



September 2019

# U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA

Department of State  
Should Establish a  
Comprehensive Plan  
to Assess Progress  
toward Prosperity,  
Governance, and  
Security

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-590](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The United States has provided assistance to the Northern Triangle of Central America for many years to address poverty, weak governance, and insecurity. Introduced in 2014, and updated in 2017, the *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America* (Strategy) supports the objectives of improving prosperity, governance, and security. State coordinates implementation of the Strategy's objectives among agencies. This report examines: (1) the projects the U.S. government has implemented from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 to support the Strategy's objectives in the Northern Triangle, (2) what is known about project results, and (3) what is known about progress toward the objectives.

GAO reviewed results for a subset of 190 projects in a nongeneralizable sample of six sectors selected based on funding, country, and objective; analyzed Strategy documents and key elements of effective strategies; interviewed officials; and conducted fieldwork in the Northern Triangle.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State collaborate with DOD and USDA to develop a comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluation of projects that support Strategy objectives. State did not concur, citing lack of authority to direct other agencies' actions. GAO modified the recommendation to clarify that a collaborative effort would allow State to include information about all relevant projects as it evaluates progress under the Strategy as discussed in this report.

View [GAO-19-590](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 or [GroverJ@gao.gov](mailto:GroverJ@gao.gov).

September 2019

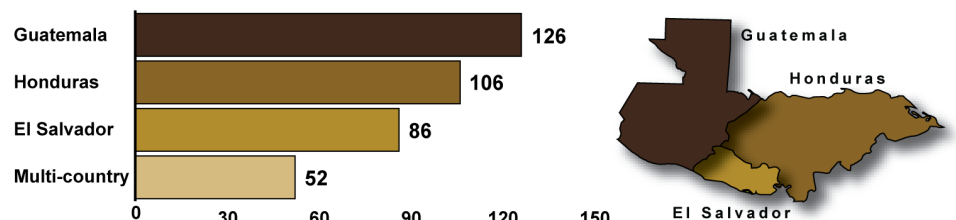
## U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA

### Department of State Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security

## What GAO Found

To support their prosperity, governance, and security objectives, the Departments of State (State), Defense (DOD), Agriculture (USDA), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) allocated about \$2.4 billion from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 for 370 projects in the Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. USAID and State implemented most of these projects, with some supporting more than one sector and objective. For example, USAID implemented projects to address poverty, while State trained prosecutors and police to address governance and security needs.

**Number of Projects Supporting Prosperity, Governance, and Security Objectives in the Northern Triangle by Country, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Agriculture (USDA) data, Map Resources (map). | GAO-19-590

State, USAID, and other agencies reported mixed results for the 190 projects in the six sectors GAO reviewed. For example, in fiscal year 2018, USAID assisted 1,376 individuals in workforce development programs in Guatemala, exceeding the target of 1,000, while it assisted 651 individuals in Honduras, falling short of the target of 5,000. State and USAID trained 12,557 justice system personnel in the Northern Triangle, exceeding the target of 2,275. USDA rehabilitated school kitchens in Honduras as part of its school feeding program. DOD helped Guatemala establish a budget system to increase accountability for military funds, but DOD reported persistently low public trust in Northern Triangle militaries.

Limited information is available about how U.S. assistance improved prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle. Agencies generally reported more information about progress toward prosperity than toward governance and security, in part because evaluations were conducted unevenly across agencies and sectors. In addition, project implementers did not consistently collect key information needed to evaluate progress, but officials noted improvements. Nevertheless, agency officials described examples of progress through technical assistance, and noted challenges, such as drought. GAO has reported that development of a monitoring and evaluation plan is key to assessing agencies' common goals and objectives, and mutually reinforcing results. While State has a monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy, the plan does not include activities by DOD and USDA that support the Strategy's objectives and thus does not establish a comprehensive approach to assessing progress.

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**Abbreviations**

|          |  |
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| ADOC     | Asociación de Desarrollo Organizacional Comunitaria  |
| CARSI    | Central America Regional Security Initiative   |
| CBVP     | Community based violence prevention  |
| DEE      | Decentralized Enabling Environment Project   |
| DHS      | Department of Homeland Security  |
| DOD      | Department of Defense  |
| DOJ      | Department of Justice  |
| FFE      | Food for Education   |
| FPPr     | Food for Progress  |
| IMET     | International Military Education and Training  |
| INCSR    | International Narcotics Control Strategy Report  |
| INL      | Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs                              |
| NEXOS    | Transparent Local Governance and Improved Service Delivery Project                         |
| PAVI     | Project Against Violence and Impunity  |
| PCVR     | Programa de Monitoreo y Evaluación: Evaluación final del Proyecto Cadenas de Valor Rurales |
| PPR      | Performance Plan and Report  |
| State    | Department of State  |
| Strategy | U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America  |
| USAID    | U.S. Agency for International Development  |
| USDA     | Department of Agriculture  |
| WHA      | Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs   |

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September 26, 2019

Congressional Requesters:

The three countries that make up the Northern Triangle in Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—have struggled with high levels of poverty and unemployment, weak governance, and widespread insecurity and violence, with homicide rates among the highest in the world. These challenges have serious consequences for the United States. For example, the region has become a significant source of migration to the United States due to multiple factors, including a lack of economic opportunities, high poverty rates and poor living conditions, gang-related violence and insecurity, and the desire for family reunification.<sup>1</sup> Transnational criminal organizations have also taken advantage of weak government institutions and justice systems in the Northern Triangle to engage in illegal activities. All three Northern Triangle countries, for example, are major transit countries for illegal drugs destined for the United States and are vulnerable to the money laundering activities of organized crime groups, particularly drug and human trafficking organizations.

The U.S. government has committed resources and provided assistance over many years to the Northern Triangle countries to address these challenges. Specifically, beginning in 2008, the United States established the Mérida Initiative to provide foreign assistance to Mexico and Central America, including the Northern Triangle, to address violence and criminal activity. In 2010, the United States established the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which created a collaborative partnership between the United States and Central American countries, including the Northern Triangle, to improve citizen security. Multiple U.S. agencies implemented projects intended to improve prosperity, governance, and security in Central America, including the Northern Triangle, to support and complement these initiatives.

In 2014, the U.S. government introduced the *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America* (Strategy) to expand assistance to

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<sup>1</sup>See GAO, *Central America: USAID Assists Migrants Returning to their Home Countries, but Effectiveness of Reintegration Efforts Remains to Be Determined*, [GAO-19-62](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 8, 2019).

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Central America, including the Northern Triangle countries, by taking a broader, more comprehensive approach to the immediate and long-term challenges facing Central American governments.<sup>2</sup> The Strategy aims to promote prosperity, good governance, and security cooperation in the region. Multiple U.S. agencies fund foreign assistance projects supporting each of the three objectives. The Department of State (State) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are responsible for developing a plan for monitoring and evaluating U.S. assistance under the Strategy and reporting progress toward its objectives. In 2017, State updated the Strategy to place more emphasis on preventing illegal immigration, combatting transnational crime, and generating export and investment opportunities for U.S. businesses, while maintaining the Strategy's three objectives.<sup>3</sup>

On June 17, 2019, State announced that the Department would not provide new funds for programs in the Northern Triangle until it is satisfied that governments in the region "are taking concrete actions to reduce the number of illegal migrants coming to the U.S. border." According to this announcement, previously awarded grants and contracts would continue as would certain new assistance to help Northern Triangle governments "take actions that will protect the U.S. border and counter transnational organized crime."

You asked us to review U.S. government assistance to the Northern Triangle. This report examines (1) the projects that the U.S. government has implemented in the Northern Triangle from fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2018 to support prosperity, governance, and security, (2) what is known about the results of these projects, and (3) what is known about progress toward the Strategy's objectives.

To determine the projects that the U.S. government has implemented in the Northern Triangle, we reviewed documents and analyzed project and funding data on foreign assistance projects supporting prosperity,

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<sup>2</sup>Prior to the introduction of the Strategy, U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle primarily focused on enhancing security in the region as the key objective of assistance, although agencies supported a wide range of projects. The Strategy is based on the premise that prosperity, governance, and security are mutually reinforcing and of equal importance.

<sup>3</sup>In 2017, following direction contained in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, State promulgated the *Report to Update the U.S. Strategy for Central America* that maintained the three objectives of the Strategy. State refers to the updated Strategy as the "*U.S. Strategy for Central America*."

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governance, and security objectives from State, USAID, and the Departments of Defense (DOD), Homeland Security (DHS), Justice (DOJ), and Agriculture (USDA). We analyzed agencies' project and funding data to identify the number of projects implemented by agency and country and the total funding agencies allocated for these projects from fiscal years 2013<sup>4</sup> through 2018.<sup>5</sup> We focused our analysis on State, USAID, DOD, and USDA because they allocated the largest amounts of funding for the largest number of projects supporting prosperity, governance, and security objectives in the Northern Triangle during this period. We assessed the reliability of the data that agencies reported for these projects by reviewing information from agency officials regarding the underlying data systems and by checking the data for consistency and errors. When we found potential duplicate data and discrepancies, we contacted relevant agency officials to resolve these data issues. As a result of these steps, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting the number of projects that supported prosperity, governance, and security objectives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and allocations for these projects from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

To select a subset of the projects for review, we reviewed agencies' project information and Strategy documents to categorize all projects into

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<sup>4</sup>We conducted our last comprehensive review of U.S. assistance to Central America in fiscal year 2013. See GAO, *Central America: U.S. Agencies Considered Various Factors in Funding Security Activities, but Need to Assess Progress in Achieving Interagency Objectives*, [GAO-13-771](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep 25, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>We gathered information about agencies' assistance in the Northern Triangle related to prosperity, governance, and security. Agencies use different terms to describe such assistance, including programs, projects, or activities. We use the term "projects" to refer to assistance that agencies fund. Agencies implement these projects directly or through awards they make to implementing partners. In general, projects consist of a set of activities that agencies design and execute over a time frame to achieve a specific aim. We asked State, USAID, DOD, DHS, DOJ, and USDA to provide us with project-level data and when possible, to report each project by country. While most agencies and bureaus provided us with project-level data, some were unable to report data at the project level, and instead provided us with data that combined multiple activities or awards to implementing partners to accomplish a broader aim. Since most agencies and bureaus provided us project-level data, we use the term "projects" to encompass all available data on agencies' assistance.



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18 sectors that generally align with the current objectives of the Strategy.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, we grouped similar projects by sector such as economic growth, justice reform, and community based violence prevention, and aligned them according to the Strategy's three objectives of prosperity, governance, and security. We then selected a judgmental sample of six of the 18 sectors for an in-depth review of performance-related documentation. The six sectors we selected were agricultural development, economic growth, good government service, justice reform, community based violence prevention, and professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities. We selected these six sectors to achieve a range of projects by agency, funding allocation amount, and country, and to include projects that align with each of the three objectives.

To determine what is known about project results, we reviewed agency performance reports and data for the 190 projects implemented from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 in the six selected sectors. We also examined detailed documentation of results information, including State and USAID's *Performance Plans and Reports (PPR)* for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras for fiscal years 2013 through 2018; State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports (INCSR)* for fiscal years 2013 through 2018; State and USAID's *Progress Report for the U.S. Strategy for Central America's Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation* for fiscal year 2018 and 2019;<sup>7</sup> and State's quarterly country cables reporting on agencies' progress in implementing projects in support of the prosperity, governance, and security objectives in each of the Northern Triangle countries for the available quarters of fiscal years 2016 through 2018. We also requested and reviewed all 23 evaluations completed from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 related to each of the six selected sectors

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<sup>6</sup>The 18 sectors include agricultural development, community based violence prevention, counternarcotics, democracy building, economic growth, education, energy, environment, finance, good government service, health, human rights, infrastructure, justice reform, migration, police reform, professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities, and reduce the influence of organized crime and gangs.

<sup>7</sup>State and USAID's *Progress Report for the U.S. Strategy for Central America's Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation* for fiscal years 2018 and 2019 consolidate performance data obtained in fiscal years 2016, 2017, and 2018 for projects implemented in support of the Strategy's objectives.

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in each Northern Triangle country.<sup>8</sup> In addition, we examined detailed project documentation of results information for a non-generalizable sample of 19 projects within the six sectors, including, among other things, quarterly, semi-annual, and annual reports from implementing partners to assess project results. We selected these 19 projects based on a variety of criteria, including the types of project activities and the objectives they supported, as well as to obtain a range of funding allocation amounts, countries, and agencies.

To examine what is known about progress toward the Strategy's objectives, we reviewed Strategy documents, including monitoring and evaluation plans, to assess if they included key elements of effective strategies that we have identified as related to assessment of progress toward strategic goals.<sup>9</sup> In assessing the monitoring and evaluation plan, we also considered the Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, which specifies that managers should identify the information needed to achieve objectives and use such information to evaluate performance in achieving objectives.<sup>10</sup>

To support our work on all three objectives, we conducted fieldwork in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to observe selected project activities, and to interview agency officials, implementing partners, and project beneficiaries about project activities and results, and factors that have affected project results. We also interviewed agency officials in Washington, D.C. and at the U.S. Southern Command in Doral, Florida about project activities and results, factors affecting results, and actions to address these factors, as well as efforts to monitor and evaluate project results. See appendix I for more details about our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from December 2017 to September 2019 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing

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<sup>8</sup>We requested and reviewed all completed evaluations from State, USAID, and USDA related to the six sectors we reviewed for fiscal years 2013 through 2018. For the same time frame, we requested all completed evaluations of projects supporting the Strategy's objectives from DOD. DOD officials reported that the Department had not completed any evaluations of DOD projects in the Northern Triangle during the time frame requested.

<sup>9</sup>GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Better Guidance for Strategy Development Could Help Agencies Align Their Efforts*, [GAO-18-499](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2018).

<sup>10</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014).

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standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate, evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

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### U.S. Assistance to Central America Has Supported Three Objectives—Prosperity, Governance, and Security

The United States historically has maintained close ties to Central America and played a role in the region's political and economic development because of geographic proximity and common interests. The United States has provided assistance to the governments of Central America, including those of the Northern Triangle, under multiple initiatives over many years. In 2008, the United States began a multiyear assistance package to Central America under the Mérida Initiative to help address violence and criminal activity, especially from drug trafficking and other criminal organizations.<sup>11</sup> In 2010, U.S. assistance continued under CARSI. CARSI was a collaborative partnership between the United States and Central American partner countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, designed to improve citizen security within the region by taking a broad approach to security beyond traditional counternarcotics activities. Multiple U.S. agencies implemented projects in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle, to support and complement these initiatives. These projects focused on, among other things, improving law enforcement and criminal justice, promoting the rule of law and human rights, preventing youth violence in violence-prone areas, enhancing customs and border control, and encouraging economic and social development.

Introduced in 2014, and updated in 2017, the Strategy is the latest U.S. government initiative in the region.<sup>12</sup> The Strategy notes that prior U.S. assistance did not yield sustained, broad improvements in social or

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<sup>11</sup>The United States established the Mérida Initiative to provide foreign assistance to Mexico and Central America, including the Northern Triangle countries.

<sup>12</sup>In 2017, following direction contained in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, State promulgated the *Report to Update the U.S Strategy for Central America* that maintained the three objectives of the Strategy, but which placed more emphasis on preventing illegal immigration, combatting transnational crime, and generating export and investment opportunities for U.S. businesses.

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economic conditions and thus the Strategy intends to take a comprehensive, an integrated, and a whole-of-government approach that aligns activities and resources required to achieve systemic and lasting improvements. Under this approach, the Strategy promotes three mutually reinforcing objectives—prosperity, governance, and security.<sup>13</sup> These three objectives seek to address challenges facing Central American countries, including the three Northern Triangle countries. For example:

- **Prosperity Challenges:** Northern Triangle countries have had high rates of poverty, low per capita income, and a lack of employment opportunities. The World Bank reported that, in 2014, over half of the population of Guatemala lived below the poverty line and, in 2017, almost one-third of the population of El Salvador and more than half of the population of Honduras lived below the poverty line. The World Bank also reported that El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras had among the lowest per capita incomes in Latin America in 2017. In addition, more than 27 percent of the population aged 15 to 24 in each of the Northern Triangle countries were not employed or seeking education or training in 2016, according to the World Bank.
- **Governance Challenges:** Northern Triangle countries have experienced widespread corruption, weak government institutions, and poor adherence to the rule of law. According to the 2018 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, which ranks 180 countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, the Northern Triangle countries ranked among the bottom half. In addition, in 2018, Guatemala and Honduras ranked in the lowest 15 percent of countries in the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index, which measures countries’ adherence to the rule of law.
- **Security Challenges:** Northern Triangle countries have had weak security structures, high rates of crime and gang activity, and a lack of legitimate employment opportunities for youth susceptible to being drawn into criminal activity. While Northern Triangle countries experienced a decline in homicide rates from 2014 to 2017, the average homicide rate for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras remains much higher than the averages for Latin America and the Caribbean for recent years and five to 12 times higher than the 10-year average for the United States. In addition, the percentage of

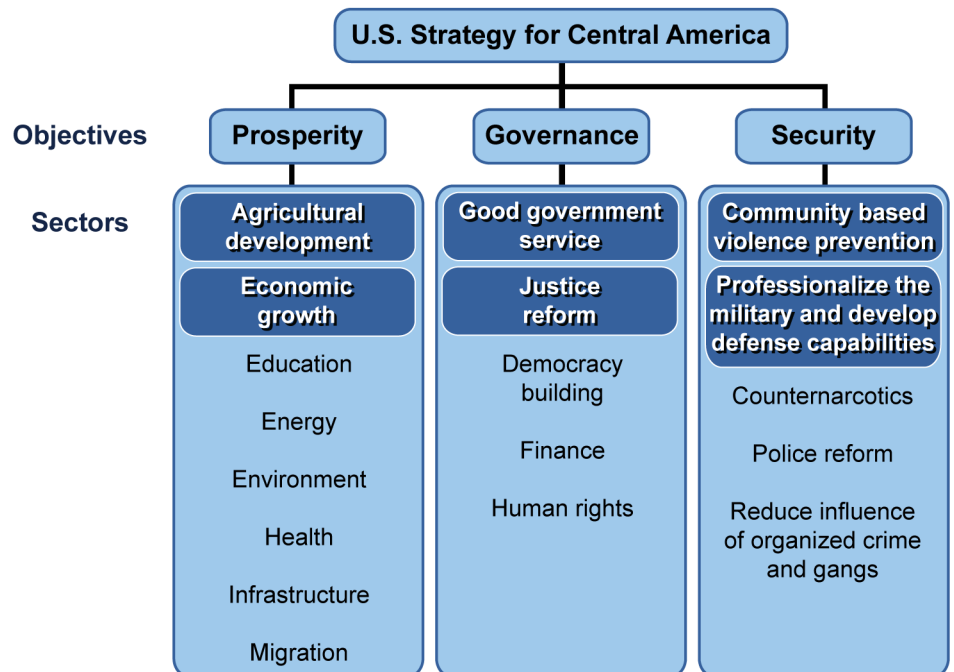
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<sup>13</sup>The Strategy encompasses CARSI, which focused on security objectives, and expanded the focus to include prosperity and governance objectives. See [GAO-13-771](#) for more information.

people in the Northern Triangle who reported feeling safe walking in their neighborhoods at night was about 50 percent in 2017.

