STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE AGAINST EXTORTION: A COMMUNITY-LED APPROACH IN CENTRAL AMERICA

FINAL ACTIVITY REPORT
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The "Strengthening Resilience Against Extortion: A Community-Led Approach in Central America" project, implemented from January to July 2024, aimed to enhance community resilience against extortion in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This initiative, led by GI-TOC and its partners, focused on empowering local communities through research, capacity-building activities, and active dialogues, fostering collaboration among civil society, academia, and law enforcement.

The project delivered several key outcomes:

- **Policy Brief:** A comprehensive assessment of community responses to extortion under the State of Exception in the target countries. This brief provided detailed analysis and recommendations, addressing the effectiveness of community resilience over time.
- **Updated Manual:** The existing manual on community responses against extortion was enhanced with a new chapter on Victim Support. This updated resource was used extensively in nine capacity-building workshops conducted across the three countries.
- **Capacity-Building Workshops:** Nine workshops were held, three in each country, training a total of 233 participants (157 females, 76 males). These workshops aimed to deepen the understanding of community responses to extortion and strengthen local capacities.
- **Resilience Dialogues:** Four virtual and one in-person meeting facilitated active dialogue among stakeholders. These dialogues led to the development of three anti-extortion mechanisms: an interinstitutional roundtable on gender approaches, recommendations for preventing extortion risks, and an advocacy plan for telecommunication protection laws.

Throughout the project, several challenges were encountered, including fear and resistance from community members, lack of updated comparative statistics, and alleged corruption within law enforcement. These obstacles highlighted the need for building trust, ensuring confidentiality, and providing mental health support. The lessons learned emphasized the importance of comprehensive security approaches, applying gender and intersectional analyses, and fostering collaboration between civil society and government.

To sustain and enhance these efforts, future support should focus on strengthening community structures, advocating for balanced policies that protect human rights, establishing mental health support programs, and promoting comprehensive security measures that go beyond military interventions. Additionally, continuous training in digital security, mental health first aid, and legal rights is essential for empowering communities against evolving threats. Public-private partnerships and international awareness campaigns are also crucial for addressing the root causes of extortion and violence in the region.

By implementing these recommendations, communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras can build more resilient and secure environments, effectively combatting the pervasive issue of extortion.

1. ABOUT THE PROJECT

The "Strengthening Resilience Against Extortion: A Community-Led Approach in Central America" project, implemented from January through July 2024 as a subgrant under USAID's LACLEARN activity, aimed to bolster citizen security, enhance community participation, and build resilience against extortion in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Through a combination of research, capacity-building activities, and active dialogues, the project showcased community-driven responses to extortion. The initiative leveraged the expertise of GI-TOC and its partners, fostering collaboration among local stakeholders, including civil society, academia, and law enforcement. By empowering local communities and facilitating knowledge exchange, the project aimed to create sustainable solutions to combat extortion and improve overall community resilience.

The project encompassed key deliverables to ensure its objectives were met effectively. The team conducted an updated assessment of community responses against extortion, emphasizing the context of the State of Exception, which resulted in a policy brief with analysis and recommendations for Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

The team updated the Manual on community responses against extortion, enhancing it with a new chapter on Victim Support. This manual supported nine in-person capacity-building workshops, with three in each target country.

Additionally, the team facilitated four virtual and one in-person meeting to foster active dialogue among stakeholders, leading to the design of three anti-extortion mechanisms. These efforts culminated in the submission of this report, which summarizes the project's achievements, challenges, and lessons learned.

Overall, these deliverables provided a structured approach to bolstering citizen security, enhancing community participation, and building resilience against extortion across the targeted regions.

2. DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

Activity 2.1 Policy Brief: "Community Resilience Against Extortion: Experiences from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras".

General description

Since the start of the project, we identified the human resources needed to complete this activity successfully. A coordinator joined the team to oversee the research. The GI-TOC team developed and validated a methodology, focusing on understanding community resilience against extortion and state anti-extortion measures in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras over time and in varying contexts.

