



Agricultural Missions, Inc.



Children & Migration: Why are they fleeing? And... What is the right and just thing to do?

AMI staff analysis of the context and root causes of this crisis, with annotated links and articles below.

Agricultural Missions, Inc (AMI) understands the strong link between economic marginalization/exploitation and the forced displacement of peoples. We understand this because our partners are people of the land, and only extreme pressures and injustice can drive people from their home lands and communities, particularly for peoples who depend directly on the land for their lives. The phenomenon of tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors having been detained recently by U.S. Immigration while migrating across the Mexico-US border from three Central American countries, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, points far more to a “push” than a “pull”: it points to a time of dislocation, rising violence and despair, and a collective sense of desperation in the home communities. Of 400 unaccompanied minors, most of whom are 14 to 18 years old, who were interviewed while migrating through Mexico by a journalist, only 1 of them had a notion before leaving that they could game the system and gain US residency by doing so. According to the study, the vast majority of those interviewed migrated due to either economic desperation, to reunite with a missing parent who had migrated previously, and/or because of unacceptable levels of fear of violence in their home communities.

No parent or child in their right mind would risk such a migration, unless the situation were desperate indeed. The portrayal of these children as a fearsome threat to the U.S. is illogical on its

face, and is only plausible given the hateful rhetoric that has been spewing against immigrants for decades now (in this recent xenophobic wave stirred up by unscrupulous right wing pundits and politicians, with strong nativist and racist stances.) Vigilante groups now sending armed volunteers to the border to “protect private property” from this “invasion” is another example of hate-mongering and fear blocking out common sense.

It is no surprise to us at Ag Missions that Honduras is the country from which the most unaccompanied minors originate, and our close partners OFRANEH (The National Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras), an indigenous group called the Garifuna, reported to us at our last Study Session of the absence of these youth after they departed for the U.S. OFRANEH is in the midst of dangerous and dynamic land recovery and defense struggles, succeeding despite the fact that in 2009 Honduras’ legitimate government was overthrown through a coup d’etat. Elections that have taken place since then either took place under a form of martial law and were boycotted by the vast majority of Honduras, or they were stolen outright as occurred in the most recent one. The U.S. has turned a blind eye to the illegitimate provenance and repressive means by which the Post Coup regimes have held onto power. The country is now “open for business” which in reality means “open for a clearance sale” (everything must go!). To enforce such an economic policy that enriches a tiny percentage of extremely wealthy families at the expense of the 99.9%, the police and military have

been shackled to serve the 0.01% and the courts have been corrupted as well. The influence of Narco Trafficking among the wealthiest Hondurans and in the ranks of a police force that has been thoroughly infiltrated and corrupt, is another factor that weighs heavily on Honduras. The murder rate has gone up to a level that makes Honduras the most murderous country in the world, with 90 some deaths per year for every 100,000 persons. Corruption and impunity reign in Honduras. The Honduran government, nevertheless, has had strong backing, including support for Honduras' police and military forces, by its largest patron, the U.S. government.

The leaders of OFRANEH understand full well that the root causes of this phenomenon lie in the lack of opportunity for the youth in their communities. Honduras, along with Guatemala and El Salvador, are extremely impoverished countries, with extremely high unemployment, particularly for youth. This is all the more true in small towns and rural areas, where the land is monopolized by Big Agribusiness, in the form of Palm Oil Monocultures, and other monocrops such as bananas and pineapples, etc... Landlessness among Honduran family farmers is so great that today there are dozens and dozens of farmer groups struggling to recover lands lost due to corruption, brute force, or desperation on the part of indebted small-scale farmer families. Living under virtual siege in their encampments or rustic houses, the youth of these communities in struggle face a future of extreme impoverishment and constant threat of repression. So many leave their communities for nearby cities. But now with the gangs and transnational organized crime syndicates penetrating low income neighborhoods in many of Honduras' cities, the violence has become widespread and commonplace and the police are so corrupt that they no longer protect the people, but are seen as another fearsome armed group in tactical collusion with organized crime. Finally, the canary in the mines are gasping for air, and in desperation, light out for the U.S., paying big money or indebting themselves to professional smugglers, sometimes in

pursuit of a parent or other relative who had migrated previously.