Agencies reported implementing various assistance projects in the Northern Triangle to support the prosperity, governance, and security objectives from fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2018. We found that these projects generally correspond to 18 sectors that align with the three objectives of the current Strategy. Figure 1 shows the alignment of the 18 sectors with the objectives of the Strategy, including the six sectors we selected for an in-depth review. Table 1 shows the definitions for each of the 18 sectors we identified and the three objectives of the Strategy.

**Figure 1: U.S. Strategy for Central America Objectives and Sectors GAO Identified**



Source: U.S. Department of State (State) and GAO analysis of Strategy documents and agency data and information. | GAO-19-590

Note: Shaded sectors highlight the six sectors we reviewed in depth.

**Table 1: Types of Projects by U.S. Strategy for Central America Objectives and Sectors GAO Identified**

| Sector  | Type of Project   |
|---|---|
| Prosperity Objective: Improve the business environment, create jobs, enhance food security, expand energy security, and increase U.S. investment and trade. |   |
| Agricultural Development  | Projects to address food security and provide emergency food assistance, help farmers access capital, enhance investment in agricultural research to improve crop yields, and develop agricultural markets and sustainable agricultural strategies. |
| Economic Growth   | Projects to assist populations living below the poverty line to meet basic needs, increase market access to goods and services as well as investment among Central American nations, and promote workforce development.                             |
| Education   | Projects to improve the quality of and access to basic and secondary education.   |
| Energy  | Projects to connect and diversify electric grids, attract investment in energy sources, and decrease energy prices.   |
| Environment   | Projects to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, protect biodiversity, address deforestation, and protect resource rights.  |
| Health  | Projects to build health systems to prevent child and maternal deaths, control epidemics, and combat infectious diseases.   |
| Infrastructure  | Projects to design, rehabilitate, and construct basic infrastructure.   |
| Migration   | Projects to support the integration of returning migrants into Central American societies and reduce the factors contributing to emigration of citizens.  |
| Governance Objective: Reduce impunity and corruption through the creation of more transparent, efficient governments that deliver services effectively.     |   |
| Good Government Service   | Projects to build a competent civil service that can provide non-partisan continuity and services that are effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable.  |
| Finance   | Projects to increase government revenue and fiscal accountability and responsible investment of public resources.   |
| Justice Reform  | Projects to train and implement institutional reforms in the justice sector to decrease impunity and combat corruption.   |
| Human Rights  | Projects to promote the participation of civil society and other entities to require government accountability without reprisal to their rights, and to influence policy outcomes.  |
| Democracy Building  | Projects to promote values and practices of liberal democracy and free and fair elections, and hold governments accountable to the rule of law.   |
| Security Objective: Professionalize the military and combat drug and human trafficking, and transnational gangs and criminal organizations.                 |   |
| Community Based Violence Prevention   | Projects to reduce violence at the local level through civil society, municipal governments, and security forces.   |
| Counternarcotics  | Projects to reduce the demand and supply of illegal drugs; develop and sustain drug prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and care; help countries reduce illegal drug production; and improve countries' interdiction capabilities.               |
| Police Reform   | Projects to provide more effective and accountable law enforcement capacities and professionalize civilian police institutions with training and staffing.  |

| Sector  | Type of Project  |
|---|--|
| Reduce Influence of Organized Crime and Gangs                 | Projects to support the collaboration of law enforcement, governments, and multilateral organizations and to decrease the influence of organized criminal groups and gangs on elected bodies, financial institutions, and citizens.          |
| Professionalize the Military and Develop Defense Capabilities | Projects to support the transition of the military to missions that reflect civilian control of the military; improvement of regional defense cooperation and human rights; and provision of U.S. defense equipment, services, and training. |

Source: GAO analysis of Strategy documents and agency data and information. | GAO-19-590

## Multiple Agencies Provide Assistance to Central America

Multiple agencies implemented assistance projects in the Northern Triangle to support the prosperity, governance, and security objectives from fiscal years 2013 through 2018. State, USAID, DOD, and USDA were the primary agencies that implemented such projects in the Northern Triangle during this period.<sup>14</sup> In particular, State and USAID manage foreign assistance to support the Strategy’s objectives, and play key roles in monitoring and evaluating this assistance. According to agency officials, State’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) is responsible for managing the implementation of the Strategy’s objectives among agencies. For example, WHA manages regular coordination meetings with USAID and State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) as well as larger coordination meetings with other relevant agencies, including DOD and USDA, according to officials. In addition, WHA gathers information across agencies on a quarterly basis to produce and disseminate cables that discuss progress and challenges related to the Strategy’s objectives. WHA also collaborated with USAID to develop a plan to monitor and evaluate U.S. assistance and report results.

<sup>14</sup>Other agencies also reported that they implemented a limited number of projects in the Northern Triangle during this time frame. State funded the majority of these projects through inter-agency agreements. We include the number of projects and funding allocations for projects implemented through inter-agency agreements with State in the data we report for State. For example, through inter-agency agreements, State funded DOJ projects in each Northern Triangle country that provided training and case-based mentoring to prosecutors and other justice system personnel to strengthen legal processes, reduce impunity, and combat corruption. Additionally, DHS conducted border security activities in the Northern Triangle, according to officials. However, we focused our review on the four primary agencies with the largest number of reported projects and funding.

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## Agencies Allocated about \$2.4 Billion from Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018 to Implement Hundreds of Projects to Support Prosperity, Governance, and Security in the Northern Triangle

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State, USAID, DOD, and USDA Allocated about \$2.4 Billion to Fund Projects to Support Objectives in the Northern Triangle from Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018

Based on our review of agency funding data, we found that State, USAID, DOD, and USDA allocated about \$2.4 billion in assistance to the Northern Triangle to support projects related to prosperity, governance, and security objectives from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.<sup>15</sup> USAID reported the largest amount of allocations with approximately \$1.44 billion, while State reported \$464 million, and USDA and DOD each reported less than \$235 million.

For fiscal years 2013 through 2018, the four agencies reported allocating the largest amount of funding for projects in Guatemala, followed by Honduras and El Salvador. Specifically, the agencies reported allocating

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<sup>15</sup>Allocations data include all reported funding supporting projects related to prosperity, governance, and security objectives from the four key agencies that reported the largest number of projects and funding—State, USAID, DOD, and USDA—between fiscal years 2013 and 2018. We include funding for projects that do not provide direct technical assistance, but which support administrative or monitoring and evaluation activities. Multi-country allocations include funding for projects implemented in two or three Northern Triangle countries. Allocations do not include funding for multi-country projects for which agencies do not report specific country allocation amounts because these data could include funding for countries outside of the Northern Triangle. As of April 2019, USAID allocations data were not finalized for fiscal year 2018, according to officials. We do not report allocations data for USAID for fiscal year 2018. In cases where agencies funded projects that other agencies implemented, we report the project and funding data under the funding agency's allocation totals and project counts. For example, DOD and DOJ implemented assistance projects through agreements with State that we include in State's allocation totals and project counts. The allocation totals do not include DOJ and DHS funding for two projects because we focused our review on the four key agencies.



approximately \$1.07 billion or 45 percent of total allocations to fund projects in Guatemala, approximately \$749 million or 32 percent of total allocations to fund projects in Honduras, and approximately \$496 million or about 21 percent of total allocations to fund projects in El Salvador. Some agencies also reported allocations for multi-country projects implemented in two or more countries, including at least one Northern Triangle country.<sup>16</sup> For example, USAID funded a regional initiative to improve clean energy investment and reduce overall energy consumption throughout many Central American countries. The agencies reported allocating approximately \$53 million for multi-country assistance projects implemented exclusively in two or three Northern Triangle countries, or about 2 percent of the total.<sup>17</sup> See Table 2 for reported amounts of allocated funding by country and agency from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

**Table 2: Allocations for Projects Supporting Prosperity, Governance, and Security Objectives in the Northern Triangle by Country and by Agency, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018**

| Agency       | El Salvador        | Guatemala            | Honduras           | Multi-country <sup>a</sup> | Total                |
|--------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| USAID        | 328,211,844        | 598,650,515          | 464,281,999        | 52,641,995                 | <b>1,443,786,353</b> |
| State        | 94,106,151         | 237,757,022          | 131,732,688        | –                          | <b>463,595,861</b>   |
| USDA         | 32,196,000         | 119,104,000          | 70,624,000         | –                          | <b>221,924,000</b>   |
| DOD          | 41,526,540         | 110,260,749          | 82,280,638         | –                          | <b>234,067,927</b>   |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>496,040,535</b> | <b>1,065,772,286</b> | <b>748,919,325</b> | <b>52,641,995</b>          | <b>2,363,374,141</b> |

Sources: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-19-590

<sup>a</sup>Multi-country allocations include funding for projects implemented exclusively in two or three Northern Triangle countries. Allocations do not include approximately \$166 million in funding for multi-country projects implemented outside of the Northern Triangle for which agencies did not report specific country allocation amounts because these data could include funding for countries outside of the Northern Triangle. State, DOD, and USDA did not report multi-country project allocations exclusive to the Northern Triangle as denoted by dashes.

<sup>16</sup>Some agencies separated multi-country project and funding data by country. Other agencies did not report multi-country projects by country and therefore we report these in the multi-country project category.

<sup>17</sup>Agencies reported a total of approximately \$219 million in allocations for multi-country projects. Of this total, agencies reported allocating about \$53 million to fund projects implemented exclusively in two or three Northern Triangle countries. Allocations do not include approximately \$166 million in funding for multi-country projects for which agencies do not report specific country allocation amounts because these data could include funding for countries outside of the Northern Triangle.

State, USAID, DOD, and USDA Implemented At Least 370 Projects to Support Objectives in the Northern Triangle from Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018

State, USAID, DOD, and USDA implemented at least 370 technical assistance projects in the Northern Triangle to support prosperity, governance, and security objectives from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.<sup>18</sup> The total number of projects that we report is lower than the actual number of projects implemented because some agencies and bureaus could not report data at the project level. Specifically, DOD and INL reported some broader assistance data that encompassed two or more projects and officials told us they were unable to disaggregate this data at the project level.

Among the four agencies, USAID implemented the largest number of projects in the Northern Triangle during our time frame. Specifically, USAID reported that it implemented 218 projects or 59 percent of the projects reported across the four agencies. State reported that it implemented 124 projects or about one-third of the projects. DOD and USDA each reported 14 projects to support prosperity, governance, and security or about 4 percent each of the total projects. Collectively, the agencies reported they implemented the largest number of projects in Guatemala (126), followed by Honduras (106), and El Salvador (86). Agencies reported they implemented 52 multi-country projects that included at least one Northern Triangle country. See table 3 for the number of projects reported by country and agency.

**Table 3: Number of Projects Supporting Prosperity, Governance, and Security Objectives in the Northern Triangle by Agency, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018**

| Agency             | El Salvador | Guatemala  | Honduras   | Multi-country <sup>a</sup> | Number of Projects |
|--------------------|-------------|------------|------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| USAID              | 43          | 73         | 64         | 38                         | <b>218</b>         |
| State <sup>b</sup> | 35          | 42         | 34         | 13                         | <b>124</b>         |
| DOD <sup>b</sup>   | 5           | 5          | 4          | –                          | <b>14</b>          |
| USDA               | 3           | 6          | 4          | 1                          | <b>14</b>          |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>86</b>   | <b>126</b> | <b>106</b> | <b>52</b>                  | <b>370</b>         |

Sources: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-19-590

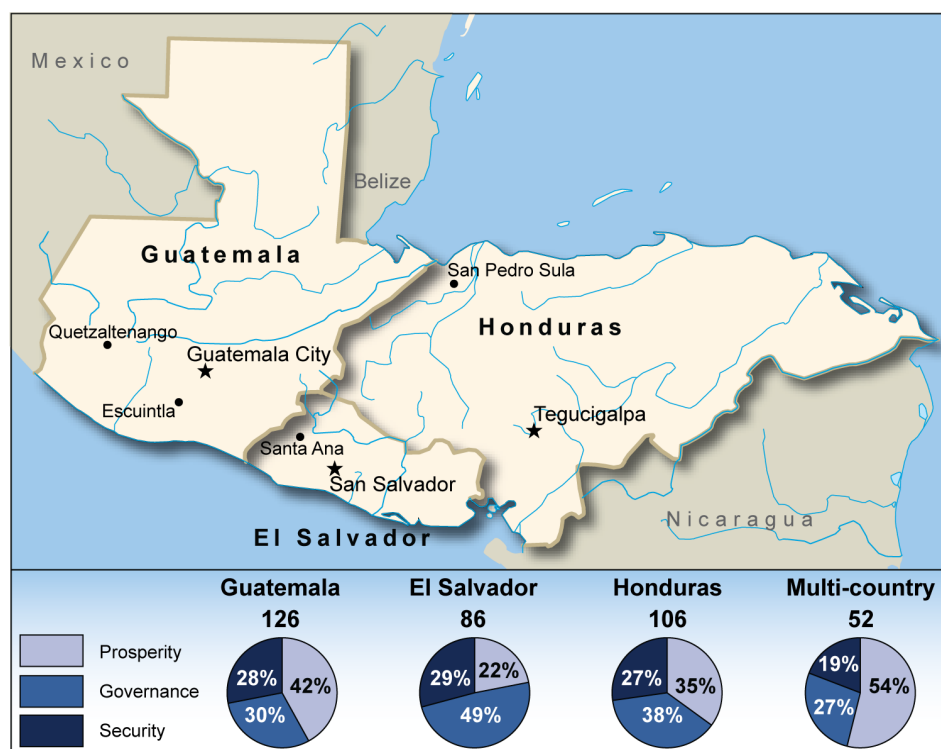
<sup>a</sup>Multi-country projects were implemented in two or more countries, including at least one Northern Triangle country. DOD did not report multi-country data, as denoted by dashes.

<sup>b</sup>DOD and State provided some broader assistance data that encompassed two or more projects and officials told us they were unable to disaggregate the data at the project level. As a result, the total number of projects that we report is lower than the actual number of projects implemented.

<sup>18</sup>The project count does not include 37 projects that supported administrative or monitoring and evaluation activities.

Agency officials typically reported implementing similar types of projects in each of the Northern Triangle countries, although there were some differences in the number of projects implemented for each objective and sector based on each country's needs (see fig. 2). For example, officials told us that agencies implemented fewer agricultural development projects in El Salvador because its agriculture industry is small relative to Guatemala and Honduras and the majority of its population lives in urban rather than rural, agricultural areas. Instead, agency officials in El Salvador said agencies focused their prosperity assistance on projects in the economic growth sector that targeted more prominent business areas such as technology or manufacturing. For example, USAID supported a youth training center in El Salvador where students develop computer skills to work in the information technology fields (See fig. 3).

**Figure 2: Number of Projects Supporting the Prosperity, Governance, and Security Objectives in the Northern Triangle by Country and Objective, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-19-590

Notes: Multi-country projects were implemented in two or more countries, including at least one Northern Triangle country. Percentages shown may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

**Figure 3: USAID Economic Growth Project in El Salvador that Provided Various Vocational Trainings to Youth, Including Computer Software Skills**



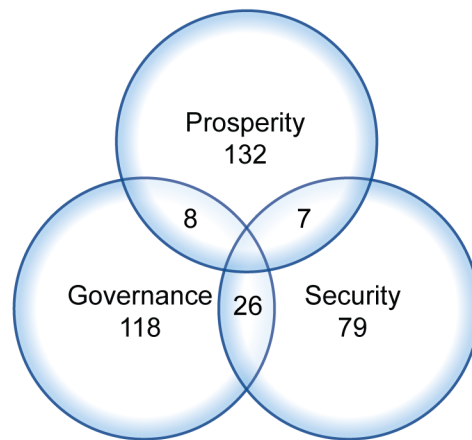
Source: GAO. | GAO-19-590

Some agencies funded projects that supported multiple sectors and objectives, while others focused on a specific sector supporting one of the three objectives (see fig. 4). For example, USAID and State supported all three objectives by implementing projects in a variety of sectors. However, USDA supported only the prosperity objective by implementing projects primarily in the agricultural development sector and DOD supported the security objective by implementing projects primarily in the professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities sector. We also identified some specific assistance projects that supported more than one of the three objectives. For example, some of USAID's workforce development projects targeted at-risk youth, which supported both the prosperity and security objectives. Other USAID projects worked with government officials in the Northern Triangle to improve health, environment, or economic growth, which supported both the prosperity and governance objectives. In addition, State's rule of law projects, which

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trained police and other personnel in the judicial sector, supported both the governance and the security objectives.

**Figure 4: Number of Projects Supporting the Prosperity, Governance, and Security Objectives in the Northern Triangle, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018**



Sources: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-19-590

Below is an overview of the agencies' general roles and responsibilities for supporting the three objectives:

- Prosperity: USAID, State, and USDA implemented projects supporting the prosperity objective. USAID implemented projects to assist populations to meet basic needs, help businesses access markets for goods and services, build a skilled workforce, and enhance health systems and education institutions. For example, one USAID economic growth project in El Salvador provided assistance to small enterprises through university-affiliated training centers where representatives of firms received training and advice to improve their business practices. State also implemented projects to assist businesses and entrepreneurs develop their capabilities. For example, State implemented a multi-country project to provide training to small and medium businesses on e-commerce platforms to access new markets and increase sales. USDA and USAID both implemented projects intended to help farmers improve agricultural management practices and increase their access to markets and capital. For example, a USAID agricultural development project in Honduras provided training to local farmers to increase their household incomes, strengthen access to food markets, and diversify their crops (see fig.

