

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the work of the authors, Sandra Kozeschnik and Liza Noriega, and to the valuable contribution of organizations such as the Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible and Asociación por una Sociedad más Justa, and the consultant Raúl Chiquillo. Siria Gastélum, Ana Castro, Adrián Ancira and Guillermo Vázquez participated in the publication and design process.

This effort was made possible through funding from the government of Canada to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of neither the GI-TOC nor the government of Canada.



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INTRODUCTION

phone call can change someone's life. This is confirmed by extortion data from the Northern Triangle countries – the Latin American region most affected by extortion. For decades, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have witnessed the growth of this criminal economy and the way it affects many people, institutions and businesses, as well as its impact on the quality of life of Central American countries.

Extortion comes in different forms, and the actors behind it seem to adapt their operating ways according to the profile of the victim. Owners of small and large businesses, merchants, agricultural workers, teachers and directors of educational institutions, doctors, sex workers, children, teenagers and residents of communities controlled by gangs – they have all been victims of extortion. This criminal economy generates annual profits of millions of dollars at the expense of the fear and resources of many Central Americans.

The urgency to obtain a benefit is one of the key elements of extortion. This instils fear in the victims, who often give in to the pressure and pay up. How to tackle this problem? Who are the victims of extortion in the Northern Triangle countries? What actions are being carried out by governments and civil society to counter it?

To better understand extortion in Central America and promote efforts that favour its control and elimination, as part of the Coalitions for Resilience project, the GI-TOC prepared a report on extortion in five Central American countries, organized several meetings on the subject and supported the creation of a regional network of experts.

This action manual stems from the recommendations made at a regional workshop organized in August 2019 in Guatemala. Over the course of the two-day workshop, public officials from various governments, experts in the field, and members of civil society

and international cooperation discussed ideas for possible collaborative activities against extortion. Hence, the idea to produce this manual, developed from the GI-TOC and InSight Crime's report 'A criminal culture: Extortion in Central America'. The information presented in all the sections of this document is based on this research and report.

The GI-TOC now presents the 'Action manual for community resilience in Central America' as a tool for communities, institutions, organizations and a diversity of actors seeking to contribute to the exchange of information on extortion at the local level, and to provide planning and prevention tools that can be used in extortion incidents. Compiling collective knowledge and reaching agreements are an essential part of the process of understanding and confronting the criminal market.

This action manual is aimed at anyone interested in learning more about the issue of extortion, especially those who wish to get involved in local initiatives that work to counter it. Extortion incidents in some communities are not isolated from cases in others: actors and methods are generally connected and tend to intertwine. Just as extortion is formed by a network of actors and elements that come together to make it work, so must be the response to tackle it: a diversity of actors, ideas and actions that together aim for its control and elimination. Each one of us is invited to read this manual, to think about it and to discuss, change, reproduce and distribute it.

This document is organized into five modules:

MODULE 1: What is extortion?

MODULE 2: What are its local impacts?

MODULE 3: What are the responses to extortion? MODULE 4: What to do in an extortion incident?

MODULE 5: Community action

The first two modules focus on concepts, offering definitions and information on extortion types and methods, and presenting data on its effects and impacts on people's lives. The third and fourth modules provide ideas on initiatives in response to the criminal market, and recommendations for how to act in a case of extortion in accordance with authority guidelines. The fifth module proposes ideas and tools for diagnosis, planning and monitoring that various community actors can use for registering, reporting and following up on extortion cases.

The action manual can be read and used individually or in groups. Questions for reflection are included at the end of each module and, in case the manual is used for educational purposes in a group setting, a supplementary guide is provided. The guide includes organizational, developmental and activity suggestions for both workshops and dialogues for community resilience.

The tools in the action manual and guide allow for learning to be reinforced and applied, including activities such as case analyses and the creation of new proposals to counter extortion. With this, we hope to provide communities with access to relevant information on extortion, as well as ideas for responses to address it in the quest for a just, safe and inclusive society for all.



Module 1

WHAT IS EXTORTION?



At the end of the module, participants will be able to define the term extortion, its elements, types and causes in Central America, and identify the most common types of extortion in their community.

What is extortion?

Extortion is a daily phenomenon in Central American countries, especially in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Many people are victims of the various forms of extortion, and many others live off and benefit from them. The threats of violence and the fear provoked by extortion make it a criminal activity that is rarely reported. It is important to know what extortion is, as well as its typology, in order to have useful information that will allow you to recognize when you are facing a possible case of extortion.

Extortion is the pressure that a person puts on another to act in a certain way in order to obtain an economic benefit or other advantage, such as goods or services. Fear, threats, intimidation and aggression are recurrent elements that characterize an extortion, which will always seek to obtain a wrongful benefit.

Extortion can take several forms depending on who conducts it, the source of power behind the extortionist, the nature of the threat, the payment method and the way in which the extortion is carried out. These elements combined make each case different, as well as its victims and perpetrators.



Identifying extortion and its elements

WHO EXTORTS

Extortionists can be **individuals**, **groups**, **gang members or public officials**.



Often, extortion comes from criminal imitators that opportunely take advantage of the fear caused by gangs to undertake their own extortions.

SOURCES OF POWER



These are different means or resources used by extortionists to generate fear in the victim, for example information or images of their family or place of residence.

Physical or verbal violence is also a **source of power**.

NATURE OF THE THREAT



It refers to the threat in case of non-compliance, such as the destruction of a business or of the victim's reputation, violence, death, or the death of a family member, among others.



Identifying extortion and its elements

METHOD OF PAYMENT



Extortion can be paid for in cash, deposits, or in the form of food, goods, services and favours, such as drug storage, territorial-fee exemptions, property cleaning, babysitting and vehicle repairs, among others.