Ag Missions, and our Honduran and Salvadoran partners all agree that these children should be treated as refugees, or in the worst case scenario, as victims of trafficking. The U.S. government needs to apply the safeguards available, particularly for children, under the Anti Trafficking Reauthorization Act of 2008 as well as the Refugee Act of 1980. This means that ICE needs to turn over the children to the Department of Health and Human Services within 72 hours of their detention, and that the minor children all be treated as potential asylum seekers. To do otherwise as the Obama administration proposes, to expedite their deportation, would be to risk sending children back to violent neighborhoods where, evidently, the threat to life and limb of the youth had become so strong, that flight had seemed like the only way out. In any case, all means should be employed to make sure this does not happen. The idea of "solving" this problem by sending more aid to Honduras for the "security forces" is absurd on its face, since such aid has been used to buy bullets that have been used against the people on hundreds of occasions, under the pretext of the "war on drugs".

What the U.S. needs to do is to take a new look at what is in our national interest in the long term and allow for democracy to be restored to Honduras, and to Guatemala, now ruled by a former military general implicated in crimes against humanity. The mass arrival of the children at our border is a symptom of a great injustice perpetuated and financed by the U.S. in our misguided corporate-led foreign policy, not a cause for fear or alarm. These children are truly a warning sign to us, they are the canaries in the mine, warning us that we will all be harmed by such short sighted foreign policy that favors the already wealthy and powerful, at the expense of everyone else. Agricultural Missions calls on people of faith, people of the land, justice-minded people, to speak truth to power, and to call on our Congress and our Executive Branch, to respect the safeguards written into our laws under

the Anti Trafficking Reauthorization Act of 2008 as well as the Refugee Act of 1980. In addition, we call on the people of the U.S. and our government to look to transforming the root causes of this crisis, to stand on the side of the 99%, to begin to undo the damage done by interventionist US policy toward Central America from 1954 in Guatemala onward, when the C.I.A. helped overthrow a democratically elected Arbenz government attempting to represent the majority and distribute land to those who would feed Guatemala, leading to decades of bloody civil war against the indigenous and peasant communities there. We call on the U.S. to cease supporting the illegitimate post-coup government in Honduras and to cease bolstering that regime by cutting our military cooperation and support. We demand the repeal of the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade agreement that has so undermined the agricultural and small-business economies of the region, in favor of corporate trade, Big Ag and Exploitative Agro-Fuel industries.

Stay tuned for more specific actions that our partners and allies and that we will be recommending people take! For now, please contact your Congresspersons to insist that mass deportation would be a crime and that these children should be treated as asylum seekers and refugees until proven otherwise, and released to their relatives or community support organizations.

Agricultural Missions is among 30 organizations that comprise the Honduras Solidarity Network (HSN) which issued this statement:

Honduras Solidarity Groups Demand Justice for Child Refugees from Central America

The Honduras Solidarity Network, a network of over 30 US solidarity organizations, and Department 19, a network of Hondurans living in the US and Canada, members of the FNRP/LIBRE Party, are appalled and saddened by the refugee crisis on the US border. Children fleeing military and police, drug cartel, corporate violence and extreme poverty in Central America, to reunite with family members in the United States, cannot and must not be viewed through a nativist lens as illegal aliens, but rather as the refugees that they are.

We are ashamed that the response of our political class and the Obama administration to this crisis is to call for yet more militarization of the border and quicker deportation processes with a complete lack of acknowledgement of the responsibility of the US government for creating this crisis over both the long and short term.

The problem of the child refugees is in part blowback from US policy in the 1980s when our government trained and funded Salvadoran and Guatemalan military and police to prevent popular revolutions, and more recently when the US supported the coup against President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras. US foreign policy, anchored in the militarized Drug War and pursued by both the Democratic and Republican administrations, has only empowered brutal and corrupt armies and police forces, particularly in Honduras and Guatemala.

