

## Access to Education in “Other Situations of Violence”

The right to education, enshrined in international human rights law, establishes that states must take the necessary steps to ensure that children have universal access to safe and quality education. This right does not stop because of conflict or displacement<sup>1</sup>.

In North of Central America (NCA), universal access to quality education is severely impacted by the ongoing protection crisis. In the communities most affected by criminal violence, walking to school is dangerous, gangs have infiltrated schools, and physical and sexual violence is so high that it is often seen as commonplace. Far from being places that contribute to peace, development and the guarantee of rights, schools have become places where children, adolescents and even teachers are forcibly recruited, extorted, and abused. The response from the governments in the three countries is varied, but all three lack the budgets and public policies needed to address the consequences of violence through a protection lens or to create protection plans for affected children and teachers. Instead, states often respond to violence through police intervention, placing military or police patrols at school entrances.

In 2018 alone, 49,000 children and adolescents dropped out of school in El Salvador (on top of those already out of school)<sup>2</sup>. Estimations in 2018 point to up to 900,000 out of school children in Honduras<sup>3</sup>, and approximately 1.5 million in Guatemala<sup>4</sup>. School desertion often leads to confinement at home, child labour, forced or coerced recruitment, internal or cross-border displacement, among other consequences.

This protection snapshot highlights: the risks that children, teachers, schools and communities face; the state and humanitarian responses; and a series of recommendations put forward by a selection of humanitarian organisations working on education in the region. The research focuses on access to public education for children between 6 and 18 years old.



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This is the fourth snapshot report on the protection situation in the North of Central America; an initiative of the REDLAC Regional Protection Group for the NCA, led by the Norwegian Refugee Council, and supported by UNHCR and AECID. The analysis is based on contributions from humanitarian organisations operating in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, through 13 semi-structured interviews carried out in March 2019, as well as from monitoring of official statistics, press, academic studies and reports from civil society. The document includes inputs from a variety of organisations of the Protection Group, but does not reflect messages approved by each organisation.

## An update on the protection crisis in the NCA in 2019

## In Honduras:



- 777 homicides were reported between January and March 2019, or 9 homicides per day<sup>6</sup>
- In 2018, the homicide rate was registered at **40.7 deaths per 100,000** people<sup>7</sup>
- Nearly nine out of ten **people feel unsafe** in Honduras, according to a recent survey<sup>8</sup>
- In the first two weeks of the year, 30 people were killed in 8 different **massacres**<sup>8</sup>
- **4 human rights, land and indigenous rights defenders were murdered** in Colón and



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- Yoro in February (two had been granted protection measures by the IACHR)<sup>9</sup>
- In March, a **journalist critical of the government** was killed in Nacaome<sup>10</sup>

- Every 23 hours a **woman is murdered**<sup>11</sup>
- **4 LGBT+ people have been murdered** in 2019<sup>12</sup>
- In February, 17 rural families in La Paz were **forcibly evicted**<sup>13</sup>. In March a judge in Francisco Morazán notified the **eviction of a Lenca indigenous community**<sup>14</sup>
- An estimated 30,000 people live in modern slavery in the country<sup>15</sup>
- In January and February, approximately **11,000 people were returned** from the US and Mexico, 11% higher than in the same period in 2018<sup>16</sup>

## In El Salvador:



- 787 homicides were reported between January and April 9, approximately **8 homicides per day**<sup>17</sup>
- 2018 closed with a homicide rate of **50.4 homicides** per 100,000 people<sup>18</sup>
- In February, 5 bodies were found in a **clandestine grave** in Sonsonate<sup>19</sup>
- The **alert for missing children** was activated 16 times between January and March<sup>20</sup>
- There was a reported decrease in extrajudicial executions in recent

months, a possible positive result of the 2018 UN Special Rapporteur's report. However, between January and June 2018, 125 deaths in the hands of the armed forces were reported<sup>21</sup>

- Police rescued more than 40 Guatemalans, including minors, victims of **trafficking and forced labour** in San Miguel in March<sup>22</sup>. It is estimated that some 16,000 people live in modern slavery in the country<sup>23</sup>
- 46 women lost their lives in violent acts in the first 42 days of the year<sup>24</sup>
- In January and February **two transgender women were murdered**, one of them had