In Central America, payment with sexual services is a common method that directly affects women, who in most cases are victims of abuse and sexual violence as a result of extortion.

WAYS OF CARRYING OUT EXTORTION



It can be direct or indirect.

In a direct way, the extortionist makes the threat in person.



In an **indirect way**, extortion can occur **by phone**, through intermediaries **or social networks**.

For many criminal groups, extortion has become one of the main sources of income and livelihood for their members. There are currently three main drivers of extortion in the region: an organized crime that becomes more organized, the use of mobile-phone technology and criminal impersonators.



Organized crime becomes more organized.

Some years ago, criminal gangs realized that the wholesale purchase of weapons and drugs was possible through extortion and the resources obtained from it. Continued extortion allowed them – and still does – to increase the purchase of goods that strengthens their structure. This led to the increase and proliferation of criminal gangs with high availability of weapons, making their violent threats credible.



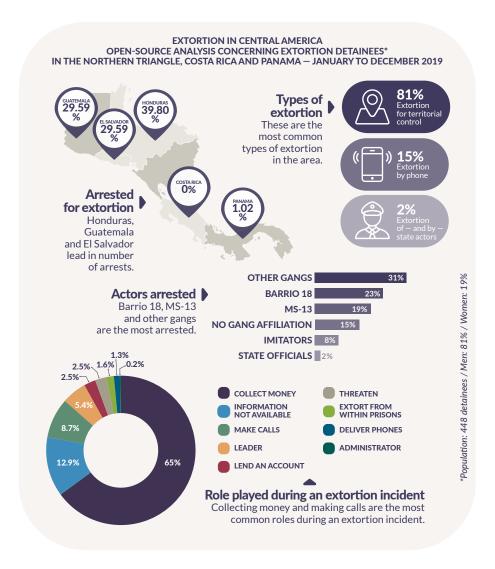
Mobile-phone technology. For some decades now, the accessibility and coverage of mobile phones in Central America have reached a level where most inhabitants have a mobile phone. This situation has been exploited by many extortionist groups, who find new criminal opportunities that do not require being physically present; a single phone call is enough. Governments have tried to counter these types of extortions, many times originating in prisons, by blocking cell signals

around prison facilities. However, because of the practicality and effectiveness of this technology, and the lack of legislation in place to control it in prison, government measures have failed and mobile-phone technology continues to be an important element of extortion.

Criminal imitators. The emergence of groups posing as gang members and the impunity of crime in the region have been other important reasons for the rise of extortion in Central America. Criminal imitators are new, independent groups that take advantage of extortion's structure and schemes, as well as the fear that these provoke, to carry out threats, scams and extortions.



The main difference with extortions undertaken by gangs or organized criminal groups is that these imitators do not have the capacity to carry out the threat of violence. Criminal imitators continue to exist because they have realized that citizens lack trust towards authorities and do not report these cases. People will pay the extortion out of fear.



Types of extortion

Extortion in Central America is manifested in multiple forms according to various elements and it has gained importance in the region due to the three main drivers explained above. This section now focuses on the different types of extortion. What types of extortion exist and what are their methods?



EXTORTION FOR TERRITORIAL CONTROL

This type of extortion is carried out both directly and indirectly by gangs in a particular territory. Individuals or businesses must pay a fee to gang members in order to live and/or work in the territory. It is usually collected in cash or through deposits in weekly, biweekly or monthly fees.

The most affected by this type of extortion are people who own informal businesses, local shops, workshops, and pilots or owners of transportation companies. Although this kind of extortion occurs mainly in urban areas, with municipal markets playing an important role as a place of business, cases have also been reported in rural areas, affecting mainly agricultural and livestock producers. In these cases, the payment methods are usually in the form of products. Although most of these extortions are aimed at small and medium-sized businesses operating in the territories, cases of extortion have also been documented against multinational companies who are required to make payments in order to operate and/or bring products into a territory.

Most affected people: People living in gang-controlled territories, small-scale and medium-sized merchants.



EXTORTION BY PHONE OR THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

It is a type of indirect extortion and it is the most common among criminal impersonator groups. There are different extortion schemes of this type, from fake lotteries to business or life threats. In order to make a threat, extortionists obtain information about their victim through social media.

In some cases, the extortionists are in prison and need outside help. Female accomplices will deliver mobile phones to businesses, from which victims will then receive an extortion phone call. In some cases, women also lend their bank accounts for the deposit of extortion money.

Most affected people: General population, often at random.

'They decided it was better to pay because [the gangs] began to shoot at the trucks and killed the son of one of our colleagues; it is terrifying.'

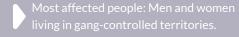
- Owner of a waste-collection truck in Guatemala



SEX-TORTION

Sex-tortion is a type of extortion in which, through the use of social media, a person initiates a conversation with another, seduces the victim and exchanges intimate images. The victim is then blackmailed into sending money to avoid the images being released.

This type of extortion is often related to sexual violence. Gang members pressure their victims to make extortion payments, otherwise they threaten them with sexual violence against them, their partner or children. There are cases in which the payment with sexual services is requested from the beginning, with sex workers being the main victims.





EXTORTION OF - AND BY - STATE ACTORS

This type of extortion is aimed at or carried out by public officials. It occurs when staff of public institutions – such as prisons – impose payment systems in exchange for benefits. In the case of prisons, security staff and hired personnel charge for services such as housing space, visiting rights, the establishment of small businesses and the distribution of mobile phones to prisoners. It has also been reported that state actors, generally corrupt individuals in the security forces, extort sex workers under the threat of being reported and/or arrested, in exchange for money or sexual services.

