

Against all Odds

# Youth in Postwar Societies

The Case of El Salvador



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German Institute of Global and Area Studies  
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

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# **Against All Odds: Youth in Post War Societies**

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Isabel Rosales

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## Against all Odds - Youth in Postwar Societies

Postwar societies are high-risk contexts for the youth due to inequality, demographic pressure, dysfunctional institutions and the personal experience of violence. In these contexts, transitions to adulthood, i.e. economic independence, family formation, political citizenship, are difficult. While the awareness that young people are an important actor has risen considerably at the international level, young people's problems and needs are rarely priorities at the national and local level in developing societies. Youths enter the public sphere mostly when their behaviour is considered inappropriate, unsocial or violent, leading to claims about 'youth out of control'. Youths – most of all marginalized males – are considered a security threat as they account for the majority of perpetrators (and victims) of different forms of violence. Nevertheless, the vast majority of youth does not resort to arms or violence.

The case studies on El Salvador, Nicaragua, and South Africa show how formal possibilities of economic and political participation shape young people's transitions into adulthood. All three countries have a violent history but have also experienced a significant increase in the level of political participation during the last two decades. Former rebels have been elected president. The current youth cohort is the first postwar generation. Levels of postwar violence vary. El Salvador is one of the most violent countries in the world, Nicaragua has relative lower levels and South Africa presents decreasing levels of violence. While these different contexts shape young people's opportunities, a lot of similarities can be observed in these countries.

The country reports present the results of field research in early 2015. Focus group discussions with young people on their possibilities to participate were held in rural and urban contexts, in hotspots of violence and non-violent neighbourhoods. The reports show that most of the young people try to transit into adulthood by using the few possibilities provided by adult society. Major problems in all countries are related to the lack of decent work despite the fact that youth have a better education than their parents. Regarding political participation, young people express frustration that their specific needs and ideas are largely ignored by adults in government and society. This generational bottleneck contains a high potential for future conflict.

Sabine Kurtenbach

Hamburg, May 2016

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## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADESCOS	Asociaciones de Desarrollo Comunal
ANEP	Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada
ARENA	Alianza Republicana Nacionalista
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional
ILO	International Labour Organization
INJUVE	Instituto Nacional de la Juventud
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
LWP	Left Wing Party
18th Street	Mara 18
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
RHC	Rural High Crime
RLC	Rural Low Crime
RWP	Right Wing Party
UHC	Urban High Crime
ULC	Urban Low Crime

## Introduction

“Migration, blogs and gangs are youth’s rebellious acts of resistance”

Interview with male psychology professor at UCA, 2015

**EL** Salvador is the smallest country in the Central American region. Surrounded by Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, El Salvador has about 6,141,350 (2015 est.) inhabitants in barely 21,041 sq. km total area. The country has one of the highest population densities on the continent (291 H/km) and is among the poorest countries in the Latin American region. A distinctive feature of this country has been migration. El Salvador is a territorial space that has historically been a witness to different forms of immigration and emigration, and is categorized as a country of destination, transit, origin and return. Its geographic location makes it a transit space that allows easy mobilization from South and Central America to North America or from the North to the South. The population analyzed in this study are young people, officially defined by Salvadorian regulation between the ages

of 15 to 29 years (Asamblea Legislativa de El Salvador 2012). With a population between 10-24 years old that accounts for 32% of their total population (“Population Reference Bureau” 2013), and only 10% over 60 years old, it can be affirmed that El Salvador is a “young” country. Despite policies and institutions created for the protection and rights of the youth -that attempt to provide quality of education, decent work and health services- youth remains excluded (UNFPA 2015).

This report aims to answer the following questions: What opportunities are offered to youth in order to participate politically and economically? Where and how does youth become engaged? What are the alternatives when formal participation channels are blocked? This study is of special importance because in contrast to the majority of studies made in El Salvador about youth that focus on gangs and violence, this study focuses on

youth who are not part of gangs and sheds light on the factors that contribute to violence prevention of those youth.

This report has five main sections. First it introduces the historical background and contemporary dynamics in El Salvador, which set the basis to understand youth participation in the country. Second, it describes the method used and the characteristics of the groups that participated in the study with focus groups discussions. The third

section explains the opportunities and challenges for the transition to adulthood such as family formation, political and economic participation and youth regulation in the country. Fourth it explains what Salvadorian youth does in cases of blocked transitions, such as strategies to voice their needs or to exit their realities. Last, the conclusions present a summary of the report and point to future research avenues.

## **1. Context matters: Being young in El Salvador**

Four main events have contributed to El Salvador's demographic and migratory changes. First, though independent as of 1821, the region's livelihood did not change substantially until the late nineteenth century, when coffee and then other export harvests were introduced. The liberal reforms at that time privatized communal lands, displacing thousands of peasants and initiating a pattern that endures to this day: an oligarchy in control of both the land (dedicated to export over subsistence harvests) and the military, on the one side, and a majority of the population battling perpetual poverty, on the other. The combination of

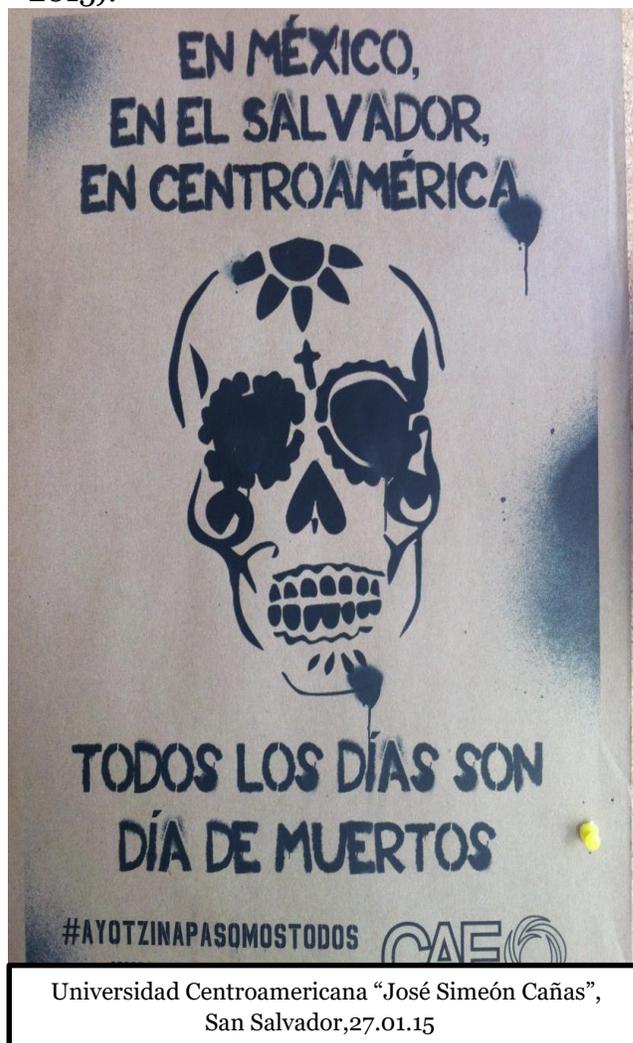
precarious agricultural labour with people displaced from the land brought about seasonal, rural-to-rural as well as rural-to-urban and intraregional migration – a phenomenon that lasted until the second half of the twentieth century (Roniger 2011; Torres-Rivas 2007).