Community resilience was defined as the community's capacity to respond to adversity through organization, leadership, coordination, and interaction with public institutions. The study categorized resilience into three levels: absorption, adaptation, and transformation, and involved two research courses through six case studies—two per country. The first course, a longitudinal study, revisited previous community responses documented by GI-TOC to identify factors contributing to their success or failure. The second course, a descriptive study, explored three new cases to understand how communities resisted extortion and adapted to new anti-extortion measures.

The general objective of this research was to deepen the understanding of how community actors built and maintained resilience against extortion and state anti-extortion measures. The specific objectives included analyzing the effectiveness of community responses over time, studying the impact of new anti-extortion measures on community resilience, and understanding the processes through which communities absorbed impacts, adapted, and transformed in the face of extortion and anti-extortion measures.

The research questions were designed to address the effectiveness of community responses, the impact of new anti-extortion measures, and the process of building resilience. Questions explored the factors that contributed to the success or failure of community responses against extortion, how endogenous (internal) and exogenous (external) factors influenced community resilience, and how recent anti-extortion measures affected community resilience. Additionally, the study examined how communities manifested their capacities for absorption, adaptation, and transformation.

The theoretical framework for this study defined community resilience as a collective quality that enabled communities to absorb changes, transform, and leverage opportunities to improve their conditions. The research focused on how individual capacities within the community extrapolated to a collective process, considering the community's social, cultural, economic, and political environment, as well as the strength of institutional relationships and interactions with public institutions. The study aimed to identify factors that facilitated or obstructed the development of community resilience and to understand how these factors operated within different contexts.

We began implementing the methodology at the beginning of April 2024, starting with identifying the national researchers. We selected them based on their access to vulnerable communities most affected by extortion in each country, their knowledge of the issue, and their capacity to implement similar tasks.

The process of implementation had challenges and limitations, but the team managed to finalize the policy brief

and disseminated through the Global Initiative website and social media channels during the remaining of the Year 2024. (see document here)

The document will be available in both Spanish and English. As of the completion of this report, only the Spanish version is available, but the editing team is working on the translation, which is expected to be ready by the end of August.

Challenges and limitations

- Sensitive topics and fear: The sensitivity of extortion and violence topics led to resistance from community members and fear among women victims of sexual extortion, particularly under the regime of exception in El Salvador. This fear limited data collection and delayed field visits.
- Lack of updated comparative statistics: The absence of current and comparative data hindered the analysis and evaluation of initiatives like the boxing school in La Bethania.
- Limited access to key interviews: Difficulties in accessing interviews with founders, key business figures, local leaders, and authorities restricted the understanding of various initiatives' implementation and outcomes.
- Fragmented information and resistance to discuss: Organizational transitions and fear of information leaks led to fragmented data and reluctance among stakeholders, such as *Cámara de Comercio e Industrias de Cortés* (CCIC) members, to discuss extortion openly.
- Alleged corruption and distrust: Alleged corruption within law enforcement and collusion with criminal organizations diminished trust and hindered efforts to combat extortion effectively.
- Lack of focus and coordination: Some organizations and individuals lacked focus on the issues, resulting in varied perceptions and fragmented efforts within communities.
- Inconsistent data collection: Inconsistencies in data collection due to leadership transitions and lack of continuity affected the quality of information.
- Absence of detailed qualitative data: Limited availability of qualitative data, such as interviews with gang leaders and police chiefs, constrained understanding of community initiatives' broader social impacts.
- Resistance and fear of reprisal: Entrepreneurs and community leaders often resisted discussing extortion due to past experiences of information leaks and fear of reprisals.
- Difficulty in contacting representatives: Establishing contact with representatives of the *Asociación Azucarera de El Salvador* and securing interviews proved challenging, requiring intermediary intervention and assurances of anonymity to obtain valuable insights.
- Continuity and follow-up: In the "4 Grados Norte" longitudinal case, maintaining continuity and follow-up since the initial GI-TOC publication was challenging. The effectiveness of the model relied heavily on private investment in a public space, prioritizing those who could afford membership during criminal incidents.
- Security and scheduling issues: The descriptive case study on the boxing school in La Bethania faced security problems and difficulties in scheduling interviews in the area.
- Victim reluctance in group settings: In Usulután, El Salvador, women victims found it difficult to discuss their cases in front of other community members, necessitating individual visits to encourage them to share their stories.

