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**NAVAL
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**U.S. POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR NORTHERN
TRIANGLE PROBLEMS**

by

Larry N. Ervin

September 2022

Co-Advisors:

Cristiana Matei
Carolyn C. Halladay

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U.S. POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR NORTHERN TRIANGLE PROBLEMS

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(HOMELAND SECURITY AND DEFENSE)**

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ABSTRACT

The Northern Triangle region of Central America has experienced instability for many years due to crime, violence, corruption, and a lack of economic opportunity for its citizens. This instability has driven irregular migration to the United States in record numbers for nearly a decade. This thesis presents a gap analysis and makes recommendations aimed at improving the overall effectiveness of U.S. initiatives to stabilize the Northern Triangle. The overall strategic focus, funding levels, consistency, and program evaluations are examined to determine how these initiatives have either promoted or hindered their success. Research indicates that the Mérida Initiative, the Central American Regional Security Initiative, and the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America have focused primarily on the symptoms as opposed to the root causes of migration. This thesis finds that the U.S. funding intended for the Northern Triangle must be consistent, and the programs involved must be properly monitored and evaluated to determine their effectiveness. These U.S. initiatives could be more successful with a shift in strategy combined with well-funded, coordinated, and evaluated programs.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
CARSI	Central American Regional Security Initiative
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CICIG	International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala
DARE	Drug Abuse Resistance Education
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOS	Department of State
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GREAT	Gangs Resistance Education and Training
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
ILEA	International Law Enforcement Academy
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
LAPOP	Latin America Public Opinion Project
LE	law enforcement
MACCIH	<i>Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras</i> (Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras)
NGO	non-governmental organization
NTEEA	Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act
SICA	<i>Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana</i> (Central American Integration System)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growing mass migration of people from the Northern Triangle countries—Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—to the United States is overwhelming U.S. border security and immigration systems. For example, the United States apprehended 86,705 Northern Triangle nationals at the southern border in 2012, but this number rose dramatically—to 237,860—in 2014.¹ When this total exceeded 511,000 in 2019, the sudden spike in migrants prompted the White House to label the situation a national emergency and humanitarian crisis.² Many sources identify poor economic conditions and violence as the main factors driving the Northern Triangle nations’ citizens to leave their countries.³ For example, the American Council on Immigration suggests that being a victim of violent crime usually precedes emigration from the Northern Triangle.⁴ The United States has instituted initiatives to help the Northern Triangle countries improve governance, economic prosperity, and security for some time.

These initiatives were intended to reduce irregular migration from Central America through improvements in governance, prosperity, and security, but after well over a decade of activity, the region has steadily increased overall in poverty, insecurity, corruption, and poor governance, leading to an all-time high of forced migration from the Northern Triangle.⁵ These three countries are currently some of the most violent in the world, and

¹ Peter J. Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. R44812 [updated July 24, 2019] (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44812/11>.

² Meyer, 1.

³ Amelia Cheatham and Diana Roy, “Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/background/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle>.

⁴ Mike LaSusa, “Crime, Violence Driving Migration from Central America: Reports,” InSight Crime, March 2, 2016, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/crime-and-violence-drive-migration-from-central-america-reports/>.

⁵ Peter J. Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview*, CRS Report No. IF10371 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 1–2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10371.pdf>.

this is driving a decrease in its citizens' standard of living, civil liberties, and trust in their government institutions.⁶

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis examines how U.S. initiatives for the Northern Triangle could be enhanced, expanded, or changed to help stem the flow of migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to the United States. The three initiatives enacted to mitigate the instability in Northern Triangle countries include the Mérida Initiative, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), and the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America (hereafter, Strategy for Engagement). The Bush administration enacted the 2008 Mérida Initiative with a predominant focus on crime, anti-narcotics, and security.⁷ In 2010, President Obama enacted CARSI also with a focus on the citizens' security, and with the surge of migration in 2014, he enacted the Strategy for Engagement, which focused more broadly on economic prosperity, security, and better governance.⁸ When President Trump took office, he continued with the ongoing Strategy for Engagement but also made U.S. border security and illegal immigration a priority. He also attempted to control illegal migration and improve border security by building a wall along the southwest border and threatening to cut financial aid to the Northern Triangle if the host countries did not control their own borders to prevent the migrant flow.⁹ In light of the all-time high irregular migration flow in 2019 from the Northern Triangle to the United States and the fact that these three initiatives have been in place for more than a decade, the United States should consider making changes to these initiatives to experience more positive results.

⁶ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*, 1–2.

⁷ Cheatham and Roy, “Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle.”

⁸ Jennifer Grover, *U.S. Assistance to Central America: Department of State Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security*, GAO-19-590 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2019), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-590>.

⁹ Janet Seiz and Eliza Willis, “Troubled Countries Can’t Keep People from Leaving,” *Atlantic*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/central-american-governments-cant-stop-migration/586726/>.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This thesis provides policy recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of the initiatives devised by the United States to help stabilize the Northern Triangle.¹⁰ In this connection, this thesis conducts a gap analysis of each existing U.S. initiative aimed at stabilizing the Northern Triangle: the Mérida Initiative, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement.¹¹ The primary source literature included studies, policy documents, reports, hearings, and expert testimony, which were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of these initiatives. Such secondary academic sources as peer-reviewed academic articles, research from experts, books, and media coverage, also figured in this process. This thesis proposes that an effective policy must result in a more stable Central American region, which in turn must result in fewer migrants from this region over time—hence, effectively combating the threats to U.S. homeland security posed by mass migration from the region.

C. FINDINGS

Northern Triangle crime and violence remain at unacceptable levels, with more than half the region’s residents living in poverty, unemployment rates for young adults at 33 percent, and “some of the highest murder rates in the world,” according to the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition.¹² U.S. efforts have also failed to mitigate narcotics trafficking effectively in the region, with 53 percent of all South American cocaine being trafficked through the Northern Triangle and into the United States in 2020.¹³ The failure to achieve results in irregular immigration, crime, violence, and narcotics trafficking suggests that the current initiative, the Strategy for Engagement, has not been successful at stabilizing the region and enabling security, governance, and prosperity. Data collection

¹⁰ Eugene Bardach and Eric M. Patashnik, *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2016).

¹¹ Tom Wright, “How to Perform a Gap Analysis: 5-Step Process,” *Cascade* (blog), June 23, 2022, <https://www.cascade.app/blog/gap-analysis>. A gap analysis involves determining the current performance of the policy, identifying the desired policy outcomes, and determining actions to achieve the desired result.

¹² U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, “U.S. Assistance to Central America Promotes Security, Economic Development, and Rule of Law” (Washington, DC: U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, April 2021), 1, <https://www.usglc.org/faq-violence-migration-and-u-s-assistance-to-central-america/>.

¹³ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*, 1.

and evaluation, however, have been a tremendous success for the initiative and will be for future initiatives by clearly highlighting what works and what does not.

The Strategy for Engagement did work—beginning in 2014 and culminating at a program high in 2016—until 2017, when the Trump administration pulled back and redirected funding to U.S. border security, narcotics trafficking, and immigration.¹⁴ Decreasing funds correlated with increasing destabilization in the Northern Triangle, which led to an increase in migrants at the U.S. border until 2019, eclipsing the previous 2014 border surge high.¹⁵ From Mérida and CARSÍ to the Strategy for Engagement, administrators have seen a flip in funding priorities—from two-thirds toward security and one-third toward prosperity and governance to two-thirds toward prosperity and governance and just one-third toward security.¹⁶ With the latter ratio, the Strategy for Engagement saw success until funding was pulled back and redirected toward the U.S. border.¹⁷ These trends make manifest the need to address the issues of border security at the source, in the Northern Triangle, and not just at the U.S. border.¹⁸ Additionally, they highlight the need for a long-term, bipartisan plan like the Strategy for Engagement when it was devised in 2014.¹⁹ Future initiatives should shift focus to the decentralized, grassroots level, addressing the need for prosperity and governance, with funding levels that are adequate and consistent to affect the drivers of forced migration. Although the most effort should be directed toward prosperity, security is needed, and it should be effectively coordinated among all agencies involved.

¹⁴ Mark P. Sullivan et al., *Latin America and the Caribbean: Issues in the 115th Congress*, CRS Report No. R45120 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 9, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45120/31>.

¹⁵ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 1.

¹⁶ Meyer, 13–14.

¹⁷ Peter J. Meyer et al., *Unaccompanied Children from Central America: Foreign Policy Considerations*, CRS Report No. R43702 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016), 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/R43702.pdf>.

¹⁸ Jeff Ernst et al., *US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014–2019: Promoting Success by Learning from the Past* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2020), 33, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/US%20Foreign%20Aid%20Central%20America.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ernst et al., 13.

The United States has invested approximately 12 years in the Northern Triangle through Mérida, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement. During this time, these initiatives have seen constant change in overall strategy, fluctuating funding levels, and a lack of effective coordination, monitoring, and evaluation, according to many sources.²⁰ Mérida’s security and anti-narcotics programs were not coordinated, nor did they constitute a coordinated strategy, so the initiative was not effective at stabilizing the region. CARSI expanded the funding and scope of regional programs to include important social and political factors but was also hindered by a lack of strategic coordination and consistent funding.²¹ Finally, the Strategy for Engagement made a radical shift to promote prosperity and better governance in addition to security.²² It has also failed because of the same issues with focus, funding, and strategic coordination, but the U.S. agencies managing this initiative and regional experts have recommended initiating monitoring, data collection, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms to reinvigorate the program.²³

²⁰ White House, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America* (Washington, DC: Obama White House Archives, 2016), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/central_america_strategy.pdf; Cristina Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses Are Helping, Hurting, and Can Be Improved*, Report No. 34 (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2015), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/FINAL%20PDF_CARSI%20REPORT.pdf; David Gagne, “US Continues Shift in Security Priorities with Aid Package to Central America,” *InSight Crime*, February 4, 2015, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/us-shift-in-security-priorities-with-aid-package-to-centram/>; Daniel F. Runde and Mark L. Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle>.

²¹ Florina Cristiana (Cris) Matei and Michelle Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan: Any Impact on the Gang Situation in Central America?,” *Dialogue, King’s College London Politics Society*, no. 11 (Spring 2015): 1–4, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/44736>; Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. R41731 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 19, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf>.

²² Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*.

²³ Ernst et al., *US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014–2019*, 21–35.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

The existing U.S. initiatives for the Northern Triangle can be more effective at stemming the flow of migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador by making better governance with decreased corruption the most important, clearly defined, and coordinated strategic objective. This strategic objective should focus on community-based implementation, and the programs and activities that support it must be effectively monitored and evaluated by actionable data that must be collected and disseminated to all stakeholders involved.²⁴ The United States has provided funding to the region that is necessary for success, but experts from the Wilson Center’s Latin American Program believe that U.S. political pressure will be more effective at reducing corruption in the region and improving governance than the money spent on programs.²⁵

The strategy must include stakeholders at all levels, and those stakeholders at the local level are more likely to know what will work and why, what will not work and why, and how to adjust programs accordingly. For example, gender-based violence has had a greater negative impact than other violent crimes on these societies, but the need to prioritize this form of violence over others may not be obvious to a policymaker who is removed from this issue at the local level.²⁶ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)’s data collection, evaluation, and reporting on its programs has provided valuable information on what is working in the region. This process should be modeled by all agencies involved in these initiatives to ensure success and communicate the results. This approach of adjusting the strategy to focus on the problem that has the most negative impact on success, pushing the programs and decision-making down to the lowest community and government levels, and accurately evaluating the programs and activities involved will promote results that better stem the tide of migration that has been overwhelming the U.S. southern border.

²⁴ Ernst et al., 6–10.

²⁵ Ernst et al., 25.

²⁶ María Fernanda Bozmoski, “The Northern Triangle: The World’s Epicenter for Gender-Based Violence,” *New Atlanticist* (blog), March 3, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-northern-triangle-the-worlds-epicenter-for-gender-based-violence/>.

The Northern Triangle initiatives have struggled to succeed primarily due to corrupt and insufficient governance; a centralized, poorly communicated and coordinated strategy; and the inability to determine what is working and capitalize on those successes. The United States must use political pressure to get the ruling class of elites in the region to buy in to developing governance that keeps their citizens safe and restores trust in their institutions. Achieving this goal of effective governance means giving the common citizen a seat at the table when policy decisions are made, and it also means developing and communicating clear strategic objectives that are understood so that all organizations involved know what success should look like. The programs and activities that support U.S. initiatives in the region must be transparent in documenting and communicating successes and failures through effective monitoring, data collection, evaluation, and reporting.

The citizens of the Northern Triangle overall want governmental reform, but it is not always in the best interest of the region's political leaders and economic elite for this to happen.²⁷ The United States has the means to incentivize the Northern Triangle's elites to help ensure success with these regional initiatives through bipartisan political pressure, using U.S. Treasury sanctions, criminal prosecutions, extradition, and immigration visa programs.²⁸ The citizens of the region need economic opportunity in the form of new jobs created and the ability to create and succeed at small business enterprises.

Finally, the initiatives must have honest and realistic reporting procedures. It is not usually in the best interest of bureaucratic administrators to admit failure, so many programs look good on paper but fail to make a meaningful impact. The U.S. initiatives for the Northern Triangle slowly adjusted toward success from 2008 until 2020. The successful transition to the strategic priority of reducing corruption and improving governance will likely reduce forced migration from the region to the United States, and it will succeed at the grassroots level by focusing on root causes instead of symptoms and including civil

²⁷ Ernst et al., *US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014–2019*, 20.

²⁸ Ernst et al., 13.

society, non-governmental organizations, and private-sector businesses, along with the government.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The growing mass migration of people from the Northern Triangle countries—Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—to the United States is overwhelming the U.S. border security and immigration systems. For example, the United States apprehended 86,705 Northern Triangle nationals at the southern border in 2012, but that number dramatically rose to 237,860 in 2014.¹ Then, a sudden spike in migrants prompted the White House to label this situation a national emergency and a humanitarian crisis in April 2019.² Many sources identify poor economic conditions and violence as the main factors driving the Northern Triangle nations’ citizens to leave their countries.³ For instance, the American Council on Immigration suggests that being a victim of violent crime usually precedes the emigration from the Northern Triangle.⁴

The United States has instituted policies to help the Northern Triangle countries improve governance, economic prosperity, and security for some time. President John F. Kennedy’s administration enacted the Alliance for Progress in 1961 to help these nations, but parts of this aid package targeted programs that addressed the communist threat to the region, for example, the U.S. counterinsurgency response to the region.⁵ The Bush administration enacted the Central American Free Trade Agreement in hopes that more trade would stimulate the region’s economy; with his second term came the 2008 Mérida

¹ Peter J. Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. R44812 [updated July 24, 2019] (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44812/11>.

² “An Overwhelming Surge in Illegal Immigration Is Worsening the Crisis at the Border,” Trump White House Archives, April 5, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/overwhelming-surge-illegal-immigration-worsening-crisis-border/>.

³ Amelia Cheatham and Diana Roy, “Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/background/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle>.

⁴ Mike LaSusa, “Crime, Violence Driving Migration from Central America: Reports,” InSight Crime, March 2, 2016, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/crime-and-violence-drive-migration-from-central-america-reports/>.

⁵ Daniel F. Runde and Mark L. Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle>.

Initiative, which focused more on crime, drugs, and security.⁶ In 2010, President Obama passed the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) with a focus on the citizens' security and, with the surge of migration in 2014, legislated the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America (hereafter, Strategy for Engagement), which focused more broadly on economic prosperity, security, and better governance.⁷ When President Trump took office, he continued with the Strategy for Engagement but also made border security and illegal immigration a priority. He also attempted to control illegal migration and improve border security by building a border wall along the southwest border and threatened to cut financial aid to the Northern Triangle if the host countries could not control their own borders to prevent the migrant flow.⁸

The Biden administration has made a shift from Trump's U.S. border focus attempting to address the root causes of migration from the region with the recently introduced U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. According to the Congressional Research Service, Biden's new plan is very similar to the current Strategy for Engagement that has been in place since 2014.⁹ It is too early to tell if it will make any significant shift in strategic focus or be more successful at delivering adequate and consistent funding and evaluations. However, in 2022 Director Garza of the Hope Border Institute in Central America, states that "there is a long way to go in overhauling U.S. policy to truly target root causes of migration."¹⁰ The Washington Office

⁶ Cheatham and Roy, "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle."

⁷ Jennifer Grover, *U.S. Assistance to Central America: Department of State Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security*, GAO-19-590 (Washington, DC: General Accountability Office, 2019), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-590>.

⁸ Janet Seiz and Eliza Willis, "Troubled Countries Can't Keep People from Leaving," *Atlantic*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/central-american-governments-cant-stop-migration/586726/>.

⁹ Peter J. Meyer and Maureen Taft-Morales, *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report No. IF11151 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>.

¹⁰ Teresa Welsh, "Hurdles Remain for Biden's 'Root Causes' Strategy in Central America," *Devex*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/hurdles-remain-for-biden-s-root-causes-strategy-in-central-america-102592>.

on Latin America also states that the Biden Administration “has not implemented major policy changes . . . instead, it has kept in place most of what came before.”¹¹

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

How can existing U.S. policies on the Northern Triangle be enhanced, expanded, or changed to help stem the flow of migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to the United States?

