

## **Recommendations for a root causes strategy that addresses the needs of migrant children**

As the nation's leading organization advocating for the rights of unaccompanied migrant and refugee children, KIND provides pro bono legal representation for over 5,000 unaccompanied children in immigration proceedings every year. KIND also leads programs in Central America and Mexico to address the root causes of migration, better protect children in transit, and ensure that children can be safely returned and reintegrated into their home countries. Our work in the United States and the region provides KIND with unique insight into the root causes of forced migration and the needs of unaccompanied children in their home countries and along their journey.

Informed by our on-the-ground experience, domestically and abroad, KIND published a comprehensive administrative blueprint, [Concrete Steps to Protect Unaccompanied Children on the Move](#), with domestic and foreign policy recommendations to ensure migrant children are protected at every stage of their journey. Our recommendations for a root causes strategy that addresses the needs of migrant and refugee children are drawn from and build upon that document.

## **Recommendations for the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration**

- **Center the strategy on the needs of children, families, and vulnerable populations.** Any strategy to address the root causes of migration must start by acknowledging that children and families make up the majority of those migrating. Acknowledging that many of the migrants arriving at the border are children is important because it allows policy-makers to craft a solution that is child-centered, child-focused, and child-friendly. Just as a gender-blind policy would fail to consider the experiences of women and meet their needs, a strategy that fails to recognize the particular needs and perspectives of children will fail to address the root causes of why they are migrating. While the drivers of migration are complex, the factors driving children to migrate are different than what might be motivating single adults. Consequently, the proposed solutions must be different too and any strategy must be designed with children in mind.
- **Prioritize Development Assistance over security assistance.** In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic crisis, and back-to-back hurricanes, “Development Assistance” that addresses poverty and inequality through multiple program areas is more important than ever. While security assistance will be essential, it should complement the Development Assistance and not be the main driver of the strategy. Security assistance should be focused on community-based violence prevention, strengthening the rule of law, and fighting corruption and should not go to funding military units or national police that have committed human rights violations.
- **Prioritize investments in local civil society organizations (CSOs).** The best way to ensure that assistance is effective, sustainable, and protected from corruption is by targeting assistance to local civil society organizations.
- **Build in regular CSO consultations, especially with CSOs in the region.** The strategy must be developed and implemented with the input and oversight of the people and

communities it will impact. This requires an increase in the frequency and diversity of consultations in the region, which should continue throughout strategy implementation, as well as increased transparency regarding the programs that fall under the strategy.

- **The U.S. government must resume leadership** in the region and help convene and coordinate efforts of other donors and international organizations to address root causes.

#### *Combating Corruption, Strengthening Democratic Governance, and Advancing the Rule of Law*

- **U.S. foreign assistance should prioritize investments in people, communities, and local civil society organizations.** The best way to ensure that assistance is protected from corruption is by prioritizing development assistance that is targeted to local civil society organizations.
- **Investments in government institutions are necessary, but should be strategic, targeted, and closely monitored.** U.S. government should target assistance to departmental and municipal governments as well as government institutions that provide social services and increase accountability, like special prosecutors.

#### *Promoting Respect for Human Rights, Labor Rights, and a Free Press*

- **The Department of State, USAID, MCC, DFC and other U.S. entities should increase efforts to ensure that development programs respect and enhance the rights of those in the region.** This is especially true for all efforts to leverage the private sector and create new public-private partnerships.
- **Additional safeguards and accountability mechanisms should be developed for all U.S.-financed development projects and partnerships,** and in the short term the strategy should ensure that all development programs are planned and implemented with the input and oversight of the people and communities receiving aid. This includes increasing the frequency and diversity of consultations and improving transparency.

#### *Countering and Preventing Violence, Extortion, and Other Crimes Perpetrated by Criminal Organizations*

- **Increased emphasis on community-based violence prevention and response,** especially as it affects women, children, and youth. Programming should scale up effective projects that address youth violence prevention and assist youth who are victims of violence or are renouncing gang membership.
- **Any security programs that impact children should be informed by child development specialists and strategies and designed to address the particular needs of children.**
- **All security assistance programs must be informed by robust gender analysis** and consulted with gender and inclusions advisors and specialists.

