



Policy Brief

Addressing COVID-19 in fragile cities in the Northern Triangle of Central America

November 2020

The Northern Triangle of Central America – consisting of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – is one of the poorest regions in the western hemisphere.¹ Residents endure high levels of poverty and inequality; gaps in critical basic services, political instability and weak governance; the impact of climate change on their food security and livelihoods; the threat of natural disasters, like Hurricane Eta; and widespread organised crime and violence,² with some of the world's highest homicide rates.³ Children and youth are often the victims and perpetrators of this organised crime- or gang-related violence, with gang members joining or being forcibly recruited anywhere in age from 12–24, sometimes younger.⁴ Women in the region suffer some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the world, both in the home and at the hands of criminal entities.⁵

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this multidimensional fragility⁶ was affecting hundreds of thousands of men, women, girls and boys. The violence, as well as the lack of income generation opportunities, were driving many to flee their communities or migrate in search of a better life. Resultant displacement and migration put pressure on urban centres already lacking economic opportunities and ill equipped to meet the growing demand for services. Roughly 70% of the population

across the three countries were working in the informal sector⁷ without adequate social benefits or a social safety net,⁸ and many relied on informal services to meet their needs. Corruption, inequality, unemployment, impunity and weak institutional environments exacerbated this fragility and drove more violence in these cities.

The COVID-19 pandemic and some well-intentioned government-led efforts to prepare for, respond to and contain the virus across the Northern Triangle have overwhelmed already weak social service institutions and exacerbated the difficult circumstances many children and families endure, jeopardising their immediate and long-term health, well-being and safety. Now months into the crisis, the three governments have started to ease restrictions, but the threat of the virus still looms and an even greater number of people have been pushed into poverty and vulnerability after months of confinement.

It is critical to maintain strong response measures over the coming months, while also establishing recovery plans that create safer, more inclusive cities for children, and stronger, more cohesive and peaceful communities for all. World Vision has been on the ground responding to the immediate and long-term needs of children, families and fragile communities across the Northern Triangle for over 40 years.

Based on this extensive experience, World Vision calls on the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector and donors to take action to:

- ensure national COVID-19 response and recovery plans are inclusive of hard-to-reach urban contexts and incorporate tailored approaches for serving these communities, especially children
- create a more protective environment by bolstering national and local child protection systems and efforts to prevent and respond to GBV
- redouble efforts to ensure all children have access to virtual/distance education and re-enrol when it is safe for schools to re-open
- support local planning and efforts to meet immediate humanitarian and long-term development needs while improving social cohesion, addressing the root causes of fragility, and preventing future violence.

“Parents cannot go out to work; there is no money for food.”² **Aslihe (12, female, Honduras)**

COVID-19's exacerbating effect

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, there were initial reports of reductions in homicides and violence in the region attributed to strict government- and gang-imposed movement restrictions,¹⁰ yet these same measures have also led to a rapid loss of livelihoods and a spike in hunger. **Across the region, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has projected that poverty levels will increase by 3% to 6.5% and extreme poverty will increase by 2.9% to 4.5%.**¹¹

Families have now endured confinement to their homes for months. They are going without the wages they relied on to meet their food and other basic needs. Food insecurity is on the rise and likely to persist in the coming months.¹² This confinement and these socioeconomic hardships within the home have contributed to a dramatic increase in domestic and gender-based violence,¹³ yet women, children and youth have little place to go for safety and support, as any previously available services have reduced activity or closed due to COVID-19.

