

Country: Honduras

CRRF Pillar: Pillar 2, Pillar 4

Actors: Mennonite Social Action Committee (CASM)

CRRF Objectives: Objective 1, Objective 2, Objective 4

Keywords: reintegration, labor, self-esteem, displacement, faith

Good practices in promoting long-term integration and self-reliance through education and training: An example from Honduras

Introduction

This case study is part of a collaborative project carried out by Joint Learning Initiative and UNHCR, which aims to generate locally grounded evidence and identify examples of good practices of local faith community-led responses to refugees across 6 countries: Honduras, Mexico, Uganda, Germany, Bangladesh, and Lebanon. Thirty-four interviews and one focus group with a total of 41 participants were conducted for this case study¹.

The Mennonite Social Action Committee (CASM) is a Christian, non-profit organization that was first established in Honduras in the mid-1990's. Today, the organization manages over 40 diverse projects across the country that aim to support the development, resilience, and social advancement of vulnerable populations. In 2014, CASM began the Support Program for Returned Migrants (*Programa Apoyo a Migrants Retornados*) in order to respond to the urgent needs of a growing population of youth migrants forcefully displaced by violence and endemic poverty. This encompasses a population of youth and their families who have been internally displaced, as well as those who have returned to Honduras following migration, generally as a result of deportation from the US or Mexico. According to recent reports, between 2004-2015, 174,000 Hondurans were internally displaced², and every year tens of thousands return due to deportation. In 2017, alone, 48,000 Hondurans were deported³. CASM strives to mitigate the impact of forced displacement by supporting the conditions for a safe and dignified return of migrant populations. The Support Program for Returned Migrants offers vocational training for displaced youth. The program aims to enhance self-reliance and reintegration by equipping participants with the skills, credentials, and materials necessary to successfully enter labor markets. The program also fosters social cohesion and resilience among youth through various psychosocial interventions and community-based initiatives, including the recent formation of a migrant youth network geared towards political engagement.

¹ Project leads: Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London, and Dr. Olivia Wilkinson, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI). We gratefully acknowledge the efforts and dedication of the researchers in collecting the primary data and analyzing it: Luis Sierra, Heather Wurtz (data collection, analysis and writing), and Molly Middlehurst (analysis and writing).

² Comisión Interinstitucional para la Protección de Personas Desplazadas por la Violencia, Characterization of Internally Displaced Populations in Honduras, 12, November 2015, accessed October 26, 2017, http://www.jips.org/system/cms/attachments/1050/original_Profiling_ACNUR_ENG.pdf.

³ Observatorio Consular y Migratorio de Honduras (CONMIGHO). Cantidad de Hondureños Retornados al País Durante el Año 2017, accessed September 8, 2018, <http://conmigho.wixsite.com/subscym-conmigho/retornados-2017>

Faith as the Foundation of Committed Labor

Many of the hosts and LFL's interviewed in the Honduras cases study reported that their faith and religious values served as an invaluable foundation of emotionally exhausting and selfless labor. Across organizations, it was strongly emphasized that participants are not excluded or given priority based on religious preference. The role of faith and religion was discussed more extensively in terms of personal motivation for committed work that is often carried out in a voluntary capacity or with limited financial rewards, and which entails high stakes in terms of both personal safety, as well as emotional well being. Some reported that this type of committed work, "done from the heart", is the key to withstanding shifts in funding and resources that often threaten sustainable practices. As one LFA reported, "Faith is what carries us through all of the difficulties and challenges of this work: the limitations that we face, the feelings of hopelessness and frustration, you know? So, it gives us strength to keep moving forward despite the difficulty. Otherwise...well, personally, if I didn't have such a strong commitment to faith, I probably would have left the organization".