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines academic debates on 20 years of U.S. policies to address problems in the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Those policies were intended to stabilize the region and mitigate the push factors of illegal immigration: historical patterns of crime, violence, poor governance, and economic instability.

1. Mérida and CARSI

Enacted in 2007 under the Bush administration, the Mérida Initiative began as a U.S. security program for Mexico and Central America. It was intended to mitigate the problems of drug trafficking, violence, and corruption in those Latin American countries.¹² In 2010, the Obama administration enacted CARSI, a continuation of Mérida with a focus on security for the Central American countries of the Northern Triangle. These initiatives aimed to increase security while decreasing violence and drug trafficking. Likewise, CARSI set out to build cooperation between the Northern Triangle countries, so they could more effectively work together for success.¹³ These two policies were the first to address

¹¹ “Biden’s First Year Policies toward Latin America,” Washington Office on Latin America, January 18, 2022, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/bidens-first-year-policies-toward-latin-america/>.

¹² Anna Grace, “10 Years of the Mérida Initiative: Violence and Corruption,” InSight Crime, December 26, 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/merida-initiative-failings-violence-corruption/>.

¹³ “Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI),” InSight Crime, October 18, 2011, <https://www.insightcrime.org/uncategorized/central-america-regional-security-initiative/>.

the underlying issues of crime, violence, and economic instability that undermine the security of the Northern Triangle.

Most scholars, including Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner, agree that Mérida and CARSI have not been effective overall.¹⁴ In their view, the lack of success is the result of an absent coordinated strategy.¹⁵ Matei, for one, attributes this lack of effectiveness to the precarious U.S. government agency coordination and policy focus and conflicting visions of the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government.¹⁶ On the same note, according to Eguizábal et al., while the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of State (DOS), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), among others, have invested billions of dollars in these programs, these agencies are not effectively coordinating their efforts to accomplish unified strategic goals.¹⁷ Thus, properly coordinated strategic solutions will be necessary to mitigate the challenges facing the Northern Triangle countries.

Critics claim that these programs do not use the correct approach to be effective. Eric Olsen from the Wilson Center, for one, believes that the traditional focus on drug trafficking and aggressive law enforcement has not been successful, and an approach that

¹⁴ Florina Cristiana (Cris) Matei and Michelle Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan: Any Impact on the Gang Situation in Central America?,” *Dialogue: King’s College London Politics Society*, no. 11 (Spring 2015): 1–4, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/44736>; Cristina Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses Are Helping, Hurting, and Can Be Improved* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2015), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/FINAL%20PDF_CARSI%20REPORT.pdf; Grace, “10 Years of the Mérida Initiative”; “Is the US Taxpayer-Funded Central America Regional Security Initiative Effective at Stopping Violence?,” *Tico Times*, December 15, 2014, <https://ticotimes.net/2014/12/15/is-the-us-taxpayer-funded-central-america-regional-security-initiative-effective-at-stopping-violence>; *Regional Security Cooperation: An Examination of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI)*, House, 113th Cong., 1st sess., June 19, 2013, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhr81568/pdf/CHRG-113hhr81568.pdf>; Thomas Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner, eds., *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 9.

¹⁶ Florina Cristiana Matei, “The Impact of U.S. Anti-Gang Policies in Central America: Quo Vadis?,” in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, ed. Thomas C. Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 197–210, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/387697>.

¹⁷ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 30.

addresses community-based crime prevention and builds social capital is needed for greater success.¹⁸ Runde and Schneider support this argument, agreeing that the focus on narcotics trafficking and illegal immigration should shift to building a stronger economy and better governance in those nations.¹⁹ According to Matei and Cortez, Mérida and CARSI did not have realistic objectives.²⁰ Those policies aimed to eliminate illegal drug trafficking, but that was not an attainable goal, Matei and Cortez stress.²¹ In an InSight Crime analysis, Gagne points out that the lack of success is due to the inattention to corruption issues.²² This limitation suggests a possible need to redirect efforts away from aggressive law enforcement and toward programs that build up civil society in those Central American countries.

Critics also cite reasons for a lack of policy success, including the U.S. demand for illegal narcotics, the flow of firearms from the United States to Latin American countries, and insufficient monetary investments.²³ For example, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and former Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly both agree that the demand for illegal narcotics in the nation significantly contributes to international drug trafficking and violence in the Northern Triangle.²⁴ Firearms that are illegally trafficked from the United States and weapons left from the U.S.-supported conflicts in the region are cited by Bermeo as contributing factors in Northern Triangle violence.²⁵ The Council on Foreign Relations also supports this finding, concurring that the demand for drugs and U.S. firearms laws are contributing to the problems in the Northern Triangle countries of Central

¹⁸ H., *Regional Security Cooperation*, 50–55.

¹⁹ Runde and Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*.

²⁰ Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan.”

²¹ Matei and Cortez.

²² David Gagne, “US Security Initiative Faces Political Obstacles in Northern Triangle,” InSight Crime, March 27, 2017, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/us-carsi-political-obstacles-northern-triangle/>.

²³ Cheatham and Roy, “Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle”; Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 3.

²⁴ Sarah Bermeo, “Violence Drives Immigration from Central America,” *Future Development* (blog), June 26, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/06/26/violence-drives-immigration-from-central-america/>.

²⁵ Bermeo.

America.²⁶ Besides agreeing that American user demand for narcotics and illegal firearms trafficking from the United States to Central America have fueled regional instability, the Wilson Center’s Eric Olsen points out that the Northern Triangle countries received only \$50 million under Mérida, yet Mexico received \$500 million.²⁷ This imbalance in financial aid recurred when approved aid to the region dropped from \$604 million in 2015 to \$182 million in 2019. These three factors, cited as significant in hindering policy effectiveness, are contributing to the lack of effectiveness of U.S. policies in reducing violence in the Northern Triangle.

Most critics and scholars agree that effectively determining whether or to what degree these programs are working is impossible, given the lack of evidence about program outcomes.²⁸ These programs must be evaluated and reliable data delivered for policymakers to make informed, accurate decisions on how to carry out security and nation-building programs in the region. Most scholars readily understand that this challenge will require a long-term, coordinated focus to achieve success.²⁹ This gap suggests that U.S. policies concerning the Northern Triangle countries will need to be evaluated for effectiveness, but this effort will require a reliable, collaborative system for the evaluation process.

²⁶ Michael Shifter, *Countering Criminal Violence in Central America* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2012), <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-criminal-violence-central-america>.

²⁷ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 22.

²⁸ Mike LaSusa, “Are US Anti-Crime Programs in Central America Working?,” InSight Crime, March 6, 2017, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/are-us-anti-crime-programs-central-america-working/>; David Rosnick, Alexander Main, and Laura Jung, *Have US-Funded CARSI Programs Reduced Crime and Violence in Central America?* (Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2016), <https://cepr.net/images/stories/reports/carsi-2016-09.pdf>; “US Taxpayer-Funded Central America Regional Security Initiative”; “Examining the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI),” Wilson Center, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/examining-the-central-america-regional-security-initiative-carsi>; Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*; Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan”; and Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner, *Maras*.

²⁹ David Gagne, “US Continues Shift in Security Priorities with Aid Package to Central America,” InSight Crime, February 4, 2015, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/us-shift-in-security-priorities-with-aid-package-to-centram/>.

2. Strategy for Engagement

In 2014, President Obama changed U.S. policy for the Northern Triangle from CARSI to the Strategy for Engagement. This policy depended on the region's leaders having the political will to succeed in changing their nations.³⁰ It was like CARSI but focused on promoting increased security, economic development, and better governance, instead of primarily countering narcotics. This policy also involved coordination from U.S. departments that were supplying the assistance.

Some scholars have praised U.S. policies in the region for targeted community-based programs. The Strategy for Engagement under the Obama administration valued such programs because that policy enacted a more holistic approach to securing the region. According to Elon University professor Carmen Monico, research in Guatemala shows that USAID programs successfully reduced crime and violence by engaging the community and letting local leaders set the priorities needed for success.³¹ Berk-Seligson et al., members of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) from Vanderbilt University, have also confirmed this success. Their research documents how USAID's community-based programs in the region have successfully reduced violence.³² This report is the only scholarly work found to document U.S. policy success in the region but reflects merely one department's work. However, the Center for Economic and Policy Research has contested the findings of LAPOP's surveys.³³ This debate adds to the overall findings that Central American policy has been ineffective.

A body of literature discusses the extent to which the Trump administration continued the efforts started by the Strategy for Engagement. Scholars agree that these

³⁰ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*.

³¹ Carmen Monico, "Why Cutting Off Aid to Central American Countries Won't Curb Migration to the U.S.," *Pacific Standard*, June 21, 2019, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/cutting-off-aid-to-central-america-wont-curb-migration>.

³² Susan Berk-Seligson et al., *Impact Evaluation of USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America: Regional Report for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, 2014), <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CARSI%20IE%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

³³ LaSusa, "Are US Anti-Crime Programs in Central America Working?"

policies have not been entirely effective.³⁴ For example, the Congressional Research Service has argued that the Trump administration’s actions were inconsistent with the framework of the Strategy for Engagement and has raised concern that Northern Triangle cooperation and support would decrease because of his disparaging remarks.³⁵ Furthermore, the Government Accountability Office of the United States suggests that a lack of collaboration between the departments that implement aid programs to the Northern Triangle region may cause the programs’ effectiveness to suffer.³⁶ A 2019 Congressional Research Service report on this initiative also confirmed this mismatch.³⁷ The U.S.–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act of 2019 may foster greater cooperation by requiring that the DOS develop a coordinated five-year strategy with the other departments.³⁸

Critics state that the United States does not have a continuous focus on helping the region but a selective focus on the issues that impact it the most. For example, according to Runde and Schneider, border security, immigration, and drug trafficking have been the nation’s primary concerns, but the strategic issues of economic prosperity, strong governance, and internal security in Central America are crucial in controlling migration and crime.³⁹ They also argue that the nation’s planning must project at least 10–15 years into the future because a long range translates to consistent support, as demonstrated by successes with such countries in similar situations as Colombia.⁴⁰ Therefore, the consensus seems to be that U.S. policy has been too focused on the short term, and under the Trump administration, it shifted away from the original intent of the policy initiated under Obama.

³⁴ Cheatham and Roy, “Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle.”

³⁵ Mark P. Sullivan et al., *Latin America and the Caribbean: Issues in the 115th Congress*, CRS Report No. R45120 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45120/31>.

³⁶ Grover, *U.S. Assistance to Central America*.

³⁷ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*.

³⁸ Meyer.

³⁹ Runde and Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*.

⁴⁰ Runde and Schneider.

3. Deterrence Campaigns

Migration to the United States from the Northern Triangle is treacherous as migrants must travel through Mexico. One survey reports that 68 percent of migrants become victims of violence in traversing Mexico.⁴¹ The United States has partnered with the Northern Triangle countries to educate would-be migrants of the dangers involved in the trip by discouraging them through social media, billboards, and commercials, but this effort is not working to any significant degree.⁴² Research from Vanderbilt University's LAPOP confirms this finding, surmising that public awareness campaigns are ineffective because the migrants are already facing the threat of violence at home.⁴³ Likewise, an InSight Crime analysis and the American Immigration Council agree that a deterrence strategy based on information of migration dangers is not likely to work because most Central Americans from the Northern Triangle are already aware of the threats and would choose to come anyway given their current situations.⁴⁴ A 2019 Congressional Research Service report also maintains that public awareness campaigns do not deter illegal immigration, thus strengthening the evidence for this contention.⁴⁵ Therefore, U.S. attempts to dissuade people from leaving the Northern Triangle appear to be another failed strategy in the region.

4. Deportation to Home Country

Another corpus of literature debates the effect of deportation on migration. According to Mike LaSusa of InSight Crime, deporting large numbers of illegal migrants back to the Northern Triangle could actually make the overall situation much worse

⁴¹ Bermeo, "Violence Drives Immigration from Central America."

⁴² Peter J. Meyer and Maureen Taft-Morales, *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report No. IF11151 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>.

⁴³ Liz Entman, "Crime, Not Money, Drives Migration from El Salvador and Honduras," Vanderbilt University Research News, September 18, 2018, <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2018/09/18/crime-not-money-drives-migration-from-el-salvador-and-honduras/>.

⁴⁴ LaSusa, "Crime, Violence Driving Migration from Central America."

⁴⁵ Meyer and Taft-Morales, *Central American Migration*.

because they might resort to criminal gang activity, given their lack of options.⁴⁶ Pfaffinger states that there is no evidence that repatriation of gang members to the Northern Triangle addresses the actual long term risk factors, and there is no evidence that helps the overall gang problem.⁴⁷ Another Congressional Research Service report in 2019 echoes this argument, stating that deportations might destabilize the region even more, prevent remittances, and worsen the gang problem.⁴⁸ Likewise, according to Sullivan et al., Congress is concerned that terminating the temporary-protected-status program and deporting people could further destabilize the region.⁴⁹ The authors further note that the Northern Triangle governments agree these actions will likely exacerbate the problems they already face. Since nations are taking on this additional burden at a time when existing financial aid might be suspended by the U.S. president, such actions could intensify the problems. Matei and Cortez counter this view, contending a correlation between deportations and the problem of crime and violence in the region cannot be confirmed due to the lack of definitive research.⁵⁰ The increase in deportations under the Trump administration has been a contested factor in policy effectiveness that requires further research to better understand its impact.

5. Summary

By all accounts, U.S. attempts to stabilize the Northern Triangle region have not been successful overall. This literature review has identified sources of research that identify reasons for the lack of success. It has also recognized debates in areas of success and the validity of limited success.

⁴⁶ LaSusa, “Crime, Violence Driving Migration from Central America.”

⁴⁷ Maximillian X. Pfaffinger, “Balas y Barrios: An Analysis of U.S. Domestic and Regional Anti-Gang Policies from a Human Security Perspective” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2021), <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/68739>.

⁴⁸ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*.

⁴⁹ Sullivan et al., *Latin America and the Caribbean*.

⁵⁰ Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan.”

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis presents a gap analysis of each existing U.S. policy aimed at stabilizing the Northern Triangle: the Mérida Initiative, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement.⁵¹ The criteria used for this analysis helped to determine how successful these policies have been in achieving their desired goals of a safe, secure Northern Triangle region. In this context, this thesis proposes that an effective policy must result in a more stable Central American region, which in turn must result in fewer migrants from this region over time—hence, effectively combating the threats to U.S. homeland security posed by the mass migration from the region. This thesis outlines recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of the policies devised by the United States to help stabilize the Northern Triangle so that people can choose to stay in their countries.⁵²

To this end, this thesis relied on primary source literature, including studies, policy documents, reports, hearings, and expert testimony. Secondary such academic sources as peer-reviewed academic articles, research from experts, books, and media coverage, were also used in this process. These sources provided this researcher with U.S. and Northern Triangle perspectives on reducing violence in the region.

⁵¹ Tom Wright, “How to Perform a Gap Analysis: 5-Step Process,” *Cascade* (blog), June 23, 2022, <https://www.cascade.app/blog/gap-analysis>. A gap analysis involves determining the current performance of the policy, identifying the desired policy outcomes, and determining actions to achieve the desired result.

⁵² Eugene Bardach and Eric M. Patashnik, *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2016).

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II. U.S. INITIATIVES FOR NORTHERN TRIANGLE COUNTRIES: AN OVERVIEW

To provide a basis for evaluating these programs, this chapter examines the U.S. initiatives implemented to stabilize the Northern Triangle and reduce illegal immigration from those countries. The Mérida Initiative, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement have aimed to address the elevated levels of crime and violence in the region since 2008. The Mérida Initiative demonstrated the need for further expansion beyond Mexico into Central America, and CARSI highlighted the need for greater intervention in Central America, which spawned the final initiative, the U.S. Strategy of Engagement in Central America. None of these programs have achieved their original goals of making the region more secure and prosperous with trusted, functioning governments and civil society organizations. This chapter describes the objectives of the Mérida Initiative, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement and reviews the programs and activities implemented to accomplish each initiative's objectives.

