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## **El Salvador: Solutions to Food Insecurity**

“Unable to consistently access or afford adequate food.” This definition by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary captures what many rural Salvadorans struggle with every day – food insecurity.

There are many contributing factors to El Salvador's lack of self-sufficiency: outside access into Salvadoran markets, large foreign companies snatching and destroying Salvadoran land, and the health problems that the local people face from such foreign invasion; however, for every problem, there can be a solution.

In order to fully understand the problems facing El Salvador, we must first understand its geography, climate, land use, living conditions, diet, work life, and other socio-cultural aspects of Salvadoran life.

The terrain of El Salvador is rugged. It has a large mountain range and a history of volcanic activity has created many rocky outcrops throughout the country, which hinders agriculture and utilities. It also features a central plateau and a narrow coastal skirt running along the edge of the country (World Factbook). El Salvador's climate is both beneficial for farming and a challenge. It has a very tropical climate covering most of the country, which is great for growing certain products. The rainy season, which can cause floods, takes place from May to October, and the dry season runs from November to April (World Factbook).

El Salvador's main exports are coffee, sugar, and corn (National Encyclopedia). Other large exports are beef and seafood (National Encyclopedia). Many politicians emphasize coffee and sugar exports because those are two very popular global products (Voices on the Border). Unfortunately, the money made from these exports go to wealthier owners and not the lower classes who desperately need the income. This is partially due to the fact that companies go to El Salvador for “cheap labor.”

El Salvador is about the same size as New Jersey, and 74.7% of its land is devoted to agriculture, which is about 3,824,842 acres (World Factbook). This includes both high and low quality land. Coffee and sugar farms take up most of the fertile land, leaving lower quality land for the crops the people use in their diet, such as corn and rice. The average size of such corn and rice farms is less than 7.4 acres, compared to Salvadoran coffee and sugar farms, which average around 100 acres in size (U.S. Department of Agriculture). Most of El Salvador's non-fertile land that isn't farmed is used for cattle pasture (World Factbook).

About 32.4% of Salvadorans live in rural areas, typically in small adobe huts that are used for storage and sleeping, with large porches to spend time on when at home (National Encyclopedia). An average family has about five to eight people, made up of a couple and three to five children, and sometimes grandparents (National Encyclopedia). These rural Salvadoran families have poor access to utilities and healthcare. The presidential government of El Salvador has recently improved water conditions for the people, but 7% of the population faces either water shortages or contaminated water. The government has also been working on improving sanitation conditions. Now 75% of the population has improved hygiene, but that still leaves a solid 25% without proper sanitation (World Factbook). Rural Salvadorans also do not have electricity readily available to them. Looking toward Salvadorans' healthcare, there are only 1.92 physicians and 1.3 hospital beds for every 1,000 Salvadorans (World Factbook). This shortage results in lack of affordable and available healthcare for low-income and rural Salvadorans.

For many rural lower-class families, it is very difficult to get an education because of the cost of school supplies and registration fees, combined with the distance that must be traveled to get to school. Many Salvadorans don't achieve a high school degree because of these barriers and many jobs, such as secretarial positions, require a high school degree for employment (National Encyclopedia). The education rate for women is lower than the education rate of men, and women are typically forced to take on poorer paying jobs, such as selling candy at bus stops or selling their husband's or father's produce at the local market, and begging. Both the elderly and young children are forced to take up menial jobs to earn money as well (National Encyclopedia). The average monthly income for rural Salvadoran families is \$361.82, compared to \$660.90 in urban sectors (Central America Data). This is an almost \$300 wage gap. This difference in job and education availability contributes to the income rift.

Salvadorans have a varied diet. One of the biggest staples of a Salvadoran diet is fresh fruit, such as mangoes, tamarind, bananas, cucumbers, and tomatoes. They also eat rice, eggs, beef, poultry, and lots of seafood, and their preferred method of cooking is grilling (National Encyclopedia). Most rural families grow their own food and raise their own cattle, buying only what they cannot grow. Urban families may produce their food from small backyard gardens or buy it at the markets or stores.

Poverty paired with the lack of opportunity and resources makes life very hard for Salvadorans. There are solutions to help end hunger and poverty; however, we must better understand the major problems.

Currently, a large percentage of tillable land is being taken up by coffee and sugar crops for exporting (National Encyclopedia). This causes the country to have to import more of the crops they need, such as wheat and rice, for their consumption (National Encyclopedia). As a result, traditional farming practices and family farms are lost as coffee and sugar companies buy them out (Moore). The companies running these operations are largely foreign, and are looking for inexpensive labor and land to increase profits (Voices on the Border).

