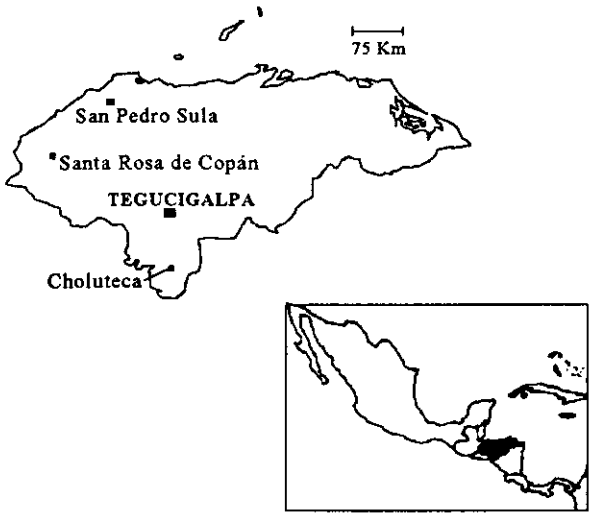
HONDURAS



Capital: Tegucigalpa
Area: 112,080 km^2
Population: 5,105,000 (1989) (a)
Population density: 46.3/km^2
Urban population: 44% (b)
Per-capita GDP in USD: 900 (1989) (c)
Life expectancy at birth: 64.9 years (d)
Infant mortality rate: 63‰ live births (1991) (e)
Illiteracy: 32% (f)
Population under poverty line: 76% (1990) (g)
Human Development Index 1992: 0.474 (101st) (h)[1]

The challenge of social deficiencies built up over decades and aggravated by structural adjustment

The history of Honduras during the 1980s was heavily influenced by its strategic situation and role in the armed conflicts of El Salvador and especially Nicaragua, as well as by the influx of around 250,000 refugees from those countries, most of whom were "undocumented." All this meant that Honduras was fully involved in the regional crisis that affected Central America during the 1980s. In this context, Honduras from the early years of the decade experienced extensive militarization, to such an extent that three armies were operating simultaneously in the country: its own armed forces, United States troops, and the Nicaraguan Resistance, or "contras." The Honduran army doubled its effective strength and, despite the return of civilians to power in 1982, exercised considerable influence on the life of the country. In addition, links tightened with the United States which, through a mutual assistance treaty signed in 1981, established permanent military bases such as that at Palmerola, provided large amounts of military aid, and staged almost uninterrupted joint military maneuvers from 1981 to 1988.[2] Finally, Honduras became the base for the "contras." These irregular armed groups, financed by the United States, eventually had about 15,000 troops who, from camps in El Paraíso Department and the Mosquitia area, kept up a low-intensity war against Nicaragua. Against this background, demobilization of the "contras" has been a key point in Honduras' political agenda since these armed groups became a crucial factor in domestic destabilization; they were also one of the main topics of negotiation in the region's peace processes.

In the economic sphere, Honduras experienced periods of boom and decline during the 1980s. The years 1982 and 1983, coinciding with the "debt crisis" in other countries in the region, were ones of regression and crisis. The gross domestic product (GDP) grew moderately between 1984 and 1986. From 1987 to 1989 the economy grew vigorously, at a rate of between 4.7% and 4.9% a year.[3] Nevertheless, economic growth has had a very limited effect on improving the social situation, which historically has been characterized by inequality and poverty levels among the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean. The per-capita GDP fell by 12% from 1981 to 1989, the poor increased from 2 5 million to 3.5 million between 1980 and 1985 until they accounted for 79% of the population, and real minimum wages lost a quarter of their value during this period. All this shows that during the decade the economy and society retained their already traditional pattern of "exclusive growth," which kept most of the population in poverty.

The growth of the economy and of imports, together with the mounting fiscal deficit, helped the external debt reach unsustainable levels. In 1981, the total external debt was USD 1,588 million. By 1988 it reached its highest level of USD 3,810 million.[4] Despite massive U.S. aid to stabilize the balance of payments, debt service payments caused a shortage of foreign exchange and major macroeconomic imbalances. By 1989 the country's payments in arrears amounted to USD 251 million. International financing organizations therefore declared the country "ineligible" to receive new credits, and negotiations were begun with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to apply the severe stabilization and structural adjustment plan of 1990.

