



Extreme violence, treacherous journeys and invisible borders

Children on the Move in and from the Northern Triangle of Central America

Children born in gang-controlled areas of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala (known as the Northern Triangle of Central America or NTCA) are living through an escalating humanitarian crisis, and violence dominates their daily lives. When they try to escape, to relocate or to seek protection elsewhere, they are faced with closed doors, no exits and limited solutions. This violence can and must be stopped, and solutions must be found.

This Briefing Paper explores the protection risks that children on the move face in the Northern Triangle of Central America, with a particular focus on Honduras, where the Norwegian Refugee Council is currently responding to the humanitarian crisis. The paper is based on a series of workshops and consultations held in Honduras and Panama with local community based organisations, international NGOs, UN agencies and government representatives.

Among most violent countries in the world, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have seen rises in internal displacement over the past few years due to violence perpetrated by gangs, organised criminals, drug cartels and traffickers. Homicide rates are on a par with some of the world's worst war zones, such as

Afghanistan¹. In the last year, asylum requests from the region have gone up 72%². As gangs fight each other for control of territory, civilians are affected in multiple ways: coercion, threats, kidnappings, beatings, robberies, mobility restrictions, extortion of small business owners and families living in gang areas, land appropriation, forced conscription of children and adolescents into gangs, extreme sexual violence and violence against vulnerable groups such as LGBTI persons, human rights defenders and journalists. Additionally, States have frequently used violent means (including arbitrary detention and extrajudicial killings) to crack down on gangs and drug trafficking, further exacerbating the insecurity in the communities. Corruption in the police forces, armies and governments limits access to justice for victims. In some cases, the authorities are co-opted by the illegal groups whose criminal activity they are supposed to be fighting.

Children are particularly affected by this type of violence, especially as they approach adolescence and become an attractive target for the gangs to recruit. Boys can be forced to work for the gangs as spies, and report on other children, families, teachers and members of their communities. Even those

¹ Honduras has a murder rate among the world's highest, at 63 per 100'000.

² UNHCR, November 2016.

who are not actually working with a gang are at constant risk being misidentified as having a gang association, based on clothing, having recently moved to the community, hand gestures, family ties, etc. Girls risk being forced to become a gang member's "girlfriend" at a very early age. Families living in these zones of high violence are among the poorest in the country, and so despite the risks associated with living in areas where they are constantly in danger, the costs of relocation are prohibitive. Families usually try to resist having to leave their homes and belongings by negotiating with gangs and paying extortion fees. Yet, when faced with a death threat from the gangs, when their daughters catch the eye of a gang member, or when their teenage sons are told they must join the gang or die, these families have no other choice but to flee. The first time, this may be to a distant cousin's house, or to a friend's home in a different, yet equally violent and disadvantaged part of the city or country. Each time the family is forced to flee, options become more limited. Families and children often have to leave their homes without advance warning, without documents or belongings. In many cases, gangs take control of the abandoned houses, and often destroy them and burn them to the ground. When the houses are not torn down, they are frequently used by the gangs. Not only does this use damage the houses but it results in them being marked, and thus it becomes impossible for families to consider returning.

Internal displacement in Honduras and in the Northern Triangle is often characterized as "invisible." For the very few humanitarian actors who are operating in the most violent zones, this claim of invisibility is more of an indication of the lack of access to the affected neighbourhoods than it is of a lack of visible displacement. For those actors with access, there is a widespread recognition that internal displacement is everywhere. A survey conducted by the government of Honduras two years ago in 20 out of 290 municipalities,

found 174'000 internally displaced persons. What is invisible is the statistical recording of this displacement, as internally displaced persons (IDPs) do not report their movement for fear of identification and retribution from the gangs. In many cases, IDPs do not self-identify as displaced because having to react to threats and violence by moving has become so normalised. Finally, individuals may not report themselves as displaced because doing so does not result in assistance or lead to any actual solution.