Lessons learned

- Building trust and ensuring confidentiality: Trust and confidentiality are crucial for encouraging community members and stakeholders to share their experiences without fear.
- Need for updated data: Current and comparative data are essential for accurately assessing the progress and impact of community resilience initiatives.

- While acknowledging the challenges posed by alleged corruption, it is important to note that collaboration between the private sector and law enforcement can significantly enhance community resilience against extortion and violence. The results of the 'Zona Segura' initiative in Guatemala and the efforts of the CCIC in Honduras highlight the benefits of public-private partnerships in addressing these issues.
- Addressing corruption and ensuring accountability: Combatting corruption within law enforcement and ensuring accountability are vital for maintaining trust and achieving long-term success in anti-extortion measures.
- Adapting strategies to local contexts: Tailoring strategies to specific social, economic, and cultural contexts can improve the effectiveness and sustainability of resilience initiatives.
- Comprehensive approaches to security: Implementing integrated security measures, such as community monitoring systems and collaborative frameworks, can reduce crime and enhance the overall sense of safety within communities.
- Application of gender and intersectional approaches: Applying gender and intersectional approaches in case analyses, such as in the experience with sexual extortion in Usulután, El Salvador, allows for a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the impacts on different community members.

These insights underscore the complexity of addressing extortion and violence through community resilience, emphasizing the need for multifaceted and context-specific approaches to foster sustainable and effective outcomes.

Activity 2.2 Update of Manual on community responses against extortion

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime has been working in Central America since 2019. During that year, a Manual of Community Responses Against Extortion was developed. Five years later, this tool was updated as part of this project, incorporating new information and adding a chapter focused on supporting victims of extortion.

The updated version will be available in both Spanish and English. As of the completion of this report, only the Spanish version is available, but the editing team is working on the translation, which is expected to be ready by the end of August. The document was uploaded to our website and disseminated through our social media channels. However, its most significant use has been during the capacity-building workshops implemented as part of this project.

During the implementation of the project, the team identified several limitations, challenges, and lessons learned:

Limitations:
- Although society in the target countries is culturally supportive, emotional states during crises affect the level of support. Extortion generates high levels of fear and hopelessness, hindering effective crisis response.
- Fear is linked to the intensity of extortion and control by gangs, exacerbated by media portrayal. Hopelessness stems from the perceived inefficiency of justice institutions.
- Low mental health levels impede the development of support skills. Good intentions are often overwhelmed by indiscretions, mistrust, rash decisions, and even self-inflicted violence like suicide among victims.
- Economic precariousness makes individuals vulnerable to harm addressing material needs (e.g., raffles, remittances, job offers). The cost of supporting victims is challenging for community leaders, with limited police response and support during business hours.

- There is a deficiency in systematic community support experiences for victims of common crimes, influenced by all the above factors.

Challenges:
- Addressing the emotional states influenced by fear and hopelessness.
- Overcoming the negative impact of media and perceived inefficiency of justice institutions.
- Enhancing mental health to foster effective support skills.
- Managing the economic burden of supporting victims in resource-constrained communities.
- Developing systematic approaches and sharing best practices for community support to crime victims.
- General issues with data collection to demonstrate case systematization and treatment. In Guatemala, there is no uniformity in cases presented by the Public Ministry and National Civil Police. In El Salvador, there is a lack of information and government resistance to working with civil society.

Lessons Learned:
- Governments in Guatemala and Honduras show willingness to continue combating extortion with preventive measures, while El Salvador focuses on criminal prosecution.
- Increasing collaboration between civil society organizations and governments to implement innovative measures, emphasizing preventive measures, human rights, and specific group approaches like gender focus.
- There is a need to deepen understanding of community actions against extortion.
- GI-TOC's work in addressing extortion is widely recognized, facilitating information gathering and interviews, with GI-TOC being a key information source.