The second main event was the demographic change brought about by the civil war between the military-led government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), an organization of five left-wing guerrilla groups that started in 1979 and lasted for 12 years. One of the main consequences of this event was the rise of Salvadorians

fleeing the country, mainly to the United States. After the signing of Peace Accords in 1992 the number of citizens leaving the country did not decrease. On the contrary, during the 2000s Salvadorian citizens continued to migrate to the United States and in 2010, it was calculated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that around 25 percent of Salvadorian nationals (close to 3 million people) resided in the U.S., and that more than half of this population lacked formal documentation (MRE 2010).

The third main event is related to border securitization resulting from a regional strategy. After 11 September 2001 there was a general increase of border surveillance brought about by regional policies such as the Plan Merida or Plan Sur. These policies have had consequences in El Salvador in that it led to an increase of violence to counter drug trafficking and the persecution of migrants along the borders. This situation not only led to a rise in international and intraregional migration in the country, but also brought new ideas for smugglers on how to avoid the new controls as well as a rise in smuggling and trafficking of people (UNODC 2010). Another important

consequence of the rise of border securitization is deportations, which have increased from 5,561 in 2003 to 73,272 people in 2014 (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería 2015).



Lastly, the existence of gangs has been a major theme for El Salvador. Gangs have existed in Central America for some time, and they are considered to be one of the most important consequences of the civil wars in the region. Both, Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) and Mara-18

(18th Street) belong to the broader category of Maras, which originated in the streets of Los Angeles in the 1980s. As violence escalated, the state of California implemented very strict anti-gang policies and deported several thousands of Mara members back to El Salvador. Deportees arrived to a country with few opportunities and a large number of unemployed population. Both of them, MS-13 and 18th Street founded cliques in their local communities, which attracted new young population and supplanted the already established local gangs. The estimated number of gang members in El Salvador, pertaining either to MS-13 or 18th Street, vary from 10,500 to 39,000 and the activities in which they participate varies: petty theft, extortion to local business and bus drivers, and inter-gang violence (Ribando Seelke 2014).

In March 2012, the MS-13 and 18th Street agreed to enter a truce, which was determinant for the decrease of homicide rates in the country. The truce encouraged gang leaders to talk to each other face to face and offered an alternative to hard fist policies (“mano-dura” policies) that have failed repeatedly to stop violence. However, due to conflicts between the different

negotiation groups the truce ended in March 2015. El Salvador’s FMLN left-wing president, Salvador Sánchez Cerén disowned the truce, even though he was vice-president when it was brokered. He feared that ARENA the right-wing party would bash him for being soft on crime. ARENA who is close to the National Association of Private Enterprise (Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada ANEP), hired Mr. Giuliani, a former mayor of New York City, who in his visit to El Salvador in January 2015 stated: “the best answer to terrorist groups and gangs is to confront them” (*The Economist* 2015). The facts, however, may prove him wrong. El Salvador’s murder rate dropped sharply during the truce with even not a single homicide according to the deputy police chief’s tweet on January 23, 2012 to the headline “one murder every hour” in August 2015 (Watts 2015). This re-surge in violence is a result of a government crackdown that has led to gunfights between police and criminals, as well as gang battles over territory. On August 24, 2015 El Salvador's top court reclassified the MS-13 and 18th Street as terrorist organizations, in what appears to be an official declaration of war and further militarization of domestic security as

well as a going back to hard fist policies against gangs. Some criticized the truce stating that it did not work because of lack of inclusion at the local level: “Even though it might be arguable that in fact homicide figures went down for two years, the sudden rise in the same statistics during 2014 is an example on how unsustainable these initiatives are, since they are not embedded in the community with trust in social institutions and people’s empowerment. In fact, the presence of a device such as the gang truce (where criminal groups arbitrarily decide to reduce an ongoing homicide outburst) is already enough evidence for weak institutions and a lack of traditional social control of violence” (Salguero 2015). All and all during the truce process, some positive mechanisms such as coordinated action, certification and social appropriation appeared (Hernández Anzora 2015). The truce was a space of participation where gangs (young and older members) felt like they had a saying and it was heard.

### **Perceptions about and from the youth**

Being young in El Salvador definitely depends on if they are middle class or poor, depends on gender. We asked in

some expert interviews, what does it mean to be young in El Salvador and one of the participants argued: “We should put that in plural. There are youths and not a homogenized youth because this is a country where different realities coexist. What youth is, is a social construction” (Male professor from UCA). Being young in El Salvador carries a strong stereotype marked by criminalization because of gangs or stereotypes that have to do with social status. People who live in wealthy areas do not perceive any problems of gang-related violence. However, for young men who are a majority in El Salvador, middle class or poor — their life is linked to gangs not because they belong to one, but because they are affected by them. For instance, to study in a public school is a risk because infiltrated gang members are constantly looking for new recruits for their gang” (Male professor from UCA). Even though this study is not about youth in gangs, this is important to understand how the youth in El Salvador is perceived. Young people make up gangs in its majority. Thus many youth living in contexts of poverty, social exclusion, lack of education and job opportunities are considered youth “at risk” (Ribando

Seelke 2014). Some state that youth unable to attend a university or obtain skilled employment provide a ready pool of gang-recruit, as explained by a Priest working with youth in El Salvador: “The lack of education and employment makes young people cannon fodder for the gangs... there is something worse than the gangs threatening the community; this is youth without a place to get education opportunities”. (Interview with Catholic Church Priest). Other studies have pointed out that youth living in unequal contexts is an important variable to understand why youth join gangs (Cruz and Giralt 2005). This argument is supported by other authors who state that inequality is the main aspect that contributes to violence but also to migration in postwar contexts (Zinecker 2007).

El Salvador’s youth has been highly criminalized. Security policies have aimed at suppressing gang activities instead of addressing the core crime issues (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011). Hard fist policies tend to create a difference between citizens who deserve protection and social groups considered

to be a potential threat. In a way, people who are part of these groups become the “criminal other” because the policies of *seguridad ciudadana* implicitly exclude them (Peetz 2008). Both Salvadorian society and repressive policies perceive youth as a potential threat. Just the fact that youth get together in a group might be a cause of suspicion. This causes an automatic criminalization and distrust of both the State towards the youth (belonging or not belonging to gangs), as well as from youth to their State institutions.

This distrust of youth and the state in both ways, has brought about another challenge to youth, this is the culture of silence (“cultura de silencio”). Many young people are perceived as having no interest in participating in the political life of the country. However, this has to be understood in the context of how complicated it was for the last generation to state their opinion during the armed conflicts. Youth in a postwar society such as El Salvador might have learned from their parents to be reluctant to discuss about certain topics in public.