While internal displacement is a "last resort" option for many families who often spend years resisting threats, moving does not ensure a durable safe solution. After pursuing this option, living in new "homes" as guests of distant family members or friends, they may be followed by gang members looking for revenge for the fact that they left the controlled territory, they may not be able to access school, or their parents may not find opportunities to keep their families alive. Internal displacement does not guarantee survival. The next option for these children is to seek protection abroad. Most often they are not able to pursue international protection through regular pathways, as the trust in the authorities, and the ability of these authorities to provide an adequate response is largely absent, having been eroded by decades of corruption, collusion and inefficiency. Children board buses to try their luck in Mexico, or pay extortionate amounts of money to smugglers ("coyotes") to take them to the United States.³ On this treacherous route, children disappear, are trafficked into forced labour, cartels and brothels, abused, robbed, raped, or killed. But in the majority of cases, often after surviving horrendous human rights abuses, most children are eventually caught, detained, and

³ The cost of using a coyote is between \$9,000-\$10,000 for an adult and up to \$20,000 for an unaccompanied child. This one-time payment entitles the payee to three attempts to arrive in their country of destination.

deported back to their starting points- where they face the “choice” of once again trying to survive in the violent communities which caused them to flee, or trying again to make the perilous and costly journey to a safe country.

Treacherous journeys and dead-ends

NRC works with Vicky⁴, a young teen, who lives in a particularly notorious neighbourhood in Honduras. She witnessed the murders of both of her 12 and 14 year old brothers, for refusing to be recruited into a gang as informants. Her mother encouraged her to escape, to make her way to the United States to seek asylum. On the route, Vicky was attacked and raped on four different occasions. In Mexico, she was detained, her application for international protection was refused, due to “lack of proof” of her situation. Vicky was placed on a bus for 24hour journey, and deported back to Honduras. At the centre receiving deportees in Honduras, she was handed back to her legal guardian, her mother, and sent back to live in the same neighbourhood where she had started out. Her family was left on their own to negotiate with the gangs for her safety. Her situation is a desperate, yet common one; she receives no protection, no solution, and no exit.



ECHO: Aragon, 2016.

⁴ Name has been changed together with some details of the case to protect the identity of the child.

OPERATIONALISING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Right to Education

This situation of violence and gang warfare has a particularly damaging effect on children's right to education. Travelling to school is enormously dangerous for children, as they may be followed, threatened, forcibly recruited, or caught in cross-fire on the way to school. As control of territory in the neighbourhood changes between gangs, borders, invisible to outsiders but heavily enforced on residents, are drawn. These borders shift frequently, as competing gangs vie for control. Families who live in the houses on these “borders” are forced to flee immediately, and for those living in a newly created territory, access is blocked to cross to the other side. Some children are therefore forbidden to attend the school just around the corner from their house. Children who have access to schools may be forced to drop out as invisible borders shift and their schools become controlled by a different gang. Inside schools, gangs control teachers and children alike, prescribing body language, dress code and behaviour. Teachers are consistently extorted for their salaries, and threatened and killed for non-compliance. As a result, many teachers refuse to work in the more notorious neighbourhoods, leaving education to be provided by interns and volunteers in these areas, further lowering the quality and capacity of schools. As playgrounds are often also used by gangs for meetings and parking, children are kept inside during gym and recess, to keep them safe. To ensure security, schools often employ an armed guard to stand outside the school gate, and charge parents a security fee. In turn, the guard is often extorted by the gangs for a portion of the money. This fee often inhibits parents from being able to send their children to school. Fear means that teachers and humanitarian organisations are often unable

to work with children who are associated to the gangs, whether through forced recruitment or family ties. Schools have been known to refuse access to girls who are too pretty, for fear of gang attention. Girls who fall pregnant at a young age, especially due to rape and sexual violence from the gangs, also drop out of school and are confined to staying at home.

A secondary barrier to fulfilling the right to education is a lack of legal documentation, in particular birth registration. While children can access primary education, they cannot sit exams, graduate from school or continue through to secondary schooling without this documentation. This, therefore, may further diminish the motivation of children who face protection risks by attending school to continue to do so.

As a coping mechanism to the dangers of sending children to school, families often see their only option as taking their children out of school and keeping them safe, yet confined, at home. The Norwegian Refugee Council recently conducted a census in five neighbourhoods of the town of Choloma, Honduras, to identify children who had dropped out of school. In the small portion of the town surveyed, six hundred children were found to be out of school (over two hundred more than predicted). No alternative education mechanisms are being offered for these children confined to their houses. Many of the parents have extremely low literacy levels, and are unable to provide home schooling.

