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**ANALYZING THE SUCCESS OF THE USAID-FUNDED *EMPLEANDO FUTUROS* AND
CRIME AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROJECTS IN REDUCING EMIGRATION
FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE TO THE UNITED STATES**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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PROFESSOR WILLIAMS**

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Introduction

Since 2014, more than two million people have left the Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua (also known as the Northern Triangle), causing the United States (hereafter “the U.S.”) government to label this a crisis, as many of these migrants traveled to the U.S. - Mexico border (Cheatham and Roy 2022). As a result of these migratory flows, the U.S. government has focused much of its attention on developing immigration and foreign policies connected to the Northern Triangle region. In an effort to decrease the number of migrants attempting to settle in the U.S., administrations have attempted to control the violence, poverty, and other factors causing Northern Triangle residents to emigrate, with little success. In light of this phenomenon, I will focus on U.S. government’s reliance on development projects in the Northern Triangle as a way to ameliorate potential migrant’s quality of life in hopes of decreasing overall emigration. In the last decade, the U.S. Congress has allocated roughly \$2.6 billion towards these efforts, mainly funding initiatives by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), highlighting the commitment to and interest in achieving these goals (Ernst et al. 2020). Out of this funding, 40 percent has been dedicated to development and assistance work (Ernst et al. 2020, 23).

Currently, U.S. government international development policies in the Northern Triangle follow a neoclassical economic approach to migration, which in brief, argues that migration results from differences in wages, labor market conditions, and the journey between a country of origin and the possible destination country. According to this theoretical approach, emigration from the Northern Triangle should decrease as economic growth increases and there are more barriers to migration to the U.S. However, various theoretical considerations and empirical

research in the Northern Triangle shows that this may not be salient for these particular cases. Given the large amounts of funding, extensive political debate, and U.S. policy priorities, it is imperative that these development approaches are actually successful in achieving their goals. This leads me into my main research questions: What has been the impact of USAID-funded development projects with regards to the push/pull factors that determine someone's propensity to migrate? Are USAID projects an appropriate way of addressing these push/pull factors and causing a decrease in migration to the U.S.?

Through examining results of two USAID-funded projects targeting unemployment and violence in Honduras and El Salvador, I will analyze how their goals and final outcomes fit within existing literature offering theoretical and empirical explanations regarding the efficiency of foreign aid in tackling migration. Given that several scholarly conclusions claim that “neither economic growth in the Northern Triangle nor foreign aid [has] kept pace with sharply negative trends that [have] buffeted communities” and that these efforts have “yielded limited gains”, it is clear that these programs feature several holes that can be criticized and improved (Ernst et al. 2020, 5; Cheatham and Roy 2022). From the analysis I will undertake in this thesis, I aim to understand to what extent the U.S. government has applied incorrect theoretical approaches to their foreign aid policies and what this suggests with regards to future migration-related policies.

There is no existing external analysis of these two development projects. That which exists comes from the projects themselves through the form of quarterly, yearly, and final reports. Therefore, this thesis will begin filling in a notable gap in migration-related international development literature by analyzing these projects through an alternative theoretical framework and external studies, data, and analysis on migration and development in the region.

Literature Review

U.S. Immigration History Related to Latin America

In recent decades, U.S. immigration policy related to the Northern Triangle has followed a heavily securitized model, both in domestic and foreign policy (Massey and Pren 15). Multiple administrations have attempted to decrease the number of undocumented immigrants arriving from this region by increasing border security and expanding internal enforcement, which has proved year after year to be highly problematic and largely unsuccessful (Chishti and Bolter 2021; “Comprehensive Immigration Reform” 2007). Creating immigration policy using a national security lens has diminished the opportunity for the U.S. government to instead develop policies that capture the benefits of immigration and reduce any existing negative effects. International development and foreign aid attached to the region has similarly adopted this approach, to its detriment (Weiss 2019; Latin America Program n.d.). While this securitized approach is not a focus of my analysis of select USAID programs in the Northern Triangle, an overview contributes to an understanding of U.S. government motivations behind immigration policies.

The use of national immigration policies to control migratory flows into the U.S. is not a new phenomenon and has, for decades, been a key tool used by politicians to tailor both who and how many immigrants are allowed to enter the country. The patterns of Northern Triangle migratory flows throughout the implementation of a variety of U.S. immigration policies deviate from past immigration flows. A notable historical example includes the increase Asian migrants after the passage of amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 (Massey and Pren 2012). This rise in Asian (and some Latin American) immigrants arriving to the U.S. occurred as a planned and direct result of this policy, which repealed national-origins quotas

inspired by changes in U.S. immigration priorities and preferences (Chishti, Hipsman, and Ball 2015). This stands in sharp contrast to the dramatic increase in immigration flows from Latin America starting in the 1990s, which occurred despite, not because of, new U.S. immigration policies (Massey and Pren 2012). Suddenly, U.S. immigration policy was incapable of generating its intended effects. This set off a new era of immigration policymaking, where politicians are seemingly unable to properly and successfully manage the immigration factors they wish to target. When trying to decrease immigration numbers in the early 2000s, “not only did the massive enforcement effort fail to prevent the entry of unauthorized Latin Americans, in an unanticipated way it actually accelerated the net inflow” (Massey and Pren 2012, 17).¹ The immigration policy arm of the U.S. government shifted from tailoring policies to produce the desired effect to constantly scrambling to address failures in policy, all with a backdrop of migration flow increases and crises (Berk-Seligson et al. 2014).

Northern Triangle Policy Approaches

Present-day U.S. immigration policy towards the Northern Triangle can be attributed to rising anti-Latino sentiments, alongside securitization trends in policymaking following multiple major terrorist attacks in the 1990s and 2000s (Massey and Pren 15). The decision to create and adopt this approach has not always been rooted in strong theoretical and empirical migratory analyses and “even when policies respond explicitly to shifts in immigration, rarely are they grounded in and real understanding of the forces that govern international migration” (Massey

¹ Massey and Pren describe the various ways in which restrictionist measures resulted in the unintended effect of increasing Latin American immigration into the U.S. One of these include a shift from a circular to a settled pattern of migration, where greater enforcement measures lead migrants to stay in the U.S., as it becomes increasingly difficult to return if they were to ever return to their home country. Another is the feedback loop that is created when an increase in apprehensions leads to more funding for restrictionist legislation, which then increases apprehensions and creates the illusion that undocumented migration is steadily growing (Massey and Pren 17- 22).

and Pren 2). Instead, they have been built off of “prevailing economic circumstances and political ideologies” (Massey and Pren 2). Despite this analytical absence and the notable failures in U.S. immigration policy, politicians have continued to expand ineffective border and internal immigration enforcement policies (Massey and Pren 2012).

To balance U.S. immigration policy with alternative approaches, foreign aid and international development work in the Northern Triangle has been used in an attempt to decrease migration before reaching U.S. borders. De Haas captures the reasoning behind this shift in explaining that,

The argument that promoting development in sending countries is an effective means to reduce immigration is based on the underlying assumption that migration and development are negatively and linearly correlated processes and, hence, substitutes for each other. Following this logic, migration can be reduced by addressing the alleged ‘root causes’ of migration, such as economic underdevelopment, poverty and unemployment (828).

While this may seem to be an effective approach, a deeper look into the nature of foreign aid and development projects have demonstrated that they are not a fool-proof policy measure in combatting migration. For instance, “large investments of foreign assistance by the United States in the Caribbean and Central America, and broad-based trade liberalization with Mexico, did not meaningfully reduce migration pressures in the region” (Newland 2011). If Washington is to continue investing resources into development work, it is in their best interest that these policies 1) address migration push/pull factors, 2) decrease a person’s propensity to migrate, and 3) consequently decrease migration flows to the U.S. Literature exploring the success of migration related development and foreign aid policies is both limited and does not come to a consensus regarding whether this approach is efficient in decreasing overall emigration. In addition, this literature is often limited to migration flows going into Europe from a variety of African countries. Despite the major presence of the topic migratory flows from the Northern Triangle in

U.S. domestic and foreign policies, the existing literature does not thoroughly examine the degree to which international development related approaches have succeeded. Through this thesis, I will fill part of this gap by analyzing two past USAID projects in El Salvador and Honduras whose goals are explicitly related to addressing the root causes of emigration from the Northern Triangle. I will first describe the narrow and, as I will determine, incorrect theoretical approach present in U.S. immigration policies and migration-related development projects. Through an overview of alternate theories that claim that foreign aid and development projects focused on migration reduction are inherently unsuccessful and cannot be solely relied upon to tackle these policy goals, I will construct a theoretical framework to use in my analysis of select past USAID projects. In applying existing migration and development theories, I will establish how these projects fit within the framework and also analyze their ability to meet U.S. political objectives in reducing migration from the Northern Triangle.

