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El Salvador, Gang-Violence

Government Focus on Eliminating Gang Violence in El Salvador: A Necessity to Facilitate Improved Food Security

Alicia Hernandez¹ studies math in her family's home while her father is out looking for work and her mother tends to the garden, collecting that night's frugal dinner of corn and beans. No one in her family has a high school education and Alicia hopes to be the first to enter into high school and graduate with a diploma. Alicia worries about her aging father who works to earn 7 Colón a day, barely enough feed the family and put Alicia through school. Medical attention is expensive, and any injury sustained by her father would mean traveling tens of miles on foot to the nearest hospital. As the year sheds its days, work becomes harder and harder to come by with violent gangs extorting business and driving out any and all opportunities for employment. Food has now become a great concern for the Hernandez family.

In its current state, El Salvador is widely recognized as one of the most violent countries on earth. Country-wide organized crime grew to fill a power vacuum created by civil war and political confusion, and as a result gangs have become so pervasive that every corner of El Salvador's society is haunted by their presence. Far from residing exclusively in urban areas, gangs threaten families in rural regions as well. One such family, who chose to remain anonymous, affirmed that a violent gang operates in their rural community. Their own daughter, Alicia, said, "there is a gang that does not coexist in our community." While this family may not represent the situation of every family in El Salvador, they nonetheless represent the average family's predicament regarding safety. According to the family, the government's main priority is to provide protection and security to the people of El Salvador. The government of El Salvador prioritizes security for good reason, considering that gangs are a serious detriment to food access. According to Alexander Segovia, economist and president of the Central American Institute of Research for Development and Social Change who was published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, violence from gangs in El Salvador threatens food security by displacing families, restricting the movement of food, and extorting workers (Segovia 13). Thus, the government of El Salvador is mainly concerned with minimizing the threat of organized crime. While the government is focused on protecting its people from the threat of crime, support groups from outside of the country are left to protect the people of El Salvador from the threat of malnutrition. But support groups such as the World Food Program (WFP) are just that, support programs, and cannot be expected to sustainably provide help perpetually while the government is focused on stopping gangs. The family I interviewed acknowledged the WFP was a great help but said that their food security hadn't improved at all. In order to establish strong and stable food security in El Salvador then, the government must be able to quickly eliminate the threat of gangs to improve food security in El Salvador.

Currently the government of El Salvador has invested heavily in its police forces in an attempt to wipe out organized crime. President Nayib Bukele promised to reduce crime and from 2014 to 2015 the homicide rate was brought down nearly 70% by the police (MacroTrends). This is evident in the family I interviewed who said that violence was less commonplace in their community with a strong police presence. Although violent crime may be substantially reduced with police constantly patrolling, extortion from gangs is on the rise and this prevents businesses from forming or even operating. According to the El Salvador 2020 Crime & Safety Report from the Overseas Security Advisory Council, "extortion continues to be a common and lucrative criminal enterprise in El Salvador. In 2019, victims filed 2,115

¹ Alicia Hernandez is a pseudonym, and the original name of the person interviewed has been changed for safety purposes.

complaints, up from the 1,628 complaints in 2018” (El Salvador 2020 Crime & Safety Report). Sadly, these reports signal a large presence of extortion since many are unlikely to report extortion out of fear for their own safety. Consequently, the increase in under-the-radar extortion has led to difficulties in finding employment for many in El Salvador. The family I interviewed stated that the biggest obstacle when it came to food security was finding employment. Despite the presence of police, gangs still affect the food security of the people of El Salvador through extortion. Clearly, much more is needed than a show of force to remove gangs and improve food security in El Salvador.