Local public officials are also victims of extortions carried out by gangs, who request direct payments in cash, jobs for their group members or funds for the controlled territories, in exchange for specific situations that criminal groups can control, such as keeping the levels of violence in a region low.

Most affected people: Depending on the case, public officials, prisoners, sex workers, etc.



Case Study: Extortion in Honduras

How does an extortion actually start?

A terrible phone call. They identify you. They give you instructions. They extort you. The world falls apart and 25 years of work vanish. This is what happened to María (her name has been changed) who lost everything in 2013, without any information, legal assistance or support from the police or the state.

"...you realize that protecting material goods comes last, and it is crucial to protect your family. This is the moment when it becomes even more traumatic..."

Today, María belongs to a group of experts and recognizes that an important part of the problem lies in national legislation, mainly in the governments of the Northern Triangle countries, who until recently did not tackle transnational crimes such as extortion. In

María's case, for example, although the call was placed from a prison in Honduras, information was traced to El Salvador.

María recalls: '... they tell you what they are asking for and you innocently give them even more information... and making the right decision is very distressing, whether to accept what they are asking for, or to lose everything and run away. At this point you realize that protecting material goods comes last, and it is crucial to protect your family. This is the moment when it becomes even more traumatic...'

As a result of this experience, María decided that the only option was to start over, protect her family and give her country a second chance. With her vast experience as a school principal, she resumed her social activism and began to form groups of women to train and empower them.

In Honduras, prevention programmes and government policies are in place to tackle the problem; however, it is common for these programmes to be permeated by the criminal groups themselves. Moreover, when governments do take action, gangs show a great capacity for mutation and reorganization, which directly impacts state efforts. In addition, the communities in which organized crime operates become convenient locations where training in various types of crime goes unpunished.



- Extortion is the pressure that a person puts on another to act in a certain way in order to obtain an economic benefit or other advantage, such as goods or services.
- In order to identify a case of extortion, it is important to take into account the following elements: who is doing it, what source is empowering them, the nature of the threat, the payment method and how the extortion is carried out.
- Fear, threat, intimidation and potential for aggression are recurrent elements of extortion.
- There are three main reasons for the increase of extortion in the region: an organized crime that is better organized, the use of mobile-phone technology and criminal imitators.
- The most common and recurrent types of extortion in Central America are extortion for territorial control, extortion by phone or through social media, sex-tortion and extortion of – and by – state actors.



- What is the most common type of extortion in my country, region and/or community?
- Is extortion a way of measuring the power of gangs within a territory?



Module 2

WHAT ARE ITS LOCAL IMPACTS?



At the end of the module, participants will be able to understand the effects and impacts of extortion on communities and people's lives, as well as the importance of a comprehensive approach to understand the criminal market.

What are its local impacts?

To think of extortion is to remember the fear, terror and uncertainty reflected in stories of family members, neighbours or acquaintances who have suffered from it or even in one's own personal experience. What are the effects generated by extortion on people's lives and their communities?

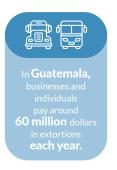
The control that gangs exert over the Central American region has led criminal groups in many territories to strengthen their structures, gain more stable incomes and expand their criminal activities to other criminal markets such as the drug trade or the protection of transnational drug dealers. Although for some criminal groups extortion is an empowering way of life, generating stability and income, for another large part of the population it is the cause of economic and emotional instability, material and family losses, and even forced displacement

The economic impacts of extortion are the most evident, both for perpetrators and victims. In Guatemala, businesses and individuals pay around 60 million dollars in extortions each year. Many small-scale and medium-sized businesses in the Northern Triangle countries have shut down because of threats and/or violence related to extortion, leaving companies, employees and families without work or a source of income.

In the case of large companies, gangs can make millions in revenue: between one and 10 million dollars a year per company. This has led many companies to include extortion fees in their

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fixed expenses, a budget that is accounted for in the production costs, added to security and insurance elements that are contracted to mitigate the problems of extortion. All these costs have an effect on the product's final price for the consumer.



In terms of social impacts, extortion has come to affect basic services such as health and education, especially when health or education centres are forced to pay fees. Extortion affected 60 per cent of El Salvador's schools in 2016, leaving an estimated 39 000 children without education.³ In addition, many

people are choosing to arm themselves to deal with extortion, increasing the numbers of people owning weapons in the region and intensifying rates of community violence. Deciding to carry a weapon is a visible sign of living in a society impacted by violence and fear, where, for many, a weapon seems to be the only defence against criminal acts.

At the community level, the fear and violence caused by extortion affects people's lives significantly, to the point that many prefer to isolate their families within their homes, instead of exposing children, spouses or other family members on the streets, especially in gang-controlled territories. Community life is one of the great losses of extortion.

Extortion has impacts on people's economic, social and community lives. However, one of the highest impacts or consequences of extortion in Central America has been forced displacement. Many families have been forced to move from their homes because of threats of violence in their communities. Statistics on forced displacements are generally associated with various causes such as extortion, crime, drug trafficking and development projects, so it is not possible to have reliable statistics on the number of displacements that occur solely because of extortion. However, there has been an increase in forced displacement over the last few years; in Honduras alone, the National Human Rights Commission registered 1 400 cases of forced displacement in 2017, compared to 757 cases in 2016.⁴

'We do not want to leave, we love our country, but unfortunately there are many people who have ruined it... We either leave or risk our family's lives.'

