



# Youth Well-being Policy Review of El Salvador

ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS



# **Youth Well-being Policy Review of El Salvador Assessment and Recommendations**



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## Assessment and recommendations

### Youth well-being in El Salvador and its main challenges

**Access to education has improved since 2004, but remains well below the Latin American average.** Secondary-school enrolment rate improved from 31.6% in 2004 to 37.9% in 2014 and the tertiary-education enrolment rate, also increased from 26% to 30.9% in the same period (MINEC/DIGESTYC, 2015). Despite this progress, they remain well below the Latin American average enrolment rates of 74% for secondary and 42% tertiary. Better coverage needs to be accompanied by better quality. The combination of low enrolment rate and high early school dropout rate leave many young people outside the school system. Non-attendance of school is strongly conditioned by the socio-economic situation of households, affecting especially young people from low income families or from families with several working members. El Salvador has one of the highest shares of young people who have not completed their secondary education (54% in 2014) in Latin America (OECD/CAF/ECLAC, 2016). Despite these challenges, the overall education level of young Salvadorans has improved, with more of them holding a secondary- or tertiary-level qualification in 2014 (35.5%) than in 2004 (25.1%) (MINEC/DIGESTYC, 2005; MINEC/DIGESTYC, 2015).

**Access to employment, particularly decent jobs is a major concern for the Salvadoran youth.** Between 2004 and 2014 the share of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) has stagnated at around a quarter of the youth, yet the current rate of 26.8% is one of the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the regional average is 20.6% (MINEC/DIGESTYC, 2014). The NEET rate among young women (41.1%) is three times higher than among young men (13.3%) (ibid.). Salvadoran young people who manage to join the labour market find work in low-skilled and poorly paid positions, usually in the informal sector. Nearly three in four jobs in El Salvador are in the informal sector, compared with a Latin American average of 47.3% (ibid.). There has also been an increase in the share of young people working as unpaid family members (from 12.1% in 2004 to 16.9% in 2014), a vulnerable job category (ibid.).

**Violence is the leading cause of death in the country and is paralysing social and economic productivity.** In 2015, youth mortality rate was 207.5 per 100 000 young people, well above the global (149) and Latin American (156) averages (WHO, 2016). The mortality rate is ten times higher among young men than young women, with homicide being the main cause of death. El Salvador also has the worse rates among Latin American countries in terms of sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Adolescent maternity rate is particularly high among poor women (23.2%) and women with a low level of education (29.8%) (MINSAL/INS/UNICEF, 2015), and knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases and HIV is poor among teenagers and young adults.

**Salvadoran young people tend to trust state institutions, but growing dissatisfaction about the National Civil Police is aggravating the violence problem.** Compared to other Latin American countries, distrust in state institutions (the justice system, the legislative assembly, elections, etc.) is relatively low (around a third) in El Salvador. Distrust in political parties (50.7% in 2014) is, however, high and growing (LAPOP, 2014). Distrust in the National Civil Police has grown between 2004 and 2014, creating greater challenges in terms of addressing insecurity and violence.

**Although the majority of young Salvadorans may seem to be generally satisfied with their lives, the thought of suicide or attempted suicide is high among teenagers.** In 2014, 11.7% of young people aged 18-29 indicated that they were dissatisfied with their life

(LAPOP, 2014). These data, however, must be interpreted with caution. Some of the data reveal a worrying situation that warrants further investigation. For example, 14.1% of those aged 13 to 17 have considered committing suicide in the last 12 months and 13.2% have tried to commit suicide at least once (MINSAL, 2013).

### Policies and the institutional framework for the youth

**In recent years, youth policies have gained greater importance and support from the government.** The institutional and regulatory frameworks have both changed considerably since the end of the Civil War in 1992 and the signing of the peace accords. Since 2012, El Salvador's institutions have included the National Youth Institute (INJUVE), which was created through the General Law on Youth and the National Council for Youth (CONAPEJ). The General Law on Youth and the National Policy for Youth, both introduced in 2012, were drafted with a vision for 2024. Another example of how the executive is increasing its focus on youth-related issues is the Five-Year Development Plan 2014-19 (PQD), which makes the youth one of its main target groups. The plan's three priorities (jobs, education and security) focus on key sectors of the population, including the youth. One pending issue is to adopt a more cross-sectoral approach. Although there are already youth-oriented education, employment, health and citizenship programmes, they do not always complement each other or have a cross-sectoral focus.

