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.

State, USAID, and other agencies reported mixed results for the 190 projects 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.

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.