US so-called free trade and structural adjustment policies have required the countries of Central America and Mexico to cut social services and credit to small farmers while wiping out local producers with a flood of low-cost, US taxpayer-subsidized products from US agribusiness. These policies have increased poverty and desperation in Central America and Mexico and created a fertile recruiting ground for drug cartels and criminal gangs.

The Obama administration bears particular responsibility for the influx of refugees from Honduras. The US turned a blind eye to the military coup of June 28, 2009 which overthrew the democratically elected government. After a brief suspension of aid, the Obama administration devoted its full diplomatic weight to return Honduras, under its coup-spawned government, to the OAS and UN despite opposition from most countries in Latin America. US Ambassador Lisa Kubiske was quick to recognize current defacto President Juan Orlando Hernandez' election last November while credible complaints of

massive fraud were still coming in. The Obama Administration has spent millions of dollars since the coup to equip and train Honduras' murderous and corrupt military and police with the result that massacres of small farmers and political assassinations of reporters, Libre Party activists, human rights defenders, indigenous, labor, women, campesinos and LGBTI activists have skyrocketed.

We are especially saddened and incensed that President Obama's \$3.7 billion request to Congress for emergency funds to deal with the refugee crisis contains almost \$2 billion for more incarceration and removal of minors and refugees, without regard to their due process rights or the root causes of their desperate flight from their home countries. Indeed, in order to speed their deportation, he has called for suspending a 2008 law which requires minors to be transferred out of detention to centers where they can locate family members to care for them.

We call on the Obama administration and all elected officials to stop playing politics with the lives of children, and we demand:

1. That the Obama administration abide by international treaties and US laws concerning the treatment and due process rights of refugees claiming asylum and of minor children; and
2. Stop all deportations until a comprehensive immigration reform bill, based on human rights and family reunification, not militarization of the border, is passed by Congress, and

Thoroughly revise our trade and economic, drug and military policies so that they respect the right of self-determination of the peoples of Central America and Mexico to create alternatives to displacement and migration with living wage jobs, prosperous communities and accountable and democratic governments.

Ag Missions Partner OFRANEH and its New York based Coalition has issued this statement:

COALITION OF ORGANIZATIONS RESPOND TO THE EMERGENCY IMMIGRATION CRISIS OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES STATEMENT

The Organizations and individuals whose signatures appear below demand urgent humanitarian actions with respect to the ICE detention of tens of thousands of unaccompanied children who have migrated mainly from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and have crossed the US-Mexico border.

These children and their families are a reflection of the failure for a comprehensive, humane reform of immigration law by the United States government and the worsening situation of insecurity and poverty that exists in our home countries, especially Honduras, such that they have not found another way to resolve the problem other than fleeing to a place that can serve as a refuge for their lives.

The growing phenomenon of large numbers of unaccompanied children who migrate north of Central America did not occur at once or by chance. In 2011 and 2012 there was an increase in the migration of unaccompanied minors. The current migration represents a "perfect storm" of factors that are pushing young people from the communities of Central America to take the flyway of unaccompanied children. Some of these factors are:

1. Increasing economic hardship and marginalization throughout Central America due to structural changes in trade and production (called "free" trade represented by DR CAFTA) have increased impoverishment and marginalization of people in many sectors, particularly those dependent on agriculture and land for their livelihood, many have been forced to migrate to cities in recent years.
2. The unresolved crisis of U.S. drug demand has many communities in Central America in the crosshairs of the turf wars of organized crime, and this has created great insecurity and outbreaks of gangs and the violence of the drug cartels in urban and rural communities in Central America.

3. The crisis of democracy in Honduras and Guatemala has stripped away most of the protections and security for marginalized communities, in favor of a "business at any cost" politics and corruption at all levels of Honduras and Guatemalan society and to a lesser degree in El Salvador.
4. Struggles for land and unresolved violence or threats of violence of a few and their "security forces" or paramilitaries against many often indigenous people (prevalent in many communities in Honduras and Guatemala); these conflicts are leaving many people, including many young people coming of age without hope or a viable livelihood. An important additional factor is the dissemination of information circulating informally and by human trafficking groups which refer to the ability to access a place in the society of the United States through shortcuts that can be used with existing laws or expected changes in the laws in the near future. These rumors have created a false understanding among the large number of unaccompanied minors and may be creating confusion with these new expectations of life for children and their families. However, the main driver of this immigration crisis is violence and insecurity and impoverishment.