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5). A USDA project provided schools in Honduras with food assistance, infrastructure improvements, and trainings to support school feeding, sought to improve educational outcomes (see fig. 6).

**Figure 5: USAID Agricultural Development Project in Honduras That Provided Farming Equipment and Irrigation Systems to Cultivate Lettuce and Other Crops**



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-590



**Figure 6: USDA Agricultural Development Project in Honduras Supported School Feeding to Improve Education Outcomes**



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-590

- **Governance:** USAID and State were the primary agencies supporting the governance objective. USAID projects provided technical assistance to governments to increase accountability, transparency, revenue collection, and provision of basic services. For example, a USAID project in Guatemala provided technical assistance to municipal governments to improve their financial management and increase the quality of government-provided services such as water and sanitation systems. State and USAID also supported this objective by supporting projects to strengthen justice institutions, combat corruption, improve democratic processes, and advocate for the protection of human rights. For example, we visited a morgue in Honduras where USAID and INL collaborated to provide forensic training and equipment and improve evidence collection and analysis capabilities, to better prosecute crimes (see fig. 7).

**Figure 7: Forensic Equipment at a Morgue in Honduras Provided by U.S. Government Assistance**



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-590

- Security: State, USAID, and DOD implemented projects to support the security objective. USAID and INL projects supported community based activities to prevent violence by supporting community youth centers, strengthening community policing, and implementing workforce development projects for at-risk youth. For example, a USAID project in Honduras provided technical training, mentorship, and job placement support for at-risk youth. INL also provided training and equipment to law enforcement to improve its capabilities and reputation in communities and to better identify and prevent crime, violence, and gang activity. For example, we visited the International Law Enforcement Academy in El Salvador, where U.S. assistance provides a variety of training courses to Central American and South American police, judges, and prosecutors, to increase capacity and coordination among law enforcement officials (see fig. 8). In addition, State funded and DOD funded and implemented projects to train and equip Northern Triangle militaries. DOD officials in Honduras, for



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example, told us they provide a range of trainings to Honduran military leaders at U.S. military schools.

See appendix II for a summary of U.S. assistance projects in the Northern Triangle for our six selected sectors.

**Figure 8: Law Enforcement Training at the International Law Enforcement Academy in San Salvador**



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-590

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## Agencies Reported That Projects Implemented from Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018 Achieved Mixed Results

State, USAID, DOD, and USDA reported mixed results, primarily focused on outputs, for the 190 projects in the six sectors we reviewed.<sup>19</sup> While some projects in these sectors achieved the targets that agency officials established, others did not.

We reviewed a variety of performance-related documents for the 190 projects that aligned with our six selected sectors—economic growth, agricultural development, good government service, justice reform, community based violence prevention, and professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, we reviewed State and USAID’s PPRs for fiscal years 2013 through 2018 for each Northern Triangle country, and State’s INCSRs for fiscal years 2013 through 2018.<sup>21</sup> We also reviewed State and USAID’s *Progress Report for the Strategy* for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, and State’s quarterly country cables reporting on agencies’ progress in implementing projects that support the Strategy’s objectives in each of the Northern Triangle countries for available quarters of fiscal years 2016 through 2018.<sup>22</sup> In addition, we reviewed implementer progress reports for a sample of 19 projects to obtain more detailed information on project-specific outputs and outcomes, as well as all available evaluations related to the six sectors completed from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Project outputs are the direct products and services delivered by a project. In contrast, project outcomes are the results of a project’s products and services. GAO, *Performance Measurement and Evaluation, Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2011).

<sup>20</sup>We focused on 190 projects aligned with six of the 18 sectors that supported prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle from fiscal years 2013 through 2018. See appendix I for more details. Agency officials noted that they achieved results during these years from projects implemented in the other 12 sectors of assistance, such as police reform and reduced influence of organized crime and gangs.

<sup>21</sup>State and USAID’s *Performance Plan and Report* provides information on agencies’ progress in meeting foreign assistance goals and objectives in each country for each fiscal year. As part of these reports, State and USAID provide data on results for the fiscal year, relative to established targets, for a range of performance metrics, including those related to the six sectors we reviewed. State’s *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* includes country-specific information about some of our selected governance and security sectors in the Northern Triangle.

<sup>22</sup>State and USAID’s *Progress Report for the U.S. Strategy for Central America’s Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation* for 2018 and 2019 consolidate performance data obtained in fiscal years 2016, 2017, and 2018 for projects implemented in support of the Strategy’s objectives.

<sup>23</sup>See appendix III for more information about the 23 evaluations we reviewed.

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Examples of results for projects related to each of the six sectors include the following.

- **Economic Growth:** USAID implemented projects to assist workers improve their access to employment, and help firms improve their business practices and access markets. According to the PPRs we reviewed, USAID achieved 81 of 123 (66 percent) of its targets for performance indicators related to the economic growth sector for fiscal years 2013 through 2018.<sup>24</sup> In addition, all nine evaluations in the sector reported generally positive project results. For example, according to the PPR, USAID assisted 176 firms to invest in improved technologies and 329 firms to improve their management practices in Guatemala in fiscal year 2017, exceeding the targets of 141 and 310, respectively. In addition, 5,067 individuals completed workforce development programs with U.S. assistance in the Northern Triangle countries in fiscal year 2018, according to the PPRs. USAID reported that 1,376 individuals completed workforce development programs in Guatemala, which exceeded the target of 1,000. However, USAID reported that 3,040 individuals in El Salvador and 651 individuals in Honduras completed such programs, which did not meet the fiscal year targets of 7,300 and 5,000, respectively. According to an evaluation of a USAID project in El Salvador that focused on providing training to individuals to improve their job opportunities, 3,585 individuals completed the training, which was 175 fewer than expected due, in part, to the project's focus on training individuals for existing jobs and the scarcity of job opportunities for some individuals who completed the training.
- **Agricultural Development:** USAID and USDA implemented projects that provided assistance to apply improved agricultural technologies or management practices, and increase agricultural productivity and food security. According to the PPRs we reviewed, USAID achieved 58 of 86 (67 percent) of its targets for performance indicators related to this sector for fiscal years 2013 through 2018, and six of eight evaluations of agricultural development projects generally reported positive project results. For example, USAID reported in the PPR that 35,245 individuals in Honduras received short-term training with U.S.

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<sup>24</sup>To report on the percentage of targets achieved for PPR indicators in each sector, we include all indicators reporting targets for fiscal years 2013 through 2018 for which the reported results either met or exceeded the target or that fell short no more than 10 percent. According to State and USAID's guidance for the preparation of the PPRs, where the deviation between the fiscal year target and the result is less than 10 percent, State and USAID consider the target met.

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government support on agricultural productivity or food security in fiscal year 2018, exceeding the fiscal year target of 32,500, but 40,492 individuals received such training in Guatemala, which did not meet the target of 52,417. According to an implementer progress report, as of March 2017, an ongoing USDA school feeding project in Honduras had helped to construct and rehabilitate kitchens and food storage facilities at five of the 30 schools targeted by the project in 2017. An evaluation of a USDA project in El Salvador reported that the project issued 307 agricultural loans to improve agricultural production, which did not meet the target of 345 loans due, in part, to a delay in implementing the project.

- **Good Government Service:** USAID implemented projects to help create accountable and effective government institutions through improved provision of government services, increased citizen oversight, and greater ethics and transparency. According to the PPRs we reviewed, USAID achieved 22 of 30 (73 percent) of its targets for performance indicators related to this sector for fiscal years 2013 through 2018. Some of the projects achieved mixed results, according to an evaluation of projects in this sector. For example, USAID in the PPRs reported that in Honduras it exceeded targets in fiscal year 2018 by providing assistance to 94 local governments to improve public service and by training over 2,600 individuals in Guatemala in fiscal management to strengthen local government and foster decentralization. USAID met the target for fiscal year 2018 by having 81 public policies introduced, adopted, repealed, changed, or implemented with citizen input in Honduras. A USAID project in Guatemala designed to better manage public resources and government services reported in its fiscal year 2017 annual report that it helped 76 percent of the municipalities involved in the project increase their average monthly revenues following the project's financial management training. However, an evaluation of two USAID projects in Honduras found that one project did not meet 70 percent of targets and struggled to successfully promote decentralization laws or increase municipal fiscal autonomy.
- **Justice Reform:** USAID and State provided technical assistance and equipment to help improve the efficiency of the courts and forensic laboratories, and strengthen the capabilities of prosecutors and judges. According to the PPRs we reviewed, USAID achieved 27 of 41 (66 percent) of its targets for performance indicators related to this sector for fiscal years 2013 through 2018. For example, according to the PPRs, 2,298 government officials in El Salvador received anti-corruption training with U.S. assistance in fiscal year 2018, surpassing the fiscal year target of 1,845. However, according to the PPRs, 150

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individuals affiliated with nongovernmental organizations received such anti-corruption training in Guatemala in fiscal year 2017, which was below the fiscal year target of 550. The Progress Report for the Strategy for fiscal year 2019 reported that USAID assisted 244 courts in Guatemala to improve their case management systems in fiscal year 2018, which surpassed the target of 220. The Progress Report for the Strategy also reported that State and USAID trained 12,557 justice system personnel, including prosecutors and criminal investigators, in the Northern Triangle in fiscal year 2018; which surpassed the target of 2,275. Although State did not report targets, it provided data in its annual INCSR on U.S.-supported trainings, including training more than 1,000 police and justice sector personnel in El Salvador in 2016 and 2017, and 262 students in criminal investigations in Honduras in 2013. An evaluation of a USAID project in Guatemala noted the project helped improve prosecution practices and court management, but the evaluation also noted that continuous support would be required to preserve and consolidate reforms.

- **Community Based Violence Prevention:** USAID and State supported a number of efforts under the security objective to prevent violence in communities. According to the PPRs we reviewed, USAID achieved 7 of 18 (39 percent) of its targets for performance indicators related to this sector for fiscal years 2013 through 2018. For example, in El Salvador, 13 U.S. government-supported schools or other learning spaces met the criteria for the safe schools program in fiscal year 2018, surpassing the target of 10 schools. However, according to the PPR, in Honduras approximately 161,300 individuals participated in U.S.-funded gang prevention and education in fiscal year 2018, which did not meet the fiscal year target of 219,600. The Progress Report for the Strategy for fiscal year 2018 reported that State's Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (GREAT) reached tens of thousands of youth and hundreds of police officers received instructor certifications to deliver anti-gang and crime prevention training through the program in the Northern Triangle in fiscal year 2017. However, State did not report targets for the program for the fiscal year. According to an implementer progress report, as of June 2018, an ongoing USAID project in Honduras that provides workforce development services for at-risk youth, had enrolled 2,528 of the project's target of 6,500 youths for fiscal years 2017 and 2018. In addition, 440 of the project's target of 2,488 youths for those fiscal years had completed the workforce development services as of June 2018, according to the report.
- **Professionalize the Military and Develop Defense Capabilities:** DOD and State supported efforts to professionalize the militaries of the

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Northern Triangle countries and develop their defense capabilities. While DOD and State reported positive output results for this sector, they also reported some limitations. According to the PPRs we reviewed, State achieved 48 of 71 (68 percent) of its targets for performance indicators for this sector for fiscal years 2013 through 2018. For example, in fiscal year 2018, State reported that 100 military personnel in Guatemala received technical or tactical training, which met the fiscal year target. State also reported that Guatemalan military personnel completed 12 exercises with U.S. or coalition personnel as a result of U.S. government assistance, which also met the target for fiscal year 2018. However, State reported that it supported the training of 44 fulltime peacekeeping staff in El Salvador in fiscal year 2017, which did not meet the target of 155. In its monitoring progress reports from fiscal years 2013 to 2018, DOD reported that it provided international military education and training to over 2,000 military personnel in the Northern Triangle, although DOD did not report targets. DOD personnel also engaged directly with Central American military personnel to improve their professionalism. For example, in Guatemala, DOD helped to establish a defense budget system designed to increase transparency and accountability of funds within the Ministry of Defense. However, DOD has reported ongoing challenges regarding the professionalism of Northern Triangle militaries and noted that public trust in the militaries remains low.

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## Limited Information Is Available on Progress toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security

Based on our review of various performance-related documents, we found limited information on progress toward improving prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle. Specifically, agencies generally reported more information about progress toward prosperity than toward governance and security. Some of the evidence about governance and security may be limited because evaluations were conducted unevenly across agencies and sectors. In addition, project implementers did not consistently collect key information to assess progress toward the Strategy's objectives. Nevertheless, agency officials cited examples of important results from U.S. assistance as well as challenges to achieving progress toward the objectives. In addition, the Strategy's monitoring and evaluation plan is not comprehensive because, while the plan specifies that State and USAID should track evaluations of their projects, it does not include a plan for evaluations of projects conducted by agencies other than State or USAID.

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## Agencies Reported More Information on Progress toward Prosperity than toward Governance and Security for the Sectors We Reviewed

For the sectors we reviewed, agencies generally reported more information on progress toward prosperity for projects related to economic growth and agricultural development, than toward governance and security. In addition, agencies generally reported positive information on progress toward prosperity for projects related to these sectors. For example, an evaluation of a USAID economic growth project in Guatemala reported the project supported 64 public-private partnerships that managed \$39.1 million in investment, primarily from the business sector, for health, nutrition, and education activities to improve economic growth and development. In addition, USAID reported in the PPR that small and medium-sized firms assisted by its projects in El Salvador increased annual sales by approximately 40 percent in fiscal year 2016, which exceeded the target of 29 percent. In Guatemala, USAID also helped to increase crop yields by about \$62 million and reduced household poverty by about 12.6 percent through two projects that trained agricultural producers in farm management practices and helped them access markets, according to an evaluation. Finally, an evaluation of a USDA agricultural development project in El Salvador reported that it helped generate approximately 12,930 new jobs, significantly exceeding the project's goal of 900 jobs, in part, through increased access to credit and credit competency training.

In general, however, little information was available from agency reports about progress toward the governance and security objectives. For example, an evaluation of a USAID project in good government service in Honduras that provided technical assistance to local governments to improve citizen satisfaction with services reported improvements in the quality of water and health services in most of the targeted municipalities, although the evaluation noted that the project had not developed appropriate indicators to measure results that were directly attributable to the project's activities. Despite these improvements, the evaluation reported that the services remained largely unable to satisfy citizen needs adequately, and there was little evidence that municipalities would have the capabilities or resources to continue to improve the services without donor assistance. The evaluation also noted that the project promoted citizen advocacy by providing training to citizen oversight committees and establishing well-attended town halls in rural municipalities. However, it found no evidence such efforts were effective because the organizations remained too weak to advocate effectively for improved accountability and service.

Another evaluation of a USAID project to prevent community based violence in Honduras reported significant reductions in homicide rates,

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ranging from 42 percent to 68 percent, in four of the six targeted communities, but also noted that these outcomes might not be attributable to the project's activities. Although there were no evaluations of projects in the sector for professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities, DOD reported in its after action reports that it trained dozens of personnel who subsequently held positions of prominence within Northern Triangle militaries.

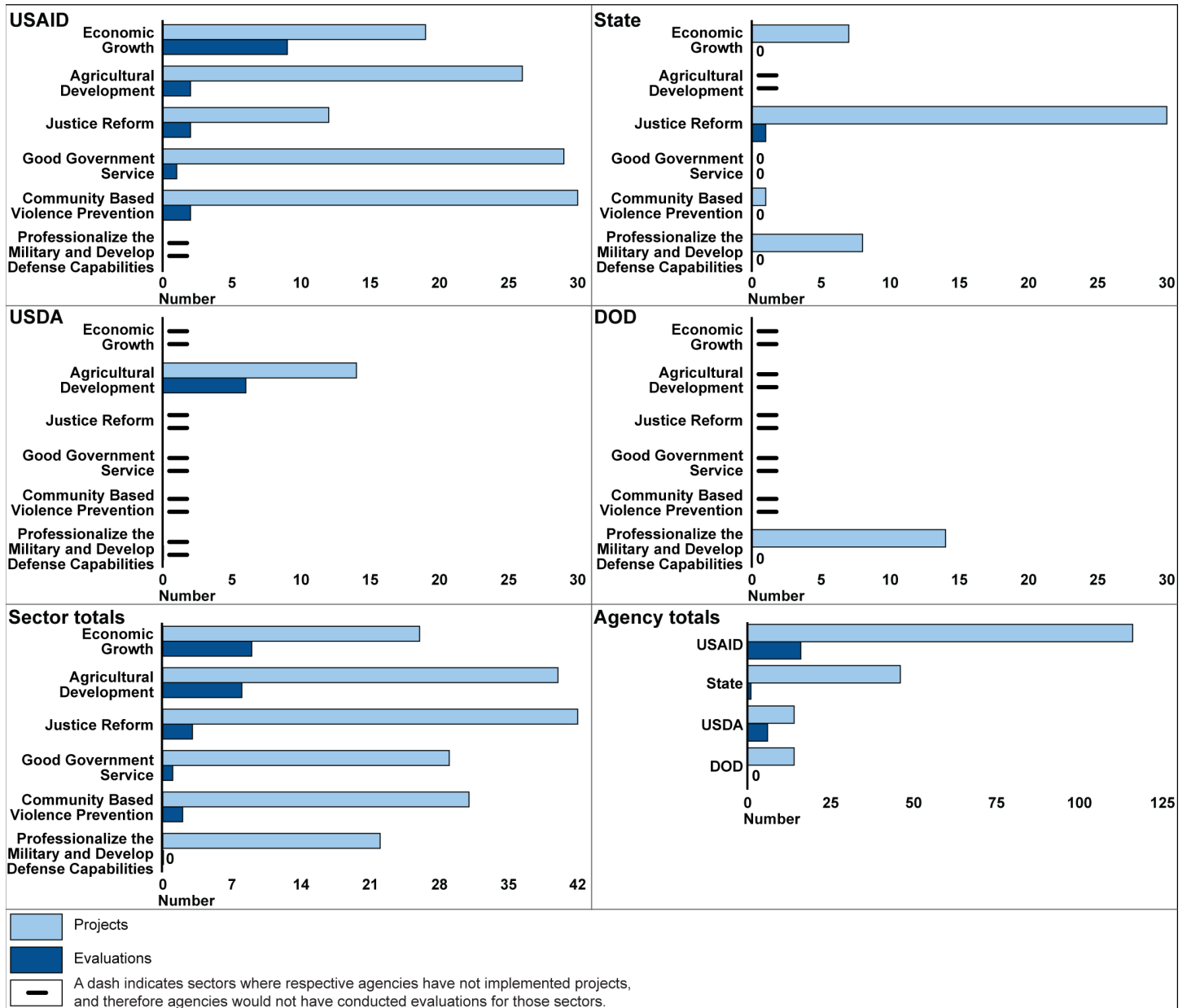
The differences in results information for the three objectives are likely due, in part, to variations in the number of evaluations agencies conducted for their Northern Triangle projects.<sup>25</sup> For example, we found that evaluations had been conducted unevenly across the agencies and six sectors we reviewed. Figure 9 shows the number of projects and completed evaluations of projects in the Northern Triangle that support the Strategy by agency and selected sector from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

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<sup>25</sup>Project evaluations are individual systemic studies conducted periodically or on an ad hoc basis to assess how well a program is working. Experts, from inside or outside the agency, who are not working on the project often conduct these evaluations. Project evaluations typically examine a broader range of information on program performance and its context than is feasible to monitor on an ongoing basis.