This trade imbalance also lowers Salvador's level of self-sufficiency (Voices on the Border). It is important that countries have some level of autonomy in case of soured relations with neighboring or trading countries. El Salvador currently cannot feed all of its people without outside help (National Encyclopedia). In addition, from 1990 to 2001, coffee exports from El Salvador have gone down 35.4% and production has decreased 33.2% (Giovannucci 8). These two factors together leave El Salvador in an unstable and precarious position. If their presidential government were to crumble or trading ties were cut, the people of El Salvador would suffer immensely.

The emphasis on sugar production has led to various health problems associated with sugar cane production in the region as well. The chemicals used on the sugar plants as a pest deterrent are also documented to cause ill effects in local villagers and workers in the sugar fields. Some of the pesticides cause chronic renal failure and other devastating diseases (Voices on the Border). Many workers also develop chronic kidney failure while working in the field, causing them to have lower production and earn less money. Another strike against them is that companies monitor workers' kidney function and do not hire back workers with decreased kidney function (Beaubien). The companies get a baseline reading when they hire, and compare to end results at the end of the season. Due to the lack of available medical treatment, this condition is usually fatal. Scientists theorize workers develop kidney disease as a result of pesticide exposure and lack of clean water to drink in the field, causing dehydration (Beaubien).

Coffee companies use new farming practices that negatively affect the environment and Salvadorans. The new trend among these outside companies is "sun cultivation" to grow the coffee crops faster (Moore). But in order to get the sunlight needed, they level El Salvador's forests. The trees of El Salvador reduce soil erosion among the fields, and removing them results in more frequent mudslides and faster erosion

during the rainy season (Moore). The mud destroys Salvadorans homes and crops, devastating the economy and communities. The removal of trees also promotes the runoff of fertilizers and pesticides into local waterways during storms, further contaminating El Salvador's dwindling water supply (Moore).

El Salvador has also allowed large United States farms access to their food market, and local farmers simply cannot compete with these large corporations (Voices on the Border). Large foreign companies have far more resources than local farmers, and with their ability to mass produce products for lower prices, small farms and their products are pushed aside by people looking for low-cost food (Voices on the Border). For example, an Iowa farm (which averages at 345 acres in size) growing a 52 bushel per acre yield corn variety can produce 17,940 bushels of corn. In comparison, a 7 acre Salvadoran farm growing a 20 bushel per acre yield corn variety only produces 140 bushels. That is a 17,800 bushel difference. Even if you were to change the variety to a 52 bushel a yield corn on the mere 1,694,315 farmed acres of El Salvador, it is still far less than can be produced on the United States' 388,792,146 farmed acres. These facts alone make it improbable, if not impossible, for small Salvadoran farming families who are desperately trying to make a living to be able to compete at even a local level.

It is important to address the struggles plaguing El Salvador. The main question, though, is what is the best solution to the problem of food insecurity and foreign monopolies? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. There will have to be multiple pieces of legislation and several compromises before there is help for the needy Salvadorans. The largest problem that needs to be solved is the prioritization of large-scale coffee and sugar production over the welfare of local farmers growing needed food for Salvadorans. This problem has only been growing thanks to people who are only looking to make a quick buck and get out as the country, its land, and its people collapse. (Voices on the Border).

One way to help limit coffee and sugar's monopoly on farmland would be to impose a heavy tax or tariff upon the exporting of coffee and sugar from El Salvador. This would make it far less profitable to grow these products there for exportation. This action would result in the loss of jobs for many Salvadoran coffee and sugarcane workers. Ideally, after the act is passed, local Salvadoran farmers would have the option to buy this higher quality fertile land, once used for coffee and sugar exports. They can then grow their own operations and hire more workers, such as those unemployed from the coffee and sugar farms. They can then bring back more eco-friendly and traditional farming practices to help keep El Salvador's food culture alive and well. They will be able to increase production, and also increase wages.

This step would help better the lives of many lower income Salvadorans. It will also help to grow community economies by keeping the money earned through selling locally produced food and agricultural products among the people who need it. El Salvador's ecosystem and economy will both benefit from the change, as well as the Salvadoran people. It will also help improve the health of workers in the fields and local villagers because of the decrease in the use of unsafe coffee and sugar pesticides on crops. This measure could be imposed by the World Trade Organization, which El Salvador is party to (Export.gov). It could also be implemented by the government of El Salvador itself. One of the issues that could arise with this measure would be loss of coffee revenue, but it can be remade in a safer, more beneficial way by El Salvador's people.

The big question is how do we help the low income farmers acquire land? This land, of course, will be high price, higher priced than they can currently afford.

One option to help with this issue would be for small communities to form their own cooperatives. This would pool money together to buy more land with less financial strain on individual families. It would also promote teamwork and cooperation among community members, and help ease stress. A big part of this measure would be to also create a renewable contract that the land bought cannot be sold for 30 or more years. This would keep land-hungry companies and people at bay. Farmers will want to make sure

that a single person or company does not get a large monopoly on Salvadoran land. By preventing this, they are also helping to pave the way for future farming generations.

