in Honduras. However, the 2009 law lacks a *reglamento* - a legal document outlining the implementation guidelines and principles and the creation of the water authority is pending.
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| Closing civic space | Improve state and non-state protections for actors under threat. Cultivate space for diverse opinions and voices. Mission CDCS SIR 2.4.4 and SIR 3.1.4 Protection of human rights increased, and SIR 2.3.3 Civil society and media strengthened RCS Pillar III | **Leverage resources**: Explore opportunities to work with the Regional Human Rights and Democracy project or other regional anti-corruption mechanisms to improve state protection capacity  
Use findings from the recent Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA) to understand and inform responses to patterns of digital violence and digital divides.  
**National and/or local-level programming**: Contextualize and improve non-state protections for individuals and organizations under threat for challenging power or documenting abuses of power.  
Explore the feasibility of creating an independent civil society protection mechanism and support existing organizations protecting those under threat. Expand violence observatory tracking of violations against human rights defenders, journalists, and others under threat.  
Support civil society initiatives to monitor ethical standards and neutral content of media coverage. Integrate fact checking into journalist training. Facilitate opportunities for emerging media, train  |

**54** Juntas de Agua are community associations present in most communities.
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<td><strong>j</strong>ournalists and editors on ethics, and strengthen the Ethics Board of the Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras (CPH).&lt;sup&gt;75&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Support advocacy and creation of legislation protecting against harm in digital spaces, including GBV. Support designated response units with technical assistance and resources.</td>
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<td><strong>Youth disenfranchisement</strong></td>
<td>Engage and empower youth in all aspects of social, economic, and political life.</td>
<td><strong>Leverage resources:</strong> Encourage GOH and private sector investment and tangible actions in formal and informal education. Collaborate with DOD small grants programming to improve education infrastructure.</td>
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<td><strong>Mission CDCS IR 1.1</strong> Youth and children are better educated and more productive members of society and IR 3.2 Risk of delinquent behavior reduced.</td>
<td>Look for opportunities to partner with other donors to build a contextualized approach to sexual and reproductive health and alcohol and drug abuse. When feasible, integrate elements of health / positive behaviors (e.g., lack of using alcohol and drugs) into existing activities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>RCS Pillars I and IV</strong></td>
<td><strong>National and local-level programming:</strong> Involve youth as agents of their own change. Cultivate youth leaders and engage youth as implementers, visionaries, and monitors of youth-focused activities. Be intentional about engaging young women and girls who have special needs and risk being exploited or overlooked.</td>
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<td>Work at multiple levels of entry, e.g., education policy and budgeting, investing in school infrastructure, working with families and communities, etc. to return students to school.</td>
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<td>Focus workforce development / employment activities as much on job placement at a fair wage as on skills matching with private sector need and training.</td>
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<td><strong>Public/private sector tensions</strong></td>
<td>Foster conditions for dialogue and support the development of a common agenda.</td>
<td><strong>Leverage resources:</strong> Encourage GOH and private sector discussions to alleviate tensions and agree upon common objectives.</td>
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<td><strong>National-level programming:</strong> Work with private sector representatives inside and outside of the...</td>
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<sup>75</sup> All Honduran journalists must be members of the Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras (Association of Journalists of Honduras - CPH). This requirement, established by law in 1979.

https://medialandscapes.org/country/honduras/organisations/journalist-associations
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<tr>
<td>Mission CDCS IR 2.1 Private sector effectiveness improved RCS Pillars I and II</td>
<td><strong>Mission CDCS IR 2.1 Private sector effectiveness improved RCS Pillars I and II</strong></td>
<td>government to identify champions who support partnership and foster constructive communication between the private sector and the Government of Honduras. Identify a neutral international actor with credibility to facilitate and mediate a dialogue process and the creation of a common agenda between sub-sectors within the private sector. Support the unification of demands and a private sector common agenda. Work with government counterparts to support negotiations. <strong>National and local-level programming</strong> Look for opportunities to grow private sector dispute resolution mechanisms to mitigate private sector fragmentation, support management of scarce resources, and reduce chances of violence. Foster government and private sector collaboration at the local level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hope... but not forever</td>
<td>Capitalize on hope for change</td>
<td>Encourage the President to address high expectations for change following her election. Support President Castro’s leadership in areas such as education, health, poverty reduction, women’s rights and GBV. Identify opportunities to work with President Castro on key anti-corruption initiatives and other high-profile projects and pair these with an energetic GOH communications strategy. Create spaces for dialogue between the government and Indigenous populations and Afro-descendants, private sector actors and women’s rights and LGBTQI+ advocacy groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Migration and remittances</td>
<td>Track the role that migration and remittances play in mitigating violence and social conflict.</td>
<td>If US foreign policy or other factors limit migration, monitor for signs of increased dissatisfaction with the government of Honduras and other unintended consequences to inform diplomacy and programming objectives. Explore options for designing activities that encourage investment of remittances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational and management recommendations for the Mission</td>
<td>Integrate conflict and violence sensitivity across the mission</td>
<td>Ensure conflict sensitivity integration into Mission programming and approaches. Use the Conflict Sensitive Integration Hub (CSIH), the conflict sensitivity checklist for school programming and</td>
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<td>Dynamic</td>
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<tr>
<td>strategy and program portfolio</td>
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<td>monitoring and evaluation mechanisms such as MESCLA 2.0 to support conflict-sensitive design and continuous monitoring of situational changes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mission CDCS Strategic Approaches and Principles</td>
<td></td>
<td>Allow for mid-course adjustments in response to changes in dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace by integrating conflict sensitivity into ongoing Mission processes, e.g., portfolio or PMP reviews.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLA, gender and social inclusion, integrated programming</td>
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<td>Consider hiring an Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants advisor within USAID, establishing an Indigenous peoples’ advisory board or group, and/or having an internship program for Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants.</td>
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<td>Insert language into DOAGs identifying key actions by relevant government counterparts on priority issues to enhance accountability.</td>
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<td>Ensure that implementing partners conduct due diligence processes when partnering with NGOs and advocacy organizations, not just private companies. Develop a Mission order on due diligence to clarify who USAID is really supporting and avoid reputational and performance risk.</td>
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<td>Improve coordination between USAID activities working in the same zones and coordination between USAID activities and those of other organizations.</td>
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<td>Consult with communities to identify shared goals and support sustainability. When feasible, use resources available within the community.</td>
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<td>Consider longer activity time horizons (beyond five years), and/or long-term monitoring and evaluation for projects seeking to create systemic change.</td>
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The following offers a more detailed exploration of the recommendations above. For each dynamic discussed, the team proposes a theory of change (TOC) to clarify assumptions about how specific actions will reduce the potential for violence and conflict. The TOC serves as a tangible link between the analysis and proposed responses.

Similar to the matrix above, recommendations are organized for ease of access in relation to specific dynamics of violence, conflict, or peace. However, many of these recommendations overlap and have the potential to impact more than one single dynamic, e.g., recommendations concerning normalization of
violence have the potential to also impact dynamics of land security, youth disenfranchisement, and others.

In both the matrix and the narrative below, dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace and their associated recommendations are ordered by:

- **Immediate concern** – these recommendations address the dynamics that are the most likely to lead to violence or conflict in the shorter-term, possibly six-months to a year.

- **Concern** – these recommendations address dynamics that will not necessarily lead to widespread violence or conflict, either because violence is very targeted in nature (closing space) or there is a pressure release valve that is minimizing chances of escalation.

- **Latent** – these recommendations address opportunities to mitigate potential escalation of these dynamics.

- **Mitigating** – these recommendations capitalize on the dynamics that keep conflict and violence in check.

- **Operational** – these recommendations target Mission operations and cross-portfolio conflict sensitivity.

Recommendations offered below encourage USAID to leverage resources and develop or integrate conflict sensitive activities into new or existing programs at the national and local levels.

**Dynamic: Clientelism and a culture of impunity (Immediate Concern)**

**TOC:** IF civil service and political parties are professionalized, AND IF government (local and national-level) accountability is increased, AND IF justice and security institutions are pressured to work together and with civil society, THEN clientelism and impunity will be reduced AND access to justice will be more inclusive.

**Leverage resources:**

1) **Recommendation - foster political will to combat impunity:** Leverage high level buy-in and commitment to combat impunity. Explore possible diplomatic points of leverage, e.g., Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) renegotiation, return of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), opportunities with the Consular section.

2) **Recommendation – improve accountability and ensure consequences:** Coordinate USG messaging and commit to shifting resources when agreed upon benchmarks are not met in the justice and security sector. Build accountability mechanisms across development and other assistance programs.

One example of an opportunity to build accountability mechanisms into an upcoming activity is the launch of USAID’s new Justicia Efectiva activity. With new funding for the HPN and/or the Attorney General’s Office, the USG and relevant counterparts could sign an MOU agreeing to key benchmarks related to open data, access to justice, mitigating impunity, and other areas. The MOU and associated benchmarks could tie specific USG investments from both agencies, including any subgrants with civil society organizations partnering with the USG, to performance. This would signal political will and concrete actions taken to ensure accountability and responsiveness from Honduran counterparts.

**National-level programming:**

1) **Recommendation – improve transparency and accountability:** Use the ELECCT mechanism to
work with the National Congress and the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) to promote public disclosure of private contributions and issue-lobbying. Look for opportunities in the new Access to Justice project to support independent bodies that track progress and make data more publicly accessible.

2) **Recommendation – support professionalization of the civil service:** Increase incentives related to civil service processes and protections to support professionalization. **Prioritize institutions that have a direct relationship to drivers of violence and conflict.** For example, the Property Institute at the national and local level (related to land tenure), COPECO (related to climate change, natural disaster management and mitigation, and resource scarcity), among others. Use these models to pilot approaches and learn for future replication.

As witnessed by the team during data collection, it is customary in Honduras that when a new political party wins the presidency, they fire personnel from the prior administration who are working in public offices to create space and reward party supporters with jobs. This administration is not only firing experienced administrative and managerial personnel, but also those with deep technical skills. This dynamic perpetuates routine draining of public institutional capacity every time a new political party is voted into power. For USAID and others, this implies significant losses of institutional capacity and relationships of trust forged over time.

The team also heard about the automatic deduction of 3-5 percent of public employee salaries that goes directly to the political party, perpetuating cycles of clientelism. At the time of data collection, employees were receiving notices about the amount of deductions from their paychecks.

**Local-level programming:**

1) **Recommendation – expand on good practice and lessons learned:** Identify, replicate and contextualize successful access to justice, reducing impunity, and supporting transparency and accountability programming at the local level.

Examples of successes that could be contextualized for local application include:

- Lessons from **violence observatories** at the national and local levels to increase coordination, data sharing and technical capacity among the police, Public Ministries, and justice actors. The model also encourages information exchange and collaboration with academia and civil society.

- Replicate successful social accountability models, adapting similar communication strategies and increased technical capacity to local contexts. For example, **CNA’s “Dónde está el dinero?” campaign.** This approach focuses on specific corruption issues to increase accountability and deliver anti-corruption messaging in a way that resonates with peoples’ daily lives.

- Elements of the **EuroJUSTICIA model that have been successful with inclusion,** noting that the model could do more to engage and catalyze high level decision makers to act.

2) **Recommendation – explore opportunities for implementation of the municipal career law and strengthen the municipal transparency councils:** Expand the practice of hiring and retaining qualified personnel in line with the municipal career law in order to create sustainable governance models that can be replicated at the national level.
**Dynamic: Normalization of Violence (Immediate Concern)**

TOC: IF understanding of rights and access to claim those rights are increased, AND there is increased state responsiveness, and visibility of improved response AND IF there is an increased respect for the value of human life and human rights (through formal and informal institutions - families, schools, church) THEN the culture of impunity will be reduced AND gender-based, domestic, community violence and violence against at risk groups will decrease.

**Leverage resources**

1) **Recommendation – support police responding to GBV**: Support **comprehensive approaches within the police for responding to GBV** using survivor-centered approach, especially in areas where there is no MAIE or Ciudad Mujer. This could also be integrated into basic training at the Police Academy.

2) **Recommendation – leverage the power of USG voice**: **Call attention to cases that highlight misogynistic behavior**, particularly those playing out in national government, with the intent of encouraging longer term behavior change.

Despite the recent election of the first woman president in Honduras, violent and misogynistic behavior are playing out in the highest levels of government. Before Xiomara Castro was even inaugurated, highly publicized physical altercations broke out in the National Congress between competing factions of the LIBRE party. Since then, several women legislators have presented complaints against male colleagues while other women legislators have been the object of slander campaigns and threats to themselves and their daughters.

**Local-level programming**

1) **Recommendation – reinforce human rights and the value of human life**: Work through the **school community** – students, teachers, parents, and communities - to **raise awareness of rights and how to act to safeguard and value human life**. Take a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to fostering behavior change beginning at an early age. Build protection mechanisms into the school community to address violence against children, women, LGBTQI+, and other vulnerable populations.

In many interviews, the normalization of violence was described as “cultural,” requiring long-term change of deeply ingrained attitudes and behaviors. Many pointed to the failings of the education system, but also considered an approach grounded in schools to be the best option for fostering this change.

The team heard mixed feedback on the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program. GREAT is implemented by the HPN and has law enforcement officers come into schools to deliver classroom curricula designed to reduce youth violence and prevent youth from joining gangs.

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Some respondents in the West wanted more resources to be able to expand GREAT into additional schools. However, in the North, where gangs are more pervasive and control many aspects of daily life, the team heard concerns that GREAT labels gang members as “bad,” thereby stigmatizing children related to gang members. It would be beneficial to avoid this type of labeling when speaking to the audience in these areas. It is necessary to adjust messaging from a criminal to a social approach, recognizing that gang members are an integral part of these communities. They are family members, friends, and neighbors. They may also provide physical and economic security and serve as a de facto government. Intentionally engage individuals who might not actively participate and avoid stigmatizing children of gang members, further deepening community divides, and reducing the legitimacy of both schools and police. Respondents also suggested reconsidering gang reduction and violence prevention programming designed specifically towards the highest risk population, including family units, which would help reach those most directly tied to gangs.