However, finding a solution to stopping gangs in El Salvador and improving food security is not as simple as arresting all the members of a given gang. For one, the MS13 gang alone is spread across multiple countries and has between 50,000 to 70,000 members according to InSight Crime, a nonprofit journalism and investigation organization in Latin America and the Caribbean (“MS13 In the Americas” 3). Moreover, gangs such as MS13 are a crucial source of income for some communities and are in fact some peoples only option for food security. Choetsow Tenzin, a second-year student at Harvard pursuing social studies stated in the Harvard International Review, “out of desperation, individuals, mainly young men ages as young as 7 years old, were joining these gangs because it was seen as the best way to gain power, money, and safety” (Tenzin 44). These gangs in El Salvador can recruit so many young men because the gang provides a means of improving food security for that individual, however at the cost of the food security and safety of others. Though the circumstances seem dire, the fact that the gangs rely on people’s desires for food security and safety presents the government with a unique opportunity to undermine gangs. Already, the government has attempted to subvert the recruitment structure of gangs by promoting campaigns against gang-violence to reduce pressures to join gangs, according to Ms. Tenzin (Tenzin 44). However, these campaigns have little substance when gangs can influence communities through more than just violent acts. Some groups within MS13 have taken it upon themselves to provide quasi-social services to their communities in order to gain support and recruits. According to Douglass Farah, the president of the national security consulting firm IBI Consultants, and Kathryn Babineau, a research coordinator of IBI Consultants, MS13 developed “small scale social programs such as bowls of soup and a slice of bread as lunch for school children and the elderly,” and even, “employment opportunities in the informal labor market” (Farah et al 66). Rather than relying on violence alone to pressure people into joining the gang, MS13 is shifting strategies to gain support from the community in different ways. Here lies an opportunity. The government of El Salvador could focus on providing social services that gangs are using to manipulate communities and topple the structure of gangs in El Salvador to improve food security and physical security in the long run.

How can creating social programs reduce crime and improve food security? Look no further than the situation of MS13 in Honduras, where the gang has a notably stronger rooting in local communities than its counterpart in El Salvador. The situation offers the Government of El Salvador a unique perspective on how gangs integrate themselves within their respective communities and how the government can stop them. As mentioned previously the gang provides social services to the community and has a relatively positive relationship with its people. The government of El Salvador can use this knowledge to their advantage in preventing people from joining gangs in the first place. Dr. Jose Miguel Cruz, the director of research at the Florida International University’s Kimberly Green Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, notes a former member of the Honduran Gang Barrio-18 who said, “If the state intervened and gave all the benefits to the young people, I think this part of the gangs would not have much impact. The organizations are no longer looking for adults, but, rather, they are looking from a young age to form the gang...I don’t believe that with blood, or killing people, or increasing military budgets...there can be a solution” (Cruz 47-48). Though this is from a former member of a gang in Honduras, the situation in El Salvador is similar and if the government provides the same services that gangs use to entice new recruits, gangs can be eliminated in El Salvador.

Arguably, gangs are working to improve food security for the people of El Salvador more so than the government of El Salvador, and at first it may seem counterintuitive to undermine MS13 since the gang is shifting to help struggling communities. Despite appearing to be beneficial to communities, it cannot be forgotten that the gangs are simply purchasing the support of communities through social services and are the same groups responsible for 23,914 reports of crimes including rape, homicide and kidnapping in 2019 alone (“El Salvador 2020 Crime & Safety Report”). Given that the gangs are so violent, the knowledge of how they root themselves in a community is valuable to the Government of El Salvador for preventing gangs like MS13 from becoming a permanent threat to their people’s safety. To establish stable food security for the people of El Salvador, the government should implement social programs in the effort to eliminate gangs. This solution provides the most peaceful way of removing gangs from El Salvador and improving food security, although state-wide social programs are expensive.

Money is the main issue that plagues this solution. Currently El Salvador does not have the infrastructure nor the tax base to fund social programs such as medical care and farm protection services. For comparison, consider that in the U.S. \$51 million was spent on the Farm and Ranch land Protection Program according to the USDA’s 2021 budget summary (USDA 30).