A. MÉRIDA INITIATIVE, 2008–2010

The United States realized the problems of international narcotics trafficking and border security that it had long struggled to mitigate could be addressed through partnerships with neighboring countries, an idea that expanded over time. By building mutual security relationships in Central America, the United States hoped that both societies might improve, thereby mitigating narcotics-driven crime and violence. The Mérida Initiative was a strategic partnership based on a framework of four main objectives: to disrupt or dismantle transnational organized crime organizations, to bolster the rule of law in Mexico, to increase border security, and to build more resilient communities in Mexico.⁵³ Although the Mérida Initiative focused primarily on Mexico, as intended by its Mexican and American creators, it affected the Northern Triangle countries in two ways. First, just four months after signing Mérida, leaders requested the initiative be extended to

⁵³ Ocampomi, "The Merida Initiative," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Mexico, September 7, 2021, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/the-merida-initiative/>.

include the Northern Triangle countries to better address narcotics trafficking and illegal immigration because of crime, violence, and economic instability.⁵⁴ Second, Mérida targeted narcotics, transnational crime, and security, a direction that later policies would follow. In addition to providing funding for Central American security, Mérida represented a partnership between the United States and its neighboring countries for strategic, bilateral collaboration and security improvement in the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Realizing the United States' responsibility in creating some of these problems may have helped bring the agreement to fruition. The United States took ownership of several security problems, including trafficking weapons, smuggling cash south from narcotics sales, and fueling the drug demand.⁵⁵ Thus, U.S. leaders would need to make a substantial effort to control American drivers of crime and violence in the Northern Triangle because those internal U.S. drivers were creating and sustaining the problem. Without the substantial and unceasing demand for narcotics or the ability of criminals to smuggle their cash from black-market sales in the United States, transnational organized crime organizations could not sustain their operations at the current scale. Furthermore, illegal U.S. weapons that flooded into the region fueled the level of violence in those Central American countries. Therefore, this mutual partnership with its four strategic pillars could begin to address these shared regional problems in the Northern Triangle to strengthen both regions, build better security relations, and more effectively fight the crime and violence that had driven irregular migration from the Northern Triangle. However, the conditions imposed on the partnership slowed the implementation, thereby affecting the police, the judiciary, and customs and border protection. Part of the 2008–2009 fiscal year budget that funded Northern Triangle aspects of the Mérida Initiative set requirements for contracts,

⁵⁴ Diana Villiers Negroponte, "The Merida Initiative and Central America: The Challenges of Containing Public Insecurity and Criminal Violence," Working Paper No. 3 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2009), 64, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/05_merida_initiative_negroponte.pdf.

⁵⁵ Ocampomi, "The Merida Initiative."

negotiations, and interagency coordination.⁵⁶ The recipient nations also had to show sufficient judicial reforms to the U.S. secretary of state, establish complaint commissions, and implement human rights investigation and prosecution procedures to avoid having a percentage of the funding withheld.⁵⁷

Once the program was implemented, the Northern Triangle nations began receiving equipment and training (see Table 1). Under the direction of the DOS, the FBI sent a regional legal advisor to El Salvador and established transnational anti-gang units in Guatemala and Honduras.⁵⁸ Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) supported law enforcement by assessing each nation's ports of entry, making recommendations to strengthen security protocols, and assisting in border security improvements.⁵⁹ The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) conducted regional firearms' assessments and began implementing a Spanish language-based firearms tracking technology in the region.⁶⁰ This technology enabled Northern Triangle law enforcement organizations to use the U.S. system for tracking firearms and coordinate efforts with U.S. agencies. The International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) and the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies also began training officials from each country to increase the capacity and performance of their law enforcement, judiciary, and military.⁶¹ Despite a slow start and reduced funding because of initial coordination challenges, Mérida allowed U.S. agencies to implement programs in the areas of law enforcement, the judiciary, and border protection to further the initiative's objectives of counternarcotics, border security, law enforcement capacity, and rule of law.

⁵⁶ Claire Ribando Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues*, CRS Report No. R40135 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010), <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc462895/>.

⁵⁷ Seelke, 8–10.

⁵⁸ Seelke, 11.

⁵⁹ Seelke, 11.

⁶⁰ Seelke, 11.

⁶¹ Seelke, 11.

Table 1. Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues, 2008–2010⁶²

Objectives	Programs/Activities Implemented
Transnational organized crime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FBI: Transnational anti-gang units • DEA, ICE: Support for regional law enforcement (LE) units
Rule of law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FBI: Regional legal advisors • ATF: Firearms tracking technology • ILEA: Training for judicial, LE, and military
Border security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBP: Port-of-entry assessments, recommendations, technology, and training
Resilient community building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USAID: Youth violence, community policing, and community development programs

The Mérida Initiative addressed the objective of building resilient communities through engagement and prevention programs. Although the DOS controlled the bulk of funding for the Northern Triangle, USAID also administered a significant portion of funding for youth violence-prevention programs, community-based policing programs, and community development in high-risk areas.⁶³ In addition to USAID’s capacity-building programs, the agency began an impact evaluation survey to measure the effectiveness of its operations in the region.⁶⁴ These programs later covered the Northern Triangle countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—throughout 2009 and into 2010 as a small add-on to the Mérida Initiative. Even though the funding levels increased each year after a slow start, overall funding was low, with the Northern Triangle receiving about 10 percent of Mexico’s funding. The Northern Triangle’s problems required greater attention

⁶² Adapted from Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America*.

⁶³ Seelke, 7.

⁶⁴ Seelke, 7.

than this small add-on to Mérida afforded, thus laying the foundation for CARSI. Although Mérida sought to achieve regional success through its four pillars, the United States initially desired success in mitigating its own domestic narcotics trafficking and border security issues through the initiative. Realizing the scope of these problems, the United States shifted funding, with about one-third of funds dedicated to economic and social development through USAID programs. However, only a minute portion of Mérida funds were ever realized due to the bureaucracy of U.S. appropriations and the short timeframe involved.

B. CARSI, 2010–2014

CARSI pursued the original goals and aims of the Mérida Initiative by aiming to create a stable environment in Central America directly and Mexico indirectly by increasing funding for the region and focusing on the Northern Triangle’s problems with a broader, more long-term approach than with Mérida. Policymakers realized that the region needed functioning institutions that provided an effective state presence in all communities to be successful, so CARSI pivoted to address capacity and institution building more so than Mérida had. After taking office in early 2009, President Obama continued the Mérida Initiative but gave the Central American portion its own policy, expanding its scope and funding. CARSI, enacted in 2010, extended the strategic partnership with the countries of Central America, with funding increasing from \$60 million to \$171 million.⁶⁵ However, the scope of its work expanded to all of the countries in the region—from Belize in the north to Panama in the south—but most of the funding had been allocated to the Northern Triangle.⁶⁶ CARSI, like Mérida, directed the most funding to security, organized crime, and counternarcotics (64 percent); the remainder went to economic and social development (32 percent) and counterterrorism (4 percent).⁶⁷ USAID carried out the bulk of the economic and social development portion of CARSI through its programs, and with such

⁶⁵ Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. R41731 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 17, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Meyer and Seelke, 22.

⁶⁷ Meyer and Seelke, 22.

a large increase in funding levels, this initiative provided much more support to the Northern Triangle in areas outside of security and narcotics control. CARSI aimed to work with Central American countries to help them achieve goals and execute programs to which they were already committed for the security of their nations.⁶⁸ Therefore, while quite similar to Mérida in its programs, in shifting its focus toward the community level and citizens of Central America—through safer streets, more effective and present state organizations, and less corruption within governments—CARSI set itself apart with its attention to root causes.

Under the CARSI agreement, the definition of partnership broadened to achieve greater economic and social development in the region. It required the Northern Triangle nations to partner with international financial organizations, members of the private sector, and civil society groups in addition to the U.S. organizations involved.⁶⁹ For example, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) supported all three Northern Triangle governments in addressing economic development planning, and the United Nations supported crime prevention through its Development Program.⁷⁰ USAID brought together private-sector businesses, civil society groups, and local leaders to form prevention councils and support prevention and rehabilitation efforts.⁷¹ For example, 5 percent of staff at the El Salvadoran manufacturing plant owned by Grupo Calvo were rehabilitated gang members, and the company helped to employ 100 more through other businesses.⁷² These parties collaborated to accomplish goals set by the host nations and supported by the United States through CARSI.

⁶⁸ “Central America Regional Security Initiative,” U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, January 20, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220317055608/https://gt.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/carsi/>.

⁶⁹ “The Central America Regional Security Initiative: A Shared Partnership,” Department of State, March 5, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2014/223804.htm>.

⁷⁰ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 13–14.

⁷¹ Meyer and Seelke, 21.

⁷² Jason Marczak et al., *Security in Central America’s Northern Triangle: Violence Reduction and the Role of the Private Sector in El Salvador* (New York: Americas Society and Council of the Americas, 2012), <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/security-central-americas-northern-triangle-violence-reduction-and-role-private-sector-el>.

CARSI's five objectives have helped to measure the program's success. First, unlike Mérida, the nations wanted safe streets for their citizens by increasing security and reducing violence.⁷³ Second, in a continuation of Mérida, it targeted the movement of criminal actors and illegal contraband to disrupt domestic organized crime, transnational criminal organizations, and international narcotics trafficking.⁷⁴ Third, like Mérida, CARSI promoted better governance by building up accountable criminal justice systems and judicial systems.⁷⁵ Fourth, unlike with Mérida, Central American nations sought to provide high-risk communities with an effective state presence to provide safety and services that might not have been available previously.⁷⁶ Finally, building on Mérida, CARSI sought greater coordination between neighboring nations in the region because they all shared the same challenges to their security and prosperity.⁷⁷ These five goals provided a general framework for measuring the success of the policy and resembled Mérida's original four pillars with a novel focus on the individual citizen's safety, a realization of the need for better state presence at the local level, and a desire for greater regional coordination between Northern Triangle nations.

The DOS and USAID have primarily managed CARSI. While the DOS has administered programs addressing narcotics interdiction and law enforcement support to promote security in the region, USAID programs have intended to build institutional capacity and prevent crime and violence. For example, a lack of trust between police and prosecutors has caused information-sharing problems and affected the ability of both to control crime and violence effectively. It also has eroded the trust of citizens in those institutions. USAID has worked to build those institutional relationships to improve performance through efforts to recruit, train, and support both police and prosecutors in working together effectively and building community trust.⁷⁸ In previous efforts to control

⁷³ InSight Crime, "Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)."

⁷⁴ InSight Crime.

⁷⁵ InSight Crime.

⁷⁶ InSight Crime.

⁷⁷ Department of State, "A Shared Partnership."

⁷⁸ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 12.

crime and violence, the military has been used to help police the region, and this effort has led to counterproductive human rights abuses. USAID also works to implement community-based programs that avoid such problems and reverse the negative impacts of previous failures.⁷⁹ Each agency has implemented activities in a coordinated effort to promote the five pillars of CARSII (see Table 2), but from the beginning, this effort posed a coordination challenge that only increased as funding was allocated to subordinated government agencies.

1. DOS Programs

The DOS managed 66 percent of all CARSII-appropriated funding, and the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) served as the sub-agency that oversaw the funds. Other U.S. cabinet-level departments provided agencies that developed and delivered the programs and activities for the Northern Triangle, but those agencies were subordinate to the DOS and INL. Having multiple managers overseeing activities throughout CARSII in separate agencies—working under different departments and serving cross-purposes—contributed to the lack of coordination and communication encountered throughout these initiatives.

These subordinate cabinet-level departments included the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of Justice, DHS, and the Department of the Treasury.⁸⁰ Each government department worked on specialized programs to support the overall INL mission of increasing security, reducing violence, and disrupting narcotics trafficking through law enforcement–related programs that provided equipment, training, and technology to Northern Triangle governments.

The FBI, DEA, and ATF under the Department of Justice, along with CBP and ICE under DHS, delivered specialized programs that furthered this mission by equipping, training, supporting, and building the capacity of law enforcement in each country. The FBI continued the transnational anti-gang units; supplied fingerprint and biometric

⁷⁹ Meyer and Seelke, 12.

⁸⁰ Meyer and Seelke, 18–19.

investigative capabilities, wiretapping, and forensic capabilities; and built police investigation capabilities through training and support.⁸¹ The ATF continued its Spanish language-based firearms tracking program initiated under Mérida and trained law enforcement units in how to investigate firearms trafficking. The DEA continued supporting law enforcement units by training them in how to conduct narcotics smuggling investigations.⁸² DHS provided the Northern Triangle nations with its criminal-history-sharing program to keep them informed about persons deported from the United States to their region, as well as supported police units with hands-on management and training in human and narcotics trafficking investigations through ICE.⁸³ Although mostly focusing on narcotics trafficking and law enforcement, the DOS did manage some programs geared toward prevention—for example, GREAT and DARE.⁸⁴ Multiple agencies carried out these programs, working under several U.S. departments and requiring the coordination of many foreign agencies also working under the departments of their host countries. In addition, these DOS-implemented programs and numerous others helped to further the mission of narcotics interdiction and law enforcement support.

2. USAID Programs

The community-based programs that began under Mérida gained a much broader scope under CARSI—due to increased funding—and involved mostly institutional capacity-building and prevention programs. USAID managed 32 percent of CARSI funding appropriated to the Economic Support Fund, targeting government capacity building in the areas of policing, prosecution, courts, and prisons as well as civil society in such areas as education, vocations, and recreation. USAID used more than 190 community-based and locally led programs to prevent and reduce crime, secure unstable communities, and back up the government’s presence in them. For example, a novel approach to collaboration with the local community, the community-based *Villa Nueva* (New Town)

⁸¹ Meyer and Seelke, 19–21.

⁸² Meyer and Seelke, 19–21.

⁸³ Meyer and Seelke.

⁸⁴ Meyer and Seelke, 21.

police precinct in Guatemala, focuses on service to citizens, a concept that builds confidence in local law enforcement.⁸⁵ USAID has repeated this concept throughout the Northern Triangle because it was so successful. USAID’s Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Project represents another example in El Salvador. That project uses youth in the community, community leaders, civil society groups, and local governments to tackle the crime and violence issue at the local level.⁸⁶ Local prevention councils in the region analyze, plan, and create social programs that promote vocational and entrepreneurial growth.⁸⁷ Besides these specific activities, USAID also works to educate and train both government and civic organizations to continue building trust and institutional capacity.

From 2008–2014, the Northern Triangle–specific initiatives that began under Mérida and then became CARSI saw a tremendous growth in funding, increasing from \$60 million to \$161 million in six years.⁸⁸ The Obama administration implemented these initiatives and largely supported law enforcement and counternarcotics with only 27 percent of overall CARSI funding dedicated to development programs.⁸⁹ Underlying root causes that required an increased focus on development and corruption issues drove the complex security and prosperity levels of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. See Table 2 for each agency’s coordinated activities in promoting the five pillars of CARSI.

⁸⁵ Meyer and Seelke, 20.

⁸⁶ Meyer and Seelke, 21.

⁸⁷ Meyer and Seelke, 21.

⁸⁸ Meyer and Seelke, 17.

⁸⁹ InSight Crime, “Central America Regional Security Initiative.”

Table 2. CARSI’s Objectives, Programs, and Activities by Organization, 2010–2014⁹⁰

Objectives	Organization	Programs/Activities Implemented
“Create safe streets for the citizens of the region”	USAID/INL	Community-based, service-oriented policing; forensic labs; wiretapping centers
	ATF	Firearms tracing technology
	FBI	Fingerprint and biometric capability
“Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and between the nations of Central America”	INL	Vehicles, aircraft, equipment, maintenance, technology, and training (e.g., cargo x-ray equipment, weapons, ammunition, body armor, helicopters, radios)
	DHS	Criminal history information-sharing program
	DEA, ICE, ATF, INL	Training to investigate money, laundering, smuggling, narcotics/firearms/human trafficking
“Support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments”	USAID/INL	Long-term capacity building in justice and law enforcement sectors, judicial/prosecution training, prison management training and technology, investigation schools
	DEA, FBI, ICE	Management of vetted police units/prosecutors to build their capacity to pursue complex investigations
	FBI	Regional legal advisors
	ILEA	Training for judicial, LE, and military
“Re-establish effective state presence, services and security in communities at risk”	USAID	Community-based, locally led programs: Crime/violence prevention project, educational programs, recreation programs, vocational programs, prevention councils, social entrepreneurship programs, 120+ employment outreach centers
	INL	Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT), Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE)

⁹⁰ Adapted from Department of State, “A Shared Partnership.”

Objectives	Organization	Programs/Activities Implemented
“Foster enhanced levels of coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region, other international partners, and donors to combat regional security threats”	USAID/INL	Security Commission of the Central American, <i>Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana</i> (Central American Integration System; SICA), Group of Friends of Central America, IDB

C. CARSI AND THE STRATEGY FOR ENGAGEMENT, 2014 TO PRESENT

The CARSI initiative appeared to be ineffective when migration of Northern Triangle citizens spiked in 2014 in response to regional crime and insecurity, as well as economic hardship. The increase in families and unaccompanied minors fleeing the region became the most significant aspect of increased migration. The data show that apprehensions of Northern Triangle citizens by the U.S. Border Patrol nearly tripled, growing from 86,000 in 2012 to 237,000 in 2014.⁹¹ This increase posed challenges for U.S. border security agencies because the spike represented not only numbers of migrants but types of migrants as well. The number of unaccompanied minors and families migrating from the Northern Triangle jumped from approximately 10,000 in 2012, to more than 20,000 in 2013, to more than 50,000 in 2014.⁹² This increase in families and unaccompanied children fleeing the Northern Triangle indicates systemic problems in areas that CARSI might not be mitigating, not to mention represents a demographic that is much harder for border security agencies to process. Furthermore, the volume of migrants draws much more public attention to the issue of involuntary migration and its drivers.

The CARSI initiative has continued, from 2014 to the present, but in response to the events of 2014, President Obama developed the Strategy for Engagement. The new official strategy for U.S. actions in the region prioritized the crisis in the Northern Triangle

⁹¹ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 1.