**The National Education Policy aims to create an inclusive education system that addresses dealing with violence.** Given the low enrolment rate in secondary education, the Ministry of Education has done considerable efforts to provide different educational options and improve coverage for adolescents and young people. The flagship programmes are those that provide school and food packs to try to ensure that students remain in school and have access to proper learning conditions. These programmes focus in particular on supporting lower-income families. The impact and coverage of these programmes, however, is hindered by the country's insecurity and violence.

**Employment policies and programmes aim to develop the skills needed for the labour market and to promote entrepreneurship.** *Jóvenes con Todo* (Youth with Everything) is a flagship programme that aims to improve the employability of working-age young people living in vulnerable situations. The programme helps young people find jobs and remain in the labour market, and promotes youth entrepreneurship. Programmes like this one generally focus on neighbourhoods and areas that are highly vulnerable with many social risks. Few, however, involve beneficiaries' families or communities, even though such people are vital to the programmes' success, especially for the marginalised youth living in highly vulnerable neighbourhoods. Furthermore, many programmes are aimed primarily at young people over the age of 18. Consequently, minors who have dropped out of school and do not work receive no support and are left to fend for themselves, becoming vulnerable to the influence of gangs. Finally, few programmes do proper monitoring and evaluations.

**Health policies for youth target different stages of the life-cycle.** Because of the Salvadoran context, many aspects of the policy emphasise violence prevention and the consequences of violence. Sexual and reproductive health is addressed through support programmes for pregnant adolescents. The programmes usually support young people who are in school or visit a health centre, which leaves out a large number of young people not in the system. A considerable challenge faced by the government is to expand the coverage of the programmes and to encourage young fathers to take joint responsibility for their children.

**Co-ordination and collaboration among the various independent bodies responsible for youth policies will be essential to implement cross-sectoral programmes.** To

implement successful youth policies, it is essential to work closely with government institutions, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international co-operation organisations. The effectiveness of inter-institutional work depends on the level of commitment and the extent to which a youth-oriented cross-sectoral approach is adopted at all levels. Despite joint efforts and initiatives to address the demands of the youth in education, employment, participation and security, the strategic partnerships needed to provide a comprehensive approach have not yet been firmly cemented. An important feature of the INJUVE (the government body responsible for youth) is that its administrative structure includes a cross-ministerial body: the Board of Governors. The board members are the main institutions in charge of public policies for the youth and there is a commitment to implementing joint initiatives.

**As a newly formed institution, INJUVE is in the process of consolidating its leading role as a governing body for youth policies.** The body responsible for youth in El Salvador has evolved, with its leadership and remit having been shaped by the national context. In recent years, progress has been made in terms of its leading role and in terms of recognition of other bodies. The weaknesses observed are derived from the fact that the INJUVE is a small institution compared with other government institutions. Because its budget is small, its infrastructure is inadequate and there is no continuous training programme for staff. The major threats to the government's work for and with young people are insecurity, the negative portrayal of young people by the mass media, and the consequences thereof. INJUVE should take advantage of the opportunity presented by the executive's decision to increasingly prioritise the youth and to throw its weight behind achieving the goals drawn up in the PQD.

**Youth participation in public life is evolving from a passive role to active engagement thanks in part to official exchange platforms.** Traditionally in El Salvador, youth participation is limited to information sharing and some consultation. To counter this trend, INJUVE has created numerous spaces for youth to participate, engage in debate and express themselves. For example, CONAPEJ (the National Youth Council) was established in 2012 and officially represents the youth on the INJUVE Board of Governors. Likewise, the recently created Youth Parliamentary Group could become an important tool to boost real participation among young people in policy making.

### Juvenile justice and young offenders

**Young people are both victims and perpetrators of violence.** Insecurity and violence in El Salvador have become major preoccupations for the population. Violence is perpetrated through crimes like homicide, kidnapping and extortion, among other forms. These crimes are linked to gangs known as *maras* or *pandillas*, which have become powerful, well-organised crime syndicates. In 2015, El Salvador overtook Honduras and Venezuela to become the most violent country in the Americas, with 108 homicides per 100 000 inhabitants. Young people under the age of 30 are the main targets of homicide, with 3 201 victims aged 15-29 in 2015. The perpetrators of crimes (including homicide) are also young people with links to gangs. In 2014, for every 100 000 minors, 418.5 were arrested by the National Civil Police (National Civil Police, 2016). Most of those young people come from poor, single-parent households in marginalised urban communities.