Activity 2.3 Capacity building workshops

Dates and figures

The workshops in El Salvador were implemented on June 10, 11, and 12, 2024. The first workshop, held on June 10 with the Red de Mujeres del Departamento de San Vicente, had 24 participants, including 23 females and 1 male. The second workshop took place on June 11 with the Asociación Comunal de San Esteban Catarina (AMUSEC), attended by 26 participants, comprising 23 females and 3 males. The final workshop was conducted on June 12 with the Grupo de Acción Territorial (GAT-CBJ) in Usulután, with 24 participants, of whom 19 were females and 5 were males. In total, the project supported 74 individuals to enhance their understanding of community responses against extortion.

In Guatemala, the workshops were held on different dates. On June 20, 2024, the Mixco workshop had 34 participants, including 8 females and 26 males. The workshop at the Instituto Industrial Israel in Zona 21 on June 24, 2024, included 19 participants, with 15 females and 4 males. Finally, on July 6, 2024, the workshop in Colonia Bethania, Zona 7, had 30 participants, consisting of 11 females and 19 males. In total, the project supported 83 individuals to enhance their understanding of community responses against extortion.

The workshops in Honduras were also conducted on various dates. On June 19, 2024, the El Progreso workshop had 22 participants, with an equal number of 11 females and 11 males. The Villanueva workshop on June 20, 2024, saw 34 participants, with 33 females and 1 male. The workshop in Tegucigalpa on June 21, 2024, included 20 participants, consisting of 14 females and 6 males. In total, the project supported 76 individuals to enhance their understanding of community responses against extortion.

In summary, the total number of participants trained in each country is as follows:

COUNTRY	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	FEMALES	MALES
El Salvador	74	65	9
Guatemala	83	34	49
Honduras	76	58	18
Total	**233**	**157**	**76**

In total, the project supported 233 individuals to enhance their understanding of community responses against extortion.

Summary of challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

Challenges

Impact of extortion

- Economic and social displacement: across all three countries, participants shared stories of abandoning homes and crops due to threats and violence from extortionists, leading to significant economic hardship and forced migration.
- Psychological trauma: many individuals, including children and youth, have been exposed to violence and threats, resulting in long-term psychological effects and a lack of mental health support.

Regime of exception and security measures

- Rights violations: While increased security measures brought temporary relief in some areas, they also led to abuses of power by authorities, including wrongful detentions and extortion under the guise of law enforcement.
- Community organization impact: militarized approaches undermined community organizational structures that were previously effective in maintaining local security.

Evolving nature of extortion

- Technological adaptations: Extortionists have shifted their methods to online platforms, utilizing social media and messaging apps to deceive and extort community members under various pretexts.

Lessons Learned

Community Resilience

- Historical context and organizational strength: communities with a history of strong organization, such as San Esteban Catarina in El Salvador and various community groups in Honduras, demonstrated lower levels of extortion due to their cohesive and proactive approaches to security.
- Empowerment through dialogue: open discussions about personal experiences with extortion fostered a sense of solidarity and collective action among participants, highlighting the importance of trust and safe spaces.

Importance of comprehensive security

- Beyond military solutions: Participants emphasized the need for a holistic approach to security that includes education, healthcare, housing, and respect for human rights, rather than relying solely on military and police interventions.

Need for mental health support
- Addressing trauma: the psychological impact of extortion and violence requires targeted mental health services to support affected individuals and communities.

Recommendations

Strengthening community structures
- Reinforce local organizations: support and expand community-based organizations that have proven effective in mitigating extortion and violence through collective action and local governance.
- Training and capacity building: provide continuous training in digital security, mental health first aid, and legal rights to empower communities to protect themselves against evolving threats.

Policy and legal reforms
- Human Rights protections: advocate for policies that balance security with the protection of human rights, ensuring that law enforcement actions do not lead to further victimization of innocent citizens.
- Judicial efficiency: streamline judicial processes to prevent prolonged detentions and ensure fair trials for those accused under security regimes.