⁹² Peter J. Meyer et al., *Unaccompanied Children from Central America: Foreign Policy Considerations*, CRS Report No. R43702 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016), 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/R43702.pdf>.

as a national security crisis.⁹³ After the U.S. National Security Council convened in 2014, all U.S. agencies followed its objectives.⁹⁴ With this new initiative, the U.S. approach in the Northern Triangle shifted priority from security to economic opportunity and local confidence in functioning governments. Mérida had focused primarily on anti-narcotics trafficking and law enforcement, and then CARSI shifted its focus to greater capacity building in government institutions and civic organizations. The 2014 Strategy for Engagement promoted the three objectives of fostering prosperity, strengthening governance, and improving security—a significant change in that security took a subordinate role to prosperity and governance.⁹⁵ The U.S. government realized that stabilizing the region would involve prosperity as the primary focus, with trust in a functioning government second, and security necessary but also inextricably tied to the first two objectives (see Table 3). Also, in this shift toward prosperity and governance in the Northern Triangle, the U.S. government significantly increased funding, from \$161 million for CARSI in 2014 to \$750 million in 2016 for both CARSI and the new Strategy for Engagement initiatives.⁹⁶ With this new strategic focus on prosperity and augmented funding for the programs, the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras would have a significant chance of achieving their new comprehensive objectives.

⁹³ Peter J. Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview*, CRS Report No. IF10371 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10371.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 5.

⁹⁵ Meyer, 6.

⁹⁶ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*, 2.

Table 3. The Strategy for Engagement’s Objectives and Supporting Strategies, 2014–2020⁹⁷

Objectives	Strategies
Promote prosperity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve trade and transportation • Improve education • Reduce poverty • Improve the electric grid • Support disaster resilience
Strengthen governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform the judicial system • Promote democratic values • Improve accountability • Improve civil service
Improve security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce local violence • Professionalize the police • Professionalize the military • Reduce the impact of gangs and organized crime

1. Prosperity Objective

This initiative focused on improving economic capacity at the country, regional, and individual levels of development, an innovation of this program. Five new supporting objectives involved improving trade, improving the energy systems, reducing poverty, improving education, and making the countries more resilient to disasters.⁹⁸ These prosperity programs include work by the Department of Commerce and USAID with the Central America Integration System to improve trade by formulating and implementing new regional trade policies that leverage the Central American Free Trade Agreement.⁹⁹ The Bureau of Energy Resources under DOS administers programs to reduce costs and improve the electric grid in Northern Triangle nations by ensuring the diversity and connectivity of systems, increasing energy trade, and promoting investments in the region’s

⁹⁷ Adapted from Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 6.

⁹⁸ “Protecting U.S. Citizens at Home and Abroad: U.S. Strategy for Central America,” Department of State, accessed August 2, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201224034626/https://www.state.gov/u-s-strategy-for-central-america/>.

⁹⁹ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 7.

infrastructure.¹⁰⁰ USAID’s agricultural programs have attempted to address poverty and hunger through improved crop production and management using new technology and practices and promoting resilience to climate change.¹⁰¹ In the area of education, USAID’s programs aim to improve performance of teachers and students and increase students’ chances for success in the job market with programs that connect students with employers through career centers and internships.¹⁰² This increased focus on prosperity works to build the government and civil society capacity to sustain the residents of the Northern Triangle and make a society where citizens want to stay.

2. Governance Objectives

The second objective, strengthening governance, was more broadly defined than in the prior agreements by encompassing the competence of all civil services with greater continuity and reforms—in contrast to focusing solely on training and technical competence of the justice system. Four supporting objectives aimed to improve fiscal accountability, reform the justice system, and promote democratic values in each government.¹⁰³ In one program to promote efficient and transparent financial management by the Guatemalan government, the U.S. Department of the Treasury provides technical assistance and helps to develop investment policy.¹⁰⁴ In another example, USAID works with Guatemalan civil society groups to promote transparency and build capacity through training programs that help citizens and civil society groups learn methods to hold their officials, leaders, and governments accountable for their actions.¹⁰⁵ USAID programs reinforce democratic values that give civil society a voice in the independent media, and the DOS works to safeguard human rights for civil society groups through its Bureau of Democracy programs.¹⁰⁶ In a region with a long history of human rights abuses by the

¹⁰⁰ Meyer, 7.

¹⁰¹ Meyer, 8.

¹⁰² Meyer, 8.

¹⁰³ Department of State, “A Shared Partnership.”

¹⁰⁴ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Meyer, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Meyer, 9.

military and police, human rights protections rate high as a key concern.¹⁰⁷ Finally, justice reforms include the DOS's INL programs, which train and give technical assistance to judges, prosecutors, and investigators to prosecute cases more efficiently.¹⁰⁸ A safe and professional civil society requires a voice to uphold the democratic values of transparency and accountability in governance, and these programs support that end.

¹⁰⁷ Professor Eduardo E. Estévez says the Northern Triangle region has had a long history of human rights abuses against its citizens by security forces. From 1962 until 1996, Guatemala experienced a brutal internal civil conflict that resulted in political instability, social conflict, repression, corruption, and violent crime. This civil war has been attributed to the 1954 political coup, influenced by the U.S. intelligence community, to oust Guatemala's communist-leaning government. In the revolution that followed, military and intelligence forces partnered with ruling elites to suppress public dissent and citizen protests. The Guatemalan security forces drove many citizens to the side of guerrilla insurgents by declaring them state enemies and brutalizing them during security operations. The politicized national security and intelligence organizations were used to spy on the ruling party's political opponents and repress political dissent. This oppression by intelligence and security organizations resulted in corruption, insecurity, and impunity throughout the nation for decades. Eduardo E. Estévez, "Guatemala," in *The Handbook of Latin American and Caribbean Intelligence Cultures*, ed. Florina Cristiana Matei, Carolyn Halladay, and Eduardo E. Estévez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2022), 209–12.

According to Estévez, El Salvador experienced a similar history with a U.S.-backed civil war against a communist insurgency from 1980 until 1992. Ruled by military leaders and oligarchs from 1931 until 1992, El Salvador's government placed citizen security in the hands of the military. During this time of violence and political instability, civilians were repressed by U.S.-trained national police, army, and paramilitary organizations. The El Salvadoran security forces committed human rights abuses—including torture and killings—against civil society members such as union leaders, teachers, and political activists. These death squads supported the ruling elite's interests by suppressing opposing dissent, but the brutality spurred citizens to support leftist guerrillas. As of this writing, violent crime, elevated homicide rates, gangs, extortion, kidnappings, and human rights abuses have proliferated against the El Salvadoran citizens due to the lack of civilian oversight over the nation's security forces. Eduardo E. Estévez, "El Salvador," in *The Handbook of Latin American and Caribbean Intelligence Cultures*, ed. Florina Cristiana Matei, Carolyn Halladay, and Eduardo E. Estévez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2022), 261–62.

Bruneau and Goetze detail Colombia's similar history of crime, violence, and human rights abuses perpetrated against its citizens by security forces. Considered a failed state for many decades, Colombia has made considerable improvements since the 1990s. The citizens successfully control the military and intelligence agencies, and they also help define the nation's security strategy. This civilian oversight has changed the environment from a self-regulated military to a nation with a civilian-run ministry of defense, operating with clear objectives developed by civil society. One reason for this success appears to be a significant level of U.S. support. Although Colombia's counternarcotics programs have failed consistently, the nation still receives the most U.S. funding in Latin America, and it is NATO's only Latin American partner. Colombia's success at reducing crime, violence, and repressive security forces indicates that consistent and adequate funding are needed, along with civilian oversight from the lowest levels, to build a secure and prosperous democracy. Thomas C. Bruneau and Richard B. Goetze Jr., "From Tragedy to Success in Colombia: The Centrality of Effectiveness in Civil-Military Relations," in *The Routledge Handbook of Civil-Military Relations*, ed. Florina Cristiana Matei, Carolyn Halladay, and Thomas C. Bruneau, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 310–18.

¹⁰⁸ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 9.

3. Security Objectives

Current and previous initiatives have all attempted to improve security in the Northern Triangle by focusing on narcotics trafficking and organized crime. The region serves as a major corridor for narcotics flowing from South America to the United States. The supporting objectives of professionalizing the military and police forces, reducing local violence, and reducing the impact of organized crime and gangs in the Northern Triangle all bolster the security objective.¹⁰⁹ While these supporting objectives are manifest in current CARSI programs in the region, more funding and energy has been allocated to prevention.

Under this initiative, CARSI has created new programs to vet, equip, train, and support law enforcement officers with a focus on engagement at the community level. For example, the INL works with the Honduran National Police to promote civil society engagement with police organizations and promotes intelligence-led policing to analyze and map criminal activity for better results.¹¹⁰ Both INL and USAID have integrated prevention and law enforcement activities into the most violent areas through their “place-based” method to improve efficiency.¹¹¹ Finally, USAID intervenes to identify, counsel, protect, and reintegrate at-risk youth into civil society, and INL programs work to reduce gang affiliation and help former inmates secure jobs to reintegrate into society.¹¹² Overall, the community-based activities attempt to bridge the gap between civil society and law enforcement to promote the trust needed for effective security in the region, in addition to the ongoing security programs. These security programs under the Strategy for Engagement are not entirely new, but they have established a new focus on pushing input and control down to the lowest possible community level to achieve greater success than in the past initiatives.

¹⁰⁹ Department of State, “A Shared Partnership.”

¹¹⁰ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 10.

¹¹¹ Meyer, 10.

¹¹² Meyer, 10–11.

These initiatives continued in the Northern Triangle through the rest of the Obama administration. When President Trump took office in 2017, he maintained the same objectives and supporting aims of the original Strategy for Engagement, likely doing so because the strategy stood out as more comprehensive and coordinated than CARSI's "stove-piped" approach.¹¹³ Although the Trump administration followed the overall strategy of the initiative, funding for the Northern Triangle dropped from \$750 million in 2016 to a requested \$445 million for 2020.¹¹⁴ This dramatic decrease in funding of the initiative—before the new focus on prosperity and governance had significant enough time to be successful—likely curbed its impact. As with Mérida, the lack of sufficient funding to the programs at the community level, not to mention the lack of political will to stick to a long-term strategic plan, hampered their intended impact.

Surges in migrants at the U.S. southern border had resulted in increased funding for Northern Triangle programs before—under CARSI and the Strategy for Engagement under the Obama administration. However, another surge in migrants occurred in 2019, and the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended over 600,000 people from the Northern Triangle, most of whom were unaccompanied minors.¹¹⁵ This surge inspired lively debates about the effectiveness of U.S. initiatives in the region to reduce the push factors of this migration. President Trump responded by cutting off aid to the Northern Triangle in March 2019 until the three countries' governments could control the problem. This suspension resulted in the redirection of \$450 million in appropriated funds for the region.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the Trump administration in 2017 withheld \$802 million from the 2018 appropriations for Northern Triangle programs.¹¹⁷ By disrupting funding, U.S. leaders hoped to pressure the Northern Triangle's leaders to show more political will in controlling the factors driving this emigration. In 2019, the United States mostly restored the funding that had been

¹¹³ Meyer, 5.

¹¹⁴ Meyer, 13.

¹¹⁵ Meyer, 1.

¹¹⁶ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Mathew Lee, "US Restores Some Aid to El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala," AP News, June 18, 2019, <https://apnews.com/0eaa42865d974e46ba04a51e21e1a81b>.

temporarily suspended, but this hiatus had disrupted programs underway in the Northern Triangle, making it difficult to determine the damage that had been done.

The Trump administration's withholding and redirecting of aid prompted Congress to take action to address the crisis resulting from the 2019 migrant surge. Congress unanimously passed the bipartisan Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (NTEEA) in July 2019 in response to both the crisis and the president's suspension of aid to the region.¹¹⁸ This action protected funding for the Northern Triangle programs and expanded the scope of focus to such new critical factors as gender-based violence and the internal displacement of people, representing a step forward.¹¹⁹ The NTEEA primarily focuses on economic development, democratic institutions, and government corruption. Overall, the NTEEA does not focus on anything outside the scope of the Strategy for Engagement. For example, it guarantees \$577 million in irrevocable aid, but such aid still depends on the region's meeting requirements that have been stumbling blocks in the past.¹²⁰ Additionally, the same contractual procedures that have hindered the timely disbursement of funds remain intact.¹²¹ The NTEEA protects the funding for the region and focuses efforts on the root causes of instability, but these issues have been previously identified throughout the initiatives, and there is no guarantee that these protections will ensure funding is delivered due to the bureaucratic procedures that remain.

D. CONCLUSION

Even as the initiatives have grown in size, scope, and billions spent, the results and impact on Central America have, at best, fallen short of the original goals and intentions, designed to make the region more secure and prosperous with trusted, functioning governments and civil society organizations. The succession of U.S. initiatives from 2008

¹¹⁸ "Bill Summary: United States–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act," National Immigration Forum, July 8, 2019, <https://immigrationforum.org/article/bill-summary-united-states-northern-triangle-enhanced-engagement-act/>.

¹¹⁹ Anna Giffels, "10 Facts about the Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act," Borgen Project, June 28, 2019, <https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-the-northern-triangle-enhanced-engagement-act/>.

¹²⁰ Gina Beviglia, "The Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act," Borgen Project, August 5, 2019, <https://borgenproject.org/the-northern-triangle-enhanced-engagement-act/>.

¹²¹ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 15.

until the present to stabilize the Northern Triangle has shifted focus across the period. It began with a centralized, top-down approach that focused primarily on security and counternarcotics and secondarily on improvements to Central American societies through economics and better governance, beginning at the technical level with training and equipping. As the initiatives developed and feedback consistently indicated that change was needed for success, they shifted to a grassroots or community-based approach that centered on the prosperity and trust of average citizens, realizing that security coincides with trust at that level. Throughout this timeframe, a consistent theme of these initiatives was inconsistency in the delivered program funding and a lack of political will to stick to a long-term plan across changes in U.S. leadership. With such inconsistency, the initiatives have failed to stabilize the Northern Triangle sufficiently to stem the flow of irregular migration from the region to the United States. Mass migration surges have overwhelmed U.S. border security and immigration systems in recent years, making them a key homeland security issue.

III. AN ASSESSMENT OF U.S. POLICIES IN NORTHERN TRIANGLE COUNTRIES

The three U.S. initiatives for the Northern Triangle countries have had successes and failures throughout their history. This chapter examines these aspects and analyzes the effectiveness experienced in those countries because of the initiatives. The Mérida Initiative spanned the timeframe of 2008–2010, when it was expanded into CARSI; CARSI spanned the timeframe of 2010–2014; and the Strategy for Engagement has spanned its implementation in 2014 to the present. Mérida’s security and anti-narcotics programs for the region were not coordinated well overall and did not work together for a coordinated strategy, so the initiative was not effective at stabilizing the region. CARSI expanded the funding and scope of regional programs to include social and political factors but was hindered by the same lack of strategic coordination and consistent funding. Finally, the Strategy for Engagement made a radical shift to promote prosperity and better governance in addition to security, but it, too, was ineffective due to the challenges of focus, funding, and strategic coordination.

The U.S. initiatives to stabilize the Northern Triangle have made progress in their focus, funding, and strategic coordination but have wasted U.S. funding with ineffective programs. These ineffective programs have been the result of not making the complete shift to a decentralized focus at the grassroots level with adequate funding and effective coordination between the agencies and governments involved. The initiatives could be made more effective by examining the strengths and weaknesses of each to determine fitting recommendations based on analytical findings.

A. MÉRIDA INITIATIVE

Mérida represented an ideological success because it established a multilateral partnership between the United States and its Central American neighbors to collaborate on the common problem of crime. The leaders of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras requested that they be included in this program after it had been created solely for Mexico. Although the United States took responsibility in promoting solutions for the region’s

problems, each country played its own role, a vital step in addressing each nation's security issues. This initiative shifted the U.S. focus to the region and the view of the Northern Triangle as a partner with a shared threat.

The Mérida Initiative's strategic focus was centralized and narrow, chiefly addressed the symptoms instead of root causes of an unstable Northern Triangle, and prioritized U.S. rather than regional interests. For example, Mérida was centralized in its support of regional security by strengthening law enforcement and the judiciary primarily at the federal level, and this initiative involved using the military for policing.¹²² This use of military forces for policing in the Northern Triangle led to many human rights concerns and reported abuses.¹²³ Citizens need and are responsive to policing that includes them in the solution, as opposed to "approaching communities in armored personnel carriers."¹²⁴ This centralized approach to security was criticized for its ineffectiveness, as well as its role in making the gang problem in the region worse.¹²⁵

For the most part, Mérida's strategic focus was narrow, thus addressing symptoms of the region's security issues instead of the root causes. The Congressional Research Service has cited poor socioeconomic conditions, natural disasters, a lack of citizen security, and poor governance as the main root causes of Central American migration, but much of Mérida's emphasis was on counternarcotics and border security.¹²⁶ The programs that did address security focused narrowly on training, technology, and equipment that were reactive to migration and crime trends instead of proactive and broad in scope.¹²⁷ The Congressional Research Service also recommended that Mérida be part of a more holistic anti-narcotics policy because Mérida's international model had failed to produce

¹²² Andrew Selee, *Overview of the Merida Initiative: May 2008* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2008), 1, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/overview-the-merida-initiative>.