Another important consequence of the culture of silence has been that youth has involuntarily perpetuated the domination of the generation that fought during the war. This generation dominates many spheres of the society such as the political system even until today. This is what Kurtenbach and Pawelz call generation bottlenecks. Referring to the cases of Guatemala and Timor-Leste the authors show that bottlenecks ignore or block agency of youth and their ability to transition into the phase of active participation in postwar societies: “Given the fact that youth represent the largest part of the population in most of these countries, the voice of youth could have salient effects if they organized and participated. When young people refrain from action,

political elites have an easy time staying in power” (Kurtenbach and Pawelz 2015, 2). This holds true for El Salvador as a post war society. In most of the focus group discussions conducted on this study, young people mentioned “adultocentrismo” (an adult-centric society) referring to the fact that many adults are holding key positions, both in the political as in the labor spheres as one of the main obstacles to participate. On the one side, youth perceives that adults do not want to grant them opportunities to work or participate in political parties. On the other side, adults see youth as unoccupied and thus free-labor market either for companies or for political parties that see youth in a utilitarian way to collaborate for free during the political campaign.



## 2. Methodological procedures

This study aims to find differences and similarities of ways youth participate or cope with lack of participation opportunities in contexts with different levels of violence. Thus, the population selected for this study is young people between 15 and 29 years old. Youth was selected living in rural and urban municipalities, as well as in high and low crime areas. To widen our findings, we also conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth participating with the left wing party (LWP), FMLN, and with a right wing party (RWP), ARENA.

In order to obtain data and select the groups, which took part in this study, a first phase was made with the collection of reports, local studies and research related to the topics of youth and participation in general and in El Salvador particularly.

For the sample definition we tried to have a department in each of the

administrative regions of the country: 1) West (Ahuachapán); 2) Center I (San Salvador and La Libertad); Center II (La Paz). We only missed a department in the east side of the country, but the main characteristics of the sample were met: a high percentage of young population, high and low crime areas as well as urban and rural areas.

During the second phase of this study, we did fieldwork in El Salvador for six weeks. The first step here was to conduct expert interviews with actors of the civil society, government (police and youth institutions) and international cooperation organizations. Some background interviews were especially helpful in order to get in touch with key contacts for the organization of FGDs. The main difficulty was to get access to high crime municipalities.

**Table 1. Description of Focus Groups Discussion Participants**

Name	Code	Place	Date	Size	Male	Female	Age (mean)
Agentes de Cambio	ADC	San Salvador, San Salvador	January 31, 2015	5	60%	40%	28
Urban Low Crime	ULC	Antiguo Cuscatlán, La Libertad	February 2, 2015	8	38%	63%	16
Urban High Crime/ Left Wing Party	UHC/ FMLN	Zacatecoluca, La Paz	February 5, 2015	12	33%	67%	23
Rural High Crime	RHC	Santiago Nonualco, La Paz	February 9, 2015	3	100%	0%	22
Rural Low Crime	RLC	Jujutla and Guaymango, Ahuachapán	February 10, 2015	5	60%	40%	24
Right Wing Party	ARENA	San Salvador, San Salvador	February 12, 2015	7	57%	43%	24

**Source:** Authors' calculation based on research questionnaires.

In total, we conducted six FGDs. The key-characteristics can be found in Table 2. The first FGD was with youth of the Program Agentes de Cambio, a group of youth in their twenties who get together regularly and are politically active. The relevance of this group comes out of the fact that its members have work experience specially within the government, which is one of the main requirements to acquire a scholarship to enter this program, financed by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. This group was the first one where we conducted a FGD and served to gain a wider view of the urban youth perception. However, it is not taken into the comparative analysis

of the base cases, which are high and low crime areas and rural and urban areas.

The urban low crime ULC FGD took place in the school Walter Deninger, in Antiguo Cuscatlán, Department of La Libertad. Here it is important to mention that this group is very different to the rest of the groups since the participants were still in school, thus the youngest group in this case study. However, this will provide us with insights of the differences of attitudes towards participation across different ages.

The third group urban high crime (UHC) was in Zacatecoluca, La Paz, a municipality with one of the highest homicide rates in El Salvador and home of the high security prison. The particularity here is that they happened to be involved and supportive of the FMLN, left wing party. Thus, this group is taken as both UHC and LWP. The fourth group was in Santiago Nonualco, a municipality also at the department of La Paz, high crime as well but rural. The main challenge here was to get participants, because many of the invited have migrated or in the case of women faced difficulties to get permission from their parents to participate. This was also the case of the rural low crime municipalities of Jujutla and Guaymango in Ahuachapán, with less participation of women. Lastly, the right wing party ARENA participants were selected randomly only because of their participation within the party so that no other variables such as crime level of the city they live in was taken into account, although the participants lived in San Salvador.

Each group participant filled out a questionnaire and then we had the FGDs both with questions regarding:

**a) General data:** sex, marital status, and family situation.

**b) Education:** years of schooling.

**c) Economic participation:** work related issues.

**d) Political participation:** interest in politics, if they vote, how they follow political events, if they are members of a party.

**e) Navigation:** asked about the type of memberships they have religious, sports, cultural, unions and any other ways of participation that enables them to stay afloat and be involved in their community.

**f) Voice:** how they externalize their wishes and demands. If not through conventional channels like voting, being members of parties, how? For instance, the use digital media, protests, performance, music or any other type of expressions.

**g) Exit:** the main question here was if they had family abroad or if they ever thought of migrating.

**h) Violence assessment:** they were asked if they or their families had been victims of war related and contemporary violence.

**i) View of their community:** participants were asked to identify the main topics within their community.

Regarding the most important topics youth identified in their community, this table provides the results of that question because it will give us an overview of how each group perceives their current situation in order to understand where they are coming from when reading the report.

The comparison with the department level results of the Instituto Nacional de la Juventud (INJUVE) survey serves to observe that the sample results coincide with the department youth perceptions even if they are not numbered in the same priority.

**Table 2. Most Urgent Topics Perceived in Youths' Communities**  
**Comparison between Department and FDGs**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Department: Ahuachapán</b>	<b>Focus Group: Jujutla and Guaymango (RLC)</b>
First	Unemployment	Patriarchy
Second	Violence	Lack of education
Third	Gangs	Unemployment
Fourth	--	Violence
Fifth	--	Migration
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Department: La Libertad</b>	<b>Focus Group: Antiguo Cuscatlán (ULC)</b>
First	Unemployment	Unemployment
Second	Gangs	Violence
Third	Poverty	Lack of participation opportunities
Fourth	Crime	Politics
Fifth	--	--
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Department: La Paz</b>	<b>Focus Group: Santiago Nonualco (UHC)</b>
First	Unemployment	Insecurity
Second	Vices	Youth and communitarian organization
Third	--	Unemployment
Fourth	--	--
Fifth	--	--
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Department: La Paz</b>	<b>Focus Group: Zacatecoluca (UHC)</b>
First	Unemployment	Insecurity
Second	Vices	Lack of education
Third	--	Unemployment
Fourth	--	International cooperation
Fifth	--	Lack of inclusion/ discrimination

**Source:** Department data - INJUVE 2012; Focus group data 2015.

### **3. Opportunities and challenges for the transitions to adulthood**

#### **Family formation**

Family as an institution has gone through several changes in El Salvador especially after the war. Some examples of these changes are the inclusion of women in the labor market and migration. Increase in migration during the war had as a consequence that women stayed alone at home with their children. Later during the 1990s more women started to migrate too, leaving their children with their grandparents, but especially with their grandmothers. Another change in the family formation had to do with an income improve that some families experienced when their families that have migrated sent them money (remittances), as well as social remittances (influenced the idea of their families who stayed on how to spend their money) for instance in: private health and education degrees. The expectations and variety of choices of what some families want to acquire have also grown. This has had an impact in the delay of the youth to leave their homes, in the middle class even to postpone marriage and the decision of

having children. This postponement of emancipation of youth from their core families is what has being called: “extended youth” (Ramos et al. 2011). Nevertheless, in the poorest families, the youth does not leave their homes because of a lack of income to move out of their home. They do not earn enough money to pay for a rental somewhere else, and in most cases they need to work to support their families.