**Figure 9: Number of Projects and Completed Evaluations for Selected Sectors in the Northern Triangle by Agency and Sector, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018**



Sources: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Agriculture (USDA) data and information. | GAO-19-590

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From fiscal years 2013 through 2018, agencies completed 23 evaluations across the six sectors, which related to the 190 projects that agencies implemented in these sectors during this period. USAID completed 16 of these evaluations, with more than half of them in economic growth, although only 19 of the 116 projects USAID implemented in the sectors we reviewed related to economic growth. USDA completed six of these evaluations in agricultural development. State completed one evaluation in justice reform. DOD did not conduct any evaluations of its efforts to professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities in the Northern Triangle. In January 2017, DOD established agency-wide guidance for conducting assessment, monitoring, and evaluation of security cooperation programs and activities.<sup>26</sup>

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**Project Implementers Did Not Consistently Collect Key Information to Assess Progress toward the Strategy’s Objectives, but Officials Noted Improvements**

We found that project implementers for State and USAID did not consistently collect key information to evaluate progress towards outcomes. Specifically, 12 of the 23 evaluations we reviewed from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 cited instances in which projects had not established measures or collected data to measure outcomes.

Six of the 17 evaluations we reviewed for the sectors for economic growth and agricultural development noted that implementers had not collected sufficient data to measure the projects’ outcomes. For example, an evaluation of a USAID project that supported municipalities to mobilize financial resources for economic development noted that evaluators were unable to measure whether the project’s activities improved the municipalities’ competitiveness in providing services to businesses and investors. The evaluators could not perform this assessment because the project implementers did not consistently collect data to measure improvements in the local business climate. An evaluation of USAID projects in agricultural development in Guatemala noted that evaluators were unable to assess the total welfare impacts of the projects, such as changes in household incomes, because the projects had not collected information on household or farmer incomes from all sources with which to compare results following project activities.

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<sup>26</sup>DOD did not have agency-wide evaluation guidance for security cooperation prior to issuing this guidance. See DOD Instructions 5132.14, *Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise*, January 13, 2017, available at <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Directives/issuances/dodi/>

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All four evaluations we reviewed in the sectors for good government service and justice reform noted that the projects did not sufficiently establish or measure the projects' outcomes. For example, an evaluation of two USAID projects in Honduras for good government service found that one project did not incorporate indicators to measure outcomes. While the other project incorporated outcome indicators, the evaluation found most of these indicators to be poorly defined and inadequate to measure the project's results. An evaluation of a State project in justice reform in Honduras also found that project indicators were focused on outputs and not outcomes. The evaluation also noted that the indicators were established after the project started and thus did not establish a true baseline or capture results from the beginning. As a result, evaluators reported that they lacked the data to evaluate key results.

The two evaluations of projects to prevent community based violence we reviewed discussed deficiencies with progress indicators. For example, an evaluation of a project in Honduras that focused on reducing homicide rates noted that the implementing partner relied on the Honduran government to obtain data on homicides, although the government had limited capability to document and report such data.

USAID officials noted that USAID and project implementers have made improvements to projects' monitoring and evaluation plans in response to evaluation findings. For example, project implementers have added outcome indicators and USAID officials have provided technical assistance to implementers to help them design new methods for collecting data in response to evaluation findings and recommendations, according to USAID officials.

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### Agency Officials Described Progress and Challenges in Achieving Prosperity, Governance, and Security

Although our review of various performance-related documents related to the six sectors show that limited information from evaluations is available on progress toward prosperity, governance, and security, agency officials described some important results from U.S. assistance in the Northern Triangle related to these sectors. For example, USDA officials noted that technical assistance and training helped to enhance crop research and water and soil conservation, which contributed to increased agricultural production. USAID officials noted that the technical assistance the agency has provided to small and medium sized firms has helped them access markets and increase sales. State and USAID officials also described improvements in the use of forensic evidence through technical assistance and training provided to judges and prosecutors and enhanced court management, which contributed to timely criminal

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investigations and prosecutions. In addition, State officials explained that U.S. assistance along with support from other donors and host governments has contributed to positive results, including the passage of laws that prevent organized crime from donating to political campaigns, multiple anti-corruption investigations, as well as reductions in homicide rates through community based violence prevention projects. Furthermore, DOD officials noted that assistance in defense planning and management helped support oversight and accountability in the use of military funds and enhanced the capacity of security forces to respond to disaster relief and drug interdiction efforts.

Agency officials also noted that from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 they achieved results toward enhanced prosperity, governance, and security for the 180 projects that corresponded to the 12 sectors outside of the scope of our review. In particular, USAID officials noted that environment sector projects increased incomes for thousands of individuals through improved management and conservation of natural resources, such as watershed management. State officials also described important results from projects in the human rights sector, including strengthening the capacity of labor union networks to monitor and document hundreds of incidents of violence against union activists in Guatemala and Honduras and increasing the number of investigations into such incidents. In addition, State officials identified results in the police reform sector, including passage of police reform legislation, professionalization of police academies, and sharing of information among law enforcement.

Agency officials we interviewed also cited examples of challenges to achieving progress toward prosperity, governance, and security. For example, USDA and USAID officials noted that drought and coffee rust—a fungal disease that harms coffee plants—reduced agricultural production in affected areas. USAID officials also pointed out that the health of the economy and labor markets affect the results of economic growth projects, particularly with regard to firms' sales and the placement of individuals in jobs following their completion of workforce development programs. In addition, State and USAID officials cited the importance of government officials' willingness to implement reforms as an important factor that affects the achievement of results across sectors. Furthermore, high turnover of civil service and military professionals affects the achievement and sustainability of results in various sectors, according to State, USAID, and DOD officials. Agency officials also explained that they have taken steps to modify projects to address such challenges. For example, USAID and USDA projects have provided technical assistance

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and training to farmers on how to prevent coffee rust and cultivate coffee varieties resistant to the disease.

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## Strategy's Monitoring and Evaluation Plan Is Not Comprehensive

In its coordinating role for the implementation of the Strategy, State has not created a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan that specifies an approach to evaluating progress across all agencies. Our prior work regarding effective foreign assistance strategies found that development of a monitoring and evaluation plan is a key element in terms of assessing agencies' common goals and objectives, and mutually reinforcing results.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, we found that foreign assistance involves the collaborative efforts of multiple agencies, and strategies that consistently address agencies' roles and responsibilities and include interagency coordination mechanisms can guide effective collaboration among agencies and prevent fragmentation.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government indicates that managers should identify the information needed to achieve objectives and use such information to evaluate performance in achieving objectives.<sup>29</sup>

State, in coordination with USAID, has developed and updated a monitoring and evaluation plan for funds appropriated to them to implement the Strategy in response to direction contained in committee reports accompanying several State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations acts.<sup>30</sup> However, the plan that State and USAID developed for the Strategy, while consistent with the committee reports' direction, is not comprehensive. In particular, it does not incorporate all the relevant agencies, sectors, and activities that support the Strategy's objectives. The plan notes that State and USAID will monitor and evaluate foreign assistance supporting the Strategy. While the plan specifies that State and USAID should track completed, ongoing, and planned evaluations of their projects supporting the Strategy's objectives, it does not include a plan for evaluations of projects conducted by

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<sup>27</sup>GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Better Guidance for Strategy Development Could Help Agencies Align Their Efforts*, [GAO-18-499](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2018).

<sup>28</sup>Fragmentation in the U.S. government refers to circumstances in which multiple federal agencies are involved in serving the same broad area of national need and opportunities exist to improve service delivery.

<sup>29</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014).

<sup>30</sup>See e.g. H.R. Rep. No. 114-693, at 85 (2016), H.R. Rep. No. 115-253, at 82 (2017).

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agencies other than State or USAID, such as DOD and USDA. Additionally, the plan notes that each agency requires project monitoring, including progress indicators, baselines, targets, and expected outcomes of projects. The plan specifies that State will compile and report performance data, which will provide an important source of information to assess progress toward Strategy objectives. However, the plan does not specify how State and USAID would include reporting on many activities conducted by other agencies that support the Strategy's objectives.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, State officials noted the monitoring and evaluation plan does not include indicators for DOD and USDA activities that contribute to the objectives of the Strategy, with the exception of DOD activities funded through State. For example, State, in addition to determining the scope of security assistance and funding level for each recipient of International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs, also identifies annual IMET goals and objectives for each country. DOD administers IMET in coordination with State. State and USAID's monitoring and evaluation plan includes indicators to measure progress of these programs.

DOD, however, conducts a number of other programs to professionalize the military that State and USAID have not included in the monitoring and evaluation plan. For example, DOD provides training to Northern Triangle militaries and Ministries of Defense that is outside of the IMET program, such as Defense Government Management and Training engagements. *The Progress Report for the Strategy* for fiscal year 2018 indicated that under the IMET program there were 13 U.S.-trained personnel in positions of prominence, or positions of military or government leadership, in the Northern Triangle in fiscal year 2017. DOD, though, in a separate report on these military training and education programs, noted there were over 100 U.S.-trained personnel in positions of prominence in the Northern Triangle in fiscal year 2017. In addition, the monitoring and evaluation plan does not include any of USDA's activities or activities related to the health sector that support the Strategy's objectives, despite the fact USDA completed six evaluations of its agricultural development projects that could be used to inform an understanding of progress toward the Strategy's objectives. By not capturing information on DOD and

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<sup>31</sup>See appendix IV for an overview of the *U.S. Strategy for Central America* results architecture.

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USDA activities, State and USAID have limited ability to assess the progress made by all U.S. government agencies in the Northern Triangle.

State officials stated that the monitoring and evaluation plan is not inclusive of DOD and USDA activities because the legislative direction for the plan did not require it. The Strategy, however, intends to take a comprehensive, integrated, and whole of government approach to engagement in Central America. DOD and USDA officials in headquarters and at the Missions in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras told us that their activities also support the Strategy's objectives.

Given its coordinating role in the Strategy's implementation and in foreign policy objectives in general, State is well positioned to work collaboratively with officials from other agencies to develop a comprehensive approach to monitoring the impact of all activities across all sectors that directly support the Strategy's objectives. A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan that specifies an approach to evaluating progress across all agencies would help State and USAID to determine to what extent U.S. government activities in the Northern Triangle are achieving the Strategy's desired results.

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## Conclusions

The Northern Triangle, an area of strategic interest to the United States, faces high levels of poverty, weak governance, and widespread violence and insecurity. To respond to these challenges, the U.S. government has for many years provided assistance to the region. Multiple agencies have allocated billions of dollars to implement hundreds of projects that have provided technical assistance, equipment, and training to thousands of individuals and organizations. Agencies have reported mixed results from these projects, relative to targets set, yet little is known about progress on meeting broader objectives to improve prosperity, governance, and security in the region. Under the *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America*, State and USAID developed a monitoring and evaluation plan, for their own projects, that is an important tool for assessing impact in the region. A more comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluation of projects that may address the Strategy's objectives to include all relevant agencies, sectors, and activities would enable the U.S. government to have a better understanding of progress under the Strategy and how U.S. assistance is addressing the underlying challenges that confront El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Given State's coordinating role in the implementation of the Strategy among U.S. government agencies, including DOD and USDA, it is uniquely positioned to ensure that

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agencies collaborate effectively and that monitoring and evaluation are well coordinated and documented in a comprehensive plan.

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## Recommendation for Executive Action

The Secretary of State, working with the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, should collaborate with the Departments of Defense and Agriculture and other Departments as necessary, to develop a comprehensive approach to the monitoring and evaluation of projects that directly support the objectives of prosperity, governance, and security, and incorporate this approach into the Strategy monitoring and evaluation plan.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to State, USAID, DOD, USDA, DOJ, and DHS. We received written comments from State, USAID, and DOD, which we reprinted in appendixes V through VII. We received technical comments from State, USAID, DOD, and DHS, which we incorporated as appropriate. USDA and DOJ informed us in writing that they had no comments.

State and USAID did not concur with our recommendations, indicating that neither agency has the authority to direct DOD or USDA to design and implement programs. USAID indicated that while greater interagency coordination would be appropriate, it does not have the authority to direct DOD or USDA to monitor and evaluate their projects against objectives developed for the Strategy. DOD noted that while some of its programs enable progress toward the Strategy's objectives, it is not appropriate for State to specify how to monitor and evaluate DOD-funded programs. State also asserted that our recommendation is not consistent with the explanatory statements accompanying the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, which directs State and USAID to develop a monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy for programs funded by appropriations to them, but does not direct that the plan include monitoring and evaluation of programs funded by appropriations to DOD and USDA.

We are not recommending that State and USAID direct DOD and USDA to monitor and evaluate projects, but rather that State collaborate with DOD and USDA to develop a more comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluating projects that support the Strategy's objectives and that State document the results of this collaboration in the Strategy's monitoring and evaluation plan. We do not prescribe the format or content for how the Strategy's monitoring and evaluation plan might be updated.



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We have modified relevant sections of our report and our recommendation to make this clearer and eliminated the recommendation to USAID, since State coordinates implementation of the Strategy by the various agencies of the U.S. government. We found that DOD and USDA have designed and implemented programs that directly support the objectives of the Strategy. While we acknowledge that some coordination among agencies occurs in Washington and in the Northern Triangle, we found that such coordination does not formally extend to monitoring and evaluation. We agree with USAID's comment that interagency coordination on a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy would be appropriate. Consistent with USAID's comment, we believe that our recommendation encourages greater coordination among agencies, including DOD and USDA, by ensuring that comprehensive monitoring and evaluation efforts of the entire U.S. government are in sync with the monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy. Excluding DOD and USDA projects from the monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy could result in an incomplete or unclear understanding of the results of U.S. assistance in the Northern Triangle. Without a complete and clear understanding of the results across all agencies involved, agencies may miss important lessons about the types of assistance that are most effective in achieving U.S. objectives in this region, potentially limiting overall progress. Furthermore, while the explanatory statement accompanying Pub. L. No. 114-113 directs State, in coordination with USAID, to develop a monitoring and evaluation plan for funds appropriated to them, we are recommending that State, as coordinator for the implementation of the Strategy, work with the other agencies to develop a more comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluating projects that support the Strategy's objectives. State should update the monitoring and evaluation plan that was created in response to the congressional direction to document the comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluation.

State indicated that the credibility of our report was limited by the following five methodological issues: (1) our inclusion of projects implemented by DOD and USDA; (2) our inclusion of projects implemented with funds appropriated prior to fiscal year 2016; (3) our use of inconsistent reporting methods for funding allocations among the four State bureaus providing data and among State, USAID, DOD, and USDA; (4) our classification of program sectors, which was not consistent with the sub-objectives used by State and USAID as part of the Strategy; and (5) our exclusion of several "primary" sectors for our in-depth review, such as police professionalization, reducing violence at the local level, and reducing the influence of organized crime and gangs.

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We believe that our methodology enhanced the credibility and reliability of our report. Overall, we designed our objectives, scope, and methodology, as outlined in detail in appendix I, to provide a reasonably comprehensive review of the results of U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle toward achieving key U.S. objectives.

- First, we chose to review all agencies that have allocated a significant amount of funding from their appropriations to implement projects in the Northern Triangle from fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2018 to support prosperity, governance, and security. DOD and USDA officials confirmed that DOD and USDA projects support these objectives and we believe that the inclusion of these agencies significantly enhanced the accuracy and completeness of our reporting on the results that have been achieved from U.S. assistance as well as the gaps in the current monitoring and evaluation approach and implications for State's ability to assess results comprehensively.
- Second, we believe our inclusion of projects implemented from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 provided a reasonable time frame for our review because it included projects that supported the objectives of improving prosperity, governance, and security—long standing objectives that predated appropriations for the Strategy, and even the Strategy itself. Including projects implemented between fiscal years 2013 and 2018 increased our ability to report on the results of agencies' projects and their overall progress toward the Strategy's objectives because projects funded since fiscal year 2016 were in too early a stage of implementation to report meaningfully on such results. However, we considered, as appropriate, any results information we were able to obtain on such projects.
- Third, we acknowledge that the precision of our estimates for reporting on funding allocations was limited due to the inconsistent nature of reporting of financial data by different bureaus and agencies. However, taking into consideration qualifications noted throughout our report, we believe that our reporting of funding allocations provides a reliable description of how agencies used allocated funding to support prosperity, governance, and security objectives.
- Fourth, we believe that our classification of projects under different sectors we identified provides a detailed, comprehensive, and

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meaningful analysis of projects and related results. Because some of the sub-objectives developed by State and USAID, such as “reduce poverty,” were very broad and did not lend themselves to an analysis of specific project sectors that supported the Strategy’s objectives, we identified more specific sectors, including health, economic growth, and agricultural development. State and USAID officials validated the accuracy of our definitions, and we revised them as appropriate, given input from agency officials.