The Neoclassical Economic Theory of Migration

The neoclassical economic theory of migration is the U.S. government's predominant approach when creating migration-related foreign policy, and by default, largely dictates USAID programmatic priorities in emigration-heavy regions like the Northern Triangle. This neoclassical approach is the earliest theoretical framework used to understand migration and as a result, is largely accepted by policymakers around the world (Porumbescu 2018). The theory explains that migration occurs due to geographic and labor differences between regions. At its most basic level, migration takes place when one region has a greater supply of jobs while another has a greater demand for labor. Workers who seek out this labor (and/or greater salaries) decide to migrate to access a more fruitful economy. According to this reasoning, an increase in employment and wage rates in any given "home" country should motivate potential migrants to

stay, lowering emigration elsewhere. Through this simplistic view, governments who wish to reduce emigration can do so by stimulating their labor market or, in the case of a “receiving” country, restricting access to their labor market. The theory takes other personal considerations into account, and views migrants as rational actors who make a cost-benefit analysis in determining whether to emigrate. These “costs” can include financial considerations, such as the ability to travel and sustain oneself while seeking new employment, but they could also include cultural and language barriers, or even personal sentiments related to moving away from family, friends, and a known environment. A number of theories have developed further from this neoclassical economic model, including Sjaastad’s theory of human capital, which establishes that migration is akin to investment in human capital and takes education, age, and wages into consideration (Sjaastad 1962). What these theories, and numerous others (see Shields and Shields 1989; Tiebout 1956; Harris and Todaro 1970), suggest is that migration is an economic and relatively straight forward phenomenon (Bodvarsson and Van den Berg 2013). Criticisms of these models emphasize that “it is difficult to argue that migration, whether regarded as an individual act or considered in terms of flows and processes, can be explained by taking into consideration only a certain set of influencing factors” (Porumbescu 2018, 14). Alternate theories reject this approach and seek to understand more thoroughly how economic and other significant factors may affect a potential migrant’s propensity to emigrate.

Foreign Aid and Migration

There is a subsection of migration literature that seeks to understand the impact of foreign aid on migratory flows, specifically looking at whether foreign aid has a negative relationship with migration. Rooted in the prevailing neoclassical economic theories of migration previously described, it is understandable how policymakers jump to the conclusion that a decrease in

unemployment rates, an increase in wages, and an increase in both actual and perceived costs of migration would deter potential migrants from emigrating to the United States. This theoretical framework is most commonly used by U.S. government officials when creating and implementing migration-related policies (Clemens 2014). These sorts of policies range from visa and asylum policies, border and internal security, foreign policy, and foreign aid. For the purposes of this paper, focus will be placed on migration-related foreign aid policies (specifically USAID development projects) and accompanying theories and literature covering this phenomenon.

Existing migration and foreign aid literature ranges in arguments and opinions. While some authors question whether development aid has any sort of positive impact on recipient communities, others find that the impact of foreign aid on emigration rates depends on country characteristics and strategic implementation, and some argue that in general terms, aid does reduce immigration (Clemens and Postel 2018, 673; Holm 2022, 2; Bandyopadhyay, Chambers, and Munemo 2014; Gaytán-Fregoso and Lahiri 2000). With prevailing conclusions being so far-reaching, it is essential to generate a specific theoretical framework under which to analyze aid projects, focusing on literature that most closely applies to the targeted region and case. U.S. policymakers are still committing to the neoclassical approach to migration, as seen in the Biden-Harris administration's Root Causes Strategy launched in 2021, despite a wide range of evidence questioning these methods (The White House 2022). This complicated reality gives more relevance to the exercise I will be conducting, as it is important to understand whether the neoclassical approach generates the positive outcomes it sets out to accomplish.

There is an established historical pattern of attempting to address the root causes of migration through foreign aid around the globe, most notably coming from the U.S. and

European countries, targeting Latin American and African countries (Clemens and Postel 2018). Given this long legacy, one would expect that the assumptions and theories guiding motivations to continue creating and implementing these projects would be well-established, with favorable results. While that may be true for in some cases, a notable flaw in migration-related policy making is the lack of consensus regarding the efficacy of development programs in addressing the migration trends they seek to target. Literature on the subject largely covers the theoretical sphere, while empirical evidence tends to be hyper-specific, and its results seem to not have influenced the decisions of key policymakers. As the U.S. government (and other relevant actors) continue to dedicate portions of their immigration and foreign policy budgets to these projects, it is imperative to understand whether these efforts are appropriate given their stated goals.

Both scholarly and grey literature continue to ask questions such as “[is there] clear evidence that aid (if distributed accordingly) can affect conditions in migrant-origin countries to a degree that is sufficient to deter migration?” (Clemens and Postel 2018, 672). Attempts to answer this question have led to hyper-specific conclusions explaining that “the impact of [Official Development Assistance] on emigration patterns suggests that ODA can be strategically used to deter emigration from some ODA-receiving states boasting higher levels of development,” supporting further investment in migration focused development projects (Holm 2022, 45). On the other side of this question, “aid affects migration through two channels: by facilitating contacts and population movements of skilled foreigners (e.g., students) into the donor country and by allowing migrants to afford migrants” (Berthélemy, Beuran, and Maurel 2009, 1594), suggesting that policymakers should shift their focus entirely, and “ODA should ultimately be dedicated to the development of international migratory processes, working to reduce danger faced by migrants and maximize benefits enjoyed by both countries of origin and

destination countries” (Holm 2022, 47). Even though it is clear that opinions on the overall efficacy of migration-related foreign aid are disputed, there is ample evidence that its effects are not nearly as positive and consistent as is represented and believed by U.S. government policymakers.

Mobility Transition Theory

In discussing migration-related foreign policy, a major perspective often overlooked by policymakers is that which is outlined in Zelinsky’s mobility transition theory. Zelinsky observes that migration takes place through a series of phases represented by an inverted-U relationship between migration and development (Zelinsky 1971; Holm 2022). In this model, we can see that as economic development increases, emigration rates will increase until they reach a specific point of development (some have determined this as being at a GDP per capita greater than \$6,000), after which rates will begin to decrease (Holm 2022, 9). However, since foreign aid typically goes to lower-income countries as opposed to these upper-middle income countries, it is unlikely that the development resulting from foreign aid support will cause a large enough increase in GDP per capita to reach the point in which emigration rates will begin to decrease. In support of this phenomenon, numerous studies have demonstrate how the “reception of net ODA has a positive impact on the emigration rates of underdeveloped aid receiving states and a negative impact on the emigration rates of comparatively more developed countries” (Holm 2022, 2). Given that Honduras has a GDP per capita of \$2,831 and El Salvador has a GDP per capita of \$4,408.50, it is clear that these countries, which are major focuses of U.S. immigration and foreign policy, are not classified as the upper-middle income countries that, according to Zelinsky’s theory, would experience a decrease in emigration due to development spurred by

foreign aid (“GDP per Capita (Current US\$) - Honduras | Data” 2021; “GDP per Capita (Current US\$) - El Salvador” 2021).

When analyzing case-specific evidence alongside existing literature, it is clear that the mobility transition theory goes against the perspective espoused by the U.S. government, where any sort of development is seen as a positive driver of a decrease in migration. When analyzing migration-related foreign aid and development policies, determining “which of these forces dominates is an empirical question” that is worth examining in order to better shape U.S. policy expectations (Clemens and Postel 2018, 675). While there are certain exceptions where foreign aid may serve to spur the decrease in emigration desired by donor countries, these are notably minor and highly specific cases. Existing outlier cases are small enough where the resulting decrease in emigration does not set off a major change in migratory flows, but this inadequate result does not seem to have motivated a deviation in how the U.S. government approaches migration related development projects. Therefore, in my analysis of USAID programs in the Northern Triangle, I will utilize Zelinsky’s approach to evaluate their success.