However, some young people do get married in El Salvador because of religious reasons. They want to start having sex and feel that with marriage it will be officially allowed. Nevertheless, the majority starts having sex before marrying and the lack of sexual education has had an impact in teenage pregnancy. The majority of the interviewed stated that having children is one of the main rites to transition to adulthood, due to the compromise and financial and social responsibility that it involves. 30% of pregnancies in El Salvador are teenage pregnancies (UNICEF 2011). When this occurs, young people acquired new

commitments. Getting married becomes a luxury they cannot afford. They would need to invest in a wedding, buy a house, car, and get everything ready for the baby. In order to achieve this, they would have to take out a loan. To obtain a bank loan, they would have to prove their creditworthiness to the bank, for instance by showing that they have had a steady job with average contract duration of 3 years. Job stability is definitely not a characteristic of the economic system in El Salvador. All of these factors make it complicated for youth to start a family nevertheless they do it at an early age.

Since youth pregnancy is still happening quite frequently, youth without jobs or enough income move in together instead of getting married. That saves some costs. In El Salvador people often talk of

“acompañarse”, meaning they had moved in together. If we look at the results of the focus groups discussions (FGDs) the majority of the interviewees were single and if they had a partner, the majority were living together without marrying. According to the DIGESTYC survey of 2011 youth from 15 to 29 who moved in together were around 200 thousand in comparison to 150 thousand of those who got married. Salaries are so low, and when young males live with their grandmother and take care of her (because the parents are in the US) the easiest choice is to bring their pregnant girlfriend to live with them at his parents’ house. Instead of moving somewhere else and paying another rent.

In this context it is possible to understand why in the absence of



economic stability and secure neighborhoods, many young marginalized Salvadorians have turned to their families. When asked who do you trust the most in your community and who do you go to, if you experience violence? for both questions the first answer was: Family.

## Citizenship

El Salvador is a presidential democracy and bi-partisan system comprising the conservative ARENA and the leftist FMLN party. According to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index El Salvador has a liberal-representative democratic form of governance, which although it is not threatened, shows problems in effectiveness and representation, as well as deficiency with respect to the rule of law. Even so, El Salvador has a score of 6.7.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a report by Freedom House characterizes this Central American country as respectful for freedom of press both in theory and practice (Freedom House 2016). This should mean that there is enough room for any citizen in general to participate if they wish so.

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<sup>1</sup> This score is measured by democracy and market economy indicators, for more information see: <http://bti2003.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/102.0.html?&L=1&L=0>.

In a broad sense citizenship is understood as formal acknowledgment of a person's integration into the rights and duties system shared in a determined society. Marshall's concept of citizenship is building upon three types of rights: civil, political and social (Marshall 1950). In this section we focus on the political rights. Our aim was to find out about the political participation that the Salvadorian youth has in different circles (school, neighborhood, church), the ways they participate, their posture towards politics (how and if they follow politics) and more formal ways of participating for instance if they vote. We also analyze up to a certain extent elements of political culture such as who do youth perceive as the most influential person in its community and at the national level. Table 3 shows some results of these questions from all the FGDs.

An interesting fact is that the majority – no matter if urban or rural, men or women – are interested in participating and would participate in elections. The main difference among the groups is between high and low crime communities. A possible explanation for this is that the participants of the FGD

conducted in a low crime community were younger (average of 16 years old) as the rest of the groups, thus they may not be so interested in participating yet. Another observed fact is that both in rural and urban areas all young people expressed their interest in participation in the next elections.

Contrary to what has being said that rural youth have less means to participate, the results in this study show that both, urban and rural youth participate by using social media to express themselves. Some saw in programs such as the municipalities free of violence “municipios libres de violencia” a plurality of actors offering participation possibilities: NGOs, Church (Music, productive projects).

Many youth from the FGDs argued that there are no quotas for young people, only for women (less than 40 years old for instance).

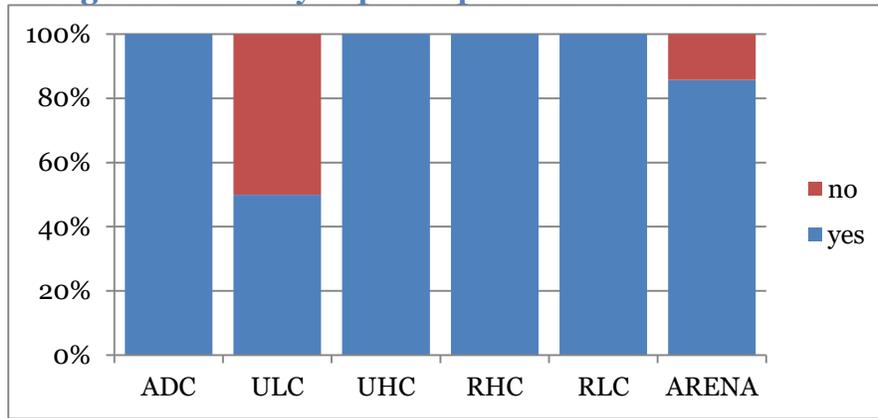
Surveys on individuals’ perceptions about the political system show an interesting overview of the country’s democratic regime. The 2008 IUDOP’s Youth National Survey conducted to 1,234 individuals between 15 to 24 years across El Salvador found that the fourth part of the interviewees are active members of a sports team and nearly more than the fifth part belongs to some religious group, whereas the affiliation to political parties and community organizations barely represents more than 3% (Santacruz Giralt and Carranza 2009).