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- recently been deported from the United States where she tried to request international protection<sup>25</sup>
- Nearly 4,000 people were returned from the US and Mexico in January and February, a constant figure compared to 2018<sup>26</sup>



### In Guatemala:



- 1,183 autopsies associated with criminal acts were registered between January and March, indicating an **estimated 13 homicides per day**<sup>27</sup>
- 2018 closed with a rate of 22.4 homicides per 100,000 people. Half of the homicides occurred in Guatemala and Escuintla. 50% of the victims were between 25 and 29 years old<sup>28</sup>

- In January, **several violent attacks on public transport** in Guatemala City left at least 9 people dead and 11 people injured<sup>29</sup>
- An estimated 47,000 people live in conditions of modern slavery in the country<sup>30</sup>
- Every two days a LGBT+ person is the victim of a **hate crime**<sup>31</sup>
- On International Women’s Day, the offices of the Political Alliance of the Women’s Sector, who coordinate the day’s activities, were victims of a violent attack<sup>32</sup>
- **Political tensions** and threats to the judiciary continue after the president tried to stop the activities of the international commission on corruption and impunity, CICIG, in the country in January. The IACHR also requested that the government put an end to a bill that would grant amnesty to crimes against humanity committed during the internal armed conflict<sup>33</sup>
- Nearly 13,000 people were returned from the US and Mexico in January and February, 11% less than in 2018<sup>34</sup>

### Outside of the NCA:

- 37 **kidnapped** Hondurans and Guatemalans were found in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico<sup>35</sup>
- 41 people were registered as having **disappeared on the migratory**

**route** between the NCA and the US between January 1 and April 10<sup>36</sup>

- In the last 5 months, **26,302 unaccompanied migrant girls, boys and adolescents** from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras were arrested at the southern border of the United

States<sup>37</sup>

- Between 2014 and 2018, **4,500 instances of sexual abuse against unaccompanied migrant children** were reported to have been committed by personnel from the Department of Health and Human Services in the US<sup>38</sup>

### Update on the “migrant caravans” of 2019:

- A **new caravan** formed on the 14th of January in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, with the aim of travelling to Mexico and the US<sup>39</sup>. **6,875 registered migrants** had passed through Guatemala by the 30th of January, 2019<sup>40</sup>
- **Abuse of authority** was recorded by the Honduran police, who used tear gas and injured several people from the caravan, including

children and adolescents<sup>41</sup>. On the Guatemalan side, the IACHR received information regarding the use of force by the authorities, such as the use of police **barriers with batons, rubber bullets and arms**<sup>42</sup>

- **People with physical disabilities** reported the difficulties they faced accessing basic services such as food and accessible WASH

facilities in shelters in Mexico<sup>43</sup>

- 63% of people indicated that in the last 12 months they had to change residence in their country of origin due to **violence or insecurity**<sup>44</sup>
- 67% do not know the procedures and requirements for protection in Mexico and 65% did not receive any information about their rights as migrants<sup>45</sup>

## (Un)safe schools in the NCA

### 1. RISKS

As criminal groups battle for control over communities, **invisible borders** are drawn between territories, limiting freedom of movement, and the access to services. These borders are often the first barriers to education, as although children may live close to their local school, they cannot physically access it. Crossing the border can put them at risk of attack, or at worse, homicide. **En route to school**, children and adolescents are subject to the attention of criminal groups, who harass them both physically and verbally, and pressure and coerce them into recruitment.



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In several areas, criminal groups impose social rules to maintain control over communities. These range from curfews, prohibitions on certain types of clothing, makeup and hairstyles. Walking to school can imply going past abandoned houses used by gangs for their operations, or areas where illegal drugs are sold. In El Salvador, children who take the bus to school are at risk of either being mugged by gangs, or stopped and checked by regular police operations. Teachers are also required to enter and exit communities at specific hours, and often have to pay a “war tax” to criminal groups in order to get to work<sup>46</sup>.