Theoretical Framework

As previously mentioned, I will construct a theoretical framework that will allow for a thorough inquiry into the beliefs that drive migration-related development projects, and how these are manifested in the reported results of past USAID projects in the Northern Triangle. Here I will provide an overview of the theories upon which I will rely in the analytical portion of this thesis.

Included in this theoretical debate is the idea of foreign aid fostering receiving country dependency on the monetary or programmatic contributions offered by donor countries. This creates an undesirable situation where further development is unable to take place due to this

phenomenon, effectively decreasing the positive impacts foreign aid may have on a receiving country. Aid dependence is said to occur when countries receive a constant and large amount of aid without gaining tools for sustainability once that aid is retracted (Bräutigam and Knack 2004). This creates a situation where governments rely on monetary or programmatic support to deliver key services to their constituents but find themselves unable to continue giving those services (or at least to the degree experienced with the aid) without external support. Aid dependence within the context of migration-related policy could take place when employment, educational, violence-prevention, and therapeutic programs established through aid are defunded or experience a decline in success after direct aid has been removed. While this phenomenon is not a primary focus of my analysis, it still holds relevance. Aid dependence could be an unintended consequence of U.S. migration related development programs, which would help explain why programs have not managed to result in large-scale success. If capacity building and sustainability efforts are not effective during USAID-supported project implementation periods, or if these don't hold up in the long-term, whatever short-term successes that may have occurred will be unable to continue in the future. Following the theoretical ideology that serves as a foundation for these aid programs, failure (or decreased performance) of these projects will not lead to the desired decrease in migration.

Another foreign-aid related factor that can have notable effects on the outcomes of any given project is aid size and type. When looking at how aid size interacts with migration related programs, scholarly economic analysis found that “additional aid increases the level of illegal immigration when the level of aid is small. However, when the level of aid is large, additional aid reduces illegal immigration. We also examine the effect of a transfer of resources from border control to foreign aid, and find that such a shift would increase illegal immigration”

(Gaytán-Fregoso and Lahiri 2000, 526–27). However, even the best executed and heavily funded development projects may cause unfavorable local conditions. It has been noted that “[receiving] governments often react to inflows of foreign aid by redirecting government spending away from public service provision and towards other things. When sudden and unexpected decreases in foreign aid occur, the services funded by aid are necessarily cut and governments are often unwilling or unable to move money back to support them”(Ganso, Lu, and Yuldashev 2021, 582). Inherent to foreign aid and development work is funding-related instability. Due to the “at-will” nature of monetary and/or programmatic aid, any changes in political goals, economic shocks, or foreign relations between the donor and receiving countries can have major impacts on how programs are executed and if they even exist. Such volatility is never welcome, and “results suggest that negative aid shocks are accompanied by higher emigration rates” especially for population groups most vulnerable to migratory pressures, which are those with lower skill levels and greater difficulties in the labor market 12/19/2022 6:53:00 PM.

Other characteristics to take into consideration when examining how foreign aid may affect emigration possibilities include a country’s Human Development Index (HDI) score (which captures factors such as life expectancy, standard of living, and education), fertility rates and the number of children per household, youth employment rates, and other social characteristics (Clemens and Postel 2018; Holm 2022; Porumbescu 2018; Berthélemy, Beuran, and Maurel 2009). Finally, there are more intangible considerations, which argue that “by increasing people’s skills and aspirations, development aid is likely to encourage migration” (Dennison, Fine, and Gowan 2019). I will touch on many of these factors in my subsequent analysis, which will also take into consideration how factors related to migratory motivations contribute to overall project successes.

Push and Pull Factors

Immigration policymaking first requires identifying the key “push” and “pull” factors that motivate migrants to make their way to the U.S. While both policymakers and varying theoretical approaches debate what these factors are and which may be the strongest and most relevant in a migrant’s decision-making process, it is generally agreed that the threat of violence, economic opportunities, and family reunification are of fundamental importance (Orozco 5). For instance, statistical analysis of municipal-level data has shown that “in Honduras, a 1% increase in homicide drives migration by 120%; increases in the size of economic informality drive migration by 12%” (Orozco 6). Additionally, surveys of migrants from the Northern Triangle region conducted through the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) found that “migrants are mainly pulled by the search for economic opportunities and family reunification; they are pushed by high levels of violence and insecurity in their countries of origin” (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019, 29).

The idea that these specific factors have a direct relationship to migration flows has been well-established, but perhaps the degree to which this is true for different countries, regions, and demographic groups has not been made as clear. A gap in existing literature involves further analysis of migratory changes in response to major events, changes in U.S. policy, and fluctuations in the economic and security situations in relevant home countries.

Through this thesis, I will analyze USAID-funded development programs in the target countries of El Salvador and Honduras that describe their goals as being directly linked to migration and focus on one of the push/pull factors identified above. The cases I have chosen in Honduras and El Salvador both address youth unemployment and crime and violence prevention, making them appropriate to analyze in conjunction. There has not been much theoretical or empirical work analyzing past USAID projects in the Northern Triangle, especially beyond the

immediate goals of the given project and with larger migration-prevention U.S. policy objectives in mind. Even when such projects have succeeded in their programmatic goals, there is no certainty that this has not only properly addressed migration push factors, but that they have decreased the population's propensity to migrate to a degree that will notably change migratory flows to the U.S (Roth and Hartnett 2018). An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the case of the implementation of Youth Outreach Centers in El Salvador, where researchers concluded that "push factors are linked to larger structural concerns... so progress towards alleviating these push factors will take many years and lies beyond the scope of the Centers" (Roth and Hartnett 53). This same conclusion has been reached in the context of other international development projects such that, "trade, aid, return migration and remittances are no short-cut 'solutions' to migration, and sustained immigration therefore seems likely" (De Haas 2007). Therefore, if U.S. policymakers are to continue to promote and fund development projects with the hope that they will mitigate push/pull factors in such a way that there will be a decrease in migration, they must be sure that an analysis of the results of these projects confirm that this is the proper approach.

Methodology

I will choose two finalized USAID-funded programs, one in Honduras and one in El Salvador, that address major push/pull factors that motivate migrants from that region to leave for the U.S. While the push/pull factors that affect migrants' decisions to leave their home countries are well established, I will conduct research to determine which of these are the strongest and most relevant regionally. To achieve this, I will analyze existing survey and interview data collected by think tanks, development organizations, NGOs, journalistic accounts, and government reports which will paint a picture of where most emigration is occurring in Honduras and El Salvador and why this is the case. For instance, a survey conducted by the IDB spoke to recent migrants in main metropolitan areas in the U.S. (Washington, DC; Los Angeles, CA; and New York, NY). Their interview-style approach characterized migrants based on their nationality, education level, main occupation, their motivations to migrate, and their migration experience (Emmanuel Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). Sources such as these are helpful because they identify major push/pull factors while also ranking them and establishing their level of importance. Reading through major newspaper stories and local reporting will give more insight into how journalists and people on the ground are experiencing the events that are directly linked to existing push/pull factors. Examining local government functions will also be important to see what policies have been enacted in the region (and if these have been successful). These observations will contribute to a deeper understanding of the stickiness of the existing push factors and whether there are other factors that have been overlooked but may also hold importance. Using these findings, I will compare them to USAID programmatic practices to understand whether program activities have been targeting the right factors.

Using the theoretical framework previously established, I will evaluate findings described in official USAID program reports through this lens and determine whether the program was successful. I will also break down the reasoning behind program activities to determine whether this fits in with regional findings and priorities. By doing a general program overview with a closer analysis of specific activities, I will be able to gain a broad understanding of how these programs are designed and what may be contributing to their outcomes.

Analysis

As explained above, I will analyze two USAID-funded development projects in Honduras and El Salvador and determine their level of success and sustainability as it relates to a decrease in emigration to the U.S. I will also be highlighting where USAID has relied on the neoclassical economic approach to reducing migration when both creating and implementing these projects.

