

## **Dual Nature of Internal Migration in Honduras, Central America**

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### **Introduction**

Research relating to the population geography of Latin America during the latter half of this century has highlighted the importance of two spatially distinct and competing trends in the movement of people within the countries of the region. Rural-to-urban migration and frontier settlement have been shown to be important contributors to the evolving population distributions of individual countries as well as to the region as a whole. The purpose of this paper is to present these two processes as important themes in the internal migration pattern of Honduras.

Our research and fieldwork in Honduras has impressed upon us the significance of the processes of rapid change operating in two important sub-regions of this Central American country. The growth of population and the expansion of economic activity in (1) the major urban centers and (2) along the eastern frontier, place these regions among the most dynamic areas in the country. Large differentials in the rates of population growth and net migration among its municipios give us an indication of Honduran perceptions of the more and less desirable parts of the country in which to live. Both of these indicators suggest that the cities and the frontier are seen as attractive areas that offer greater opportunities for a better life.

We have conducted fieldwork in the frontier region on several occasions from 1989 to 1993 to observe first-hand the status of settlement there. Aware that most studies of the population geography of Honduras have had an urban focus, we decided to examine the population statistics to see if they supported our field observations and to better understand the magnitude of the frontier expansion in both absolute terms as well as relative to the process of urbanization.

### **Recent Honduran Population Changes: Areas of Rapid and Slow Growth**

Comparison of the populations of the almost 300 Honduran municipios from the 1974 and 1988 censuses yields a detailed pattern of population changes for the country and allows the identification of faster growing versus slower growing regions. Migration data, collected in the 1988 census via a question on the respondents' municipio of residence in 1983, can be mapped to illustrate the patterns of population movement between municipios during that 5-year period.

From the censuses, we identified regions of relatively rapid and sluggish growth within the country. Honduras' population increased from 2.6 million in 1974 to 4.4

million in 1988. This represents a 67 and one-quarter percent growth during the census interval, and equates to an annual rate of total increase of 3.7 percent. The 67 percent national increase, of course, was not spread evenly throughout the country, but was concentrated in selected zones -- especially, the two urban centers and the eastern frontier.

A municipio map of the percentage change in total population highlights the areas of the country that experienced relatively rapid or sluggish growth during the fourteen year period. Only 68 municipios recorded a population increase greater than the national average. Most of these are located along a corridor stretching from Tegucigalpa to San Pedro Sula or near the eastern frontier. Portions of the north coast and the Pacific lowlands also grew faster than average. Only 22 municipios doubled their population during the inter-census period. This fastest growing subset emphasizes the national capital, northern portions of the corridor, and the eastern frontier zone as areas of rapid change.

The arrival of in-migrants from other parts of the country has certainly contributed to the rapid growth rates experienced by the urban centers and the frontier. The internal migration data show that the municipios near the two largest urban centers and the eastern frontier are among the minority of municipios with positive net migrations. Of the 15 municipios whose net migration rates were greater than 5 percent, seven contained the major cities or were their immediate neighbors and 3 were near the eastern frontier.

## **Urbanization**

Although Honduras is classified as one of the least urbanized countries of Latin America, and perhaps precisely because it does not yet have a majority urban population, the concentration of Honduras' residents into agglomerated settlements is continuing to increase. The process of urbanization in Honduras is, for the most part, a tale of two cities. Tegucigalpa, the capital, and San Pedro Sula, the industrial center, are the only places with over 100,000 inhabitants. These cities currently dominate the urban scene of the country, and they are expected to continue in that role. Tegucigalpa became the political capital of Honduras in 1880. Lands in and surrounding the city are quite sloping, relatively infertile, and seasonally dry. The landscape of modern Tegucigalpa reflects its growth over several centuries from a small town organized around a central plaza to a major city with far-flung suburbs that now extend over some 100 square kilometers and virtually fill the upland basin in which the city is located.

