

## Between poverty and violence



Poverty, increasing inequality and a culture of violence are threatening the human security of the Salvadorean people. The acts and omissions of the Government, far from protecting people in the current critical situation, have deepened their insecurity. Actions taken by civil society are still fragmented, and have not managed to revert government inefficiency.

### Control Ciudadano El Salvador<sup>1</sup>

Rosio Villatoro Pineda / Ana Murcia / Armando Pérez Salazar  
Jeannette Alvarado / Mario Antonio Paniagua

### Obstacles to human security<sup>2</sup>

Human security means respect for every human right, including access to food, health care, education and basic services, a healthy environment, and guarantees against violence and discrimination. However, there are a series of obstacles that prevent a large part of the population from enjoying this security. In this report we analyse those aspects which we consider most important for the country.

### The economic threat

El Salvador has a population of 6 million, and almost half are poor. This limits their chances of access to a dignified and full life, and is the main obstacle to human security.

According to the Human Development Report El Salvador 2003,<sup>3</sup> at least 43 out of every 100 inhabitants are still poor, and 19 out of every 100 live in absolute poverty. The situation is worse in rural areas, where 55.8% are poor and 29.1% live in absolute poverty. In 33.6% of poor homes women are the heads of household.

The report also recognises that poverty has increased, and that the quantification of poverty is not correct since it is based on suppositions that are no longer valid. For example, it is assumed that the cost of the wider basic needs basket is twice that of the basic food basket, although the prices of some elements in the former (housing, education,

electricity) have more than doubled in recent years. If prices were updated, the segment of the population classed as poor would certainly be larger.

The productive sector has not been able to generate jobs or salaries to meet the basic needs of the population. Official employment data give a rather distorted picture when they show that 94% of the economically active population are in employment. The reality is that 30% of employed people do not have a steady job, and make a living in the informal sector, where their earnings provide a mere subsistence income. In other words, 40% of the population have employment problems.

Because of stagnation in the agricultural sector and the absence of policies aimed at developing rural areas, unemployment has mostly affected the peasant population. "Workers employed in the agricultural sector, who in 1991 amounted to 35.8% of the total employed labour force, only made up 21.8% of total employment in 2001."<sup>4</sup>

But unemployment and underemployment are not the only factors generating poverty. The minimum salary in urban areas in the trade and services sector is USD 158 per month, in industry it is USD 155, and in textiles and clothing manufacturing, where the female workforce is concentrated, it is USD 151. With this level of income a family of five can just about afford the basic food basket (approximately USD 129), but they cannot pay for education, health care, housing and basic services.

In rural areas the situation is even more serious since the minimum salary (USD 74 per month) is not even enough to cover the cost of the basic food basket, and unemployment rates are high. This explains why the segment of the population in absolute poverty is concentrated in rural areas.

The precariousness of the quality of life for Salvadorean men and women is directly linked to inequalities in income distribution: "In 1992 the richest 20% of households in the country received 54.5% of national income while the poorest 20% received 3.2%. Ten years later, the share of national income going to the richest 20% had increased to 58.3% and that of the poorest 20% had fallen to 2.4%."<sup>5</sup> The Government has been criticised for its economic measures that foster

an excessive concentration of wealth in the hands of a small group of families.<sup>6</sup>

### Incorrect hypotheses

Government action to eradicate poverty has been inadequate. Its main strategy was aimed at attaining economic growth and raising foreign investment, which it projected would generate employment and social well-being. This theory has not been proved correct. "Starting in 1996, El Salvador registered a slowdown in growth, which worsened in the period 2000-2002 when per capita GDP was paralysed."<sup>7</sup> Besides this, foreign investment has been small-scale and of poor quality because it is based on light maquila-type manufacturing. Human insecurity (the lack of a sound legal system, criminality, etc.) is also a factor in businesses' reluctance to invest.

The money which Salvadoreans who have emigrated to the United States send back to their families is what has enabled the national economy to stay afloat. According to the Central Reserve Bank, in 2003, USD 2,105.3 million was received in remittances, the highest figure of all times. It is estimated that the families benefiting from this practice receive more than USD 200 per month. Remittances currently account for 14% of the GDP. The export of cheap labour, then, is profitable for the Government, which is why it has begun to promote it openly.

A second government strategy has been to increase social expenditure. Although total public social expenditure (including social security) increased from 5.5% of GDP in 1994 to around 8% of GDP in 2002, it is still among the lowest in Latin America. The widespread lack of access to basic services is evidence that there is scant investment. Of people aged 15 and over, 18% are illiterate. Social security excludes almost the whole of the rural population, and 24% of households do not have running water.

1 Control Ciudadano El Salvador: Asociación de Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida (LAS DIGNAS); Asociación Maquilishuattí (FUMA); Acción para la Salud en El Salvador (APSAL); Asociación Comité de Familiares de Víctimas de Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (CODEFAM); Asociación Intersectorial para el Desarrollo Económico y el Progreso Social (CIDEP).

2 The authors are grateful for the invaluable collaboration of César Villalona, researcher and economist, and Roxana Martel, researcher and journalist.

3 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano El Salvador 2003. Desafíos y opciones en tiempos de globalización*. San Salvador: UNDP, 2003.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 "A new oligarchic group has come into being whose visible face is seen in the control which a few families have over the financial system. Certainly, if we talk of an oligarchic group it is because these families also control other important sectors of economic activity like industry, trade, agriculture, transport, construction etc." Paniagua, Carlos. "El bloque empresarial hegemónico salvadoreño". *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* 645-648. San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana José León Cañas (UCA), July-August, 2002.