Migration to the U.S. is idealized in the region, and is often understood as being a solution to any absence of opportunities, resources, and a general low quality of life (Vázquez Mota et al. 2017). Even with the successes that development projects can afford to its participants and the target community, if there is still a perception that a better life is out there, an interest in migration will remain present, even if not overwhelming (Vázquez Mota et al. 2017). However, once there is a change in circumstances (often understood as a “trigger” or “shock”), this opinion can change, ultimately pushing residents to emigrate. While some of these shocks may be mitigated or decreased through the goals of USAID-funded programs, others may not be as controllable, and migration is still expected to continue.

Empleando Futuros – Honduras

Here, I will be addressing the salience of unemployment as a push factor motivating migration to the U.S., for which the proposed solution is increasing employment in the target region, especially for youth. This program was chosen because it has a combined focus on youth unemployment and crime, which are major push factors that motivate people to emigrate in Honduras. In order to address the key push factors present in Honduras, the program is structured to focus its workforce readiness activities in high-crime areas (one major push factor) to increase youth unemployment (another push factor).

A study conducted by Creative Associates International investigating the various “triggers” (also understood as push factors) that motivate migration in the region found that 67 percent Honduran respondents who said they intended to migrate cited “economic concerns” as their main motivation (Creative Associates International 2019). Additionally, overall intentions to migrate are more prevalent among the Honduran youth demographic (defined as between the ages of 18-29). A reported 46 percent of youth respondents intended to migrate compared to 28 percent of adult respondents (Creative Associates International 2019, 10). Another survey conducted by the LAPOP Lab supported this data, finding that 27 percent of all Hondurans had intentions to migrate or work in another country, with this number having been increasing since 2014 (The AmericasBarometer by the LAPOP Lab 2022b). A survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration asked unaccompanied minors that had attempted to migrate North about their motivations to migrate, most of which answered they sought jobs and a better quality of life (Unidad de información para los países del Norte de Centroamérica 2022).² The following program takes these factors into consideration and was designed to address employment concerns as they relate to migratory motivations.

Project Overview

The *Empleando Futuros* project in Honduras was a five-year program implemented by Banyan Global from June 2016 through November 2021, focusing on workforce readiness for at-risk youth. The project’s geographic coverage spanned 10 regions, including Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and La Ceiba, which capture 52 percent of emigration from Honduras to the U.S (“Empleando Futuros Final Report” 2021; Creative Associates International 2019). Additionally,

² 71 percent of participants migrated to improve their quality of life, 33 percent sought better job opportunities, 30 percent aimed for family reunification, and 13 percent listed other factors such as violence and crime, natural disasters, among others (Unidad de información para los países del Norte de Centroamérica 2022, 3).

the program focused on recruiting participants from the most violent neighborhoods in the most violent municipalities within these regions. The neoclassical migratory theory present in this case argues that as this population gains employment and steers away from crime, their propensity to migrate will decrease. Targeting unemployment as a main goal is supported by surveys that report that 75 percent of migrants from Honduras reported economic reasons as a main motivation for emigration (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019).

The program targeted youth (aged 16-30) unemployment and their exposure to crime, especially those classified as NiNis, those who are neither working nor studying, which has been reported as being one of the population groups most vulnerable to emigrate (Cea 2022). In 2017, it was estimated that 27.7 percent of Honduran youth between the ages of 15 and 24 fit into this category and were neither in school nor working (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). Through online and in-person educational programs, collaborations with local businesses, entrepreneurship and job skills training activities, and mentoring sessions, youth in this program were encouraged to (re)enter the work force or continue their education, gaining with skills and knowledge deemed essential by local industries (“Empleando Futuros Final Report” 2021). Crime prevention work focused on targeting at-risk youth who were either likely to enter a life of crime or had previously been arrested or incarcerated. Through tertiary prevention practices (taking place after a violent even has occurred), these participants were given skills training and cognitive behavioral therapy sessions to work through existing trauma and strengthen support structures beyond that of criminal networks (VetoViolence n.d.; “Empleando Futuros Final Report” 2021).

Results

At the end of the five year period, the project reported that around 7,500 at-risk youth had received workforce development training and at least 50 percent were able to get new

employment (“Empleando Futuros Final Report” 2021, 6). 400 youth benefitted from tertiary prevention services and 53 participants who were previously in conflict with the law had “positive” outcomes after completing the training modules (e.g., job placement, formal education, entrepreneurship).

The program’s final report highlights a number of “success stories” about program participant’s positive experiences. Some of these stories emphasize a participant’s past interest in emigrating; by explaining what they have gained through the program (new employment, new business skills, education, etc.), these stories infer that the participant now holds no desire to migrate, though this is not explicitly stated. These stories, while positive examples of the program’s success within its stated goals, offer little as evidence that gaining new employment or bolstering a participant’s business will, with any degree of certainty, lead to a decrease in their desire to migrate. Additionally, there is no explanation offered of how this program may prevent or combat future desires to migrate that may arise (both for participants that disclosed they had previously desired to migrate and those that may not have).

The final report explains that the project took on an interest in understanding how its work affects the root causes of migration around 2019, and as a result began tracking migration indicators. The document does not mention what these indicators are, but they do share that in surveying project beneficiaries, they found that 25 percent had an intention to migrate to the U.S. within three years and 8 percent had even attempted to migrate to the U.S. within a year of joining the program (“Empleando Futuros Final Report” 2021, 54). After the surveyed beneficiaries completed the program, intentions to migrate were said to decrease to 21.4 percent. While this data shows that the program (and perhaps programs similar to it) did succeed in decreasing some participant’s intentions to migrate, this is not a major decrease. These results

also do not give insight into whether unemployment was a major factor in beneficiaries' inclination to migrate (as opposed to other push factors) or if this can be applied to other populations on a larger scale. There are notable gaps in information related to how these conclusions are made and how they are being generalized.

Employment considerations

While unemployment is a major (48 percent) factor in an economic migrant's reason to emigrate, there are other factors that shine a light onto the complexity of economic considerations, which cannot entirely be addressed by increasing employment rates (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). Through the increase of employment (as experienced in this project), there will be a consequent increase in participant incomes. While neoclassical theories argue that this would decrease someone's propensity to migrate, as they have achieved greater economic standing in their home country, "the data offer no sign that among low-income or lower-middle-income countries, rising incomes are associated with smaller emigrant stocks or lower net emigration rates. To the contrary, typical countries in this group show a positive, significant association between average incomes and emigration" (Clemens 2014, 9). This research published by the Center for Global Development points to *Empleando Futuros*' central project goals as being antithetical to the U.S. government's desired decrease in migratory flows. At the most basic level, this project is unable to meet U.S. immigration objectives. Additionally, as stated above, other economic factors also play a role in someone's propensity to migrate.

A survey conducted by the IDB found that 18 percent of Honduran migrants reported that not having enough work, having low wages (13 percent), and not enough income to support their family's needs from all "economic activity" in Honduras (10 percent), motivated them to migrate to the U.S. (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). Missing in *Empleando Futuros*' purview is a focus not only on employment levels, but also whether this work generates a livable

wage. When taking the responses from the IDB's survey into consideration, it is clear that income and familial quality of life are important migratory considerations. These results may indicate that even if an increase in individual employment is achieved, if a significant increase in quality of life is not achieved, it may not dissuade program participants or their families from emigrating in search of better paid work and more opportunities. This same conclusion is supported by literature that emphasizes the importance of looking at analyzing fertility rates and the number of children per family as a way to measure migratory pressures (see Clemens and Postel 2018). Analyzing the connection between individual and familial motivations to migrate demonstrate how, despite this project's individualistic focus, a greater emphasis on family employment and income considerations is missing.