**Table 3. Salvadorian youth and their interests in getting involved politically**

Question	Urban	Rural	High Crime	Lower crime	Male	Female	All
<b>Interested in politics (in %)</b>	75	100	100	64.54	85	90	87.5
<b>How interested (scale from 1 to 5)</b>	3	3	3.5	2.41	3.55	3.68	3.46
<b>Participate in elections (in %)</b>	80	100	100	69.23	85	90	87.5

**Source:** Focus group discussion results, 2015.

**Figure 1. Would you participate in the next elections?**



**Source:** Authors' calculation based on research questionnaires.

Against this background, a survey designed by the National Democratic Institute finds that the 48.7% of the respondents show total confidence for churches, while total confidence for

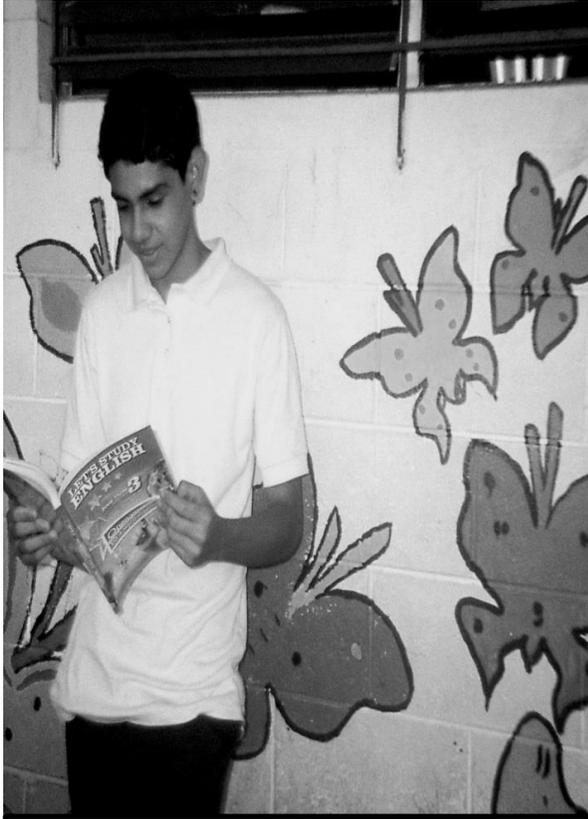
political parties and the Congress is only of 2.9% and 3%, respectively (Nevitte 2009). A more detailed description is shown in the table below:

**Table 4. Participation of Salvadorian Youth**

**Type of Membership**

Type of Organization	Active Member			Non-active member			Does not belong		
	Female	Male	TOTAL	Female	Male	TOTAL	Female	Male	TOTAL
<b>Sport Team</b>									
<b>Religious Group</b>	11,8	39,9	26,0	1,4	5,3	3,4	86,8	54,8	70,6
<b>Political Party</b>	23,6	20,6	22,1	4,5	6,2	5,4	71,9	73,2	72,5
<b>Community Org</b>	1,8	4,8	3,3	1,5	2,2	1,8	96,7	93,0	94,9
<b>Cooperative</b>	2,6	4,1	3,3	0,4	0,1	0,2	97,0	95,8	96,5
<b>Security</b>	1,1	1,9	1,5	0,4	0,4	0,4	98,5	97,7	98,1
<b>Other</b>	0,3	1,2	0,7		0,5	0,3	99,7	98,3	99,0
	1,3	2,7	2,0	0,3	0,4	0,4	98,4	96,9	97,6

**Source:** Santacruz Giralt and Carranza 2009.



Antiguo Cuscatlán, La Libertad, 02.02.15

In January 2011, the Salvadorian government held the Youth National Dialogue (Diálogo Nacional con Juventudes) along with young population from 262 municipalities, in order to collectively build a youth policy program. Different focus groups according to the activities of the respondents (teenage mothers, prisoners, students, gang members, young party members, among many others) were made and told to identify El Salvador's main problem. The two main issues identified as problematic by the youth were both unemployment and poverty,

and security and violence. "Youth are excluded and stigmatized, this has created 'rebellious feelings'" (Church mediator of the Truce 2015).

The main difference found between urban and rural youth is that urban youth use social networks, want to have political agency, they organize forums, formal proposals, they are used to the food after the events. They do not go to the streets. The difference with rural youth is that there are more agricultural activities; they organize more to solve their problems at the communitarian level. "Rural youth get together more and are not expecting anything for free not even a snack" (Employee of INJUVE 2015).

### **Economic opportunities**

As discussed in family formation section, family support provides mainly emotional and affective support in the construction of the life of a young person. An interesting finding is that in the low crime rural areas, contrary to expected young people are studying at the university because even with low economic income, family's support becomes vital to continue education.

There are other cases where there is economic support but no emotional support. As a consequence, although adolescents grow up with a nuclear family dad, mom, etc. the parents failed sometimes to fulfill their roles, and the emotional support was absent. In some families it becomes urgent to provide food, these parents become disoriented in providing other things to his children.

As a female psychologist UCA professor explained, one of the main reasons for youth to seek for an exit somewhere is the lack of emotional support, which in many cases becomes impossible for full time working parents: “Take for instance the ladies working in the *maquilas*. They start to work at 6 am, meaning they have to leave home at 5 in the morning ... if money is not enough they will most-likely have another job, or come home to clean and prepare food. Many other parents return home at 8 pm. How do they manage to build a bond with their children? There is a breakdown of the bond and the need to build a new relationship emerges. Thus, youth seek a form of emotional support somewhere or a way to financially help their parents or their own started families.”

On the requirements to get a job when you are young in El Salvador...

*“They are asking for job experience of five years and now ask you in your resume where you live, and if you live in a dangerous area you will not get the job. If you come from Soyapango, Apopa of those areas near Mejicanos they will not give you the job. Some companies even come to your house. They came to my house. They want to see how you live and ask your neighbors, because they need referrals to see if you’re not involved of have ties with gangs. The topic of gangs is a whole structure that has limited the labor access... Now if you’re young, you’re a woman it is even more complicated because you know the only job you can easily get is in maquilas, which hire more women.”*

(Female participant of FGD with Urban high crime area, 2015).

Results show that although there are employment possibilities, most of them are underemployment. “Maquilas, call center, they only reinforce the poverty cycle. 6 out of 10 of young people live in poverty. More than half! Even if young people have a job, it is precarious. Call Centers are maquilas for young people. Making social mobility impossible” (male psychology professor at UCA, 2015). Other work opportunities are offered by the private sector ANEP/ILO or cooperation organizations working together but the projects are not

sustainable, however there are not so many opportunities. Some think it would be better if the private sector supported the State more: “There should be alliances with the public and the private sector because it is them who generate employment” (Employee of the Ministry of Labor, 2015). Many young people from the focus groups complained to be working in the informal sector or to be

underemployed: “Even if you find a job, you get lousy wages, long working days, unrealistic goals, and sometimes without basic labor or health insurance. Is there an alternative? 35% to 45% of businesses in the country are informal, thus these people have no minimum wage, social security or decent conditions of work” (male participant of FGD urban high crime area, 2015).

