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Center



Latin America
Program



Environmental Change
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Executive Summary

Challenges and Opportunities in
Water Provision in El Salvador,
Guatemala, and Honduras

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This executive summary synthesizes the findings of three comprehensive papers that address the critical water situations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The papers are the result of the Wilson Center's efforts to generate research and analysis to understand climate resiliency and adaptation in the northern-tier countries of Central America, particularly concerning access to water and food security.

Three local experts conducted the studies: Carolina Amaya, an environmental journalist at MalaVerba, El Salvador; Gabriel Woltke, a journalist, writer, and director at Quorum in Guatemala; and Lucia Vijil Saybe, an Advisor on Environmental and Ecological Justice at the Center for the Study of Democracy (CESPAD) in Honduras. The papers provide an in-depth analysis of the water crises faced by these countries, present case studies that exemplify the problems, and propose potential solutions.

The studies show that there are opportunities primarily in prioritizing water governance, increasing public investment in water and sanitation infrastructure, and investing in data collection, monitoring, and research.

1. Overview of Water Problems and their Impact on Quality of Life

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras experience water scarcity, which exacerbates poverty and erodes the quality of life for their most vulnerable populations. Water issues include inadequate access to clean drinking water and sanitation services, water scarcity due to mismanagement and climate change, and pollution of water sources, especially by industrial and agricultural activities.

In Guatemala, despite its abundant water resources, a lack of treatment and care means that about 90% of water sources are unfit for human consumption. It is estimated that 67% of households in the country do not have potable water, mainly affecting low-income families in rural and urban areas. Meanwhile, lack of water access significantly impacts the country's indigenous population in rural areas, which have an average annual allocation of 45,000 liters per person compared to 65,000 liters in urban areas. Additionally, as metropolitan areas grow rapidly in population, industry, and water needs, the current institutions cannot respond quickly enough.

In El Salvador, due to contamination, less than 12% of El Salvador's rivers can be used for human consumption, irrigation, aquatic life development, and recreation. Similarly, over 90% of surface water is contaminated. Meanwhile, more than 192,000 households still need access to piped water. In 2020, 55% of urban Salvadoran households had running water in their homes, while only 6% of rural households did. As a result, many Salvadorans depend on public water sources (communal taps) outside their homes.

Honduras faces similar challenges, with only 85.1% of rural households having access to water services and 6.4% relying on natural sources like rivers and lakes.

In the most affected areas, water problems can severely impact the health and well-being of the poorest communities. They generate waterborne diseases, physical hardship, and an economic cost due to increased prices and lost time spent carrying water. Moreover, water scarcity, especially during severe weather events such as the current effects of El Niño, cripple agricultural productivity, threatening food security and livelihoods. Due to their individual and economic impact, water problems contribute to pressure on individuals to consider leaving their communities for larger cities or emigrating abroad.

2. Root Causes of Water Problems

As exemplified in the case studies, water access issues in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras can be traced back to several common root causes. These include:

1. Inadequate water governance.

- a. In Honduras, the institutional framework for water management is based on a 2004 law governing water management. However, its implementation has been criticized due to insufficient coordination between responsible bodies, especially between local and national level authorities. Meanwhile, the political will and resources necessary to implement the changes proposed by the law are lacking.
- b. In Guatemala, the fragmented and uncoordinated institutional framework for water management breeds inefficiencies, lack of accountability, and poor service delivery. Local activists point to an incapacity to understand who the appropriate authorities are for each of their issues, given that the overall responsibilities for water issues fall on five ministries and local authorities, with no coordinating body among them. This allows authorities to evade accountability and exacerbates a situation that also includes the intimidation of community activists by private and public entities.
- c. In El Salvador, the ecosystem of institutions that cover water governance recently incorporated the Salvadoran Water Authority (ASA) in 2021 with the enactment of the General Water Resources Law. However, the law and the ASA have faced criticism for their responses to El Salvador's water issues.

2. Lack of appropriate information on water-related problems. Recent tensions around water issues in Guatemala City revealed that authorities lack sufficient data on water deficiencies, impeding evidence-based decision-making. Similarly, in El Salvador, limited access to information about watersheds and their ecological contributions hinders the development of national plans to curb the indiscriminate use of water. Moreover, communities that work for water rights in Honduras have difficulty accessing information about extractive projects, making it difficult to effectively use official means to challenge illicit activities, as exemplified in the Guapinol and San Pedro Sector case study. The lack of information in Honduras also hinders efforts to improve local planning.