¹²³ Selee, 3.

¹²⁴ Runde and Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*, 10.

¹²⁵ Cheatham and Roy, "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle."

¹²⁶ Meyer and Taft-Morales, *Central American Migration*; Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America*.

¹²⁷ Cheatham and Roy, "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle."

results.¹²⁸ These shortcomings in Mérida were primarily due to policymakers' U.S.-centric priorities, mainly crime and narcotics trafficking.

Therefore, Mérida failed to build institutional and civil society capacity in the Northern Triangle countries that would develop the economic prosperity and rule of law necessary for a healthy society. For example, rural areas of the Northern Triangle countries lacked a sufficient judiciary.¹²⁹ This shortcoming had to be addressed, but the existing judiciary and government institutions had to be free of corruption as well. Corruption in governance was an ongoing and unmitigated issue during the Mérida Initiative.¹³⁰ Congress attempted to create a more holistic approach by adding the objective of building community resilience to the initiative, but it was not a priority throughout the program.¹³¹ Understanding the strategic focus of Mérida is crucial, because the U.S. policy effort to mitigate instability in the Northern Triangle and reduce forced migration had been criticized by experts since the program's beginning for its centralized, narrow approach in mitigating the symptoms of the region's problems.

In addition to its focus, funding issues contributed to Mérida's ineffectiveness. For example, Mérida provided dedicated funding for the Northern Triangle, but these funds represented a fraction of what Mexico received. Beginning in 2008, when Mexico was positioned to receive \$500 million under the initiative, the Central American component was earmarked for only \$50 million.¹³² This allocation increased to \$100 million for the region under Mérida for the next year, but obstacles prevented agencies from using it for needed activities.¹³³ Congress's preset conditions for the recipient countries, the administrative procedures of U.S. bureaucratic organizations, and requirements to build capacity in Northern Triangle institutions accounted for the delays in funding

¹²⁸ Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America*, 22.

¹²⁹ Negroponete, *The Merida Initiative and Central America*, 38.

¹³⁰ Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America*, 22.

¹³¹ Selee, *Overview of the Merida Initiative*.

¹³² Selee, 2.

¹³³ Selee, 2.

disbursement.¹³⁴ For example, the recipient nations had to show proof that human rights issues were being addressed to receive all funds, but those nations also struggled with the institutional capacity to implement programs in a timely manner.¹³⁵ These problems were compounded by the centralized approach to law enforcement, which might have promoted conditions that impeded the funding approvals.

Additionally, Congress required the reporting of spending plans that included strategic goals, budgets, and expected outcomes as a condition of funding approval, not to mention U.S. contracting procedures caused delays because the timeframes involved in those procedures typically take three to six months to accomplish.¹³⁶ Mérida’s programs operated in isolated silos that prevented overall coordination for program success.¹³⁷ This problem was made manifest when the Government Accountability Office (GAO) encountered difficulties tracking the status of Mérida funding between U.S. agencies because of differing accounting processes.¹³⁸ In contrast to these bureaucratic impediments, Mérida’s programs could have been more successful with oversight and input from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local leaders, and faith-based organizations, promoting transparency, fighting corruption, and ensuring effectiveness.¹³⁹ As Mérida was in place for only two years before being replaced by CARSI, its schedule did not allow for successful implementation of its programs due to these limits and delays in program funding.

Each of the Northern Triangle initiatives was guided by primary objectives throughout its timeframe, and these objectives evolved over time based on their perceived successes and failures and recommendations from regional experts. The Mérida Initiative began with four primary objectives: 1) disrupting transnational, criminal, narcotics

¹³⁴ Jess T. Ford, *Status of Funds for the Merida Initiative*, GAO-10-253R (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2009), 10–14, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/100/96493.pdf>.

¹³⁵ Ford, 14.

¹³⁶ Ford, 11–12.

¹³⁷ Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan.”

¹³⁸ Ford, *Status of Funds for the Merida Initiative*, 17–18.

¹³⁹ Negroponte, *The Merida Initiative and Central America*, 66–67.

trafficking organizations; 2) ensuring border security; 3) building justice capacity; and 4) reducing gang activity and regional drug demand.¹⁴⁰ The fourth objective was changed to building community resilience after congressional influence on the initiative resulted in the final four “pillars” of Mérida.¹⁴¹ The four pillars of Mérida guided the programs and activities of the initiative, and Congress requested that benchmarks and reporting requirements be developed to evaluate their progress (see Table 4).¹⁴² Nevertheless, no benchmarks were developed, no data were collected, and no effective studies were undertaken to determine the effectiveness of Mérida’s programs or the overall success or failure at meeting the objectives.¹⁴³ Therefore, the congressionally stipulated benchmarks were insufficient to evaluate the overall success of these objectives. In the absence of actionable data from effective evaluations, program managers and bureaucrats judged the performance of Mérida’s objectives by the level of funding dedicated and delivered to its programs, the programs implemented, the technology delivered, and the people trained.

Table 4. Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues, 2008–2010¹⁴⁴

Objectives	Programs/Activities Implemented
Counternarcotics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FBI: Transnational anti-gang units • DEA, ICE: Support to regional LE units
Border security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBP: Port-of-entry assessments, recommendations, technology, and training
Judicial/LE capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FBI: Regional legal advisors • ATF: Firearms tracking technology • ILEA: Training for judicial, LE, and military
Building community resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USAID: Youth violence, community policing, and community development programs

¹⁴⁰ Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America*, 3.

¹⁴¹ Seelke, 14.

¹⁴² Selee, *Overview of the Merida Initiative*, 4.

¹⁴³ Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARS to Obama’s New Plan.”

¹⁴⁴ Adapted from Seelke, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America*, 2.

There was a lack of consensus on how to evaluate the success of Mérida's objectives at mitigating crime, violence, and migration in the region. For example, looking at homicide rates, the region saw a steady increase in homicides per capita of approximately 20 percent for all three Northern Triangle countries during the timeframe of Mérida.¹⁴⁵ This trend indicates a failure of Mérida, but many factors contribute to violence in addition to homicide rates. An InSight Crime analysis indicates that instability and migration in the Northern Triangle has been driven by corruption and impunity, in addition to crime and violence, and that any analysis of violent crime in the region must include extortion and violence toward women to effectively capture the driving forces behind regional instability.¹⁴⁶ From 2008 to 2010, no comprehensive metrics were developed to effectively measure progress or performance at meeting Mérida's objectives. Mérida's objectives were aimed at security issues related to organized crime, narcotics trafficking and border security, but they had also been intended to address corruption and impunity by increasing judicial and law enforcement capacity. The objectives of the initiatives for the Northern Triangle shifted over time to address corruption, impunity, and community resilience due to the lack of results in reducing violent crime and controlling emigration from the region.

B. CARSÍ

In 2010, CARSÍ was created, building on the Mérida Initiative's platform with a slight change in emphasis. The combination of more time allotted, increased levels of funding, and a slight shift in strategic focus toward decentralized programs provided CARSÍ with a greater likelihood of success. For example, it implemented programs and activities that had started under Mérida, increased funding levels, conducted an effective program evaluation, and shifted away from a primarily counternarcotics strategy to a broader one including citizen security and community-based programs. These modifications provided the foundation for future changes in funding and strategic focus for

¹⁴⁵ "Five Facts about Migration from Central America's Northern Triangle," Washington Office on Latin America, January 15, 2016, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/five-facts-about-migration-from-central-americas-northern-triangle/>.

¹⁴⁶ Seth Robbins, "3 Crime Factors Driving Northern Triangle Migrants Out," InSight Crime, October 30, 2018, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/crime-factors-pushing-northern-triangle-migrants-out/>.

the initiatives. The objectives of CARSI's programs and activities included increased citizen security, disruptions to criminal movement and contraband, greater government capacity and presence in communities, and higher levels of coordination between Northern Triangle countries.¹⁴⁷ CARSI's programs supported its objectives and continued to build on the judiciary and law enforcement capabilities in the Northern Triangle countries, and many of the programs used a community-based approach for security and capacity building (see Table 5). For example, specialized security-focused courts in Guatemala worked around the clock to process cases, and some were dedicated specifically to protecting women from human trafficking and violence.¹⁴⁸ These types of activities increased conviction rates and provided protection for the victims of crime, witnesses, and government employees involved.¹⁴⁹

In addition to its security-focused law enforcement programs, CARSI was significant in that it expanded the scope of Northern Triangle assistance to support better governance and community-level programs, which were shown to be the most successful in evaluations of USAID programs by Vanderbilt University. The funding levels for CARSI fluctuated between a low of \$101 million to a high of \$270 million from 2010 to 2015.¹⁵⁰ During this period, Vanderbilt University's LAPOP conducted the only significant evidence-based evaluation of U.S. programs for the Northern Triangle from 2008 to the present. The study showed that USAID had significant success in reducing crime and violence through community-based crime prevention and reduction programs, thereby increasing citizen satisfaction with police performance.¹⁵¹ For example, in communities where USAID community-based programs had been implemented, citizens reported a 51 percent reduction in murders and extortion incidents and a 25 percent reduction in narcotics sales.¹⁵² The overall funding commitment, program implementation,

¹⁴⁷ Department of State, "A Shared Partnership."

¹⁴⁸ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Eguizábal et al., 11.

¹⁵⁰ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 16–17.

¹⁵¹ Berk-Seligson et al., *USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach*.

¹⁵² Berk-Seligson et al., 5.

and positive feedback on USAID community programs pushed CARSI in a positive direction moving forward.

Table 5. CARSI’s Objectives, Programs, and Activities by Organization, 2010–2014¹⁵³

Objectives	Organization	Programs/Activities Implemented
“Create safe streets for the citizens of the region”	USAID/INL	Community-based, service-oriented policing; forensic labs; wiretapping centers
	ATF	Firearms tracing technology
	FBI	Fingerprint and biometric capability
“Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and between the nations of Central America”	INL	Vehicles, aircraft, equipment, maintenance, technology, and training (e.g., cargo x-ray equipment, weapons, ammunition, body armor, helicopters, radios)
	DHS	Criminal history information-sharing program
	DEA, ICE, ATF, INL	Training to investigate money, laundering, smuggling, narcotics/firearms/human trafficking
“Support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments”	USAID/INL	Long-term capacity building in justice and law enforcement sectors, judicial/prosecution training, prison management training and technology, investigation schools
	DEA, FBI, ICE	Management of vetted police units/ prosecutors to build their capacity to pursue complex investigations
	FBI	Regional legal advisors
	ILEA	Training for judicial, LE, and military
“Re-establish effective state presence, services and security in communities at risk”	USAID	Community-based, locally led programs: Crime/violence prevention project, educational programs, recreation programs, vocational programs, prevention councils, social entrepreneurship programs, 120+ employment outreach centers
	INL	GREAT, DARE

¹⁵³ Adapted from Department of State, “A Shared Partnership.”

Objectives	Organization	Programs/Activities Implemented
“Foster enhanced levels of coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region, other international partners, and donors to combat regional security threats”	USAID/INL	Security Commission of the Central American, SICA, Group of Friends of Central America, IDB

The main problems with CARSI that limited its success in stabilizing the Northern Triangle concerned funding, strategic focus, and insufficient evaluations of results. Funding levels for CARSI’s programs grew significantly from their inception, but 60 percent of the \$1.2 billion dedicated to the initiative was not used between 2008 and 2015 because of stipulations.¹⁵⁴ In other words, CARSI could only be 40 percent effective at program implementation due to the lack of funds disbursed to its programs. Several sources—including Matei and Cortez, Eric Olsen of the Wilson Center, and the Congressional Research Service—agree that the strategic direction of CARSI was ineffective due to an absent coordinated strategy.¹⁵⁵ A lack of coordination among the U.S. agencies involved created many individual programs without a common strategy to work together.¹⁵⁶ A lack of coordination between programs in each Northern Triangle country caused inconsistencies in the region.¹⁵⁷ Finally, the objectives of the strategy were not clearly presented to the participants to be measurable or attainable.¹⁵⁸ For example, the DEA used traditional law enforcement programs that did not complement the community-based programs that USAID had been promoting, and this disconnect caused problems

¹⁵⁴ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 19.

¹⁵⁵ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*; Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan”; Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*.

¹⁵⁶ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 26.

¹⁵⁷ Eguizábal et al., 9.

¹⁵⁸ Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan.”

with agency coordination.¹⁵⁹ This lack of coordination affected CARSI's efforts, making it ineffective at reducing crime, violence, and emigration from the region.

The lack of an overall strategy and program evaluation remained a significant problem with CARSI. While LAPOP examined USAID programs, it left out all DOS efforts, which accounted for most of CARSI's programs. According to the Wilson Center, many U.S. programs used data containing input metrics for evaluation instead of output metrics, a method that fails to truly measure success.¹⁶⁰ In the context of evaluating CARSI programs, output metrics would give a better measure of effective results. For example, an input might be the number of people trained in a school or the officers with access to new technology, but this input might not correlate with the desired outcome: a reduction in crime or violence. In the Northern Triangle, forced migration has been impacted by such output metrics as increased citizen trust in the government and a sense of safety. Policymakers could not make informed evidence-based decisions because of this lack of data and proper outcomes against which to measure success.

The most noticeable failure of CARSI relates to a lack of impact on crime, violence, gang activity, and forced immigration from the region. For example, at the beginning of CARSI in 2010, 13 percent of illegal immigrants detained at the U.S. southern border were from Northern Triangle countries, but by 2016, this group had increased to 42 percent.¹⁶¹ This increase in forced migration has been attributed to crime and violence in the Northern Triangle, with 40 percent of Northern Triangle immigrants having recently experienced a homicide in their family.¹⁶² Gangs in the region have caused most of the violence, and CARSI does not appear to be effective at reducing this threat. For example, the FBI created a task force to eliminate Mara Salvatrucha, or MS13, in 2004, and targeted Barrio 18 in 2007, but by 2012, MS13 had grown to be a significant enough threat in the Northern Triangle that the U.S. Treasury Department classified it a transnational criminal

¹⁵⁹ Gagne, "Political Obstacles in Northern Triangle."

¹⁶⁰ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle*, 289; Gagne, "Political Obstacles in Northern Triangle."

¹⁶¹ Bermeo, "Violence Drives Immigration from Central America."

¹⁶² Bermeo.

organization.¹⁶³ The Northern Triangle experienced some success in reducing homicides during the CARSI period, but the region continued to experience disproportionate violence compared to the global standard.¹⁶⁴ Table 6 provides an overview of program results by targeted objective.

Table 6. CARSI Results by Program Type¹⁶⁵

Objectives	Organization	Programs/Activities Implemented	Results
Narcotics interdiction and law enforcement support	INL	Vehicles, aircraft, equipment, maintenance, technology, and training (e.g., cargo x-ray equipment, weapons, ammunition, body armor, helicopters, radios)	No overall strategy; no evaluations of outcomes; Limited communication, coordination, and collaboration between agencies
	FBI	Transnational anti-gang units	
	DHS	Criminal history information-sharing program	
	DEA, ICE, ATF, INL	Trained units to investigate money, laundering, smuggling, narcotics/firearms/persons trafficking	
Institutional capacity building	USAID/INL	Long-term capacity building in justice and law enforcement sectors; community-based, service-oriented policing; forensic labs; wiretapping centers; investigation schools; judicial/prosecution training; prison management training and technology	Positive improvements from USAID’s community-based programs based on LAPOP studies, lack of data and evaluations to determine accurate program results
	ATF	Firearms tracing technology	
	FBI	Fingerprint and biometric capability	

¹⁶³ Carlos Garcia, “Tracing the History of Failed Gang Policies in US, Northern Triangle,” InSight Crime, December 3, 2015, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/tracing-the-history-of-failed-gang-policies-in-us-northern-triangle/>; Pfaffinger, “Balas y Barrios,” 19.

¹⁶⁴ Meyer and Taft-Morales, *Central American Migration*.

¹⁶⁵ Adapted from Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*.

Objectives	Organization	Programs/Activities Implemented	Results
Prevention	USAID	Community-based, 120+ locally led programs: educational, recreational, vocational, prevention councils, social entrepreneurship	USAID programs have shown success with community-based programs, but more reliable studies are needed
	INL	GREAT, DARE	INL programs unlikely to work because they have not worked in the United States

Regarding overall performance, CARSI has not met its intended results. The initiative’s goals were safe streets, the disruption of narcotics smuggling, an increased state presence, capable governance, and regional coordination. Research has shown minimal success in each area, but such evidence has been insufficient to ensure a healthy and functioning society in any of the three countries. USAID prevention and institutional capacity building have been the most successful types of programs, but these areas represent only 31 percent of overall CARSI funding under the Economic Support Fund that USAID manages.¹⁶⁶ The DOS’s INL manages most of CARSI’s programs. Regional experts like Eric Olsen of the Wilson Center believe CARSI to be ineffective at stabilizing the Northern Triangle’s drivers of immigration¹⁶⁷ Many programs have been put in place to train and equip law enforcement and judiciary personnel, but the lack of a coordinated strategy created many independent programs, with independent objectives that might be at cross-purposes with one another.¹⁶⁸ In 2015, before the 114th Congress, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs acknowledged that CARSI was incapable of significantly improving the security of the Northern Triangle given its

¹⁶⁶ Meyer and Seelke, 16–17.