An important factor to consider is that unaccompanied minors that had attempted to migrate lived in homes with an average of 4.2 people, showing how migration of this type usually occurs with several household members remaining in their home country (Unidad de información para los países del Norte de Centroamérica 2022). Since, on average, migrants come from large homes with other members that remain in their home countries, this may point to the idea that the propensity to migrate is not as strong for every member of the family, otherwise we would see the emigration of the entire family. Within the context of the *Empleando Futuros* project, it could be argued that while the generation of youth employment opportunities may reduce that individual's propensity to migrate, as they have acquired valuable employment that wills them to remain at home, this could also motivate and free up the opportunity for other family members to migrate. This motivation could be generated from financial support resulting from this recent employment (as explored in the theoretical framework), a decrease in guilt regarding leaving a family member behind since they have found greater stability, and general

motivations to acquire a better quality of life which, despite new employment, may not be perceived as achievable in the region (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019; Creative Associates International 2019). 54 percent of migrants in the U.S. that reported having children also mentioned that those children were still living in the Northern Triangle, meaning that splitting up one's family does not seem to be dissuading people from migrating (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). While *Empleando Futuros* does take community considerations into account, as the program clearly understands that perceptions regarding employability and safety within a community are major sources of motivations to migrate, program activities have an overly individual focus. The central functions of the project involve individual training, therapy, and job placement, but it is clear that migratory decisions are rarely made individually, as “transnational families seek migration and separation as survival strategies”, showing how the decision to migrate in a familial environment is a strategic one (Castrejón 2020, 5). For Hondurans, a majority (58 percent) of funding for travel to the U.S. is acquired from a family member, 54 percent send remittances back to Honduras, and these are mostly used to cover basic household expenses (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019).³ The individual focus characteristic of this project fails to consider migratory realities that show how the choice to migrate is a familial one, as the possible economic benefits afforded by emigration is shared among a family or community. An individualistic approach ignores how a decrease in the propensity to migrate for one individual may not be felt for all of those in their family and may just shift the migratory burden to another.

³ Hondurans reported that 88 percent of the money/remittances sent home is used for basic needs (food, water, clothing, electricity, etc.). 63 percent of Honduran migrants sent this money back to their parents, 19 percent sent it back to their children, 13 percent sent it to their siblings, and 11 percent sent it to their spouses (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). There is a clear split in who this money is sent to – showing that almost anybody in a given family may make the decision to migrate.

Education levels and employment

Another insight is that while migrants aiming to settle in the U.S. are generally low in human capital and have below average education levels compared to other migrant groups in the U.S., a notable characteristic is that these migrants are more educated than the general population in their home countries.⁴ While these findings do not demonstrate a causal relationship between higher education levels and migration, it is an observation that should be considered, especially since the *Empleando Futuros* project seeks to increase participant education levels, skills, and general employment opportunities. *Empleando Futuros*, along with many other similar development projects, was created under the assumption that an increase in educational attainment and individual skillsets will improve employment opportunities and reduce migration. However, given that migrants that have settled in the U.S. have a higher level of education than residents in their home countries, there seems to be a flaw in the development theory underlying this project. If such theory were correct, we should expect that the people that remain in their home country would have higher levels of education than those who chose to migrate. Another inconsistency is that 51 percent of migrants were employed in their home countries prior to their emigration (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). If such a high number of migrants had employment, then home country employment may not be as strong of a dissuading factor when considering migration, especially given the previously mentioned observations regarding wage satisfaction and quality of life. The focus of this program is to increase employment levels in order to decrease emigration to the U.S., but with half of surveyed migrants already having been employed in their home country, it seems that employment status without a comparable increase in quality of life will not achieve the goal of decreasing emigration. *Empleando Futuros*

⁴ 36 percent of Honduran migrants in the U.S. reported having either an incomplete or complete higher education or more, while only 22 percent of Hondurans still in Honduras report having those same levels of education (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019).

fails to address any other factor except that of basic employment status, presenting a major flaw in the program's approach.

Another study conducted by the IDB found that in 2015, the probability of undocumented migration for an 18-year-old Honduran without formal education and in search of employment was 61 percent, double that of the average for other surveyed populations (Quijada and Sierra 2015). The propensity to migrate decreased by one percent when a Honduran individual had completed secondary education as opposed to having none (Quijada and Sierra 2019). Based on this data, it was recommended that development programs should focus on increasing educational attainment and assisting in job placement in order to “significantly reduce” undocumented migration to the U.S. There is a clear variation in the findings of this study compared to the one referenced in the previous paragraph. While some of this may be due to them being conducted in different years and through different survey methods (one focuses on migrants already in the U.S. while the other interviews returned migrants and others “in risk” of migrating in Honduras), the conclusions reached by each are markedly different. The first seems to suggest that migrants with higher education tend to migrate in greater numbers, while the other one argues that migrants with lower levels of education are more likely to migrate. This split, especially given the small amount of related literature, demonstrates how complex this topic is and shows why development projects and U.S. immigration policy may easily root itself on incorrect (or varied) assumptions that would lead to an unsuccessful project.

Other notable factors

While education and employment levels are majorly connected to the success of this project, there are other minor factors that are still important to consider. *Empleando Futuros* reported a reduction in social stigmatism related to how employers view youth who had been

conflict with the law or previously involved in gangs, which is a major barrier to youth employment in high-crime regions (“Empleando Futuros Final Report” 2021). The report also highlights a reduction in violence and recidivism but does not share how any of this information was determined and any certainty that the program itself caused these improvements. Given that a decrease in violence (and by extension, recidivism) are major factors connected to one’s decision to migrate from Honduras (due to their classification as root causes), proving this fact, as well as its connection to the activities of the project, is essential in verifying program accomplishments.

By extension, the success of such development projects is key to the validity of the neoclassical economic theory of migration and its central role in U.S. immigration and foreign policy. Of course, this program, as is true with many USAID-funded projects, is not implemented with the explicit, central goal of reducing participant’s propensity to migrate. However, this additional goal is referenced throughout project documents and aid-based migration prevention is cited as a major U.S. foreign policy goal. Therefore, one cannot fully fault these programs for not including extensive evidence and analysis on participant’s inclinations to migrate, but the program’s results cannot be included as a seemingly obvious conclusion. It is not obvious, and alternate theories on the topic even point to this being wholly untrue or even counterproductive.

Notable challenges in the implementation of these projects include significant dropout rates, participant lack of regular access to internet or technology, USAID funding instability, and general crime risks (“Empleando Futuros Final Report” 2021). All of these challenges affect the ability of this project to meet the overarching goal of decreasing emigration to the U.S., and while these challenges are inherent to any development project, this demonstrates how

ultimately, development projects of any kind are not equipped to manage international migratory flows. With high program dropout rates, even if the neoclassical theoretical framework were successful in reducing migration with programs aptly designed to address root causes attached to migration, any reduced participation would affect a program's scope and impact. This ultimately decreases the population that benefits from this aid and does not have the intended impact of reducing their propensity to migrate. High neighborhood crime rates have a similar direct effect on the success of employment-related aid projects. Gangs and other criminal networks in the region are known for threatening businesses in their claimed territory and demanding extortion fees (Ernst et al. 2020). If participants in these programs utilize the skills gained to become entrepreneurs and set up or support small businesses, they are likely to face these extortion fees (Ernst et al. 2020). Without parallel levels of crime reduction accompanying an increase in employment, these risks will dampen the economic benefits these programs provide. Prospective migrants may still have motivations to migrate even if their economic condition has marginally improved.

This program, as is true with others, faced both political and financial instability, and some program activities were cancelled or reduced due to changes in U.S. administration priorities and financial commitments ("Empleando Futuros Final Report" 2021). As previously explored, this instability inherent in foreign aid not only has a negative impact on the program image, demonstrating a lack of commitment, but also narrows the possibility of generating positive impacts that could contribute to a reduction of the effects of push factors on possible migrants. Additionally, there were "some periods of uncertainty when it was not clear how much projects could or should cooperate directly with governmental organizations considering high-level political issues between the United States and Honduras" ("Empleando Futuros Final

Report” 2021, 46). An emphasis on government-level work is necessary alongside project work to ensure that program sustainability that is essential to achieve long-term development goals (Ernst et al. 2020; International Crisis Group 2017) Changing political relationships diminish the potential impact these programs may have over the target populations and affect the bipartisan goal of decreasing migration espoused by the U.S. government.