The change of decade represented a turning point in Honduras' recent history since it modified the direction of the economy and deactivated the foci of conflict with Nicaragua and El Salvador as part of the Esquipulas peace process. At the Costa del Sol and Tela presidential summits in 1989, agreement was reached for the United Nations and Organization of American States to demobilize and relocate the "contra" combatants through the International Assistance and Verification Commission (CIAV) and United Nations Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA). After the Nicaraguan elections of February 1990, which brought the opposition to power, the Government of Nicaragua and the "contras" signed cease-fire, disarmament, and demobilization agreements which permitted the return of the combatants and their families as well as the end of the armed conflict. Finally, the Peace Agreements in El Salvador and the decision of the International Tribunal of Justice in 1992, which put an end to the old border dispute between El Salvador and Honduras, deactivated the tension existing between the two countries. Against this backdrop, rapid repatriation of refugees has taken place and, since 1991, there has been extensive public debate about the country's demilitarization in which the need has been noted of reducing the size and influence of its armed forces and the presence of foreign troops, though this has not occurred without resistance from the Honduran Armed Forces and threats to constitutional stability.

The elections of 1989 brought Rafael L. Callejas, the candidate of the National Party, to power after two consecutive legislatures dominated by the Liberal Party. One of the new Government's first measures was the "Structural Organization of the Economy Law" (LOEE), the name adopted for a "package" of neoliberal structural adjustment measures that, among other things, included a devaluation of the lempira of more than 100%, which was intended to improve export competitiveness,[5] a 50% increase in the price of fuels, privatization of state enterprises, tariff cuts and trade liberalization, and reduction in the size of the state, with the dismissal of 18,000 public employees. The adjustment had a marked recessive effect and a strong social impact. In 1990, the per-capita GDP fell by 3.5%.[6] Real income, which for three out of every four Hondurans was already below the poverty line before the adjustment, fell heavily due in great part to inflation, which reached 60% between 1990 and 1991, and the resulting rise in

consumer prices. In this context, labor conflict increased, as seen among other things in a 43-day strike that banana workers began in June 1990.

Since the achievement of peace in the region, the 1990s have created numerous challenges for Honduras in the political sphere (consolidating democracy and guaranteeing the maintenance of human rights), economic sphere (restoring economic growth, reducing the debt, and gaining a presence in external markets), environmental sphere (reining in the accelerated deterioration of natural resources), and social sphere. The shortfalls in "human development" of the Honduran population accumulated over decades and worsened by structural adjustment are clearly highlighted against this background and demand priority attention from the state and society.

The employment situation and the urban informal sector

The composition and dynamics of the economically active population (EAP) in Honduras differ from other countries in the region. Noteworthy are the large proportion of the agricultural EAP—together with Guatemala the highest in Central America—and, more specifically, of that employed in traditional agriculture on small farms and of the seasonal or regular agricultural proletariat. In 1985, 54% of the EAP was in agriculture and about 33% remained in the traditional sector of agriculture. This explains the large incidence of rural underemployment, which affected 90% of workers in the countryside in 1980. Another important factor has been the rapid growth of the work force, a result of typically "transitional" demographic behavior (a high birth rate combined with falling mortality) and a 3.3% annual population growth rate, the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean.[7] The EAP grew still more rapidly from 1980 to 1989, at 3.8% annually, from 1,079,000 to 1,561,000 people,[8] and 50,000 young people join the work force every year, which creates major difficulties in their entry into the labor market. Thus, though entry into the work force occurs early, there is much unemployment among youths since 47.7% of the unemployed population is between 10 and 29 years old and a high proportion of children under 10 years work as unpaid family workers.[9] During the 1980s the rate of growth in the urban work force was 6%, which was much higher than the national average and almost three times the agricultural EAP's growth rate.[10]

The rapid increase in labor supply in the decades of modernization could not be absorbed by economic growth, resulting in a large number of workers in the urban informal sector, which continued to grow during the 1980s because of the contraction of the economy and deterioration in family income, the persistence of rural-urban migration, and the arrival of "undocumented" refugees. Honduras' two chief cities, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, and their metropolitan areas have continued to have a relatively stable proportion of workers engaged in informal activities—around 30% and 29%, respectively.[11] The rate of growth in the urban informal sector (UIS) has nevertheless been below that in other countries in the region.

According to data from the middle of the decade, 23% of informal workers in Tegucigalpa were in manufacturing, 46% in trade, and 16% in services. It must be noted that the proportion of women in the UIS is much greater than in the work force as a whole. Almost half of UIS workers are women. More than half of workers in the Tegucigalpa UIS were self-employed, and 70% were in trade.[12] Other data show that only 4 5% were small business people.[13] This suggests that the UIS, as has been noted in most of the countries, is more a means of precarious entry into the labor market and of subsistence in a context of crisis than a vigorous, dynamic, innovative, and highly productive sector with a capacity for capital accumulation.