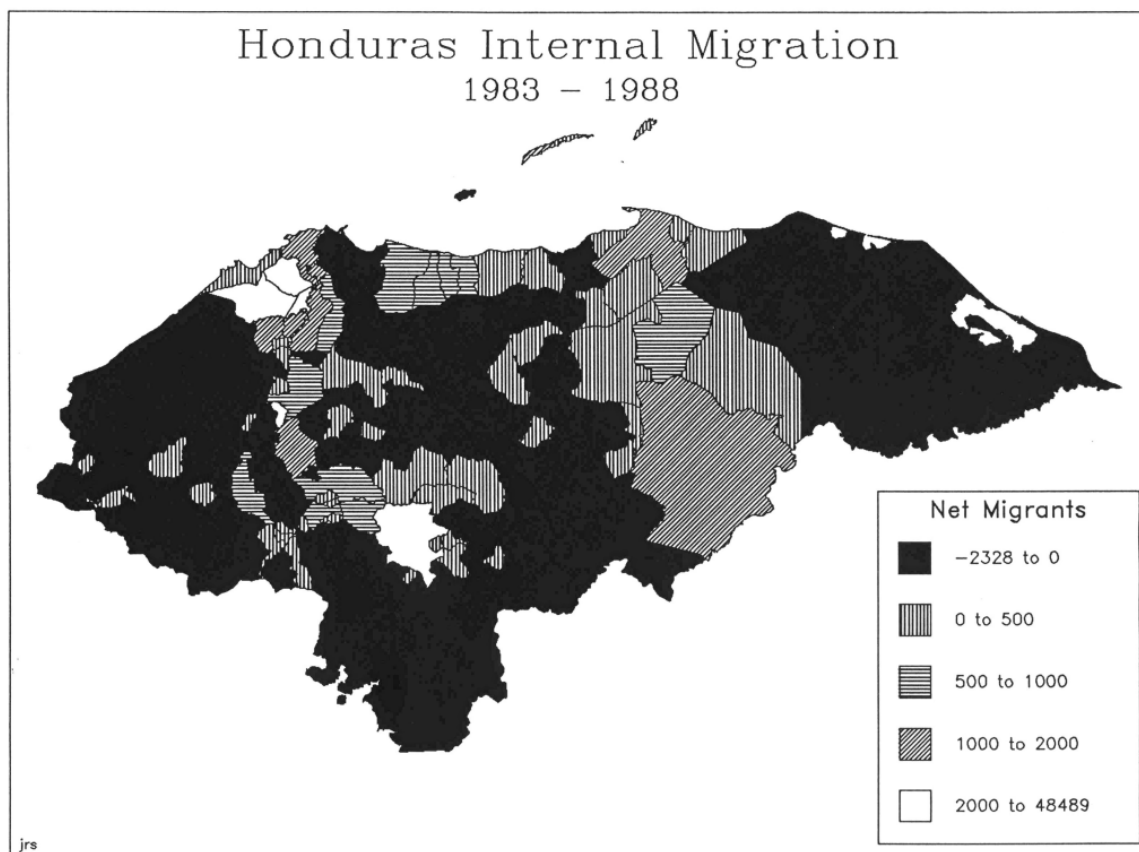
San Pedro Sula is the second largest Honduran city and has the country's largest concentration of industry. It lies on the southwestern edge of the fertile alluvial plain of the Chamelecon and Ulua rivers. Events that led to the true urbanization of San Pedro Sula occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when foreign capitalists, including the North Americans interested in the incipient banana operations, entered Honduras with intensity. By 1950, The Ulua valley had become the greatest banana-

producing area in the world and on its margins a real city was being created. During the 1950s San Pedro Sula was the fastest growing city in Central America.

The dominance of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro in the urban hierarchy is confirmed by the census data. The 1988 census registered over 1.7 million inhabitants in settlements greater than 2,500 persons. This constituted an urban proportion for the country of almost 40 percent. Tegucigalpa contained 13 percent of the country's total population and Tegus and San Pedro combined contained almost 20 percent. Their combined populations also accounted for 50 percent of the country's urban population. The next largest town, La Ceiba, had less than 69,000 inhabitants and 4 percent of the urban population in 1988.