- Fifth, our selection of six sectors for in-depth review of projects and results limits the generalizability of our findings to all sectors, which we note. Due to the large number of projects, sectors, and sub-objectives associated with U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle, we determined that a case study approach was the most effective methodology for our review. We devised selection criteria to reflect a meaningful selection of projects across sectors, agencies, and countries. Moreover, two of the sectors we selected for in-depth review—community based violence prevention, and justice reform—encompass several projects classified as relating to “reducing violence at the local level,” and “reducing the influence of organized crime and gangs.” Thus our report addresses results in these sectors. We omitted certain sectors, such as police professionalization, in part, because we had ongoing work related to this sector. We acknowledge limitations with this case study approach and do not attempt to generalize results beyond the sectors we reviewed. We believe that this methodological approach provides a reasonable basis for our overall conclusion that projects in the sectors we reviewed achieved mixed results.

USAID also raised several methodological concerns, some of which were similar to those raised by State. In particular, USAID (1) questioned the validity of our analysis, since it was based on a case study of six of the 18 sectors we identified, and commented that we did not discuss the limitation of this approach; (2) questioned the validity of our use of monitoring information relating to the achievement of annual targets to analyze results; and (3) asserted that we focused on negative evaluation findings to assess results and did not mention or analyze planned and ongoing evaluations or programmatic changes made in response to monitoring and evaluation information.

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We believe our methodological approach provides a reliable basis for our findings and conclusions, and concerns USAID raised do not limit the credibility of our report.

- First, we acknowledge the limitations of our case study approach and included statements throughout our report to make these limitations clear.
- Second, we believe that the use of data on the achievement of annual targets is a valid approach to assessing results, although the agencies collecting the data may also intend to use it in making decisions about ongoing projects. Furthermore, these data provided only one element of our analysis. We also analyzed State and USAID implementer progress reports, mid-point and final evaluations, and other performance reports, which provide a longer-term perspective on results. Collectively, we believe that this information provides meaningful insight into the successes and shortcomings of the projects in the sectors we reviewed.
- Third, we sought to present a balanced picture of results within the sectors we reviewed, highlighting both positive and negative outcomes described in the reviewed documents. We reviewed completed evaluations to provide insight into project results, but excluded ongoing and planned evaluations because conclusions about project results are not available until such evaluations are completed. Similarly, our report acknowledges that agency officials described progress and challenges to achieving the prosperity, governance, and security objectives, as well as the steps taken to modify projects to address such challenges. However, such modifications fell outside the scope of our analysis of results, absent documentation of their specific impact on the achievement of objectives.

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As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of the Department of State, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Secretary of the Department of Defense, the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, the Attorney General, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

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If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7141 or [groverj@gao.gov](mailto:groverj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix VIII.



Jennifer Grover  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

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*List of Requesters*

The Honorable Eliot L. Engel  
Chairman  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Rob Portman  
Chairman  
The Honorable Tom Carper  
Ranking Member  
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Albio Sires  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Bill Cassidy, M.D.  
United States Senate

The Honorable Paul Cook  
House of Representatives

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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This report examines (1) the projects that the U.S. government has implemented in the Northern Triangle from fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2018 to support prosperity, governance, security, (2) what is known about the results of these projects, and (3) what is known about progress toward the *U.S. Strategy for Central America's* (Strategy) objectives.

To determine the projects that the U.S. government has implemented in the Northern Triangle, we collected and analyzed agency project and funding data concerning foreign assistance projects supporting prosperity, governance, and security objectives from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Departments of State (State), Justice (DOJ), Homeland Security (DHS), Defense (DOD), and Agriculture (USDA). We focused our analysis on State, USAID, DOD, and USDA because they allocated the largest amounts of funding for the largest number of projects in the Northern Triangle from fiscal years 2013 through 2018. We included projects from fiscal years 2013 to ensure we examined projects that had undergone sufficient implementation to assess results.<sup>1</sup> We obtained the data and information from several bureaus at State that administer these projects and funds: International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs; Western Hemisphere Affairs; Political-Military Affairs; and Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. We also obtained data from DHS and DOJ concerning projects implemented through agreements with State, which we included under State's project and funding counts.

Although agencies use different terms to describe agencies' assistance, including programs, projects, and activities, we use the term "projects" to refer to assistance funded by the key agencies that are implemented directly by the agencies or through awards made to the implementing partners. In general, the term project consists of a set of activities that are designed and executed over a time frame to achieve a specific aim. While agencies and bureaus typically provided us with project-level data, some agencies and bureaus were unable to report data at the project level, and instead provided us with data that combined multiple activities or awards to implementing partners to accomplish a broader aim. In addition, most agencies reported project and funding data by country, including separating funding data for multi-country projects that were implemented

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<sup>1</sup>We conducted our last comprehensive review of U.S. assistance to Central America in fiscal year 2013. See GAO, *Central America: U.S. Agencies Considered Various Factors in Funding Security Activities, but Need to Assess Progress in Achieving Interagency Objectives*, [GAO-13-771](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep 25, 2013).

in two or more countries, including at least one Northern Triangle country. Some agencies were not able to report multi-country projects by country, which we included in the multi-country project category. Since most agencies and bureaus provided us with project-level data separated by country, we use the term “projects” to encompass all available data on agencies’ assistance in each of the three countries.

We analyzed agencies’ data and information to identify the number of projects implemented by agency and country and the total funding agencies allocated for these projects from fiscal years 2013 through 2018. We excluded from our analysis those projects that encompassed solely administrative and monitoring and evaluation activities and costs that did not provide technical assistance, although we included the funds allocated for these projects in our analysis of funds allocated by each agency for projects that supported prosperity, governance, and security.

We assessed the reliability of the data that agencies reported for these projects. We requested and reviewed information from agency officials regarding the underlying data systems and the checks and reviews used to generate the data and ensure its accuracy and reliability. We also conducted logical checks and analysis to confirm the accuracy of the data. When we found potential duplicate data and discrepancies, we contacted relevant agency officials in Washington, D.C. and obtained information from them necessary to resolve these data issues. As a result of these steps, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting the number of projects that supported prosperity, governance, and security in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and funding allocations for these projects from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

To select a subset of the projects to review, we reviewed agencies’ project information as well as Strategy documents to categorize all projects into 18 different sectors of assistance that generally aligned with the current objectives of the Strategy.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we grouped similar projects by sector such as economic growth, justice reform, and community based violence prevention, and aligned them according to the

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<sup>2</sup>The 18 sectors include agricultural development, community based violence prevention, counternarcotics, democracy building, economic growth, education, energy, environment, finance, good government service, health, human rights, infrastructure, justice reform, migration, police reform, professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities, and reduce influence of organized crime and gangs.



Strategy's three objectives of prosperity, governance, and security. We requested that officials from State, USAID, DOD, and USDA review our analysis to confirm our alignment of projects to the sectors and the three objectives. We incorporated revisions from agency officials as appropriate. We then selected a judgmental, nongeneralizable sample of six of the 18 sectors for an in-depth review of performance-related documentation for projects supporting each of the objectives. The six sectors selected included agricultural development, economic growth, good government service, justice reform, community based violence prevention, and professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities. We selected these six sectors to achieve variation by agency, funding allocation amount, country, and to include projects supporting each of the three objectives. Specifically, we selected the six sectors to include two sectors supporting each objective, a distribution of projects across the three Northern Triangle countries, and the largest amounts of allocated funding and number of projects. We excluded from our sample selection the migration and police reform sectors because of our ongoing work in those sectors concerning the Northern Triangle.<sup>3</sup>

To determine what is known about project results, we reviewed agency performance-related documents corresponding to the 190 projects implemented from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 in the six sectors we reviewed. Specifically, we examined State and USAID's *Performance Plans and Reports* for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras for each of fiscal years 2013 through 2018; State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports* for fiscal years 2013 through 2018; State and USAID's *Progress Report for the U.S. Strategy for Central America's Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation* for fiscal years 2018 and 2019;<sup>4</sup> and State's quarterly country cables reporting on agencies' progress in implementing projects in support of prosperity, governance, and security objectives in each of the Northern Triangle countries for the available quarters of fiscal years 2016 through 2018. We also requested and reviewed all 23

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<sup>3</sup>See GAO, *Central America: USAID Assists Migrants Returning to their Home Countries, but Effectiveness of Reintegration Efforts Remains to Be Determined*, [GAO-19-62](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 8, 2018). GAO, *Central American Police Training: State and USAID Should Ensure Human Rights Content Is Included as Appropriate, and State Should Improve Data*, [GAO-18-618](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 5, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>State and USAID's *Progress Report for the U.S. Strategy for Central America's Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation* for fiscal years 2018 and 2019 consolidate performance data obtained in fiscal years 2016, 2017, and 2018 for projects implemented in support of the Strategy's objectives.

evaluations completed from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 by State, USAID, and USDA related to the six selected sectors in each Northern Triangle country.<sup>5</sup> In addition, we selected a nongeneralizable sample of 19 projects within the six selected sectors to gain more in-depth information and context about project implementation and results. For the nongeneralizable sample of projects, we reviewed performance-related documentation, including, among other things, implementing partners' quarterly, semi-annual, and annual progress reports, to examine project results. We selected the 19 projects based on a variety of criteria, including the types of project activities and the objectives they supported, as well as to obtain a range of funding allocation amounts, countries, and agencies. We excluded from our sample selection those projects that encompassed solely administrative and monitoring and evaluation activities and costs, and those that agencies reported as pilot projects not yet implemented.

To examine what is known about progress toward the Strategy's objectives, we reviewed Strategy documents, including monitoring and evaluation plans, to assess if they included key elements of effective strategies that we have identified as related to assessment of progress toward strategic goals.<sup>6</sup> We developed these elements on the basis of prior work related to U.S. government strategies and interagency collaboration as well as prior work on addressing fragmentation, overlap, and duplication in the federal government. Our prior work suggests that strategic documents offer an opportunity to consider the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders involved in achieving those goals, and information on how progress toward those goals will be measured. The Strategy documents were reviewed and rated by two analysts to determine the extent the planning and reporting procedures aligned with the key elements for foreign assistance strategies in situations where multiple agencies work together to deliver foreign assistance. These elements related to (1) delineation of agencies' roles and responsibilities and coordination mechanisms; and (2) assessment of progress toward strategic goals, including identifying activities to achieve results, performance indicators, and monitoring and evaluation plans. Additionally, in assessing the monitoring and evaluation plan, we

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<sup>5</sup>We requested all available evaluations of projects supporting the Strategy's objectives from DOD. However, DOD officials reported that the Department had not completed any evaluations of DOD projects in the Northern Triangle during the time frame requested.

<sup>6</sup>GAO, *Foreign Assistance: Better Guidance for Strategy Development Could Help Agencies Align Their Efforts*, [GAO-18-499](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2018).

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considered the Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, which specify that managers should identify the information needed to achieve objectives and use such information to evaluate performance in achieving objectives.<sup>7</sup>

To determine State and USAID's rationale for not including other agencies' activities that support the objectives of the Strategy, we met with State and USAID officials in Washington, D.C. We also reviewed relevant Strategy documents and Congressional legislation, particularly Public Law 115-31, 131, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, which State and USAID cited as the basis for the creation of the Strategy's results architecture and monitoring and evaluation plan.

To support our work on all three objectives, we conducted fieldwork in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. During the fieldwork, we observed selected project activities, and interviewed agency officials, implementing partners, and project beneficiaries about the project activities and results, and factors that affected project results. We also interviewed agency officials in Washington, D.C. from relevant State bureaus, USAID, DOD, and USDA Foreign Agricultural Service as well as officials of the U.S. Southern Command in Doral, Florida about project activities, project results, factors affecting results and actions to address these factors, as well as efforts to monitor and evaluate project results.

We conducted this performance audit from December 2017 to September 2019 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate, evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>7</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014).

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# Appendix II: Summary of U.S. Assistance to the Northern Triangle for Selected Sectors, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018

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This appendix provides a summary of information on U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Departments of State (State), Defense (DOD), and Agriculture (USDA) assistance projects in the three Northern Triangle countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—to support the prosperity, governance, and security objectives of the *U.S. Strategy for Central America* (Strategy) from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.<sup>1</sup>

We provide a summary of information for the following sectors we selected by country, agency, funding allocation amount, and objective of the Strategy. The sectors include economic growth, agricultural development, good government service, justice reform, community based violence prevention, and professionalize the military and develop defense capabilities. For each sector, we provide an overview and examples of projects, including project objectives, activities, and results that State, USAID, DOD, and USDA reported toward improving prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle.

The information about each sector also includes the following data, selected to illustrate the scope of U.S. assistance in each sector and the underlying conditions that impact prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle:

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<sup>1</sup>Other agencies also reported that they implemented a limited number of projects in the Northern Triangle from fiscal year 2013 through 2018. State funded the majority of these projects, which we include in the project and funding allocation data for State. For example, through agreements, State funded Department of Justice (DOJ) projects in each Northern Triangle country that provided training and case-based mentoring to prosecutors and other justice system personnel to strengthen legal processes, reduce impunity, and combat corruption. Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) conducted border security conferences in the Northern Triangle, according to officials. However, we focused our review on the four primary agencies with the largest number of reported projects and funding.

- **Total number of projects:** The total number of projects we identified that supported each sector in each country from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.<sup>2</sup>
- **Approximate Reported Funding:** An estimate of the total allocated funding reported for the projects in each sector.
- **Context Indicators:** Data reported from various organizations relevant to each of the sectors, including the World Bank, and reported in State and USAID's *Progress Report for the Strategy* for fiscal years 2018 and 2019. We did not independently verify these reported data.

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<sup>2</sup>We gathered information about agencies' assistance in the Northern Triangle that supports the Strategy's objectives, although agencies use different terms to describe such assistance, including programs, projects, or activities. We use the term "projects" to refer to assistance that agencies fund. Agencies implement these projects directly or through awards they make to implementing partners. In general, projects consist of a set of activities that agencies design and execute over a time frame to achieve a specific aim. We asked State, USAID, DOD, DHS, DOJ, and USDA to provide us with project-level data and when possible, to report each project by country. While most agencies and bureaus provided us with project-level data, some were unable to report data at the project level, and instead provided us with data that typically combined multiple activities or awards to implementing partners to accomplish a broader aim. Since most agencies and bureaus provided us project-level data, we use the term "projects" to encompass all available data on agencies' assistance.

Students learning computer skills at a workforce training center in Guatemala supported by a USAID project.



SOURCE: GAO | GAO-19-590

## ECONOMIC GROWTH

Economic growth projects are intended to assist populations living below the poverty line meet basic needs, help businesses improve their business practices and access markets and investment, and promote workforce development. USAID and State implemented 26 economic growth projects in the Northern Triangle from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

### Selected Examples of Economic Growth Projects

#### Total Projects

26

#### Approximate Reported Funding

\$138 million

#### Projects by Country

El Salvador: 6 projects

Guatemala: 4 projects

Honduras: 3 projects

Multi-country: 13 projects

Source: GAO analysis of agency data and information.

#### Context Indicators

##### National Poverty Rate

El Salvador: 29 (2017)

Guatemala: 59 (2014)

Honduras: 62 (2018)

##### Youth Unemployment Rate

(Percentage points changed, 2014 and 2018)

El Salvador: +0.3

Guatemala: -0.4

Honduras: -1.4

Source: State and USAID | GAO-19-590

- A USAID project in Guatemala that focused on income generation, poverty reduction, and improved nutritional status of small producers trained 3,755 individuals in good business, manufacturing, and agricultural practices, according to an evaluation. The evaluation noted that the first phase of the project helped 567 producers adopt these good practices and gain access to more profitable markets enabling them to generate at least \$3.3 million in sales and create 2,434 jobs, 30 percent of which went to women.
- A USAID project in El Salvador sought to build partnerships between industries and higher education institutions to develop educational programs and research. The project trained 100 researchers at universities on how to complete applied research studies on the economy. This training, along with 26 applied research studies funded by the project, allowed for collaborative research between academia and the private sector that had not previously existed in El Salvador. The project also upgraded or created 28 new degree programs to align with industry demands. The project awarded 900 scholarships to students enrolled in these degree programs.
- A USAID project in Honduras provided assistance to rural micro-enterprises to improve their access to markets and competitiveness. The project helped 2,270 of these enterprises adopt new inputs, technologies, and practices for a range of entrepreneurial activities, such as installing solar panels and cultivating organically grown coffee, according to an evaluation. It also helped micro-enterprises achieve certifications from trade and business associations to help them access new markets with higher quality standards to obtain better prices for products, such as high quality chocolate.
- A USAID project in El Salvador encouraged public-private partnerships and provided funds to help municipalities mobilize financial resources for improving economic development. It also intended to help municipalities streamline their administrative procedures to improve the local business climate. The streamlined procedures reduced the time required to complete business processes and diminished the chances for bribery and other illegal practices, according to an evaluation.

- A USAID project in El Salvador targeted over 10,000 micro-enterprises and 20 local governments to strengthen the capacity of providers of business development services to help these micro-enterprises improve innovation and technology, access financing, and increase exports. According to an implementer progress report, the project provided trade capacity building assistance to at least 369 micro-enterprises to help them export. It also trained at least 491 entrepreneurs and 14 business consultants to develop export opportunities.
- A USAID project in El Salvador offered assistance to help workers obtain employment. It provided training to more than 5,600 individuals, including at-risk youth and disabled persons, to improve their job placement opportunities, according to an evaluation. The project also placed 4,886 participants in new or improved jobs. The evaluation also noted that the firms participating in the project reported that the project's methods reduced their recruiting and hiring costs and risks and contributed to a decrease in employee turnover.



A USAID project in Honduras installed irrigation systems to grow lettuce and other crops.