The impact of the crisis has been very visible in the open unemployment rate. In 1980 it was 15%, and in 1984, almost 24%. Subsequent economic recovery lowered it to 12% in 1987 and 10% in 1989. Unemployment has especially affected women and, as we saw, young people The creation of assembly industries, or *maquilas*,

has had some effect on employment, particularly in departments such as Cortés where industrial parks or free zones have been established. The downward trend in the unemployment rate reversed itself in 1990 and, though there are no precise data, the increase in unemployment is very noticeable. According to official data, and as an illustrative example, the adjustment resulted in the closing of 16% of small and medium-sized businesses.[14]

Poverty, adjustment, and social policies

In 1980, before the economic crisis began, poverty affected 2,515,000 people, or 68% of the total population of 3,691,000. Among the urban population, 540,000 people (44%), and among the rural population, 1,975,000 people (80%) were poor.[15] Extreme poverty affected more than half of Hondurans, or 57% of the total population. There was less extreme poverty in cities (33% of the population), but it was widespread in rural areas (70%). Absolutely and relatively, the larger proportion of rural poverty was a reflection of the dominance of traditional agriculture, the large number of landless agricultural workers (36% of the rural work force), peasant underemployment, low wages in seasonal work in the "modern" sector of agriculture, and the peasant population's deficient access to basic services. Living conditions in the rural sector have changed very slowly. Most people in the countryside do not have potable water or sanitary facilities in their homes. The illiteracy rate is high; school attendance, low. These are the main short-term obstacles to changing the patterns of living. The fact that 41% of rural households have illiterate heads demonstrates the magnitude of the problem. The principal cause of rural poverty, however, is the major inequality in land distribution which, despite the agrarian reform of the 1970s, continues to characterize Honduran agriculture.[16]

Urban poverty was in part a consequence of rural poverty because of countryside-to-city migration, as well as the pattern of modernization of the 1960s and 1970s, which did not have enough dynamism to absorb the growth in the work force and was "concentrating and exclusive" in income distribution. The precarious living conditions in agriculture are the basis of heavy domestic migratory movements. In 1961, 25.7% of the population lived in the two most developed departments (Francisco Morazán and Cortés), which in 1988 had 33.2% of the country's population. Population density has tripled in both departments. San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa have been poles attracting migration in a population trend that has begun to cause problems in health and potable water supply. The two phenomena, rural poverty and urban growth due to migration, need to be examined to project demand for social services in the 1990s.[17]

In summary, poverty is a structural feature of Honduran society which, because of the crisis of the 1980s and the impact of structural adjustment, has only worsened. From 1980 to 1988, pauperization increased significantly until it affected 79% of the population. Because of large population growth, this meant a million additional poor, so that 3,524,000 people were affected. It is significant that the greatest increase occurred in urban areas, which during this period grew from 44% to 61%, while rural poverty rose from 80% to 90% of the population. Extreme poverty remained relatively stable in both cities and the countryside, however.[18] All these data show that the crisis has had a strong impact in terms of poverty, especially in urban areas, among other reasons because of the reduction in real income and increase in unemployment.

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), there was slightly less poverty in 1989 than the figures cited above, which may be due to both the economic growth in the second half of the decade and methodological differences in measurement. According to these data, 76% of the total population, 73% of city residents, and 79% of countryside dwellers were below the poverty line. It is significant that ECLAC's data show that urban poverty continued to grow.[19] Other studies in 1990 show the main features of

Honduras' "poverty map." Among urban areas, Tegucigalpa had higher proportions of poverty and extreme poverty than San Pedro Sula. In rural areas, the greatest concentrations of poverty are in the southern region, in which poverty affects 80% of the population and extreme poverty affects 48%.[20]

It must be noted that poverty affects a half-million children under 5 years in rural areas and 135,000 in urban areas. Of these, more than 150,000 live in extreme poverty, i.e., they suffer from nutritional deficiencies that will affect their development, with the risk that they will not survive or that they will have to start working early to be able to subsist.[21] As a corollary, the number of marginalized "street children" and drug addiction problems among children and adolescents (inhalant and marijuana consumption) have increased. Honduras' poor children are one of the most important challenges facing the Government and society in general.

It is believed that the adjustment measures of 1990 have had a heavy impact on poverty levels, though there are no detailed data in this respect. Because of the social cost of the adjustment measures, the Government adopted a short-term assistance and compensation strategy in creating the Honduran Social Investment Fund (FHIS) in February 1990. The FHIS, in operation since 1991, is oriented toward the construction of social and productive infrastructure, implementation of emergency job programs, and coverage of the basic needs of the population considered "most vulnerable"—children less than 6 years old, women (especially heads of household responsible for children), the elderly, and the unemployed.[22] In this context, an Informal Sector Support Program (PASI) has been established, and it has organized 104 "community banks" and granted about 2,800 credits to self-employed workers and small businessmen.[23] The FHIS's first budget allocations have been assigned to subsidizing urban transportation, assistance for single mothers, financing property titles of marginalized urban settlers, and stabilizing prices of basic foods. It will also cover school lunches, basic foods for weaned children who have not yet reached school age, and essential drugs. The "Emergency Food Supply Program" will benefit 132,000 families through provision of a "basic family basket" consisting of oil, beans, milk, and salt.[24] It is significant that the FHIS is conducting its programs through third parties, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), municipalities, and private contractors.