3. Absence of comprehensive water legislation. Despite Guatemala's constitutional mandate, progress on water legislation has stagnated. A lack of consensus on the issue and the insufficient participation of business leaders and indigenous authorities in the discussions compound the problem. In El Salvador, the General Water Resources Law, enacted in 2021, is considered inadequate to keep pace with the country's water crisis.

4. Insufficient investment in water infrastructure. In all three countries, there has been a lack of investment in public solutions that can respond to water scarcity issues.

3. Efforts underway:

- **Citizen mobilization and advocacy:** Civil society organizations are critical in each country to elevate water-related problems nationally. Some examples in Guatemala include organizations such as Maíz de Vida, the Diocesan Commission for the Defense of Nature (*la Comisión Diocesana de Defensa de la Naturaleza*), the Observatory of Extractive Industries (*el Observatorio de Industrias Extractivas*), the Indigenous Peoples' Legal Office (*el Bufete de Pueblos Indígenas*), the Institute for Research in Natural Sciences and Technology (*el Instituto de Investigación en Ciencias Naturales y Tecnología, IARNA*), JusticiaYa and Instituto25A, which work on dissemination and awareness at the urban level, and neighborhood leaderships in Guatemala City described in the case studies. In Honduras, the case studies present organizations at the local level, such as the *Comité Municipal de Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos de Tocoa* (CMDBCP), that lead efforts to protect water sources near their communities through organizing, protest, and legal action. Meanwhile, in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Ecofeminist Women's Network (*Red de Mujeres Ecofeministas Salvadoreñas*) has proposed a draft law to protect the Lempa river.
- **Efforts at the political level:** Multiple efforts are carried out at the national government level to address the root causes of water problems. For instance:
 - o The Plan de Acción País Honduras—Euroclima, implemented by the national government, refers to creating the National Environmental and Climate Information System (SINIAC), which can help address the lack of information on water sources. Meanwhile, the National Potable Water and Sanitation Plan (2022–2030) (PLANASA) focuses on improving water governance, planning, and monitoring at all levels of governance.
 - o In Guatemala, President Bernardo Arévalo and his party's representation in the national assembly have been vocal about placing the issue of a new water regulatory framework at the top of their agenda, recognizing its need for the equitable and rational distribution of water in the country: “The fact that we do not have a regulatory framework for the equitable and rational distribution among the different uses of water—industrial, agricultural, domestic, public, etc.—is a national problem.”

4. Recommendations

The authors make the following recommendations to address the water crises in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras:

1. **Strengthen water governance through the executive branch.** Clear institutional mandates, agency coordination, transparency, and accountability to improve water management must be priorities in the three countries. In the short to medium term, authors detect more evident opportunities for improvements through the executive branch rather than through legislative efforts. In the case of Guatemala, for instance, an updated National Water Policy is suggested to channel funding to support municipalities in creating treatment plans and improving technical capacity in their water management agencies.
2. **Invest in data collection, monitoring, and research to inform evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation.** This can be done by supporting and building the technical capacity of public and non-profit institutions that study and monitor water issues.
3. **Protect water sources by supporting regulatory enforcement and independent media investigating environmental crimes.** Enforcing laws to protect water sources from pollution and private sector development is critical. Additionally, it is essential to create support programs for independent media to conduct investigations related to the protection of water sources. Journalism can fill the investigative gaps of current institutions and promote greater social demand for environmental justice.
4. **Promote greater coordination with local citizen organizations.** Discussions about water regulation need to move beyond being exclusively among national organization leaders. In the case of Guatemala, citizen dialogues are suggested to better identify and understand local water-related problems. For Honduras, the author proposes supporting capacity-building and empowerment of community-based Water Boards, recognizing their pivotal role in water service delivery and resource management.
5. **Increase public investment in water and sanitation infrastructure, prioritizing underserved rural and marginalized communities.** This would include financing for water treatment and distribution and restoring ecosystems damaged by city industrialization, such as the Acelhuate River in San Salvador.
6. **Greater coordination on water issues between Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.** This is especially important for El Salvador, as most of its rivers originate in Guatemala and Honduras, making coordination essential for solving issues such as those associated with the Lempa river basin.
7. **Develop and implement comprehensive water laws that regulate water use and protect water sources.** This should be done by establishing closer ties with business sectors, especially those more inclined toward state reform in water matters, while ensuring that other groups that have also been excluded from conversations, such as indigenous authorities, are also included. To do this, it is essential to establish alliances with grassroots organizations, especially with indigenous and local communities directly affected by water management, to unify efforts and voices in advocacy for legislation.



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