Something missing within this project (and many others) is a clear understanding of and solution for instability within Northern Triangle countries. General instability affects residents’ perspectives on their home country even if short-term improvements take place. Therefore if U.S. development projects and foreign policies “do not make good governance and anticorruption their top priority in the Northern Triangle, progress related to economic growth and security will be fleeting at best” (Ernst et al. 2020, 7). Without improving stability in these key regions through a focus on other factors such as governance and anticorruption, residents may find other reasons to migrate. Additionally, instability threats related to changes in program funding or U.S. administration policy changes are ever-present, which as existing literature demonstrates, affects the success of a project and could even contribute to an increase in a participant’s propensity to migrate if this instability is perceived as overly negative. Ultimately, it is impossible to fully prevent all possible cases of instability, especially since USAID presence eventually leaves the region, and does not have future control over the project’s outcomes.

Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) – El Salvador

With this project, I will be analyzing how crime and violence have been addressed by development projects as a major push factor for emigration out of El Salvador. The relevance of crime and violence in motivating emigration has been established by existing literature, interviews, and various studies with Salvadorean migrants. Given the importance of these, it is necessary to analyze existing development projects that seek to address these problems and

create a safer environment in El Salvador that will decrease residents' propensity to migrate, ultimately decreasing migratory flows from the Northern Triangle into the U.S. Using official USAID program documents, external research, and my previously established theoretical framework I will highlight successes and poke holes at program flaws.

Firstly, it is important to establish motivations for emigration out of El Salvador. Out of the Northern Triangle countries, Salvadorean migrants more often cite violence or insecurity as one of the main reasons they left their country, with 48 percent responding as such. However, 68 percent still list economic reasons as one of their main motivators for migrating, showing that violence may not be as salient as is often described (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). Gang violence, followed by violent threats, were reported as being a major push factor for Salvadorean migrants, pointing to these being important focuses for policies aiming to reduce desires to migrate (Abuelafia, Del Carmen, and Ruiz-Arranz 2019). In another survey, 38 percent of Salvadorean migrants cited victimization as their primary reason to migrate (Creative Associates International 2019). Surveys by the LAPOP Lab found that 27.9 percent of Salvadoreans had intentions of living or working in another country, with motivations increasing from 2012 until a peak in 2016, followed by a decrease afterwards and subsequent increase after the COVID-19 pandemic (The AmericasBarometer by the LAPOP Lab 2022a). It is evident that Salvadoreans are affected by these push factors and addressing those concerns may be relevant when considering how to reduce migration. This viewpoint is captured in a statement by the implementors of this project, stating that, "Creative Associates International believes that development can significantly mitigate irregular migration through a *first mile approach* – one that addresses the specific factors that trigger someone to leave their home" (Creative Associates

International 2019). Through the activities of this project, we can see how this philosophy is applied in an attempt to mitigate migration.

Project Overview

The *Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP)*, funded by USAID and implemented by Creative Associates International, was a seven-year project that ran from March 2013 - March 2020. The project's objective was to improve citizen safety in El Salvador at the national, municipal, and community levels, covering 64 municipalities. In El Salvador, the regions of San Salvador, San Miguel, and La Libertad counted for 28 percent of the country's emigration (Creative Associates International 2019). The project aptly has core activities in San Salvador and La Libertad and minor activities in San Miguel ("USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report" 2020). This focus is a positive sign that high-mobility regions are being prioritized in light of U.S. immigration policy goals, however whether the program is effective in reducing motivations to migrate and overall migratory flows is a different question entirely.

The explicit goals of the project were to increase the government of El Salvador's capacity to prevent crime and violence, support municipal and community-led prevention efforts, and "seize windows of opportunities" related to innovations in crime and violence prevention efforts ("USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report" 2020). During the life of the project, there was continued collaboration alongside both the national and municipal governments, and institutional collaboration with NGOs. Through outreach centers located in a variety of neighborhoods, the project provided employment skills training services, cognitive behavioral therapy, a safe space for youth to spend time after school, and general information on additional support services. These centers were visited by about

29,912 youth, and employment skills training sessions led to 1,322 job placements (“USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report” 2020, 16).

The violence prevention methods utilized in the project were adapted from successful examples implemented in Los Angeles, CA to the Salvadorean context (“USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report” 2020). However, there is always a risk that the difference in environment and circumstance between these two locations could mean that these methods may not be the right approach, or that in choosing these methods, the project overlooked other possible approaches that may be more relevant and successful.

The project also worked on the rehabilitation of 105 public spaces as a way of improving standards of living across various communities. The goal in rehabilitating these spaces was to encourage the inclusive use of them and foster a community identity, resulting in community cohesion will serve as a violence prevention method through the modification of crime-related behaviors (“USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report” 2020, 43). The program explains that exclusionary methods of interaction with gang members tend to exacerbate negative factors and that community integration is needed to reduce violent behavior (“USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report” 2020, 43). Public space rehabilitation serves as an additional support in improving community perceptions and increasing safety, which targets general violence-related push factors motivating residents to emigrate to the U.S.

The purpose of the general employment-focused violence prevention activities is that, through targeting youth at risk for turning to crime (or those that had previously done so) and giving them greater employment opportunities, the participants will not end up turning to a life of crime. Furthermore, this theory argues that as youth are deterred from crime and become

employed, this will lead to a decrease in overall crime and increase youth unemployment, both of which are major migration push factors. Ultimately under this approach, participants themselves will not be as motivated to migrate and the communities that experience a decrease in crime could also experience a decrease in their propensity to emigrate. Through the following analysis, I will critique this theory and attempt to understand why this is an inefficient approach in managing migratory flows.

Results

This project relies on the assumption that more employment (and therefore greater economic activity and more income) will steer youth away from crime. However, an analysis of homicide in El Salvador's municipalities found that "poverty has an unexpected, counterintuitive, negative relationship with homicide rates", meaning that homicides seem to decrease as poverty rates increase (Ingram and Curtis 2014). The authors of this spatial analysis argue that this may be true because an increase in economic activity generates more interpersonal interaction, creating more opportunities for crime and violence. This argument would expect the increase in employment encouraged by this project could possibly lead to an increase in violence and crime, which is the opposite of its intended effect.

Public Space Rehabilitation

After the rehabilitation of community spaces, there was an observed 64.3 percent increase in the use of public spaces, demonstrating the popularity of these improvements. An evaluation regarding the impact of these rehabilitations reported that residents considered that those spaces were 10 percent safer than before, while in another evaluation residents said there was a 33 percent increase in perceived safety ("USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report" 2020, 18). Looking at the "perceived" safety of a community, while useful, does not rely on a quantitative measurement of these factors. Additionally, there is

not much more information on how this perception of safety is determined and how it may affect an individual's actions. This is an important consideration when attempting to understand the project's success, as motivations to migrate are driven by an individual's views on the benefits and disadvantages of emigrating based on existing circumstances.

Given that the desired results of public space rehabilitation include intangible factors such as community identity and the long-term decrease of dangerous behaviors, it is similarly difficult to establish the success this approach may have on resident's propensity to migrate. However, it could be argued that stronger community relationships could dissuade individuals from migrating because there would be a greater perceived loss in one's home environment, which is not guaranteed can be replicated abroad, especially given cultural differences (Lanati and Venturini 2021). One possible weakness in this activity's approach is that these public spaces have to be taken care of in order for residents to continue to appreciate their presence in their neighborhood and for them to continuously draw in large numbers of people. If these spaces fall in disrepair or even become spaces taken up by local gangs, the intended positive effects will be erased and may even increase an individual's propensity to migrate if they become frustrated neighborhood inefficiency (possibly indicating that any future endeavors may be similarly futile). With all of these considerations, it is clear that while the efforts of the project have had positive effects in these communities, there is not a clear and established link that these actions will both decrease crime and violence over the long-term and that it will occur in substantial numbers that could trigger a decrease in emigration.