Nevertheless, one must note the short-term and charitable approach of this set of measures, which deals with the manifestations and immediate symptoms of poverty but does not create lasting solutions. Supplementary medium- and long-term solutions thus seem necessary if merely postponing the problem is not desired. An analysis of the 507 projects already approved by the FHIS shows that they reproduce the institutional centralization of other policies, since 43% of them are in the metropolitan departments of Francisco Morazán and Cortés (including Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula) and do not precisely respond to the priorities created by the country's poverty map.[25] This is in part due to the scarcity of projects created for the poorest areas.[26]

The health, nutrition, and environmental sanitation situation

Morbidity and mortality data provide very clear information about the chief causes, of a socioeconomic nature, that affect the health profile of Hondurans. They are, in short, those called "diseases of poverty." Nevertheless, health policies in Honduras have been directed almost exclusively toward the latest manifestations of diseases and neglect prevention and sanitary and environmental factors.[27]

The main causes of mortality and morbidity in the population are infections and intestinal parasitoses, influenza and anemias, respiratory infections, and malnutrition.[28] Mortality data should be interpreted with a certain degree of caution because of underrecording and the fact that at mid-decade more than 40% of deaths were classified as due to "poorly defined causes or symptoms." The diseases most frequently

reported between 1984 and 1988 were, in order, respiratory infections, diarrheal diseases, malaria, gonococcal infections, syphilis, tuberculosis, infectious hepatitis, measles, and typhus. In 1989, pulmonary tuberculosis was the sixth leading cause of outpatient care, and its incidence was greatest in Mosquitia and the Northern Region. Malaria is in third place among notifiable communicable diseases, and since 1985 its rate has climbed compared with previous years, due in part to the lack of drugs and insecticides in the malaria program. Ninety-three percent of the country's population lives in areas where malaria is endemic. There is also a significant amount of dengue.[29]

The maternal mortality rate in 1990 was 22 per 10,000 live births.[30] Its chief causes are hemorrhage, infections, and hypertension. Fourteen percent of deaths occur in women younger than 18 years. According to 1987 data, only 24% of deliveries received institutional medical care. Twenty-nine percent were attended by trained traditional midwives, and 47% by traditional midwives outside the health system. Twenty-seven percent of women of reproductive age use contraceptives.[31]

The incidence of AIDS is very high. Two of every three persons affected by the disease in the Central American isthmus are Hondurans. Up to June 1992, 1,976 cases had been reported, of which 571 had ended in death. The epidemic peaked between 1990 and 1992. From 1989 to 1990 the number of new cases doubled, from 250 to 583, and in 1991 there were 485 The incidence rate in 1990 was 110.7 cases per million population, one of the highest in Latin America. The predominant transmission route is heterosexual (80% of cases), followed by the homosexual (16%) and intravenous (2%) routes.[32] According to 1989 data, the disease is concentrated in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. It is estimated that 60,000 people are HIV-positive.

According to UNICEF data, Honduras is a country with "high infant mortality." The infant mortality rate is 63‰ live births, and the mortality rate in children younger than 5 years is 84‰ live births.[33] Diarrheas, acute respiratory, perinatal, and vaccine-preventable diseases, together with malnutrition, are the main causes of death during the first year of life. In 1983, almost seven in every 10 deaths from diarrhea occurred in children aged less than 5 years.[34]

The national census of schoolchildren's height, conducted in 1986, established that among children in the first grade (aged 6 to 9 years), 39.8% suffered from some degree of malnutrition. Five of the country's departments were categorized as at "very high risk" for malnutrition: Lempira (with a 62.1% malnutrition rate), Intibucá (60.7%), Santa Bárbara (56.7%), Copán (55.2%), and La Paz (53%). Malnutrition in children younger than 5 years has a very similar rate which, according to the National Nutrition Survey of 1987, was 38%.[35] This represents 280,000 children with mild or moderate malnutrition and 31,000 with severe malnutrition, in a total of 823,000 children, who will probably reach adulthood with irreversible developmental damage if no solutions to this situation are found. Malnourished children in rural areas are often treated only when a disease related to this condition causes their transfer to a nearby center.[36] Malnutrition also affects women of reproductive age, of whom 12% suffer from some kind of anemia.[37] In 1988, three health regions were considered to have endemic goiter because of iodine shortages.

