

Executive Summary

Signs of a crisis. Forced internal displacement as a result of violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, 2018

The Regional Forced Displacement Monitoring System is in charge of documenting and disseminating information about the scope and causes of this phenomenon in Central America. It emphasizes the importance of data collection, demographic information, and access to rights for populations internally displaced as a result of widespread violence, in order to design policy and program proposals that attend to the needs of those displaced and that protect their rights within applicable legal frameworks.

Methodological framework: The researchers used a mixed model, consulting statistical databases and conducting interviews with key persons in the three countries (public officials, representatives from civil society organizations, micro-businesses, academics, among others) with respect to: characteristics of displacement, the situations of violence that cause displacement, institutional response, consequences of displacement, necessary protections, expectations for durable solutions and recommendations.

Conceptual framework and results

Drivers. Economic, social and political conditions that make a population vulnerable to forced internal displacement as a result of violence (IDMC, 2018). Factors noted in the three countries included: *human development*, because when people have less access to basic services, State agencies, security, and an environment that allows them to fully develop, the more vulnerable they are to displacement if they are the victim of violence. *Territorial control*: the presence of gangs and organized crime can disrupt school environments, making it more difficult to stay in school. *Stigmatization*, where the youth most affected are suspected of being gang members even when it can't be proven; furthermore, state entities in El Salvador often believe that some victims of displacement do not return to their places of origin because they have ties to gangs.

The report also notes the *structural and historical abandonment of victims*, worsened by the lack of a comprehensive protection system in the three countries and by negative social attitudes towards minority groups and diverse identities. In this vein, the report notes as vulnerable groups women and the LGBTI+ population, and in El Salvador specifically members of security forces. This is also related to the lack of information regarding where people can seek out protection if their rights are violated, something especially noted by Salvadoran interviewees.

Another element that was highlighted was migration, which can be characterized in two ways: as an alternative solution to the violence they face, or, for returnees, as a precursor of forced displacement when they return to the country and face violence. It is important to note return patterns to the three countries: in 2018, 26,496 people returned to El Salvador, 75,549 to Honduras and 94,306 to Guatemala. In all three there was an increase in comparison to 2017.

The last driver highlighted in the three countries is a *distrust* in state institutions as a result of *corruption*. This perception of mistrust is confirmed by statistical data in El Salvador (Iudop 2016-2018) and Honduras (ERIC, 2019); meanwhile, in Honduras impunity has risen to levels categorized

by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) as “structural impunity,” where 98% of crimes are not solved. The IACHR also indicated in 2017 that impunity in Guatemala ranges between 99.1% and 98.4%.

Detonators of forced displacement. Events that visibly define the moment when people decide to leave their homes (IDMC, 2018). *Threats* are one of the primary detonators in El Salvador and Guatemala, whether they are threats of death, orders to leave one’s home, or of another type. These threats can be directed at one person in particular or towards a group or family.

Another criminal act identified as a detonator in Honduras and El Salvador was *extorsion*, which affects the economies of both countries. Gangs are primarily responsible, and in Honduras groups associated with organized crime are also implicated. *Narcotrafficking* is another criminal act that generates displacement in Honduras and Guatemala. For one, narcotrafficking is often connected to other gang activity. For another, narco-traffickers often force residents to sell their homes at low prices, fight with rival gangs or target the population when they inconvenience their operations.

Aspects particular to each country are explained below: in Guatemala, they are different causes that generate displacement in urban versus rural zones. In the former, it is related to gangs and organized crime, while in the latter, it is related to the establishment of megaprojects. In Honduras, the report noted *assassinations* carried out by organized crime and gangs as a detonator. And in El Salvador, the report made note of *homicides*, of which there were 3,345 in 2018 (Directory of Information and Analysis, DIA), most of them men. Similarly, men are mostly affected by the harassment committed by gangs - and, to a lesser degree, security forces - towards adolescents and youth.

Data provided by organizations belonging to the Regional Monitoring System for Forced Displacement in El Salvador and Honduras indicate that the opinions of those interviewed do have a basis in reality. The principal causes mentioned by the victims registered by Cristosal El Salvador were threats (67.2%), homicide of a family member (29.8%), and fear of violence (22.5%). In Honduras, the three principal causes registered by CIPRODEH, Casa Alianza, Pastoral de Movilidad Humana and La Red Contra la Violencia Antisindical were threats (58.6%), forced recruitment (20.7%), and homicide of a family member (14.4%).