The summary migration data provide another perspective on the importance of urbanization, and particularly of the two largest centers, in Honduras. The migration data show that only three municipios — Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and neighboring Choloma—registered a net migration of over 6,000 persons. (**Map 1**)

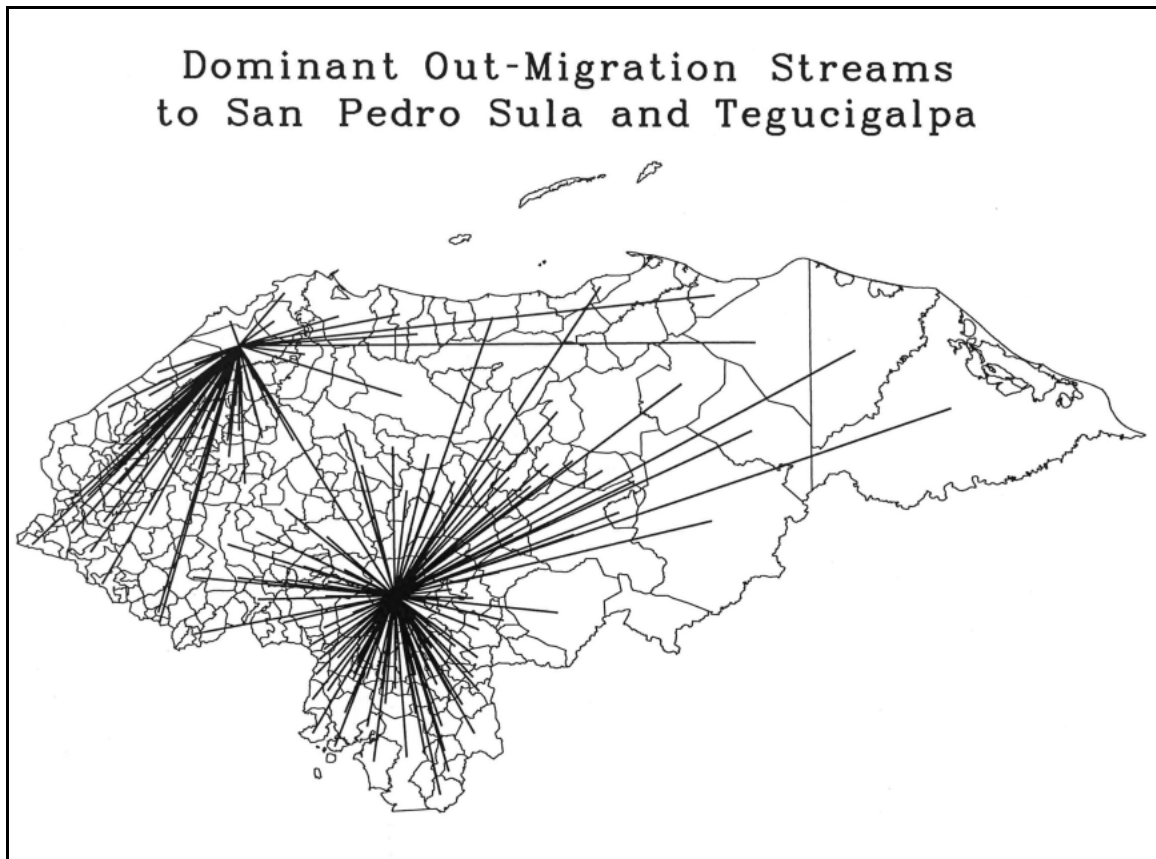
**Map 1.**



Each of these recorded a net migration far greater than La Lima's fourth ranking 2,654 net migrants. Each of the 12 municipios with a net migration of more than 1,000 persons is directly associated with one of the two large urban centers or with an important regional settlement center. Two of these regional centers are also located in the eastern

frontier zone. The dominance of the two cities in the population structure of the country is also reflected in the detailed patterns of the internal migration data. 29 percent of all known inter-municipio movements during the period had either Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula as their destination and 164 of the 283 municipios sent their largest contingent of out-migrants to either Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula. (**Map 2**) Only six other municipios were the recipients of five or more dominant out-migration streams and each of those contains a town of regional importance. Between 1983 and 1988, Tegucigalpa received in-migrants from every other municipio in the country and the migration field of San Pedro Sula included all but 11 of the country's municipios.