Malnutrition is related to lack of food supplies, which has worsened in recent years, as shown by the increase in imports of basic grains and the food aid the country receives. This problem can be interpreted as a gradual breaking of the ties between rural and urban society In 1974, 48,000 metric tons of wheat were imported, in 1988, 106,000, to which must be added the 72,020 metric tons in food aid from abroad. Wheat imports in 1990 totaled 96,100 metric tons. As a result of the massive importation of cereals, there has been a net reduction in the area planted to beans, corn, and rice in favor of crops grown for export, which have monopolized the best lands. The loss of "food sovereignty" leads to a clear weakening of the country's social

structures. The problem is also associated with distortion in the cultural patterns of consumption.[38]

The Honduran health system comprises public and private establishments. The public sector consists of the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance and the Honduran Social Security Institute (IHSS). The private sector has 26 hospitals with more than 1,000 beds and is responsible for 30% of the country's discharges. The Ministry is responsible for providing services to 60% of the population, and in 1989 had 21 hospitals and 4,334 beds: six national hospitals with specialized medicine in the metropolitan region; six regional hospitals with internal medicine, general surgery, gynecology, obstetrics, and pediatrics in the departmental capitals, and nine area hospitals in nine densely populated cities. There are also 156 general medicine health centers with a physician, generally assistants or in social service, in small towns, and 525 rural health centers attended only by a nursing auxiliary There are eight health regions and six care levels, which are weakly linked together.[39] The availability of physicians and nurses is low, despite the fact that many professionals are unemployed. Most health workers are in hospitals and the largest cities. The lack of medicines and inputs, caused by the scarcity of foreign exchange and high dependence on imports, has also severely affected the effectiveness of the Ministry of Health's services. Because coverage is still not widespread, even with advances in this field, the curative bias of services, and the lack of funds, 24% of the overall population and 40% of the rural population do not have access to health services.[40] In fact, residents of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, which have only 14% of the total population, are favored, at the cost of neglecting large segments of the rural population. There is therefore a massive influx of rural patients to centers in the two cities which is much greater than their ability to receive them. The problem of "recurring patients" who demand repeated medical treatment for diseases caused by socioeconomic and environmental factors is common.

Social security covers only 12% of the active population and 10% of the total population.[41] Its services focus on urban wage earners in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The Honduran Social Security Institute (IHSS) had 662 beds in 1989. This institution has been neglected and suffers from severe financial problems stemming from the payment arrears of many employers and the Government itself Accordingly, there is a consensus about the need to merge the various insurance institutes with the IHSS to extend coverage and take in other parts of the country.[42]

An important aspect of health policy is maternal and child care. The creation of the maternal and child and nutrition divisions, in 1973 and 1982, respectively, was a significant advance. Although the Ministry of Health's intention to deconcentrate the system is clear, this process is still far from completion. Of the 1,137 beds for women's care and the 820 available for children, 55% are also in the country's capital. This proportion increases to 68% of women and 63% of children if we take into account the two most developed departments Moreover, there are very few beds for grade III malnutrition cases.[43] Once again we encounter the problem of neglect of the rural areas that have the greatest prevalence of malnutrition and highest rates of maternal illiteracy, a circumstance closely linked to child mortality. Rural women are cared for by 11,000 midwives who, despite training, cannot deal with complications in pregnant mothers. In urban areas, in contrast, there are 140 obstetrician-gynecologists and 600 general practitioners, in addition to professional nurses and necessary hospital equipment. In 1988 an organizational model based on local health systems (SILOS) was adopted in order to extend deconcentration and increase coverage.[44]

There is a marked contrast between rural and urban areas in environmental sanitation. In the latter, 87% of the population had some kind of excreta disposal system in 1987. In rural areas, however, coverage is only 38%, and the departments with the greatest deficiencies are Intibucá, La Paz, Comayagua, Valle, Choluteca, El Paraíso, and Lempira. Eighty-seven percent of urban

and 51% of rural households have piped water [45] PAHO studies show that more than half of the foods consumed are contaminated. Directly related to these problems is the fact that cholera appeared in the country in October 1991, though its incidence has been relatively low compared with neighboring countries. Two hundred and eighty-two cases, with 13 deaths, had been recorded by August 1992.[46] Risk remains that the epidemic will spread since the surface waters that run through marginal urban areas are contaminated.

The housing situation and urban marginalization

Honduras' housing deficit has been estimated at 500,000 units, with a 5% annual growth rate. These figures contrast with dwelling construction, which is around 4,000 units a year. This figure does not even meet demand in Tegucigalpa, which is estimated at 8,000 homes a year. The public institutions carrying out housing policy financed construction of an average of 2,000 dwellings per year during the period 1980-1985.

