



## **Migration Profile**

### **EL SALVADOR**

#### **A. Executive Summary**

El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, but has the largest number of emigrants in the region, with also the highest migration dependency rates on the continent. This phenomenon is not new to the country, since historically it has always been sending migrants to the rest of the region, as well as since the 1980s to the United States, which is currently the main destination not only for Salvadorans, but also for all Central Americans.

In 2019 there was a change in government leadership, when the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) left power peacefully, after winning the election for two consecutive terms following a civil war which ended in 1992 with the signing of Peace Agreements with the government.<sup>1</sup> During that war thousands of Salvadorans went into exile, but labour migration also began. Since then, migration has continued to rise, becoming even more complex due to the increase of forced displacement and deportations of Salvadorans from Mexico and the United States.

The country has also been acknowledging the existence of forced internal displacement, caused by criminal violence and natural disasters. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of people seeking refuge or applying for refugee status, thus leading to the creation of a legal framework and government policies to address the issue.

El Salvador is affected by human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and other forms related to the forced recruitment of young people by criminal organisations.

Another challenge in the country is the difficult condition of people seeking refuge or in refugee status, and the government, international organisations, civil society, and the Catholic Church are trying to address this problem, in addition to assisting international migrants, internally displaced people, victims of trafficking and deportees from the United States and Mexico.

The legal framework in place regulates both international and internal migration, refugee, and victims of human trafficking, providing also protective measures to migrants and other people in conditions of vulnerability.

## **B. Country Profile**

### **I. Basic Information**

El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, with a territory of 21,070 sq. km, and shares its borders with Guatemala and Honduras. According to the General Directorate of Statistics and Census of El Salvador (DIGESTYC),<sup>ii</sup> in 2021 the country's population was 6.3 million and more than 60% lived in urban areas, especially in the Metropolitan Area, where almost one third (28%) of Salvadorans resided. 55% of the population is under 30 years old and only 11.5% is over 60; 83% are considered mestizo, 15% European, and only 2% indigenous.

Because of its small territory, its large number and concentration of people, especially young ones, El Salvador is a country with one of the highest emigration rates in the western hemisphere. In addition, it has had a long history of emigration to the Central American region and, since 1981, to the United States. Although at first political instability and civil war were the main drives for these migration flows, since 2000 there have been mostly labour migrants. However, with the worsening of insecurity and the territorial expansion of criminal organisations many Salvadorans began to flee the country because of its extreme violence.

Thirty-two percent of households live in poverty and, given the high population density, 45% of households live in overcrowded conditions, lack housing and other basic services. Women have a higher life expectancy at birth (77 years) than men (68 years), and the average illiteracy rate for women (18.1%) is five points higher than men's, increasing especially in rural areas. 36.7% of people from 0 to 17 years old live without one or both parents, due to abandonment, migration, or insecurity. 26.4% of people between the age of 15 and 24 do not study or work.

### **II. International and Internal Migrants**

According to data from the United Nations, in 2019 the country had 1,600,739 migrants, equivalent to 25% of its population. The distribution of migrants between women and men was relatively similar (50.28% women versus 49.71% men). Ninety percent of them reside in the United States, which has become the main migratory destination. The main causes of migration are the search for employment, family reunification in second place and finally.<sup>iii</sup>

El Salvador is also a recipient, albeit on a smaller scale, of both immigrants with low educational levels from Honduras and Nicaragua who are employed in low-skilled activities in agriculture or construction, as well as highly skilled workers who occupy important positions in international companies or institutions.

Also, in the Global Report on Internal Displacement produced by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), in 2019 the number of internally displaced persons was estimated at 455,900 and the vast majority of them were affected by lack of public security in the country. At least 2,000 people were also internally displaced by environmental disasters in that very year.<sup>iv</sup>

### **III. Emigration and Skilled Migration**

The ratio between the number of emigrants abroad and the size of the country's population is 25.1%, one of the highest in the American continent; but also migration has made the economy of that country dependent on family remittances which, according to World Bank figures, increased from 21.4% in 2019 to 24.1% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2020, while exports rather fell from 29.6% to 25.5% in those same years.<sup>v</sup> 89% of Salvadorans abroad are concentrated in the United States where they began to arrive in the 1980s due to the civil war that ended with the signing of the peace agreement in 1992. Fifty-two percent of Salvadorans in that country are irregular immigrants; 26.5% of them were able to stay thanks to the Temporary Protection Statute (TPS) of the U.S. Government allowing them to find work and avoid deportation.<sup>vi</sup>