**Map 2.**



### **The Eastern Frontier**

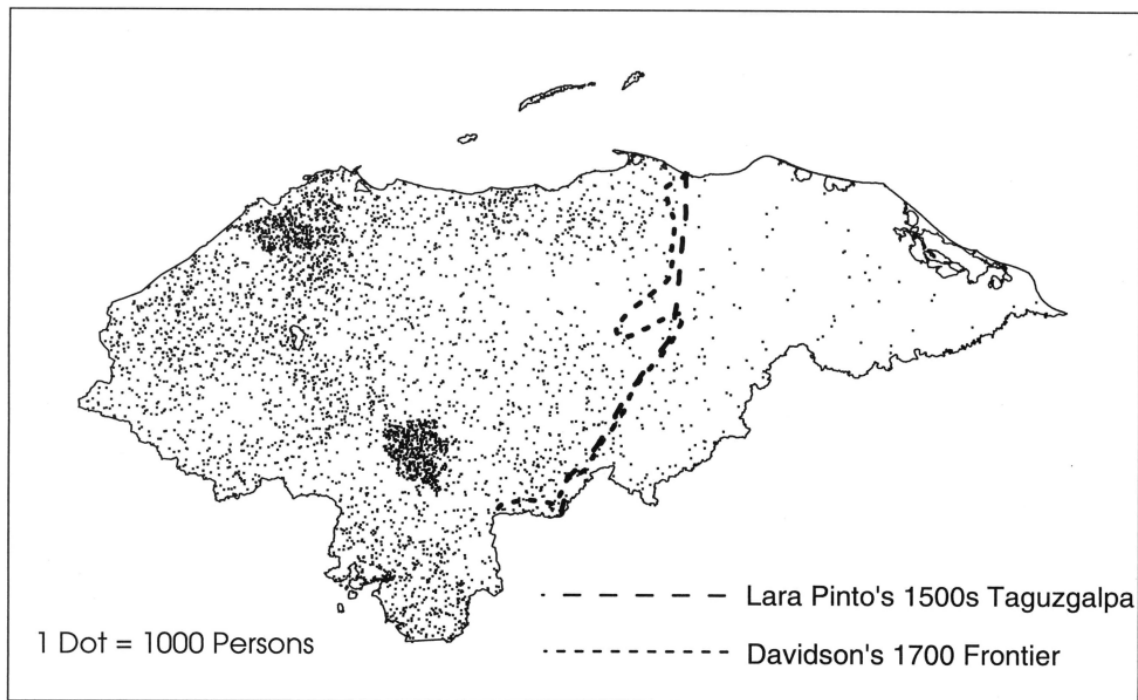
Although the absolute magnitude of population growth and in-migration of the frontier zone is far below that of the collective population agglomerations in the country, the changes wrought by these processes make the eastern frontier of settlement and economic activity in Honduras an area of interest and concern. Because of its magnitude relative to the urban processes in the country, the frontier has been much less studied by population geographers and demographers. Rather, it has been a focus of scholars concerned with the impacts of rapid change on the natural environment and indigenous peoples in the region. Our own concern for such issues has compelled us to here

juxtapose frontier expansion against urbanization as a second major theme in the evolving population pattern of Honduras.

The frontier cuts across the eastern parts of the departments of Colón, Olancho, and El Paraíso, extending roughly from Cabo Camarón to the Nicaraguan border. (Map 3) Beyond it is a zone of sparsely inhabited land, much of it tropical rain forest. In addition to the attraction open lands, three of the frontier zone municipios contain large towns located near the eastern terminus of paved roads that serve to attract migrants to the region.