It is estimated that approximately 60% of the population in the country's principal urban centers live in marginal areas, where ramshackle housing and the greatest deficiencies in basic services are concentrated. In many instances, dwellings are built on unstable land occupied illegally, or dwellings or land are leased. It is estimated that 44.1% of Honduran families do not hold title to their homes. The size of dwellings is another important factor in characterizing this situation. A significant fact about this problem is that in poor households in Tegucigalpa, for example, there is an average of 2.1 rooms per dwelling, many of which lack services such as kitchens and sanitary facilities. Overcrowding is common among people with low incomes, a fact that has very negative effects on health.[47]

Refugees, displaced persons, and repatriation

During the 1980s, and as a result of the conflicts in neighboring countries, Honduras became a major recipient of Central American refugees. According to data from the Government and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 37,000 people, essentially Salvadorans and Nicaraguans, were recognized as refugees, and it is believed that between 200,000 and 250,000 refugees entered the country as undocumented persons.[48] Refugees recognized as such were assigned to camps located in three main areas: Salvadorans in the country's western border area, and Nicaraguans in El Paraíso Department and the Mosquitia area if they were of Miskito origin.

Honduras has been no stranger to the problem of domestically displaced persons; 22,000 Hondurans were forced to leave their places of origin because of the presence of irregular Nicaraguan forces along the border.[49]

Large-scale repatriation has been part of the plans and policies adopted in 1990 at the International Conference on Refugees in Central America (CIREFCA). After nine years of operation, the camps at Colomoncagua, San Antonio, and Buenos Aires were closed in early 1990, which led to the repatriation of 11,000 Salvadorans. The Mesa Grande camp has also contributed to the flow of Salvadorans being repatriated. During the second half of 1990 the repatriation of Nicaraguan refugees from Mosquitia and El Paraíso Department accelerated, which is leading to the gradual closure of the camps in those areas [50] Only 1,700 recognized refugees remained in Honduras in June 1991.

The education situation

Illiteracy has been reduced considerably in recent decades, and in 1988 the rate was 32% [51] This average should not hide the fact that the less-developed departments have appreciably

higher rates. According to the magnitude of the phenomenon and in order of their importance, the most affected departments are Lempira (54%), Copán (47.2%), and Santa Bárbara, Ocotepeque, Intibucá, Olancho, and El Paraíso, all with rates above 40%. At the opposite end of the spectrum are Islas de la Bahía (11 3%) and Francisco Morazán (18.8%). These data are for the population older than 10 years, i.e., full school attendance by children now below that age is assumed. There is evidence that that is not so since it has been shown that there is significant school dropout.[52]

Among the most important problems affecting the educational system is the low quality of education, which is revealed by the high teacher-pupil ratio in rural areas (1:40), aggravated by the fact that most rural schools group students in the same classroom with the same teacher, regardless of their grade. More serious still is the mismatch of curricular content to the demands of society and the labor market. The urban bias of the curriculum ignores the fact that more than half of the population lives in rural areas, and technical and occupational training is not given priority.[53] State education policies have been especially aimed at the rural sector. Nevertheless, there has been progress against illiteracy in urban areas, as seen in the 17.4% illiteracy rate in those areas compared with the 42.4% rate in the countryside. The trend continues to be the educational system's inability to embrace the country's large marginalized majorities, especially in rural areas [54]

The situation of women

Honduran women confront widespread discrimination in all areas of public and private life. Their main social sphere is the home and their basic role is childbearing, as made clear by indicators such as the high average fertility rate of six children per woman and their low rate of participation in the work force (29%). In a context of patriarchal cultural tradition, it is significant that 20% of all households and 25% of urban households have a woman head, and that a sizable proportion of women are separated or divorced (16%).[55] This suggests that problems such as paternal irresponsibility and early motherhood are very widespread. Women heads of household represent a group of special interest from the standpoint of activities against poverty because of their greater vulnerability.

Twenty-eight percent of the active population are women. This rate is the second lowest in Central America, after Guatemala. The service sector (trade, domestic service) has 71% of women workers, and their participation in the informal sector as wage earners or self-employed workers is greater. Female unemployment is also greater In this context, it is noteworthy that their participation in professional and technical work—between 40% and 50% of the total—is higher than in the work force in general. The wages they receive are lower than those of men in similar occupations in all categories, however. Educationally, the most significant differences occur in university education. Women's participation is still below that of men, and most of them take university courses associated with their traditional role—education, health disciplines, and social work.