The overbearing presence of criminal groups does not end at the school gates; **gang influence is often also present within educational establishments**. This influence can be direct, through controlling teachers and operating within schools; or it can be indirect, through the presence of students involved with gangs who take on roles of informants, recruiters, or extortion collectors<sup>47</sup>. According to the Violence Prevention Unit of the Honduran Ministry of Education, there are some schools within the country where the salaries of teachers are directly financed by gangs, on the condition that these groups can use the premises for their operations<sup>48</sup>. Infiltration can imply drugs sales on campus, students carrying weapons, and the use of pornography on cell phones. In El Salvador, one study with young people revealed that 30% said that it was possible to buy drugs inside their school<sup>49</sup>. In these conditions, teachers have trouble controlling classes and exercising discipline, and may also be blackmailed into graduating students who are underperforming. Violent clashes within schools can disrupt classes and day to day schedules. In Honduras, one humanitarian organisation said that they have witnessed 3 school shootings in one year in the same school, and the neighbouring school was burned down. In El Salvador, in a survey of school headteachers, 51% said that a perimeter wall around their school would make them feel more secure<sup>50</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that the infiltration of criminal groups in schools is more common in Honduras and El Salvador than in Guatemala, but was nevertheless identified by several organisations working in **urban areas in Guatemala**, particularly in the outskirts of the capital. The organisations also mentioned the dangers of the route to school in rural contexts, in particular of sexual and gender-based violence. According to the international evaluation on education, PISA, conducted in 2018, 38% of 15-year-old students in Guatemala stated that at least one violent incident had occurred in their school or its surroundings in the four weeks prior to the survey, and at least 6% saw gangs within their schools<sup>51</sup>.

The **inadequacy of school infrastructures**, due to the lack of investment in the system (discussed in the next page), increases the risks that schools are exposed to. In Tegucigalpa, Honduras, it is estimated that between four and seven out of ten schools report deficiencies in infrastructure<sup>52</sup>. In Guatemala in 2018, 50% of schools reported having scarce or an extremely low level of material resources, infrastructure and basic services<sup>53</sup>. Often, children who study in schools without adequate toilets have to go home to go in order to the bathroom, and are further subject to the dangers in the streets around their schools. As a result of this context, characterised by violence and fear, few recreational or extra-curricular activities are organised, as both teachers and students need to spend as little time as possible on campus. For children living in areas controlled by gangs, neither schools, nor neighbourhoods, nor the few parks available, are protective environments.

*“There is violence throughout the system”*

Humanitarian organisation working in education in El Salvador

Within this context, with violent groups within and around schools, human rights abuses are extensive. The levels of **sexual violence** against children and adolescents are extremely high, especially at the hands of criminal groups who regularly coerce and force girls and teenagers to be “girlfriends” of gang members. In El Salvador, in 2018, 20% of all pregnancies were of girls and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19<sup>54</sup> and in January and February of 2019 alone, there were at least 32 reports in the press of cases or convictions for sexual violence or rape against children<sup>55</sup>. Sexual violence can also happen between students, or be perpetrated by teachers. A recent example emerged in the national press in El Salvador, highlighting the case of a teacher sentenced to 8 years in prison for raping his 5-year-old student<sup>56</sup>. In Guatemala, where at least 4% of 15-year-old students reported having been sexually harassed in the 4 weeks prior to the evaluation<sup>57</sup>, the humanitarian organisations interviewed for this study indicated that the high levels of impunity favour abusive teachers who continue to work unpunished, while victims are unable to access justice. The psychological impact of this sexual violence is profound, but also taboo. According to a report from a psychologist working with Doctors Without Borders in Honduras: *“The patients I see*



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*are mostly young women between 15 and 35 years old. Physical violence, psychological violence; sexual violence is extremely common. I see many women who suffer from depression because they have experienced violence and have normalised it as a defence mechanism”<sup>58</sup>.*

Along with sexual violence, there are other risks that increase the vulnerability of children and adolescents in the NCA. Children and adolescents are exposed to bullying and regular harassment. In Guatemala, humanitarian organisations working in education mentioned that physical punishment is commonly used by teachers. In all three countries, the levels of trafficking, as well as **disappearances and abductions** are high, and probably under-registered. In Guatemala, for example, every day 17 children and adolescents disappear, and the authorities receive 132 complaints of crimes against children<sup>59</sup>. The experience of being a victim and survivor of these violations of rights has a direct impact on the educational development of children and adolescents.