Closure of schools has disrupted education and support services (e.g. school meals, psychosocial support) for more than 8 million children,¹⁴ and alternative distance learning options are largely inaccessible for many, especially the most marginalised. In the months since the start of the crisis, many children and youth have stopped studying to pursue income-generating activities (e.g. coffee and sugar cane harvest, housework), and some have been forced into child labour or recruited into gangs. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates nearly a million children and youth may not return to school.¹⁵

“[I would ask the president] to give scholarships to children and young people in need, so they do not have to work.”¹⁶ **Dennis (12, male, Honduras)**

Before the COVID-19 crisis, all three countries suffered from weak and fragmented health systems ill prepared to respond to such a pandemic, and large swaths of their populations were without adequate access to basic services.¹⁷ Since the start of the crisis, medical facilities have been overwhelmed by COVID-19 and other public health crises (e.g. dengue fever outbreak in Honduras) and staff have complained of insufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) and other necessary supplies to respond safely and adequately. Facilities responding to COVID-19 have struggled to maintain primary and reproductive health services, as well as mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and clinical care for GBV survivors. Movement restrictions have also interrupted critical immunisation services. To further complicate matters, the three governments have not only been responding to the needs of infected residents, but also managing reception, quarantine and treatment of deportees and returnees from the United States, some of whom arrive COVID-19 positive.¹⁸

Despite prolonged COVID-19 related movement restrictions across the region, gangs continue to control and perpetrate violence against communities, leading to ongoing displacement. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and community leaders expect that once these restrictions are lifted, displacement will rapidly increase.¹⁹ With borders starting to re-open, a caravan of 3,500–4,000 people, including approximately 800 children, mobilised in San Pedro Sula, Honduras in late September and crossed into Guatemala moving north – the first recorded since the start of the pandemic.²⁰



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World Vision's response to urban fragility

World Vision's work in the Northern Triangle aims to address the education, child protection, livelihoods and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) needs of vulnerable children and their families in rural and urban communities. As a multi-mandated organisation, World Vision has committed to aligning its work across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and deepening its impact for children in fragile contexts. As part of this commitment, World Vision developed a fragile contexts programme approach (FCPA)²¹ to enhance its adaptive programming ability, tapping into the organisation's expertise in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding action to support a management approach to meeting immediate survival needs while also addressing the systemic root causes and drivers of conflict and violence, fragility and vulnerability in evolving contexts. Underpinned by scenario planning, joint context analysis and monitoring, the FCPA allows World Vision to prioritise agility and flexibility in the use of digital technology, accelerated data collection, real-time analysis, and remote programme management. World Vision launched an FCPA pilot in San Pedro Sula, Honduras in 2019, and is now incorporating lessons and approaches from that pilot into its COVID-19 response efforts and other work in fragile cities across the region.

World Vision's FCPA urban pilot in **San Pedro Sula** continues today, focusing on improving social cohesion in neighbourhoods, strengthening the resilience of children, youth and families, and advocating with city government and private sector actors for investment of resources in fragile neighbourhoods in the city. Beyond this pilot, World Vision is implementing initiatives to protect children from violence, support education and livelihoods opportunities for children and youth, build social cohesion, and support social accountability mechanisms in fragile and violence-affected neighbourhoods in cities and towns across the region. For instance, World Vision, in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, has developed a system dynamic modelling tool to be used in **El Salvador and Honduras** to help better understand the causes and likelihood of migration and inform development of tailored response efforts and durable solutions to address these issues. In **Honduras**, this work is reinforced with an early warning system. In **Guatemala**, World Vision is partnered with Fe y Alegría, an international Jesuit-based movement focused on education for the vulnerable, to improve relationships between students and teachers, achieve greater coexistence in the classroom, and reduce violence in schools.

World Vision's response to COVID-19 in fragile cities

In response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in hard-to-reach, fragile, urban neighbourhoods, World Vision adjusted its San Pedro Sula FCPA pilot and similar programming in other cities in the region to incorporate and enhance scenario planning and context monitoring. Taking a phased approach and building on its strong and trusted relationships with key local actors, World Vision is working to meet children's and families' immediate needs, while supporting them to adapt throughout the 'new normal' of this protracted crisis.