Civil and penal law is still significantly discriminatory, something very noticeable with respect to sexual crimes. Honduras ratified the "United Nations Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" and, though legislative changes have been introduced, little progress has been made, especially with regard to positive action.

The ethnic situation

Most of Honduras' population is mestizo. There are seven ethnocultural groups, however, who make up 10% to 15% of the population, according to estimates, and number between 300,000 and 350,000 people, according to more limited census data.[56] The largest group is the black-creole/Garifuna one, which has around 250,000 members and is located in the depart-

ments of Cortés, Atlántida, Colón, Gracias a Dios, and Islas de la Bahía. The *lencas,* now fast losing their language, number 80,000 and live mostly in Intibucá and Lempira. The third ethnocultural group in order of importance is the Miskitos, who live on both sides of the Coco River. The Honduran Miskito population consists of some 35,000 people. Other, very small groups are the *tolupanes,* 18,000 people; *chortís,* 2,000; *petch,* 1,500, and *tawanhas,* barely 1,000 [57]

The indigenous groups are subject to intense pressure on their land and natural resources. Although the Agrarian Reform Law establishes the inalienability of communal property titles, there are problems in defending that right in practice. Prevailing legislation does not recognize the rights of indigenous persons as a people, which means that the educational system contributes to the loss of Indian cultures by not recognizing the linguistic and cultural traits of such peoples.

The human rights situation

Despite democratization, the 1980s and early 1990s have been characterized by the persistence of human rights violations. This is made clear by threats to and intimidation of individuals (such as the recent case of the rape of Mabel Martínez, presumably by members of the Armed Forces[58]) and professionals in the communications media, the murder of union leaders, peasants, indigenous persons, students, and members of the Armed Forces, as well as numerous cases of arbitrary detention and torture in the field offices of the National Investigation Directorate (DNI) and Public Security Forces (FUSEP) recorded by human rights organizations. Arbitrary recruitment by the Armed Forces has also been reported. The Inter-American Human Rights Court has confirmed the practice of forced disappearance, of which there were 143 cases during the decade.[59] Those responsible for such deeds go unpunished since they are neither investigated nor tried.

Honduras has adhered to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 since 1965, though it has not yet ratified Additional Protocols I and II of 1977 on protection of victims of international and noninternational armed conflicts.

The environment and vulnerability to disasters

Environmental deterioration is deeply rooted in the Honduran economic model that has been taking shape for decades, one based on the predominance of monoculture and extensive livestock raising for export. In both cases, though for different reasons, the result has been overexploitation of natural resources. The 1980s accelerated these processes, and the worsening of social problems and the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s raise still more worrying prospects.

The most important environmental problems are deforestation and its consequences, the use of agricultural chemicals, contamination of surface and underground waters by these products and untreated urban and industrial wastes, and unplanned urban growth. Accelerated deforestation is perhaps the most important of them. Forest covers 36% of the country, and there are still 3.7 million hectares of natural woodland. The annual deforestation rate is 2.3%, which means that more than 80,000 hectares are lost each year on average.[60] It was estimated in 1986 that 30% of forested land, about 2.3 million hectares, had already lost its original forest cover. According to data from the same year, 33% of the forest was lost to fires, 31% as a result of "slash and burn" agriculture, 38% for firewood for energy use, and the remaining 8% as sawn lumber for industrial use.[61] These data show the pressure that both landless peasants and large agricultural and livestock-raising estates put on the forested area, and suggest that in addition to being overexploited, forest resources are used with little rationality. Forest fires are a widespread problem throughout the country during the dry season, from March to August. In 1988 alone there

were 1,600 fires, and thousands of hectares of broadleaved and coniferous forest were lost. Mosquitia lost 60,000 hectares of forest to this cause in 1989.[62] It is thought that many fires are set intentionally. The great commercial value of Honduran forests and trade liberalization policies have created new threats to the conservation and sustainable use of this resource in recent years. In this context, one must consider the Government's intention to privatize the Honduran Forest Development Corporation (COHDEFOR), an agency that monopolizes forest exploitation, and concessions to foreign timber companies. It is significant that in February 1992 the Government had to suspend indefinitely negotiations on granting concessions on 1.4 million hectares in seven of the country's departments to the Stone Container Corporation for forest exploitation because of popular rejection.

A direct result of deforestation is the greater incidence of floods, erosion (it is estimated that 21% of the country suffers from this problem[63]), drought and desertification, and sedimentation of water basins. The El Cajón hydroelectric plant shows appreciable deterioration from this cause.