Several humanitarian organisations working with youth in the region, particularly in El Salvador, highlight **the role of the police and the military in human rights abuses** of children and adolescents. In recent years, the use of military forces in schools in the three countries has increased, with the pretext of combating violence and dismantling gangs<sup>60</sup>. Often, the police patrol around school premises, or station themselves at the school gates and check backpacks. Although the need to act in the face of violence is evident and necessary, for many members of the humanitarian community, this militarisation, used as a repressive security strategy, contributes to the violation of rights instead of strengthening protection or the access to justice. According to a humanitarian worker in Honduras, the militarisation of schools: “instead of fostering a culture of peace, teaches children and adolescents that you have to be armed to be safe”. The Committee on the Rights of the Child of the United

Nations commented in 2018 that adolescents pay a high price for confrontations between police and gangs, and are frequent victims of police brutality<sup>61</sup>. In the UNICEF UReport, 490 young people in El Salvador were asked: ‘who do you think treats young people correctly?’; only 2% responded the police, and 41% indicated that they did not know who treated them well<sup>62</sup>. In some communities, according to a humanitarian organisation, people have more confidence in the gangs than in the police, and “the little boys and girls run away in fear when the police enter their neighbourhood.” In Honduras, sexual harassment by the military in schools has been documented<sup>63</sup>.

*‘In focus groups with young people, they tell us that it is the police who is the victimizer’*

Humanitarian organisation in El Salvador

### Other aggravating factors:

There are a multitude of factors that, together with violence, restrict access to education for children and adolescents in the region. These include:

#### *The lack of investment in education:*

- In Guatemala, the government allocates 2.8% of its Gross Domestic Product to education<sup>64</sup>, despite having a National Education Law that stipulates that the state will raise the allocation to 7%<sup>65</sup>.
- In El Salvador, educational budgets fell in 2017 and 2018, despite the annual increase planned for in the “Plan El Salvador Educado” in 2016. The budget for 2019 has been increased, but remains below overall needs<sup>66</sup>.

#### *The financial expenses of schooling:*

- In Honduras, parents can spend up to 2,000 lempiras<sup>67</sup> (\$82USD) per child at the beginning of the school year to cover uniforms, shoes and books. Parents must then have 500 lempiras available each month (20USD) to cover other expenses such as photocopies, transportation and school fees. Many schools require assignments printed in colour, or refuse children who do not have the correct uniform.

#### *Child labour:*

- For families living in poverty, it can be difficult to justify sending children and adolescents to school when they are needed to work at home, on the land, or outside of the home to support the family financially.
- More than half of Guatemalans live below the poverty line; and the country has the highest rate of child labour in the continent<sup>68</sup>.



### **Hunger:**

- 46% of Guatemalan children suffer from chronic malnutrition, as do 23% in Honduras and 14% in El Salvador<sup>69</sup>.

### **Geographical coverage of schools:**

- In Honduras, due to the lack of schools that offer the third and final cycle of education, many students drop out from sixth to seventh grade<sup>70</sup>.
- According to the organisations interviewed in Guatemala, there is a lack of school coverage, particularly in rural areas.

### **Cultural and family patterns:**

- In particular, in rural areas, machista attitudes and practices about gender roles and stereotypes persist, as well as lack of interest or knowledge about the benefits of education.
- In neighbourhoods affected by violence in San Salvador, an educational census found that 22% of the adults surveyed were illiterate<sup>71</sup>, further complicating the positioning of the importance of education within some families.

### **Broken homes:**

- Closely linked to violence and displacement, the fracturing of families has an impact on the development of children and adolescents. It is particularly observed in the high levels of orphans<sup>72</sup>, single mothers, recomposed families, children and adolescents living with grandparents or aunts and uncles.

## **2. IMPACTS**

This situation has a range of negative impacts on the offer of education in the region. This can be observed in particular in the **closure of schools**. In 2018, 13 schools in El Salvador closed due to threats from gangs<sup>73</sup>. In Honduras, one school in Tegucigalpa went from having one thousand students enrolled in 2010 to just 70 in 2018, due to students dropping out because of the insecure environment<sup>74</sup>. This low enrolment implies that several schools are not able to maintain a full range of classes, and regularly have to cancel days or to close.

Violence also leads to increased pressure on teachers and **difficulties in maintaining educational staff** in the most affected areas. In Honduras, in the capital alone, the Ministry of Education receives 10 requests for transfers from teachers per day<sup>75</sup>. In the same country in 2018, 22 teachers were murdered (9 more than in 2017)<sup>76</sup>. According to a study

about the **impact of violence on teachers** in Honduras, the latter feel exhausted and overwhelmed<sup>77</sup>. Few schools have counsellors, psychologists or nurses who can provide support, or those of their students, and teachers often have to take on this role as well. In addition, the simple act of reporting violations (such as, for example, cases of pregnant girls) is often prohibited by criminal groups.