Many youth lamented that parks created under the prior government are no longer safe for them. Some even described this as a breach of social contract. Additional support in communities through the recovery or creation of safe spaces where children and youth can receive services and safely enjoy their free time would be beneficial. While this is done mostly through the international donor community, for sustainability purposes it is critical to reduce the operational costs of said spaces and extend partnerships to permanent, local actors. Explore potential new locations for USAID funded Outreach Centers (OCs) model in the western region.

2) **Recommendation – Facilitate trauma healing**: In addition to improving protection mechanisms for vulnerable populations, facilitate access to trauma healing and other psycho-social support for families, especially young children, to counter the effects of witnessing and experiencing violence in their homes and communities.

3) **Recommendation – contextualize all programming interventions**: Across the Mission portfolio, interventions need to be highly contextualized, e.g., accounting for profound domestic violence in the West, or violence against migrants in Choluteca, and grounded in diverse and tolerant community understanding of violence.

Integrate community-led consultations that engage vulnerable populations in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of activities. Be intentional about including vulnerable populations and acknowledge that gangs and their families are part of many communities. Review results of the Gang Desistance Study and integrate learning and recommendations into upcoming programming. Recognizing that gang is an identity and a sole focus on disengagement may not be effective.

4) **Recommendation – expand on learning and good practice**: Identify, replicate, and contextualize successful violence reduction approaches, and models that promote access to services and protections for populations at risk (women, children, and LGBTQI+) in rural areas. Pull back from approaches that are ineffective.

When implementation issues arise, take corrective action. For example, the Mission provides technical support to Ciudad Mujer, a women’s program implemented by the GOH. It recently emerged that Ciudad Mujer is excluding members of the LGBTQI+ community, men, and those perceived as having different political affiliations than the party in power. This renders interventions less effective and unlikely to bring about long-term behavior change.

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During interviews, the team also learned that there is considerable competition in the GBV space for funding. Implementing partners should be mindful of these dynamics when awarding grants. Grantees should demonstrate systematic approaches with meaningful inclusion of LGBTQI+ and men. As the team heard during fieldwork in San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba, it should not be assumed that organizations advocating on behalf of women necessarily share an agenda with those advocating for the rights of LGBTQI+.

Based on learning, prioritize the location of new Integrated Criminal Justice Centers (CEINs) in areas with limited resources and political will.

5) **Recommendation — disseminate contextualized behavior change messaging:** Use contextually appropriate messaging, through traditional and social media, to reach diverse audiences. Considerations for tailoring messaging may include digital access, geography, and demographic profile of the desired audience. *Invest in community radio equipment, registration, and programming in the West.* Partner with industry, e.g., maquiladoras in the North, to promote messaging around labor rights and violence mitigation, especially GBV.

Tailor both the messages and the mode of communication to reach targeted audiences. For example, in the West, outside of urban areas, remote communities rely on community radio to get information. Even when digital access is available, it is primarily used by youth, who repeatedly mentioned using Facebook and Instagram. A few organizations that met with the team in the West have some radio equipment, but they are unable to broadcast for various reasons including lack of access, personnel, and resources. Very few people reported watching TV. Support community radio in the West to develop and broadcast programming around inclusion and the rights of women and other populations in situations of vulnerability with the objective of helping listeners to understand and claim their rights and reduce stigmatization of vulnerable groups.

In the North, people tended to trust local TV networks over national news. The team heard about more penetration of social media in urban areas of the North and surrounding Tegucigalpa. Many use WhatsApp for messaging and their favored platforms to gather information are Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, with the caveat that needing to access user data may likely deter users. Use data analytics to track usage.

Look for opportunities to work with the private sector on labor rights campaigns and violence prevention, with a specific focus on GBV.

6) **Recommendation — work with citizen security committees:** As citizen security committees begin to form, work with them to *create models of inclusive, transparent, nonviolent and accountable practices and responses* to local needs.

The first citizens’ security committees are forming in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. There is an opportunity to work with these nascent entities to establish positive models of inclusion, transparency, and accountability for replication.

7) **Recommendation — contextualize the role of the church:** Understand the different roles that the church can play, as potential *advocates for peace,* but also in *perpetuating dynamics of exclusion and machismo,* further marginalizing and fueling violence against women, children, and LGBTQI+. Account for this in all programming working with faith-based partners to avoid contradictory messaging.
**DYNAMIC: DISPUTES OVER LAND (IMMEDIATE CONCERN)**

TOC: IF communities, inclusive of Indigenous populations, government administrative and legal institutions, private sector, and other actors, respect and enforce land titling, AND IF the capacities of judges, magistrates, and prosecutors are strengthened to act with independence to execute the law, including Convention 169 THEN violent land disputes, land encroachment, and abuse of land and human rights will decrease BECAUSE land rights will be enforced in a transparent, just, and accountable manner.

**Leverage resources:**

1) **Recommendation – integrate messages of adherence to ILO 169:** Coordinate with other USG agencies to integrate messages of adherence to ILO Convention 169 and respect for human rights when meeting with Honduran counterparts.

**National-level programming:**

1) **Recommendation – passage of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) law:** Facilitate passage of an FPIC law working closely with Indigenous and Afro-descent populations, the National Congress and other stakeholders. Engage national and international private sector actors to adopt and adhere to FPIC.

Honduras ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169) in 1995. As a signatory, the Convention is integrated into Honduran law. Despite this, the framework is not being adhered to, and many people who met with the team spoke about the importance of developing regulations specific to the requirement for FPIC, and clarity of what constitutes compliance with the FPIC mandate. In many situations, the requirement for FPIC is completely ignored, or municipalities use a town hall forum as a means of satisfying the requirement – which it does not.

2) **Recommendation – improve protections:** Strengthen protections for human rights and environmental defenders.

There are currently no effective protections in place for human rights and environmental defenders. Even when they request protection, it is often not provided (see Closing Civic Space recommendations for improving state and non-state protection mechanisms.)

**Local-level programming (some of these programming interventions may also be appropriate at the national level if opportunities arise):**

1) **Recommendation – strengthen capacity of relevant stakeholders to implement ILO 169:** Work with a wide range of stakeholders, e.g., land titling entities, municipalities, ombudsman, local judges, magistrates, and prosecutors to apply and enforce Convention 169. Focus special attention on meaningful compliance with FPIC.

2) **Recommendation – support peaceful land dispute resolution:** Work with business, communities, and authorities to strengthen peaceful land dispute resolution mechanisms and, improve education and oversight of business compliance with human rights standards. Improve government civil presence in areas experiencing high rates of land disputes.

Look for opportunities to facilitate access to justice through both formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms for Indigenous populations, Afro-descendants, campesinos, and other groups in situations of
vulnerability. Work with Chambers of Commerce and local authorities to navigate and resolve confrontations, including those relating to tourism projects and ZEDEs. Use social auditing and other mechanisms to build an evidence base around land disputes that can be used by civil society organizations for advocacy with the government.

3) **Recommendation – promote peaceful advocacy by NGOs:** Work with relevant NGOs to support social auditing of resolution of land disputes and promote peaceful advocacy and engagement in human, environmental, and labor rights. As possible, integrate contextually appropriate messaging about women’s rights to hold land.

Work with civil society to advocate and promote accountability without spurring confrontation. Explore linking organizations addressing similar issues to develop networks and unify advocacy. Particularly in rural areas, foster inclusive advocacy for land rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations and women, particularly in rural areas, struggle to access land.

4) **Recommendation – amplify models of community and private sector collaboration:** Working with private sector and community actors, identify and disseminate models of successful, inclusive initiatives that mutually benefit the private sector and communities.

**Dynamic: Climate Change and Resource Scarcity (Immediate Concern / Concern)**

**TOC:** If the government implements transparent, timely, and technically led approaches to furthering climate adaptation and mitigation and emergency response AND if politically motivated decisions are reduced THEN the response will be more effective AND resource management will be improved.

**Leverage resources**

1) **Recommendation (immediate concern) – plan for impending food insecurity:** Work with BHA and the government of Honduras to develop a plan for those areas likely to experience high food insecurity.

In both urban and rural areas, people spoke about food scarcity due to increasing prices of food, fuel, agricultural inputs, and other necessities. There is a widespread perception of impending food insecurity.

2) **Recommendation (immediate concern) – strengthen interagency preparation and response:** Strengthen coordination with USAID/DOD emergency response and preparation. Continue to coordinate with DOD’s Humanitarian Assistance Projects (HAP) for broader USAID disaster preparedness and climate risk reduction efforts.

3) **Recommendation (concern) – support passage of water law regulation:** Participate in donor efforts to pass the 2009 water law regulation. Create opportunities to promote its implementation.

**National-level**

1) **Recommendation (immediate concern) – improve flood mitigation infrastructure in the Sula Valley:** Restoration, strengthening, and refurbishment of the flood mitigation infrastructure in the Sula Valley is urgently needed.
Working in Cortés, the team repeatedly heard concerns that the destruction caused by Eta and Iota has not been fixed, leaving Cortés even more vulnerable to extreme weather events than in 2020. Existing flood mitigation infrastructure is also urgently in need of repair. Given these conditions, new natural events will have the greatest impact on already vulnerable populations, possibly triggering social conflict and violence.

2) **Recommendation (concern) – support operational protocols and decision making:** Work with the Comisión Permanente de Contingencias (COPECO) to facilitate the development of operational level protocols in response to emergency situations under the new Sistema Nacional de Gestión de Riesgos (SINAGER). Assist with improving information systems to inform national decision making about land use, hydrology, and soils.

Provide support to Red Humanitaria to document lessons learned, good practices, and recommendations concerning the response to emergency situations under the new SINAGER. Information derived from the examples of Eta, Iota, COVID-19, and other emergencies can inform development of the operational level protocols. Build the capacity of SINAGER to assess damages and respond to emergencies in a timely manner.

3) **Recommendation (concern) - climate risk reduction mainstreaming:** Support COPECO’s efforts to mainstream climate risk reduction as a prevention tool by increasing the adaptive capacities of communities.

**Local-level**

1) **Recommendation (concern) – support water dispute resolution:** Strengthen water boards and municipal water authorities to improve informed water allocation, maintain water quality and protect water sources to assure future water resources, and resolve water disputes at the community level.

2) **Recommendation (concern) – foster partnerships for natural resource management:** Look for opportunities across Mission programming to support or create cross-sectoral partnerships and other fora to manage and mitigate climate change and resource stresses.

Support municipalities and CSOs in protecting ecosystems for climate adaptation. The specifics of the stresses will be different from location to location.

**Dynamic: Closing Civic Space (Concern)**

TOC: IF inclusive and effective protection measures are put into place to support human rights defenders, dissenting voices in the media, and other independent actors, AND IF the independence of these measures are upheld THEN opportunities will open for critical voices to exercise their liberties and demand accountability and democracy.

**Leverage resources:**

1) **Recommendation – strengthen state protection mechanisms:** Explore opportunities to work under the regional PADF project or the Regional Anti-corruption mechanism to improve existing state capacities to oversee and protect journalists, human rights defenders, environmental defenders, and others under threat.
2) **Recommendation** - Use findings from the Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA) to understand and inform responses to patterns of digital violence and digital divides.

**National and local-level programming:**

1) **Recommendation – strengthen non-state protection mechanisms and build an evidence base:** Contextualize and improve non-state protections for individuals and organizations under threat for challenging power or witnessing abuse of power.

Opportunities may include providing resources and support to organizations protecting independent media and organizations auditing powerful actors. Explore working through the Honduran Press Association to provide training on security and legal assistance to journalists under threat.

If there is a protection capacity deficit, explore the feasibility of creating an independent civil society protection mechanism to address complaints, provide legal assistance, offer pro bono litigation, support cyber security and offer psychosocial services (or refer to others).

Create a centralized evidence-base of human rights abuses by expanding the Violence Observatory scope to include tracking of violations against human rights defenders, journalists, and others under threat.

2) **Recommendation – support professionalization of the media:** Support civil society initiatives to monitor ethical standards and neutral content of media coverage. Explore good practices for fact checking in traditional and social media in urban areas. Integrate fact checking into journalist training.

3) **Recommendation - nurture independent media voices:** Facilitate opportunities for emerging media and train journalists and editors on ethics. Strengthen the Ethics Board of the Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras (CPH) to provide meaningful media ethics oversight.

By law, Honduran journalists are required to pay a monthly membership fee and join the CPH. In principle, the organization is charged with maintaining professional recruitment and ethical standards in journalism. However, deeply entrenched political affiliations among journalists have limited their effectiveness in applying and enforcing ethical standards.79

4) **Recommendation – support safe digital space:** Supports efforts to advocate for and create legislation protecting against harm in digital spaces, including GBV. Support designated response units with technical assistance and resources.

**Dynamic: Disenfranchised Youth (Concern)**

TOC: IF youth are provided increased, meaningful, contextually appropriate, and dignified socioeconomic opportunities, AND IF youth experience reduced stigmatization, criminalization, and victimization in institutions and society, AND IF youth behave in healthy ways, THEN youth engagement in the informal economy, criminal economy, and migration will decrease BECAUSE youth will experience increased trust and hope for their future in Honduras.

**Leverage resources:**

1) **Recommendation – encourage investment in education:** Encourage the GOH and the private

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sector to increase investment and tangible actions in formal and informal education. Collaborate with the DoD small grants program to improve education infrastructure.

The recently released GOH development plan prioritizes access and permanence in the education system.\textsuperscript{80} Today, an estimated 2 million\textsuperscript{81} Honduran children and youth are still out of school.

2) **Recommendation – target youth with healthy behaviors programming:** Look for opportunities to partner with other donors to address a contextualized approach to sexual and reproductive health and alcohol and drug abuse. When feasible, integrate elements of health / positive behaviors (e.g., don’t use alcohol and drugs) into existing USAID activities.

**National and local-level programming:**

1) **Recommendation - involve youth in all aspects of programming:** Cultivate youth leaders and engage youth as implementers, visionaries, and in monitoring of activities. Take into account the special needs of youth, particularly girls and young women, so that they can meaningfully participate.

Many youths are energized and want to be agents of their own change. Some youth who met with the team described USAID activities as being designed and implemented by adults, perceiving that youth were viewed only as an indicator to be counted. They appealed to USAID to shift to youth centered activities designed, implemented, and monitored and evaluated by youth.