7 UNDP, *op cit.*

Another government initiative to free the country of poverty is to subscribe to trade treaties, the most important of which is the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States. However the situation of other countries like Canada and Mexico (10 years after the implementation of their FTAs with the United States) raises concern about the results of trade liberalisation. While the United States proposes a treaty which not only allows free access for its products but gives it control of public services and natural resources in the region, Central American countries can merely aspire to obtain free trade conditions for their products, mainly local crafts and agricultural produce, whose potential market would be none other than Central Americans living in the United States.

The main organisations opposing these treaties have pointed out that they have not been inspired by or constructed in the interests of the population, but are designed to guarantee local big business profitable alliances with transnational corporations. There are reasons to think that the Government's theories about FTAs will not prove correct.

### *The culture of violence*

The violence that has been taking place during the last 10 years constitutes a second obstacle to human security in the country.

Criminality, the inability of the legal or police systems to cope with it, and the easy availability of weapons are some of the factors that have led to the intensification and institutionalisation of violence. The annual murder rate in El Salvador is 53 per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> According to the official register of the Public Prosecutor's Office (FGR), 3,163 people were the victims of murder in 2003, an average of nine murders per day.

But criminality is only one kind of violence. Social violence is also on the increase, particularly violence towards women in the public, social and domestic spheres. According to the National Civil Police (PNC), in 2001 half the firearm-related murders (47.8%) were classified as social violence.

The ability of both the PNC and the FGR to investigate crimes has always been questionable. According to data from the National Council of Public Security, in 1996 and 1997, the levels of police efficiency in the resolution of murder cases barely reached 6% and 8% respectively. Of the total summonses presented by the FGR to Justices of the Peace, only 54% managed to pass the instruction phase. From 1998 to 2000 there were 4,700 reported sexual offences (the vast majority against women and children), but only 2.8% resulted in court cases and only 1.4% led to convictions.

This inefficiency in the FGR and the police has worked in favour of corruption and impunity. According to data from Transparency International (2003), among the 133 countries evaluated and rated from 0 (very corrupt) to 10 (very clean) El Salvador is in 59th place with a rating of 3.7.

In El Salvador, there are around 450,000 (mainly illegal) firearms in the hands of civilians. This has evidently raised the murder rate at national level. According to the PNC, in 2000, 7 out of every 10 robberies and 7 out of every 10 murders were committed with firearms. Besides that, the national survey of attitudes and norms about violence and firearms shows that nearly 14% of people who said they possessed a firearm and had been the victim of a robbery were injured, whereas among people who were robbed and did not possess a firearm only 7.4% were injured.

### *The Mano Dura (Firm Hand) Plan*

The Government ought to consolidate a culture of peace, promoting preventive measures, implementing justice efficiently and looking after the victims of violence. Nevertheless there is no state policy in this area, and action has been repressive rather than preventive. Proof of this is the Firearms Law, which allows citizens to bear arms to defend themselves from delinquency given the incompetence of the PNC, a law which has been defended both by the Presidency and the main parties on the Right in the Legislative Assembly.

The most recent measures against violence have been the passing of the Anti-gang Law and the implementation of the *Mano Dura* (Firm Hand) Plan, which seek to combat the criminal activities of gangs. This law, besides being unnecessary (because many of the offences it covers are already covered in the Penal Code and in the Juvenile Offender Law), is also unconstitutional in that it contravenes fundamental rights like the presumption of innocence. Similar government plans against gangs, or *maras*, have been passed in other Central American countries (the *Escoba* Plan in Guatemala and the *Libertad Azul* Plan in Honduras). As has been pointed out, the common denominator in these measures is that they are part of an electoral campaign strategy: "In El Salvador, the *Mano Dura* Plan which is guaranteed by the government party is a central component in their bid to attract votes in next year's elections". "The current President of Honduras, Ricardo Maduro, based his electoral campaign on a zero tolerance policy against crime."<sup>9</sup>

### **Monitoring by civil society**

Civil society has undertaken development projects that aim to provide the most underprivileged communities with services that the Government is unable to provide like health care, housing, education, piped water, gender equity, etc. But their strategies have also aimed at tightening social control.

There have been organised protests against the privatisation of health services and in favour of an integral reform of the health system (1998-2003). This movement co-ordinated the activities of a good number of civil organisations and offered opportunities for citizens to voice their needs, as well as managing temporarily to halt the process of privatisation of basic services promoted by the Government.

The strategy of social control gained strength in the mid 1990s when a sizeable group of social organisations was invited to take part in the World Summit for Social Development and in the IV World Conference on Women. After the summits, the main task of civil society was to see that commitments made by governments were kept. Up until now, action taken by civil society has been fragmented, and its claims have not managed to influence government decisions.

In 2000, world leaders again committed themselves to achieving a series of goals: to eradicate hunger and poverty by 2015. Monitoring by citizen organisations will be indispensable if the Millennium Development Goals, which promote the full enjoyment of human security in the country, are to be met. ■

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9 *Proceso*. "Un vistazo centroamericano a los planes gubernamentales para la represión de las pandillas". I and II. San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA), 2003.

8 *El Mundo*, 22 December 2003, p. 3.