Similar to the upkeep of these new community spaces, a necessary feature of the project was ensuring its sustainability. Intentional collaboration with both governmental and non-governmental organizations was implemented to support the long-term presence of the services

the project established. Given the successes boasted over the course of the seven-year project, it is essential that these outcomes continue past the implementation period to classify this as a successful investment. Herein is where the problem lies. There are significant challenges to continuing the same levels of positive outcomes after funding has finished and project close-out has been completed. The *CVPP*'s final report noted that roughly 6 percent of the outreach centers were classified as “unstable” due to a lack of municipal and financial support to cover the center’s costs and continued maintenance. Additionally, it was observed that municipal-funded interventions were less resilient as a result of government leadership changes (“USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report” 2020, 34). Even if USAID were to have implemented a perfect project that achieves all its desired goals and secondary effects, instability after project close-out undermines the long-term success of the project as it is unable to continue having these positive impacts. This can greatly lessen or even put a stop to any positive future development and impacts. Foreign government-funded development projects that are not designed by or in significant collaboration with recipient countries also have the added risk of having weak political interest, which is essential to the continuation of any intervention (Ernst et al. 2020). While the *CVPP* was implemented and developed in collaboration with local governments and organizations, the report recognizes that continued political will is needed across a variety of sectors in order for the interventions and their desired goals to be successful in the future (“USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final Report” 2020).

CVPP and the government of El Salvador

As mentioned above, the project took significant steps to work closely with the central, municipal, and local governments “to review, socialize, and implement public policies and national strategies” (“USAID: El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Project (CVPP) Final

Report” 2020, 38). However, this collaboration, in conjunction with El Salvador’s crime and violence prevention policies, resulted in negative effects and even contradicted the *CVPP*’s goals. There is a clear policy connection between the *CVPP* and *Plan El Salvador Seguro* (PESS), the government of El Salvador’s policy plan aimed at improving citizen safety and reduce crime and violence across the country. In official government documents, policies such as increasing youth unemployment, improving public spaces, and offering violence prevention and rehabilitation services are listed as PESS goals, mirroring that of the *CVPP* (“Plan El Salvador Seguro Resumen Ejecutivo” 2015). However, there is significant criticism of this plan and the government of El Salvador’s implementation of these policies. One emphasizes that PESS “chose 50 municipalities where 60 percent of the population is concentrated in order to tackle insecurity. However, these municipalities are not those that, since 2010, have had the highest homicide rates” (Arévalo n.d.). The Executive Director of El Salvador’s Foundation for the Study and Application of Laws also pointed out that in addition to human rights abuses attributed to policy, “we have not agreed with, for example, re-militarization actions and the use of tanks in San Salvador and we have raised [these concerns], and it has not been taken into account because the tanks are still there” (“FESPAD Evalúa Implementación de Plan El Salvador Seguro” 2017). However, even with these criticisms, there have been supposed successes, as the government of El Salvador and the U.S. Ambassador in El Salvador announced that PESS led to a 60 percent reduction in emigration to the U.S. (“Plan El Salvador Seguro Incide En Disminución de Migración a Estados Unidos” 2018). However, there was no information on how this figure was calculated or how the connection with PESS was established. Since both PESS and the *CVPP* clearly attempt to reduce crime rates, comparing these approaches provides more context regarding the success of USAID-funded violence prevention approaches versus others.

In recent years, notable decreases in homicide rates have been met with positive reactions, but have not been a result of either the *CVPP*'s approach to crime and violence reduction or similar prevention measures implemented by PESS, and instead has been attributed to gang truces (Mistler-Ferguson 2022). Since 2019, President Nayib Bukele's administration has negotiated secretly with members of MS-13 and Barrio 18 (two major gangs in El Salvador) by giving "privileges" for imprisoned gang leaders in exchange for low homicide rates around the country (Mistler-Ferguson 2022). While this approach initially did work, as seen through the resulting decline in homicides, "government betrayal" led to a rupture in this truce, not only causing a brief increase in homicides as a retaliation, but also generating concerns about the long-term security impact of this failure in negotiations (Mistler-Ferguson 2022). Not only is it clear that violence prevention policies featured in the *CVPP*'s activities have not been central to the celebrated decrease in homicide recently occurring in El Salvador, but the policies that did contribute to this decrease are markedly different from that of the *CVPP*. Gang truce negotiation techniques inherently go against U.S. government policy practices, and U.S. officials sanctioned top Salvadorean negotiators due to their communication with these gang members (Mistler-Ferguson 2022). A key takeaway of these events is that efficient approaches⁵ to violence reduction in El Salvador occur on a national and institutional level, and that a top-down approach involving major criminal actors is essential to spurring this coveted decrease in violence. However, since these approaches go against U.S. practices, they are not realistic options for USAID development projects, or even broader U.S. foreign policies. However, not only has the Salvadorean government emphasized that working with these criminal networks is key to

⁵ While President Bukele's approach to violence reduction has been efficient on a quantitative level, many have criticized his administration's methods. These criticisms will not be explored in this thesis and for the purposes of this project, I will define efficiency and success as the decrease in homicides.

improving El Salvador's security situation, a report published by the International Crisis Group explained that "tolerance for these grassroots [negotiation] efforts, despite existing legal restrictions on any contact with gangs, is essential to build the confidence that will be required for dialogue in the future" (International Crisis Group 2017). This variety of evidence demonstrates that USAID's approach to crime and violence reduction in El Salvador is incorrect, and any policies without negotiation may not be viable.

Community focus

The *CVPP* has a similar flaw as *Empleando Futuros* in that they both attempt to mitigate crime, violence, and youth unemployment push factors through an individualistic approach. In offering services to individual participants, the projects aim to eventually reach a large enough audience so as to decrease emigration to the U.S. The *CVPP* does manage to implement a community approach as seen through the public space rehabilitation efforts. However, these community-based efforts are not as effective as desired. Ingram and Curtis suggest that "policymakers should target violence prevention policies in regional fashion, not at isolated communities" (Ingram and Curtis 2014). This concern comes from the influence of violence in neighboring areas, which the authors note can have notable effects on violence in other cities. While the *CVPP* does consider violence prevention efforts on a larger municipal level, much of the activities take place at the community level and follow the logic that individual community strengthening will achieve a decrease in crime and violence.

Additionally, policies implemented by the government of El Salvador seem to undermine the *CVPP*'s approach, in particular President Bukele's state of exception. In March 2022, in response to a recent increase in homicides, Bukele's administration announced a state of exception that suspended a number of constitutional rights including the right to privacy, freedom of assembly, and certain due process protections ("El Salvador: Evidence of Serious

Abuse in State of Emergency” 2022). In the following months, thousands of suspected gang members were arrested as El Salvador implemented this iron-fisted approach in rounding up and imprisoning criminals “until the last gang member on the streets is brought to justice (Erazo 2022; “El Salvador: Widespread Abuses Under State of Emergency” 2022). However, not only has this approach violated Salvadoran’s human rights, as hundreds of indiscriminate arrests, cases of torture, and other abuses have occurred in the name of national security, but this policy has also added to further social stratification (Espinoza 2022). Ex-gang members in community re-insertion programs fear being arrested, despite having completed their sentences, disaffiliating from their old gangs, and participating in programs similar to that of the *CVPP* (Barrera and Peña 2022). Additionally, during periods of widespread arrests, police officers and soldiers targeted low-income neighbors in search of gang members, going against the goals of wider community cohesion espoused by the *CVPP* and its activities (“El Salvador: Widespread Abuses Under State of Emergency” 2022).

This context demonstrates how other institutions, such as the government of El Salvador, can have a significant impact on the outcomes of these development policies. The *CVPP*’s inclusion-centered goals design program activities around individual strengthening and community cohesion. However, when other policies (such as the state of exclusion) go against these goals and even undermine these approaches, then we can presume that activities put in place by development projects such as the *CVPP* will experience a decline in their success or even fail. As outside actors in the Northern Triangle, USAID-funded projects are helpless in making sure that external factors and the country’s political environment are suitable for program activities to flourish.

As seen from the dampened success of the *CVPP* and how it was impacted by the government of El Salvador's own approaches to the issue of crime and violence prevention, it is incredibly difficult to implement development projects with the goal of having widespread, long-term success that diminishes emigration to the U.S. In program documents and U.S. foreign policy rhetoric these projects are celebrated as being powerful solutions to various social issues in the Northern Triangle. However, these development programs don't seem to be the right approach. Firstly, various theoretical arguments related to violence prevention seem to go against the *CVPP*'s policy approaches, and empirical evidence involving homicide rates and alternative country responses to policies demonstrate that development projects (as currently structured) are not the appropriate method to rely on to decrease violence, increase unemployment, and ultimately decrease emigration.