*"I know a school headmistress who works in a neighbourhood dominated by a gang, but some of her students live on the other side of an invisible barrier and cannot attend school. There are no flexible modalities or institutional support for them, so she meets with the children every week in a shopping centre. She buys them a coffee, gives them their homework for the week and tests them on the tasks of the previous week and tests them on the tasks of the previous week. She says: 'I'm not going to let these children fall behind.'"*

While some schools in sectors dominated by violence suffer from under-attendance (especially those in areas under heavily gang control), the others that are more accessible suffer from **overcrowding**. These different pressures on schools and teachers are further aggravated by the lack in investment in the system. In Guatemala, there are 33 students per class, however, 32% of teenagers attend classrooms where there are 41 or more students<sup>78</sup>. In El Salvador, there are more than 483 educational centres with only one teacher<sup>79</sup>. **The levels of student under-performance**, as well as the number of students who have to repeat a grade, are very high in these countries. By 2018, Honduras reported that 18% of children in school were in over-age<sup>80</sup>. In Guatemala, 36% of students report having repeated a grade at least once, and a high percentage of students are below the basic performance level in reading, maths, and science<sup>81</sup>.



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## OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN

In 2018 in **Honduras, approximately 30% of all children and adolescents were found to be out of the educational system** (some 890,000 children) and school desertions are increasing<sup>82</sup>. In communities affected by violence, this rate is higher. The Norwegian Refugee Council, in its education census of 2017-2018, identified that of 5,077 children living in several communities in Tegucigalpa, Choloma and San Pedro Sula, 56% were out of school<sup>83</sup>. One third of these children dropped out of school at the age of 11, possibly due to the risk of recruitment that increases at that age, as well as the lack of safe schools in their neighbourhoods.

In **Guatemala**, it is estimated that around **1.5 million children are out of the system**<sup>84</sup>, or 25% of all children<sup>85</sup>. In 2018, 226,587 children were reported to have left school, a 42% increase relative to 2017<sup>86</sup>. Data on access to education in regions affected by criminal violence are difficult to obtain. It is known however that only one in ten girls who are pregnant or in forced relationships manage to stay in school<sup>87</sup>. Of the boys and girls who start primary school, only 68% complete the sixth grade and 40% the basic level<sup>88</sup>. School desertion in Guatemala is not always permanent and is often seasonal. In 2018, 17% of 15-year-olds reported missing classes for more than three months in a row, of which 15% said their absence was because they did not feel safe in their schools<sup>89</sup>.

In El Salvador, **49,000 children and adolescents dropped out of school in 2018**, about 1,000 per week<sup>90</sup>. The dropout rates in communities affected by violence, such as the neighbourhoods of Apopa, Tonacatepeque and Santo Tomas, reach 38%<sup>91</sup>. Of these, 28% said that they left school due to financial problems, 23% due to conflicts, and 18% due to being in an insecure area<sup>92</sup>.



There are several **barriers that prevent children from returning to school**:

**Documentation requirements:** such as grades, graduation tests and identity documentation. In El Salvador, one survey found that out of 1,294 children out of school, 66% did not have identification<sup>93</sup>.

**Procedures for school reintegration that are not adapted to the context of violence:** for example, night classes do not take into account that in most of these communities there is a curfew or mobility restrictions at night.

**The lack of financial support** for obtaining new school supplies and / or uniforms, as well as the lack of academic support for catch-up and levelling.

**The risks of being out of school** are numerous:

- **Confinement:** Parents often keep their children at home, to not to expose them to more danger. This mechanism of self-protection leads to confinement and mobility restrictions.
- **Child recruitment:** which is not just a risk but a cause and consequence of violence in schools. According to the organisations interviewed, recruitment begins at the age of 7, and is more common at 10 or 11 years of age. During the first phases of recruitment, children have to transport drugs, hide weapons or work as messengers. At the ages of 13 or 14, recruits begin to engage in criminal activities, such as collecting extortion rent and participating in homicides. Girls are generally used for sexual exploitation or as domestic workers<sup>94</sup>. Involvement in gangs can lead to children dropping out of school, or being present in school but with 'de facto' absenteeism, due to having to work for the gangs during classes. Some organisations mentioned that recruitment is not always forced, but can be coerced, as gangs promise material benefits and power, or that some children see joining gangs as their only option in life.