Therefore, given this context, we make an Urgent Call to The White House and to the Department of Homeland Security to address the immediate humanitarian crisis to provisionally release the detained youth, and create a commission to study the range of reasons why migration of this type arose and is growing.

WE DEMAND

1. That the National Security Department provide civil society with the names and birthplaces of children deprived of liberty, for families and community organizations to have access to that information in order to provide support and relief to these young people, and put them back in touch with their parents or relatives living in the U.S. and in their countries of origin.

Many of the organizations that have signed this petition will work to provide information and clarity to the communities of origin of these young people and children, to inform communities about the reality of the difficulties and risks associated with this type of migration, to work in locating children who may still be on the way, and see that detained children are encouraged to contact their families, whether in the U.S. or Central America as soon as possible. But all those efforts may not bear fruit if the White House and the Department of Homeland Security do not work together with community organizations representing these sectors.

2. That the President of the United States find solutions for the short, medium and long term.
3. A special permit be provided for a commission made up of member organizations of this coalition to visit different points of the border points and visit the shelters where these immigrants retained are to confirm in which conditions they are and provide them with support.
4. That the Government of the United States organize an investigation that will reveal the places where most people are migrating from and to generate data to further discussions involving the search for urgent immigration, drug-enforcement and economic reforms.
5. In the case of Honduras, we strongly need for the US to stop sending funds to the government of this country, funds designated to "strengthen the police and army," and instead to use these funds to support the efforts of community organizations for the implementation of sustainable development projects that promote self-employment and improve living conditions in the population.
6. For children whose relatives have not yet been identified in this country, and in the case of children of the Garifuna community and in the interest of cultural preservation, we request the

creation of foster homes in the city of New York, in areas where there is a greater Garifuna population, and that these shelters can be handled by the members of this coalition as the emergency persists.

7. We need an urgent political solution: issue asylum for migrant children and their families.
8. Have each child under age 17 have the company of a lawyer at their hearings with the immigration judge.
9. To know about the work of lawyers who have been hired to handle cases concerning the immigration emergency and recommend actions according to the particularities of each individual.
10. That the Conventions and treaties on behalf of the indigenous and black peoples be respected and applied as well as the International Declaration of Human Rights when processing the cases of migrants.
11. An urgent and frontal fight against organized crime and drug trafficking in coordination with Honduran Civil Society, accompanied by replacement of corrupt police as first steps towards the eradication of poverty.

We welcome and we echo the words of the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama reading "The year 2014 is the year of change":

**The suffering and the limbo of the tens of thousands of children
in ICE detention centers, must end now!**

Below are articles and links to articles on the child migration, for a fuller understanding of the context of this crisis.

- Insightful interviews with child and youth migrants en route in Mexico:
<http://cronkitenewsonline.com/2014/07/central-american-minors-pushed-north-by-poverty-violence-and-hopes-for-refuge/>
- *Excellent analysis of the realities of Guatemalan governance and economic exploitation and suffering, and its violent history perpetuated today in organized crime, gangs, and state repression:*
<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118675/child-migrants-guatemala-are-fleeing-more-just-gang-violence>
- *First hand testimony and analysis by Kentuckian with decades of experience with Guatemala and Guatemalan children:*
<http://www.kentucky.com/2014/07/15/3336848/ky-voices-kerby-neill-says-every.html?sp=/99/349/>
- *Debunking the myths about immigration: Ronald Reagan, Central America and everything Ted Cruz doesn't understand - If we want to understand the immigration crisis, we need to revisit Reagan and the violence we brought the region, by A.W. Gaffney:*
http://www.salon.com/2014/08/02/debunking_the_myths_about_immigration_ronald_reagan_central_america_and_everything_ted_cruz_doesnt_understand/
- Excellent article on root causes:
<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/international-archives-60/4965-we-reap-what-we-sow-the-link-between-child-migrants-and-us-policy>