One must highlight the lack of denunciations filed against criminal activities in El Salvador and Honduras. In El Salvador, this is connected to corruption and a lack of trust in institutions. Cristosal El Salvador registered that 66.7% of victims did not seek help at any state institution for the criminal action that victimized them.

Profile of victims: In Honduras and Guatemala, experts identified the indigenous population as vulnerable to displacement due to the establishment of megaprojects in the territories where they lived, with black and Honduran farmer populations also at risk. Meanwhile, in El Salvador and Guatemala, poor families were noted as particularly at risk due to the fact that their living conditions affect their level of human development.

An at-risk group identified in all three countries were community leaders and/or human rights defenders, whose vulnerability originates from their expressed opposition to megaprojects or their actions combating the interests of those behaving outside the law. Women were also identified in all

three countries as at risk of displacement, though with subtle differences in how the phenomenon affects them. In El Salvador and Guatemala, women often opt not to leave due to the traditional gender roles; when their partners leave, they feel obligated to assume the leadership and maintenance of the family. When women do decide to leave, they normally bring along the entire family unit, which makes them even more vulnerable.

The LGBTI+ population was also identified. In Guatemala, they're displaced due to the community and familial discrimination; in El Salvador and Honduras, they're displaced as a result of territorial control exercised by gangs. Adolescents and youth were also mentioned, being that in Guatemala they are subject to the harassment of gangs and organized crime, in El Salvador to the harassment of primarily just gangs, and in Honduras to the harassment of gangs inside gang-controlled schools. In regards to professions at risk of displacement, the report mentioned micro-businesses and truckers in Honduras, journalists in Guatemala, and police in El Salvador. It is necessary to mention that the political situation in Honduras is also putting the population at risk of displacement.

The Regional Monitoring System for Forced Displacement registered in 2018 a total of 1,946 people (53.4% women and 46.6% men) with a need to leave their residences. 1,724 were Salvadoran and the rest were Honduran. Out of the total, 1,742 were already displaced at the time of being interviewed by member organizations of the System and 204 had not yet left their home, lacking some other place to stay or economic resources, among other reasons.

It is important to quickly make reference to the victimizers. The report identified gangs as the principal aggressors in the three Central American countries, and state agents as other aggressors in cases of displacement. In Guatemala, the report mentioned judges, police, representatives, among others, that have entered into agreements with big businesses to construct megaprojects. In Honduras, the report mentioned security forces that act in conjunction with businesses and political actors. In El Salvador, the report mentioned the National Civil Police, and to a lesser degree the Armed Forces, as entities responsible for the harassment of youth and adolescents. To a lesser degree, the report mentioned farm/ranch owners and narco-traffickers (Guatemala), organized crime (Honduras) and individuals and citizens that are not party to groups that act outside the law but that take advantage of the climate of violence in Guatemala and El Salvador.

Types of Forced Displacement: Interviewees mentioned *confinement*, understood as seclusion in one's home as a security measure against possible criminal acts. According to data provided by the Regional System, in Honduras and El Salvador there were 877 registered cases of confinement during 2018. 814 were Salvadoran (Plan International El Salvador and Cristosal El Salvador) and 63 were Honduran.

Another type is that of *relocation*. These are limited by the coverage of the institutions that provide these types of services, as well as by the restrictive offers of said institutional services. In El Salvador, the report indicated that one should work not towards providing only immediate help but towards providing an avenue for people to resume their life plans in their new areas of settlement. Guatemala has national protocols for relocation, but there do not exist concrete plans that guarantee that relocation occurs under dignified conditions. In Honduras, the Characterization of Forced Displacement report realized in 2014 showed that people relocate to localities where there is a higher level of human development.

Collective displacement is a phenomenon about which there is not much information in the Northern Triangle. However, those interviewed said that this type of displacement is in response to threats directed at a community that share a mutual geographic living site. In the case of Guatemala and Honduras, this type of displacement occurs as a result of land grabs for the purpose of constructing megaprojects: in El Salvador it occurs as a response to acts of violence.