Enhanced mental health services
- Access to counseling: establish mental health support programs within communities, focusing on trauma recovery and resilience building for those affected by extortion and violence.
- Community outreach: Develop outreach initiatives to educate community members about available mental health resources and encourage their utilization.

By addressing these challenges, leveraging the lessons learned, and implementing these recommendations, communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras can better combat the pervasive issue of extortion and build more resilient and secure environments.

Grupo de El Salvador – Enrique Merlos facilitador.
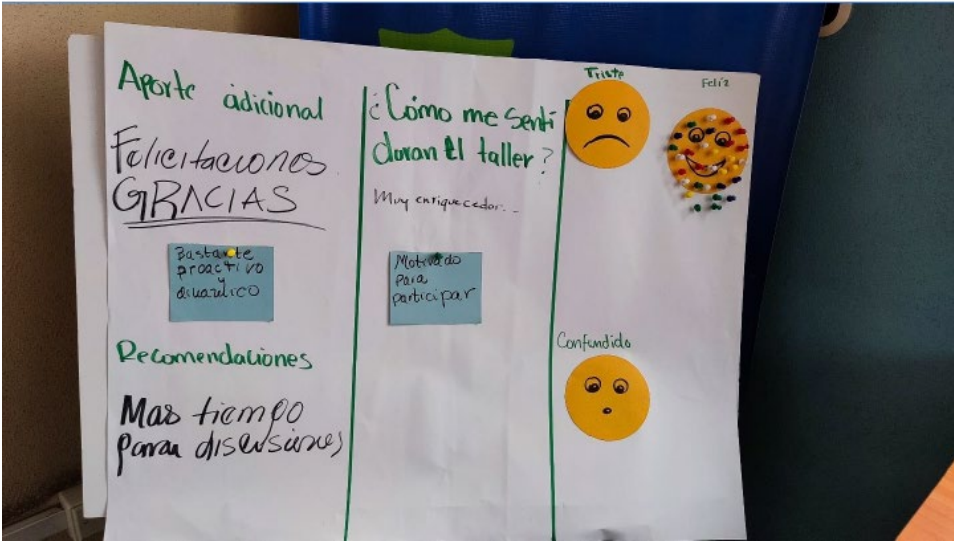
Comentarios finales de los participantes y evaluación del taller. Sesión en Guatemala – Facilitador Byron Hernández

Sesión en Honduras – Facilitador Leonardo Pineda.

Activity 2.4 Resilience Dialogues and anti-extortion mechanisms

Resilience Dialogues

In the framework of the project, the Gi-TOC coordinated the implementation of a series of five dialogues focused on combating extortion and enhancing community resilience in Central America. These dialogues, held between April and June 2024, provided a platform for various stakeholders—including government officials, civil society representatives, researchers, and community leaders—to discuss the pervasive issue of extortion and share insights on effective strategies for addressing it. Through a mix of virtual and an in-person session, participants explored the multifaceted nature of extortion, the unique challenges faced by different communities, and the critical role of local leadership and inter-institutional cooperation in fostering resilience. This report presents a sequential narrative of each dialogue, highlighting key discussions, participant contributions, and actionable recommendations aimed at mitigating the impact of extortion and promoting safer, more resilient communities in the region.

Dialogue on Extortion and gender in Guatemala

Date: April 4, 2024
Participants: 44
Link to video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eESvdebn9tM
Highlights:
This virtual dialogue was organized by Colectivo Artesana and focused on the specific impact of extortion on women. The discussion emphasized the lack of a culture of denunciation, economic and social pressures on women, and the need for scientific and gender-based arguments in their defense. Recommendations included launching awareness campaigns, implementing financial control policies, and creating employment programs for affected women. Panelists stressed the importance of inter-institutional cooperation and highlighted the role of media in fostering a culture of denunciation and prevention

Dialogue on the other face of Extortion

Date: April 23, 2024
Participants: 33
Link to video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ7-HPxsuDo
Highlights:
This dialogue addressed cases where individuals were deceitfully used to commit extortion. Organized by members of the Red Contra Extorsiones, it highlighted the challenges these individuals face in proving their innocence. The dialogue identified the need for better institutional support and community centers to prevent youth recruitment by criminal groups. Panelists discussed the importance of immediate bank account blocking and campaigns to inform the public about these deceptive practices. Recommendations focused on strengthening public-private partnerships and improving institutional attention to victims.