Many youths are not working or in school. The majority of these are girls. Understand and account for the special needs of youth, particularly girls and young women who risk being overlooked and are at heightened risk of abuse and trafficking. The team repeatedly heard about women and girls getting pregnant earlier, some as young as 9 years old, and many by the time they are 16.

Youth may live in youth-headed households and if parents have migrated or are otherwise unavailable, girls and young women often take on childcare and elder care responsibilities. Create activities that are sensitive to youth context. For example, have childcare services and offer other support to facilitate engagement of girls and young women.

2) **Recommendation – get children and youth back to school:** Integrate work at multiple levels of entry to return students to school. This may include working on education policy and budgeting, information dissemination, working with families, teachers and communities, and investing in school infrastructure (see leveraging resources above).

Consider scholarships for youth from marginalized populations to support their return to school. Incorporate lessons learned from past scholarship activities and establish safeguards and processes that support transparency in the award process.

3) **Recommendation – focus on job placement and fair salaries:** When working with youth, focus on placement and fair salaries as much as training. Offer incentives, e.g., explore options with human

\textsuperscript{80} Secretaría de Planificación Estratégica. Prioridades de Gobierno 2022-2026. May 2022
\textsuperscript{81} Transformemos Honduras (2021). “Dos millones de estudiantes son excluidos del sistema educativo por causa de la pandemia.” http://transformemoshonduras.com/org/2021/10/12/honduras-dos-millones-de-estudiantes-son-excluidos-del-sistema-educativo-por-causa-de-la-pandemia/
rights compliance, to employers to hire youth. Establish linkages between workforce development, violence prevention, and job creation activities.

The team heard consistently from youth about lack of employment opportunities. Barriers to employment include politicization of hiring, e.g., based on party affiliation, and employers who require experience, making it almost impossible for someone with a university degree to find a position. Other obstacles included stigmatization of youth if they live in the wrong neighborhoods, and a general scarcity of opportunities.

Some youth planned to stay and keep looking for work in Honduras. Others hoped that training or a university degree would make them more employable when they emigrate. Several youths mentioned the gap between job training and attaining employment at a fair salary. When designing workforce development activities, focus as much on securing employment for trainees at a fair wage as the training itself.

**Dynamic: Tensions Between the Public and Private Sectors (Concern)**

**TOC:** If the public and private sectors can agree on conditions and minimum principles for dialogue THEN they will be able to establish a level of trust and move closer to a common agenda BECAUSE mutual understanding is necessary to agree on the shared benefits of economic stability.

**National-level programming:**

1. **Recommendation – identify champions for change:** Work with willing private sector representatives inside and outside of the government to identify champions who support partnership and foster constructive communication between the private sector and GOH.

2. **Recommendation – set the stage for dialogue:** Invest resources to identify a neutral mediator and set the stage for dialogue.

If there is no one in Honduras considered a credible and neutral mediator by both parties, find an international mediator. Organizations such as the Center for International Private Enterprise have extensive experience working to identify shared value between good governance in the public and private sectors in a variety of contexts and may serve as a useful resource in exploring potential entry points.

3. **Recommendation – facilitate a dialogue process:** Using the neutral actor with credibility to facilitate and mediate a dialogue process, begin work within the private sector to create a unified agenda among sub-sectors. Using this private sector agenda, work with the private sector and government counterparts to negotiate demands and proposals.

Before engaging in negotiations with the government, work within the highly fragmented private sector to develop a shared private sector agenda. Once this has been clarified, support mediation between the private sector and the government.

If the Mission has conducted a Private Sector Landscape Assessment (PSLA) or similar studies, it may help inform how USAID can most effectively use its convening power to support more constructive engagement. This information might also be useful for facilitating a more active role by the private sector in alleviating social tensions and adhering to international standards.
**National and local-level programming:**

1) **Recommendation – support private sector dispute resolution:** Look for opportunities to grow private sector dispute resolution mechanisms to **address private sector fragmentation, support management of scarce resources, and reduce chances of violence.**

Some chambers of commerce at national and departmental levels have created mechanisms for resolving private sector disputes with varying levels of success, e.g., the Olancho Chamber of Commerce has contracted an attorney to mediate labor disputes. Despite these efforts, the private sector remains highly fragmented and faces disputes over labor, land, and resources. Offer support to credible dispute resolution mechanisms and look for opportunities for replication.

2) **Recommendation – create opportunities for local level public – private collaboration:** Foster government and private sector collaboration at the local level.

Topics for collaboration may include water management, workforce development opportunities, and community consultations. Even though this recommendation is offered through the lens of addressing public-private sector tensions, it has the opportunity to impact other dynamics as well by addressing lack of opportunities for youth and others through workforce development and management of scarce resources such as energy and water.

**Dynamic: Hope… But Not Forever (Mitigating)**

1) **Recommendation – encourage President Castro and her Administration to address high expectations of change following her election:** **Support Castro’s leadership** in areas such as education, health, poverty, reduction, women’s rights and GBV. Identify opportunities to work with the president on key anti-corruption and other high-profile initiatives, **accompanied by an energetic communications strategy.**

Expectations for the new government remain very high. While many people told the team that 100 days is not enough to see change, most raised concerns that the government does not appear to be acting in line with promises made during the campaign. Indeed, many felt that President Xiomara Castro is not even in control of the government, but rather it is her husband, Manuel Zelaya, who is making the decisions.

People want to see the change that they voted for with President Castro, but they will not wait indefinitely. There is a window of opportunity for the government and the LIBRE party to clearly signal that President Castro is fulfilling her election promises, but that window already shows signs of closing. The team routinely heard from people who pinpointed the one-year mark as a threshold, meaning that if the government didn’t demonstrate promised changes, people would take to the streets.

In addition to the perception that Manuel Zelaya holds the power rather than Xiomara Castro, the team heard many concerns about replicating past administrations, particularly relating to corruption and nepotism in political appointments. Some of the issues that people are watching closely in urban areas include the upcoming elections of the Attorney General and Supreme Court Justices, and advances in women’s rights such as legalization of the PAE.

2) **Recommendation – create space for dialogue:** Work to **open spaces for dialogue between the government and Indigenous and Afro-descent populations, private sector actors, and women’s rights and LGBTQI+ advocacy groups** to demonstrate the inclusion and participation promised during the campaign.
In rural areas, the team heard from Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations that the inclusion envisioned in the new government is not materializing. Hopes are high for consultations with the President and the return of ancestral lands.

**Dynamic: Migration and Remittances (Mitigating)**

1) **Recommendation – monitor migration for signs of change:** If US foreign policy or other factors limit migration, monitor for signs of increased dissatisfaction with the government of Honduras and other unintended consequences. Explore options for designing activities that encourage investment of remittances.

Despite being extremely dangerous, irregular migration is perceived as one of the few economic opportunities available to most people. Remittances that are sent back are used primarily for consumption, but to an extent alleviate pressure on the government to provide basic goods and services.

**Operational Recommendations**

In addition to the programming and policy recommendations above, the assessment team offers the following operational recommendations to USAID/Honduras.


Review for conflict sensitivity in ongoing Mission processes, e.g., portfolio or performance management reviews. In the event of significant changes in context, schedule a free-standing review of conflict and violence analytics and act on the implications for programming.

2) Integrate conflict-sensitive design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation across the Mission portfolio. The Conflict Sensitive Integration Hub (CSIH) and Mission monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can assist with conflict-sensitive design and continuous context monitoring.

3) To support inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, consider hiring an Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples’ advisor within USAID, establish an advisory board or group, and/or create an internship program for Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants.

4) Insert language into DOAGs identifying key actions by relevant government counterparts on priority issues to enhance accountability.

5) Ensure that implementing partners conduct due diligence processes when partnering with NGOs and advocacy organizations, not just private companies. Develop a Mission order on due diligence to clarify who USAID is really supporting and avoid reputational and performance risk.

Some NGOs and advocacy organizations in Honduras are deeply politicized, and do not always represent the populations that they claim to. Who USAID is working with can send important messages of support and legitimacy.

6) Improve coordination between USAID activities working in the same zones and coordination between USAID activities and those of other organizations.

7) Consult with communities to identify shared goals and support sustainability. When feasible, use resources available within the community.
8) Consider longer project time horizons (beyond five years) and/or longer-term monitoring and evaluation for projects seeking to impact systemic change.
ANNEX A: DEPARTMENTAL SNAPSHOTs

Atlántida

INTRODUCTION

Atlántida lies on the southern edge of the Caribbean, along the northern coast of Honduras; it borders the department of Cortés (West), Yoro (South) and Colón (East). Atlántida has eight municipalities within its 4,251 square kilometer area, including two critical ports in La Ceiba, its capital, and Tela. The department economy, and that of La Ceiba and Tela, revolves mainly around tourism. As the fourth largest city in the country, La Ceiba serves as a regional hub of government services for neighboring departments like Islas de la Bahía (the only island department in Honduras), Colón, Yoro, and portions of Olancho.

Only two-hours—driving distance—from the Sula Valley cities, Tela is a small yet popular destination attracting a diverse population of weekend and holiday travelers. Tela has several large Afro-descendant communities within its boundaries: Triunfo de la Cruz, La Ensenada, Miami, San Juán, and Tornabé. With slightly over 106,000 residents, Tela heavily relies on the jurisdiction of La Ceiba for many of its government services. Tela experienced a surge in homicide rates between 2016-2019 as one urban gang, MS-13, slowly gained control over certain peri-urban areas of the city, and more importantly, Tela’s beach-related tourism. With more gang presence in this coastal town and given its location in a notorious northern corridor for drugs, Tela has experienced not only a hike in crime and violence but also an increase in drug use among its youth. However, the control of one gang over most criminal activities in Tela produces a perception of less insecurity when compared to perceptions in La Ceiba.

La Ceiba, only a two-hour drive from Tela and a total of four hours from the Sula Valley interconnection via the CA5 highway, has double the population of Tela. La Ceiba experienced unstructured growth in its peri-urban areas following the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1999. La Ceiba also houses two major Afro-descendant communities, Sambo Creek and Corozal. Despite having only a fifth of the population of San Pedro Sula, in 2016 La Ceiba had a similar homicide rate of 120 per 100,000 inhabitants; in 2019 that had decreased to 56.6. The crime and violence occurring in La Ceiba stems from the presence of two major gangs—MS13 and Barrio 18. It is also a city connected to Colón and Gracias a Dios, a drug trafficking route; its location along this route accounts for a portion of the violence in La Ceiba attributed to territorial control among drug trafficking networks. La Ceiba has also been the scene of high-profile cases related to gender-based violence (GBV) within the past three years. For example, a case of sexual assault against a young woman in 2019 spurred in-person protests and social media campaigns (Todas Somos Alejandra) against impunity in GBV cases.

Perceptions of USG and USAID. Respondents in Atlántida generally have a positive perception of the work that USAID conducts. However, they have less clarity on the cohesiveness of the interventions and the coherence between the public diplomacy and development work that is done by the USG writ large. There is some criticism of the tenuous nature of some of the interventions, in particular the ones related to employment generation, GBV work, and police support. The team heard from people hoping to access USAID funding who were critical of frequent changes to reporting and regulation requirements, as well as the competitiveness for grant money which generated by the issuance of grants for the region, forcing some of the work to be conducted in partnership with organizations with differing visions and approaches, thus contributing to strained outcomes. On the issue of compliance, USAID was criticized for not supporting organizational development of civil society in a region where there are few civil society organizations (CSOs) to begin with. The CSOs struggle for financial opportunities from international donors; however, many yet are hard-pressed to meet the multiple requirements to access funding. In one
case, USAID’s interventions were described as not reflective of the objectives and aspirations of the community. Some private sector representatives commented on the dispersion of activities across multiple implementers that seek out information from them and then fail to provide concrete outcomes or relay back results; they were also highly critical of USAID implementers’ focus on indicators that do not reflect the sustainability these interventions need to foster development in these cities. A few people felt that USAID excluded older participants from their workforce development programs.

DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

Clientelism and a culture of impunity. The team heard repeatedly that municipal governments completely ignore the needs of these two cities and their specific communities. For example, Tela’s former mayor did not want to engage with international donors or the different community boards known as patronatos. Residents in one community had to file with the Interamerican Human Rights Commission to defend their communal title because municipal employees registered land sales specifically prohibited by said title. In the case of La Ceiba, when civil society criticized how the municipality was managing the women’s shelter, specifically taking ownership of a USAID-donated car for the shelter, the reaction was to close down the Women’s Municipal office, thus directly affecting survivors of GBV.

Normalization of violence. Tela and La Ceiba have a high incidence of intra-family violence, domestic violence, and violence against LGBTQI+ people. Respondents mentioned significant challenges placing a complaint with law enforcement, often resulting in either revictimization of the survivor, abandonment of the criminal process, and/or belittling of the situation by first responders and the police. In cases where the survivor self-identifies as transgender, the police and military police are often the aggressors, which then negates the victim’s right to seek justice. Furthermore, the services for survivors in Tela are even more challenging as they need to seek services (for example, from Forensic Medicine) in La Ceiba, a two-hour drive or four-hour bus ride away.

The team heard about violence, intimidation, and aggressive language utilized by members of print media when interviewing and reporting on news involving the LGBTQI+ community. Many transgender sex workers resort to paying criminals to protect them against gangs that force sex workers to sell drugs for them and described how police are complicit in these criminal activities. Many respondents cited a spike in violence occurring in the department and how the police were either powerless or complicit in it. For example, the team heard about one individual being stalked by the gang in his neighborhood and how little recourse he had to avoid being forcefully recruited or killed; he had a clear intent to migrate illegally to Spain to escape this situation.

Violence in the department is perceived as normal; it is especially accepted as a daily occurrence among gang-disputed territories. This perception is widespread and often unrecognized by respondents when asked, violence is accepted as a currency, as a consequence of territorial disputes, and as a result of infringement of gang-imposed control measures. The possibility of life free of violence seems to be excluded in the perception of interviewees.