Fifty percent of the Salvadoran adult population (25 years of age or older) living in the United States did not complete their high school education, while the average for other immigrants from all over the world in the country and with the same age was 26%.<sup>vii</sup> In El Salvador, the average education span is 6.9 years. Salvadoran migrants have a high dropout from the educational system especially between the age of 15 and 19, estimated at almost 40% in 2019 and aggravated by the closing of schools in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Females are more likely to drop out than males. Pregnancy and household chores among adolescent females are two of the main causes; however, regardless of their gender, violence and migration are also mentioned as reasons for leaving school.

Like other Central American migrants in the United States, Salvadorans are employed in low skilled and paid jobs, and often work in precarious conditions, such as services, construction, maintenance, and transportation.

Salvadorans with higher skills have also migrated to the United States and are employed in management, business, science, and the arts, as well as in skilled services, both in the United States and in other Central American countries.

### **IV. Forced Migrants (internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees, climate displaced people)**

Forced displacement in El Salvador is often the result of violence and insecurity in the country, in addition to the already known flows of labour migrants. In El Salvador, internal displacement is a multi-causal phenomenon; economic and family reunification are the main reasons, although violence or being a victim of crime come in third place. Organisations helping these people note

that victims often do not seek help or, for fear of reprisals, refuse to mention it as the real cause of their displacement.

Violence and lack of security are caused by criminal organisations, known as "*maras*", formed by gangs involved in kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking, which dominate many uncontrolled territories in the country. This displacement mostly affects families with adolescents (12-17 years old) and young people (18- 29 years old). Young people are at greater risk of being victims of harassment, forced recruitment and becoming victims of violence. Among those displaced by violence, women are more vulnerable, because many of them are single mothers, heads of households, even though the youngest ones are more at the risk of becoming victims of violence or sex slaves.

Among the main factors of forced internal displacement are extortion and threats to life, physical violence and homicides, sexual violence and feminicides; also, the forced recruitment of children and adolescents aims at joining criminal gangs and aggressions against people because of their sexual orientation.

Places of origin for this type of migration are the main cities, especially the ones located in the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (AMSS) and others, where there is a high concentration of violence and homicides. Displaced people initially move between areas in the same municipality, but, due to the control of criminal organisations, they often move to other territories and, if they have a chance, migrate out of the country. This has been one of the causes of the involvement of Salvadoran migrants in the so-called migrant caravans, that originated since 2018 in the northern Central American countries.

The small territory of El Salvador is placed in the Central American dry corridor. Therefore, it has been impacted annually by extreme events, such as droughts that generally occur during the first four months of the year; then a period of thick rain causes floods and landslides from hills and mountains, where houses have been built to accommodate low-income families, as well as middle-class households. Thus, year after year there is an estimated displacement of people and families who, due to climatic adversities and increased risks, seek to relocate to other parts of the country. This situation causes both internal displacement and international migration.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Security in El Salvador, in a 2017 report, pointed out among the immediate impacts of mobility: emotional or psychological disorders (70%), economic impacts due to the forced abandonment of properties in places of origin (42%), temporary or permanent family separation (29%), loss of income sources (28%) and interruption of education for minors (22%). While in the places of destination these vulnerabilities were added to homelessness (33%), overcrowding because most of the people affected seek shelter with relatives or acquaintances, or are forced to seek rental housing, which does not usually provide an adequate space for family members.<sup>viii</sup>

In 2019, the government officially recognized the existence of victims as forcibly displaced and created a Directorate for Attention to Victims (DAV). Despite its efforts, the government has recognized its limitations to resolve this problem. However, the *Mesa de la Sociedad Civil contra el Desplazamiento Forzado a causa de la Violencia en El Salvador* noted in a 2019 report that the lack of basic and adequate emergency assistance to effective protection measures and livelihoods indicated the absence of responses.