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-590

## AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agricultural development projects are intended to assist farmers to increase the quantity and quality of crops through training, research, and better access to capital. They also sought to assist farmers to gain access to markets and address food security. USAID and USDA implemented 40 agricultural development projects in the Northern Triangle from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

### Selected Examples of Agricultural Development Projects

#### Total Projects

40

#### Approximate Reported Funding

\$381 million

#### Projects by Country

El Salvador: 4 projects  
 Guatemala: 19 projects  
 Honduras: 13 projects  
 Multi-country: 4 projects

Source: GAO analysis of agency data and information.

#### Context Indicators

##### Rural Population

(Approximate percent of total population, 2017)

El Salvador: 29  
 Guatemala: 49  
 Honduras: 44

##### Rural Poverty

(Approximate percent of rural population, 2014)

El Salvador: 38  
 Guatemala: 76  
 Honduras: 65

Source: World Bank | GAO-19-590

- A USAID project in Guatemala sought to train farmers and other agricultural producers in farm management practices and help them access markets. The project helped to increase crop yields by approximately \$62 million and to create approximately 8,900 jobs, according to an evaluation. The evaluation noted the project also increased daily consumption of food by beneficiaries by almost \$2 per person and reduced poverty by approximately 12.6 percent, with extreme poverty falling by approximately 4.6 percent.
- A USAID project in Guatemala aimed to help farmers increase their productivity and quality of life through better farming management and techniques and access to more profitable markets. The project increased net earnings by 59 percent for those it assisted, according to an evaluation. The evaluation noted the project also generated more than 2,400 jobs. Twenty agricultural groups assisted by a follow-on project generated sales of approximately \$1.1 million and more than 1,300 jobs, according to the evaluation.
- A USDA project in El Salvador sought to improve agricultural productivity and expand trade. The project provided training to more than 500 individuals, approximately 99 percent of whom reported using the lessons they learned to improve their farm management practices, according to an evaluation. In addition, approximately 97 percent of them reported that they made business decisions based on economic considerations or analysis following the training. The project provided 35,215 microfinance loans, valued at approximately \$37.5 million. Approximately 82 percent of the beneficiaries reported an increase in agricultural production and approximately 88 percent reported an increase in business sales because of the loans, according to an evaluation. Although the evaluation noted that the loans had the potential to expand agricultural trade, the effects were mixed.
- A USDA project in Guatemala that provided school meals doubled the number of schools that reported having access to food in six municipalities and provided more than 40,400 school-age children



with daily meals, according to an evaluation. The evaluation also reported that the reduction in hunger from the project contributed to a decline in absentee rates for students at the participating schools, from 20 percent before its implementation to 5 percent. The project also constructed or rehabilitated kitchens at 106 schools and provided utensils and equipment for preparing food.

- A USDA school feeding project in Honduras provided meals to more than 50,000 children in 1,047 schools. The project also conducted education campaigns using local media to inform the population about the importance of education and the steps for enrolling children in school. Following the project's implementation, school attendance for boys increased by approximately 6 percent and for girls by approximately 2 percent, according to an evaluation.
- USAID projects in Guatemala that aimed to help small farmers improve their farming practices and gain access to markets had mixed results. For example, the evaluation noted that per capita incomes or household incomes of municipalities included in the projects fared worse than municipalities that were not. However, municipalities included in the projects fared better in access to electricity and rates of home ownership.



Source: GAO | GAO-19-590

## GOOD GOVERNMENT SERVICE

Good government service projects are intended to increase the effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, and transparency of government services and institutions. They do so by providing training and technical assistance to improve revenue collection and management, promote transparency and citizen oversight, and enhance the quality of government services. USAID funded 29 good government service projects from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

### Selected Examples of Good Government Service Projects

#### Total projects

29

#### Approximate Reported Funding

\$185 million

#### Projects by country

El Salvador: 10 projects

Guatemala: 8 projects

Honduras: 7 projects

Multi-country: 4 projects

Source: GAO analysis of agency data and information.

#### Context indicators

##### Government effectiveness (est.): (Percentage points changed 2013 to 2017)

El Salvador: - 0.25

Guatemala: +0.06

Honduras: +0.22

##### Population using at least basic level of services:

##### Drinking water (Percentage points changed 2013 to 2015)

El Salvador: +1.35

Guatemala: +1.02

Honduras: +1.22

##### Sanitation (Percentage points changed 2013 to 2015)

El Salvador: +1.27

Guatemala: +1.04

Honduras: +2.18

##### Electricity (Percentage points changed 2013 to 2016)

El Salvador: +3.58

Guatemala: +3.81

Honduras: +0.39

Source: World Bank | GAO-19-590

- A USAID project in Honduras sought to increase citizen satisfaction with locally provided services in 43 municipalities. An evaluation found that modest improvements had occurred in the quality and coverage of health and water services in Honduras and that project activities could have a positive effect on these services at the local level. However, the evaluation noted challenges linking these results to the project activities due to weaknesses with the performance indicators. It also found that despite these efforts, health and water services remained largely inadequate to address citizen needs. This project also supported civil society organizations to promote transparency and accountability but the evaluation found that the results of these efforts were ineffective.
- A USAID project in Honduras aimed to promote decentralization of government services to better respond to citizen needs. An evaluation noted that the project helped draft stronger decentralization laws, but these were not passed due to lack of political will. The evaluation also reported the project provided technical assistance and training to municipal governments on revenue collection, fiscal management, and financial software systems intended to help raise revenue. However, the evaluation also found that 39 percent of municipalities reported decreases in fiscal autonomy. The evaluation also cited resource constraints, data inconsistencies in income records, and concerns about the sustainability of the training.
- A USAID project in Guatemala sought to strengthen select municipalities to better manage public resources and deliver services in a efficient and transparent manner in order to foster development. According to the project's 2017 annual report, 76 percent of the target municipalities increased their average monthly revenues by 19 percent following finance management trainings.
- A USAID project in El Salvador aimed to improve government transparency and accountability. It did so by supporting citizen oversight and government compliance with regulations and standards related to transparency, professionalism, and ethics. According to a 2018 implementor monitoring report, the project met a majority of its expected performance goals. In addition, 11 of the targeted municipalities noted in their self-assessments an increased capacity to provide access to information and promote ethics in their institutions.



Source: GAO. | GAO-19-590

## JUSTICE REFORM

Justice reform projects are intended to provide training, equipment, and technical assistance to the justice system to decrease impunity, combat corruption, improve prosecution and forensic capacities, and increase the efficiency and management of courts. USAID and State implemented 42 projects in justice reform from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.

### Selected Examples of Justice Reform Projects

#### Total Projects

42

#### Approximate Reported Funding

\$191 million

#### Projects by Country

El Salvador: 15 projects

Guatemala: 14 projects

Honduras: 11 projects

Multi-country: 2 projects

Source: GAO analysis of agency data and information

#### Context Indicators

##### Corruption Perception Index:

(Difference in percentage points, 2014 and 2018; scores range from 0 (highest perceptions of corruption) to 100 (least perceptions of corruption))

El Salvador: -4

Guatemala: -5

Honduras: No change

##### Percentage of the Population with Trust in the Courts:

(Percentage points change, 2014 and 2018)

El Salvador: -6

Guatemala: -1

Honduras: -1

Source: State and USAID | GAO-19-590

- State funded Department of Justice (DOJ) projects in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras that sought to increase the capacity of justice personnel, including judges and prosecutors, through training and mentorship. According to the final 2018 DOJ El Salvador report, 224 justice personnel received DOJ training. In addition, DOJ provided technical assistance that supported high-profile arrests and prosecutions, including the former President of El Salvador .
- A USAID project in Guatemala sought to address justice sector issues by strengthening prosecution and trial procedures and improving management and coordination processes for justice institutions. An evaluation found that project activities resulted in infrastructure improvements and increased rates of successful prosecutions for crimes such as murder, assault, and violence against women and children. However, the evaluation also noted some limits to the project's success. For example, the project partially implemented court security and protection protocols, and overall the evaluation noted that all work areas still need continued support.
- A USAID project in El Salvador aimed to promote government transparency, accountability, and ethics, and increase civil society participation in government through technical assistance and training. An evaluation found that the project increased awareness of these topics, and led to some improvements in laws and regulations, such as improving the legal framework for anti-corruption efforts. However, the project was unable to achieve any significant changes intended due to lack of political will.
- A State project in Honduras implemented activities that sought to reduce violence and homicide by increasing access to justice, strengthening institutions and local organizations' capacity to deliver legal and support services for victims of violence and rehabilitation and reintegration services for prisoners. A mid-term evaluation found that the project successfully convened stakeholders to discuss women and children's access to justice and carried out a campaign to disseminate information on human rights and access to justice. The evaluation also found the project helped maintain, but not increase rehabilitation and reintegration services for prisoners.

El Salvadoran police meeting with youth in a police athletic league.



Source: GAO | GAO-19-590

## COMMUNITY BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Community based violence prevention (CBVP) projects are intended to reduce the levels of crime and violence, including addressing some of the root causes of insecurity. USAID and State implemented 31 CBVP projects from fiscal years 2013 through 2018. These projects sought to support anti-gang education, employment opportunities for at-risk youth, and efforts to increase institutional capacity and citizen responsibility for crime prevention in municipalities plagued by violence.

### Selected Examples of Community Based Violence Prevention Projects

#### Total Projects

31

#### Approximate Reported Funding

\$223 million

#### Projects by Country

El Salvador: 2 projects  
Guatemala: 5 projects  
Honduras: 15 projects  
Multi-country: 9 projects

Source: GAO analysis of agency data and information.

#### Context Indicators

**Homicides Per 100,000 People:**  
(Difference in intentional homicides, 2014 and 2017)

El Salvador: -1  
Guatemala: -6  
Honduras: -22

**Percentage of the Population Who Feel Safe Walking in their Neighborhood at Night:**  
(Difference in percentage points, 2014 and 2017)

El Salvador: +25  
Guatemala: +20  
Honduras: +20

Source: State and USAID | GAO-19-590

- USAID projects in El Salvador aimed to reduce school violence through coordination with the Ministry of Education on plans to promote safe schools and strengthen the capacity of local organizations to support educational activities and prevent school violence. In fiscal year 2017, 213 U.S. government-supported schools or other learning centers in El Salvador met the criteria for the safe schools program in fiscal year 2017, reaching over 90 percent of the target of 230 schools.
- The U.S. government funded gang prevention and education projects aimed at increasing access to comprehensive, long-term social, education, and health services for high-risk populations. As part of these efforts, 242,029 individuals participated in U.S. government-funded gang prevention and education programs in Honduras in fiscal year 2017.
- USAID projects in Honduras worked with civil society organizations to provide violence prevention services with a focus on vulnerable populations. In fiscal year 2018, USAID reported that 202 people received U.S. government-funded gender-based violence services, including health, legal, and counseling services.
- A USAID project in Honduras sought to lower rates of homicide and other violent crime through alliances of communities and government institutions, especially the police. A mid-term evaluation of the project reported significant decreases in homicide rates, ranging from 42 percent to 68 percent, in three of the six communities where USAID targeted its assistance.
- A USAID project aimed to improve educational options for out-of-school youth by offering them alternatives to criminal and gang activity. An evaluation of the project reported that more than 90 percent of the more than 15,000 individuals who enrolled in school did not pass exams to demonstrate competency at the end of courses. The evaluation further noted that 30 percent of the youth did not remain in school, which likely resulted in a small fraction of them meeting the goal of increasing their income.

Honduran Special Forces demonstrate U.S. training.



Source: GAO | GAO-19-590

## PROFESSIONALIZE THE MILITARY AND DEVELOP DEFENSE CAPABILITIES

Projects to professionalize the military are intended to increase the accountability, competency, and capabilities of militaries in the Northern Triangle. DOD and State implemented a number of these activities from fiscal years 2013 through 2018. The projects provided military equipment and training to military personnel and technical assistance to Ministry of Defense personnel.

### Selected Examples of Professionalize the Military and Develop Defense Capabilities Projects

#### Total Projects

22

#### Approximate Reported Funding

\$313 million

#### Projects by Country

El Salvador: 8 projects

Guatemala: 8 projects

Honduras: 6 projects

Source: GAO analysis of agency data and information.

#### Context Indicators

##### Total Number of US Trained Personnel at National Leadership Levels: (Fiscal year 2018)

El Salvador: 1

Guatemala: 6

Honduras: 1

Source: State and USAID | GAO-19-590

- DOD provided 2,217 people in the Northern Triangle with International Military Education and Training, in collaboration with State, from fiscal years 2013 through 2018.
- DOD provided about \$227 million in military equipment, training, infrastructure and other projects to militaries in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from fiscal years 2013 through 2018. The equipment was intended to develop military capabilities to conduct ground and border security, maritime and riverine narcotic interdiction, and aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.
- DOD reported assisting Guatemala to develop its National Defense Policy and a budgeting system for its Ministry of Defense that supports transparency and accountability.
- An After Action Report of a DOD Defense Governance workshop in Guatemala noted that DOD continued to support the Guatemalan Ministry of Defense to identify national policy and strategy priorities, determine capabilities, and develop a data-driven approach to problem solving and making decisions on resources.
- A DOD report noted that DOD training in El Salvador that focused on fighting corruption had improved relations between military and civilian institutions.



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# Appendix III: Evaluations Related to Selected Sectors of U.S. Assistance to the Northern Triangle, FY 2013 through 2018

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Andrade Costa, Melissa, and Irene García Palud, *Evaluation Report: Mid-term Evaluation of the Program, "Reducing Violence and Homicide Through Access to Justice in Chamalecón, Satelite, and Rivera Hernández Neighborhoods of San Pedro Sula, Honduras"*, August 2018.

USAID/El Salvador Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Initiative. *Final Performance Evaluation of the Higher Education for Economic Growth Activity*, May 17, 2018.

DevTech Systems, Inc. *Programa de Monitoreo y Evaluación: Evaluación final del Proyecto Cadenas de Valor Rurales (PCVR)*, August 2017.

Mendéz England and Associates, *Evaluación de Desempeño de Medio Término de la Actividad de Educación para la Niñez y Juventud 2011-2017*, August 2017.

Management Systems International, A Tetra Tech Company. *Performance Evaluation of the Partnership for Growth in El Salvador*, March 20, 2017 (Revised July 24, 2017).

Asociación de Desarrollo Organizacional Comunitaria (ADOC). *Mid-term Evaluation of the Investment for Educational Development of the Highlands (IDEA) Project*, Save the Children/USDA, 2016.

Advisem Services, Inc. *Final Evaluation Report: Final Evaluation of FINCA's Food for Progress (FFPr) in El Salvador*, November 30, 2016.

The Cadmus Group, Inc. *Performance Evaluation of USAID/Honduras Proparque Program*, June 2016.

Boston College School of Social Work, *Final Evaluation Report: Food for Education (FFE) Project – USDA Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Honduras*, April 2016.

Khanti, S.A. Project Concern International, *Food for Education II, Mid-term Evaluation Final Report*, December 2015.

Boston College School of Social Work. *Mid-term Evaluation Report: Food for Education "Learning for Life" Guatemala*, October 2015.

Social Impact, Inc. *Honduras Convive! Mid-term Evaluation Report*, July 10, 2015.

DevTech Systems, Inc. *Final Evaluation of the USAID/Alianzas Project*, December 12, 2014.

Optimal Solutions Group, LLC. *Partnership for Growth: El Salvador–United States (2011-2015), Mid-term Evaluation Final Report*, September 30, 2014.

DevTech Systems, Inc. *Informe final Evaluación del Proyecto Apoyo en Políticas y Regulaciones para el Crecimiento Económico de Guatemala (PRS)*, September 20, 2014.

Optimal Solutions Group, LLC. *Final Report: Does Assistance to Farmers Translate into Community Welfare Improvements? Non-Experimental Program Evaluation of USAID Assistance to Smallholder Farmers in Guatemala*, August 18, 2014.

Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development. *Food for Education Mid-term Evaluation*, July 2014.

Democracy International, Inc. *Final Report: Mid-term Performance Evaluation of the Transparent Local Governance and Improved Service Delivery Project (USAID/NEXOS) and the Decentralized Enabling Environment Project (USAID/DEE)*, May 2014.

International Business and Technical Consultants, Inc. *Evaluation Report: Final Performance Evaluation of the USAID Municipal Competitiveness Project in El Salvador*, January 29, 2014.

Development Training Services, Inc. *Report on the Mid-term Performance Evaluation of the USAID Transparency and Governance Project El Salvador*, December 24, 2012.

Rivera Cira Consulting, Inc. *USAID/Guatemala Final Performance Evaluation for the Project Against Violence and Impunity (PAVI)*, December 20, 2012.

Amex International and DevTech Systems, Inc. *USAID/Guatemala Mid-term Performance Evaluations for Two Economic Growth Office Projects*, October 25, 2012.

International Business and Technical Consultants, Inc. *Performance Evaluation of the “Improving Access to Employment Program in El Salvador”*. October 17, 2012.