Other important types are *irregular migration* and the *migrant caravans* that occurred towards the end of 2018. The report found a consensus of opinion in the three countries that people make the decision to migrate as a result of state abandonment and lack of protection, as well as due to a lack of durable solutions to their problems. Concerning the type of migration referred to as “caravan migration,” the three primary reasons for joining were: to improve living standards (58.1%), to flee violence (18.3%), and to reunite with family (1.8%), according to the International Organization for Migration. Despite not having statistics on irregular departures from the three countries, there are statistics on asylum claims made during 2017. According to the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugee, 60,272 Salvadorans, 59,788 Hondurans and 36,546 Guatemalans presented asylum claims in different countries; however, until such a study is conducted we will not whether or not these persons were internally displaced in their countries of origin.

The State in the face of cases of forced displacement: The recognition of forced internal displacement as a result of violence, as stated in the guiding principles of the United Nations, is in different stages of progress in the three countries of the Northern Triangle. In El Salvador there exists Resolution 411-2017, decreed by the country’s maximum judicial authority, that mandates that the state recognizes forced displacement and gives attention to the victims; it has yet to be honored. Forced displacement has been rendered invisible in Guatemala, the only cases recognized being those generated by the armed conflict. Only Honduras has made progress on this subject, recognizing the phenomenon in 2013. Although their attention given to victims is weak, the recognition has allowed for the creation of the Inter-institutional Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence (CIPPDV in Spanish), as well as for the creation of a law for the Prevention, Attention and Protection of Displaced Persons for violence, presented to Congress in March 2019.

There exist some programs and policies that can help to mitigate the situation in the region. In El Salvador, there exists Plan Safe El Salvador, adopted under the mandate of previous President Salvador Sánchez Cerén; this program permitted the creation of the Local Offices for Attention to Victims (OLAV in Spanish). For its part, the Direction for the Attention to Victims has also developed a route and protocol for attention to displaced persons. Additionally, the report highlighted the Health Ministry’s Comprehensive Units for Attention to all forms of Violence. The National Civil Police also has special mechanisms for the prevention and containment of displacement, such as the protection of witnesses and victims, the program Safe House and the philosophy behind community policing, as well as the formation of the Committee for Police Actions. Civil society representatives signaled that the state’s inter-institutional work must be strengthened and noted that the state’s recognition of forced displacement is of the utmost importance.

For its part, Guatemala possesses action protocols for cases of displacement as a result of eviction, such as the Governing Ministry, the National Civil Police, the Attorney General for Human Rights and the Public Ministry. However, none of these plans were put into action by the experts actually

consulted. Interviewees noted budget limitations in Honduras, decriing the fact that more money is directed towards the military than towards attention for victims.

Alternatives for protection and attention. At the regional level, there exist actions that can be developed in each country, according to each one's particularities. These actions can be picked up by diverse sectors of society, by international organizations, and, principally, by the state, in order to better understand forced displacement and to catalyze action towards its prevention and the protection of victims.

In general, Guatemala and El Salvador must start by understanding and adopting the concept of internal displacement proposed by the UN, in conjunction with a recognition of the phenomenon on behalf of the state. Additionally, they should also pursue information, training, and investigation campaigns on the subject; it is necessary to identify the risk factors of displacement among returned populations and to detect which families might be trapped in situations of confinement or are at risk of moving by means of public businesses with a local presence. Additionally, there should be the establishment of a set of indicators on citizen security that measure the impacts of violence, violations of human rights and internal forced displacement.

Other notable aspects were the creation of measures for the restitution of rights for the victims of forced displacement; the role of the justice system is essential for providing an adequate response to the denouncements and demands of the population.

Recommendations. The principal recommendations revolved around the public recognition of forced internal displacement by the Salvadoran and Guatemalan states. There should also be an evaluation of the impact of the implementation of security policies in the Northern Triangle, and an analysis and recognition of the link between forced displacement as a result of violence and migration.

There should be the implementation of comprehensive strategies that involve many diverse sectors and that capitalize on the experience of civil society as well as international cooperation on the topic. It is urgent that states confront the drivers and detonators of forced displacement for the purpose of early prevention of the phenomenon and for the comprehensive attention and protection of vulnerable populations. There should be the creation of attention protocols that include the institutions that make up the protection systems in the aforementioned countries, that make vulnerable groups visible and that include durable solutions for victims.

Finally, we invite civil society action and international cooperation in order to conduct social auditing to identify challenges in the implementation of public policies related to forced internal displacement as a result of violence.