During the previous decade, the number of refugee claimants from El Salvador increased exponentially from 1,553 in 2010 to 31,454 in 2015, and 119,257 in 2018. According to UNHCR, at the end of 2020 the number of refugees from the Northern Central American countries was over half million people and, although the figure for El Salvador was not specified, this country exceeded the number of people that instead came from Guatemala and Honduras.<sup>ix</sup>

The country also faces the challenge of looking after hundreds of thousands of forced returnees from both the United States and Mexico. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), between January and April 2021 El Salvador received 1,381 deportees, of whom 85.4% were men and 14.6% women. 52.9% of them are returnees from the United States, 44.6% from Mexico, and 2.5% from another country.<sup>x</sup>

## **V. Victims of Human Trafficking**

According to the National Civil Police (PNC), between 2014 and 2018 a total of 211 cases of human trafficking were reported, of which 149 were for sexual exploitation, 7 for fraudulent adoptions, 5 for forced marriage, 8 for forced begging, 3 for illegal organ trafficking, 1 for servitude and 28 undetermined.

Due to the complexity of migration in the country, El Salvador is also a country of origin, transit and destination of migrants exposed to forced labour or at risk of sexual exploitation. Gangs subject many minors to forced labour in illegal activities, like selling or smuggling drugs, and even sexual exploitation both at home or abroad.

Some Salvadorans who migrate irregularly to the United States are subjected to forced labour, criminal activity or sexual exploitation, either at their destination or *en route*. Some Latin American migrants transiting through El Salvador to Guatemala and North America are also subsequently sexually or labour exploited.

Salvadoran migrants are exposed to smuggling and trafficking networks, becoming the objects of extortion and kidnapping, slave, or semi-slave labour and, when they refuse, they may lose their lives. According to the U.S. State Department reports, Salvadoran women and children are trafficked from rural and eastern El Salvador to urban areas for the purpose of sexual exploitation. As a destination country, El Salvador receives trafficked women mainly from Nicaragua and Honduras, although women from other countries on the continent have also been found.

Poverty promotes this unlawful business. Many women living in poverty agree to migrate irregularly and are therefore subject to abusive conditions. The highest rate of recruitment occurs in shopping malls or recreational centres, both in rural and urban areas, or through social networks, where people are deceived with false employment opportunities and promises of better living conditions.

The most vulnerable groups to human trafficking in El Salvador are women (mainly girls and adolescents) and sexually diverse people, usually engaged in activities like street begging, domestic services and forced labour.

The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons revealed that in 2014 human trafficking for labour exploitation had become the main threat against migrants in Central America and was also associated with trafficking for sexual exploitation. The same report in 2020 alluded that, despite the efforts of the Government of El Salvador, the situation had not improved.<sup>xi</sup> The U.S. State Department also noted in 2020 that the Government of El Salvador had made considerable efforts to eliminate human trafficking.<sup>xii</sup>

## **VI. National Legal Framework**

Despite changes in leadership among various political parties with opposite ideological positions, the Salvadoran State has made progress in adopting a well-structured institutional framework to manage migration, address the risks of migration and take better advantage of the opportunities related to migration. With the enactment of the Special Law on Migration and Foreigners in 2019 and a Regulation to that law, the country provided a comprehensive approach to the management of the mobility of national and foreign persons, to the procedures, permits and sanctions and to the processes of issuing documents that fall under the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners. Also under this law, some measures were established to provide attention and care to Salvadoran emigrants. Since 2017, the National Policy for the Protection and Development of Salvadoran Migrants and their Families was approved. The country also passed legislation aimed at protecting women victims of violence, at combating human trafficking and regulating the refugee status.

Also, in 2020 the country approved the Special Law for the attention and integral protection of persons in the condition of forced internal displacement, complementing at the local level the attention to internal migration and solving some problems involving the protection of victims of displacement due to violence. With this law, the Directorate for Attention to Victims was created as the body in charge of coordinating efforts among different institutions and civil society organisations to aid victims of displacement by violence in different territories of the country. This legal framework seeks to adopt at the local level the international treaties for the protection of migrants.

## **VII. Main Actors**

## *The State*

Due to the country's dependence on migration abroad, a culture of migration has been created that permeates the entire national territory and involves families, businesses, and institutions, both national and local. In this context, the Salvadoran State exercises migration control functions at the national level, managed by a specific legal framework.

The National Council for the Protection and Development of Migrants and their Families (CONMIGRANTES) is an inter-institutional body whose purpose is to serve as a link between the different governmental institutions, reinforcing the horizontal coherence of migration policy. The institutions part of this council are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the General Directorate of Migration and Aliens, the General Directorate of Civil Protection, Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, the Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women (ISDEMU), and the Salvadoran Institute for the Integral Development of Children and Adolescents.