¹⁶⁷ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 6–7.

¹⁶⁸ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 23.

implementation at the time.¹⁶⁹ The GAO has suggested that the DOS and USAID must work together to build a comprehensive strategy that includes monitoring and evaluating these newly coordinated programs.¹⁷⁰ The significant difference between the results desired versus those achieved seems to stem from this lack of a comprehensive strategy and agency coordination. CARSI also lacked substantial resources to promote civil society, which has also been deemed critical for success by regional experts.¹⁷¹ CARSI's lack of success was most evident in 2014 with the 150 percent increase in unaccompanied minors migrating from the Northern Triangle.¹⁷² Over 50,000 children were apprehended at the U.S. southern border in 2014, and that number has risen for the duration of CARSI, since 2010 until the present.¹⁷³ Figure 1 illustrates this increase in unaccompanied minors throughout CARSI and the spike in 2014. The growing numbers of children being forced to make such a long and dangerous journey to escape the region alone highlight the gravity of the region's instability and the need to revise the initiative. Despite being offered recommendations by regional experts, CARSI's administrators have only partially implemented the suggested changes—but not fully or broadly enough to have significant newfound impact—and continue to face the same issues that have plagued the initiatives. This gap led to the 2014 migration surge, the highest levels of immigrants arriving at the U.S. border since Mérida was implemented in 2008.

¹⁶⁹ Meyer and Seelke, 23.

¹⁷⁰ Grover, *U.S. Assistance to Central America*.

¹⁷¹ H., *Regional Security Cooperation*.

¹⁷² Meyer et al., *Unaccompanied Children from Central America*, 1.

¹⁷³ Meyer et al., 1.

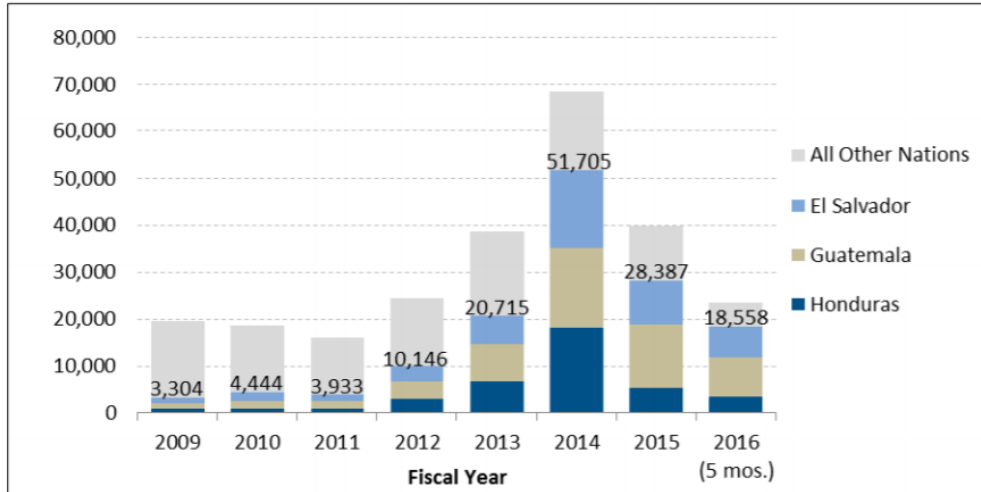


Figure 1. Child Migration from Northern Triangle Countries, 2009–2016¹⁷⁴

C. THE STRATEGY FOR ENGAGEMENT

The Obama administration developed the new Strategy for Engagement in 2014 to provide a broader approach to solving the region’s problems. This new initiative maintained CARSI programs but also placed greater emphasis on better governance, economic growth, and social welfare.¹⁷⁵ The surge of migrants from the Northern Triangle countries to the southern border in 2014 brought increased U.S. national attention to the problems in Central America. This surge also underscored the failure of the region’s efforts to mitigate the challenges that drive forced migration. Over 230,000 Northern Triangle families and unaccompanied minors were apprehended at the U.S. southern border in 2014, and the majority sought asylum due to the crime and violence in their countries of origin, which made leaving their homes desirable.¹⁷⁶ This immigration surge overwhelmed U.S. border security and immigration systems to the point that President Obama declared the situation a national security threat. The president determined that CARSI had been successful in specific areas but decidedly unsuccessful at stabilizing Central America.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Source: Meyer et al., *Unaccompanied Children from Central America*, 1.

¹⁷⁵ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*, 1.

¹⁷⁶ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 2.

¹⁷⁷ Meyer, 5.

This new strategy for the Northern Triangle initiatives was a significant shift in emphasis away from security and counternarcotics and toward the root causes of migration.

The Strategy for Engagement has had some successes from the implementation of programs and activities: USAID community engagement programs have continued to yield positive results, funding has increased for the region, and evaluations with benchmarks have been implemented.¹⁷⁸ The programs have supported the three goals of prosperity, governance, and security. Border security programs increased trade efficiency in the region between countries by reducing the time to move goods across national borders without compromising security.¹⁷⁹ Programs have supported the economy through farming improvements, job creation, and food security. For example, more than 13,000 Hondurans escaped extreme poverty, and 22,000 new jobs were created in El Salvador between 2011 and 2016.¹⁸⁰ In Guatemala, USAID farming programs increased farm sales and promoted the growth of 20,000 jobs in this sector.¹⁸¹ Better governance was promoted through such programs as the *Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras* (Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras; MACCIH). In 2016, this program placed anti-corruption personnel in the Honduran judicial and law enforcement systems.¹⁸² This new initiative also supported such international programs as the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), and led to the arrest of high-ranking government officials in Guatemala.¹⁸³ Security programs saw results during this period, too. For example, conviction rates in El Salvador rose from 74 percent to 96 percent in 2016, and Operation Phoenix produced a 40 percent decrease in

¹⁷⁸ White House, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America* (Washington, DC: Obama Whitehouse Archives, 2016), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/central_america_strategy.pdf.

¹⁷⁹ Department of State, *Report to Update the United States Strategy for Engagement in Central America* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2017), 4, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/WHA-CEN-Central-America-Strategy-Report-to-Congress.pdf>.

¹⁸⁰ Department of State, 4.

¹⁸¹ U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, “U.S. Assistance to Central America Promotes Security, Economic Development, and Rule of Law” (Washington, DC: U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, April 2021), 3, <https://www.usglc.org/faq-violence-migration-and-u-s-assistance-to-central-america/>.

¹⁸² White House, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America*, 5.

¹⁸³ White House, 5.

Guatemalan homicides over the same period.¹⁸⁴ These localized successes give examples from which future programs may derive strategies.

The USAID community-based prevention and law enforcement programs continued to show success in the region. These programs saw reductions of homicides by 78 percent in Honduras and 66 percent in El Salvador between 2015 and 2017 by targeting high-risk areas.¹⁸⁵ A Fulbright research project confirmed this success, indicating greater citizen satisfaction with local leaders and a reduction in crime as a result of USAID prevention and engagement programs.¹⁸⁶ This initiative increased funding to \$750 million for 2016 and reallocated funding with 40 percent designated for development assistance, 33 percent for INL, and 20 percent for the Economic Support Fund.¹⁸⁷ This funding level was the highest for the initiative between 2016 and 2020.¹⁸⁸ With the opposite approach seen at the beginning with Mérida, only one-third of the funding was devoted to fighting crime and narcotics at this point. This allocation illustrates the commitment to prosperity and governance that was intended with this initiative, with most program funding shifting from security to development assistance.

The Strategy for Engagement added evaluation and benchmarking systems to measure its success. The previous initiatives had lacked a means of collecting data and measuring results against preset metrics for success, so this new accomplishment ensures progress for these regional security initiatives. The DOS and USAID worked together to produce a report for Congress that detailed data, beginning in 2017, concerning Central American programs that both agencies implemented.¹⁸⁹ This plan for monitoring and evaluating U.S. programs includes performance indicators, context indicators, and

¹⁸⁴ White House.

¹⁸⁵ U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, “U.S. Assistance to Central America.”

¹⁸⁶ Monico, “Cutting Off Aid.”

¹⁸⁷ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 13–14.

¹⁸⁸ Meyer, 13.

¹⁸⁹ Department of State, *Progress Report for the United States Strategy for Central America’s Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2019), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FY-2019-Central-America-Strategy-Progress-Report.pdf>.

evaluations.¹⁹⁰ The performance indicators compare the targeted and actual results of individual programs, and the context indicators document long-term results with international and regional benchmarks.¹⁹¹ After the data are collected, reported and analyzed, a third-party organization evaluates the results—and USAID repeated this process 35 times from 2013 to 2018.¹⁹² A results architecture was created based on the three objectives of prosperity, governance, and security with performance indicators supporting each objective, as well as evaluation tools with which to measure this system’s performance and context indicators independently. See Figure 2 and Tables 7–8 for the results architecture and examples of performance and context indicators.¹⁹³

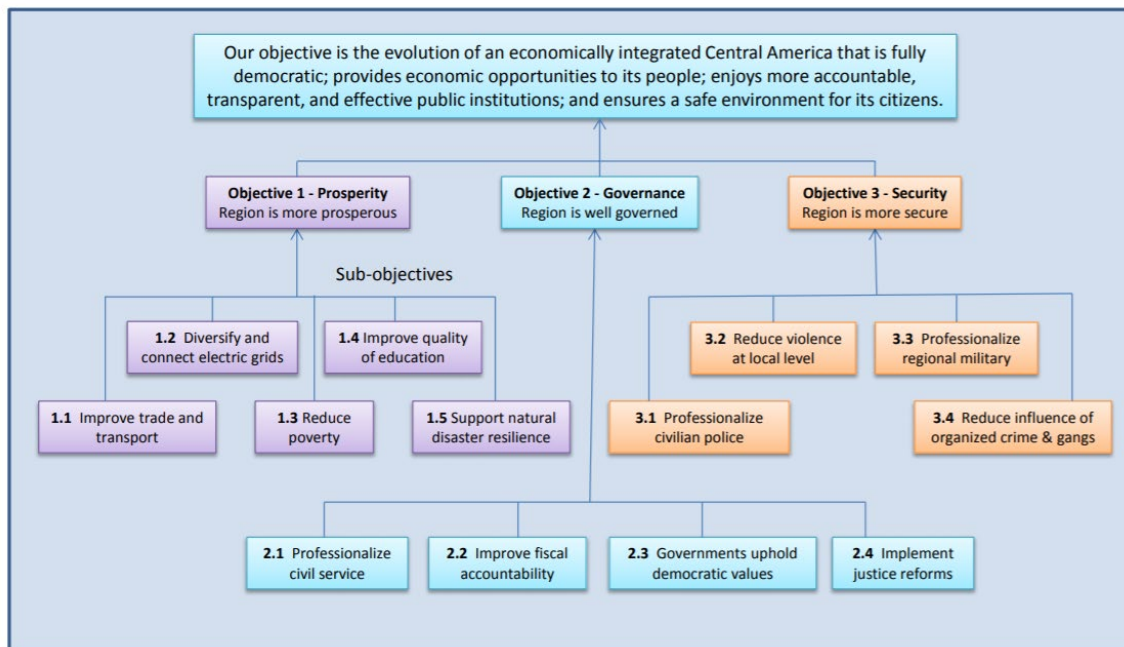


Figure 2. The Strategy for Engagement’s Results Architecture¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Department of State, 4.

¹⁹¹ Department of State, 4.

¹⁹² Department of State, 4.

¹⁹³ Department of State.

¹⁹⁴ Source: Department of State, *Report to Update the United States Strategy*, 1.

Table 7. U.S. Strategy for Central America: Region-Wide Performance Indicators by Country¹⁹⁵

Indicator/Country:	FY 2016 ¹ Actual	FY 2017 Actual	FY 2018 Target	FY 2018 Actual	FY 2019 Target ²	Notes/Context:
Number of people with improved economic benefits derived from sustainable natural resources management and/or biodiversity conservation as a result of USG assistance	n/a	22,025	35,500	44,857	tbd	Includes USAID data for one activity in Honduras, two Central America Regional activities, and one State WHA Regional interagency activity awarded to the State Bureau for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (OES).
Honduras	n/a	22,025	35,000	43,800	tbd	Measures economic growth and social development results of sustainable natural resources management programs. Improved economic benefits are positive changes in economic earnings or consumption due to sustainable management or conservation of natural resources, which can include wages, communal revenues, non-cash benefits, economic benefits from ecosystem services and reductions in the rate of loss of an economic benefit under threat.
Regional	n/a	n/a	500	1,057	tbd	
1.4 Improve Quality of Education						
Number of individuals who complete USG-assisted workforce development programs	1,687	2,427	12,548	6,175	tbd	Includes USAID data for two activities in El Salvador, two in Guatemala (one ended in 2018), one in Honduras, two in Nicaragua, and one LAC regional activity. Some activities met or exceeded their FY 2018 targets and some had implementation delays related to lengthy capacity building for training centers and institutions, redesigned beneficiary targeting and tracking, and local socio-political unrest. Includes data for State WHA Regional interagency funds awarded to DOL, and State WHA Regional trade capacity building activities.
El Salvador	n/a	985	7,310	3,040	tbd	Measures scale and accomplishment of initial step in guiding at-risk youth toward improved employment and livelihoods. Completion of workforce development programs by at-risk youth in Central America also shows indirect results of programs aiming to improve the quality and strength of labor markets and institutions. Completing workforce development program means that an individual has met the completion requirements of a structured workforce development program (components of which are defined by the program offered).
Guatemala	1,187	461	1,010	1,409	tbd	
Honduras	n/a	n/a	2,498	651	tbd	
Nicaragua	500	981	1,240	1,075	tbd	
Regional	n/a	n/a	490	0	tbd	

The Strategy for Engagement started off strong financially, but its funding levels consistently dropped over its existence (see Figure 3).¹⁹⁶ This inconsistency has limited the initiative’s ability to implement programs and operate at the scope determined necessary at its inception. The Congressional Research Service and other analysts indicate that while appropriations started at approximately \$600 million in 2015 and increased to \$750 million in 2016, actual disbursement dropped precipitously thereafter, to approximately \$200 million in 2019.¹⁹⁷ These withering funding levels indicate that the Trump administration did not support the framework of the initiative, and this variation reflects an inconsistent U.S. commitment to the security and prosperity of the Northern Triangle.¹⁹⁸ These actions contrast with past U.S. efforts, as does the anti-immigration rhetoric from the Trump administration, straining levels of cooperation between the United

¹⁹⁵ Source: Department of State, *Progress Report for the United States*, Attachment 2, 4.

¹⁹⁶ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*.

¹⁹⁷ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*, 1; Monico, “Cutting Off Aid.”

¹⁹⁸ Sullivan et al., *Latin America and the Caribbean*, 9.

States and the Northern Triangle, according to the Congressional Research Service.¹⁹⁹ The initiative started out as a greater commitment to the region with a primary focus on development assistance, but the failure of funding disbursement to reach the region has undercut that promise.

Table 8. Strategy for Engagement—Northern Triangle Country Security Context Indicators²⁰⁰

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
						Benchmark Analysis of 2014-2018 Data
INTENTIONAL HOMICIDES PER 100,000 PEOPLE	The World Health Organization (WHO) considers a rate of 10 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants or higher to be characteristic of endemic violence. El Salvador and Honduras observed dramatic declines in their national homicide rates in 2017, as did El Salvador again in 2018. Nevertheless, these countries' homicide rates remain much higher than the most recent 10-year average for Central America (36.85). All Northern Triangle countries' national homicide rates exceed the LAC-wide average for recent years (22.67) as well as the 10-year average homicide rate for the U.S. (5.05).					
El Salvador	61	103	81	60	50	
Guatemala	32	30	27	26	NA	
Honduras	68	60	59	46	NA	
PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION WHO FEEL SAFE WALKING IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD AT NIGHT	Northern Triangle citizens' perceptions of security continue to fluctuate in recent years, are consistent with recent LAC region-wide trends, and have detrimental economic and political consequences for citizens and governments. Analysis of 2016/17, AmericasBarometer survey data showed that Central American citizens' fear of crime leads large percentages of the population to alter their daily activities—avoiding public transit or making purchases, keeping children at home, changing jobs or place of study, moving neighborhoods, and even considering emigration. For more information, see <i>Beneath the Violence: How Insecurity Shapes Daily Life and Emigration in Central America</i> , available at https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Crime-Avoidance-Report-FINAL-ONLINE.pdf .					
El Salvador	26%	32%	45%	51%	41%	
Guatemala	26%	28%	62%	46%	47%	
Honduras	34%	39%	66%	54%	52%	
PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION WHO EXPRESS TRUST IN THE POLICE	Citizens' trust in the police in the Northern Triangle remains low, a LAC region-wide phenomenon. Recent research shows that individuals living in high-crime or insecure areas are more likely to report that police officers asked them to pay a bribe and are less confident that police would respond quickly to a call for help. For more information, see <i>The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016/17: A Comparative Study of Democracy in the Americas</i> , available at www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2016 .					
El Salvador	26%	32%	38%	28%	25%	
Guatemala	26%	28%	34%	25%	33%	
Honduras	34%	39%	40%	37%	34%	

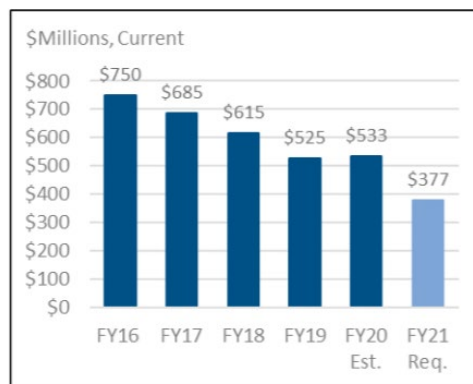


Figure 3. Funding Levels for the Strategy for Engagement, 2016–2020²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Sullivan et al., 9.