- **Child labour and exploitation:** in Guatemala, 1 out of every 4 children aged from 5 to 17 works. Rates for Honduras (14%) and El Salvador (9%) are also high<sup>95</sup>. However, these jobs are mostly informal. There is often a high stigma against people from certain communities affected by violence, and this, coupled with the lack of graduation diploma, can highly impact access to the formal labour market.
- **Early/underage marriage and teenage pregnancy:** according to NRC's education census in El Salvador, 22% of out-of-school girls were mothers. The rates of early marriage (the % of girls between 15 and 19 years old and married) are 20% for Guatemala, 22% for Honduras, and 16% for El Salvador<sup>96</sup>.

### 3. DISPLACEMENT – An consequence of violence and a cause for school desertion

Forced displacement is sometimes caused by a violent event in school. Displacement can also be a coping mechanism for families to avoid forced recruitment of their children into gangs. In other cases, families and individuals flee other risks arising within the community. In all cases, one of the consequences of forced displacement is school desertion. In their destinations, displaced children face additional barriers to returning to school. In parallel is the forced displacement of teachers who have been threatened and



attacked during their work. In Honduras, teachers are the third profile most affected by displacement<sup>97</sup>. Although there are estimates of the levels of internal displacement within the different countries of the region, the under-registration of the phenomenon and its invisibility means that there is no reliable data on the number of children and adolescents who are both displaced and out of school.

#### Internal displacement:

**Transferring schools** is one of the main challenges for displaced children and adolescents. In Honduras, to request a school transfer, families must officially declare the reason for the request; however many parents and students avoid divulging this type of information out of fear<sup>98</sup>. One of the organisations interviewed in Honduras working in a school in 2018: despite having witnessed the displacement of 86 students, they found that only 21 requested a school transfer (24%).



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**Documentation** is an important issue: to transfer schools, students need to provide exam certifications, graduation

tests or grades, and sometimes these need to be certified by authorities. These are documents that are often forgotten during a forced and urgent displacement, requesting them again often generates fear. In many cases, civil society actors facilitate the search or processing of documents. In Guatemala, an organisation doing this said it takes between 1 to 2 years to obtain these papers. Often there is a lack of will from schools to process or accept these documents, in particular when there are differences between curricula or exams<sup>99</sup>. In addition, although children and adolescents have the right to education, in practice, acceptance into a new school is at the discretion of school directors. If they do not want to register the child, particularly if he or she comes from a community controlled by a different criminal group from the one in their community, the director can deny the request, citing that the child constitutes a security risk. In other cases, directors have been known to say that the school is overpopulated and that there are no spaces available.

In El Salvador, there is a **registration system** in which each child has their own identification number. However, this system is not automatically updated with the grades and progress of each student, if it were so it could facilitate the transfer of the student. However, there are serious questions related to confidentiality and data protection of displaced children within this type of system. In Guatemala there is a similar register, run by the National Education System, but again, it is not updated on a regular basis. No such system was identified in Honduras.

Beyond documentation issues, **adaptation** to a new school is challenging. Displacement can be a traumatic experience, particularly when its trigger was a violent event, such as a homicide or a threat to a family member. In addition to the **psychological impact**, children and adolescents face **stigmatisation**, especially in communities that are suspicious of new members. According to the organisations interviewed, there is little psychological support in schools to support this transition. According to the Profiling Study on Internal Mobility due to Violence in El Salvador, while access to education tends to stabilise after several years post internal displacement, the time spent out of school can have medium and long term effects on displaced children<sup>100</sup>.

### **Cross-border displacement:**

The situation of generalised violence in the NCA means that internal displacement often does not lead to a safe and durable solution, and displaced persons are forced to cross borders to seek protection. In Guatemala it is estimated that every day 300 children and adolescents move and migrate to Mexico and the United States, fleeing violence, lack of opportunities, or seeking family reunification<sup>101</sup>. There are no education programs in the available shelters along the migration route, especially as families and unaccompanied children do not stop for more than two nights in the shelters before continuing their journey. The Guatemalan Institute of Radio Education offers radio programs which people in transit could access. However, these are not used at the service points along the routes for the same reason, and also due to lack of adequate infrastructure (radios, computers, spaces, etc.). In the U-Report survey conducted in El Salvador, 50% of the children and adolescents who took the migratory route lost a year of education or more<sup>102</sup>.