- Ana, El Salvador⁵

The impact of extortion on different areas of human life is high. The constant threat and the high level of violence in the region contribute to a climate of fear and perpetual alert. This leads to particular situations, mainly in gang-controlled territories, where the population has accepted the need to pay fees to gangs as a way to be protected and avoid conflicts with members of criminal groups. Populations coexist with extortionist groups within a territory, which leads them to adapt to their criminal modes of operation as a method of survival.⁶

According to Alexandre Formisano, former head of mission of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Honduras, 'people want to become invisible. They try to disappear, to cease to exist, because they know that the gangs have the ability to find them in every corner of the country.'⁷

Women and extortion

When we talk about the impacts of extortion, we are not only referring to those felt by its victims but also by extortionists and, especially, their family members and accomplices.

In Guatemala, extortion is the most common crime for which women are being imprisoned, according to InSight Crime research: 791 women were imprisoned for extortion in 2017, compared to 382 in 2014.8 Participation of women in extortion schemes as intermediaries has been increasing for some years, either directly with the delivery of mobile phones to businesses or indirectly through the use of personal bank accounts for the deposit of payments. Government actions to prosecute this crime have led to the imprisonment of many women, an action that has triggered the debate on the role of women within criminal structures.

Many of the documented cases of women's involvement in extortion specify how gang members take advantage of the emotional relationships they have with a variety of women – mothers, girlfriends, wives – to get them to do 'favours', such as giving out mobile phones or lending bank accounts. In some cases, they promise them some sort of remuneration. Although in some cases women's participation is informed and consensual, in many others it is as a result of deceit by gang members, who make up false stories mainly to borrow bank accounts and thereby ask for the required support.

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According to Andrea Barrios, director of Colectivo Artesana, a civil society organization in Guatemala, many of the women who have been imprisoned as a result of their involvement in extortion cases became involved after visiting family or friends in prison, where there is little control of such visits by the authorities. This allows for negotiations to emerge, strengthening the network of extortion that affects the country.

One of the debates generated around the issue of women and extortion is the way in which the justice system punishes women who participate in this crime, being judged and imprisoned for extortion without taking into account the criminal structure that is usually behind the action itself. Poverty and lack of opportunities for many of the women involved make their participation in extortion schemes understandable. 'Instead of considering women and minors as part of a criminal structure, which would give them the opportunity to talk [with the authorities] about the leader, they are judged only for the crime [of extortion], while the leader of the gang remains free,' said Carmen Rosa de León, director of the Institute of Education for Sustainable Development in Guatemala, in an interview with InSight Crime in 2018.9

An essential issue to be considered for a comprehensive approach to women's participation in this region is the development and implementation of public policies with a gender perspective. This should target the creation of economic opportunities and a full life for women, in order to prevent them from becoming involved in cases of deception or obtaining resources through their participation in extortion schemes. The justice response to these particular cases continues to be an open debate.





- Extortion impacts people's economic, social and community life. At the economic level, extortions produce millions of dollars a year in profits to individuals or companies.
- Fear and violence as a consequence of extortion have significantly impacted people's way of life, causing communities to become increasingly isolated and governed by fear and insecurity.
- One of the highest-impact consequences caused by extortion in Central America has been forced displacement, causing many people to move away from their homes.
- The participation of women as intermediaries in extortion structures is a subject of analysis and discussion, especially due to the multiple cases of deceit that women have reported when getting involved in extortions and the judicial punishments they face for them.



- How has extortion affected community life in my territory?
- Are the female relatives of gang members extortion victims or accomplices? Why?



Module 3

WHAT ARE THE RESPONSES TO EXTORTION?





At the end of the module, participants will have information on different responses from the state, civil society, the private sector and organized communities to counter extortion.

What are the responses to extortion?

We have a lot of information on extortion and its impacts, but we hear little about the different responses, projects and activities undertaken to counter it. The responses to extortion come from the state and are implemented through government entities, civil society, the private sector and even organized communities. But which ones are the most effective?

Here we present some ways to address the criminal market as well as projects driven by the search for ways to fight it both contextually, responding to concrete actions of criminal groups, and structurally, to improve people's living conditions so they can have a decent life where there is no place for extortion. Knowing the different responses adopted by countries is important in order to adapt and/or create communities' own responses.







Legislation related to the use of telecommunications

Northern Triangle countries have passed and implemented legislation to stop extortion in their territories. One of these regulates and/or limits mobile-phone services inside prisons, after findings revealed that many phone-based extortions originate there. Honduras and El Salvador currently have laws regulating this situation, passed in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Guatemala approved a similar legislation in 2014, but it was declared unconstitutional and annulled in 2016. In 2019, the Special Prosecutor's Office against Impunity of the Attorney General's Office, and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala presented a case of corruption related to purchase of votes in the legislative branch between 2012 and 2016, to approve specific laws in favour of the executive agency. Among the laws approved was the one passed in 2014, called Law for the Control of Mobile Telecommunications in Prisons and Strengthening of the Infrastructure for Data Transmission. Guatemala does not currently have laws to regulate mobile-phone services in the country's prisons.

Although these types of regulation have favourable indicators in the fight against extortion, they do not prevent it completely. Generally, extortionists find other ways to act and achieve their goals, adapting their methods and strategies.



Investigating criminal acts related to extortion

Other mechanisms promoted to stop extortions are investigations by prosecutors' offices. Governments have undertaken anti-money laundering investigations to understand and dismantle financing structures of criminal groups that carry out extortions and other illicit activities. Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have conducted successful anti-money laundering investigations, finding that individuals or groups buy and/or provide services in hotels, clinics, gas stations and restaurants,

among other places, to hide and move the benefits obtained from activities like extortion.