**El Salvador's juvenile criminal justice system is based on a series of international and national instruments and a set of policies, guidelines and institutions specifically for young offenders.** According to the standards of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), El Salvador has a separate regulatory and institutional framework specifically for minors, which is well-

defined and covered by legislation. In addition to this distinction between adolescents and adults, adolescents are divided into two categories: one for 12-16 year olds, with the authorities determining whether or not they have engaged in anti-social behaviour; and one for 16-18 year olds, with the authorities determining whether they have committed a criminal offence. The tasks, functions and duties of the institutions linked to the criminal justice system are clearly defined, with no overlapping powers, but some of those institutions do not exercise their powers.

**The law states that the provisional measures and final penalties imposed on juvenile offenders are designed primarily to educate them, and that juvenile offenders should not have their liberty removed unless there are extraordinary circumstances.** The measures alluded to are family counselling and support, cautions, rules of conduct, supervised probation, and internment (or deprivation of liberty). These measures were designed to reduce the number of repeat offenders and to rehabilitate offenders who are young. Internment means a custodial sentence, and is used only in extraordinary circumstances. Instead of internment, offenders can be sentenced to supervised probation, rules of behaviour or community service, provided that they do not pose a risk to the victims or witnesses and they are not repeat or regular offenders. The length of a custodial sentence depends on the offender's age, but there are no data available to conduct an in-depth study on whether the measures reduce the number of repeat offenders.

**Only cases with strong evidence go to trial.** In most cases, the definitive measures imposed are supervised probation and rules of behaviour. In 2015, only 13% of cases with criminal proceedings resulted in deprivation of liberty, which stigmatises young offenders and makes their reintegration into the community difficult. Over half of custodial sentences handed out to the youth are for homicide or extortion, and the perpetrators usually have links to a gang.

**Young people serving either a custodial or a non-custodial sentence receive support to facilitate their reintegration into society.** Support for young people serving a custodial sentence focuses on education, psychosocial care, family care, health care and the development of life skills. The support given to young people serving a non-custodial sentence seeks to keep them in education and improve their employability, while not separating them from their family and community, which are considered vital to the reintegration process.

**Provision of social support to youth who have committed an offence is regionally unequal.** The availability of programmes and services varies from one part of the country to another, as well as among the various support centres run by the Salvadoran Institute for the Integral Development of Childhood and Adolescence (ISNA). Reasons why the availability of these programmes and services is limited include resource shortages, management problems at detention centres, the lack of support for reintegration from certain sectors of society, and the strong influence of dynamics that are determined by gangs. Another major hurdle is the fact that detention centres have a shortage of specialists, a high staff turnover and inadequate staff training. The specialists they do have are exposed to psychological stress and even death threats against them and their families.

**Social support and the juvenile justice systems are not designed to cope with high levels of violence.** Those who operate the services explain that the juvenile justice system was designed to deal with young offenders in normal social settings, rather than to deal with the problems posed by gangs. Gang membership usually determines whether an offender's social reintegration programme is successful or not: those with strong ties to one of the gangs usually either refuse to take part in programmes of any kind, or participate only very passively. The ISNA's technical teams are aware of the situation and intervene



without interfering in gang dynamics, since it is impossible to break them. Similarly, because violence is so widespread in an environment of social exclusion, the failure of the programmes to adopt an integral approach and the limited willingness to reintegrate young people in society makes it difficult to effectively enforce young people's rights and provide them with a second opportunity.

**Young people who have completed their sentence usually face various challenges in the labour market.** Despite the support that young offenders receive in detention centres, their subsequent integration into the labour market is hindered by the fact that they receive only basic academic training or vocational training that does not equip them to compete with other young people. On top of that, they do not have work experience, and the diplomas issued by detention centres may constitute a stigma. The climate of violence and insecurity harms social cohesion and trust in the commitment of young offenders, which means there is little willingness to give them a second chance.

## Recommendations

**Youth programmes should specifically target young people living in poverty and in marginalised neighborhoods.** In all aspects of well-being, young people from poor families suffer the most. Poverty (or economic need) is often a determining factor for deprivation, as are school non-attendance, adolescent pregnancy and precarious job placement. The poor youth living in marginalised neighbourhoods are also more vulnerable to gang-induced risks, as they are more exposed to gang extortion and recruitment. Finally, it is crucial to develop policies that tackle the many challenges faced by poor young people and to ensure that adolescent mothers can study and work.

**Make school attendance more flexible to expand coverage.** The secondary-school enrolment ratio has increased, but remains far below universal coverage, and the percentage of young people who do not complete secondary school is among the highest in Latin America. One factor that contributes to this situation is the (opportunity) costs of education. It is therefore important to expand and improve the programmes that provide school and food packs. Another contributing factor is the terrible insecurity in school environments. These trends have to be reversed through strategies to reduce violence, so the government ought to respond to this situation in the short to medium term by making school education more flexible, allowing distance learning and even e-learning when insecurity makes it impossible to attend school regularly.