**Table 5. Education and Employment of Youth**

Question	Urban	Rural	high crime	low crime	male	female	all
Education (years of schooling)	13,45	15	15,2	12,38	16	15,9	15,94
Economic participation (do you work?)	55,0	75,0	66,67	53,85	70	65	67,5

**Source:** Focus group discussions, 2015.

#### 4. Governability, state and civil society

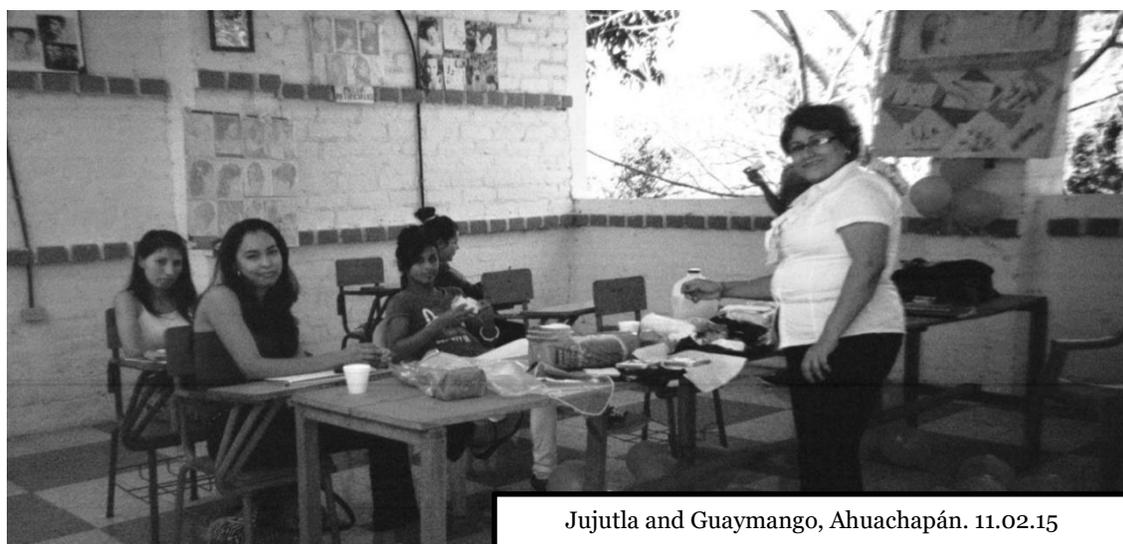
As already seen in some sections of this paper, criminalization is what most harms youth in El Salvador. It is almost impossible to make a distinction between a young person who has joined a gang in El Salvador or one who has not. This is especially true for youth living in high crime areas. Criminalization can occur in many spheres of a young person. As one female participant commented how it is to apply for a job and live in a high crime area and the strategies that they have had to come up with, out of fear of not being hired: “I have had to lie

in the forms when applying for a job and write another address. Otherwise the employer might think I am a gang member or that I might bring trouble to the office just because of the neighborhood where I live. I’ve heard this strategy is not working for everyone lately because now companies send people from human resources to verify that the address provided is real, or they just want to see where you live” (Female participant focus group discussion, San Salvador).

In the Salvadorian society not only employers from companies criminalize youth, the main actor that has been doing this for a while is the State. After the proliferation of “hard fist” policies, gangs adaptation strategies changed, and stopped tattooing of wearing visible tattoos and wearing baggy jeans in order to not be so easily identified. This adaptation strategy has made gang members hard to find by police members and has brought about the criminalization of any young person living in a high crime neighborhood - with or without tattoos-. Anyone can be a suspect in the eyes of the police. In an interview with a chief of the Salvadorian Police he talked about a high crime *colonia* (neighborhood) in San Salvador, called La Tutunichapa: “Youth has been criminalized here for living in a high

crime neighborhood. They are victims of the fight against drug trafficking. No matter their ideology when in power, parties in El Salvador have not invested in prevention but in fighting against the ‘enemy’. Criminalization with hard fist policies turned out being highly violent.” (Male police officer, El Salvador).

Police is perceived by youth as their enemies because they have not set an example of dealing with conflicts in a peaceful way, on the contrary repressive policies have increased violence. This takes us to the other form of criminalizing youth, by the neighbors. The mix of lack of trust in the Police and also thinking that youth are born troublemakers has brought about the trend that it is better to ignore conflicts. Thus, many adults will tell young



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persons to rather stay at home; to not go out in the evening; to not confront the neighbors; to not denounce crimes, in order to not “make it larger”. This type of advice does not solve the problem it just makes it invisible. A strategy to cope with violence in El Salvador has been the “culture of silence”. The main challenge faced by youth living in rural areas is that the relation towards public authorities is ambiguous. On the one hand, people expect the Police to provide security, but on the other hand they do not trust them. So they prefer to stay in silence. This phenomenon is observed in both rural and urban areas, the difference is that in rural areas the police has a closer relationship to the inhabitants and thus they know everyone. This can become a problem when youth want to denounce crimes, as explained by a young male in a rural low crime community: “I learned my lesson not to report something to the Police. I heard the neighbor was beating his wife and called them (the Police). They came immediately and told the neighbor that I have complained, he denied it all and got out of it without a problem. The next weeks I started to receive threats from the neighbor because the Police told him who had reported him. I am never going

to the Police again. It just endangers me and my family”.

Another issue is that young persons are criminalized for being young. “There is a myth in El Salvador that is being invaded by criminal adolescents and, more recently, by mafia organizations” (Oettler 2011). As a young woman from a rural low crime area explained: “Our community used to be so safe, but so poor too, thus, many people migrated to San Salvador. Now many of these families are coming back and people in the community say that their adolescent children might have turned into gang members while living in San Salvador, when in reality they are coming back because even if it means to be poor, they would be safe. People in the community say that they are bringing gang members with them. They are bringing the problems to us” (Female, FGD rural low crime area).

In summary, the relationship between State institutions, society and youth is a vicious circle fed by criminalization of youth in El Salvador. State institutions attack youth because they might be gang members or criminals, thus youth do not trust public institutions. This circle is reinforced by the culture of silence, in part legacy of the internal armed conflict

and in part of the current situation of violence in El Salvador. This culture of silence does not allow a different

approach to conflict resolution between the State and the society.

## 5. Navigating blocked transitions

The poorer you are, the faster your transition to adulthood. Depending where a young Salvadorian is born, there might be the chance that they are subject to “*moratoria social*”. Middle class youth have the possibility to delay this transition they expect a linear trajectory, prolongation of their student life and start a family later. However, there are other young people marginalized, especially in high crime areas where young males need to reinforce some masculinities as soon as possible. It is expected that males support their families, and if they have a partner, or become fathers very young they will need to reinforce certain roles, more traditional roles, where men need to support their homes, thus bringing responsibilities sooner. “Some young people are pushed to a premature adulthood. Two main factors can be accountable for this: ‘the lottery’ where you were born, and context related aspects plus ingredients like violence, drugs contribute to lock yourself in a

context”. (Interview with UCA male psychology professor, 2015). According to a Church representative in El Salvador, some necessary conditions to a good transition are: a) Integrated family (protection, love) b) Violence-free context c) Economic opportunities d) Education e) Opportunities to generate legal income f) A non-criminalizing role of the State. This holds true for any young person living in high or low crime, rural or urban areas.