There are several government programs aiming at helping with the reintegration of migrants returning to the country, such as El Salvador is your home (*El Salvador es tu casa*). This is an initiative promoting academic, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for the benefit of Salvadorans returning to their country.

The Salvadoran State is also part of regional cooperation processes on migration policies, such as the Regional Conference on Migration (Puebla Process); it is also part of a Central American free mobility agreement, Convention CA-4, which has created a single Central American visa for citizens of that country, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

In 2019, the Government of El Salvador adhered to the Regional Comprehensive Framework for Protection and Solutions (MIRPS), which is a joint commitment of the governments of Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama to prevent and address the root-causes of forced displacement, strengthening protection within the countries of origin and improving international protection for asylum seekers and refugees fleeing these countries.

## *The Church*

There is no pastoral structure of the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador (CEDES) to specifically address the phenomenon of migration, as is the case in other countries where there is no human mobility pastoral outreach as such. Caritas takes on the role of main referent for this issue and, through it, different Church's initiatives are carried out by the CLAMOR network.

There are several church organisations devoted to the care of migrants, refugees, displaced persons and victims of trafficking.

The Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo (Scalabrinians) in El Salvador has the *Casa del Migrante*, where they provide care and temporary housing to people in situations of

forced displacement, mainly providing legal, psychosocial, and humanitarian assistance. This comprehensive service is also offered to international migrants.

The Jesuit Network with Migrants provides legal support for the regularisation of migrants in an irregular situation through the Human Rights Institute of the *Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas* (IDHUCA). This institute also offers legal, psychosocial, and humanitarian assistance to people in situations of forced displacement or at high risk of displacement.

The Justice and Peace and Integrity Commission and the Conference of Religious Men and Women of El Salvador (CONFRES-JPIC) work to raise awareness and educate about human trafficking and forced migration, and coordinate actions to assist cases of trafficking victims by involving some religious orders.

The Franciscan Network for Migrants offers orientation and humanitarian assistance to migrants and displaced persons.

Caritas of El Salvador has a program that provides legal, psychosocial, and humanitarian assistance to people in situations of forced displacement or at high risk of displacement. It also helps asylum seekers and refugees in El Salvador, accompanying them in their asylum application process and providing humanitarian assistance. In addition, it works in the formation of a network of border parishes, training pastoral agents to carry out awareness-raising activities and care for migrants or those in need of protection.

### *Other Organisations*

UNHCR and IOM, together with other organisations of the United Nations Network, offer support to the government, civil society entities and migrant communities to improve the coordination and impact of assistance to migrants, returnees, asylum seekers and refugees. In addition, different agencies affiliated to the Regional Network of Civil Organisations for Migration (RNCOM) develop their own programs to assist these people and also work together at the national level and with other organisations in 11 countries in Central America, the Caribbean and North America. Since 2006, the Committee of Relatives of Deceased and Disappeared Migrants (COFAMIDES) was established and has been coordinating along with government institutions and other civil organizations the search of missing migrants, migrants murdered in transit, and to seek justice.

Migrant organisations are represented in the National Council for the Protection and Development of Migrants and their Families (CONMIGRANTES).

Organisations of Salvadorans in the United States are also involved in migration management, not only through the action of the Salvadoran state institutions, both at the national and local levels, but also by the people living in the migrants' communities of origin.



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## D. Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> January 2022 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the agreements signed at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City.

<sup>ii</sup> See DIGESTYC

<sup>iii</sup> UN-DESA, 2019.

<sup>iv</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019*.

<sup>v</sup> World Bank. Worker's Remittances. El Salvador h

<sup>vi</sup> O'Connor, A., Batalova, A., & Bolter, J., 2019

<sup>vii</sup> O'Connor, A., Batalova, A., & Bolter, J. 2019.

<sup>viii</sup> Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública de El Salvador, 2018.

<sup>ix</sup> ACNUR. *Fact Sheet. El Salvador 2020*.

<sup>x</sup> OIM. *Portal de Datos Mundiales sobre la Migración. Perfil de Gobernanza de la Migración: La República de El Salvador*.

<sup>xi</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. 2020.

<sup>xii</sup> U.S. Embassy in El Salvador. Report on Human Trafficking 2020.