Land disputes. Many of the land disputes in Atlántida involve afro-descendent communities, commonly referred to as Garifuna communities. These communities are governed by ancestral communal titles that often restrict sale of plots to “ladinos” (non-Garifuna people). Disputes arise when multiple land titles over the same land are filed in local offices and municipalities sell off land to private companies in the tourism sector. When the community seeks institutional redress of these situations, they face indifference, negligence, and/or collusion which then forces them to escalate their land grievances to international authorities.
Land disputes are less contentious yet equally unnerving when land is taken by organized crime; in these cases, victims do not seek institutional or legal redress due to credible fear for their lives. Several of the organizations that met with the team expressed distrust of the government and its human rights framework. They believe that the government is complicit in the disappearances of human rights defenders of the land, and negligent when faced with recrimination from these groups. The impunity around the land disputes and the unresolved cases of defenders then generates more land encroachment and resentment from these communities.

**Youth disenfranchisement.** The job market in Atlántida centers around the tourism industry. With a struggling economy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, many youth are unable to get a job. Moreover, youth that reside in peri-urban, gang-controlled areas are subject to discrimination from employers and criminalization by police. Public education is weak, and this was reported to have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. The jobs available to youth with only a few years of schooling past sixth grade are low-paying jobs with high risk or difficult conditions (for example, private security companies with 24-hour shifts); these types of jobs do not satisfy the needs and the aspirations of youth, as one of the respondents pointed out. Furthermore, in their communities, children and youth are actively recruited by gangs, criminal organizations, and drug trafficking networks; more often than not they have little choice to refuse, driven by either desperation or threats that they and their families will be killed. Migration becomes the only option for youth in that situation.

**MITIGATING FACTORS**
In Atlántida, many families rely on remittances for survival. With one or more family members in the United States, Spain, or Mexico sending remittances to their family in Honduras provides an economic relief in an area where the tourism economy was hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic, where many businesses were forced to close. Respondents mentioned high gas prices, increases in electricity bills, the high cost of the food basket, and loss of jobs as the main reasons to consider migrating, which many saw as the only viable option left for them. Some respondents mentioned they could migrate as soon as within the next four months.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents mentioned how their hope for an improved future in Honduras had depended on the outcome of the recent election. With President Castro now in office, many of these expectations had fallen severely short as many campaign promises did not seem to be prioritized and many of the corrupt practices criticized by LIBRE in other administrations were being replicated. A cross-section of respondents expressed serious concerns over what they dubbed as “bad warning signs” from the current Castro administration, increasing their frustration in the short term. Many of them cited as few as four months, and as long as six months, for their patience to hold. A few organizations even went as far as mentioning they were ready to battle the Castro administration on the streets if promises remained un-kept. They noted they had protested on the streets before and were willing to do it again.

**Choluteca**

**INTRODUCTION**
Choluteca is Honduras’ southernmost department, featuring both a Pacific coastline and a shared border with Nicaragua. Socio-economically, it is characterized by high unemployment, perpetual land contestation, and competition for limited water and mineral resources. The intensity of water competition decreases in the rainy season, but conflict over land is constantly present. The area’s dynamics are largely shaped by the presence of large business investments, including gold mining, shrimp farming, major
agroindustry, and energy production (solar), as well as the Orquidea Special Economic Zone (ZEDE) in San Marcos de Colón. The ZEDE is a key water source for valley production and human consumption in the coastal municipalities. Major hubs of business development in the area include San Marcos de Colón, El Corpus, Namasigue, and Pespire. Choluteca’s geographic location further makes it a transit point of both licit and illicit goods to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Catacamas, Olancho.

Choluteca is a crucial entry point into Honduras for migrants from Haiti, Cuba, Venezuela, Africa, and Asia that are in transit to the US’ southern border, which also makes it a hub of human smuggling and trafficking in persons. Some locals participate in these activities, while local police have insufficient resources to effectively respond to the influx of migrants, leaving some exposed to exploitation, kidnapping, and sexual assault.

**Perceptions of USG.** Choluteca has not been traditionally prioritized as a recipient of US foreign assistance, and respondents shared a perception that Choluteca is only on the international community’s radar in the wake of natural disasters or major migration events. Respondents were aware of the benefits of USAID’s partnerships elsewhere in the country, and saw Zona Sur as an area with tremendous resources, potential, and human capacity. Respondents identified local needs around both meaningful employment options and educational opportunities.

**DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT**

**Land security.** The primary source of social conflict discussed by respondents in Choluteca was contestation over agriculturally productive land between businesses and members of local communities. These conflicts further grow to involve state officials (police, administrative, and legal bodies) and local and sometimes national environmental or human rights non-governmental organizations. Respondents identified confrontations with most of the industries present in Choluteca, with particular discussion of confrontations over gold mining, agroindustry, energy/solar, shrimp fishing, and the department’s Special Economic Zone.

These conflicts manifest in a variety of ways. In some cases, businesses may purchase productive land or expand operations into areas where local farmers live and/or work the land, which they may or may not own a title to. In other cases, farmers may move into productive land to farm when it is not perceived to be in use. Companies may evict them with private security or police assistance, offer them payouts, or take them to local administrative or legal forums to resolve disputes. Respondents identified that administrative and legal processes frequently are rapidly decided in favor of big business, with local farmers evicted or stuck in legal limbo. Respondents communicated that farmers who bring cases against big business experience substantial delays in justice compared to big business. The possibility of payoffs by businesses seeking to avoid administrative and legal processes incentivizes “professional squatters” to seek out planned developments to occupy, further contributing to tension and distrust between officials, private sector, and local farmers. The police are called to evacuate people who have encroached.

Respondents communicated community tensions over perceived unequal access to justice and further community experiences of pollution and exploitative treatment by businesses. Local environmental and human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seeking to promote accountability inadvertently increase these tensions, sometimes involving the media, as they organize community confrontations with businesses perceived to be at fault.

At the time of the assessment, the team heard that there is a directive not to use police force and try to mediate confrontations. This effort has been augmented by an extra workforce brought from Tegucigalpa. Overall, respondents believed the governmental transition has contributed to an increase in land invasions...
(by squatters) and increased extortion as opportunists seek to take advantage of perceived decreases in forceful police responses.

Closing civil space and normalization of violence. Violence is perceived as a fixture of civic activism in Choluteca, particularly for environmental activists and those who confront private interests over violations of the activist’s rights. Environmental activists face threats and targeted assassinations over their work (e.g., the killing of Marvin Damian Castro Molina, a youth environmental activist in Pespire in 2020). Civic activism in Choluteca also remains contentious in itself within many communities. Families in these communities depend on employment opportunities created by the agro-industry and mining corporations, and communities are fragmented over how to respond to environmental and social harms created by businesses and their use of productive land. Local elites are perceived to benefit from limiting the effectiveness of civic activism and maintaining this status quo.

Exploitation of migrants. Organized crime in Choluteca largely centers on efforts to profit from the flow of migrants from the Nicaraguan border, either through human trafficking or smuggling. This population is also subject to increased risk of extortion and sexual violence, though in some cases the risk is tempered by the need for smugglers to protect their reputations once migrants enter their care. The most vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation are those migrants who do not speak Spanish, such as those from Haiti, Africa, or Asia.

Criminal opportunism. Traditional crime is not a significant problem compared to cities in the North of Honduras, but both extortion and drug trafficking are perceived to be increasing, frequently coinciding with shipments of counterfeit goods and human trafficking networks. Respondents did not cite massacres as frequently occurring in the region, suggesting more sophisticated organized crime and fewer turf wars between groups. Respondents in Choluteca shared rumors of arrivals of Salvadoran gang members who were seeking to hide in Choluteca following President Nayib Bukele’s anti-gang policy declarations, but these were not accompanied by reports of increased crime at the time of interviews.

Clientelism and a culture of impunity. The Mayor of Choluteca is currently in his fourth straight term, and respondents indicated this is largely due to a strong clientelist base from marginalized areas of the city with poor infrastructure and public services. Respondents also communicated that local police sometimes serve as private security for companies, and local judicial and administrative processes are seen as largely operating in favor of big business.

Disenfranchised youth. Youth in Choluteca face high unemployment and are strongly concerned by the lack of opportunities for social mobility. Many youth turn to migration as the only opportunity that provides economic security, though the strength of the illicit economy in Choluteca is also considered an opportunity for many youths and the unemployed.

Latent public/private sector tensions. Businesses in Choluteca, particularly energy producers and the Special Economic Zone in San Marcos de Colón, face increased uncertainty with the government’s more restrictive stance toward the private sector. The private sector in Choluteca includes both domestic and international investment, and respondents identified multiple instances of investors leaving due to the challenges of the business enabling environment.

Impacts of climate change and resource scarcity. Access to water is a critical trigger of conflict. Choluteca heavily depends on agriculture and the central government has weak capabilities to implement water management policy. Even when there is enough water, the way it is distributed prioritizes the private sector interests (production) at the expense of human consumption. Continuous droughts will continue
to push people to the cities and the United States. Local environmental groups have struggled to curb alleged damages to the local environment by businesses, including pollution of limited water sources. Choluteca’s solar energy industry represents an opportunity for integrating green energy into energy planning.

**MITIGATING FACTORS**

Migration and remittances constitute a meaningful mitigating factor for grievances against the government in light of the lack of meaningful economic opportunities and public service provision. Further, the private sector’s ability to influence local outcomes and generate economic opportunities is also a mitigating factor; however, the influence of the private sector is contentious when it fails to engage communities constructively. Respondents cited shrimp company FundeSur as an example of a business that effectively established a positive relationship with the local community.

**Colón**

**INTRODUCTION**

Trujillo is the main town in the department of Colón, located on the Caribbean coast of the country. The main economic activities of the department are tourism and large plantations such as palm oil, as well as mining and cattle raising. The department borders Olancho, Yoro, Gracias a Dios, and Atlántida. The department has 10 municipalities, six of them with access to the Caribbean coast. It is rich in natural resources, with 304,603 inhabitants and 8,276 square kilometers. Population density is low, at approximately 29.9 people per square kilometer. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of the population lives in poverty and, according to the 2022 Human Development Report, has one of the highest rates of school dropout together with Yoro, Atlántida, Islas de la Bahía and Cortés.

Public infrastructure in the department is limited. The road connecting La Ceiba, department of Atlántida, and Trujillo, main city of Colón, was finished during the 1980s. For decades economic activities were oriented to the Trujillo port but due to insufficient infrastructure, tourism took over as the main activity in the region. Tocoa, a border municipality of Trujillo, is a commercial center in the department. The agrarian reform of the 1970s distributed large portions of territory to farmers cooperatives with the goal of activating and diversifying agriculture in the North of the country. This led to internal migration from other parts of the country in pursuit of land. Changes in the agrarian reform law in the 90’s allowed farmers cooperatives and municipalities to sell land to individuals, national, and international companies. This led prominent families and companies to accumulate large land holdings, most of them dedicated to palm oil cultivation. It was also a period in which economic elites consolidated their links to political power at both the national and local level; it was characterized by the use of security forces, especially the military, to exert control over territories.

The department is also a strategic territory for international drug trafficking. National cartels linked to international drug organizations control the department of Colón and its connections with Gracias a Dios, Olancho, Atlántida and Cortés. Fights for the recovery of collective land, resistance to mining and hydropower projects, and the increasing presence of large tourism projects on indigenous land, together with the control of drug cartels, have produced several episodes of violence in the department. Unlike other departments, in Colón violence is not related to the activity of gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18, consequently extortion and street sales of drugs have not been reported in this department. However, violence produced by conflicts, amongst and within communities, repression by state security forces and involvement of criminal groups and private security companies are common. In 2014, 257 homicides were reported. This number decreased to 140 in 2017 and increased again to 164 in 2019. The increase in
homicides reported since 2017 may be related to an increase in socio-environmental conflicts in the region. The department of Colón is highly vulnerable to natural events such as hurricanes and tropical storms.

**Perceptions of USAID are diverse.** Garifuna communities in Trujillo perceive that benefits from USAID projects are not reaching the community because USAID only works with the municipality, which has different goals than the communities. Municipal authorities on the other hand expect that USAID will increase investments in the region since its presence was reduced during the last four years. The private sector in Trujillo criticized excessive bureaucracy in USAID projects and the excessive investment in administration costs which seem to reduce expected benefits for the population, in their opinion. Some respondents perceive that USAID programs perform better when funding is given directly to civil society organizations. They raised concerns that resources may be lost when allocated to public institutions due to corruption. Some noted that social auditing promoted by USAID programs has helped to identify and reduce corrupt dynamics in the municipality. In general, USAID is well-regarded and there is an expectation that USAID will increase its presence in Trujillo. This perception was also shared by indigenous communities that have never benefited from USAID programs.

**DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT**

*Clientelism and a culture of impunity.* Respondents perceived that corruption and clientelism in Trujillo will continue without changes. This especially affects Garifuna and indigenous communities by reducing access to justice regarding land conflicts and access to social services and by increasing stigmatization and criminalization. For example, one community has faced repression by justice and security forces related to land conflicts; furthermore, the community is stigmatized as being violent and insecure. Although Garifuna communities supported the new government, they do not feel that their needs are being met, and they do not consider themselves as part of the LIBRE party. Consequently, they feel used and excluded. The Pech community shared this same perception due to persistent high levels of political and social exclusion. For example, as the team wrapped up the field work, a protest led by the *Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña* (OFRANEH)’s Miriam Miranda took place; it centered on the government and Public Ministry’s indifference on what this Garifuna organization called racist treatment of indigenous populations. The protest called for action against the assassination and disappearances of Garifuna leaders over the last two years.

A few private sector representatives mentioned that clientelism and corruption are the main sources of current conflicts in the department and that powerful corrupt structures will be difficult to fight and change. One main driver of this is the strong influence of drug trafficking organizations in local politics as they strive to maintain territorial control. Clientelism is also producing conflicts inside the political party. The overall perception is that corruption and clientelism will not be reduced by the new government because they are reproducing the same clientelist practices as the previous government.