Analysis by Greg McCain of Honduras Solidarity Network

There seems to be a general consensus that we should be addressing not only the symptoms, but also the “root causes” of rising emigration from Central America. But what are they? On the right, the influx of children from the region is said to be the predictable result of our allegedly lenient immigration policy; mass deportation, therefore, is supposedly the obvious solution. “[I]mmediately deport these families, these children,” demands Rep. Raúl Labrador, R-Idaho, in “plane loads,” specifies Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. Closer to the center, the causes of immigration from the region are typically said to be rising gang violence, the drug trade and the drug war and – to a lesser extent – poverty.

With the exception of our immigration policy, it’s obvious these factors are playing a major role in encouraging emigration from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. But if we are to speak of true “root causes,” we have to look deeper still: first, to the gross inequality from which these social maladies arise, and second, to the political forces that have maintained and enforced this economic status quo, decade after decade. The implications of Thomas Piketty’s “Capital” for the developed world have been much discussed, but the meaning of inequality for poor countries is no less: The crisis of Central American immigration, I would argue, is a crisis of inequality, tragically manifested.

Clearly, inequality in Central America has been, to some degree, the brutal legacy of colonialism. Yet even today, the countries of Central America are among the most unequal not only in the hemisphere, but also on the globe: Honduras is the eighth most unequal country worldwide, and Guatemala isn’t far behind. Income distribution aside, Central American nations are also the most impoverished in Latin America. Using a multidimensional index, the U.N. estimates that 79.9% of children in Guatemala, 78.9% in El Salvador and 63.1% in Honduras live in poverty (compared to 31.8% in Venezuela and 15.7% in Chile). In Honduras, rates of malnutrition reach 48.5% in rural areas, while almost half of Guatemalan children are moderately or severely stunted in growth. Superimposed on this poverty has been a devastating wave of gang violence. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have some of the highest homicide rates in the world.

But why is the region so underdeveloped, why is poverty so entrenched, and why has the colonial legacy of inequality proven so resistant to social and political change? Though the situation is admittedly complex, the dismal state of affairs in Central America is in no small part the result of the failure of social democratic and left-of-center governments to maintain power and enact socioeconomic change; this failure, in turn, is sadly (in part) the consequence of the ironic “success” of U.S. foreign policy.

Consider the case of Guatemala. As it did elsewhere, the legacy of the colonial and postcolonial era meant massive inequalities in land ownership in Guatemala, with large numbers of dispossessed peasants condemned to lives of severe poverty. This status quo was maintained in the 1930s and ’40s by the U.S.-supported dictator Jorge Ubico, but it was challenged following his overthrow in 1944, particularly after the election of Jacobo Árbenz in 1951. “All the riches of Guatemala,” Árbenz announced at his inauguration, “are not as important as the life, the freedom, the dignity, the health and the happiness of the most humble of its people.” And he delivered: In seeking to take Guatemala out of feudalism, Árbenz redistributed lands of the United Fruit Company (with full compensation) to landless peasants.

Perhaps unsurprisingly – in the context of the reductionist zero-sum politics of the Cold War – Árbenz was soon deemed a communist threat; however strong his democratic credentials and however nonexistent Soviet involvement might be, his days were numbered.

In Operation PBSUCCESS, the CIA achieved the overthrow of Árbenz by destabilizing the Guatemalan economy, engaging in various innovative forms of psychological warfare and ultimately orchestrating an invasion of the country from Honduras in 1954. Following his overthrow, a military dictatorship was installed, and variably supported, for decades.

But this status quo could only be maintained with violence and authoritarianism; insurgency would follow, while inequality and social deprivation would remain largely untouched. The logic of support for “anticommunist” dictatorship in Guatemala reached a bloody apex during the Reagan administration, when the U.S.-supported military regime went on an unprecedented killing spree. During the reign of General Rios Montt (called by Reagan “a man of great personal integrity,” though recently tried in Guatemala on charges of genocide), the military embarked on a “scorched earth” counterinsurgency operation. Some 100,000 Mayan peasants were murdered by the army between 1981 and 1983 alone, through unspeakable acts of brutality, torture and sexual violence. An international Truth Commission would later appropriately call this genocide.