²⁰⁰ Source: Department of State, *Progress Report for the United States*, Attachment 3, 1.

²⁰¹ Source: Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*, 1.

The focus of the Strategy for Engagement reversed direction—toward U.S. border security, irregular immigration, and narcotics trafficking—under the Trump administration.²⁰² This emphasis on prioritizing U.S. interests and preventing immigration from the Northern Triangle coincided with increased deportations of Northern Triangle nationals and decreased funding, and these activities have been criticized for contributing to gang activity and crime in the region.²⁰³ For example, deportees who have not been incarcerated usually arrive without knowledge of the area or a means to support themselves, and this isolation often leads to crime or victimization.²⁰⁴ The push factors of crime, violence, and economic hardship trumped past efforts to discourage migration through deterrence, so this return to crime and repelling of immigrants will most likely exacerbate the region’s problems.

The most problematic failure of the initiative during its lifespan, from 2015 to 2020, has been its lack of obvious results. This failure to produce results is manifest in irregular migration, crime and violence, and narcotics trafficking. The Strategy for Engagement came out in response to the surge of asylum-seeking migrants arriving at the U.S. southern border in 2014, but an examination of recent apprehensions there has revealed recent numbers that eclipse the 2014 figures. For example, in 2019, of the 600,000 Northern Triangle nationals who arrived seeking asylum, 80 percent were families or unaccompanied children (see Figure 4).²⁰⁵ The Trump administration responded to the migration surge in 2019 by suspending aid to the region, thus forcing Northern Triangle leaders to control the number of people leaving their countries for the United States. This suspension of aid lasted approximately six months in 2019, but while the aid was eventually reinstated, the interruption had a significant impact on the initiative’s programs. For example, between March 2019 and March 2020, USAID activities in the region dropped from a high of 1.5 million to a low of 700,000.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Department of State, *Report to Update the United States Strategy*, 5.

²⁰³ Sullivan et al., *Latin America and the Caribbean*, 9–10.

²⁰⁴ Negroponte, *The Merida Initiative and Central America*, 68.

²⁰⁵ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*.

²⁰⁶ Meyer, 1–2.

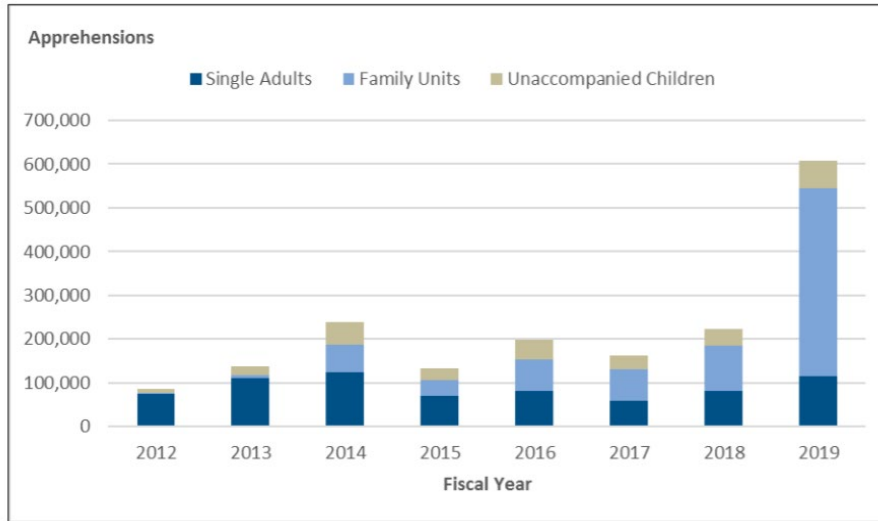


Figure 4. U.S. Apprehensions of Migrants by Demographic, 2012–2019²⁰⁷

Northern Triangle crime and violence remain at unacceptable levels, with over half the region’s residents living in poverty, unemployment rates for young adults at 33 percent, and “some of the highest murder rates in the world,” according to the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition.²⁰⁸ U.S. efforts have also failed to effectively mitigate narcotics trafficking in the region, with 3 percent of all South American cocaine being trafficked through the Northern Triangle and into the United States in 2020.²⁰⁹ The failure to achieve results in irregular immigration, crime, violence, and narcotics trafficking suggests that the Strategy for Engagement has not been successful, at least not as of this writing, in stabilizing the region and enabling security, governance, and prosperity.

The Strategy for Engagement could be more easily analyzed for the period from 2014 to the present due to the increased monitoring, data collection, and evaluations conducted. This data-based approach is a major success and notable change from previous initiatives in helping drive policy with data. The DOS and USAID conducted 35 different evaluations of their programs from 2014 to 2019, and their report for Congress displayed

²⁰⁷ Source: Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 1.

²⁰⁸ U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, “U.S. Assistance to Central America,” 1.

²⁰⁹ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*.

the results architecture, region-wide performance indicators, and region-wide context indicators for the activities.²¹⁰ The context indicators have been most helpful in performance analysis because they measure broad, high-level factors that impact the overall results of the initiative. The factors measured by the context indicators are not a direct result of U.S. programs but instead drive overall results, for example, trust in government or the feeling of safety among citizens.

The performance indicators can show informative data that track increases or decreases in specific program performance, but this tracking can be misleading. For example, in 2018, 18,000 new jobs were created, 1,700 human rights defenders trained, 15,000 judicial personnel trained, and 140,000 at-risk youth supported with crime-prevention programs.²¹¹ These figures initially appear to be outputs from programs, but they do not represent the types of outcomes that the trained judiciary and youth programs achieve to change the region for the better. The data also show that homicide rates dropped between 40 percent and 70 percent in some areas, but this result does not give as high level a picture as the context indicators from the results architecture can.²¹²

The context indicators in the results architecture represent a high-level view of the initiative's performance in the overall impact of Northern Triangle migration, security, prosperity, and governance. Even though the homicide rates fell significantly, the context indicators show that El Salvador had 50 homicides per 100,000 people in 2019 and Honduras had 46 per 100,000 in 2018.²¹³ The benchmark analysis cites the ten-year U.S average of 5.05, and the World Health Organization (WHO) considers ten homicides per 100,000 to be endemic violence.²¹⁴ In other words, the Northern Triangle's homicide rates are about ten times that of the United States and five times that of the "endemic" level defined by the WHO. The initiatives have been ineffective overall at stabilizing the region since their beginning in 2008. Many individual programs can be used as examples of

²¹⁰ Department of State, *Progress Report for the United States*.

²¹¹ Department of State, 1–2.

²¹² Department of State.

²¹³ Department of State.

²¹⁴ Department of State, Attachment 3, 1.

success in all three objective areas—prosperity, governance, and security—but the overall program evaluation shows unacceptable levels of violence, corruption, and poverty.

The Strategy for Engagement was intended to provide better security, governance, and prosperity for the citizens of the Northern Triangle, but even after six years of Mérida and CARSI, the first four years of the initiative demonstrated limited success or effectiveness overall. For example, while citizens do feel safer than before—with El Salvadorans reporting an increased perception of safety from 26 percent to 41 percent and Hondurans reporting an increase from 34 percent to 52 percent—these figures still mean that at least half of citizens feel unsafe.²¹⁵

The efforts in better governance floundered as well. Trust in law enforcement was mostly unchanged in the entire region, with at least two-thirds of the population lacking trust in their law enforcement, and the corruption index remained unchanged or dropped for the period, with the region scoring a low 29–35 out of a possible 100 points.²¹⁶ According to the evaluations using the context indicators, the citizens in the Northern Triangle actually lost trust in their courts for a fair trial during the period of this initiative. El Salvador experienced a drop from 23 to 17 percent, Guatemala a drop from 35 to 34 percent, and Honduras a drop from 29 to 28 percent in confidence.²¹⁷ These findings mean that at least two-thirds of citizens in the region believe they will not get a fair trial in their justice systems.

In the area of regional prosperity, the initiative failed to perform again, with unemployment and poverty rates left unchanged. For example, El Salvador’s poverty rate dropped only from 32 percent to 29 percent, and Honduras saw a reduction of nearly 10 percent, a drop from 63 percent to 52 percent.²¹⁸ This new trend in data collection, measurement, and evaluation is a success for the initiative because it gives analysts and ultimately policymakers an accurate, high-level picture of the initiative’s performance.

²¹⁵ Department of State.

²¹⁶ Department of State.

²¹⁷ Department of State.

²¹⁸ Department of State.

Table 9 provides an overview of the Strategy for Engagement’s results from its strategies and objectives.

Table 9. The Strategy for Engagement: Objectives, Strategies, and Results, 2014 to Present²¹⁹

Objectives	Strategies	Results
Promote prosperity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve trade and transportation • Improve education • Reduce poverty • Improve electric grid • Support disaster resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved performance in cross-border trade for El Salvador and Guatemala (not in Honduras) • Mixed results in training for technical energy fields • Mixed results in poverty reduction measures • Improved farming practices that achieved desired outcomes • Mixed results in job creation with overall increased results • Workforce development that did not meet desired results • Overall significant educational success with educational assistance programs
Strengthen governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform judicial system • Promote democratic values • Improve accountability • Improve civil service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice sector personnel trained far exceeded target goals • Mechanism for public oversight did not meet target goals • Civil society watchdog/advocate organizations exceeded target goals • Human rights defender training exceeded target goals
Improve security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce local violence • Professionalize police • Professionalize military • Reduce impact of gangs/organized crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homicide rates dropped since 2016 • Percentage of population that feels safe peaked then dropped after 2016 • Trust in police rose but then dropped after 2016

²¹⁹ Adapted from Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 6; Department of State, *Progress Report for the United States*.

The Strategy for Engagement did not meet its desired results overall because of its lack of success in consistently following long-term planning and implementation strategies set by the initiative. This long-term commitment to strategy has been proven necessary in such past U.S. successes as in Colombia, where the United States invested more than \$500 million per year from 2000 to 2008 in the U.S. war on drugs in that nation.²²⁰ The commitment to Plan Colombia was maintained through a long-term strategic plan, deemed a success for both nations involved. According to Nick Miroff of the *Washington Post*, “After 16 years and \$10 billion, the once-controversial security aid package is celebrated today by many Republicans and Democrats in Congress as one of the top U.S. foreign policy achievements of the 21st century.”²²¹

The United States has invested approximately 12 years in the Northern Triangle through the Mérida Initiative, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement. During this time, the program has seen constant change in overall strategy, funding levels have been inconsistent, and the programs have been neither coordinated, nor monitored, nor evaluated effectively according to many sources.²²² Recommendations for monitoring, data collection, evaluation, and reporting have surfaced from the U.S. agencies managing this initiative, so the framework for success may still guide their efforts.

The increase in data collection and evaluation is a tremendous success for these initiatives and future ones, with an aim to clearly highlight what works and what does not. The Strategy for Engagement did work from 2014, culminating in a program high in 2016, until 2017, when the Trump administration pulled back and redirected funding to U.S. border security, narcotics trafficking, and immigration—and it can work again. The decreasing funds correlated with increasing destabilization in the Northern Triangle, which

²²⁰ Daniel Mejía, *Plan Colombia: An Analysis of Effectiveness and Costs* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016), 4, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Mejia-Colombia-final-2.pdf>.

²²¹ Nick Miroff, “‘Plan Colombia’: How Washington Learned to Love Latin American Intervention Again,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/plan-colombia-how-washington-learned-to-love-latin-american-intervention-again/2016/09/18/ddaeae1c-3199-4ea3-8d0f-69ee1cbda589_story.html.

²²² White House, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America*; Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*; Gagne, “US Continues Shift in Security Priorities”; Runde and Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*.

led to an increase in migrants at the U.S. border through 2019, eclipsing the previous 2014 border surge high. From Mérida and CARSI to the Strategy for Engagement, administrators have seen a flip in funding priorities—from two-thirds toward security and one-third toward prosperity and governance to two-thirds toward prosperity and governance and just one-third toward security. With the latter ratio, the Strategy for Engagement saw success until funding was pulled back and redirected at the U.S. border. These trends highlight the need to address the issues of border security at the source, in the Northern Triangle, and not just at the U.S. border. Additionally, they highlight the need for a long-term bipartisan plan, like the Strategy for Engagement when it was implemented in 2014. Future initiatives will need to shift focus yet again to the decentralized, grassroots level, addressing the need for prosperity and governance, with funding levels that are adequate and consistent to successfully impact the drivers of forced migration. Although most of the effort should be directed toward prosperity, the security focus is needed and should be effectively coordinated among all agencies involved.

D. CONCLUSION

The U.S. initiatives aimed at stabilizing the Northern Triangle and, in effect, reducing the flow of forced migration from the region were not as effective as they could have been. As seen throughout this analysis, these initiatives suffered from the fallacy of addressing the symptoms instead of the root causes of the problems. In addition to this issue, the agencies involved have not had a clear picture of what success is or how to recognize it, and those agencies have a record of poor communication and coordination. The bureaucratic obstacles that delay or totally block the needed funding are also still in place. These challenges must be dealt with effectively to see future success. The current initiatives in place for Central America must be changed to correct these problems and successfully stem the flow of irregular migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States.

This analysis indicates that policy makers need effective monitoring and evaluations of programs to determine success, but that success must be framed in the context of how the activities promote the overarching objectives of the initiatives and how

they impact the most important metric involved in measuring success, irregular migration flows. Without strategic coordination and evaluation, any initiative will most likely repeat mistakes of the past by focusing on outputs instead of outcomes. Pfaffinger states that agencies involved in the Northern Triangle initiatives tend to prefer using outputs to measure success, because they are short term focused and government institutions tend to resist change.²²³ This change requires political will, but political leaders need actionable data to make strategic decisions that will stabilize the region and reduce the irregular migrant flow to the United States.

Merida, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement have consistently shifted away from a centralized, predominantly law enforcement approach toward a strategy aimed more at achieving prosperity and better governance for the region's citizens. This shift has been called for by regional experts, but the initiatives continue to fail at achieving a more stable and prosperous region. This analysis indicates that the agencies involved must coordinate and communicate effectively while working toward a vision that is shared by all stakeholders. A shared vision of a more prosperous and better governed region can be achieved by including leaders from all levels of society, both within government and nongovernment organizations. Once achieved, this collaborative effort will require a long-term commitment by both the Northern Triangle countries and the U.S. agencies involved.

²²³ Pfaffinger, "Balas y Barrios," 53.

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IV. CONCLUSION

Considering the analysis in this thesis, the United States should be more effective at stemming the flow of migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador by making better governance with decreased corruption the most important, clearly defined, and coordinated strategic objective. This strategic objective has the greatest chance of success if the focus is on community-based implementation and if the programs and activities that support it are effectively monitored and evaluated by actionable data that are disseminated to all stakeholders involved.²²⁴ The United States has provided funding to the region that is necessary for success, but experts from the Wilson Center’s Latin American Program believe that U.S. political pressure will be more effective at reducing corruption in the region and improving governance than the money spent on programs.²²⁵

The strategy must include stakeholders at all levels, and those stakeholders at the local level are more likely to know what will work and why, what will not work and why, and how to adjust programs accordingly. For example, gender-based violence has had a greater negative impact than other violent crimes on these societies, but this may not be obvious to a policymaker who is removed from this issue at the local level.²²⁶ In his thesis on improving U.S. anti-gang policies, Pfaffinger states that “overlooking strategic partnerships with local subject-matter experts creates a situation whereby those closest to the problem are the least supported in developing effective solutions.”²²⁷ The data collection, evaluation, and reporting done by USAID on its programs have provided practitioners with valuable information on what is working in the region. This process should be modeled by all agencies involved in these initiatives to ensure success and communicate the results. This approach of adjusting the strategy to focus on the problem that has the most negative impact on success, pushing the programs and decision-making

²²⁴ Ernst et al., *US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle 2014–2019*, 6–10.

²²⁵ Ernst et al., 25.

²²⁶ Bozmoski, “The Northern Triangle.”

²²⁷ Pfaffinger, “Balas y Barrios,” 92.

down to the lowest community and government levels, and accurately evaluating the programs and activities involved will promote results that better stem the tide of migration that has overwhelmed the U.S. southern border.