*Closing civil space.* Garifuna and Pech communities in Trujillo do not feel that the new government is changing the exclusion they have faced for decades. They perceive that during the election, the Castro campaign was listening to all groups, but after the election there was no more communication with the President. Representatives of these communities feel that the new government used indigenous communities to win the election but does not have capacity or interest in addressing indigenous needs. As one Garifuna leader stated, “they only invited us to dance as part of a cultural festival.” For both of these groups, resistance is the only way to survive and that includes to resist and fight the new government if their demands are not met.
**Normalization of violence.** While violence related to delinquency is low due to control of crime by drug trafficking organizations, other forms of violence (repression, armed confrontations, killings of indigenous, Afro-descendent, and campesino leaders) are perceived as a normal occurrence because of the intensity of the long-standing conflicts between communities, private companies and local authorities. One leader of a farmers’ movement described how fear of repression and violence have changed all aspects of life; they now feel it is a daily quest to protect themselves and the land. Pech communities mentioned that they have to be prepared, using their own security committee, to face any threat coming to its people and territories. These “alternative protection mechanisms” are present in both Garifuna and Pech communities due to the lack of police presence, access to justice, and the existence of violent groups (criminal organizations and private security companies) involved in land conflicts. Intra-community conflicts produced by social fracturing also create the perception that self-protection is the only alternative in highly conflicted territories.

**Land security.** Land disputes in Colón involve several actors: Garifuna communities, farmers (local and from other departments), indigenous communities (Pech), national companies owned by members of powerful and wealthy families, and international companies (mining, tourism). According to Garifuna and Pech leaders, respect for land titles is at the center of all conflicts. Garifuna leaders of Cristales and Río Negro described conflicts between members of the community and between the community and international companies developing tourism projects. Garifuna leaders explained that most conflicts are created by members of the community that sell plots to “ladinos” (non-Garifuna outsiders) who came to Trujillo. The Garifuna believe that “ladinos” coming to Trujillo are escaping problems and bring illicit actions, crime, and violence when they arrive. However, they also feel that these outsiders are protected by the police and local authorities because they share similar motivations—racism against Garifunas and desire for their lands. These feelings are shared by the Pech community.

Other conflicts involve farmers’ cooperatives against powerful palm oil companies. Similarly, these conflicts originated in the 90’s after the Agrarian Law Reform and have been prolonged by a cycle of land encroachment and violent evictions; these evictions have resulted in killings of farmer leaders, consequently leading a new, enraged generation to invade lands again. One leader, who was in prison for seven years, described the complicity of justice institutions and security forces with national companies owned by prominent wealthy families. Farmers organizations have limited power against these strong interests, and leaders suffer the consequences of impunity for crimes committed against them and instances of cooptation of justice.

**Disenfranchised youth.** Garifuna and Pech youth face limitations to engaging in agriculture in their own communities, mostly from poor access to land and limited benefits of farming; these circumstances make agriculture less attractive to youth. This leads to increased migration among youth. Participants mentioned that increasing drug consumption is affecting youth and reduces the expectations of obtaining a job and staying in school. Unemployment among youth is considered one of the main triggers of migration. High levels of stigmatization and criminalization of Garifuna youth influence the decision to migrate since they are often unable to access jobs and education in Trujillo. Private sector representatives agreed that unemployment is the most important problem for youth in Trujillo. Furthermore, private businesses in the tourism industry report challenges in finding qualified youth in the region.

**MITIGATING FACTORS**

Migration and remittances remove pressure on the government to provide goods and services. However, at the same time they reduce popular motivation to claim services. For example, when youth face barriers to accessing justice, education, or other services, they prefer to migrate instead of demanding that the government improve services. Migration is also the solution to problems created by high levels of impunity,
and limitations to accessing land or justice related to labor rights violations. It was also mentioned by private sector representatives that once youth start receiving remittances they stop working.

There is still hope for change following the election of a new government. However, Garifuna communities feel used and expect signs of respect and recognition by the new government. Pech communities are even more skeptical regarding promises of the new government and the existence of political will to address their historical claims regarding ethnic rights; however, they consider the change of the government as something positive and necessary. Pech and Garifuna communities are well organized and are willing to establish dialogue based on respect and recognition of their rights. This is a mitigating factor if there is political will of the government to seek dialogue and address their demands. However, if indifference persists, these communities could launch strong protests against the new government.

**Copán**

**INTRODUCTION**

The department of Copán has an area of 3,242 square kilometers with a population of 412,927 inhabitants, subdivided into 23 municipalities. Its departmental capital is Santa Rosa de Copán. The department is also home to the Archaeological Site Ruins of Copán, which houses one of the most important Mayan cities of antiquity, attracting many tourists every year.

Throughout the department there is a lot of transit of people and illicit substances along the border with Guatemala. The main source of employment is agriculture. Tobacco is grown for export while the rural population produces basic grains, corn, and beans for self-consumption, as well as vegetables and coffee to market outside the region. In Santa Rosa there is a lot of trade and in Copán Ruinas the tourism industry is driven by the archaeological park, where an estimated 200,000 tourists arrive annually, although tourism was heavily impacted by COVID-19.

In the department of Copán and especially in Copán Ruinas, Santa Rita, and Cabañas, there are important settlements of indigenous Maya Chortís, especially in the border area with Guatemala, which serves as a zone of irregular migration and trafficking. Copán is home to about 5,000 Maya Chortí (compared to 55,000 in Guatemala). In Honduras, unlike in Guatemala, the Maya Chortí have largely lost their language and traditional dress.

In the remote areas of Copán, there is a lack of state presence and high levels of domestic and intrafamilial violence, including incest and rape. There are limited resources for survivors of violence and a lack of acceptance of LGBTQI+ and indigenous peoples. There is also extreme marginalization of women, especially in more rural communities.

In addition, there are land security issues over land titling, selling communal lands, narco-trafficking, and disregard of ILO Convention 169. People are suffering from rising food prices and the cost of agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizer, resulting in food insecurity. With a lack of economic opportunities, people are migrating to larger cities like San Pedro Sula or going directly to the US.

**Perceptions of USAID.** The assessment team had the opportunity to meet with people from the three most important municipalities of the department: Santa Rosa de Copán, Copán Ruinas, and La Entrada. Most of the interviewees were aware of USAID’s work and its contribution to the development of the department, such as water and irrigation projects, including different types of training and education. Both community leaders and mayors welcomed USAID assistance and stated examples of programming that has supported development. However, they emphasized the importance of better coordination among USAID and other international NGOs and requested resources to go through their technical experts.
rather than hiring and bringing in outside consultants. They also requested that USAID take advantage of the local resources already available in the mancomunidades and mayors’ offices, including personnel who are well aware of the needs of the population and have the academic training and experience to undertake projects. They said that using community resources is preferable to hiring outside consultants to do the work.

Respondents reported communication and coordination between USAID projects and municipalities as essential. There is already a strategic development plan in the municipalities that should be followed to make more efficient use of resources that are becoming scarcer. When consultants come, they bring their goals, which are sometimes contrary to those of the municipalities. Respondents cited an economic growth project that allocated L. 2000 per entrepreneur; in their opinion, this amount was too small to do anything meaningful. Respondents emphasized that funds should be invested in processes and not in projects.

Follow-up by USAID to its projects is another issue regarding the sustainability of interventions. Respondents noted that this issue could be addressed by using existing social structures (existing boards, etc.) internal to the community.

In the past, USAID has made significant contributions to water projects, irrigation, food security, and agriculture. USAID also provided humanitarian assistance in emergencies for the purchase of food and medical supplies, and has worked with the municipal governments of Copán Ruinas and Santa Rosa de Copán. Many respondents felt that if USAID had transferred funds directly to the communities or municipal governments, there would have been more sustainability.

Lastly, there is little participation of women in the different projects and programs of not only USAID but also other organizations because their husbands do not allow them to participate.

**DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT**

*Clientelism and a culture of impunity.* Due to political clientelism, there is job insecurity for state employees who worked under the previous nationalist governments. There were also perceptions that the reintegration of purged policemen may cause more violence.

Respondents noted that there has been a recent division of the LIBRE party, where 20 deputies have expressed their discomfort with the coordination of the party and have decided to form a group within the congress that will not follow the party line, potentially leading to instability in the court and public ministry, and thus in the country. Within this context, almost all respondents believe that corruption and impunity will continue in the country, as well as the looting of public institutions.

Many noted that the justice system is not operating, unless one has influence. Due to the lack of police investigations, operations, and almost total absence of police presence, the use, sale, and distribution of drugs was reported to be growing in the area and contributing to the increase in violence.

*Closing civic space.* Many respondents characterized Copán as a place with a conservative culture. As a result, there is limited space for the voices of indigenous populations, LGBTQI+ populations, women, and children. While some noted that the church can play a role in engaging women and children, it also plays a role in maintaining the conservative culture. The conservative nature of Copán can also restrain many children of information about sexual and reproductive health because it is rarely discussed in schools or families.
Most of those consulted about the LGTBQI+ population throughout western Honduras noted that there is a denial of its existence, and also commented on how this population is not organized in any way.

**Normalization of violence.** There were two different relationships described between gangs and transnational organized crime. In some instances, the team heard that the gangs provide services to drug traffickers, e.g., protection, hitmen, etc. Others described situations where gang members were killed by the drug traffickers as soon as they became organized. There was general agreement that gangs do not have the impact in Copán that they do in other parts of the country.

Despite this, extortion continues to be an issue. Given the mistrust of justice operators, many business owners do not report extortion for fear of reprisal. In some cases, businesses that cannot afford to pay the extortion close or relocate.

There is a general feeling among respondents that the justice system (police, public ministry, and the judiciary) has failed. Even when a complaint is filed, there is no response, investigation, or prosecution. When there is a response, judicial processes are described as slow, with a long backlog.

According to those interviewed, excessive alcohol consumption is a leading factor of violence. Respondents said it contributes to domestic violence, high rates of teenage pregnancy, rape, pedophilia, statutory rape, and incest, as well as cases of abduction of young girls.

**Land security.** The location of the department of Copán is strategic for organized crime because of its proximity to the Guatemalan border routes that are used to traffic drugs. Respondents gave the example of money laundering businesses used by the drug cartels which undercut pre-existing businesses. However, they also noted that businesses established for the purposes of money laundering did offer jobs and construction in the communities; however, these jobs have been lost due to recent extraditions. The presence of drug cartels was also reported to have dramatically driven up land prices and pressure to sell, especially land located in border areas. In cases where owners refused to sell, they were subject to harassment and death threats.

Leaders of indigenous organizations said that in the area inhabited by the Maya Chortí indigenous peoples, an agreement signed by the Maya Chortí National Indigenous Council with the state, represented by President Carlos Roberto Reina, stated that the state commits to provide the Maya Chortí people with 15,000 hectares of land. However, to date they have only received about 5,000 hectares. Currently, the leaders have access to the government authorities, and they confirm they will demand that the state's commitment to the communities be fulfilled.

There is a dominant narrative among non-indigenous populations, particularly in the area of Copán Ruinas, that indigenous populations have been given land by the government, but rather than work the land, they lease it or resell it. In particular, the team heard multiple references describing the Maya Chortí as lacking ambition and uninterested in working.

**Disenfranchised youth.** The team observed many Maya Chortí children, mostly female, roaming the streets of Copán Ruinas, entering restaurants and hotels selling corn husk dolls and seed necklaces made by their mothers. Mostly unable to sell the dolls and jewelry at the original prices due to tourist haggling prices, they offer a discount plus the courtesy of singing the Honduran national anthem in Maya Chortí. Rather than attending school, the children spend their days selling to tourists, placing them at increased risk of human trafficking and other abuses. Educational opportunities are very limited for indigenous youth, and do not reflect local language and culture.
There is a degree of dissatisfaction among the population due to the fact that prices have skyrocketed given the increase in oil derivatives and decrease in purchasing power of families, accompanied by a shortage of job opportunities and high employment, all within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is seen as especially true for young people, who often work in sectors different from their area of study and many opt to migrate to other cities in Honduras or emigrate to another country.

**Latent public/private sector tensions.** Since the beginning of President Xiomara Castro’s government, several organizations and groups have begun to protest issues pertaining to their missions, including demands for labor rights and other salary increases, dairy producers for an increase in milk, and transporters for an increase in fuel supplies, among others. Some of the measures taken by the protesters are road blockades, paralyzing the transportation of people and goods, affecting the supply of goods, and impacting the incomes of those involved in the supply chain. Respondents from the private sector reported that this form of protests, when consistent, can decrease investment, leading to a decrease in available employment.

As a result of endemic poverty in rural communities, there is a strong demand for government action to support small-scale agricultural producers through the provision of inputs for production, especially now that the price of fertilizers has risen. Respondents reported that if crop production is not supported, there could be food shortages in the coming months due to the lack of production, leading to widespread protests.

The indigenous organizations do not believe that reforms and campaign promises of the new government will improve their situation, since they say the country is morally and financially bankrupt. These organizations report contentious relationships with their respective mayors, and for this reason they have requested a meeting with President Xiomara Castro. However, to date, they have not received a response to their request.

**MITIGATING FACTORS**

Among those interviewed from the indigenous Maya Chortí, they expressed hope that they will have greater participation with the new government, and that their needs will be taken into account. This would be a divergence from past governments, such as that of Juan Orlando Hernández. They have already had meetings with some government ministers, including those of the National Agrarian Institute, with whom they have discussed the possibility of assigning them lands seized from drug traffickers. Likewise, the indigenous peoples throughout the western part of the country hope to have their lands, seized by drug traffickers, returned to them. However, this will not happen overnight, as it must follow the procedures of the Office for the Administration of Seized Assets (OABI) and wait for the sentencing rulings of the Supreme Court of Justice.

**INTRODUCTION**

San Pedro Sula is the second largest city and main economic hub in Honduras; Choloma, La Lima, and El Progreso are satellite cities to San Pedro Sula which contribute to the area’s strong industrial economy. The San Pedro Sula metropolitan area, also known as Sula Valley metropolitan area (which includes San Pedro Sula and 17 other municipalities) contributes to around 60 percent of the country’s GDP and 50 percent of exports (mostly in the industrial/textile and agribusiness industries). The area has 2.2 million inhabitants living mostly in urban areas. The area lies in the lowlands of two rivers, the Ulua and the Chamelecón, bordered by the Merendón mountain range. The department has a hot, humid climate and a mean yearly temperature of 26 degrees Celsius. The department of Cortés was affected by hurricanes.
Eta and Iota in 2020, resulting in a loss of industrial and agricultural investment and a decrease in housing stock.

San Pedro Sula and neighboring municipalities like Choloma and La Lima have some of the highest homicide rates in Honduras. Choloma in particular was also a source of massive protests and social movements after the 2017 elections and the anti-corruption movement. Under its 2015-2020 CDCS, USAID did extensive work to improve citizen security in the San Pedro Sula, La Lima, Choloma, and Chamelecón areas.