#### *Combating Sexual, Gender-Based, and Domestic Violence*

- **A substantial increase in funding is required for programs that promote gender equality as well as those with a primary purpose of preventing and responding to gender-based violence.** These programs should address not only sexual violence and intimate-partner violence, but also child abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

- **All programs should serve survivors with a trauma-informed response and serve children with a child-sensitive lens.**
- **Engage men and boys in gender-based violence prevention.** Preventing gender-based violence requires robust engagement with men and boys through community-based programs and expanded use of a healthy masculinities framework.
- **Increased global health programming** that provides sexual, reproductive, and mental health services to children and youth.
- **Build the capacity of local judicial systems to respond to GBV-related crimes,** including crimes against children, and protect survivors.
- **Build the capacity of the countries' child welfare and child protection systems.** These government agencies could provide essential services to vulnerable children and their families so children in danger have alternatives to migration. The child welfare systems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are currently weak, poorly funded, too centralized, and unable to provide basic protection to children in need—especially for children living outside of major cities. The absence of effective child protection systems within these countries means that children experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect at home have limited resources and no viable alternatives to migration. U.S. assistance is needed to build the capacity of these local systems to protect children so they can remain safely in their home countries and have meaningful alternatives to migration. Programs should support specialized training for child protection system personnel to work with child survivors of violence, as well as an increase in family-based shelter options for children in need of protection.

#### *Addressing Economic Insecurity and Inequality*

- **Increased educational and economic opportunities for youth with differentiated approaches for boys and girls.** Vocational training should be tied to workforce needs and economic programs should include rural communities and address the distinct needs of urban and rural youth.
- **Increased access to primary and secondary education.** An important and often overlooked driver of child migration is the complete lack of access to quality education. This is true across the board, but particularly true in rural areas and for secondary education. To increase options for children to remain in their communities and countries, a significant and long-term investment of resources in the education systems is critical. The U.S. government must take a role in increasing investments in education, through its own assistance but also by encouraging the deployment of domestic private and public resources as well as investments from other donors and international entities.

#### *Cross-Cutting Issues and Gaps that Must be Addressed in the Strategy*

- **Integrating GBV prevention and response in all programs** to ensure that projects in each sector are proactively addressing the risk of gender-based violence and are not unintentionally contributing to increases in violence against women, children.
- **Integrating throughout the strategy climate change adaptation and resiliency** that targets women, children, indigenous peoples, and other vulnerable groups experiencing the brunt of climate change impacts that threaten their livelihoods and safety.

- **Promoting gender equality and inclusive development** that 1) addresses gender inequality in every sector and 2) targets assistance in each sector to the most vulnerable populations including indigenous peoples, racial and ethnic minorities, children, gender and sexual minorities, and people with disabilities.
- **Humanitarian aid to help address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent back-to-back hurricanes.** Both of these humanitarian crises are resulting in increased deprivation and displacement and will require immediate and long-term assistance for recovery.
- **Safe return and reintegration programs for migrant children** returning from the United States and Mexico to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. As prior migration is a significant risk factor for future migration and other vulnerabilities, the U.S. government should increase assistance to guarantee the safe return and reception of children but also create new and expanded programs for the successful reintegration of those children back into their communities. Reintegration assistance should include a range of services for children and their families including educational assistance, job training and placement, case management, health and mental health services, as well as a gender component to address the unique needs of returning girls and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

## Foreign Assistance to Mexico

While Mexico should be seen as a valuable partner in any regional strategy, Mexico is also in need of assistance to adequately address root causes in its own country, enhance its ability to protect migrants in transit, and strengthen its capacity to receive asylum seekers who would like to stay in Mexico. Gender-based violence, inequality, and discrimination are still strong drivers of migration, particularly from southern and rural regions of Mexico. Children who travel through Mexico or seek to remain there are faced with a system with little capacity, resources, or infrastructure to ensure their safety. Many migrant children and families are never informed of their right to ask for protection in Mexico and some are denied access to the asylum system.

- **End assistance that supports immigration enforcement and invest in enhancing protections for migrants.** U.S. assistance should not be used to interdict asylum seekers, prevent children from accessing the U.S.-Mexico border to ask for asylum, or otherwise deter migrants from seeking protection in Mexico or the United States.
- **Increase funding to improve the long-term capacity of Mexico's asylum agency, COMAR,** by, for example, strengthening and expanding their capacity to conduct timely and child-friendly adjudications of asylum claims.
- **Increase technical and financial assistance to Mexico's child protection entities,** including national child protection system (SIPINNA), child welfare agency (DIF), and federal and local child protection authorities (*Procuradurías de Protección de Niñas, Niños, y Adolescentes*) to ensure that the rights of migrant children are protected and best interests determinations are carried out resulting in meaningful protection.
- **Increase funding to help Mexico prevent and respond to gender-based violence, especially as it impacts the migrant community and unaccompanied children.** Assistance should be targeted to migrant communities and provided to ensure access to justice, protection, and specialized support services for survivors, including shelter, medical, and mental health services for migrants who are victims of violence in Mexico.