This was \$14 million more than the \$37 million the U.S. gave to El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala for police training alone (GAO 1). More is being spent on U.S. social programs than on training police in South America, and if El Salvador must rely on foreign agencies to help fund its police force than it clearly is not able to move funding towards social programs. While the police are important, they can't stop the formation of criminals in a country where crime is one of few means to escape extreme poverty. Homicides have gone down because police have eliminated gang members, not because police have stopped people from becoming gang members. The optimal way to reduce crime in the long run is to improve the standard of living and establish social programs in El Salvador. Unless other opportunities are made available, people will continue to seek alternatives.

Where will the money come from then? Foreign aid to El Salvador had declined since former president Donald Trump initially rescinded support to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. According to Mr. Sires the chair of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade Committee on Foreign Affairs, Donald Trump cut \$400 million in assistance to the three countries (Assessing the Impact of Cutting Foreign Assistance to Central America, 2019). Without the support of foreign aid, El Salvador has much less flexibility to subsidize social programs. Moreover, El Salvador is not able to tax its already poor population. How then will El Salvador create social programs if it cannot tax its population for the money or shift its budget that relied heavily on foreign assistance? El Salvador needs a cheap way of improving the poorest areas of its country to bolster its economy and fund social programs. Establishing its own social programs appears to be a far-off goal for El Salvador but not an impossible one. One possible solution is funding from non-government organizations. To fund social programs El Salvador should invest in greenhouses provided by charitable organizations. Greenhouses would simultaneously improve the food security of the poorest people in El Salvador while investing in the food security of future generations. In El Salvador, water availability is a considerable struggle for farmers because during dry season nothing can be grown. In a study done by the UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, it was found that of the Central American countries El Salvador would have the lowest availability of water by 2100 given current trends of availability (Barcena 65). El Salvador is expected to have 1,366 cubic meters of water per year per person. To put that number in perspective, the average in the U.S. is 2,842 cubic meters of water per year per person, more than double the amount El Salvador is expected to have (National Water Footprint).

Greenhouses make effective use of water and would allow farmers in El Salvador to produce greater yields while conserving water resources. Wanchen Chung, who has a masters in International Economics and International Relations, performed a study of greenhouses in Africa where many of its agricultural struggles are shared by El Salvador (Chung 322). In her study she found that greenhouses costing around

\$350 in materials could drastically reduce water usage by up to 60% and increase crop yields by 300%. Given the similar conditions, El Salvador could benefit from these greenhouses. Because greenhouses conserve water, farmers in El Salvador would not only be able to increase their yields but also sell their crops at a higher price during the dry season. Much of the population of El Salvador would benefit since they grow crops for a living. According to the World Bank, roughly a quarter of the male workforce in El Salvador are farmers (Employment in Agriculture). These farmers can sell their crops to the U.S. duty free. In 2004 El Salvador signed the Central American United States Free Trade Agreement to establish free trade between the U.S. and several other Central American countries. According to the United States Trade Representative, El Salvador is the 50th largest exporter to the U.S. (United States Trade Representative). Both the U.S. and El Salvador would benefit from the increased yield in crops created by greenhouses.

With the assistance of charitable organizations, greenhouses could transform the lives of the poorest in El Salvador. Charities working in El Salvador are already privy to the poorest regions in El Salvador and are monitored by the U.S. Government. Under the care of project managers and overseers the benefactors of the greenhouses would be protected from extortion. Greenhouses are a good solution because they are managed by trusted organizations. Greenhouses will create economic opportunities for poorer communities in El Salvador. By allowing farmers to grow year-round, fewer people will be forced into crime to feed themselves and their families. More greenhouses mean less hungry communities and more economic growth. More economic growth means a larger tax base that the government can capitalize on to form social programs that gangs use to influence communities. More greenhouses mean improved food security for the people of El Salvador.

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² For citation purposes the pseudonym of the person interviewed was used in the Works Cited.