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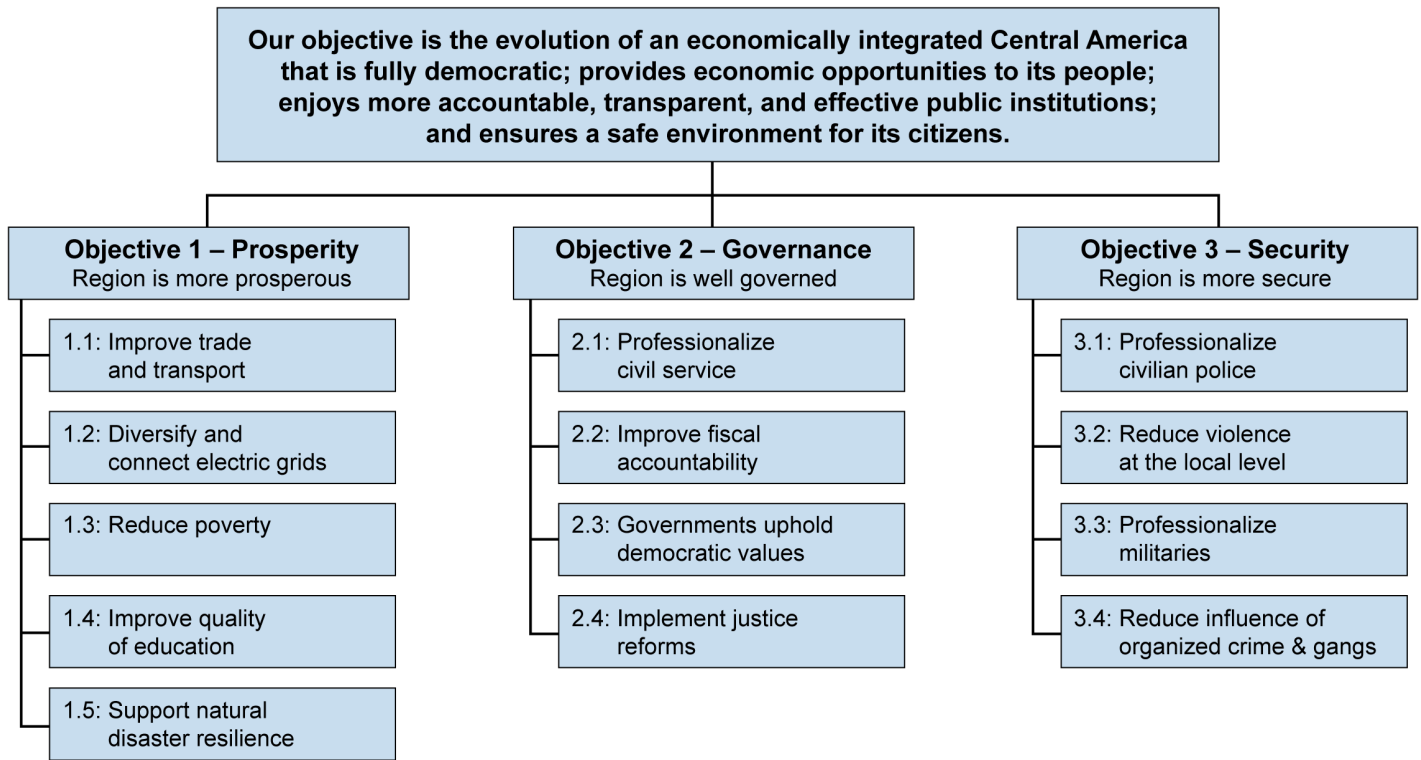
# Appendix IV: U.S. Strategy for Central America Results Architecture

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The Department of State (State) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) produced the results architecture for the *U.S. Strategy for Central America* (Strategy). The results architecture presents the desired end-state of the Strategy; the three primary objectives of prosperity, governance, and security; and sub-objectives that support each of the primary objectives. State and USAID defined the Strategy's mission as to secure U.S. borders and protect U.S. citizens by addressing the economic, governance, and security drivers of illegal immigration and illicit trafficking, and to promote private sector investment in Central America. The result architecture's overall objective is an economically integrated Central America that is fully democratic; provides economic opportunities to its people; enjoys more accountable, transparent, and effective public institutions; and ensures a safe environment for its citizens. The Strategy's prosperity objective is to work with Central American governments to improve the business environment, create jobs, enhance food security, expand energy security, and increase U.S. investment and trade. The Strategy's governance objective focuses on reducing impunity and corruption through the creation of more transparent, efficient governments that deliver services, including justice, effectively. The Strategy's security objective includes enhancing citizen security, re-establishing state presence and security in communities at risk, scaling up violence prevention and law enforcement activities in communities, and targeting individuals most susceptible to gang recruitment. Figure 10 depicts the overall summary of the Strategy's results architecture, which focuses on the objectives of prosperity, governance, and security.



Figure 10: U.S. Strategy for Central America Objectives and Results Architecture



Source: Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development. | GAO-19-590

# Appendix V: Comments from the Department of State

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



United States Department of State  
*Comptroller*  
Washington, DC 20520

AUG 14 2019

Thomas Melito  
Managing Director  
International Affairs and Trade  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, “U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA: State and USAID Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security” GAO Job Code 102492.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeffrey C. Mounts".

Jeffrey C. Mounts (Acting)

Enclosure:  
As stated

cc: GAO – Jennifer Grover  
WHA – Julie Chung  
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

**U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA: State and USAID Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security (GAO-19-590, GAO Code 102492)**

The Department of State thanks GAO for its draft report, *U.S. Assistance to Central America: State and USAID Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security*. Below, please find Department responses to each of the draft recommendations as well as comments regarding unaddressed Department recommendations to GAO's draft report.

**Recommendation 1:** The Secretary of State, working with the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, should, in collaboration with the Departments of Defense, Agriculture, and others as necessary, update the Strategy's monitoring and evaluation plan to specify a comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluating progress across all agencies that directly support the objectives of prosperity, governance, and security.

**Department Response:** The Department respectfully does not concur with this recommendation, as the Department does not have the authority to implement the recommendation. As stated in the Department's response to the draft statement of facts, fiscal year 2016 through 2019 appropriation laws provide U.S. Strategy for Central America (Strategy) funding to the Department and USAID. The Department and USAID provide some Strategy funding to other U.S. agencies, such as DHS, DOJ, Treasury, DoD, and USDA through interagency agreements, which are accounted for in the existing interagency monitoring and evaluation plan. Congress, however, does not provide Strategy funding to DoD and USDA. Therefore, while as a matter of general policy the Department coordinates closely with these agencies, the Department and USAID do not have the authority to direct DoD or USDA to design and implement programs, or conduct monitoring and evaluations of programs, for the funding appropriated directly to those agencies. Furthermore, for example, DoD specifically designs its programs based on its own strategy documents, such as the National Defense Strategy.

Additionally, this recommendation is not consistent with other foreign assistance strategies and reporting requirements. The language in the appropriations law for the Department and USAID, does not indicate Congressional intent that State and USAID include DoD and USDA in the Congressionally-directed monitoring and evaluation reports. The explanatory statement accompanying the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Act (SFOAA), 2017 (division K of Public Law 114-113) states, "*The Secretary of State, in coordination with the USAID Administrator, is directed to develop a plan for monitoring and evaluation of programs funded by this Act and prior Acts making appropriations for the Department of State, foreign operations, and related programs, to implement the Strategy.*" Congress has the option to place similar requirements in the appropriations legislation for the Departments of Defense and Agriculture, but the SFOAA does not direct the Department to submit a report for those appropriations.

See comment 1.

See comment 2.

The Department acknowledges that DoD and USDA have implemented programs in Central America using non-foreign assistance appropriations, and the draft GAO report includes results data and, in the case of USDA, completed evaluations for these programs. The Department has not reviewed the results data or evaluation reports and is not able to comment on the degree to which they may align with the Strategy objectives in the M&E Plan or Progress Reports. The Department welcomes the opportunity to review and incorporate, as appropriate, the results data, evaluations, and other evidence DoD and USDA have generated or plan to generate for their own reporting. We see potential mutual benefit and effective uses of U.S. taxpayer funds in increased inter-agency data sharing and learning in order to maximize program results, but are not authorized to require reports from non-assistance accounts.

The Department provided recommendations to the GAO during the engagement that remained unaddressed in the draft report. The Department will submit a detailed list of unaddressed items to the GAO under a separate cover.

**Additional Department Comments Related to the Content of the Report:**

The report does not meaningfully address the Department's concerns and recommendations provided in its response to GAO's draft statement of facts. The Department remains concerned with the report's inconsistencies, contradictions, and inaccurate framing of the Strategy. The Department requests the following comments be included in the appendix of the final report:

- 1. The report emphasizes results of projects implemented by agencies outside the Strategy. The Department does not consider funding directly appropriated to and then implemented by DoD and USDA part of the Strategy. The initial engagement letter stated the scope of the engagement is to review progress made in implementing the Strategy. The Department's position is DoD and USDA should not be included in the report.**
- 2. The report examines projects implemented by the U.S. government from a timeframe (fiscal years 2013 through 2018) that is inconsistent with funding appropriated for the Strategy. The Department and USAID designed and implemented the majority of activities based on objectives of the Strategy after the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 appropriation. The White House approved the Strategy in a Principals Committee meeting in fall 2014 and first asked Congress for funding to support the Strategy in its FY 2016 budget request, released in February 2015. Congress enacted the FY 2016 appropriation law on December 18, 2015. The Department and USAID obligated the majority of the FY 2016 Strategy funds from April to September 2017, after meeting extensive congressionally mandated pre-obligation requirements. Congress appropriated approximately \$1.4 billion for the first two years of the Strategy (FY 2016: \$750 million/FY 2017: \$683 million). Of those levels, the Department and USAID allocated approximately \$1.1 billion to the Northern Triangle or multi-country programs including the Northern Triangle countries. To include results reporting on funding appropriated prior to FY 2016 is inaccurate and mischaracterizes such programming as ineffective in meeting Strategy goals, goals that had not yet been set.**

See comment 3.

See comment 4.

See comment 5.

3. The report uses inconsistent reporting methods for funding allocations among the four State bureaus (INL/DRL/PM/WHA) providing data, in addition to inconsistent reporting methods between the Department, USAID, DoD, and USDA. The Department takes the position that the use of inconsistent financial reporting methodologies limits the credibility of the report and does not accurately reflect assistance under the Strategy.

See comment 6.

4. The report measures project efficacy against programming sectors developed by the GAO that are inconsistent with those used by the Department and USAID, as part of the Strategy. The Department and USAID use a different, interagency-approved set of sub-objectives specifically designed to track and monitor programs and results under the Strategy. The Department takes the position that reporting progress and results of U.S. assistance under the Strategy against sectors other than those used by the Department and USAID limits the credibility of the report.

See comment 7.

5. The six sectors selected for the in-depth GAO review do not accurately reflect the Department and USAID's priority programs under the Strategy, and omit significant projects and results achieved under the Strategy. The report omits in-depth reporting on primary INL activities related to the Results Architecture's sub-objectives such as police professionalization, reducing violence at the local level, and reducing the influence of organized crime and gangs. Omission of those projects misrepresents the full scope and breadth of Department activities under the Strategy and further limits the credibility of the report.

## GAO Comments

1. We are not recommending that State direct DOD and USDA to monitor and evaluate projects, but rather that State collaborate with DOD and USDA to develop a more comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluating projects that support the Strategy's objectives and that State document the results of this collaboration in the Strategy's monitoring and evaluation plan. We do not prescribe the format or content for how the Strategy's monitoring and evaluation plan might be updated. We have modified relevant sections of our report and our recommendation to make this clearer and directed the recommendation to the Secretary of State, since State coordinates implementation of the Strategy by the various agencies of the U.S. government. We found that DOD and USDA have designed and implemented programs that directly support the objectives of the Strategy. While we acknowledge that some coordination among agencies occurs in Washington and in the Northern Triangle, we found that such coordination does not formally extend to monitoring and evaluation. We believe that our recommendation encourages greater coordination among agencies, including DOD and USDA, by ensuring that monitoring and evaluation efforts by U.S. government agencies are in sync with the monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy. Excluding DOD and USDA projects from the monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy will continue to result in an incomplete or unclear understanding of the results of U.S. assistance in the Northern Triangle. Without a complete and clear understanding of the results across all agencies involved, agencies may miss important lessons about the types of assistance that are effective in achieving U.S. objectives in the region, potentially limiting overall progress.
2. While the explanatory statement accompanying Pub. L. No. 114-113 directs State, in coordination with USAID, to develop a monitoring and evaluation plan for funds appropriated to them, we are recommending that State, as coordinator for the implementation of the Strategy, work with the other agencies to develop a more comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluating projects that support the Strategy's objectives, and that they utilize the monitoring and evaluation plan that they have already created in response to the congressional direction as a place to document the comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluation.
3. We chose to review all agencies that have allocated a significant amount of funding from their appropriations to implement projects in support of prosperity, governance, and security objectives in the Northern Triangle. State, USAID, DOD, and USDA officials confirmed that DOD and USDA projects support the objectives of the Strategy, and we believe that the inclusion of these agencies enhanced the

accuracy and completeness of our reporting on the results that have been achieved from U.S. assistance as well as the gaps in the current monitoring and evaluation approach and implications for State's ability to assess results comprehensively.

4. We believe our inclusion of projects implemented from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 provided a reasonable time frame for our review because it includes projects that supported the objectives of improving prosperity, governance, and security—long standing objectives of U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle that predated appropriations for the Strategy, and even the Strategy itself. Including projects implemented between fiscal years 2013 and 2018 increased our ability to report on the results of agencies' projects and their overall progress toward the Strategy's objectives because projects funded since fiscal year 2016 were in too early a stage of implementation to report meaningfully on such results. However, we considered, as appropriate, any results information we were able to obtain on such projects.
5. We acknowledge that the precision of our estimates for reporting on funding allocations was limited due to the inconsistent nature of reporting of financial data by different bureaus and agencies. However, taking into consideration qualifications noted throughout our report, we believe that our reporting of funding allocations provides a reliable description of how agencies used allocated funding from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 to support prosperity, governance, and security objectives in the Northern Triangle.
6. We believe that our classification of projects under the different sectors we identified enabled us to provide a more detailed, comprehensive, and meaningful analysis of projects and related results. Because some of the sub-objectives that State and USAID developed, such as "reduce poverty," were very broad and did not lend themselves to an analysis of specific project sectors that supported the Strategy's objectives, we identified more specific sectors, including health, economic growth, and agricultural development. State and USAID officials validated the accuracy of our definitions, and we revised them as appropriate, given input from agency officials.
7. Our selection of six sectors for in-depth review of projects and results limits the generalizability of our findings to all sectors, which we note. Due to the large number of projects, sectors, and sub-objectives associated with U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle, we determined that a case study approach was the most effective methodology for our review. We devised selection criteria for our case

study to reflect a meaningful selection of projects supporting each of the three objectives across a range of sectors, agencies, and countries. Moreover, two of the sectors we selected for in-depth review—community based violence prevention and justice reform—encompass several projects classified as relating to “reducing violence at the local level,” and “reducing the influence of organized crime and gangs.” Thus our report addresses results in these sectors. We omitted projects relating to police professionalization, in part, because we had ongoing work related to this sector. We acknowledge limitations with this case study approach and do not attempt to generalize results beyond the sectors we reviewed, but we believe our methodological approach provided a reasonable basis for our overall conclusions.



# Appendix VI: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



Jenny Grover  
Director, International Affairs and Trade  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Re: U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA: State and USAID Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security (GAO-19-590)

Dear Ms. Grover:

I am pleased to provide the formal response of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) titled, *U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA: State and USAID Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security* (GAO-19-590).

USAID welcomes all independent assessments and recommendations for improvement, and appreciates the GAO's work to further strengthen the evaluation within the U.S. Government (USG) of progress toward the objectives of the *U.S. Strategy for Central America (Central America Strategy)*. USAID continually strives to improve the measurable impact of our programming in Central America, as well as the quality of data we collect that drives our decision-making. This is consistent with our extraordinary efforts, over many years, to develop comprehensive and informative tools to ensure that we have state-of-the-art plans for monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) in place throughout the Agency. We are always willing to share our knowledge on best practices with our colleagues in the USG interagency, and work to ensure we are learning collectively from our coordinated efforts.

As noted in the GAO's draft report, USAID works in close coordination with other Federal Departments and Agencies in the design, implementation, and monitoring of our ongoing activities under the *Central America Strategy*. To that end, and in collaboration with our implementing partners, we are currently collecting data against new indicators related to the migration experiences, attitudes, and intentions of participants in the programs we fund in the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America. These new indicators will help USAID and our implementers target and monitor better the direct impact of our programs on deterring illegal migration to the United States.

As such, USAID respectfully disagrees with the GAO's recommendation, because the Agency lacks the authority to implement it. As stated in the draft report, appropriations legislation from Fiscal Years (FYs) 2016 through 2019 provided funding for the *Central America Strategy* to the U.S. Department of State and USAID, which do provide a portion of this funding to other U.S. Departments and Agencies through interagency agreements, accounted for in the existing MEL plan for the *Strategy*. Congress, however, does not provide funding for the

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**Appendix VI: Comments from the U.S. Agency  
for International Development**

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*Central America Strategy* to the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Defense (DoD). Therefore, the Department of State and USAID are not in a position to direct DoD or USDA to design and implement programs, or to monitor and evaluate them, against objectives developed by the Department of State and USAID for the *Central America Strategy*.

USAID suggests that the GAO encourage greater interagency coordination, including with USDA and DoD, on a comprehensive MEL plan to ensure the efforts of the entire U.S. Government are in sync with the MEL plan for the *Central America Strategy*. USAID suggests changing the title of the report to: “*U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA: The U.S. Government Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance and Security.*”

In addition, USAID would like to note that the draft report mixes and crosses FYs 2013–2018 with the time period of the *Central America Strategy*, which did not begin until FY 2016. As a consequence, the draft report does not outline outcomes and projects in a way that takes into account the shift in programming that came with the launch of the *Central America Strategy*. For example, changes in programming to align with the *Central America Strategy* and its corresponding MEL plan in 2016 is likely the reason that the GAO concludes that, “*project implementers did not consistently collect key information needed to evaluate progress, but officials noted improvements.*”

I am transmitting this letter and the enclosed comments from USAID for inclusion in the GAO’s final report. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your draft report, and for the courtesies extended by you and your staff while conducting this engagement. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the assessment of our programs in support of the *Central America Strategy*.

Sincerely,



Frederick M. Nutt  
Assistant Administrator  
Bureau for Management

Enclosure: a/s

**COMMENTS BY THE  
U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
ON THE DRAFT REPORT PRODUCED BY THE U.S. GOVERNMENT  
ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) TITLED, *U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL  
AMERICA: State and USAID Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress  
Toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security* (GAO-19-590)**

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would like to thank the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) for the opportunity to respond to this draft report. We appreciate the extensive work of the GAO's engagement team and their efforts to improve the effectiveness of our delivery of assistance to Central America.

The draft report contains one recommendation for USAID's action:

**Recommendation:** The Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, working with the Secretary of State, should, in collaboration with the Departments of Defense and Agriculture and other Departments as necessary, update the *Strategy's* monitoring and evaluation plan to specify a comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluating progress across all agencies that directly support the objectives of prosperity, governance, and security.

We note that the GAO directed the same recommendation to the Secretary of State.