At a regional level, World Vision has designed strategic research and advocacy initiatives to generate awareness about COVID-19's exacerbating effect on urban fragility and violence, to strengthen social cohesion and to promote peaceful coexistence at the household, neighbourhood, district and city levels across the three countries, in partnership with local churches, municipal child protection committees and community-based organisations (CBOs).

At the country level, World Vision's COVID-19 efforts take a nexus approach aiming to support families who have lost their livelihoods or income to stave off hunger and continue to meet their basic needs, while helping them to build the skills to recover and improve their prospects post crisis in all three countries.

Acknowledging the health and security risks of conducting distributions in particularly dangerous, gang-controlled areas, World Vision works with churches and local actors who have the greatest access to hard-to-reach neighbourhoods to deliver food aid and vouchers. World Vision transitioned its livelihoods trainings online and altered the content to build trainees' skills in areas expected to be in high-demand during and post COVID-19 crisis (e.g. production of PPE, home delivery of food and other goods). World Vision also implements virtual soft and technical skills trainings for children and youth, such as Youth Ready (YR),²² with relevant YR tools and materials offered on a YR phone application, WhatsApp, YouTube and Skype.

World Vision supports children in formal and informal education to continue their studies by training teachers in technology, information and communication methods aimed at strengthening their skills to assist students virtually. Across the three countries, World Vision also collaborates with the local authorities and ministries of education in the region to design and promote innovative, accessible virtual and distance learning alternatives, mindful of ongoing challenges related to Internet connectivity and electricity in many of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities.

World Vision launched virtual campaigns to address the increased incidents of domestic violence and abuse putting so many women and children at heightened risk. The campaigns aimed to both identify and report cases of violence and abuse, and promote proper care for children and awareness of available support and services during the crisis. World Vision also collaborates with churches, local governments and local child protection committees to monitor and report cases to the authorities, and advocates for efforts to address children's mental health and psychological well-being.

To improve community participation and strengthen social cohesion, World Vision provides technical assistance and support to governments at the national and city levels on participatory processes

for community engagement, and works to create and support well-being committees that deliver humanitarian assistance with the church, local governments and CBOs. During these joint efforts, local leaders, including formal and informal actors, work together to select families for humanitarian aid, which reduces tensions and strengthens social cohesion and collaboration between community members, CBOs and local authorities in the medium to long term as they adjust to this new normal. World Vision also conducts regular virtual meetings with a range of stakeholders to discuss and review progress on joint activities, exchange experiences and ideas about how to cope with challenges created by the pandemic, and adapt agreed plans to current and future realities.

In the time of COVID-19, children and families are not only experiencing stigmatisation and discrimination based on the neighbourhood they are from, but also rising social exclusion, stigmatisation and discrimination if they have had the virus. To address this, World Vision designed and launched public awareness raising and behaviour change campaigns to promote the rights and dignity of all children and families. In the medium to longer term, World Vision is also collaborating with the private sector to raise awareness and reduce stigmatisation of young people from these areas, and to exchange experiences about efforts to offer opportunities (e.g. internships) to these young people across the three countries, which helps to build trust and more openness amongst companies for the future.

Finally, in many of these fragile cities, there has been a longstanding breakdown of the social contract between residents and government structures. This has contributed to the fragility in the region, now exacerbated by the protracted COVID-19 crisis. Throughout its interventions, World Vision has coordinated not only with the relevant local authorities, but also with non-state actors (e.g. community leaders, churches), to access and address the immediate needs of vulnerable children and their families. World Vision facilitates and convenes initiatives and discussions with a range of stakeholders to influence urban policies that promote inclusion of all, especially the most vulnerable in slums and informal settlements, in city planning, budgeting and other processes.



