

# Why There is Hope for the Future of Honduras

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Much of what you read nowadays about Honduras feeds the perception of a country plagued by violence, corruption, poverty, impunity, and human rights abuses. Honduras is indeed confronting very serious challenges in security, fiscal management, governance, job creation, and justice sector reform. However, this is only one side of the coin and masks a lesser-known reality that provides reason for optimism. Despite the considerable challenges Honduras faces, the US government has dedicated partners both in the Honduran government and in other sectors of society who have contributed to successful, sustainable initiatives, including the Central America Regional Security Initiative, that make a difference in the quality of Honduran citizens' lives and advance mutual interests. There is indeed hope for the future of Honduras.

## Recipe for Success

The United States focuses on three priorities when identifying projects with a good chance of success and sustainability in Honduras:

- ◆ Identifying areas of mutual interest: We concentrate our efforts and resources on issues and solutions that are priorities for our Honduran partners. Buy-in from our partners is essential to success, and the best way to gain it is to ensure that the focus of our proposals meshes with the goals that our local partners hope to achieve.
- ◆ Leveraging existing capacity: In my experience, the demonstrated capacity of our local partners in Honduras (government ministries, municipalities, civil society organizations, etc.) is a make-or-break factor in determining the prospect of success of any initiative. By identifying partners with motivated, competent leadership or a proven track record of accomplishments, we increase the chances of contributing to success and sustainability.
- ◆ Investing where the Hondurans do: We look at where our Honduran partners have put their own money and time. We have found that when Hondurans are willing to expend their own resources, including national or local funds, staff, or the time and attention of their leadership, projects have a greater chance of success.

The following four examples detail US-Honduran cooperation where we applied these criteria to produce positive, sustainable results.

## Reducing Extreme Poverty

For decades, Honduras has been the second or third poorest country in the Hemisphere. Over 66 percent of Hondurans live below the poverty line. Of that group, 46

percent live in conditions of extreme poverty, subsisting on less than \$1.25 per person per day in 2005 dollar terms. Almost all Honduran poor live in rural areas, with limited or no access to basic services like clean water and transportation infrastructure.

Through Feed the Future (FTF), President Obama's food security initiative, the United States and its Honduran partners have sought to change this. FTF is helping poor, rural communities to lift themselves out of poverty by training subsistence farmers to grow higher value crops, enlisting private sector partners to connect farmers to distributors and markets, and helping reduce undernutrition and stunting. FTF is already helping nearly 200,000 people (in a country of 8.5 million) improve their incomes and family nutrition. According to the farmers, this program has reduced pressures of migration, including undocumented immigration to the United States, because new income from cash-crop farming means farmers can now support their families without leaving home. Families also have healthier children who will grow up to be more productive members of society.

We are expanding FTF. The United States and Honduran governments recently collaborated to design Honduras' proposal to the multilateral Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP). This winning proposal earned Honduras \$30 million for implementation of agricultural and environmental development under a Dry Corridor Alliance (*Alianza para el Corredor Seco*), which refers to the donors who support the initiative, and the dry corridor, referring to the environmentally stressed southwest region of Honduras. With an initial total estimated value of approximately \$130 million, the Alliance hopes to lift another 50,000 people out of extreme poverty, reduce stunting of children under age five by 20 percent, and improve more than 280 kilometers of rural roads, providing market access to thousands.

One reason FTF works is due to the selection of participants. Only those who consistently apply what they have been taught can continue in the program. As a result, Hondurans and donors are making real reductions in extreme poverty.

### Keeping Youth Out of Crime

Crime and insecurity challenges cannot be solved by law enforcement or government alone. We implement a whole-of-government, whole-of-community approach to crime and gang prevention that focuses not just on law enforcement, but also on education, health, community policing, and governance issues.

US-supported programs to help young people finish school and gain skills needed for the job market have reached more than 40,000 youth in the poorest, most dangerous neighborhoods where jobs are scarce and gangs recruit daily. We strive for a layered approach that, when possible, combines multiple programs like English language courses, leadership training, and job skills—realizing that integrated programs offer by far the strongest ladders of opportunity. We partner with the private sector to ensure youth are prepared for industry-driven employment by providing relevant training directly linked to jobs. The 40 youth outreach centers the US government and local communities have established in Honduras' most gang-plagued neighborhoods are giving 17,000 children and

teens safe places—away from gangs—to play and learn, mentored by 900 community volunteers and tutors.

These outreach centers constitute a successful model now being replicated by other donors and NGOs. The Honduran government has invested directly into these initiatives, and is increasing its commitment. Having already provided \$1 million for small infrastructure projects in dangerous neighborhoods, in February 2014, President Juan Orlando Hernández announced an additional \$1 million grant from Honduras' Security Tax Fund to finance ten new outreach centers. He also committed to allocate 30 percent of future security tax receipts to crime prevention efforts. This is a significant commitment from a country facing spending constraints.