**Perceptions of USAID.** Most of the interviewees had some working knowledge of USAID activities in the area. Some of them have been or currently are sub-awardees or beneficiaries of USAID interventions; in other cases, they have at least heard of some USAID interventions. Overall perception of USAID’s work in the area is rather positive. Interviewees highlight USAID and other donors’ work as a palliative and support given the lack of capacity in municipal and local government. However, interviews also highlighted a perceived lack of coordination between USAID activities and discussed issues regarding the sustainability of interventions both in improving citizen security and reducing poverty. Also, the interviews highlight the need for activities working with youth to be designed, implemented, and led by youth.

**DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT**

*Clientelism and a culture of impunity.* Roberto Contreras was elected mayor of San Pedro Sula in November 2021. He was a well-known entrepreneur with no previous political experience who came to office as a product of a coalition between his independent movement, LIBRE and Partido Salvador de Honduras (PSH). As highlighted by respondents, this situation has resulted in conflicts with the coalition to control the 13 departments in the municipal government in order to secure jobs for their followers. In general, interviewees perceive a lack of clarity and lack of governance within the municipality which affects the municipality’s ability to function and deliver to its constituents.

Impunity was perceived as the main constraint to reducing violence in the area. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned that when people gather the courage to place complaints, those cases do not get solved, partly because of the lack of resources to run a comprehensive investigation and also because access to justice is not seen as a service by justice operators. Some respondents mentioned they are safer not placing a complaint, as sometimes they feel harassed by the process when they do come forward. Thus, people have completely lost faith in the system.

There is a growing perception that petty crime is growing in San Pedro Sula, now affecting small business owners and entrepreneurs. Some small businesses and entrepreneurs consistently reported an increase in extortion which led to closure of micro- and small businesses. People were more inclined to continue working informally and under the radar to prevent extortion.

Respondents agree that most of the violence in the area is perpetrated by gangs. Organized crime is also perceived as very influential in the area. The San Pedro Sula area is used for money laundering through construction, investments in new business, and other initiatives. There is also a general perception that current massacres in the area can be attributed to a reorganization of organized crime organizations; furthermore, respondents feel that gangs profit from the perception of a reduction in security surveillance to reclaim and/or expand territories.

**Closing civil space.** Contreras has promoted an open-door policy for his government and holds weekly (every Friday) public hearings. Despite this very public effort, the interviewees said that there is no real
appetite for conducting real social audits. LGTBIQ+ defenders have reported having very little to no support from the mayor, mostly due to his religious beliefs. Respondents continuously highlighted the perception of chaos in the municipal government.

There was a general perception among respondents that independent media is becoming scarce. Most of the media formerly in the opposition are now pro-government, with some very vocal journalists and influencers now government officials. The checks and balances that need to come from the media are weaker for the current administration. For example, the team heard several instances in which journalists, who had been critical of the new administration in Choloma, had recently been hired by the municipality. Respondents openly shared how this strategy of attempting to “hire” critics was being applied to civil society organizations and women advocates in Choloma to silence their protests against the increased targeting of women in the municipality. It was evident to the team that this strategy is being employed writ large to neutralize criticism against the new administration.

**Normalization of violence.** The normalization of violence in San Pedro Sula continues to be one of its most salient and serious challenges. There is a general perception among respondents that there is a lack of respect for life, which enables and normalizes violence throughout society. For example, respondents mentioned how life can be taken (homicide) for very little money (sometimes as a personal favor); also mentioned was a generalized minimization of homicides as a daily occurrence to be reported. This “value void” is enabled in the family because intra-family violence and spousal abuse are generalized practices.

Another aspect that enables the normalization of violence is the Honduran population’s lack of knowledge and capacity to enforce their rights. People believe they have no rights and when they understand that they have rights they hardly know when and how to claim them. This is seen in the migratory trajectory but also here locally, as respondents noted, people just shrug their shoulders and wait for things to happen.

According to the interviewees, there is also a high incidence of intra-family violence, domestic violence, and violence against youth and members of the LGTQI+ which goes unpunished. Respondents believe that LGTQI+ community members are forced to sell drugs and provide sexual services to gangs and, sometimes, police groups.

**Land security.** Land invasion in the Sula Valley is not as common as in other areas in the country. The area hosts vast sugar cane and plantain plantations and harbors textile and other industrial parks. Respondents did not identify land security as a driver for conflict in the area. They mostly referred to areas along the northern coast as examples of this type of trigger.

**Disenfranchised youth.** Youth in these areas face a particularly challenging situation. They are unable to find “good” paying jobs (which entails more than having a paid job), described as including access to benefits and a feeling of accomplishment. If/when youth are unable to find a “good” job, they seek informal employment, choose migration, or join the illegal economy. Youth also face stigmatization and often join youth groups like barras, or gangs to achieve a feeling of belonging. The stigmatization and criminalization of youth often leads to a decrease in access to jobs and other services which increases frustration and the need to find alternatives like migrating, and/or joining criminal groups. When parents migrate, many children are left with elderly family members, older siblings, or distant relatives, leaving children to grow up without close supervision and become generally more exposed to gangs and other groups which provide a feeling of belonging.
**Latent public/private sector tensions.** The private sector is very strong and highly organized in Cortés, particularly in San Pedro Sula. The organized private sector has supported the new administration and has welcomed the change. They are willing to work together and have reached out to the government officials to support new legislation analysis, provide technical opinions on the government's actions, and assess potential impacts on job creation, etc. However, there is a growing concern over the new government's ability to create consensus and really promote peace. This is partly due to the lack of tolerance and maturity among certain sectors to hold public debates and jointly build towards progress in the country’s interest.

Respondents highlight that the private sector is becoming more united. Subsectors that have traditionally worked independently of each other, e.g., ranchers, are now joining the chambers of commerce to present the government with a concrete set of recommendations and priorities. These actors are willing to work with the government and give them up to a year before they start pressuring for results, provided positive steps materialize in the interim.

Despite this government being perceived as having a higher degree of tolerance than the previous one, there are very few credible mediators or interlocutors. In general, respondents believe the high degree of polarization in Honduran society will make it even harder for the new government to achieve consensus and move forward. This may indicate that progress will be slow or even stalled, which may in turn increase people's frustration and result in social conflict and even violence.

**Impacts of climate change and resource scarcity.** The effects of Eta and Iota are still felt in Cortés, where people have not fully gone back to their houses in some areas. There is also the perception of increasing vulnerability as the mitigating infrastructure damaged in the 2020 rainy season has not been restored. Respondents reported having lost extensive areas of plantain crop due to the hurricanes and a lack of support to the sector in recovering from these shocks.

Although there is no perception of water and other resource scarcity in the area, respondents agree on the importance of conserving forest and water, based on the issues faced in areas like Tegucigalpa. Respondents were also aware of the connection between preserving areas like Merendón to mitigate high temperatures in the cities.

**MITIGATING FACTORS**

Migration is the largest mitigation factor in the area. The Cortés department is perceived as the receiver of internal migration from nearby rural areas. It is also the place where people often get a temporary job to save money in order to migrate either to the United States or Spain.

Maquiladoras and other industries create the opportunity for entry-level, unskilled jobs in the area.

In some gang-controlled areas, gangs have imposed a violence-free rule to deter attention to their territories. In particular, areas controlled by MS-13 are calmer, have no extortion and are provided security services by the gang to the extent of gang members mediating conflict.

**Intibucá**

**INTRODUCTION**

The department of Intibucá is located in the central-western region of the country. It has a territory of 531.3 km and a total population of 65,923 inhabitants—25,572 living in urban areas. The majority of the
population identify as indigenous Lenca people (77 percent according to Instituto Nacional de Estadística Honduras (INE)). The population is mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture such as growing basic grains, vegetables (especially potatoes), and strawberries. Intibucá is subdivided into 20 villages (communities) and 127 hamlets. Sixty percent of the population has a sixth-grade education and poverty levels are high.

**Perceptions of USAID.** In general, USAID’s work in Intibucá is well received, but many informants wanted more consultation with communities and engagement of local actors with technical expertise rather than bringing in international consultants. They noted that despite significant investments, projects were not sustainable because they did not adequately take into consideration the priorities of local communities. Community members want to be consulted when projects are developed so that their input and the cultural context of the region are reflected.

A few argued that USAID projects sometimes contribute to polluting the environment, e.g., because of the number of vehicles and pesticides used. Interviewees also mentioned barriers to participation in donor projects in general, particularly for female-headed households and/or households where adolescents, especially young girls, are already mothers. Family and home obligations can prohibit the participation of women and girls.

All interviewees indicated that the support of the US government is important and necessary for the communities, and that USAID’s work in Intibucá has benefited the population. Some did point out that when projects work with the mayors, they run the risk of becoming politicized or having resources directed only to members of the same political party.

**DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT**

While in Intibucá, the team repeatedly heard about lack of trust in the police and a culture of impunity where police do not respond, and justice does not work. Most people felt that filing a complaint was not only futile but could be counterproductive.

The topics of alcohol and drug consumption arose repeatedly across interviews. While in Intibucá, it was not uncommon to see people passed out on the streets throughout the day, and there was a series of murders of alcoholics in the streets. The number varied, but respondents indicated that somewhere between 12-17 people had been murdered in the last two weeks. Alcohol was also frequently mentioned as contributing to escalating violence in the home and the community.

**Clientelism and culture of impunity.** Virtually all respondents talked about the failure of the justice system which contributes to a culture of impunity in Intibucá. Most indicated that they would not file a complaint with the police because it would never be acted on and could expose the complainant to reprisals. The team repeatedly heard about lack of capacity, political will, and coordination between the town hall, public ministry, and justice operators. Many expressed the sentiment that corruption will always exist because justice is only for those who have money. Some, when referring to the extradition of former President Hernández, said that it indicated that Honduras cannot achieve justice alone and needs the USG to intervene.

In more remote areas of the department, there is no security or justice presence and those wanting to file complaints have to travel long distances, which is often financially prohibitive. Unwillingness or inability of people to report crimes further strengthens the culture of impunity.

Although there are supposed to be systems in place to manage GBV complaints, those who do file are often re-victimized by having to repeatedly narrate to multiple people the abuse they experienced. According to respondents, the systems that are in place are not functioning as intended. Police and community members may also try to convince someone not to file a complaint, particularly in cases of domestic abuse. Many victims of domestic violence are completely economically dependent on their
partners. In general, land is registered in the man’s name, leaving women without land or collateral to access credit. Partners may also threaten to throw women out of the house or harm the children. This renders victims completely marginalized and without recourse through any formal or informal channels.

At the community level, the team frequently heard that gangs, particularly the large ones like MS-13 and Barrio 18 are not a big issue in Intibucá. People in the communities all know each other, and when they detect someone who does not belong in their community, they take action on their own.

**Closing civic space.** In connection to the issues of land security (see below) the team heard from environmental and human rights defenders who felt threatened. Some respondents reflected on the 2016 killing of Berta Caceres in the Rio Blanco community, where a hydroelectric dam was being constructed on the Gualcarque river sacred to the Lenca.

Some people perceive those conflicts over land and resources as getting worse over the last ten years, particularly around hydroelectric and extractive projects. This gives rise to more protests, exposing activists, defenders, community leaders, and print and social media journalists to harassment, criminalization, co-optation and violence.

It was also noted that there have been threats against journalists, including the journalist who covered the Keyla Martinez case.

**Normalization of violence.** When asked about the factors that contribute the most to violence, many people said that increases in family and community violence were being fueled by a culture of machismo and high availability of alcohol and drugs. In Intibucá, some of the alcohol consumed in the communities is provided bymiddlemen or coyotes who buy food crops and pay with alcohol rather than cash. Some interviewees indicated that the coffee harvest, when people come from different areas bringing drugs and alcohol with them, opens opportunities for violence and GBV that can leave women and even girls pregnant and abused.

Respondents consistently remarked on high levels of family violence, including incest and rape that leave girls as young as 12 years old pregnant. The team heard repeatedly that there is no LGTBQI+ population. To protect themselves, members of the LGTBQI+ community migrate or become invisible. Many fear rejection by their families and society and become a target of violence.

For remote communities, radio is the only communication option. There have been attempts to program and disseminate messaging about women’s experiences with domestic violence, but in one case, the Catholic church, which supported the station in question, withdrew support, leaving the organization without a means to transmit. In areas where there is connectivity, social media and messaging are the preferred media and communication apps, especially Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp.

**Land security.** The team frequently heard that the right to free and prior consultation under ILO 169 is not respected and that there are no formal mechanisms to seek redress if land is taken. This has become a perpetual source of conflict over who has the right to lands and the resources therein, particularly for lands that are collectively owned by indigenous populations.

When development projects arise, the municipality will often use a town hall meeting to present the project to the community, and then indicate that consultations have been conducted. However, a town hall meeting falls short of the comprehensive consultations contained in ILO 169, which causes conflict with the indigenous population.

In some cases, individuals or companies initiate development projects or seize collective lands. In others, individual Lenca sell their land, which is not allowed or valid in situations of collective land ownership. Land disputes and lack of resolution have caused fragmentation in the Lenca community. Organizations
claiming to represent the Lenca have split over personal or philosophical differences. Thus, new organizations claiming to represent the Lenca have emerged, the best-known being: ONILH, COPINH, MILH, FHONDIL, and CGL. These organizations also recognize that no one organization fully represents all of the Lenca people.

Several respondents talked about the cost increase of the basic food basket at the same time as the cost of agricultural inputs sky rocketing, partially due to the war in Ukraine. This is leading some subsistence farmers to stop producing because it is no longer economically viable. As a result, respondents are predicting food insecurity.

Disenfranchised youth. Youth are unable to access education beyond ninth grade without moving to another city and have limited opportunities to study and work. For the most part, even those who do complete their studies are unable to find a job in the formal sector that satisfies their financial and aspirational needs. Young people are less inclined to engage in agriculture. Some lose hope and opt to migrate to big cities or emigrate, often to the United States or Spain, in search of a better life.