**Expand labour market insertion programmes to minors and seek to involve key stakeholders.** The proportion of young people not in education and the proportion of NEETs among 15-19 year olds are both high, yet many of the programmes that focus on skills, competences and labour market insertion target young people over the age of 18. To ensure that the potential of the inactive youth is not lost and to make sure they are not taken in by gangs, the minimum age for participation in jobs programmes ought to be lowered, and the programmes should allow participants to complete their secondary education at the same time. It is also important to strengthen the relationship between these programmes and private enterprises (such as through internships and through technical and vocational education and training) to raise the employability of the participants. Furthermore, certain schemes in other countries have highlighted the importance of encouraging the families and communities of marginalised young people living in highly vulnerable areas to participate, since by doing so they increase the programme completion rate and create an environment that encourages entrepreneurship, work ethics and soft skills.

**Support adolescent mothers.** Teenage motherhood is high in El Salvador, especially among poorer women or with a poor level of education. Domestic chores and the lack of



childcare services force many young women to stay at home, as evidenced by the low ratio of economically active women. This situation contributes to maintaining traditional gender roles. It is therefore important for the government to step up investment aimed at adolescent mothers. Investments need to include financial support for young mothers in a precarious economic situation, advice on upbringing of children, health services, and especially childcare services to allow adolescent mothers to work. These programmes and initiatives need to become more accessible to young women with the greatest needs, rather than serving only young women who attend school or a healthcare centre.

**Include access to statistical data and regularly monitor and evaluate youth programmes.** Few programmes are being evaluated, and the monitoring is deficient. There ought to be a permanent body responsible for supervising the implementation of programmes and for co-ordinating information to facilitate subsequent improvements. Evaluations ought to be co-ordinated and planned in advance, and should provide qualitative and quantitative information on processes, results and impact. Supervision of programmes ought to take place with a cross-sectoral perspective to ensure that the programmes do not overlap each other or have unexpected side effects. It is suggested that monitoring and evaluation procedures should include external technical support for government agencies to provide a perspective and feedback that are not contaminated by the procedures themselves. This would ensure that progress is made based on best practices and lessons learned. Furthermore, information on the situation of the youth is diffuse and often outdated. In order to develop the National Youth Policy, formulate policies, monitor and evaluate programmes, it is essential to improve the information sources used, to co-operate with the Directorate-General of Statistics and Censuses (DIGESTYC), to carry out studies on youth issues, and most importantly, to update, disseminate and improve the quality of this information and to facilitate access to the information, documents and surveys' questionnaires. To achieve this, the information system of the INJUVE has to be strengthened, in order to co-ordinate better on data collection with the DIGESTYC, to conduct its own studies and to compile and disseminate data to help decision makers.

**Improve the co-ordination of youth policies.** When youth policies are co-ordinated, they can address the interconnected challenges posed by the youth and the policies do not become merely a list of sectoral policies. The INJUVE Board of Governors is a potential instrument that El Salvador can already use to co-ordinate youth policies, but the board needs to better organise its members and expand its scope of responsibility to become an instrument that truly co-ordinates, rather than one that merely supervises the INJUVE. Therefore, for the board to co-ordinate all areas of youth policy, there also ought to be a commission formed by NGOs, international organisations and enterprise representatives. Co-ordination of youth policy should also involve the National Council of Childhood and Adolescence (CONNA), whose target population overlaps with that of the INJUVE, and the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development (ISDEMU), which would help to harmonise measures aimed at creating gender equality. INJUVE also needs to step up co-ordination with local authorities to ensure that it increases its impact by operating across the country, reaching all 262 municipalities.

**Strengthen the INJUVE's institutional structure and raise its budget.** The INJUVE is a small institute, so it needs to have a specific mission and vision and clearly defined relations with other government bodies. The 2010-24 National Youth Policy gave the INJUVE a long-term mission, but the Action Plan, which concluded in 2014, needs to be updated. An Action Plan is essential to define the INJUVE's purpose as an institution and ensure the successful development of the National Youth Policy. The INJUVE ought to invest in continuous training for its staff to ensure that they continue to be at the forefront of youth policies. The INJUVE's budget should also be raised. Currently, it receives

enough money to cover its administration and operating expenses and to implement the actions emanating from its programmes, but it needs a suitable budget line to fulfil its mission of implementing the National Youth Policy and to provide good-quality services in all 14 regions (*departamentos*).