In addition to a tariff on coffee exports, a nationwide ban on the pesticides that have been shown to cause harmful effects in Salvadorans should be implemented, and companies who used such pesticides provide healthcare aid for those who affected by them. This step in itself would make many companies question their use of Salvadoran land, and paired with the above decision, would result in companies completely leaving El Salvador for other countries. It would also help better the lives of people injured by the questionable application of the toxic mixtures, and serve as a warning to prevent it from happening again. This measure will also enforce strict penalties upon companies that do not comply and will ensure accountability, medical aid, and better land stewardship from companies who choose to stay. This measure could best be enforced by the government by mandating routine farming inspections to ensure companies are abiding by this act, as well as interviews with locals to get a first-hand look at how the companies are improving their practices or hurting more people.

One option would be for coffee companies to work harmoniously with local farmers as a team to grow coffee. The companies could parcel their land into sections, and for a small down payment, the farmers get one parcel of land and seeds, and can cultivate the coffee for the company. At harvest time, the company buys their harvest so the farmers have a guaranteed profit. The companies should take a more hands-off approach with this method, letting the farmers rebuild the land and bring back traditional practices. This method will help the companies still be supplied with Salvadoran grown coffee, but it will also help farmers have a secure income while bringing back El Salvador's natural wonder and vitality. This would be a very smart option for companies to take, as more people are becoming aware of harmful practices used to grow some of their favorite foods. Good examples of foods that people are looking to become more "fair trade" are sugar, cacao, bananas, and coffee. This would be a great way for companies to align themselves with this new social standard.

A land conservation program would dovetail well with this approach, and help preserve topsoil and soil fertility for future generations. This can be enforced by the Salvadoran government, most likely by their department of land management or natural resources. They can start the equivalent of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), found through the United States. CRP places parcels of land that feature natural wetlands, prairies, and other sensitive soils or terrains, into a "lockdown," and the government pays the farmers to keep the land untilled. This helps protect nature and help stop erosion and flooding. This can blend in well for El Salvador. Salvadorans could buy land that is prone to erosion and flooding or houses an ecosystem that must be protected and place it into this "lockdown" program. When it is "locked," the ground cannot be tilled for a predetermined number of years. One of the things owners of the locked land can do would be to help regrow nature where it has been damaged. Examples of this would be to add trees to erosion prone places and marshy grasses to flood prone places. If Salvadorans all push for this, they can help bring back their land's vitality.

Another option to aid in the growth of local Salvadorian farmers would be to start a "local food first" program. This program would prioritize selling local Salvadorian food in grocery stores and markets over imported food from countries such as the United States. This response could include a repeal of the Central America Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement that was enacted in 2015 to provide "duty free trade" between the United States and Central America, which means "all U.S. industrial and commercial goods enter El Salvador duty free" (Export.gov). This way, the Salvadorian farmers will be able to gain a profit and be more competitive on a local level. The income earned by farmers will go to paying their workers fair wages and will help their operations to grow so they can hire more workers. This will in turn help to lower the unemployment rate and raise the average income of families so that they can afford better opportunities for their children.

This measure will also supply higher quality, fresher produce to the people. Currently, much food entering El Salvador is from the United States and is either pre-processed or packed full of preservatives to keep the food “fresh” and stable during shipping (Voices on the Border). This is not very healthy, and the foods commonly imported, such as Welch’s grape juice and pancake syrup, do not fit very well with El Salvador’s food culture (Voices on the Border). This act would help slow down those imports, and help El Salvador maintain its culinary identity.

Another project the Salvadoran people in all areas can participate in would be to have window gardens where they can grow traditional spices. This way, even if they do not have access to Salvadoran-grown food, they can still taste the flavors of their homeland. This project can be used in both rural and urban areas, and all that would be needed is soil, seeds, water, and a window box. A significant plus is that rich fertilizer can be used due to the small space, and it will help promote healthy plant growth. If families want to expand upon this more, they can also place garden beds in their backyards or even start a greenhouse! Families in a community can band together to garden, or garden alone. They can even sell the extra herbs, spices, or food that they grow to help supplement their income and other’s diets.

There is no one perfect answer to the problem facing Salvadorans, but there is a way forward. By implementing some of these changes, many lives can be improved and El Salvador will benefit in innumerable ways. The results will not be instantaneous; there will be no overnight resolution. But it is a great first step, and will hopefully inspire confidence and motivate Salvadorans to take charge of their country and their future. This legislation will help keep money among the lower classes, help improve El Salvador’s self-sufficiency and independence, maintain traditional farming practices, and generally improve Salvadorans lives. With time and care, beautiful El Salvador will have food independence and a bright future for all.

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