### Manifestations of voice: Formal channels and alternative ways of participating

One could argue that in El Salvador, political participation opportunities have increased since the civil war in 1992. However, participation mechanisms are still scarce. Yet these mechanisms are very different in rural and urban areas. To participate in rural areas seemed easier because community organization is promoted. In rural areas the Local Development Association (Asociación de

Desarrollo Comunal, ADESCOS) communities seems to work pretty well, and there is even a participation platform for children called the ADESQUITOS. But this is not spontaneous participation. It is promoted. The ADESCOS are made up of adults over a lifetime. “The problem with these institutions is that El Salvador does not prioritize generational change ‘relevo generacional’” (Interview with young female legislator from ARENA). The interview with a young legislator from ARENA party, and having had focus group discussions with young people from both ARENA and FMLN youth reflected that what we see at the local level is also what we see it in the macro level at the Legislative Assembly and ideology does not matter either, youth from both parties complained about lack of generation renewal at all levels, even in the youth wing.

Regarding “non-conventional ways” to participate criminalization and adultism are the main two problems observed in channeling demands of youth in El Salvador. For example, there are programs offered by the Mayor’s Office with the support of international cooperation where youth took some

skate board or graffiti classes to voice their needs. These programs were unfortunately not successful because the anti-graffiti unit came to stop them, as explained by a male youth from a rural low crime area. Nevertheless, there have been some successful programs such as El Polígono La Iberia, where youth learns among other things, how to play instruments, paint, etc. In order to avoid criminalization and violence, in this program no one asks where these young people come from. As a worker at El Polígono La Iberia explained during an interview: “Art has united them, there are no territories here, they come here, inside of this place nobody asks, and nobody is interested to which gang you belong to”. This is a good example of an alternative way where youth has been able to channel their voice, nevertheless this is not always the case as explained in an interview with a Church member of the Truce negotiation: “Churches have not been capable of integrating all youth, to integrate the excluded. On the contrary, everything is a sin or they take them to escape reality. Activities by the Church are ‘adultized’ and dogmatized. Marginalization is a type of violence”. Being young in El Salvador is already a challenge to channel voice because of

adultized society, criminalization and the culture of silence. To add up to these characteristics, another real challenge faced by Salvadorian youth is gender and sexual preferences. As stated in an interview with an INJUVE public official: “If you are young and a member of the LGBT community you have less chances to get an employment”. For young and poor women, the situation is even more pressing. Sexism plays a huge role in the way young women participate especially in rural areas. As explained in two FGD by youth in both, high and low crime rural areas, women are more restricted than men to join many kinds of activities to channel their voice, for fear that they might get pregnant. An extreme case was the high crime rural FGD that was integrated only by men, because young women had to cancel last minute because their parents did not let them

participate. Here the role of the international cooperation is also fundamental when financing alternative programs for youth they need to take this into account, because young woman explained in a low crime rural FGD: “my father would not let me join the dance lessons offered now by the Spanish Cooperation, because he thinks it might be inappropriate for other young men to see me dance. Instead I am allowed to go to a painting course”. It is clear that this is also related to conservative roots of the Salvadorian society particularly observed in rural areas.

Traditional social spaces for youth to use their voice are the university, the church, the mall, and at home. It seems that after the war, spaces to socialize and exert voice have been restricted and have homogenized spaces and type of



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socialization. Previous generations had more social spaces and more heterogeneous, for instance before the war, when students would go out to the streets and protest, or when it was not dangerous to go play outside and everyone would meet new friends on the streets. As explained by a female psychology professor at UCA: “Creating more spaces for socialization would contribute to reduce the need for youth to join gangs. Offering more opportunities for socialization. To the extent that these other spaces will offer other possibilities”. These spaces have been created mostly in urban areas, as it was observed in three focus group discussions with urban youth, access to social media makes a difference. These youths participate in a digital way. Whether twitting or posting of Facebook has a real impact or not in a young Salvadorian reality, this is a channel to exit their thoughts, frustrations and unconformities. This way of participation involves less socializing, in contrast to communitarian organization observed with rural youth.

### **Options to exit**

In his book about God and Gangs in Central America, Brenneman explains

that youth gang members seek out of the gang because they are bored (2011). This is the same reason why youth not involved in gangs seek out for either a gang or a church. Out of boredom, or looking for inclusion. During the war youth “getting-together” was vetoed, when young people were organized in groups. Nowadays youth is still criminalized for getting together. This time, youth organizations are vetoed because they may be criminal groups. As stated by the Church member who negotiated the Truce: “Gangs have come to fulfill abandoned spaces by the state”. Thus, belonging to criminal groups has become one of the main exits for Salvadorian youth.

A gender specific exit for many young women is to start to have children. They may think that they are not going to get a job anyway because of lack of education or job opportunities. As explained by a young female from a high crime urban area: “I have no other possibility. So I thought to myself that’s what I can be: a mom. Why deprive myself of all that I can be? I will not have a pension when I am old, but at least if I have children, maybe one will be good enough to support me”.

Lastly, another exit strategy for youth in El Salvador has been migration. The crisis of the 1980s included a deterioration of wages, repression of union movement, informalization as a powerful catalyst to restructure the Salvadorian labour market (Robinson 2003). According to Pérez Sáinz (2005) there are four tendencies of the Central American labour market due to globalization that explain current conditions: (1) the deregularization of formal employment, new proletarianization among those who have become wage workers in agro-export plantations, maquiladora factories and tourist facilities; (2) the rising exclusion because of high levels of underemployment; (3) emigration; and (4) the rise of self-employment, generally in the informal economy. These tendencies are important to understand the three main types of immigration occurring in El Salvador. Because of the sugar plantation industry, in the 1980s the number of seasonal workers or daily contract laborers (instead of permanent employees) started to increase. Thus, there was an explosion of the informal urban economy. This had as a consequence that peasants started migrating to urban

centers or to neighbor country, Honduras. International migration however has played a major exit role in El Salvador's youth. The number of population abroad compared to other Central American countries is striking. According to El Salvador's Foreign Affairs Ministry, it is estimated that 2,5 million Salvadorians live abroad out of a total population of 6,227,491.<sup>2</sup> Many young people have left El Salvador for the United States, with the sole purpose of being able to support their families, sending remittances to their home country of an average of US \$300. Lately, the reasons to migrate are not only economic, but because of violence. Entire families have been also escaping from violence in their communities, as it happened in April 2015 an entire community went to camp to a park in San Salvador, as a way of channel their demands, because it was not possible to live in their own community anymore.<sup>3</sup>