The Jaque investigation in El Salvador, a criminal investigation into the financial structure behind gangs' extortion activities in the region, identified different legal businesses, such as real-estate and import–export companies, to launder extortion proceeds on a large scale and grow their leaders' incomes. During Operation Jaque, between 2016 and 2019, people affiliated to gangs were arrested, prosecuted and convicted for crimes such as membership of terrorist organizations, homicides, illicit drug trafficking and the supply and possession of arms, among others. Additionally, different operations dismantled several money-laundering structures, intervening businesses and confiscating assets.

The strengthening of justice systems in the region and their effectiveness remain a challenge in confronting extortion. It is important to have a system that enables follow-up investigations, fair trials, and penalties that hold perpetrators accountable.



Protection of rights and crime prevention

Poverty and low-quality education, as well as poor access to the education system for all children and teenagers, are factors that affect a fulfilling life and the protection of the rights of citizens, having an impact on violence rates and heightening insecurity in communities. Public policies in the areas of education, health and employment are necessary state actions that every government must prioritize. Among the possible effects of such actions are the improvement of people's security and quality of life.

In June 2009, the Safe Schools Programme was created in Guatemala as a presidential initiative to prevent the presence of teenagers and young people in illegal armed groups and the abuse of addictive substances, out of concern for the growing rates of violence in schools and on journeys home from school.

The objective of the programme is to consolidate public schools as safe spaces, free from violence and addictions, conducive to a comprehensive education. Its strategy is to tackle two fundamental aspects of violence prevention: social prevention and situational prevention.

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The programme started as a pilot project in 25 schools from neighbourhoods and municipalities with the highest violence, crime and addiction rate of the Guatemala department (Mixco, Villa Nueva and Guatemala). The programme expanded and consolidated its methodology in 2010 to reach 49 schools from the same neighbourhoods as the pilot phase, as well as the municipalities of Santa Catarina Pínula (Guatemala) and Monjas (Jalapa). In 2011, 11 schools of Escuintla department were reached, and by 2019 the programme covered 118 schools in total.



Investing in security

Advancing police reforms and improving investment in security is also an important aspect in the fight against extortion at the state



level. All too often, citizens do not report crimes due to a lack of confidence in the police and the state institutions that are supposed to protect them.

A country's investment in security is an indicator of the working conditions of police and other civil servants in charge of ensuring security. It also indicates the investment and state projects put in place to address problems such as extortion. Of the Northern Triangle countries, Honduras is the one that spends the most on security: 1.6 per cent of its

gross domestic product. Salvador and Guatemala report spending 0.5 per cent and 0.3 per cent, respectively.¹¹

Honduras reported investment in security in 2012, when a police reform was promoted to modernize and professionalize the police force, as well as to improve officers' working conditions. With time, citizens' trust levels towards the police force improved, and a new generation of officers were trained with a community approach.

Increase in security spending is not necessarily reflected in the improvement of its indicators. Nevertheless, strengthening the institutions in charge of security is an important element within an integral plan for the security and wellbeing of citizens.



Special security forces

The creation of special security forces is a measure taken by some countries to fight extortion promptly and in the short term. In 2018, the National Security and Defence Council of Honduras created the National Anti-Gang Force (FNAMP, in Spanish) in order to strengthen the country's security strategy and improve its investigative capacities, not only against extortion, but against all criminal acts related to gangs.

Although the security context in Honduras is complex, FNAMP has been able to slowly improve citizens' trust towards the government's security entities, which is reflected in the number of cases reported. While 980 cases were reported and 669 arrests were made in connection with gangs in 2015, in 2018 cases reported increased to 1 462 and arrests to 1 337. This shows a 50 per cent increase in reported cases, while efficiency also improved in arrests of alleged perpetrators of criminal acts.

Local governments



Interinstitutional cooperation and coordination in Villa Nueva, Guatemala

Villa Nueva municipality in Guatemala has made coordinated cooperation efforts with authorities responsible for fighting extortion crimes, the public ministry and national police. This focused on sharing community information gathered by municipal officers, protecting sources' identity, facilitating knowledge and communication between the community and municipal and national authorities, as well as gathering information through municipal surveillance cameras to reinforce evidence in investigated cases.

'We are sure that this collaborative work has an important impact on the reduction of impunity, and this is the only way to build trust... so people will have the courage to report these crimes, which are the main financing source of gangs and other criminal structures at the expense of the life and effort of working citizens. Making Villa Nueva more prosperous, educated and safe is everyone's task' said Juan Estrada, a Villa Nueva officer.



Private-sector responses

Entrepreneurs, owners of small- and large-scale businesses, are the main victims of extortion in Central America. They have responded individually to the problem, by including extortion payments in the company's fixed costs and hiring private security services for their businesses. These individual actions have not provided an integral solution and seem to accept to play by the rules of extortionist groups, putting people's lives at risk.

However, some public–private initiatives have tried to yield better results in their fight against extortion. Some chambers of industry have supported general prosecutors as mediators between the judiciary and private actors, who often do not trust government authorities. Likewise, some business sectors have offered logistic support to the national police, as was the case of the sugar sector in El Salvador in 2013, which provided motorcycles, vans, radios and drones, among other assistance, to trained officers for security tasks. Private companies have the resources to finance projects, as well as the experience in cooperation and coordination processes – elements that can help build effective alliances to combat extortion.

'We need security to live in peace' - Secure zone 4, Guatemala

After a process of economic development of Guatemala City's Zone 4, extortion incidents began to occur at local shops. To counter this, the best option was the creation of a unique security model: secure zone 4. After analyzing the situation, a strategic plan was established, involving four strategic axes: setting the limits of the protected area, creating a systemic work model, ensuring community involvement and use of technology.