Dialogue on Community Resilience against Sextortion in El Salvador

Date: June 20, 2024
Participants: 25
Link to video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQaCYbgsbOQ
Highlights:
The dialogue focused on the impact of extortion and sexual violence by state actors under a prolonged state of

exception in El Salvador. Panellists from El Salvador presented a case study on how communities demonstrate resilience against extortion. Panelists included Xochilt Hernández from the legislative office, Ingrid Escobar from "Socorro Jurídico Humanitario," and Claudia Palacios from FOCOS TV. The discussion highlighted the sexual harassment and threats by military personnel, the importance of international denunciation, and the challenges faced by victims in seeking justice. Key recommendations included strengthening local leadership, protecting victims, and raising international awareness of these cases.

Dialogue on Extortion in Honduras

Date: June 26, 2024
Participants: 18
Link to video: https://youtube.com/live/Nwayk6hE50E
Highlights:
This virtual dialogue analyzed the actions taken by the Honduran government against extortion, particularly by gangs. Panelists included Luis Gerardo Reyes, Andreas Daugaard, and Juan Carlos Enamorado. The dialogue highlighted the evolution of anti-extortion efforts, from the creation of the Fuerza Nacional Antiextorsión (FNA) to the establishment of the Dirección Policial Anti Maras y Pandillas Contra el Crimen Organizado (DIPAMPCO). Despite significant efforts, the dialogue revealed that extortion remains a widespread issue. Recommendations included continuing the promotion of regulatory measures, avoiding heavy-handed policies, and fostering community resilience through education and support

Regional Dialogue on Community Resilience against Criminality and Extortion in Exceptional Regimes

Date: June 24, 2024
Participants: 21
Highlights:
Held at the Hotel Hilton Garden in Guatemala City, this dialogue brought together participants from various sectors to discuss resilience against extortion in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The event was divided into presentations and panel discussions, with key contributions from Karla Ruiz, Edgar Morales, Andrea Barrios, Celia Medrano, and Lester Ramírez. Topics included the diversification of funding, maintaining trust with authorities, and the importance of local leadership. The dialogue also explored the complexities of negative resilience and the impact of security measures on democratic institutions. Recommendations focused on strengthening community leadership, fostering safe spaces for denouncing corruption, and enhancing support for regional organizations.

Each dialogue has a detailed report included in the annexes of this document.

Recommendations and lessons learned from the implementation of the Resilience Dialogues:

- It is important to approach each dialogue as an act of community resilience. While the issue of extortion is significant, the act of gathering itself is equally vital. Opening the debate on the various sub-issues related to extortion and inviting multisectoral voices to the debate makes it more democratic and is crucial to keeping it in the public discourse.
- Over time, virtual dialogues have seen a reduced number of participants. However, they remain an efficient mechanism for recording discussions and sharing them with a wider audience over time. Even though the immediate audience has decreased, the overall reach has expanded.

- Networks are essential for discussing important community issues, but they require long-term investment. They must be built on trust, collaboration, inclusion, respect, and empathy. This is the lesson from the existence of the GI-TOC's Anti-Extortion Network.

Antiextortion mechanisms

From the dialogues, the project team identified three key anti-extortion mechanisms. The objective was to design at least one mechanism derived from each country involved. The following mechanisms were selected based on their potential impact. We are confident that these tools will be instrumental for stakeholders aiming to enhance community resilience against extortion in Central America.