**USAID's response:** As indicated in the letter that accompanies this enclosure, USAID respectfully disagrees with the GAO's recommendation, because we lack the authority to implement it. As stated in the draft report, appropriations legislation from Fiscal Years (FYs) 2016 through 2019 provided funding for the *Central America Strategy* to the U.S. Department of State and USAID, which do provide a portion of this funding to other U.S. Departments and Agencies through interagency agreements, accounted for in the existing MEL plan for the *Strategy*. Congress, however, does not provide funding for the *Central America Strategy* to the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Defense (DoD). Therefore, the Department of State and USAID are not in a position to direct DoD or USDA to design and implement programs, or to monitor and evaluate them, against objectives developed by the Department of State and USAID for the *Central America Strategy*.

In rejecting this recommendation, we suggest the GAO charge USDA and DOD to coordinate with the Department of State and USAID on a comprehensive MEL plan to ensure their efforts are in sync with the overall MEL plan for the *Central America Strategy*. USAID suggests changing the title of the report to: "*U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA: The U.S. Government Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance and Security.*"

USAID takes seriously its responsibility to the U.S. taxpayer. We are committed to accountability, transparency, and evidence-based management for all our programs. Since Congress's passage of appropriations bills to fund the *Central America Strategy* beginning in FY 2016 and subsequent years, USAID has closely collaborated with the Department of State on the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the *Strategy*, in accordance with legislative

See comment 1.

mandates. Over multiple years, Congress has made clear its directives to the Department of State and USAID. For example, in the explanatory statement that accompanied the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Act, 2016 (Division K of Public Law 114-113), “The Secretary of State, in coordination with the USAID Administrator, is directed to develop a plan for monitoring and evaluation of programs funded by this Act and prior Acts making appropriations for the Department of State, foreign operations, and related programs, to implement the Central America Strategy.”

The Department of State and USAID have carried out these mandates over multiple years by publishing (1) in October 2017, a *Report to update the United States strategy for engagement in Central America plan for monitoring and evaluation*; and, (2) in May 2018 and May 2019, a *Progress Report for the United States Strategy for Central America's Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation*. The Department of State and USAID have published these documents on their websites, as directed by Congress. The Department of State and USAID jointly plan to continue carrying out these and other mandates, as relevant and directed in future appropriations legislation related to foreign assistance.

As noted in the GAO’s draft report, DOD and USDA, by using their own, separate appropriations, have implemented programs in Central America based on their own strategic priorities. Likewise, both Departments provided data on results to the GAO, and USDA submitted completed evaluations of its programs. Not having reviewed these results data or evaluation reports, USAID cannot comment on the degree to which they align with the objectives of the *Central America Strategy* articulated in its MEL plan or progress reports. Nevertheless, USAID would welcome the opportunity to review the results of the programs funded by DoD and USDA. We see potential mutual benefit in increased interagency data-sharing and learning to maximize programmatic results, to ensure the effective use of U.S. taxpayer funds in support of the *Central America Strategy*.

We further request the draft report explicitly clarify the development and implementation of the *Central America Strategy*. While the Obama Administration approved the *Central America Strategy* in FY 2014, the President did not request, and Congress did not appropriate, funding, until FY 2016. The Department of State and USAID obligated the majority of the FY 2016 funds for the *Central America Strategy* from April to September 2017, after meeting extensive Congressionally mandated pre-obligation requirements. Congress appropriated approximately \$1.4 billion for the first two years of the *Central America Strategy* (FY 2016: \$750 million; and FY 2017: \$683 million). Of these levels, the Department of State and USAID allocated approximately \$1.1 billion to the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, or to multi-country programs that included them.

**Additional Comments Regarding Specific Findings in the GAO’s Draft Report**

USAID reviewed the draft report for sensitivity and accuracy to identify any necessary technical corrections. We have submitted under separate cover a compilation of more detailed technical comments. In addition, we would like to bring to your attention the following points:

*Time Periods and Fiscal Years Reviewed by the GAO*

See comment 2.

The draft GAO report states that the GAO included projects from FY 2013 to “ensure that we examined projects that had undergone sufficient implementation to assess results.” USAID believes that the GAO’s draft report mixes and crosses Fiscal Years, strategic priorities, and results data in such a way that inhibits a reader’s appreciation for the changes in focus, funding, and approach within the U.S Government that occurred over the time period in question as a result of the release of the *Central America Strategy*.

The GAO draft report notes that the Obama Administration first “introduced [the *Central America Strategy*] in 2014” and that the Trump Administration “updated [it] in 2017,” and, later, that Congress first appropriated funds for the *Strategy* starting in FY 2016. The background section of the draft report cites the Central America Security Initiative (CARSI) as an example of an initiative implemented prior to the adoption of, and funding for, the *Central America Strategy*. (The Administration subsequently subsumed CARSI under the *Central America Strategy*.) However, the draft report does not mention other initiatives, such as Feed the Future or the Partnership for Growth, which also pre-date the *Central America Strategy* and guided the development and implementation of USAID’s strategies and programs, including monitoring and evaluation, under the *Strategy*.

Following the release of the *Central America Strategy* by the National Security Council in 2014, with its focus on the root causes of illicit migration to the United States, and the Congressional appropriation of funds for the *Strategy* starting in FY 2016, USAID, in coordination with the Department of State, adapted ongoing programs, ended others, and began to design new programs in keeping with the new strategic priorities and overarching goals. Likewise, USAID further refined its programs and related approaches to monitoring and evaluation in line with the July 2017 update to the *Central America Strategy*. As summarized in the revised *Strategy*, by combating rampant crime and violence, addressing corruption and impunity, disrupting the activities of transnational criminal organizations, and providing greater economic opportunity, USAID and the Department of State seek to foster an environment in which individuals do not immigrate illegally to the United States.

While USAID’s programs started to yield results in FYs 2017 and 2018 (as noted in progress reports for the *Central America Strategy* for these years), the number of Central American citizens who migrate to the United States illicitly has remained historically high. In March 2019, the President concluded that current programs in Northern Triangle countries have not proven effective in preventing illegal immigrants from coming to the United States. As such, and according to direction from the Secretary of State, the Department of State and USAID have suspended foreign assistance in the Northern Triangle, pending an assessment of actions the governments of the three countries are taking to stem illicit immigration to the United States.

In addition, as noted further in our technical comments, several evaluations cited in the GAO report took place in 2012, prior to the specified time period of the report. If the GAO cites them, some of which were mid-term evaluations, we respectfully request that the final report describe them for what they are, and, when appropriate, note changes in design or performance based on those early evaluations.

See comment 3.

See comment 4.

*Sample of Programmatic Categories Identified by the GAO*

The draft report notes that GAO categorized “all projects into 18 different sectors of assistance that generally aligned with the current objectives of the *Central America Strategy*.” However, these categories differ materially from the 13 sub-objectives arrayed under the three objectives of the *Strategy*’s Results Architecture. We also note that the GAO’s categories do not align with the Standardized Program Structure and Definitions by which both the Department of State and USAID organize the funding and data on results for all foreign-assistance accounts.

From these 18 categories, the GAO selected a judgmental (non-probability) sample of six categories based on criteria described in the draft report. As with all judgmental samples, limitations to the representativeness of the sample exist, yet the draft report does not discuss them. While the draft report notes that USAID and State called attention to results data from the 12 categories of projects the GAO did not include its review, USAID continues to doubt the ability to generalize findings beyond the six sectors the GAO selected for its review of results and progress under the *Central America Strategy*.

See comment 5.

*The GAO’s Finding Regarding “Mixed Results” That Are “Primarily Focused on Outputs”*

Further, USAID questions the validity of the GAO’s analysis of annual target information, used to support the finding of the draft report that projects achieved “mixed results.” The GAO’s analysis does not take into account how USAID, according to Agency policy, uses information on targets and results to assess whether programs are making progress according to expectations—not only annually, but also over multiple years of implementation.

As noted in USAID’s Agency-wide guidance, “Actual performance indicator data rarely hit targets exactly. Failure to meet a target is not necessarily a problem, and exceeding a target is not necessarily a success. However, if the actual data are outside the expected or acceptable range around a target, it should prompt further investigation or action to understand why.”

USAID provided examples of cases in which such a process led to corrective actions or adaptation, but the GAO’s draft report does not include them. By focusing solely on annual targets and results—and the percentage of targets met or not met—the GAO missed the opportunity to examine whether implementers are achieving life-of-project targets, while also neglecting to account for steps USAID and our partners took to adapt as warranted.

Finally, the draft report states that results reported by USAID and other Federal Departments and Agencies are “primarily focused on outputs.” USAID argues the indicators selected for tracking progress against the *Central America Strategy* in the first few years of its implementation should be output-oriented, as partners typically achieve outcomes only after multiple years of work. Nevertheless, several of the indicators USAID selected for tracking region-wide results (*i.e.*, those detailed in the plan for monitoring, evaluation, and learning [MEL] and progress reports for the *Central America Strategy*)—such as jobs, sales, and courts with improved management systems—can, and should be, considered outcome-oriented. In addition, the Department of State and USAID are committed to updating and adapting the MEL plan and progress reports of the *Central America Strategy* to include additional indicators, including on outcomes. Further, the

indicators highlighted in the MEL plan for the *Central America Strategy* are a subset of hundreds of program-level indicators (many of them outcome-oriented) that USAID and its implementing partners use for country- or sector-specific programmatic monitoring, learning, and accountability

In collaboration with our implementing partners, we are currently collecting data against new indicators related to the migration experiences, attitudes, and intentions of participants in the programs we fund in the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America. These new indicators will help USAID and our implementers target and monitor better the direct impact of our programs on deterring illegal migration to the United States.

*The GAO's Finding Regarding Available Information on Progress Toward the Objectives of the Strategy*

In its draft report, the GAO largely bases its finding regarding "limited information on progress" on a review of 23 completed evaluations—16 of which USAID commissioned and published in FYs 2013 to 2018. Based largely on these same evaluation reports, the GAO also found in its draft report that "project implementers ... did not consistently collect key information to evaluate progress toward outcomes."

We are concerned that the draft report misses or omits information USAID provided to the GAO for review and analysis. First, in addition to a list of evaluations completed in FYs 2013 to 2018, USAID also provided to the GAO a list of ongoing evaluations (both performance and impact) specifically designed to generate evidence related to the effects of USAID's programs on the drivers of illicit migration. As with all but one of the completed evaluations the GAO cited in its draft report, USAID will publish these ongoing evaluations, once complete, on our Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC) website, in keeping with Agency policy. The draft report does not mention these ongoing evaluations.

Moreover, the draft report does not address how USAID uses evidence and data generated not only by the cited evaluations, but also through the Agency's monitoring efforts. According to Agency policy and best practice, the main purpose of generating evidence through our monitoring and evaluation is to drive informed decision-making and management of programs. Indeed, USAID provided to the GAO specific examples of adaptations the Agency or our implementing partners made to programs based on the findings of completed evaluations. In addition, in meetings with the GAO in Washington and during the GAO's visits to Northern Triangle countries, USAID officials described how the staff and management of our field Missions routinely review annual performance data, evaluation findings, and other evidence, such as during portfolio-review meetings or strategic, mid-course stocktaking exercises. The GAO opted not to include these examples in the draft report, and, instead, focused on negative evaluation findings without describing steps USAID and implementing partners took to address them.

See comment 6.

## GAO Comments

1. We eliminated the recommendation to USAID because State plays a coordinating role in the Strategy's implementation and is well positioned to work collaboratively with officials of other agencies, including DOD and USDA. We believe our recommendation to State, in which we recommend that they work with USAID, encourages greater coordination among agencies, including DOD and USDA, to ensure that their efforts are included in a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy.
2. We believe our inclusion of projects implemented from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 provided a reasonable time frame for our review because it included projects agencies implemented to support the long standing objectives of prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle—objectives that the U.S. government has supported under various initiatives that predated the Strategy and appropriations for the Strategy. Furthermore, including projects implemented between fiscal years 2013 and 2018 increased our ability to report on the results of agencies' projects and their overall progress toward prosperity, governance, and security because projects funded since fiscal year 2016 were in too early a stage of implementation to report meaningfully on results. However, we considered, as appropriate, any results information we were able to obtain on such projects.
3. We requested and reviewed all USAID evaluations completed during the time frame for our review—from fiscal years 2013 through 2018 or October 2012 through September 2018—to gain insight into the results of projects supporting the long standing U.S. assistance objectives of prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle. While we reviewed four evaluations that USAID completed at the beginning of fiscal year 2013, as shown in appendix III, three of these were mid-point evaluations of ongoing projects that continued implementation in fiscal years 2013 and 2014, during the time frame for our review. Although we reviewed one final evaluation of a project that had ended prior to the beginning of fiscal year 2013, the evaluation was a key aspect of the project's implementation and lessons learned, which provided information pertinent to future USAID programming in the areas of justice reform and security. Furthermore, while our report noted examples of actions that agencies took in response to challenges to achieving progress toward prosperity, governance, and security, analysis of actions taken in the design of specific projects based on the findings and recommendations of the evaluations we reviewed was outside the scope of our review.



4. We believe that our classification of projects under different sectors we identified provides a detailed, comprehensive, and meaningful analysis of projects and related results. Because some of the sub-objectives developed by State and USAID, such as “reduce poverty,” were very broad and did not lend themselves to an analysis of specific project sectors that supported the Strategy’s objectives, we identified more specific sectors, including health, economic growth, and agricultural development. State and USAID validated the accuracy of our definitions, and we revised them as appropriate, given input from agency officials. We acknowledge that our selection of a judgmental sample of six sectors for in-depth review of projects and results limits the generalizability of our findings to all sectors, which we noted throughout our draft report. However, due to the large number of projects, sectors, and sub-objectives associated with U.S. assistance to the Northern Triangle and the extensive amount of documentation to obtain and analyze for each project, we determined that this case study approach was the most effective methodology for our review. We devised our selection criteria for our case study to reflect a meaningful selection of a significant number of projects across objectives, sectors, agencies, and countries. We do not believe that omitting some sectors from our in-depth review limited the credibility of the findings of our report.
5. We believe that the use of data on the achievement of annual targets is a valid approach to assessing project results, although the agencies collecting the data may also intend to use it in making decisions about the progress of ongoing projects. These data were only one element of our analysis. We also analyzed data and information from USAID implementer progress reports, mid-point and final evaluations, and other performance reports, which provided a longer-term perspective on results. Collectively, we believe that this information provided meaningful insight into the successes and shortcomings of the projects in the sectors we reviewed. Our report acknowledges that agency officials described progress and challenges to achieving the prosperity, governance, and security objectives, as well as the steps taken to modify projects to address such challenges. However, such modifications fell outside the scope of our analysis of results, absent documentation of the specific impact of such modifications on the achievement of objectives.
6. We reviewed completed evaluations to provide insight into project results, but excluded ongoing and planned evaluations because conclusions about project results are not available until such evaluations are completed. Similarly, our draft report acknowledged that agency officials described progress and challenges to achieving

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the prosperity, governance, and security objectives, as well as the steps taken to modify projects to address such challenges. However, such modifications fell outside the scope of our analysis of results, absent documentation of their specific impact on the achievement of prosperity, governance, and security objectives.

# Appendix VII: Comments from the Department of Defense

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
2400 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2400

Ms. Jennifer Grover  
Director, International Affairs and Trade  
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Grover:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the Draft GAO Report, GAO-19-590, "U.S. Assistance to Central America: State and USAID Should Establish a Comprehensive Plan to Assess Progress Toward Prosperity, Governance, and Security," dated July 12, 2019 (GAO Code 102492). After careful review, DoD would like to address concerns with the report that were not resolved during the Exit Conference.

I want to thank the GAO team for its collaboration with DoD on this important review of U.S. assistance to Central America. As the report notes, under the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America (the Strategy), DoD has contributed to the Security objective by helping professionalize militaries in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to increase their accountability, effectiveness, and capability. Through DoD-funded security cooperation programs, we provided Defense Institution Building programs and military equipment and training to these countries' militaries to develop capabilities to conduct ground and border security, maritime interdiction, and aerial reconnaissance.

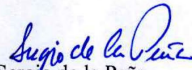
I would like to note that the report contains some misleading information not corrected during the audit period. Although DoD-funded programs enable progress in implementing the Strategy, DoD is not responsible for achieving any specific objective or indicator. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between DoD-appropriated funding and programs and those programs funded by the Department of State. Thus, for example, it is not appropriate for the Secretary of State to "specify" how DoD-funded programs are monitored and evaluated.

DoD is amenable to sharing assessment, monitoring, and evaluation data with the Department of State for awareness and to de-conflict program design, where appropriate. We also recognize the related benefit in increased interagency data sharing to optimize program results and to ensure effective use of resources in support of strategies across the Executive Branch.

See comment1.

Thank you for your support for our men and women in uniform.

Sincerely,

  
Sergio de la Peña  
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for  
Western Hemisphere Affairs

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## GAO Comment

1. We believe that the inclusion of DOD projects significantly enhanced the accuracy and completeness of our reporting on the projects that the U.S. government has implemented in the Northern Triangle from fiscal years 2013 through 2018, and the important lessons learned from these projects on progress toward the Strategy's objectives. State and DOD officials confirmed that DOD has designed and implemented projects from its appropriation that support the security objective of the Strategy in the Northern Triangle. Furthermore, we are not recommending that State and USAID specify how DOD monitors and evaluates such projects, but rather that State and USAID collaborate with DOD to specify a comprehensive approach to the monitoring and evaluation of projects across all agencies that directly support the Strategy's objectives. Excluding DOD projects from the monitoring and evaluation plan for the Strategy could result in an incomplete or unclear understanding of the results of U.S. assistance in the Northern Triangle. Without a complete and clear understanding of the results across all agencies involved, including DOD, agencies may miss important lessons learned about the types of assistance that are most effective in this region, potentially limiting overall progress.

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# Appendix VIII: GAO Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Jennifer Grover, (202) 512-7141 or [groverj@gao.gov](mailto:groverj@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, James Michels (Assistant Director), Bradley Hunt (Analyst-in-Charge), Sophie Broach, Jon Fremont, Kayli Westling, Pedro Almoguera, Neil Doherty, Mark Dowling, Justin Fisher, Christopher Mulkins, Zamir Ruli, Aldo Salerno, and John Villecco made key contributions to this report.

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## Public Affairs

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