The implementation of this effort has allowed the coordination of actions with neighbours and local shops in accordance with the law. Though we only have preliminary results, the figures so far are positive and encouraging.



Civil society responses



Investigation and support

There are several civil society organizations in Central America that work and support communities to prevent and respond to extortion. Investigations on extortion cases have raised awareness about the problem and its effects on different members of society. The Panamanian non-profit organization Mujeres con Dignidad y Derecho de Panamá ('women with dignity and rights') is an example of this. In 2017, they published an investigation exposing extortions made to sex workers by police officers in Panama City. The investigation revealed that more than half of the sex workers were victims of bribes they had to pay to police officers to be able to work, and nearly 45 per cent stated that they were forced to offer free sex services. In Central America, 30 per cent of sex workers confirmed being victims of this type of extortion.¹²

The organization also set up awareness workshops for security forces, including national police and immigration officers, as well as representatives of the different municipalities. The objectives were to share the experiences of sex workers with security officers and continue training people on this topic.



facebook.com/mujerescondignidadyderecho (in Spanish)



Communication campaigns

Communication campaigns are important tools for the spreading of messages on different topics to a wide range of audiences. Civil society organizations have used communication campaigns to provide information on extortion and raise people's awareness on the topic, as well as the importance of reporting cases.

Colectivo Artesana is a Guatemalan non-profit organization that works for access to comprehensive justice for all, prevention of crimes and support for the rights of women being deprived of freedom as well as their children. In 2019, this organization launched the *Piénsalo antes* campaign ('think twice'), which

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warned women about the risks related to lending their bank account to deposit or receive money on behalf of their partner, because these were the most recognized practices among gang members or other groups to facilitate extortion processes.

Another communication campaign on extortion was the 2004 initiative *Addiopizzo* ('goodbye extortion') in Palermo, Italy. One morning, anonymous posters appeared all over the city with the inscription: 'An entire population that pays bribes is a population without dignity.' Nobody knew who was behind the campaign, but reactions were immediate. All the newspapers talked about extortion, Palermo's mayor invited the public-security committee, and the chamber of commerce announced it would monitor the situation. *Addiopizzo* created alliances between local entrepreneurs and consumers to resist extortion and support the local businesses that were suffering from it.



twitter.com/casaartesana (in Spanish)



Addiopizzo: www.addiopizzo.org (in Italian)



Community networks of women in the fight against extortion: : Grupo Sociedad Civil, Honduras

In 2017, an investigation led by the Grupo Sociedad Civil ('civil society group') with the support of the Pan American Development Foundation, focused on internally displaced people with an emphasis on vulnerable groups such as women, LGBTI individuals and human rights defenders. One of the results found that women and children see higher rates of displacement for two main reasons: violence related to domestic abuse and forced recruitment, and poverty conditions exacerbated by lack of employment and extortion. All this combined with the sexual violence to which young girls are subjected to.

A set of proposals were drafted aimed at influencing state security responses, involving the Secretariat of Human Rights, the police and the public prosecutor's office. Some of the main ideas proposed were communities free from violence, women and youth facing domestic and sexual violence, recovery of

public spaces, and civil alliances. These resulted in, among other achievements, the recovery of public spaces and some minimal agreements between organized groups of women and gang members to stop extortion to businesses.



To learn more about cases detected by GI-TOC: globalinitiative.net/initiatives/extortion-in-central-america/

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- One of the main actors seeking to counter extortion is the state. Among actions taken, there are legislation projects, investigations, investments in security, the protection of rights, special security forces and local-government initiatives.
- Private-sector responses are focused on creating private-public initiatives that provide their resources and experience in management to support and strengthen government projects against extortion.
- Civil society has played an important role in supporting victims of extortion. It has also raised awareness on the criminal market through communication campaigns, investigations and the establishment of community networks against extortion.
- The joint efforts of government actors, the private sector, civil society and the general population is an effective way of fighting against the causes of extortion, since they create alternatives for young people and women who see gangs as an alternative way of life.



- Do I know any community initiatives to combat extortion? Think about how effective they are and possible improvements.
- Is this joint action between state and private actors the only way to combat extortion? Are there any other effective ways to address the problem?



Module 4

HOW TO REACT IN AN EXTORTION INCIDENT?



At the end of the module, participants will have information at hand to be able to respond to an immediate risk of extortion.

What to do in case of extortion?

This manual has addressed extortion in Central America, exploring what it is, its causes, and the impact it has on people's lives, as well as promoting projects and initiatives undertaken by state actors, the private sector and civil society in order to combat it.

Extortion consists of obtaining benefits by creating a sense of urgency and threat in the victim. In these cases, it is common and natural for the victim's first reactions to be fear, confusion and uncertainty, facing the decision of what to do with the threats received. How should a person react when he or she becomes a victim of extortion?

Taking into account the spread of extortion in the Northern Triangle countries as well as the efforts made by security bodies to fight it, specialized authorities were consulted in order to learn what to do in case of extortion.¹⁴

Here we present the results of these consultations with the goal of helping the reader build a better response in case of extortion. These are not foolproof measures for fighting this crime, but they are a step forward towards proposing actions to be taken in case of extortion.



Important information

1



Many extortion phone calls are made by **people in prison**, which makes it **difficult for them to carry out their threat**.

2



The **personal information** they may refer to during the phone call usually comes from **phone books or social networks**.

3



The **type of language** used by the extortionists can **help to distinguish** between members of a **gang or imitators**. For example:



A gang member rarely mentions the group he or she belongs to. If you receive a phone call where the extortionist says he or she belongs to a specific gang, it could be an imitator.