Because of its geographic location and geological peculiarities, Honduras is exposed to earthquakes, hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, droughts, landslides, and forest fires. The widespread poverty, makeshift nature of dwellings, and deficiencies in infrastructure and services place most of the population at risk in events of this kind. Recent preliminary studies by the Standing Emergency Commission (COPECO) found that about 10% of the population live in "extreme risk" conditions. The areas with the greatest urban population and concentration of economic activity are located in risk zones, such as the central depression of Honduras, the geological fault areas of Jocotal, Chamelecón, Aguán, and Guayape, and areas liable to flooding such as the Sula and Aguán valleys.[64] The central depression of Honduras, in particular, contains several geological faults that are the origin of frequent seismic activity,[65] though in recent years earthquakes in this area have had maximum Richter scale magnitudes of only 4 or 5.

Floods affect almost all the country, but the northern coast, the Atlantic littoral, and the southeastern area have traditionally been the areas most affected. The most important have occurred in 20-year cycles (1934, 1954, 1974), though since 1987 their incidence has been more frequent. Most rivers have experienced extensive sedimentation. The large amounts of sediment deposited in them as a result of erosion and deforestation have made them reach flood stage much more often. Because of their geographic and economic characteristics, some basins have experienced greater damage. In the Sula River basin, for example, almost a third of the arable lands suffer from flood damage. The Choluteca River, in the city of Tegucigalpa, repeatedly floods the slums on its banks.

The entire Atlantic coast, and especially the departments of Islas de la Bahía, Gracias a Dios, Colón, and Atlántida, are exposed to the hurricanes that traverse the Greater Caribbean from June to November every year. In 1954, Hurricane Hilda caused severe flooding along the northern coast, and in 1974, Fifi left 8,000 dead, 100,000 affected, and 20,000 unemployed. Major hurricanes have also occurred in cyclical periods of about 20 years, as a result of which it is thought probable that one will take place in the early 1990s

Droughts affect the south in particular because of the degradation of the mountainous areas of departments such as Choluteca and Valle, and the areas bordering on El Salvador The most recent occurred from 1984 to 1988 and caused the annual loss of around 60,000 hectares of crops. Landslides are common in departments with broken terrain such as Copán, La Paz, and Francisco Morazán, and especially in the municipalities of the Central District. It should be noted that in Tegucigalpa alone there are 42 neighborhoods at risk on the hills and in the ravines surrounding the city. These settlements represent a large number of people vulnerable to the effects of rains and floods. The most critical situations are in neighborhoods such as El Reparto, Casamata, and El Berrinche.

The impact of cooperation and development policies and agencies

Honduras received heavy flows of international cooperation during the 1980s. In 1987, for example, it received USD 258 million; in 1988, USD 321 million; in 1989, USD 242 million, and in 1990, USD 445 million.[66] The major increase in the last year was due to extraordinary contributions by international finance organizations and bilateral agencies to support the structural adjustment program and the FHIS. The main donor by far was the United States, through its Agency for International Development (USAID). In 1987 it contributed USD 193 million, 75% of total aid, and in 1988, USD 157 million (48%) United States aid has been particularly governed by strategic and national security considerations inasmuch as Honduras became the base for the irregular anti-Sandinista forces that were also heavily financed by the United States. It is significant in this context that United States aid fell to USD 80 million in 1989, coinciding with Honduran resistance to devaluing the lempira, as USAID requested, and demands by President Rolando Azcona to disarm the "contras". Honduras received a total of USD 1,801 million from USAID from 1980 to 1990. The importance of this aid can be seen if it is taken into account that from 1983 to 1987 it equalled 6% of the GDP, or 162% of the trade deficit, or 45% of the service on the external debt.[67]

Other major donors have been Japan, the European Community and its member states, and the Nordic countries. Many of these countries have channeled their cooperation to refugees, in response to the requirements established by CIREFCA.

A directory of local NGOs prepared in 1990 identified 116 such organizations operating in Honduras. Another, 1988 directory identified 130 local and international NGOs with ties to the United States, some of which carried out assistance activities with the "contras."[68] According to ECLAC studies, NGOs and private development organizations are located throughout most of the country. There is a difference, however, in the kinds of activity they carry out and their concentration. In fact, 62% of the organizations operate in the central corridor, which includes the departments of Cortés, Francisco Morazán, and Choluteca—the most heavily populated. Twenty-three percent operate in the western region, specifically in La Paz, Intibucá, Santa Bárbara, Copán, and Ocotepeque, and the remaining 16% are found in the eastern region, especially in El Paraíso, Colón, Olancho, and Gracias a Dios. There is a marked concentration in the central part of the country. This also coincides with the fact that this area receives most of the Government's resources.[69]

The Federation of Private Organizations of Honduras (FOPRIDEH), created in 1984, comprised 28 NGOs in 1988 and has channeled USAID funds to some of its affiliates. In 1990 the Federation criticized the structural adjustment program because of its social impact.