1. Interinstitutional roundtable on gender approaches in the fight against extortion.

Extortion in Guatemala significantly affects women, who are often coerced into criminal activities by organized crime groups. These women, typically from impoverished and marginalized urban areas, face severe physical and emotional risks and often come from vulnerable sectors of society. The criminal justice system's response is primarily punitive, overlooking the socio-economic factors that drive these women into extortion and failing to offer comprehensive support for reintegration post-incarceration.

The *"Mesa interinstitucional de abordaje de género en la lucha contra la extorsión"* (Interinstitutional roundtable on gender approaches in the fight against extortion) aims to address this gap. It seeks to strengthen institutions, promote preventative measures, provide integral support during and after incarceration, and develop best practices for prevention. This coordinated response is crucial as it aims to tackle the root causes of women's involvement in extortion, offering them viable alternatives and reducing recidivism. Such an approach not only aids in the reintegration of these women into society but also helps in breaking the cycle of crime and poverty, thereby contributing to broader societal stability and security.

This anti-extortion mechanism in Guatemala aimed to create an interinstitutional framework focused on gender-sensitive approaches to combat extortion. The first event took place on April 26, 2024, and convened multiple institutions, including the National Civil Police, the Ministry of Governance, the Public Ministry, the General Directorate of the Penitentiary System, and civil society organizations like *Colectivo Artesana*.

This inaugural meeting, held from 8:00 AM to 2:30 PM, aimed to establish a collaborative platform for addressing the complexities of female involvement in extortion. The key objectives were to strengthen institutional frameworks, enhance preventative measures, provide comprehensive support during incarceration, and promote reintegration programs post-incarceration.

The event featured group discussions and activities that identified the profiles of women involved in extortion, analyzed the judicial processes they underwent, and proposed actions to improve their reintegration into society. Each group presented their findings and proposals, fostering a holistic understanding and coordinated response to the issue. This event marked the beginning of an ongoing effort to address extortion through gender-sensitive policies and interinstitutional cooperation.

2. Recommendations for the prevention and reduction of extortion risk.

During the regional meeting, it was identified as a critical need to support people in understanding how criminals use their online information to target them for extortion. This issue was highlighted during the workshops held in El Salvador, but it is also prevalent in Guatemala and Honduras. This is why this mechanism was selected.

With the support of GI-TOC's partner, Open Briefing, an organization specializing in security, a set of recommendations was created and subsequently reviewed by the members of the Anti-Extortion Network. Below is the final product of this exercise.

3. Advocacy plan proposal for civil society to promote dialogue and consensus on a law protecting telecommunications users´

During the dialogue focused on Honduras, it became evident that discussing telecommunication laws as a mechanism against extortion is crucial. This crime has a pervasive nature and severely impacts individuals and businesses. Extortion often relies on the anonymity and accessibility provided by telecommunication networks, where criminals use mobile phones and electronic communications to threaten victims and demand payments. By enacting and enforcing stricter telecommunication laws, such as regulating the sale of SIM cards and monitoring electronic transfers, authorities can limit the tools available to extortionists. These regulations can help trace criminal activities, disrupt the financial flows that support these crimes, and ultimately provide greater protection for vulnerable populations. Moreover, ensuring these laws are effectively implemented without infringing on human rights is vital for maintaining public trust and achieving sustainable reductions in extortion-related crimes.

This is the reason why the third anti-extortion mechanism selected was an advocacy plan for civil society to address legislation. A comprehensive advocacy plan is essential to foster dialogue and consensus around a telecommunication protection law, aiming to protect users and mitigate the extortion threat. This plan involves several key objectives, such as promoting the identification of SIM card users to prevent anonymous criminal activities, raising public awareness about the importance of these regulations, and strengthening institutional collaborations to ensure effective implementation. By involving diverse sectors, including civil society, legislators, academics, and government officials, the advocacy plan seeks to create a robust legal framework that balances security measures with the protection of individual rights, ultimately reducing extortion and enhancing public trust.

It also includes an appendix that provides detailed comments on the proposed legislation, highlighting potential conflicts with existing transparency and data protection laws. The appendix discusses the necessity of ensuring that any new regulations do not infringe upon established privacy rights and offers recommendations for safeguarding personal information while enabling effective anti-extortion measures. This comprehensive approach ensures that the advocacy plan is not only strategic but also legally sound and socially responsible.