During the phone call, the **gang's typical vocabulary is not frequently used**. For example, the gang uses the word *jaina* to refer to the girls who help them. **If they use words** like **chava**, **patoja or chera**, it could be an **imitator**.



Members of **Barrio 18** gang identify themselves as a **gang**, **not as a** *mara* and they will never use the red colour (which is the colour of Mara Salvatrucha).



If the extortion attempt is made by phone

1



Keep calm and do not give any type of information.



A high percentage of extortions are done by imitators. If possible, hang up the phone.

If you are told that you have won a prize, do not give any personal information and end the phone call.



No one gives away money for no reason!

4



If you cannot end the phone call, keep calm, listen to the demands and try not to interact with the caller.



End the phone call as soon as possible.



After you hang up, analyze the call and what was said.



Write down all the possible details (date, time, person's voice, demands, etc.) as well as the caller's phone number.

5



If they told you they have kidnapped a family member or friend, make sure the person is missing before making any payment. 6



Share with family members, other people and nearby businesses you trust. Ask if they have received similar calls, to find patterns or check the veracity of the call. If you suspect someone you know, go to step 7.

7



Contact your city's security authorities.



There are specialized units for handling extortion with reliable and secure processes.

8



Do not deal with the problem alone. Speak up to those around you so as to better understand the situation. Request a response from the authorities as a group and organize alternative community solutions. **V14**



If the extortion attempt is made in person



1



Keep calm, listen to the demands and do not give any type of information.



all the detail remer time, person dema

When the person leaves, write down all the possible details that you remember (date, time, what the person looks like, demands, etc.)

3



Share with family members, other people and nearby businesses you trust. Ask if they have received similar visits, to find patterns or check the veracity of the visit. If you suspect someone you know, go to step 4.



Contact your city's security authorities.



There are specialized units for handling extortion with reliable and secure processes.

5



Do not deal with the problem **alone. Speak up** to those around you so as to better understand the situation. **Request a response** from the authorities **as a group** and organize alternative **community solutions.**



Emergency phone numbers by country

GUATEMALA



1574

There is also the mobile app Reporte MP, where you can report an extortion.

EL SALVADOR



2511-1111

Specialized
Anti-Extortion
Investigative Unit of
the National Police and
the Division of
Investigation on Extortion
for consultation
and advice.

HONDURAS



143

FNAMP
receive anonymous
reports or personal
information
for follow-up
and victim
care.

According to the specialists consulted, keeping calm and asking for support among family members, friends, members of the community and authorities are actions that can mitigate the fear and anxiety generated by the threat. It is most likely that the response will take time, but by taking these actions you will be headed in the right direction.

Is it possible to prevent an extortion?

Although anyone can be subjected to extortion at a given moment, there are a series of actions that may prevent it from happening. The following are some recommendations:



If possible, answer only those calls from phone numbers that appear in your contact list.



Inform family members and/or close friends as to your whereabouts and arrange a schedule to meet.



Avoid using names like 'mum' or 'dad' to identify family members on the contact list of your mobile phone.



Be careful with the personal information you share on social networks and check your privacy settings. Keep in mind that imitators and extortionists obtain information from the public information that the victims themselves put on social networks and other spaces.



If you make online bank transfers or payments, verify the security of the websites used.



Make a list of telephone numbers where you can report cases of extortion.



Avoid giving out personal information for surveys or promotions of unknown origin.



Tell the minors in your care about the risk involved in giving personal information to strangers.



Prepare a family contingency plan to check if all members are safe in case of an emergency.

V14

There are different recommendations to prevent being an easy prey for extortion in addition to actions that can be taken in case of extortion. Although there is no magic formula, having reliable and accurate information from the relevant authorities on the matter is key for adequate prevention, detection and response to such a threat.



- In case of an extortion incident, it is recommended to avoid dealing with the problem alone. Keep calm and don't give any information whatsoever to the extortionist. Write down what happened and share it with family members and close friends, as it helps to identify patterns and check the veracity of the case.
- Reporting the case to the authorities and government institutions in charge of extortion facilitates the documentation and investigation of cases for criminal prosecution and litigation.
- Although anyone can be a victim of extortion at a given moment, there are certain actions that can prevent it. To keep in constant contact with family members and close friends and to be aware of the action protocols to follow in case of emergency are key recommendations for prevention.



- How can we share and spread this information in our community?
- Are the violent responses of organized communities an effective way to respond to extortion?



Module 5

COMMUNITY ACTION



At the end of the module, participants will have guidelines for the creation of a community action tool for prevention, monitoring and response to extortion in their territory.

Community action

One of the most common recommendations in case of extortion is to report and to avoid dealing with the problem alone. For extortionists, a person without contacts or networks is an easy target compared to someone that implements prevention actions with other actors.

Individual actions of groups and/or actors against extortion have little results; the joint effort of public institutions, civil society organizations, the private sector and the general population is now the best ally and strategy against extortion.

It is important to note that any task or proposal needs to consider the context and both personal and community security. To this effect, it is advisable that alternatives and/or projects consider the discretion needed when working with this topic, meeting in secure places, forging alliances with other organizations and collaborating actively with authorities.

This action manual has given information on extortion in the region. It is now time to think, discuss and analyze a project that will help to prevent and/or respond to extortion in different communities. In this module, we propose a tool to be created and used by communities in order to prevent, monitor and respond to extortions.



Community groups for prevention and action against extortion

Who are they?

Community groups for prevention and action against extortion are groups of citizens that share everyday public spaces, services and ways of earning a living in a territory, organized to prevent and plan response actions in case of extortions in their community.

Community groups must be diverse and represent different sectors: teachers, civil servants, entrepreneurs, retailers, human rights activists, religious leaders, researchers, etc.