Recommendations

Urban fragility and violence in cities across the Northern Triangle jeopardises the long-term health and well-being of children, families and communities throughout the region, and the current COVID-19 crisis is only exacerbating the challenges and hardships they endure. Based on years of experience working in fragile urban contexts in the Northern Triangle of Central America, World Vision recommends the following:

National governments should:

- Ensure national COVID-19 response and recovery plans and strategies include and adequately budget for tailored efforts to address the needs of all urban residents, including returnees and migrants, and invest intentional resources in outreach to the most hard-to-reach, gang-controlled neighbourhoods, where possible.
- Collaborate with local authorities and provide municipalities with the technical and financial support to design and apply inclusive, localised solutions for addressing the needs of all urban residents, in partnership with local and grassroots actors and other key stakeholders such as local churches and United Nations agencies.
- Bolster existing national child protection systems and mechanisms by gathering and analysing data on the impact of COVID-19 and other crises on girls and boys to improve provision of and access to age- and gender-responsive protective and MHPSS services, including for children in hard-to-reach, gang-controlled areas and for returnee and migrant children. Conduct awareness campaigns at the national and local levels to improve parenting and promote peaceful relationships between family members, with additional supports for those overseeing at-home learning.
- Improve access to and availability of age-appropriate distance education methods (e.g. TV, radio, online learning, hard copy educational materials) to mitigate COVID-19's prolonged disruption to formal and informal education for girls and boys in urban areas. Also develop a strategy to safely re-open schools and conduct nationwide back-to-school campaigns once schools re-open, reaching the most vulnerable children, particularly where learning has already been difficult or interrupted due to fragility or exclusion. This can include creating and budgeting for economic and in-kind incentives for the most vulnerable families to enable children to continue their studies post-COVID-19.
- Commit to investing more in affordable housing, health care, child protection, MHPSS, education, GBV prevention and response efforts, social protection for the most vulnerable and, in collaboration with the private sector, boost sustainable income generation opportunities for the urban poor in national and local development plans and budgets beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Local governments should:

- Assess the indirect impacts of COVID-19 and government response measures on children and families in urban communities and use the findings to develop and adequately fund response and recovery strategies and plans with tailored approaches for delivering critical social services to all residents in these areas, including child protection, MHPSS and GBV prevention and response services. Plans should be context-sensitive and promote social cohesion and inclusivity of even the most marginalised communities, and assessment findings should be shared with national authorities to inform longer-term countrywide plans.
- Consistently engage with key community stakeholders including local organisations, faith actors and the private sector, to improve vulnerable urban residents' access to essentials services and build their capacity to respond to disasters, risk and hazards.
- Map hard-to-reach and gang-controlled neighbourhoods in partnership with local networks and grassroots organisations, building on the data they have already collected, and include these areas in future population data collection efforts to inform city preparedness, recovery and development plans.
- Include representatives of informal sectors in local COVID-19 response and recovery planning as well as longer-term local economic development strategies to both protect against the spread of the virus and reduce future risks to this already vulnerable population.

United Nations agencies and NGOs should:

- Apply a citywide, holistic, context-sensitive approach when planning interventions for cities dealing with COVID-19, fragility and violence, taking into account the root causes of this fragility and violence, the dynamics in gang-controlled areas, and the informal populations (slums) located in areas at environmental risk where local and national governments are unwilling to invest due to their informal status. Ensure plans and strategies avoid creating or exacerbating social tensions, especially in contexts where returnees and migrants live alongside urban poor hosting communities, and where gangs are in control.
- Support local municipalities with the necessary financial, technical and material resources to implement inclusive response and recovery plans that address COVID-19's indirect impacts, as well as ongoing issues of food insecurity, climate change and violence, and reach the most vulnerable and marginalised.
- Strengthen protective systems for girls and boys and reinforce a protective environment by supporting the capacity building of community-based/kinship systems, local government structures and national systems, and investing in the bolstering of civil society, community-based structures, and local institutions to provide adequate protection for all citizens.
- Bolster government education, social protection²³ and economic recovery programmes targeting female and male youth from areas affected by gang violence (e.g. establishment of training and apprenticeship opportunities).
- Work with and build the capacity of trusted local, grassroots and faith organisations, individual volunteers and other neighbourhood leaders to maintain two-way communication and provide information about available social services and supports (top-down) as well as local needs and opportunities (bottom-up).
- Establish and support humanitarian and social accountability mechanisms at the neighbourhood and city municipal levels, and invest in capacity building and empowerment of affected children and communities as agents of change, peace and development in their own right.
- Conduct regular, impact-focused and people-centred joint analysis with actors across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to establish and maintain a shared understanding of the context that informs principled, evidence-based decisions and helps ensure context-sensitive and specific action. Engage women, children and key community stakeholders, including faith leaders, in these efforts.

