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A large-scale restoration initiative to build the green and social infrastructure for climate resilient sustainable development in the Northern Triangle

Remarks by Herman Rosa, Senior Associate Researcher, PRISMA during virtual event “*The Challenges of Climate Change in Central America: Opportunities for the Biden Administration*” sponsored by the Wilson Center, the Ford Foundation, and PRISMA
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On behalf of PRISMA, a think tank focusing on the critical linkages between environment and development in Central America, I thank the Wilson Center and the Ford Foundation for co-sponsoring this event, and I also want to thank the previous panelists for covering so much ground.

This Wednesday, climate change was front and center in Washington, in the roundtable that Vice-president Harris had with U.S. experts on the Northern Triangle, and in the House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on “Renewing the U.S. Commitment to Addressing the Root Causes of Migration from Central America”.

President Biden has stressed that addressing the climate crisis is at heart of his foreign policy, and the Northern Triangle will be a test-case for that commitment. Therefore, we can expect an ambitious climate resilience component within the 5-year strategy for the Northern Triangle requested by Congress in the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act that was enacted at the end of last year.

That strategy is being drafted as we speak, and I will outline four critical lines of support that we believe should be included in that strategy to build climate resilience in the Northern Triangle.

First, the support of large-scale restoration of agricultural landscapes managed by small farmers to address land degradation that covers millions of hectares across the Northern Triangle. This extensive land degradation is a major source of vulnerability, climate risk and food and water insecurity. It has economy wide impacts through the destruction of infrastructure when we have extreme precipitation events. Urban areas also experience water scarcity in the dry season. Conservation agriculture practices to reduce land degradation are well known, and hundreds of experiences across the region prove their effectiveness and benefits. However, adoption of these practices at scale is low, amongst other reasons, due their large initial labor demands. Therefore, substantial external support is needed to facilitate adoption at scale.

Second, it is vital to support forest stewardship by indigenous peoples and local communities. Previous speakers provided the rationale for this support.

Third, the support for the restoration of other ecosystems, critical for risk reduction and climate resilience, such as riparian forests along riverbanks that are disappearing, and mangroves that sustain wild fisheries and the livelihoods of many coastal communities. A community-based ecological mangrove restoration drive can restore their health while generating significant employment. A drive to restore riparian forests and mangroves can also encourage the political will to enforce regulations and implement other actions to protect and expand those areas.

Fourth, the support for urban climate risk reduction and ecosystem rehabilitation. Many settlements in cities, towns, and villages across the Northern Triangle live in fear of landslides and flash



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flooding triggered by extreme precipitation. Most urban rivers are sewage channels and waste dumps threatening the health of the marginal communities that live along their banks. These risks can be reduced by focused interventions with well-known techniques that are rarely implemented due to their labor-intensive nature.

Together, these four lines of support represent an ambitious but desperately needed major initiative to build the green infrastructure required to advance climate-resilient development in the Northern Triangle. Being labor-intensive, this initiative would create hundreds of thousands of jobs, but it is also essential to build the strong social fabric, the social infrastructure that is also fundamental for inclusive climate resilient development. As we know, the social fabric in the Northern Triangle was weak to start with but has been further torn apart in the last decades, thus nurturing violent and criminal behavior.

Obviously, this massive endeavor requires sufficient resources to really make a difference, but also the full engagement and commitment of local and civil society organizations, as well as other actors in the Northern Triangle.

We are used to spending billions of dollars in building gray infrastructure, under the premise that those investments will lead to high economic growth and higher incomes. We have done that for decades and the results are not encouraging.

Therefore, it makes sense to focus large investments in building the green and social infrastructure that directly benefits the most vulnerable and that can sustain inclusive and climate resilient development.

In that regard, the Biden Administration should commit at least 2 billion dollars for this climate initiative. Given the extremely high social, economic, and environmental returns that can be expected, 2 billion dollars is a modest and initial down payment that can go a long way in addressing some of the persistent driving factors of migration, thus also giving people hope, as well as concrete options that can make it worthwhile to stay at home in Central America rather than take the dangerous trek to the United States.

Thank you very much.