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### **Return:**

The reception of deportees in the NCA has improved in recent years in terms of infrastructure and protocols for the care of families and unaccompanied minors. However, outside the migrant care centre, or the reception centre (where there is a focus on responding to basic humanitarian needs, and sometimes providing basic support with job searching), in all three countries, there is a serious lack of follow-up to cases, and in the reintegration of children and adolescents back into education. There are also serious gaps in coordination between institutions, meaning that

when children are transferred back to their communities, there is little follow up to ensure that their documents are processed and they return to school. Several protocols have been designed, especially in Honduras, but there remains to be the budgetary and practical capacity to respond to the 24,700 children and adolescents returned to the region per year<sup>103</sup>. Above all, for many children and adolescents, returning to the same communities exposes them to the same causes of their displacement. There is also no clear monitoring process to establish whether the child has returned to the same community.

## **4. RESPONSES AND CHALLENGES**

### **State responses**

#### **Honduras:**



- According to research conducted with teachers in Honduras, the legal framework and public education policies are not designed for contexts of violence and forced displacement, and therefore, there is a gap in the institutional response, tools, and budget<sup>104</sup>.
- The current flexible and distance learning programmes are not sustainable, free, or adapted to the context. There is also a lack of guidelines and protocols for teachers for responding to high risk situations, confrontations, harassment, sexual violence, and child recruitment<sup>105</sup>.
- As part of its commitments under Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework, the Honduran government has agreed to create a violence prevention and protection strategy for schools by 2020<sup>106</sup>.

#### **El Salvador:**



- Flexible modalities for alternative education exist, however, in most schools, these are not adapted to the situation of violence and displacement, and due to lack of funding, they are not available in many schools or municipalities.



- The Committee on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations commented in 2018 that the plan “El Salvador Seguro” focuses too much on the repression of criminal groups, and not on the protection of victims and the prevention of violence<sup>107</sup>. In 2019, a total of 1,123 schools in the country will have a police and military presence<sup>108</sup>. According to the MINED education census, only 8% of teachers say that the presence of the police or the armed forces in the school environment makes them feel more secure<sup>109</sup>.
- In 2018, 30% of schools have prevention and safety plans to reduce school violence, and only 19% have psychological services. 33% of teachers received training in violence prevention or promotion of peace culture in schools<sup>110</sup>.

#### Guatemala:



- The Vice Minister for the Prevention of Violence has a Safe Schools programme, which involves the deployment of the National Police Force to monitor schools in four zones of the capital, the municipalities of Villa Nueva, Mixco, Chinautla and the departments of Izabal, Escuintla and Sacatepéquez<sup>111</sup>. In March of 2019, the Public Ministry and the Vice Minister of Education (Mineduc) signed an inter-institutional agreement to establish coordination and a plan to respond to violence against children<sup>112</sup>.
- Institutionalization (or the use of orphanages) as a protection measure for victims of trafficking, sexual violence, recruitment, teenage mothers and children with disabilities persists in Guatemala. Approximately 5,000 children and adolescents are housed in these places where conditions are severe and violate several human rights treaties<sup>113</sup>. 94% of minors in institutions have relatives and 33% are in institutions or orphanages due to poverty<sup>114</sup>.

#### The humanitarian response:

- Humanitarian organisations have a variety of programmes designed to strengthen the access to education for children in the NCA. Some of the best practices include:

- **The training** of teachers, communities, youth and families in human rights, peace culture, risk identification, protection mechanisms, prevention of violence (against physical punishment and bullying), psychological first aid, differentiated capacities, gender / pregnancy / child marriage and in the development of violence protection committees.
- **The funding** of scholarships; the delivery of multipurpose cash or conditioned to education (for expenses associated with the beginning of due to school year, transportation expenses, or money lost for studying instead of working); the delivery of school kits (backpacks, books, etc.)
- **Infrastructure improvements**, such as the reconstruction of classrooms and recreational spaces.
- **Academic support** through bridging programmes, tutors and private classes for children and adolescents who want to return to school; tutoring for children and adolescents with low performances.
- **Housing of victims and displaced persons** in shelters, especially for survivors of human trafficking with comprehensive protection programs (physical, mental, sexual, legal assistance and access to education).
- **Legal assistance** to ensure access to the necessary documentation to attend school.
- **Psychosocial assistance**, individualized psychological attention for children affected by violence and displacement.
- **Technical support to Education Departments**, strengthening of education systems and protocols for the care of displaced persons.