Another option is for the children to transfer schools. For families who have been told to leave their homes immediately or be killed, often the lack of documentation makes this transfer to a new school extremely difficult. Those who do manage to transfer their documents, face stigma and discrimination. Children starting out in a new school are often considered a threat, and may be especially

stigmatised if, as boys, they are assumed to be part of a gang, or, as girls, the girlfriend of a gang member. Children who have been displaced and deported are taunted as “mojados” or “wetbacks”. Schools often have great difficulties dealing with these new students, let alone those who have specific protection needs. The state is not gathering systematic statistics on transfers between schools, and often school drop-outs are under-reported by schools and mayors who want to ensure resources that are allocated for each student.



ECHO: Aragon, 2016.

Right to Freedom of Movement

Children from violent regions in NTCA face a multitude of barriers to their right to freedom of movement. Within their own neighbourhoods, playing outside, crossing the road or visiting a friend’s house can pose the most severe risk of getting caught in cross-fire, being menaced, raped or killed. Therefore, children often stay in their houses as a method of protection. Curfews are imposed on all of the community in the evenings as another tactic of control.

For those forcibly displaced abroad, freedom of movement is in no way guaranteed. While Central Americans are free to move across Northern Triangle borders, the Mexican border exercises tight controls, and this is often where the journey ends and people are obliged to start over. Children require permission from their parents to leave the

country, and those who try to cross borders without identity papers are sent straight back – even when crossing to and from countries where borders are officially open. Therefore, children without papers are much more vulnerable on the migration route, due to having to pass through in a clandestine manner, and are particularly in danger of being disappeared.

The road to seek safety is paved with risk after risk: rape, mugging, kidnapping, forced disappearances, extortions. Gangs control common stopping points on the way, or police carry out arbitrary detention. If caught by officials, asylum seekers are detained while their cases are reviewed. Reports on conditions in many detention centres point to torture, children forcibly separated from their families, and limited to no protection measures in place to account for the special needs of children. The same applies for children who do manage to arrive at the US border, where deterrence strategies result in detention in inhumane conditions for families and children alike. Children who do bring police reports with them, as proof of the violations and threats they received back in their countries of origin, are still detained, and are most often subsequently deported. The main centre in Honduras for receiving deported children, both unaccompanied and with families, El Belen, receives between five and seven buses arriving from Mexico every day.

Adapted Response

The Norwegian Refugee Council is one of the only actors providing humanitarian assistance to communities directly affected by gang violence and displacement in Honduras. Through censuses and direct contact with children who have dropped out of school, NRC is able to identify internally displaced children and support their needs. The organisation provides food packages,

support with documentation, tutoring and facilitates the rematriculation of children into schools. NRC works with partners, such as Casa Alianza, a regional organization which provides psychosocial support, basic medical and education services, shelter and follow-up to families with protection needs, including both those arriving in deportee centres, as well as those affected by internal displacement.

Strengthening the Regional Approach

Regional efforts to address the issues in the Northern Triangle of Central America benefit from the strong regional frameworks and manifestations of cooperation by States such as the Brazil Plan of Action and the San José Action Declaration. Many international organisations and UN agencies manage their programming for the Northern Triangle from regional representation offices in Panama. These efforts are primarily concentrated on advocacy to States on strengthening asylum systems, developing norms on internal displacement, improving detention and deportation conditions, as well as education programming. Many organisations tend to agree that a regional approach to working in the Northern Triangle is necessary, as although each country context is different, movement (migration, displacement, deportation, smuggling) is highly interlinked, especially as people go through the cyclical process of trying to reach safety, being deported, and trying again. An overall approach is needed to understand the different dynamics in countries of origin, transit and destination.

However, as rates of displacement and humanitarian needs in the NTCA rise, this regional approach needs to be strengthened and improved. Firstly, while working on advocacy and system strengthening is important, organisations need to recognize the urgency for immediate humanitarian

assistance and protection, and must improve access to the most affected areas. Most urgently, they must work to ensure solid protection referral systems for the highest risk individual cases. The language of humanitarian crises and displacement is largely unknown in this region, adding an extra hurdle to recognising and establishing responses to the urgent humanitarian needs on the ground. There are a number of important initiatives in the region which have begun to introduce displacement and other humanitarian concepts into the larger conversations around violence in the Northern Triangle. These initiatives should be encouraged, as they lay the groundwork for governments in the affected countries to provide leadership in the response.