Map. 3

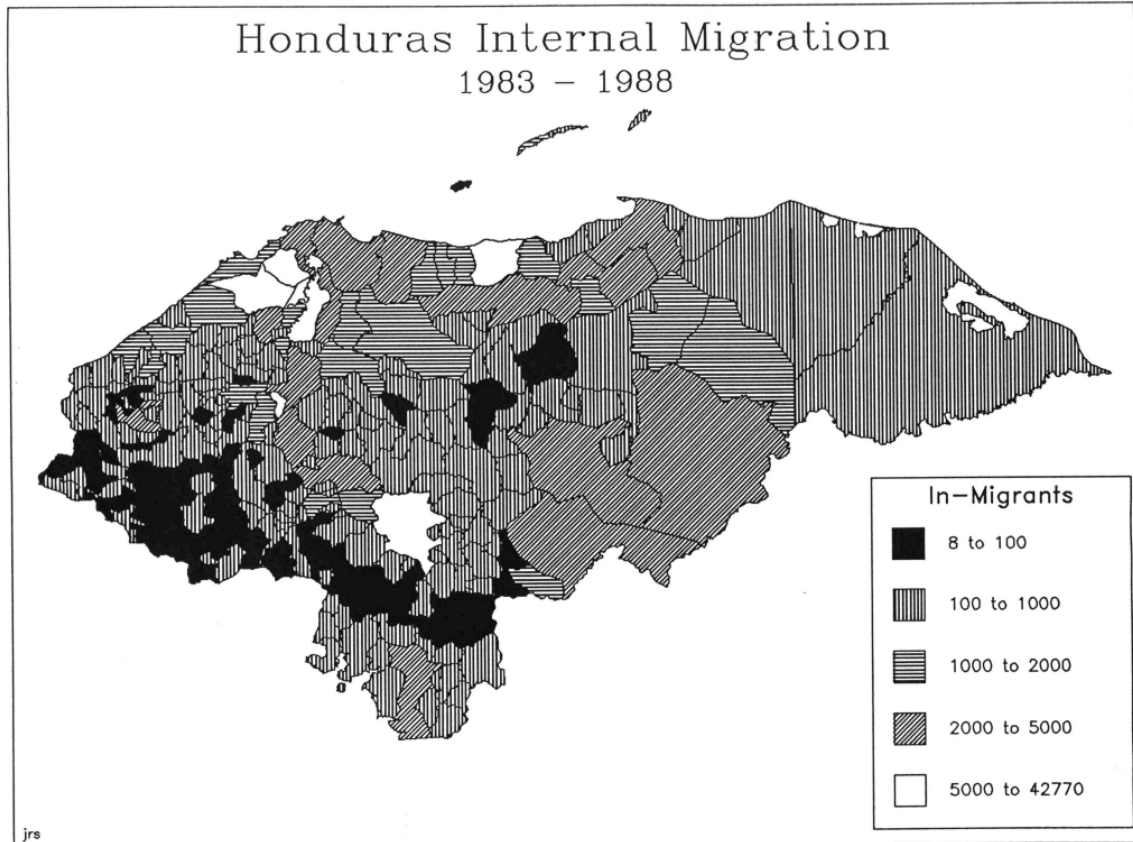
### 1988 Honduras Population Density and Former Frontiers



At the national scale, the modern frontier has advanced eastward only marginally beyond its position in colonial times. However, although the population density still drops off sharply not far beyond the position of the colonial frontier, the eastward progress that has been made has already greatly impacted the broad leaf montane forests and cloud forests in the region, as well as the lands and culture of the Pech Indians. Continued eastward movement threatens to further disrupt Central America's largest remaining tract of lowland tropical rain forest, which includes the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, and the less-aculturated Tawahka Sumu Indians.

The municipios of eastern Honduras that rank among the highest in the country in the rates of total population growth and net migration generally contain either portions of the frontier itself or the rapidly filling territory just behind it. (Map 4)