MITIGATING FACTORS
Hope for change under the new president continues to be a mitigating factor in Intibucá. The team repeatedly heard that 100 days is too early to expect change and people generally continue to hope that things will improve. In particular, respondents highlighted hopes for improved rights of women and increased inclusion of indigenous populations, including enforcement of ILO 169. The government came to power promising to strengthen protection of nature in Lenca territory, but to date, no visible action has been taken and organizations representing the Lenca people have been unable to meet with the president.

Some pointed out that the president had already fulfilled some campaign promises like repeal of the ZEDES law. However, they also point to decisions that appear to go against promises to reduce corruption in government e.g., the amnesty law and nepotism in political appointments.

Migration, both internal and external, and remittances, also appear to be keeping frustration about lack of job opportunities in check. Sending remittances is a factor that mitigates violence because it reduces pressure on the state.

Lempira
INTRODUCTION
Lempira has an area of 4,228 square kilometers and a population of 319,861 inhabitants, according to the 2015 INE Census. The economy of the department of Lempira is based on agriculture. Coffee, corn, rice, and tobacco are among the main products, as well as a fundamental part of the daily activities of this department. In recent years, there has been a boost in tourism, centered on the canopy of La Campa, a protected natural site located in the Montaña de Celaque National Park.

Lempira is divided into 28 municipalities. The department has 44.8 percent indigenous population belonging to the Lenca people, the majority of whom live in rural communities where they are engaged in subsistence agriculture and still retain many ancestral customs. These communities are known for pottery, including different types of utensils and clay ornaments.

Perceptions of USG and USAID. Not all of the key informants interviewed individually and in focus groups in Lempira were aware of USAID’s contribution to the country’s development. However, those who were aware of the assistance said that it has contributed to improved agriculture, health services,
and improved internal audits in the municipalities. They recall projects such as Fintrac, Local Governance, and Procelaque, which they describe as good projects. In general terms, the perception of USAID is positive, although there are also areas that, according to some key informants, should be improved. This is consistent with perceptions in other western departments visited. Key informants identified improved communication with indigenous organizations, increased participation of the communities so that they can receive the benefits of the projects that USAID finances, consultation with communities before the start of the projects, and the hiring of local consultants as areas for growth. The last point is two-fold in benefit, since it simultaneously allows local culture and priorities to be reflected in projects while providing local community members salaries through USAID projects, especially since many key informants noted that USAID spends a large percentage of project funds on salaries and wages. They also emphasized the fact that they want technical assistance from USAID and improved communication channels between USAID and the communities.

Key informants mentioned the US Southern Command has supported other areas with infrastructure projects, but despite the fact that support has been requested and offered, it has not materialized. No special group was mentioned as having benefited from USAID projects, but it was emphasized that most of the beneficiaries were men. In relation to the support of the US, it was mentioned that they have provided resources, but in some cases, it is not clear what happens with the funding. An example was given of a project focused on migration control, with people saying that in spite of the project, migration has increased. This made some question where the funds for the project were invested.

**DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT**

From the point of view of those interviewed, in the department of Lempira there are a series of factors that contribute to the generation of violence and conflict, such as excessive alcohol consumption—which many felt contributes to domestic violence—high rates of teenage pregnancy, rape, pedophilia, statutory rape, and incest. Respondents estimated that 90 percent of men beat their partners. Because the municipality relies heavily on transfers from the central government, they are unlikely to stop sales of alcohol because it is a source of local tax revenue.

**Clientelism and culture of impunity.** The department of Lempira has been closely associated with the National Party, largely because JOH is a native of Gracias. Many respondents expressed concerns that with a different political party in control, those who worked under the Hernández government will lose their jobs.

Most informants noted that organized crime is still present and a few fear that after being protected for so many years by the Hernández family from major conflicts, there is a risk that violence will get worse. Some suggested that justice operators are co-opted by organized crime. Several of the respondents agreed that corruption is learned as a way of life at an early age.

Given that the area is a mountainous zone, authorities report that there are clandestine coca laboratories, as well as marijuana plantations, in the department. Respondents implied that farmers have stopped producing normal crops to "diversify" their production to coca and marijuana plants. Drug production is perceived as resulting in extortion, drug use, environmental crimes, and land usurpation.

Due to a widespread culture of impunity, most people do not report acts of violence to the police. If they make a complaint, the authorities may not respond and there is no protection, leaving many fearing reprisals against themselves and their families. Detainees are quickly released from jail, many times due to the influence of authorities such as the mayors. A few respondents noted that many in the community are struggling financially. In these situations, people increasingly turn to alternative options for obtaining money, contributing to an increase in corruption and crime rates.
**Normalization of violence.** Some interviewees attributed an increase in crime to the lack of police presence. The police department in Gracias, the department capital, covers 28 municipalities. Due to a lack of resources, including vehicles, more-remote communities have no access to police. If someone from one of these communities wants to submit a report, they have to pay to travel to a nearby city, which deters filings. While there are female members of the police force, they are all located in the town of Gracias because none of the municipalities have police facilities that can accommodate women. Most of the posts in rural areas are located in dilapidated houses that belong to the community or to a member of the community. In some cases, when two or more events occur simultaneously, the police have to prioritize the most serious cases in order to provide attention due to the lack of resources to mobilize. Police vehicles serve both to respond to crimes and as ambulances to transport injured or sick people.

The Gracias Detention Center, which houses gang members from other departments, is considered another factor contributing to increased levels of violence and gang presence. Relatives of prisoners often move to Gracias from other cities, increasing gang presence, and, some suspect, ordering crimes from prison. Some also noted that a few gang members have come from El Salvador to escape Nayib Bukele's crackdown on gangs. In these situations, as in many other communities in the West, the community is "forced to take justice into their own hands" and expel the foreigners by threat or force.

Most respondents reported high rates of alcohol consumption as a substantial contributor to domestic violence. There are perceptions that rates of pregnancy in girls are increasing. Some indicated that girls were getting pregnant from rape and/or incest as early as nine years old.

**Closing civic space.** In the western part of the country, the LGTBQ+ population is invisible. Although some respondents acknowledged that the LGTBQ+ population exists, many deny their existence. If they are visible, they are bullied and harassed. In response, some commit suicide or move to urban centers to escape. Some reported that the church denies access and support to the LGBTQI+ community.

Violence is common around the issue of land. Respondents cited the murder of indigenous leader and human rights activist Pablo Hernández, who was shot nine times in San Marcos de Caiquín. No one has been brought to justice for his death, and some suspect that he was killed by hired assassins.

**Disenfranchised youth.** Youth expressed concerns about lack of employment opportunities in the area once they graduate from university. They explained that the first question often asked at a job interview is, “Who did you vote for?” Many youth who do complete university studies migrate to Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula in search of job opportunities. In other cases, they try to leave the country. Respondents noted that when these youth return to their communities, they bring a different lifestyle back with them which often is not possible to sustain in their home communities, further disenfranchising youth from the rest of the population.

**Land security.** All of the indigenous peoples that met with the team emphasized that the judicial system does not recognize ILO Convention 169. Similarly, many reported that mayors have sold indigenous lands, pocketing the profits, and often use open meetings as a form of consultation even though this is not culturally appropriate for consulting indigenous peoples. Lack of response from authorities at the municipal level has led some members of the indigenous peoples to sell their lands to third parties, further complicating the land tenure issue.

Others commented on the case of powerful families associated with the National Party who farm coffee on national park land that belongs to the municipality.

**Impacts of Climate Change/Resource Scarcity.** Several people noted that the costs of food are rising at the same time as agricultural inputs are becoming more expensive, e.g., the cost of fertilizer because of
the war in Ukraine. Some farmers have stopped producing entirely because it is no longer financially viable. Farmers expressed concerns about impending food insecurity.

MITIGATING FACTORS
Many indigenous respondents belonging to the Lenca people reported being hopeful that the situation in their communities will improve with the new government, recalling the Our Roots Program and implementation of other projects. Since then, they have been marginalized, but are hopeful for change. There are high expectations that President Castro’s government will be positive for the country and inclusive of indigenous populations, following her call for all members of the current government to take into account the needs of indigenous people. These hopes are somewhat tempered by the actions of the new government and perceptions that although people voted for Xiomara Castro, it is her husband, Mel Zelaya, who is in control.

Respondents also noted that with the new government, when they protest peacefully, they are no longer sprayed with tear gas.

Migration, both internal and external, and remittances, also appear to be keeping frustration about lack of job opportunities in check.

Olancho

INTRODUCTION
Olancho is Honduras’s largest department and shares a border with Nicaragua, as well as Honduras’ least accessible department, Gracias a Dios. While the capital of the department is Juticalpa, the city of Catacamas to the East is both the most violent city of Olancho, and the hometown of President Xiomara Castro and former president Manuel Zelaya. Historically, Olancho has had little state presence, and people are accustomed to resolving problems through their own means, which include vendettas and massacres. Olancho is also the primary home of the Pech indigenous group. This group, with approximately 9,000 members, lives in 10 communities across Olancho and neighboring departments.

The region is known for its large dairy and cattle ranches, but also serves as a major transit point for illegal logging, cocaine, and endangered wildlife from the Rio Plátano biosphere. The team’s visit coincided with a conflict between milk producers and the dairy manufacturers of cheese, cream, and other dairy products who ultimately control market prices. Furthermore, protests around lack of water are increasing due to poor management and land encroachment.

Perceptions of USG and USAID. Olancho has not been traditionally prioritized as a recipient of US foreign assistance, but the city mayor and youth are looking forward to the USAID-financed project “Creando mi Futuro Aquí,” implemented by DAI, which seeks to address migration through entrepreneurship and training.

DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT
Exclusion of Indigenous Groups (Pech). The Pech indigenous group in Olancho faces structural, cultural, and social barriers to access to services as well as meaningful participation in political and civic processes. Their communities struggle with access to services including: health, education, and electricity. They face discrimination from mestizo neighbors and service providers. The group also faces exploitation of its lands by drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and cattle ranchers. Linguistic and educational barriers mean Pech community members struggle to be represented adequately in state legal processes, including in seeking redress of grievances with prosecutors’ offices when community members’ rights are violated.
Illicit economies and organized crime. The main underlying issues triggering conflict are unregulated dairy prices, disputes between dairy producers and logistics services, and money laundering and shipments of contraband headed to El Salvador. This contributes to price inflation and dumping. The region faces significant illegal logging, drug trafficking, and illegal cheese running/exports to El Salvador. While organized criminal groups and drug traffickers actively participate in these activities, respondents highlighted that Olancho and Catacamas have much less gang presence or smaller scale crime compared to other parts of the country because the organized criminal groups will not tolerate competition.

Normalization of violence. Narco-culture and narco-violence are seen as increasingly normalized in Olancho, including in how children perceive and are exposed to the issue. In the communities, the narcos keep the peace, provide security, and do not tolerate theft or petty crime. This new culture makes communities more tolerant of their presence and allows the narcos to serve as the security source in the face of an absent state. DTOs are perceived as working together with police to control common crime, run gangs out of town, and kill gang members or criminals who may be seeking to move into their territory. Respondents highlighted that some shopkeepers have been killed over their involvement in money laundering and other illicit economies. The team also heard that hit men are for sale and active in several of Olancho’s cities, particularly Catacamas and Dulce Nombre de Culmí.

Clientelism and culture of impunity. Respondents highlighted strong patterns of patronage and clientelism in shaping power dynamics in Catacamas. Despite the strength of these patronage networks, respondents also communicated an understanding that newly elected officials are limited in how they use these networks, alleging justification of their use due to a lack of resources. The sustained lack of resources will likely produce a loss of citizen trust and participation, as well as limit collaboration with the new authorities. Journalists who dare to cover clientelist involvement in illicit dealings, like illegal logging or narcotraficking, face threats and assassinations. Assassinations of journalists like Pedro Arcángel Canelas in Dulce Nombre de Culmí frequently go unpunished, and those responsible for his killing have not been apprehended two years after the killing.

Closing civil space. Journalists face increased risk for investigating crimes related to illegal logging or drug trafficking and engage in self-censorship as a protection strategy. The team found that the new government was in the process of organizing renewed citizen security initiatives with expectations of citizen participation in security committees. The structure and transparency around these entities seemed yet to be defined, and respondents were enthusiastic, but also wary of those spaces being co-opted for political and surveillance objectives.

Impacts of climate change and resource scarcity. Olancho’s primary natural resource management challenges originate from logging, deforestation, difficulties managing and protecting its watersheds, and managing the effective generation and distribution of energy. Olancho draws its energy from the Patuca III hydroelectric dam and has suffered inconsistent access to power. Respondents expressed concern that its continued access to energy will be adversely impacted by climate change. The high rate of illegal logging also promises to impact the watersheds and licit agroforestry initiatives. Respondents were particularly interested in exploring how the region can shift to alternative farming options that are more eco-friendly such as crops that better conserve water. Lack of access to water in the urban areas, including Catacamas and Juticalpa, contributes to conflict and pressure on local governments.

Land security. Respondents highlighted a perceived increase in land contestation due to DTO encroachment and purchase of cattle lands for use as clandestine airstrips. Cattle ranchers are constantly taking forest lands, much of which is actually protected as part of natural reserves. The Pech community of about 9,000 tribe members is vulnerable to encroachment and violence from criminal organizations.
They have limited economic and legal means to respond and face structural barriers to accessing legal recourse. Indigenous land security is compounded by inconsistent responses from the Forest and Conservation Institute (ICF in Spanish), responsible for setting the limits for ancestral lands. In the case of the Pech community, land grants were given to the ICF which actually included private property.

Latent public/private sector tensions (linked to resource scarcity). Public and private sector tensions particularly revolve around energy sector tensions. Olancho is not a net producer of energy and suffers from limited and inconsistent energy access (provided by the Patuca III dam). The new government has threatened to nationalize and wants to renegotiate terms governing the operation of the energy sector, a decision which will likely impact local businesses completely reliant on the energy grid and which respondents found particularly concerning. Many businesses are considering installing solar panels, but not all can afford them and anticipate increased energy costs for energy produced by the Patuca III dam. Those that cannot afford increasing energy costs will likely turn to wood for energy, but this also has harmful impacts on the ability of dairy farmers to refrigerate their goods. At the time of this assessment, public-private sector tensions were also flaring due to price manipulation in the dairy market. Some private businesses asked the government to mediate negotiations over the milk price, but these initiatives were limited by a lack of organization among milk producers as well as intentional price dumping.