Strategies for integrated approaches to the region need to be presented to donors, highlighting the importance of funding for violence-induced displacement and humanitarian needs, and encouraging funding beyond the traditional disaster risk response and development funding that is typically allocated to the region. Recent trends of movements south to Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama need to be taken into account. Considering recent political developments in the United States – a country producing significant numbers of deportees back to the region – contingency plans need to be created for a sudden exponential increase in the number of deportees.



ECHO: Aragon, 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Northern Triangle of Central America is faced with a humanitarian crisis and children must be protected from extreme violence. NRC strongly recommends to:

- **Scale up principled humanitarian action:** The humanitarian community needs to recognise this crisis, mobilise resources, strengthen technical capacity, improve negotiation of access and maintain presence in violent regions of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Security and logistical capacity needs to be ensured for the safety and protection of humanitarian workers.
- **Uphold state responsibility:** While the Government of Honduras has been a pioneer in the region by acknowledging internal displacement, governments of the NTCA need to take responsibility for protecting children at risk. For example, recently, reception centres for deportees arriving in Honduras have significantly improved due to efforts by the government to ensure basic standards in health, registration and immediate needs. However, the arrival process lacks a proper identification of protection needs and referral strategy. Furthermore, signatory States should urgently implement the Safe Schools Declarations to ensure that schools are protective and safe environments.
- **Ensure safe transit and migration pathways for children fleeing violence:** Information and orientation on the legal aspects of migration should be provided as a prevention and protection strategy. Protection networks should be strengthened to ensure safe transit across the region. The offer of shelters for young people needs to be improved.

Alarm bells should be activated when children with protection needs are identified in these shelters, and these cases should be referred through a robust protection referral system.

- **Sustain and support community based work and best practices:** These include the monitoring of deported children who are reintegrated back into their communities, building awareness within communities on referral services, getting children who have dropped out of school back into formal education, assisting school transfers, tutoring, vocational training, attention to mental and psychological health and promoting recreational activities.
- **Involve children in decisions which affect their protection:** When children with protection risks are identified, and a strategy for protection needs to be determined, child participation must be a key component of the decision making. Often, the child's preferences can provide significant indication as to where they feel and would be most safe. This knowledge is too often being ignored.
- **Ensure programming reaches the most vulnerable children:** Programming needs to devise ways to reach children who are currently falling into humanitarian and protection gaps. These include children involved with/forcibly conscripted into gangs, children related through family ties to gangs, children and youth in detention for breaking the law, children under the influence of drugs, children under forced labour and adolescent girls who are out of school due to early marriage and pregnancy.

- **Strengthen visibility and understanding around violence-induced displacement:** More awareness needs to be built around rights and language on displacement. According to consultations with community based organisations in Honduras, there is a lack of awareness among IDPs themselves on what internal displacement is. The constant state of violence often means that deportees do not associate their displacement with violence. This translates to low official figures on violence-induced displacement, and perpetuates the impression, especially among government officials, that the causes for migration are primarily economic. Furthermore, data collection on reasons for displacement, as well as identification of protection needs, must be radically improved. Currently, the conditions of registration, especially due to the lack of confidentiality and capacity of trained staff capable of identifying protection needs, are in no way conducive to deportees highlighting that their motivation for leaving the country was violence. Studies such as “Children on the Run” and “Arrancados de Raiz” by UNHCR are extremely useful starting points for this work.
- **Innovate ways of working with new actors:** Humanitarian actors must find ways of operating in situations where displacement is caused by non-traditional armed actors. Mechanisms such as the CRC Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict should be used as a basis to more effectively address children and teenagers who have been forcibly recruited by gangs.
- **Share responsibility for those who need protection:** As part of their commitments under the New York

Declaration on cooperation for responsibility sharing of refugees, States should be compelled to strengthen and scale up mechanisms such as the Protection Transfer Agreement from El Salvador for people facing high protection risks. The offer of resettlement places in safe third countries must be raised. States must fulfil their obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, the UNHCR Guidance on Refugee Claims Relating to Victims of Organised Gangs, the Brazil Plan of Action and the San José Action Statement. Finally, States must uphold the cardinal principle of non-refoulement and ensure that no individual is deported back to a situation in which their life is under threat.