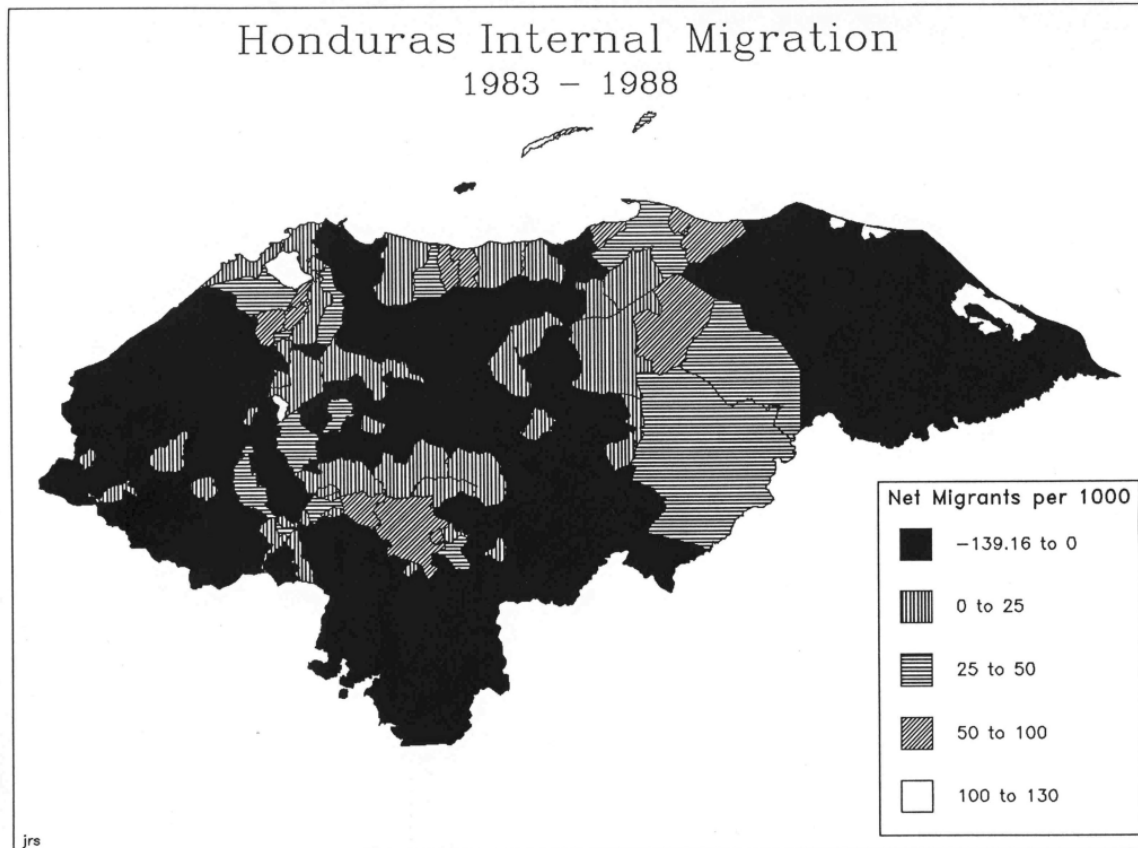
Map 4.



Of course, not all of the population increase in these municipios concentrates at the leading edge of settlement. Much of it contributes to filling in the thinly settled lands lying behind the frontier's leading edge. Several rapidly growing municipios that do not contain portions of the actual colonization front, but lie just to the west of those that do, can, therefore, be considered part of a broader frontier zone.

As in the case of urbanization, the frontier zone is shown to be a region of relatively rapid growth by the census data. Seven of the 22 municipios that more than doubled their population between 1974 and 1988 are associated with the frontier zone. Two of the 12 municipios that received more than 1000 net migrants between 1983 and 1988 are frontier zone municipios, both containing settlement center of regional importance. And three of the 15 municipios that had net migration rates of fifty or more per thousand are also located in the frontier zone. (Map 5) Frontier-ward migration from distant, more densely populated and environmentally difficult, parts of the country has been reported by various authors. Migration field maps for individual frontier zone municipios show that, while many in-migrants arrive in a particular municipio from nearby municipios, as would be predicted by gravity models of migration, the frontier municipios do receive migrants from central, southern, and western Honduras as well.

Map 5.



### Conclusion -- Consequences of Migration Trends

Although the absolute magnitude of population growth and in-migration is much greater for the urban centers than for the frontier zone, both regions are experiencing rapid growth relative to other parts of the country. Although not without some positive consequences for the country as a whole, as well as for some of the individuals involved in this changing population pattern, rapid growth and high net migration rates have created problems, especially in Tegucigalpa and the frontier zone.

The natural environment of Tegucigalpa is not well suited for the development of a large city and such rapid growth has placed severe strains on the city's infrastructure, which was not particularly well developed to begin with. Squatter settlements have mushroomed on hillsides along the city's outskirts, in the process deforesting the pine trees to use as fuel. Typically, homes in these settlements lack water, sewerage, and electrical service. In spite of the perception of the city as a place of opportunity, unemployment and underemployment rates are high. Water and electrical shortages plague the city and pollution and transportation gridlocks continue to worsen.

Honduran and international conservationists are concerned about the environmental impact of the advancing eastern frontier, which is threatening the largest

remaining area of tropical hardwood forest in Central America and its indigenous inhabitants. No fewer than five national parks, natural reserves, and indigenous reserves have been established or proposed within the frontier zone municipios in an effort to stem the disturbance of the ecosystems and indigenous cultures of the area. Their progress has been slow, however, and their effectiveness limited.

Urbanization and frontier colonization are not unique to Honduras among Latin American countries. Nevertheless, how Honduras deals with these two processes of change will have a lasting impact upon the quality of life of many of its residents in the decades to come.