Disenfranchised youth. Respondents cited increased risk among youth due to a lack of reproductive health services and education. Specifically, respondents highlighted an increase in deaths among pregnant adolescents due to the legal treatment given to them. Once underage adolescents give birth, the justice system requires them to participate in legal investigations of sexual violence—a process which stigmatizes them or which they are afraid to participate in and seek to avoid. As a result, pregnant adolescents frequently avoid medical check-ups or choose not to go to the hospital to have their children, leading to fatal complications.

MITIGATING FACTORS
The city of Olancho has a contracted attorney on staff to assist with peaceably resolving labor disputes out of the Juticalpa Chamber of Commerce. If necessary, disputes are elevated to tribunals, but this seldom occurs. More commonly, issues are resolved in the offices of the businesses party to disputes.

Hope for change was particularly pronounced in Catacamas due to their connections to President Castro’s family. Respondents were both excited and harbored high expectations.

Tegucigalpa

INTRODUCTION
Tegucigalpa is Honduras’ capital city. It sits in Francisco Morazán Department and serves as the epicenter of Honduras’ social conflicts and violence. As the seat of government (Honduras is highly centralized in decision-making and budget allocation), politics define much of the national narrative, including the competing ideologies and interests between government, private sector, and civil society organizations. Tegucigalpa is also the largest metropolitan area of the country, with a population of 1.2 million, many of whom live in impoverished communities controlled by gangs where both violence and extortion are fixtures. The city is also subject to natural stressors, as its mountainous topography makes it highly vulnerable to floods in the rainy season and wildfires in the dry season.

This assessment examined conflict and violence dynamics in Tegucigalpa at two levels of analysis—the national/institutional levels and the local dynamics of the urban center. As the national and institutional
center of the country, Tegucigalpa faces a complicated executive and legislative transition characterized by renewed polarization between political parties and sectors and a demilitarization of its security approach. At the local level, Tegucigalpa’s urban neighborhoods exhibited particular expressions of violence due to gang activity and territorial competition, as well as particularly intense violence targeted towards the transportation sector.

**Perceptions of USG and USG Foreign Policy.** The majority of respondents communicated positive perceptions of USG support, they consider the USG is the main development partner in the country, with some nuances and criticisms. Respondents were clear in pointing out the contradictory policies of the USG in Honduras, including inconsistent responses to the coup against former President Mel Zelaya, constitutional referendums, the reelection of Juan Orlando Hernández, and JOH’s later extradition. Respondents further found the anti-migration focused narrative of USG policy towards Honduras to be unrealistic, and perceived contradictions in the USG investments in anti-drug efforts while taking what was perceived to be little action targeted towards stemming the demand in the US. Multiple respondents further highlighted that while the extradition of Juan Orlando Hernández was a positive step towards accountability and combating corruption, it also followed that if the USG had enough evidence to charge the man at the top, it also had the details on the rest of the much larger network and is choosing to not pursue accountability if accountability does not reinforce its political objectives.

**Perceptions of USAID.** Respondents held largely positive perceptions of USAID's development assistance but expressed criticism over the manner in which it is delivered and pointed out several key limitations on its effectiveness. A common criticism highlighted that a large proportion of development assistance is seen to be benefiting the international organizations hired to implement the activities instead of directly benefiting the local system, local organizations, and communities, while others pointed out that major investments have been made for many years without translating into meaningful structural changes. Respondents highlighted that without deeper structural changes in partner government institutions, transparency rules, and civil service reforms, continued assistance is unlikely to translate into systemic change.

**DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT**

**National institutional polarization and competing ideologies.** The LIBRE Party’s rhetorical targeting of anything related to its predecessor, the National Party, and its appeal to mobilize the people of Honduras against any hint of “exploitation”, create institutional and sectoral challenges for constructive cross-party and cross-sectoral collaboration. Respondents in multiple sectors expressed both surprise and regret at the extent of polarization in the new government’s institutions. This polarization is further complicated by the fact that the new opposition party remains disorganized and is not postured to effectively advocate in Congress. NGOs and international cooperation agencies still await decisions in key areas such as security, education, health, and economic policy, while major opportunities for political polarization to intensify remain on the horizon in the form of pending Supreme Court elections and nominations of the new Attorney General.

**Demilitarization of security responses.** The shift in policy towards a demilitarized security approach presents new challenges. While it suggests a decreased tolerance for heavy-handed security responses and human rights abuses, a lack of adequate resources, clear handover guidelines or expertise in police leadership leaves the security institutions poorly equipped to handle the significant security challenges still facing the country and city. Numerous respondents identified increases in extortion and crime as gangs and criminals seek to take advantage of a visibly poor institutional transition, while other respondents highlighted disconcerting missteps in inter-institutional coordination required for the effective transition
of responsibilities, including a failure to share critical information between the military and police responsible for Anti-Maras and Pandillas portfolio.

**Urban violence and competition for control of profitable territory.** Urban gangs, primarily MS-13 and Barrio 18, play a role both in violence and its reduction. However, more sophistication by these groups means using different tactics to operate, from owning buses and taxis in the licit economy to subletting territory for smaller gangs to extort in exchange for a fee. Respondents highlighted the emergence of two particularly problematic and violent gangs, M1 and the Illuminati, who have been active in extorting and committing violence against the transportation sector. The transportation sector, constituting bus drivers, inter-urban bus drivers, taxi drivers, and motorcycle taxis, has emerged as the most vulnerable profession in Honduras to crime, with over 2000 killings of professional drivers. This group remains particularly exposed to violence due to the repeated threat of extortion as drivers cross multiple territories and face extortion and threats in each territory. This violence is highly gendered. All victims are male, leaving the families and wives of victims without support or meaningful organization, many of whom elect to migrate to the US. Police and national responses have been limited in scope and ineffective. The lack of security, together with rising gas prices, fueled the recent transport strikes in the capital during much of April and May 2022.

**Failure to meet basic needs and service provision.** Respondents frequently highlighted the high proportion of residents living in extreme poverty, as well as their lack of access to basic public services like water, electricity, education, and health. The team encountered strong criticisms of the poor funding and infrastructure for these services, as well as mismanagement and corruption in these sectors, as evidence of a breach by the government of their responsibility to provide for the citizens of the city and country.

**Clientelism and culture of impunity.** Respondents cited mixed signals in the willingness of the new administration to combat clientelism and corruption. They criticized the nomination of President Castro’s family members to key positions and the passing of the Amnesty Law, but also praised the repeal of the Secrets Law and the increased access to public information that institutions such as the Public Prosecutor’s Office are expected to have as a result. Overall, respondents were skeptical that the administration’s appetite for combating corruption will translate into meaningful structural reforms, instead believing that the anti-corruption efforts will be directed at the last administration’s final years in office. Respondents saw these as natural expressions of a normalization of concessions-based politics—a pattern which respondents highlighted has fragmented the LIBRE party in Congress, producing political instability and weakening the effectiveness of President Castro’s government.

The team heard that future social conflicts are expected to hinge on how well the new administration delivers on campaign promises to address corruption. One key decision is the new Supreme Court’s election, which will indicate the new authorities’ willingness or unwillingness to combat impunity and strengthen the rule of law. Other critical campaign promises include promises to teachers’ associations, civil servants, and health workers, who have already publicly engaged in protest. Respondents expect few results from government attempts to combat extortion, which are expected to increase deaths in the transport sector and produce further protests. Impunity levels in Tegucigalpa will also be dictated by the political will and technical capabilities in the police and judicial systems, as well as competing interests of key figures within the institutions to investigate and prosecute crimes against vulnerable groups (youth, women, LGBTQI+).

**Closing civil space.** Respondents were wary of increasing political polarization and increasing distrust between citizens and government. The new government has employed outspoken civil society members
and media personalities; some respondents indicated this is to co-opt or silence critical progressive voices. Civil society respondents identified what they perceive to be an increased sidelining of civil society groups as the government looks to be more directly connected with the people. Respondents cited discussions of new legislation (such as legislation to control disinformation) which would also create openings for controlling journalists and press freedoms. The team also heard of other well-intentioned efforts which might produce adverse consequences for civil society and marginalized groups. Specifically, conservative groups attack LGBTQI+ groups every time the movement demonstrates progress in same-sex marriage legislation in the region or receives public declarations of support.

CSO leadership is aging without yet transitioning responsibilities and access to younger professionals, creating disconnects in key areas. CSOs face challenges including a lack of funding for human rights protection and civil society oversight.

**Normalization of violence.** Violence directly shapes patterns of life in Tegucigalpa, particularly in the city’s poorest neighborhoods where gang presence and fragmentation is strongest. Respondents in one neighborhood highlighted that the informal curfew (the point after which people no longer feel safe leaving their homes or walking in their neighborhoods) has been reduced from 7pm to 5pm. Shopkeepers, bus drivers, and taxi drivers face regular extortion and threats of violence if they fail to pay. The profile of those perpetrating the violence continues to evolve. Female gang members are increasingly seen committing extortion, being involved as sicarias (assassins), or performing support roles in gangs. Gangs also press normal citizens into gang service selling drugs, threatening violence if they fail to act on the gangs’ behalf. Respondents made clear that these roles are not considered to be part of the gang. Respondents perceived violence and extortion in neighborhoods to be intensifying, with increases in copy-cat extortion tactics and increasing competition between smaller gangs. Respondents discussed the transition of Honduras from just a drug trafficking transit country to a producer and consumer of cocaine and synthetics and expected this transition to be accompanied by an increase in violence over control of expected profits.

Respondents saw the normalization of violence as intertwined with the government’s passiveness to address it, generally seeing the state’s inability to provide security as fundamentally tied to its lack of capability, resources, and will to overcome the realities of the challenges, albeit with committed individuals and units throughout the system. President Castro’s demilitarization of security responsibilities, including the transfer of responsibilities from the military to the police in general and specifically with the Anti-Maras and Pandillas Unit, reflect a major shift. Respondents were reticent about this shift, as its implications for citizen security are unclear without an established timeline or coordination guidelines. The government encourages protest as a way of affirming a new anti-repression policy. But there is a concern that protests will escalate in time and the government will inevitably have to respond with force, an act which will undermine the government’s credibility and ability to push the narrative of being of and for the people.

**Land security.** While not a direct issue in Tegucigalpa, the team heard an emerging recognition that social conflicts surrounding land are increasingly intertwined with political entities, the private sector, and DTOs. Conflicts are more complex due to the engagement of multiple parties, complicating attempts to resolve long-standing contractual concessions with the private sector. With a new government ideologically distanced from the private sector, it is increasingly difficult for the state to also serve as a neutral actor or mediator of land disputes. Similarly, respondents highlighted that land disputes sometimes escalate beyond local dispute forums and are brought to courts in Tegucigalpa. In these cases, courts in the capital often fail to take into consideration local or cultural nuances, while poor or unrepresented parties to the case may be unable to fully participate, often leading to rulings that favor the wealthier and better-connected parties.
**Disenfranchised youth.** Tegucigalpa, despite its size and commercial density, lacks sufficient employment opportunities for youth across socioeconomic levels. Educated youth frequently fail to find options for applying their education, and youth from poor and high-crime neighborhoods face stigmatization by employers concerned that their employment may increase risks of being targeted by extortionists. This lack of employment opportunities contributes to migration across socioeconomic levels. Youth whose parents have emigrated face increased family care responsibilities, both for younger siblings and elders, making it increasingly difficult to continue educational or work responsibilities. Limited health assistance and sexual education contribute to increased teenage pregnancies and joining the estimated 1.5 million Honduran children and youth who have not returned to school since 2020. Respondents also noted that due to insecurity, public spaces they formerly used for recreation and social activity are considered unsafe and serve as a constant reminder of the government’s inability to provide safety.

**Latent public/private sector tensions.** The Castro administration and LIBRE Party have sought to increase government accountability vis-a-vis the private sector through a series of contentious decisions, policies, and public discourse challenging the private sector’s role. The new administration’s series of private sector-oriented laws, notably those prohibiting hourly labor and the Electric Sector Laws, are particularly concerning. These laws are destabilizing the business environment in Honduras and adversely impacting domestic and foreign investment. Small business owners and potential investors, already wary of the country’s low ease of doing business, cited this unpredictability and increasing hostility as reasons for taking their investments to Guatemala and the US instead of investing domestically. Even those segments and organizations representing the private sector seeking to contribute to social responsibility have found the government unwilling to constructively engage.

**Impacts of climate change and resource scarcity.** Tegucigalpa faces natural hazards in the form of flooding and fires, but respondents were most concerned over the local government’s inability to effectively manage the distribution of water within the city. Further, as the site of the nation’s emergency response institutions, academia, and international organizations, the city should also be seen as the epicenter for coordinating climate readiness and disaster risk management and response.

**MITIGATING FACTORS**

The assessment team in Tegucigalpa heard equal parts hope in the new administration, skepticism on how optimistic to be for change, and a clear understanding of the finite nature of the country and capital’s optimism. The hope for change was placed most directly in the government’s embrace of more inclusive approaches to governance and the opportunity to demonstrate without fear of violent repression. Respondents, however, were quick to also point out limitations of both factors.

**Inclusion in government.** LIBRE has intentionally sought the meaningful inclusion of previously marginalized populations, including LGBTQI+ persons and indigenous and ethnic minorities in its institutions. Respondents believed these measures would bring improved attention to the needs of these communities, though public declarations promoting inclusivity have also been met with increased backlash against those communities. This inclusivity also extends to Tegucigalpa’s security institutions, where the local police have set gender targets for including more women in local police forces to better represent, serve, and respond to the community’s needs. If this integration is managed effectively, these institutions will be better equipped to respond to the varied needs of the supported communities, including high levels of domestic and gender-based violence. Effective integration, however, will also require intentional measures to manage institutional culture challenges and risks of GBV internal to the force.

**Increased tolerance of social protests.** Respondents noted the government’s advocacy for “street
politics” and comments encouraging those with issues to express them via protests. This narrative allows those with grievances to feel heard by the government, but the resolution of the issues will also rely on the effectiveness of the government’s response. While respondents believe the government is committed to less police/military responses, respondents anticipate that the government will eventually be forced to respond to social unrest with repressive tactics—an act with the potential to significantly shift public perceptions of and tolerance for government inaction.