Private sector should:

- Create internship opportunities for female and male youth from communities affected by gang violence to reduce stigmatisation and help them gain the technical skills and experiences to open or increase possibilities for future recruitment and employment.
- Collaborate with and support government efforts to improve the quality, accessibility and production of distance learning materials and dissemination approaches (e.g. via Internet connectivity), as well as critical child-sensitive social protection efforts (e.g. cash transfer schemes).
- Contribute to social infrastructure at the neighbourhood level that creates a space for peaceful coexistence and strengthens community participation and social cohesion, as well as helps meet community needs.
- Support the COVID-19 response in marginalised urban areas, for example, by donating PPE for health personnel and front line workers and providing food rations for residents in dire need.

Donors should:

- Urgently increase flexible funding to support children and families in vulnerable urban neighbourhoods with access to multipurpose cash and voucher assistance, child-sensitive social protection services and economic opportunities, and invest resources in strengthening social cohesion and addressing violence in the home and against children in these communities.
- Increase funding for improved and systematic data collection, analysis and sharing in urban contexts to inform local and city development plans that are inclusive of diverse groups, especially those living in fragile and violence-affected/gang-controlled neighbourhoods.
- Maintain long-term interventions focused on sustained impacts related to the food, climate, and violence crises and subsequent displacement in and to these communities.