A. FINDINGS

In 2019, prompted by the migration surge from the Northern Triangle, President Trump suspended U.S. aid to the region to pressure its leaders to mitigate the migration flow.²²⁸ This action also prompted the U.S. Congress to take action to address the crisis. Congress unanimously passed the bipartisan NTEEA in July 2019 in response to both the crisis and the president’s suspension of aid to the region.²²⁹ This action was a step forward because it protected funding for the Northern Triangle programs and expanded the scope of focus to include such critical factors as gender-based violence and the internal displacement of people.²³⁰ The NTEEA focuses primarily on fostering economic development, advancing democratic institutions, and fighting corruption. Overall, the NTEEA has addressed the shortcomings of the Strategy for Engagement. For example, it guarantees \$577 million in irrevocable aid, but such aid still depends on the region’s meeting requirements that have been an obstacle in the past.²³¹ Additionally, the same contract procedures are in place that have hindered timely disbursement of funds to the programs.²³² The NTEEA appears to have been intended to protect the region’s funding and focus the efforts on the root causes of its instability, but this initiative must make better governance and anti-corruption a top priority.

After more than a decade of U.S. initiatives, the overall findings indicate that root causes of the instability in the Northern Triangle have not been effectively addressed due to 1) a lack of consistent and adequate funding reaching the region, 2) ineffective collaboration and communication between U.S. government agencies, and 3) absent data-

²²⁸ Monico, “Cutting Off Aid.”

²²⁹ National Immigration Forum, “United States–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act.”

²³⁰ Giffels, “10 Facts about the Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act.”

²³¹ Beviglia, “The Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act.”

²³² Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 15.

driven, evidence-based decision-making supporting an overall strategy that is understood, agreed upon, and supported by all stakeholders involved.²³³ In 2019, Mark L. Schneider and Michael A. Matera of the Center for Strategic and International Studies called the U.S. efforts in the Northern Triangle “disjointed policy decisions” with “international and regional coordination . . . clearly lacking.”²³⁴ A 2019 GAO evaluation reinforced this finding, recommending for 190 DOS and USAID projects better agency coordination and collaboration—between such agencies as USAID, the DOD, and the Department of Agriculture—as well as better monitoring and evaluations to develop more specific objectives.²³⁵ The U.S. programs are still suffering from this lack of specific, obtainable objectives, which Matei and Cortez identified in 2015.²³⁶ It has been difficult for the programs to act on the strategic direction of each initiative. The U.S. initiatives seem focused narrowly on root causes in the Northern Triangle, but the actual performance of the agencies and programs has shown little change.

The research indicates that over the course of the Mérida Initiative, CARSI, and the Strategy for Engagement, community-based programs have worked. They have been shown to reduce violence, make citizens feel safe, foster trust in the government, and reduce the presence of gangs.²³⁷ The Woodrow Wilson Center’s Eric Olsen states that strengthening civil society is necessary for success.²³⁸ The Association for Peace and Justice, a faith-based NGO that has been operating in Honduras for decades, concurs with this view.²³⁹ When comparing the efforts in the Northern Triangle to Colombia, success

²³³ Mark L. Schneider and Michael A. Matera, *Where Are the Northern Triangle Countries Headed? And What Is U.S. Policy?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), 4, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/where-are-northern-triangle-countries-headed-and-what-us-policy>.

²³⁴ Schneider and Matera, 4.

²³⁵ Grover, *U.S. Assistance to Central America*.

²³⁶ Matei and Cortez, “From Mérida & CARSI to Obama’s New Plan.”

²³⁷ Berk-Seligson et al., *USAID’s Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach*, 5–8.

²³⁸ Eguizábal et al., *Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle*, 17.

²³⁹ Asociación para una Sociedad Más Justa, Alianza por la Paz y las Justicia, and Transformemos Honduras, *An Open Letter to the U.S. Congress: Increasing Aid to Honduras Is Prudent and Opportune, If Properly Focused and Accountable—A Honduran Civil Society Perspective* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Asociación para una Sociedad Más Justa, 2015), 1–2, <https://www.ajs-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/increasing-aid-to-honduras.pdf>.

depends on long-term, consistent and coordinated actions that not only are bipartisan but include the international community as well.²⁴⁰ This consistency has been lacking since 2008. The NTEEA is still in its first fiscal year of action, so it is too early to determine whether it can resolve the issues of the 2014 Strategy for Engagement.

The agencies involved have shown an increased effort to improve data collection, evaluation, and reporting for DOS and USAID programs for the Northern Triangle. Vanderbilt University and USAID took the lead by creating effective evaluation reports on USAID projects as early as 2014, and this effort grew to include some DOS projects in 2019.²⁴¹ These continual evaluations have helped to determine the success of individual projects, and the development of the results architecture, performance indicators, and context indicators for the Strategy for Engagement has provided region-wide assessments for administrators to determine the progress made and changes needed.²⁴² This information will be necessary for interagency coordination and collaboration because it helps decisionmakers determine region-wide or strategic-level performance to guide overall, coordinated efforts.

The most promising efforts in the Northern Triangle include shifting away from anti-narcotics trafficking and law enforcement programs toward economic development, democratic institution building, and anti-corruption with the NTEEA.²⁴³ Northern Triangle residents have lost faith in their governments, with 75 percent reporting their governments suffer from widespread corruption.²⁴⁴ The NTEEA calls for the support of free, fair, and transparent elections; attempts to prevent political propaganda; and the promotion of a free media—all of which are critical for effective democracy development.²⁴⁵ It is too early to tell whether the NTEEA will be effective at helping the

²⁴⁰ Schneider and Matera, *Where Are the Northern Triangle Countries Headed?*, 4.

²⁴¹ Department of State, *Progress Report for the United States*.

²⁴² Department of State.

²⁴³ Beviglia, “The Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act.”

²⁴⁴ John Negroponte et al., *Building a Better Future: A Blueprint for Central America’s Northern Triangle* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2017), 10, https://issuu.com/atlanticcouncil/docs/building_a_better_future_web_0504.

²⁴⁵ Beviglia, “The Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act.”

Strategy for Engagement meet its goals. If it is successful, it will direct half of the funding toward U.S. agency–sponsored programs and the other half toward NGO projects that fight inequality and poverty and promote citizen inclusion in democratic governance.²⁴⁶ This civil society support will include families, schools, churches, and community committees, an area that has been underrepresented throughout U.S. involvement in the region.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

For the U.S. to reduce the migrant flow from the Northern Triangle, it will have to address the challenges on a strategic level, a program level, and a U.S. domestic level. Recommendations will need to establish the most appropriate strategic direction, guide the focus of U.S.-sponsored programs, and address the U.S. domestic factors contributing to the Northern Triangle’s problems. The overall strategy must concentrate on economic development, democratic institutions, and anti-corruption efforts. These three areas have consistently undermined the success of U.S. initiatives in the region. The residents of the Northern Triangle must live in a society where they can safely support themselves, be included in legitimate governance, and have confidence in the integrity of their leaders and institutions.

Economic development can be promoted by continued investment in the region’s infrastructure, trade, agriculture, and people. The Strategy for Engagement began the work of developing sustainable and efficient energy resources and road infrastructure, and these types of programs should be continued.²⁴⁷ This infrastructure will be necessary to support a growing economy. The region’s farming should continue to be developed through technical support, not only in growing crops but in marketing the harvest. USAID achieved these milestones in Honduras through education and training on drip irrigation systems that increased crop yields, and then the products were linked with new buyers.²⁴⁸ The economy could be further supported by promoting small business entrepreneurship, vocational training, and such new industries as tourism.

²⁴⁶ National Immigration Forum, “United States–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act.”

²⁴⁷ Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 7.

²⁴⁸ Negroponte et al., *Building a Better Future*, 21.

Continuing efforts to maintain a free media to express the ideas of the citizens will help promote democracy. Elections should be held in a transparent process that ensures confidence among voters. The judiciary and law enforcement should continue to be trained, equipped, and supported by U.S. agencies to become more effective, but they also need measures to protect all stakeholders involved. An effective witness protection program could be developed to aid in the prosecution of criminals. This program would enable citizens to support the judiciary system without fear of violent retaliation.

Based on past successes, all programs geared toward developing the capacity of Northern Triangle institutions should include a community-based approach that brings the government, civil society, and private sector together for consensus building and collaboration. For example, evaluations indicate that in Northern Triangle communities participating in local anti-gang programs that included education and employment opportunities, the residents reported feeling safer in their communities than did those who were not exposed to this approach.²⁴⁹ Decision-making and transparency must be pushed to the local level, and they must involve local leaders in community organizations, schools, families, and churches, in addition to the judiciary and civil service organizations. This holistic approach, which includes the lowest level of community involvement, will have the greatest chance of success at building those democratic institutions.

The goals of economic development and democratic institution building in the Northern Triangle cannot succeed without effectively addressing the problem of corruption. Corruption has been identified as a tremendous problem in both sets of context indicators in the Strategy for Engagement's results architecture and in independent polls—with 90 percent of the population reporting that corruption was widespread.²⁵⁰ Corruption undermines the ability of the police to interact with the citizens they serve and hinders the judicial system's ability to prosecute criminals. An initiative to fight corruption at the source may involve reviving such programs as the CICIG, which was successful at

²⁴⁹ Pfaffinger, "Balas y Barrios," 87.

²⁵⁰ Negroponte et al., *Building a Better Future*, 10.

investigating and removing the president of Guatemala for corruption.²⁵¹ The CICIG and MACCIH, both internationally supported collaborations, have been successful at fighting corruption and supporting justice in the region.²⁵² Reducing corruption and building transparency, trust, and confidence will be critical to the success of all three overarching strategic goals for success in the region.

The programs and activities for the Northern Triangle must be long term, consistent, coordinated, and community-based for them to be successful. These characteristics are supported by the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Project on Prosperity and Development: "The United States should leave behind its pattern of inconsistent support and make a 15-year commitment to the Northern Triangle."²⁵³ The NTEEA calls for a five-year program that develops the economy and institutions, but this recommendation is merely one-third the duration suggested by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.²⁵⁴ A long-term commitment will need to have consistent funding, which the NTEEA calls for, to avoid the implementation problems encountered before with getting money to the programs. The NTEEA dedicates \$577 million for the region, and it must be delivered in a timely fashion without the conditional requirements and contract regulations that previously delayed disbursement up to six months, if the funds ever arrived at all.²⁵⁵ The commitment of sufficient funding that reaches the programs in a consistent manner over the long term will be a positive step toward the success of U.S.-supported programs in the region.

²⁵¹ Kevin Casas-Zamora, "The Roots of Central America's Exodus," Center for Migration Studies, September 23, 2016, <https://cmsny.org/publications/the-roots-of-central-americas-exodus/>.

²⁵² Schneider and Matera, *Where Are the Northern Triangle Countries Headed?*, 6.

²⁵³ Daniel F. Runde, Christina Perkins, and Erin Nealer, *Achieving Growth and Security in the Northern Triangle of Central America* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016), 30, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161201_Perkins_NorthernTriangle_Web.pdf.

²⁵⁴ Beviglia, "The Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act"; Runde, Perkins, and Nealer, *Achieving Growth and Security in the Northern Triangle*, 30.

²⁵⁵ Giffels, "10 Facts about the Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act"; Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: An Overview*.

The programs and activities for the Northern Triangle must also be more effectively coordinated and evaluated. This coordination must take place on multiple levels, and this effort will be challenging to accomplish. For example, the GAO has suggested that the DOD and DHS struggle to measure and assess joint task force performance effectively and need better performance measures.²⁵⁶ In another case, the GAO has reported that the ATF and ICE struggle to share information, misunderstand each other's roles and responsibilities, and fail to collaborate on firearms-trafficking operations.²⁵⁷ This disconnect has been a consistent problem since the beginning of Mérida in 2008, so it will need to be addressed to achieve the level of coordination required to work with U.S. agencies, other nations' governments, NGOs, and civil society organizations at the national and local level. The United States has been successful in the past with nation-building programs—for example in post-WWII Europe through the Marshal Plan.²⁵⁸ According to the RAND Corporation, nation-building “planning needs to involve regional experts, those with prior nation-building experience, and political leaders. It must set objectives, marshal adequate resources, establish an institutional framework for managing the intervention, and draw on all governments and organizations whose contributions will be required.”²⁵⁹ The management of the U.S.-funded programs for the Northern Triangle must resemble the co-opted nation-building model, which is common for United Nations peacekeeping missions.²⁶⁰ This concept of using post-conflict reconstruction methods to improve the

²⁵⁶ Nathan Anderson, *Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities*, GAO-19-441 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2019), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/700187.pdf>.

²⁵⁷ Jessica Farb, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Combat Firearms Trafficking to Mexico Have Improved, but Some Collaboration Challenges Remain*, GAO-16-223 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2016), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/674570.pdf>.

²⁵⁸ Daniel F. Runde and Connor M. Savoy, “Nation Building by Any Other Name,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 23, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nation-building-any-other-name>.

²⁵⁹ James Dobbins et al., “A Guide to Nation Building” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), 1, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9241.html.

²⁶⁰ Dobbins et al.

rule of law and governance is also endorsed by Schneider and Matera of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.²⁶¹

Coordination must be consolidated to avoid the problems that U.S. agencies have faced for more than a decade: miscommunication, overlap, inconsistencies, and conflicting strategies.²⁶² Consolidation would be most effective if USAID took control of the entire program's implementation, monitoring, and evaluation due to its track record of successful programs and understanding of the need to push programming to the lowest level possible. The management of U.S. initiatives for the Northern Triangle would also need to put all subordinate agencies under USAID control with strict reporting and programming requirements. This success may be attained by seeking international, collaborative help through the United Nations for organizational control. Such restructuring would enable the efforts to move from many independent U.S. agencies loosely working together to a more rigid organization with a stricter chain of command for better control and coordination. This restructuring to consolidate program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation under USAID, is an ambitious recommendation that would require research beyond the scope of this thesis, but it will take a dramatic change in organization to successfully interlink these many U.S. agencies, governments, NGOs, and civil society organizations into a collaborative unit—especially when, historically, such a construct has been inconceivable.

The Northern Triangle programs and activities must focus on the grassroots community level, and they must target NGOs as much as possible. The successful USAID programs can be replicated throughout the region for better success, but the Northern Triangle communities must be integrated with the overall effort. As Pfaffinger states, “Establishing a community coalition council that prioritizes support for local approaches through partnerships with subject-matter experts allows for the implementation of solutions that fit the scale and scope of the local landscape.”²⁶³ Communities can be better organized

²⁶¹ Schneider and Matera, *Where Are the Northern Triangle Countries Headed?*, 5.

²⁶² Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement: Policy*, 5.

²⁶³ Pfaffinger, “Balas y Barrios,” 92.

and supported through the creation of more municipal crime-prevention committees, and families can be supported through more child care and after-school programs.²⁶⁴ Schools and faith-based organizations should be integrated into the community-based programs with such functions as emotional help for young victims and youth leadership opportunities.²⁶⁵ Law enforcement and judicial programs will develop trust and transparency by integrating the civil society elements of community organizations, families, schools, churches, and NGOs with law enforcement programs.²⁶⁶ This community-level approach will help the NTEEA realize its goals of transparent, merit-based selections of judges and prosecutors; increased democratic principles; an independent media; access to information; and transparent elections.²⁶⁷ This USAID-proven method should be integrated into every applicable program implemented.

The Northern Triangle initiatives have been struggling to succeed primarily due to corrupt and insufficient governance; a centralized, poorly communicated and coordinated strategy; and an inability to determine what is working and to capitalize on those successes. The United States must use political pressure to get the ruling class of elites in the region to buy in to developing governance that keeps their citizens safe and restores trust in their institutions. This means giving the common citizen a seat at the table when policy decisions are made, and it also means developing and communicating clear strategic objectives that are understood so that all organizations involved know what success looks like. The programs and activities that support U.S. initiatives in the region must be transparent in documenting and communicating successes and failures through effective monitoring, data collection, evaluation, and reporting. The citizens of the Northern Triangle overall want governmental reform, but it is not always in the best interest of the region's political leaders and economic elite for this to happen.²⁶⁸ The United States has the means to incentivize Northern Triangle elites to ensure the success of these regional initiatives through

²⁶⁴ Berk-Seligson et al., *USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach*, 8–9.

²⁶⁵ Berk-Seligson et al., 9.

²⁶⁶ Berk-Seligson et al., 9.

²⁶⁷ National Immigration Forum, “United States–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act,” 2.

²⁶⁸ Ernst et al., *US Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle*, 20.

bipartisan political pressure using U.S. Treasury sanctions, criminal prosecutions, extradition, and immigration visa programs.²⁶⁹ The citizens of the region need economic opportunities in the form of newly created jobs and the ability to create and succeed at small business enterprises. Finally, the initiatives must have honest and realistic reporting procedures. It is not usually in the best interest of bureaucratic administrators to admit failure, so many programs look good on paper but fail to make a meaningful impact. The U.S. initiatives for the Northern Triangle have been slowly adjusting course toward the direction of success from 2008 until 2020. A successful transition to the strategic priority of reducing corruption and improving governance will likely reduce forced migration from the region to the United States, and it will succeed at the community level if it focuses on root causes instead of symptoms and involves civil society, NGOs, and private-sector businesses in the process.

²⁶⁹ Ernst et al, 13.

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