### *Reform the juvenile justice system to facilitate reintegration*

**Increase the number of support programmes for offenders and ensure that programmes are tailor-made to the individual's situation.** The ISNA needs to increase its coverage and improve the availability of support programmes for young people serving non-custodial sentences. It also needs to strengthen its planning capacity and its co-operation with other public and private institutions, especially with sub-national government bodies that contribute to social integration. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security (MJSP), meanwhile, needs to develop programmes that continue to monitor young people who have served a non-custodial sentence, such as by providing grants to those who want to escape from the vicious cycle of violence (by studying, taking internships, etc.) and by ensuring their security. Generally speaking, other countries make their support programmes more effective and reduce the proportion of re-offenders by adapting their programmes to each young person's specific situation and to the severity of their crimes. Most importantly, it is vital to continue to monitor and support young people when they have finished serving a custodial sentence, since this is a crucial period for reintegration in which they need advice in decision-making. In addition to this support, it is also necessary to implement violence-prevention policies and programmes to detach these young people from criminal groups and gangs. For a violence-prevention plan to be effective, it needs to tackle the social roots behind violence and delinquency (poverty, exclusion and inequality) by working to improve communities.

**Involve families and communities to become part of the solution.** At present, the support networks (family, school, etc.) of young people who have difficulties reintegrating into society after serving their sentences are not involved in support programmes. Their absence contributes to detention centres becoming places that reinforce violence and gang codes. Young volunteers and youth organisations have suggested creating recreational and participatory spaces in communities so that young people who have completed their custodial sentence can use their free time in a positive way. These spaces can help to raise awareness in the community and foster positive behaviour.

**Increase the level of financing for the ISNA.** The ISNA has a small budget for its social reintegration programmes (USD 3.8 million, or 16% of its 2017 budget). These programmes need a larger share of the budget so that they can offer good-quality services and infrastructure, broaden the range of rehabilitation programmes for young people serving non-custodial sentences and attract skilled staff on competitive salaries. For this to occur, greater political dialogue is needed with the Ministry of Finance and the legislative assembly, which draw up the national budget. Furthermore, given the limited fiscal margin due to slow economic growth, a closer relationship is needed with multilateral institutions and international co-operation agencies to lay the foundations for a multi-year project with a structure that will be absorbed once public finances are back in order.

**Strengthen the capacity and practical skills of government officials and technical staff who work with offenders.** Staff who work directly with young offenders need to be particularly sensitive and professional. It is therefore necessary to develop permanent specialised training schemes for judges and members of the multidisciplinary teams involved in the juvenile criminal justice system. Creating these schemes will require drawing up a programme to provide continuous training that includes not only theory but

also the practical skills needed to provide better support to young people. It is also crucial to ensure that those working in the justice system are kept safe and provide support for each other so that they can do their jobs in the best possible conditions.

**Create an information system for monitoring juvenile justice and re-offending.** The juvenile criminal justice system and the social support it provides are not systematically supervised (there are no statistics, for instance, on how many young offenders re-offend), so it is difficult to evaluate the system and check whether it acts as a deterrent. Both the ISNA and the DGCI (*Dirección General de Centros Intermedios*, a public body responsible for running transitional detention centres for youngsters over 18 who still require additional support) need to create indicators to measure progress that is made and to make the necessary public policy decisions to become more effective. Anonymised data need to be made accessible to researchers so that they can provide scientific support for the system implemented. Similarly, the ISNA needs to fulfil its commitment and create a monitoring and assessment system. It is also important to consider whether information on re-offending ought not to be easy to access and ought not to be used in trials of adults.

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## ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the end of the civil war in 1992, El Salvador succeeded in reducing extreme poverty and inequality. In order to sustain this growth and take advantage of El Salvador's opportunity to achieve demographic dividend, it will be crucial to include youth considerations in national development. Youth inclusion and well-being are not only a matter of rights, but it is also beneficial to the State and society. Investing in education and creating employment opportunities for young people contribute to increased income and productivity. The report, which is part of the *Youth Inclusion Project* co-financed by the European Union and implemented by the OECD Development Centre, assesses the situation of social inclusion and well-being of young Salvadorans using a multidimensional approach. It analyses diverse aspects of employment, education, health and civic participation affecting youth, based on the latest data available. Thematic chapters focus on key challenges faced by Salvadoran youth, namely juvenile justice and the reintegration of youth in conflict with the law. Based on the findings, the report gives recommendations for the formulation of public policies in favour of youth.

Consult the full report on line at:

[www.oecd.org/dev/inclusivesocietiesanddevelopment/youth-country-studies.htm](http://www.oecd.org/dev/inclusivesocietiesanddevelopment/youth-country-studies.htm)



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