Communication efforts

Throughout the entire project, our communication team, including designers and editors, has worked diligently to deliver high-quality documents. As part of our communication efforts, we have been disseminating project deliverables through social media, a task that will continue even after the project's conclusion.

Currently, the team is developing a podcast to add to the "Crimen y Resiliencia" series. This podcast will highlight the main findings of the report and feature interviews and insights from project stakeholders. It is scheduled for completion by mid-August. We are fully committed to creating an informative and valuable episode.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE SUPPORT

Throughout the implementation of the project, GI-TOC has identified the following recommendations for future support from donors in the region.

Strengthening community structures:

- Increase funding and support for community-based organizations that have effectively mitigated extortion and violence through collective action and local governance.
- Provide continuous training in digital security and legal rights to empower communities to protect themselves against evolving threats.

Policy and legal reforms:

- Advocate for policies that balance security with the protection of human rights, ensuring law enforcement actions do not lead to further victimization of innocent citizens.
- Streamline judicial processes to prevent prolonged detentions and ensure fair trials for those accused under security regimes.

Enhanced mental health services:

- Establish mental health support programs within communities, focusing on trauma recovery and resilience building for those affected by extortion and violence.
- Develop outreach initiatives to educate community members about available mental health resources and encourage their utilization.

Comprehensive security approaches:

- Emphasize the need for a holistic approach to security that includes education, healthcare, housing, and respect for human rights, rather than relying solely on military and police interventions.
- Implement community monitoring systems and collaborative frameworks to reduce crime and enhance the overall sense of safety within communities.

Application of gender and intersectional approaches:

- Develop and implement policies that specifically address the impact of extortion on women and marginalized groups, ensuring comprehensive support for these populations.
- Apply intersectional approaches in analyzing and addressing the impacts of extortion, considering factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.

Support for anti-extortion mechanisms:

- Support the creation and operation of interinstitutional frameworks focused on gender-sensitive approaches to combat extortion.
- Fund and disseminate guidelines to help communities understand and protect themselves from online extortion threats.
- Back advocacy efforts for legislation that protects telecommunication users from extortion while balancing privacy rights and data protection.

Building trust and ensuring confidentiality:

- Fund initiatives aimed at building trust within communities, ensuring confidentiality, and encouraging open dialogue about extortion without fear of reprisal.

Support for research and data collection:

- Invest in efforts to gather current and comparative data to accurately assess the progress and impact of community resilience initiatives.
- Support detailed qualitative research to understand the broader social impacts of community initiatives against extortion.

Public-Private Partnerships:

- Encourage and fund partnerships between public institutions and private entities to enhance community resilience against extortion.
- Promote the sharing of best practices and successful models between different sectors to improve overall strategies against extortion.

International awareness and advocacy:

- Support campaigns to raise international awareness of the challenges and successes in combating extortion in Central America.
- Advocate for increased international support and collaboration to address the root causes of extortion and violence in the region.

4. ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: Methodology

Lecciones y aprendizajes de resiliencia comunitaria contra la extorsión y medidas antiextorsión en El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras. Propuesta de investigación.

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/bozpgz9nbmmuprn2xrh6r/Metodologia-Estudios-de-casos-resiliencia-comunitaria-FINAL.pdf?rlkey=giyj9zn3plz604jgxwwwr7pyg&dl=0

ANNEX 2: Resilience Dialogues reports

- Dialogue on extortion and gender in Guatemala
- Dialogue on the other face of Extortion
- Dialogue on community resilience against sextortion in El Salvador
- Dialogue on extorsion in Honduras
- Regional dialogue on community resilience against extortion in exceptional regimes

ANNEX 3: Anti-extortion mechanisms.

- Interinstitutional roundtable on gender approaches in the fight against extortion.
- Recommendations for the prevention and reduction of extortion risk.
- Advocacy plan proposal for civil society to promote dialogue and consensus on a law protecting telecommunications users´

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