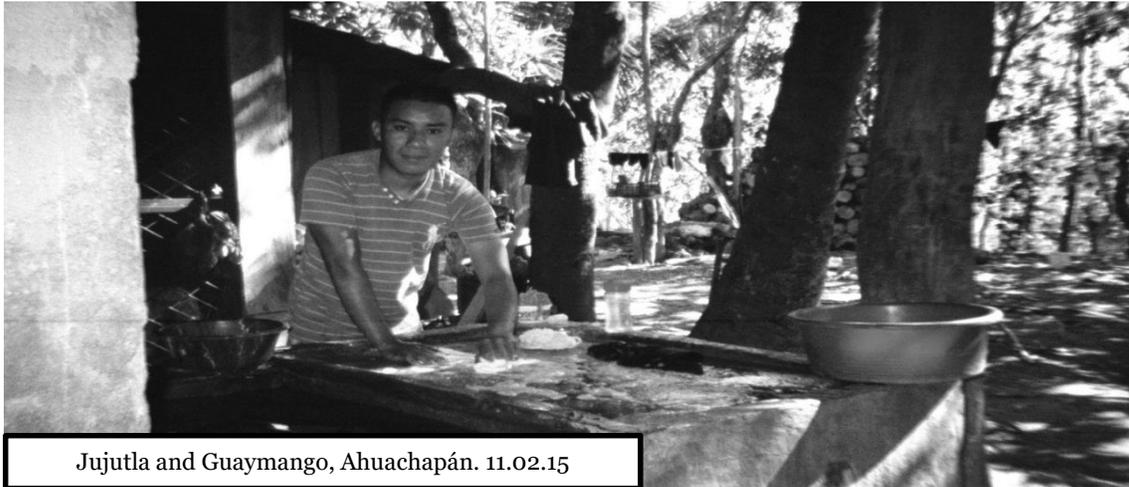
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<sup>2</sup> This statement was made by the Vice Minister of Salvadorians abroad: Juan José García in 2010 (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador 2015) and can be found here:

[http://www.rree.gob.sv/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=4357:gobierno-del-presidente-funes-reitera-compromiso-por-impulsar-el-voto-en-el-exterior&Itemid=1489](http://www.rree.gob.sv/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4357:gobierno-del-presidente-funes-reitera-compromiso-por-impulsar-el-voto-en-el-exterior&Itemid=1489).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lapagina.com.sv/nacionales/105568/2015/04/08/Familias-de-San-Martin-huyen-de-la-violencia-y-pasan-la-noche-cerca-de-Embajada-EEUU>

## Conclusions



One of the main conclusions reached on this paper is that inclusion is the key for youth's crime prevention in El Salvador. Although this research is not about gangs or youth involved in criminal activities, in a country like El Salvador, it makes no sense not to touch the issue, because it creates artificial separations that do not provide the complete picture of what is really happening in the country. The issue of inclusion is the same for those who are already involved in criminal activities as for those that are not involved. There is no way to make a distinction. In societies like the Salvadoran where all have been touched by violence in some way as victims or perpetrators, which is also difficult to separate because in most cases, people are both: the only difference is the link

to the illegal economy, i.e., crime. This is a distinction that is usually not made. Based on the information obtained by young participants in focus group discussions it makes no sense to separate strategies for crime prevention of youth for young people in secondary school and entering university. International cooperation makes the mistake of separating such levels: primary, and secondary crime prevention programs. As observed in the focus group discussions with youth in school and youth out of school, there is no way to draw lines between these divisions, they are all youth and they all need to be included. The only difference between these groups of young people is that after turning 18 they could go to jail. In fact, the most important

recommendation drawn from this report for the international cooperation and for understanding the phenomenon is that exclusion from (labor, education, social, political, etc.) makes no difference between those who are and those who supposedly are not linked to criminal activities. Repressive policies, for instance, do not make that distinction. Hence, if state policies criminalize youth no matter if they have committed a crime or not, policies to prevent crime should also not make this distinction.

On an economic level, youth needs to be included beyond *maquilas* and call center job opportunities. Policies of economic inclusion for youth taking into account that El Salvador post-conflict economic model -opening to foreign markets, promoting megaprojects and relying on remittances- has led youth to work underemployed, join criminal activities that provide an income or emigrate. On the political level, youth needs to be included beyond being pure “decoration” for political parties’ campaigns, no distinction of ideology. The only way that parties include them is when they need to mobilize votes (youth in gangs included).

In all focus group discussions, it was observed that horizontal solidarity (organization, fellowship, sense of belonging to a community) is a resource that makes youth feel included despite the violence. Although it might be difficult to understand from a Western paradigm perspective, that violence is only “legitimate” coming from the state. That’s not the case in El Salvador where violence has a social function exactly where the formal institution is absent. Criminalization of youth as a legacy of hard fist policies, has brought about that some young people who are part of criminal activities fulfill some state functions such as defend the neighborhood, because police violence does not differentiate whether youth are part or not of a gang.

In light of the evidence presented in this report, some future avenues for further research include: a) ways to achieve the release of bottlenecks in an adult centric society to provide more economic and political spaces for youth; b) Violence as a promoter of change, in order to examine youth’s participation in criminal activities as a way of political agency. Finally, some policy recommendations that come out of this

research paper are on the one hand, for the international cooperation in supporting projects that make a superficial separation between youth involved and not involved in violence; and on the other hand to public officials

making policies for youth from bottom up instead of top down (learning from the truce failure) for youth and the prevention of violence in postwar societies.

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## Appendix

### Interviews

- Male employee of the program PREVENIR, Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). San Salvador, January 22, 2015.
- Male employee consultant for SICA/ GIZ. San Salvador January 22, 2015 Consultant INTERPEACE. San Salvador, January 23, 2015.
- Male profesor of Departamento de Comunicaciones y Cultura, Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas". San Salvador, January 26, 2015.
- Male professor and freelance journalist Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas". San Salvador, January 27, 2015.
- Male professor at UCA Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas". San Salvador January 27, 2015.
- Female employee at Hanns Seidel Stiftung. San Salvador, January 28, 2015.
- Female employee at Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. San Salvador, January 29, 2015.
- Male employee at Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. San Salvador, January 29, 2015.
- Female researcher at Departamento de Estudios Políticos (DEP), Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES). San Salvador, January 30, 2015.
- Male member of the Project 3D: "Debate, Diálogo y Democracia". San Salvador, January 30, 2015.
- Male evangelic Church member, Truce negotiator. San Salvador, February 2, 2015.

- Female legislator ARENA. San Salvador, February 2, 2015.
- Female professor at UCA Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas”. San Salvador, February 3, 2015.
- Catholic priest, employee of the Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (youth training center), San Salvador February 4, 2015.
- Male employee of the Project “Estrategias municipales de prevención con participación de jóvenes” Project GIZ San Salvador. February 5, 2015.
- Female local consultant of Departamento de La Paz in El Salvador GIZ La Paz. February 5, 2015.
- Male member of the political party youth wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional FMLN. San Salvador, February 6, 2015.
- Female member of political youth organization: Juventudes Social Demócratas. San Salvador, February 6, 2015.
- Female member of youth organization: Xpressate.net. San Salvador February 6, 2015.
- Male member of youth organization Censura Cero. San Salvador, February 6, 2015.
- Male member of youth organization: CREO San Salvador, February 7, 2015.
- Female researcher at FLACSO. San Salvador, February 11, 2015.
- Former employee at Dirección General de Previsión Social y Empleo, Ministerio de Trabajo y Previsión Social. San Salvador, February 12, 2015.
- Male employee of Participación Juvenil department at INJUVE. San Salvador, February 12, 2015.
- Male member of right political party youth wing ARENA. San Salvador, February 12, 2015
- Male candidate for Legislator ARENA. San Salvador, February 12, 2015.
- Male police officer, Policía Nacional Civil. San Salvador, February 12, 2015.