The United States government is also supporting small infrastructure improvements, such as street lighting, that enhance security and crime prevention in high-crime neighborhoods in conjunction with the Honduran government's Social Investment Fund (*Fondo Hondureño de Inversión Social or FHIS*). The beneficiary communities themselves oversee the construction of these projects and provide the labor for non-specialized construction tasks.

#### Using Criminals' Own Resources Against Them

The Office of Seized Asset Management (OABI in Spanish) seizes assets from criminals and uses them to support law enforcement and anti-poverty initiatives. OABI serves as the caretaker whenever a criminal's assets are seized in a judicial proceeding. It secures these assets and then sells or donates them once the Honduran courts declare them to be permanently forfeited. Until then, OABI is charged with protecting the economic value of the assets so they can be disposed of profitably when the legal process has run its course.

Unique among asset forfeiture agencies in Latin America, OABI is self-financed. It covers all of its modest operating expenses out of the revenue generated by the sale of forfeited assets. To ensure the asset disposal process is efficient and transparent, the Embassy partnered with OABI to develop a state-of-the-art monitoring system and auction website. Live camera feeds from OABI's secure warehouses are available on the site, so the items in inventory can be monitored and verified at any time. When goods are declared forfeited and put up for sale, the site facilitates an open and organized auction procedure patterned on on-line auction sites that maximizes the amount of revenue recovered.

OABI has a social mission beyond just liquidating the ill-gotten gains of drug traffickers and other criminal actors. An integral part of its mandate is to redeploy those assets to serve the common good. OABI provides financial and material support to drug prevention initiatives, rehabilitation facilities, and other social programs throughout the country. By doing so, OABI demonstrates to the Honduran people hope that the government is on their side fighting for their interests, one seized asset at a time.

OABI was instrumental in one of the most effective blows against organized crime in Honduras in decades. In September 2013, Honduran officials seized more than \$500

million in assets from individuals and businesses associated with the *Los Cachiros* drug trafficking cartel. Honduran authorities confiscated 61 pieces of property, 64 bank accounts, 29 vehicles, and multiple businesses including a cattle ranch, a palm oil plantation, a mining company, several hotels, and a zoo. OABI immediately assumed control of the assets and continues to manage them as the forfeiture case against *Los Cachiros* proceeds.

Committed public servants—with mentoring from US government experts—essentially rebuilt OABI from scratch three years ago after the organization that preceded it became discredited by corrupt management. OABI's new managers, together with young, determined asset forfeiture prosecutors and judges, are playing a crucial role in going after the assets of criminal organizations. This effort has a significant deterrent effect with drug trafficking organizations. Seizing their assets not only provides funding for worthwhile programs, but undermines the ability of these organizations to exist.

### Strengthening Civil Society

Historically, Honduran civil society organizations have had limited success influencing public opinion or government policy on a national scale. That has changed.

In the Summer of 2012, the United States began a fruitful partnership with a new Honduran-created coalition of nongovernmental organizations including religious, youth, and civil society groups. In short order, the Alliance for Peace and Justice (APJ) developed into a nationally recognized and respected voice on security reform and government accountability. The coalition regularly engages with the president of Honduras and his advisors, members of congress, and other policymakers, and it is shaping national grassroots awareness on security and justice reform issues.

APJ advocacy was instrumental in achieving first-ever public hearings by the Honduran congress with top law enforcement, prosecutorial, and judicial leadership to discuss accountability and security reform issues. It also successfully advocated for suitability tests, including polygraphs, for candidates for the office of the Attorney General, a first for such a high-ranking government official. During Honduras' 2013 presidential campaign, APJ hosted a presidential candidate forum on security. Held in two parts, the forum first brought in international security experts to address candidates' advisors on forming their security platforms, and then convoked the candidates themselves to share their security agendas with the electorate. The APJ also sponsored a series of voter awareness activities to encourage peaceful elections and engage voters on the candidates' security plans. APJ has also been active in mobilizing the citizenry to press for government reforms. In September 2013, it co-hosted a "National Day of Reflection and Remembrance" with the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Confederation of Churches. An estimated one million people participated in the event.

Honduran civil society is gaining strength and ongoing engagement promises even greater results for the future.

### Hope for the Future

The will and the capacity to affect positive change exist in Honduras. Capable leaders from all walks of life, dedicated organizations, and stalwart communities are working and sacrificing every day to improve the lives of all Hondurans.

Despite the many challenges that remain for the Honduran government and citizenry, there is a bright future ahead if Honduras can replicate and expand the pockets of success like those shown above, where Honduras, with support from the United States, has achieved noteworthy results.