In terms of coordination: there are sectoral technical tables or clusters in El Salvador and Guatemala working on the prevention and preparation for natural hazards. In Honduras, the Roundtable for the Prevention of Violence in Schools has focused more on issues of bullying and life skills; however over the past year the group has begun to address issues of violence and protection.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Education can protect children and adolescents from violence, it can alleviate the psychological impact of living in violent contexts, by offering routines, stability and linking to other essential services<sup>115</sup>. However, for many children and adolescents living in areas affected by violence in the NCA, schools are an insecure, even dangerous environment.

These are the recommendations provided by a variety of humanitarian organisations operating in the NCA:

### ***For the governments of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala:***

1. Ensure the timely implementation of legal frameworks to respond to forced displacement caused by violence.
2. Make the necessary adjustments in public education policies to ensure effective protective measures and to reduce the risk for teachers and displaced students.
3. Adopt a methodology to identify out of school, deported and displaced children and adolescents, and to reintegrate them back into the education system. Address the challenges related to the certification, validation and accreditation of previous grades.
4. Strengthen information systems for monitoring school enrolments and dropouts, as input to generate more relevant public policies.
5. Review policies of deploying military and police to schools, and guarantee the respect for human rights.
6. Ensure greater investment in education to guarantee minimum conditions in educational centres, with infrastructure to protect students (walls, lights and safe entrances).
7. Implement existing laws, plans and projects at the municipal level, such as flexible forms of education, and legislation on child marriage or anti-bullying.
8. Support each school in the elaboration of policies and plans to promote the rights of children.
9. Train teachers and provide them with tools to strengthen their abilities to respond to the risks faced by the school and the educational community, with training in issues sensitive to conflict and violence, school safety, human rights and conflict resolution.
10. Provide psychosocial care for children and adolescents in schools, particularly for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, displacement, and criminal and police violence.
11. Recognize that child recruitment is never voluntary.
12. Strengthen and put into practice access to justice mechanisms for survivors of abuse by teachers. Reinforce tools and messages of “zero tolerance” of sexual abuse and physical violence in educational centres.
13. Implement adequate systems that guarantee privacy and protection, so that minors can have the freedom to report violence and abuse in schools.
14. Adopt measures to integrate children with disabilities and children from indigenous communities.
15. Improve understanding of the right to education for displaced people, and work on the prevention of xenophobia through training teachers and in national curriculums.
16. Review, strengthen and adapt flexible educational models, non-formal education and the option of training for work, as an incentive for returning to school in violent contexts. Promote the use of new technologies in this purpose.



***For the affected communities:***

1. Build community safety networks, ensuring the participation of parents and of the community to establish mechanisms and strategies for responding to situations of risk and mitigating the impact of violence and displacement in schools.
2. Strengthen self-care and self-protection mechanisms as strategies to avoid school desertions and to promote schooling.
3. Position education in the community as a fundamental right and a common benefit.

***For the humanitarian sector and international cooperation:***

1. Increase the presence of humanitarian actors.
2. Work to improve the capacity of Education Ministries at all levels.
3. Ensure the participation of children and adolescents in the design, implementation and accountability of humanitarian projects.
4. Ensure funding for education and child protection.
5. Using the Education in Emergencies tools, strengthen rapid processes of emotional recovery and resilience factors in educational centres and communities.
6. Strengthen coordination mechanisms with educational authorities to encourage a stronger response to the problems of desertion, physical and sexual abuse, and forced recruitment.
7. Open spaces for regional and country dialogue and coordination around education in contexts of violence, and move towards the identification of models that adapt to the characteristics of a context that is not a typical armed conflict but that involves many of the same challenges.



NRC/Up Studio, 2019

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This snapshot is an initial step in a broader discussion on the humanitarian response in contexts of “other situations of violence”, and access to education for children and adolescents. The study has several limitations, including not having addressed early childhood development, nor the particular vulnerabilities and risks for LGBT+ children, and children with disabilities, for which a more detailed investigation would be welcome.

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