The dynamics in El Salvador during this period were to some extent similar: a feudal distribution of land, grinding poverty, the inevitable guerilla resistance, an unspeakably brutal military regime, consistent U.S. support under the mantra of anti-communism, and a blind eye turned toward death squads. The infamous murder of hundreds of men, women and children by the American-trained Atlacatl Battalion in the village of El Mozote was but one massacre in a larger massacre. The tragedy was that none of this was inevitable. “The Reagan administration,” as the historian Walter LaFeber put it in his classic history of Central America decades ago, “had the alternative of negotiated settlements, international supervisions, and multilaterally shared responsibilities. It chose the unilateral escalation of the CIA-military effort to win supposed final victories.” Yet what did we win? If anything, we only “made much of Central America even more dependent on the United States,” as LaFeber presciently put it.

Honduras, meanwhile, served dutifully during these years as the archetypal “Banana Republic,” a regional U.S. battle station labeled by one expert “the USS Honduras” for its supporting role in such covert and overt military adventures. Yet lest the above events seem like ancient history, the case of Honduras suggests that much has stayed the same. In 2009, the left-wing-elected government of President “Mel” Zelaya was overthrown in a military coup – accompanied by the usual repression and human rights abuses – that was again countenanced by the United States. “Obama,” wrote Tim Padgett at Time magazine, “seems to have ceded Latin America strategy to right-wing Cold Warriors,” namely in Honduras.

One’s opinion of Zelaya, or his administration, is largely beside the point; the 2009 coup has been a disaster for Honduras. According to a report from the Washington-based Center for Economic and Policy Research, since the coup the economy has plunged, poverty has increased, social spending on health care and education has been slashed, economic inequality has worsened, and 100% of all real income gains have accrued to the wealthiest 10 percent of Hondurans. When I was in Honduras as a medical student in 2008, poverty was severe and crime was much discussed, but it is clear that things have worsened enormously: Honduras is now the murder capital of the world. Ironically, when Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Tex., recently called the influx of Central American immigrants “a crisis of the President’s own making,” he was perhaps unintentionally half correct.

But as the case of Honduras demonstrates, it’s not only about counterinsurgencies and coups – it’s about the economic policies that follow. The orthodox “neoliberal” economic policies of the so-called “Washington Consensus” – centered around privatization, trade and financial liberalization, and diminished social spending – exacerbated inequality throughout Latin America for decades. Things, however, actually began to improve in many parts of Latin America a decade or so ago: “The region moved left politically circa 2000,” Paul Krugman noted a few years back, “partially turning its back on the Washington Consensus — and there has been a dramatic reversal in inequality trends.” However, though inequality began to fall in much of South America – predominantly in nations with social-democratic or left governments – progress in Central America was “minimal” for much of the decade, according to a 2012 paper by the economist Giovanni Andrea Cornia. In Honduras and Guatemala, according to Cornia’s figures, the bottom 50% actually experienced a decrease in its income share during this period. Though the political situation varied from country to country – for instance, the left has won elections in both Nicaragua (which has much less of a problem with crime and emigration) and,

more recently, El Salvador – the 2000s were overall a lost decade for much of Central America. Admittedly, of course, it would be reductionist to explain the entire upsurge in Central American violence – or of child migration – on our foreign policy and neoliberal economic orthodoxy and its sociopolitical consequences. As others have emphasized, the impact of the drug war is no doubt critical, and gang violence can clearly take on a deranged logic of its own. But to divorce Central America – and this current crisis – from economics and history would be absurd. Countries like Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have needed a New Deal since they escaped colonialism; instead, they were kept under the jackboot of murderous regimes, far too often with U.S. support, for much of the twentieth century. Retrograde neoliberal economic policies subsequently propagated the legacy of inequality into the twenty-first century.

The border children, for reasons of human decency, should be treated as refugees. But we should know that they are also – in no small way – escaping our own failed foreign policy and economic ideology: They are the refugees of inequality.

Greg McCain

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