- ¹ Cheatham, Amelia, "Backgrounder: Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle," Council on Foreign Relations, 19 October 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle>
- ² Sandin, Linnea, "Could the Pandemic Response be a Starting Point for a More Engaged Security Strategy in the Northern Triangle?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, 18 August 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/could-pandemic-response-be-starting-point-more-engaged-security-strategy-northern-triangle>. "The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) estimates that criminality, largely driven by organised crime, costs more than 3% of regional GDP, or [US]\$236 billion; no region in the world faces larger macroeconomic losses due to crime . . . Central America is particularly plagued . . . The Northern Triangle countries – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – shoulder costs totaling up to 6.5% of GDP, and they feature some of Latin America's highest proportions of violent crime attributable to gang activity."
- ³ Cheatham, Amelia (2019).
- ⁴ Ribando Seelke, Claire, "Gangs in Central America," Congressional Research Service, 7-5700, RL34112, 29 August 2016, p2. <https://fas.org/srg/crs/row/RL34112.pdf>
- ⁵ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, Addendum: Impact of COVID-19," May 2020, p8. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200701_HNO_CENTROAMERICA%20ADDENDUM%20ING.pdf
- ⁶ Honduras and Guatemala have been included in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s "States of Fragility" publications and list of fragile states in 2020, 2018 and 2016. For OECD analysis of the Northern Triangle as a sub-region, see: OECD, "States of Fragility 2018," Chapter 2, Box 2.3, February 2019. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264302075-6-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264302075-6-en>
- ⁷ World Bank, "Informal Employment (% of total non-agricultural employment) – Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras," International Labour Organisation, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved on 21 June 2020. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.ISV.IFRM.ZS?locations=GT-SV-HN>
- ⁸ UNOCHA (May 2020) p8.
- ⁹ World Vision "ACT NOW: Experiences and recommendations of girls and boys in Latin America and the Caribbean during COVID-19," 2020.
- ¹⁰ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), "Central America and COVID-19: The Pandemic's Impact on Gang Violence," 20 May 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/mexico/central-america-and-covid-19-pandemic-s-impact-gang-violence>. Crisis Group, "Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle," Report No. 83, 13 November 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/83-virus-proof-violence-crime-and-covid-19-mexico-and-northern-triangle>
- ¹¹ Crisis Group (2020).
- ¹² Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET), "Acute Food Insecurity Remains Atypically High Amid Continued Economic Challenges," September 2020. <https://fews.net/central-america-and-caribbean/key-message-update/september-2020>. "Given that poor rural and urban households will continue to have difficulty earning enough income to meet their food and non-food needs, Stressed (IPC Phase 2) and Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes will likely persist in the post-harvest periods in Central America. Crisis (IPC Phase 3) is expected in the Honduran and Guatemalan Dry Corridor, the coffee-growing livelihood zone in El Salvador . . . Additionally, some very poor urban households who work in the informal sector will likely remain in Crisis (IPC Phase 3)."
- ¹³ UNOCHA (May 2020) p10.
- ¹⁴ Ibid p9.
- ¹⁵ Inter-American Development Bank, "IDB Receives \$1 Million from Japan to Support Education in Honduras and El Salvador," 15 October 2020 <https://reliefweb.int/report/el-salvador/idb-receives-1-million-japan-support-education-honduras-and-el-salvador>
- ¹⁶ World Vision (2020).
- ¹⁷ UNOCHA (May 2020) p6. "In 2018, the date of the last available data, NCA countries were among the nine countries with the lowest number of hospital beds per 1,000 people in the world, with Guatemala coming in last."
- ¹⁸ National Public Radio (NPR), "Official Alleges the U.S. Has Deported Many COVID-19-Positive Migrants to Guatemala," 15 April 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/15/834999661/official-alleges-the-u-s-has-deported-many-covid-19-positive-migrants-to-guatemala>
- ¹⁹ UNOCHA (May 2020) p7.
- ²⁰ UNOCHA, "Latin America & the Caribbean Weekly Situation Update (28 September – 4 October 2020)," accessed 5 October 2020, p2. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Latin%20America%20and%20The%20Caribbean%20-%20Weekly%20Situation%20Update%202828%20September%20-%204%20October%202020%29%20As%20of%205%20October%202020.pdf>
- ²¹ World Vision Canada, "Fragile Contexts: The World's Most Dangerous Places," accessed 23 November 2020. <https://www.worldvision.ca/stories/child-protection/fragile-contexts>
- ²² World Vision Canada, "Youth Ready – Vision for Vulnerable Youth: El Salvador and Honduras," accessed 23 November 2020. <https://www.worldvision.ca/WorldVisionCanada/media/our-work-sector-report-pdf/Community-Based-Youth-Ready-03-2.pdf>
- ²³ Collaborative Cash Delivery (CCD) Network, "CCD Social Protection Working Group: Advocacy in Response to COVID-19," 8 April 2020. <https://www.wvi.org/publications/disaster-management/ccd-social-protection-working-group-advocacy-response-covid-19>

World Vision is undertaking the largest humanitarian response in its 70-year history to limit the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact on vulnerable children and their families, aiming to reach 72 million people, half of them children, over the next 18 months and raising US\$350 million to do so. Response efforts will cover 70 countries where World Vision has a field presence, prioritising scale up of preventative measures to limit the spread of the disease; strengthening health systems and workers; supporting children affected by COVID-19 through education, child protection, food security, and livelihoods; and advocating to ensure vulnerable children are protected. For more information, read World Vision's [COVID-19 Global Response Plan](#).



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World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision serves all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

For further information please contact:

Marco Tulio Villela
Director of Strategic Initiatives,
Central America
marco_villela@WVI.org

Ashleigh C. Lovett
Senior Policy Advisor,
Fragile & Conflict-Affected Contexts
ashleigh_lovett@WVI.org

Aline Rahbany
Technical Director, Urban Programming
aline_rahbany@WVI.org