The objective of these community groups is to plan and implement diagnosis, prevention and response actions in case of an extortion in the community. Again, it is fundamental to prioritize discretion and security within the group. To this end, it is important to meet in secure places (for example, the meeting room of a civil society organization) and create alliances and partnerships with different institutions.



Step 1: Creating and presenting the group

The first step is the creation of the group with members of the community interested in the initiative on a voluntary basis. Once created, it is recommended to present the group to organizations, public institutions and community leaders for validation and recognition.

The diversity of actors is essential when creating the group, and the involvement of representatives coming from public institutions is an important aspect that will enhance the group's recognition at the governmental level and also help it to achieve results in an integral way with the government's plans. If involving representatives from public institutions is not possible for various reasons, the group will look for partnerships with recognized civil servants that will allow the creation of effective communication channels for decision-making.



Step 2: Community diagnosis

The second recommended step is to ask yourself, 'what is my community like?'. This diagnosis can be achieved by collecting

official information from investigations and recent studies. Some of the recommended data to include in the tool are: general population (women/men); number of boys, girls and teenagers; basic services (education, health, housing); public administration offices (municipality, courts, prosecutor's office); statistics and indicators of poverty, education, employment and security; extortion reported cases, etc.

Any information that helps establish a picture of the community should be recorded. The data collected will allow the group to understand the real situation of the community in different areas. The information can be written down in flipcharts and/or a written document. A template for the community diagnosis is presented below:

Community	diagnosis
Name of community	
Year	
Municipality	
Department	
General population (women/men)	
Children, teenagers	
Poverty and extreme poverty (%)	
Homicides	
Injured and thefts	
Extortion cases reported	
Number and name of public schools	
Number of health stations, health centres and hospitals	
Institution responsible for receiving complaints	

^{*}Include sources of data



Step 3: Community problems and needs

For the third step, we recommend drawing up a list of problems and needs related to community security, identifying priorities through numbers ranging from 1 to 5 (1 being the highest priority) and categorizing needs for diagnosis, prevention or response to extortion. For this, we recommend conducting interviews with selected actors and/or organize workshops or participatory dialogues with members of the community, and updating the tool monthly or bimonthly in accordance with the group's dynamic.



The following is a template for the listing of security-related needs:

Security-related needs			
NEED	PROBLEM	PRIORITY	CATEGORY
Security in primary school	Extortion to schools	1	RESPONSE
Awareness campaign and information on extortion	Lack of awareness of reporting mechanisms	2	PREVENTION
Types and modalities of extortion in the community	Extortion is known but there is no systematization of the cases	2	DIAGNOSIS



Step 4: Mapping and creating a directory of actors

The fourth step entails creating a mapping of actors from public institutions, civil society organizations, the media and other actors fighting against extortion, with whom the group can coordinate actions and joint activities. Ideally, the directory must have phone numbers, addresses and the names of contact people.



Step 5: Action plan

Based on the diagnosis and the list of needs and urgent problems to be solved, the groups can develop a working plan to respond to the community's basic security-related needs. The plan indicates people in charge, timelines and follow-up actions for each need.

The following is a template for the action plan:

Action plan		
Need	Security in primary schools	
Problem	Extortion to the director of a school	
Possible impact	Beating of children after school	
Category	Response	
Actions	- Notify municipal authorities and ask for patrols after school	
	- Report the extortion case	
	- Create a workshop for students on prevention and response to possible violent actions inside or outside the school	
	- Notify local media	
People in charge	Mayor: XXX Municipal police Director: XXX	
	Teachers: XXX and XXX	
_	Person in charge of the community group: XXX	
Resources	Flipcharts and markers for workshop with students	
Timeline	15 days	
Follow-up	Meeting with the school's authorities	



Step 6: Monitoring and follow-up

The following are some suggested actions to be implemented for the action plan's monitoring and follow-up. There are several ways to do this. Here are some suggestions:

- In public spaces, display the actions planned by the group, so that all members of the community can see and monitor them. Indicate progress or results every month, for example, '30 students trained on how to report cases to the prosecutor's office'.
- Present results in community meetings and to municipal authorities so as to modify and/or expand the action plan, and for decision-making purposes.
- Record successful results of action implementation and share them with neighbouring communities.

Steps 5 and 6 can be done simultaneously and it is recommended to update them at a pre-defined time to constantly follow up on the population's needs, and to keep the community informed regarding the diagnosis actions, prevention and responses being implemented.



The strategies presented in this module are general recommendations for community groups for prevention and action against extortion. Each group should develop its own steps, methodologies and tools, in accordance with community interests and needs, to achieve their objectives. Community organization is essential for an effective response to extortion. For this reason, we hope this document will be useful and can serve as a model for the groups that decide to become partners in working against extortion.



- Community organization is essential for an effective response to extortion.
- Community groups for the prevention and action against extortion should be diverse and all sectors of the community should be represented.
- The steps suggested for the creation of community groups include the establishment and presentation of the group, drawing up a diagnosis of the community, designing a problem and needs matrix, mapping the different actors, creating action plans and taking actions for monitoring and following up.

This action manual was prepared to provide relevant information to be read and used by any person who wants to understand how extortion operates in the region, its characteristics, typologies, impacts and consequences. It also offers responses to the problem and community tools that, together with citizen participation, will help to prevent and eradicate extortion.

Extortion is present in our countries and does not show any signs of decrease. Knowing, analyzing, organizing and participating to effectively address extortion in the territories is a pending action for many communities. We hope the **Action** manual for community resilience to extortion in Central America will be the beginning of this journey.



Notes and thoughts

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The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with more than 500 experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches, which serve as the building blocks for an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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