Discussion

As covered through my analysis of these two USAID-funded projects in Honduras and El Salvador, theoretical flaws related to the creation of the projects and empirical evidence demonstrating their inability to fully succeed in addressing U.S. government immigration goals lead me to conclude that development projects in the Northern Triangle are not effective policy approaches to mitigating migratory push factors in the region and ultimately decreasing emigration to the U.S. While both *Empleando Futuros* and the *CVPP* each achieve their project's immediate goals (in increasing youth employment and skills for participants at risk of future criminal and violent involvement), the argument that these achievements will directly lead to a decrease in both participant and indirect beneficiary's propensity to migrate and later lead to a decrease in migratory flows from that country does not seem to hold up.

The U.S. government, desperate to find a solution to address this migratory crisis at their border, has relied too heavily on neoclassical theoretical understandings of migration and have placed immense responsibility on the success of overly simplistic USAID-funded development projects. Through my research of theoretical arguments and empirical findings related to migration from the Northern Triangle, it is clear that this is a complicated, messy situation which cannot be fixed entirely through these projects. Their small scope, individualistic focus, partially incorrect theoretical approach, and possibility of being undermined by external forces, including changes in government goals, policies, and funding, present significant limitations to these project's ability to fully control and determine migratory motivations and flows in the region. While these projects are not failures in that they have resulted in increased employment opportunities, skills, education, and community development in Honduras and El Salvador, they should not be relied upon by the U.S. government to mitigate migratory motivations. These projects remain successful within their individual scopes and establish important policies and

institutions that lead to positive development outcomes in Honduras and El Salvador, demonstrating that their inability to meet U.S. immigration objectives does not mean that they should be dismantled and discouraged. However, their successes seem to lie most notably in the development sphere and the U.S. government should not rely so heavily on the projects as immigration policy arms. Additionally, scholars have criticized that U.S. foreign assistance has not had “a clearly defined end-state vision for what the United States hoped to achieve through assistance to the Northern Triangle [which] sometimes hampered US assistance efforts by confusing publics about the purpose of US assistance and limiting the ability of implementing agencies to establish clear metrics and timelines” (Ernst et al. 2020, 11). This points to there being a flaw in how migration-related foreign aid is being created, in that there is an immense pressure to simply reduce migratory motivations and flows, but there is not enough focus on what success may look like through a development standpoint. This failure seems present in my analysis of *Empleando Futuros* and the *CVPP*, as I noted that both projects did not fully consider long-term implications.

If the U.S. government wants to improve the migration-related outcomes of these projects, existing research suggests that a more appropriate approach would be to create immigration policies that are grounded in contemporary regional research and fully integrate past lessons learned. Another issue is that currently, “neither the literature on U.S. immigration policy nor that on U.S.- Latin American relations emphasizes a Latin American role in migration policymaking” (Rosenblum 1). Emphasizing Latin American perspectives on development and migration is key to future policies that will embed themselves into local realities and government approaches, which will do much to improve their outcomes. This will also ensure that local goals are emphasized throughout policy creation and implementation rather than U.S.- centered goals

that may not be aligned with the situation on the ground. Given that “immigration policies are shaped by domestic concerns and rarely take into consideration the well-being of foreign countries” it is important to change this narrative, especially because the U.S. government views the reality of living in the Northern Triangle as a major factor in migratory flows (Terrazas 2011, 11). Research has demonstrated that trans-national and increasingly localized approaches are to be favored, which means there should be major changes in current U.S. immigration and foreign policy (Newland 2011). This is because “local officials’ understanding of the labor markets and social context of particular places, as well as their interests in developing local-to-local partnerships, are a potential resource for national policymakers looking for innovative ways to link migration and development” (Newland 2011). Regardless, development projects should not be the U.S. government’s sole approach to mitigating the causes of migration, instead they should be intertwined with other successful immigration and foreign policies. Additionally, as emphasized in my literature review, development projects in general may not be suited to achieve a decrease in migration flows, but “the rhetoric inspiring ODA [official developmental assistance] as an emigration prevention strategy is based on the framing of immigration as a problem in need of a solution, ultimately ignoring positive aspects brought about by immigration” (De Haas 2007; Holm 2022, 45). Instead, the U.S. government should accept that migration is a naturally occurring phenomenon and “both emigration and immigration are part of every country’s participation in the global economy” (Newland 2011, 1; Terrazas 2011). Instead of allocating billions in funding for projects and policies with the goal of reducing the number of people migrating to the U.S., policymakers should instead focus on implementing policies that will capture the positive and reduce negative effects of migration. These opportunities include the possibility that “ODA should ultimately be dedicated to the development of international

migratory processes, working to reduce danger faced by migrants and maximize benefits enjoyed by both countries of origin and destination countries” (Holm 2022, 47).

Additionally, many scholars have argued in favor of more open immigration policies to better capture the positive effects of migration and also as a solution to the present migration crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. One such approach emphasizes the importance of circular migration, which is characterized by movement across home and foreign countries to capture economic and labor benefits abroad, but maintain a connection to one’s home country (Zimmermann 2014). Policymakers may be hesitant to drop the restrictionist policies that have become hallmarks of U.S. immigration policy, however, “free labor mobility is more likely to generate benefits for all sides” (Zimmermann 2014, 1). The reasoning behind this argument is that “policies that restrict worker mobility often backfire, with workers resorting to illegal means of entering the country, bringing their family with them, and no longer returning home” (Zimmermann 2014, 1). These negative effects have occurred in the U.S., as seen from the rise in unauthorized and more permanent Mexican migration in the country following years of legal, temporary migration once the Bracero program, which encouraged free labor mobility, ended (Zimmermann 2014, 5–6). This approach, supported by an expansion of temporary H-2 worker visas, could be a more realistic solution to reducing unauthorized immigration to the U.S. instead of increased restrictions and border security (“Expanding the Reach of Temporary Work Visas in Central America Could Help Reduce Unauthorized Migration to the United States” 2021). According to analysis done by the Migration Policy Institute, an increase in H-2 visas led to a decline in unauthorized migration from Mexico since 2010 (“Expanding the Reach of Temporary Work Visas in Central America Could Help Reduce Unauthorized Migration to the United States” 2021). Given that youth unemployment and a lack of economic opportunities in the

Northern Triangle are major push factors motivating migration to the U.S., one can see how policies that address these very factors would be more successful than others.

Conclusion

As explored in this thesis, the USAID-funded *Empleando Futuros* and *Crime and Violence Prevention* projects in Honduras and El Salvador, while successful in immediate project objectives of providing job training to at-risk youth and improving crime prevention capabilities, did not manage to trigger large-scale decreases in emigration to the U.S. A heavy emphasis on neoclassical theoretical approaches to migration policy instead of alternate theories stemming from more present empirical research has caused the U.S. government to create inefficient policies. My analysis of the *Empleando Futuros* project in Honduras demonstrated how an employment status-based approach does not have as strong of an impact on someone's propensity to migrate and that this overly simplistic approach fails to capture other migratory motivations. Looking at the *CVPP* pointed to the inefficiency in individual and small community-based approaches when attempting to decrease crime and violence in El Salvador. The project also ignored how changing local government priorities and crime related policies could influence the *CVPP*'s programmatic approach, ultimately diminishing its impact in the target region.

Going forward, are USAID-funded development projects the solution to the current migration crisis? Likely not. However, there are lessons to be learned from these programs and other failed policies in order to both fill the current gap in migration-related development literature and improve the manner in which the U.S. government designs their policies. A multi-faceted approach that brings together development programs, international, and local policy making between Washington and the countries of origin seems to be a more promising manner of conducting immigration reform. The U.S. government must also realize that placing migration prevention responsibilities on development programs is an unrealistic policy method and should

instead aim to capture the positive benefits awarded by migration, since these flows have and will continue to exist.

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