Labor Exclusion and Reintegration

In addition to gang violence, widespread unemployment is a major driver of migration among youth and one of the most difficult obstacles that youth face in efforts to reintegrate following displacement. Unemployment is a crisis that exists throughout the entire country and across social categories. However, youth that come from "red zone", areas with high rates of violence and out-migration, are particularly vulnerable to labor market exclusion. The majority of CASM participants, for example, hasn't completed education beyond the 4th grade and comes from neighborhoods stigmatized by rampant gang violence. Some of the CASM participants interviewed reported lying about their current residence on job applications in order to avoid job discrimination. In response to this unaddressed need, CASM created new, innovative partnerships with local technical colleges in order to provide opportunities for youth to complete vocational courses in a variety of trades, such as cell phone repair, cosmetology, and cooling and refrigeration. What distinguishes CASM from similar programs is that they provide meals and cover all transportation costs to and from courses. CASM also supplies participants the materials needed to begin employment or potentially start one's own business in their chosen trade. At the conclusion of the course, each participant receives a diploma of completion of the CASM program, in addition to a diploma issued by the Secretary of Education. Several professionals interviewed about best practices cited CASM's vocational training program as one of the most critical interventions for social integration and self-reliance among returned and displaced populations. As one LFL who works in a red zone reported:

"Work, skills training, anything that helps them access employment opportunities. That way even if they end up having security issues and have to relocate to another community, at least they'll go with knowledge and skills and the ability to pursue employment wherever they are at... And [learning] different trades...may help them decide not to leave the country again, if they feel like they have new opportunities here

in the country and don't have to resort to working in the streets, like selling drugs on the corner, for example."

Restoring Dignity and Self-esteem in the Lives of Youth Participants

One of the most consistent themes that emerged from the data on the Honduras case study was the psychosocial impact of forced displacement. Displaced youth commonly undergo traumatizing events, both within their communities of origin, as well as during the migratory trajectory through Mexico or the United States. As a result of forced gang recruitment and generalized violence within local communities, many young people are unable to return to school and cannot travel freely through their neighborhoods, which profoundly limits opportunities for social cohesion and personal development. In addition, those who return to Honduras after migration contend with the sequelae of violence and exploitation experienced *en route* and often experience feelings of failure, hopelessness, and stigmatization.

In response, CASM carries out various interventions geared towards restoring dignity to lives of youth participants. As part of the program, every participant receives an initial psychological consultation. Particularly vulnerable cases may receive additional therapy sessions, as well as home visits conducted by CASM staff. Youth also participate in formal and informal group discussions, in which they are encouraged to share their experiences of displacement and reflect on the broader context of violence and displacement. Through ongoing dialogue and engagement with youth, CASM staff promotes a shift in how return migration is conceptualized – from a narrative of failure to one that celebrates the agency that youth exercise in order to change their current circumstances. This imparts a sense of pride in participants and the confidence to articulate their experiences in relation to broader structural inequality, rather than internalizing their return as the result of personal failing. Several hosts and CASM professionals reported specific examples of personal transformations observed among youth participants. For example, one CASM volunteer described a young woman who at the start of the CASM program was very introverted and barely spoke about what she had gone through in her migrant trajectory. By the end of the program, she demonstrated an impressive capacity to discuss government failures to provide youth protection and opportunities to thrive. As a CASM volunteer relayed, “And she speaks very clearly that that trajectory, from someone who couldn’t sleep and couldn’t speak to someone who is very articulate and very clear about what should be happening and about what she went through – that she totally credits to the psychosocial support from CASM.”

Core Messages

- Through **innovative partnerships** with national and international NGO’s, ACNUR, academia, and the private sector, CASM builds resilience of displaced youth populations by offering vocational training and support for entrepreneurial endeavors.
- CASM increases **synergies between humanitarian and development approaches** through the provision of direct material support and long-term skills building that promotes labor integration.
- CASM’s **age-sensitive approach** aims to address special needs and vulnerabilities of youth populations.

- CASM programming promotes **self-reliance and reintegration** of displaced youth through its focus on psychosocial interventions and social cohesion.
- CASM demonstrates **innovative thinking** through ongoing program evaluation and adaptation in response to participant feedback.