

# Searching for Sustainability in a Country Rooted in Crisis: A Journey Towards Social and Environmental Justice in El Salvador



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## Project Overview

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Organization: SalvAide, the Association for Cooperation and the Communal Development of El Salvador (CORDES) and the Association for the Development of El Salvador (CRIPDES)

Location: La Libertad, El Salvador

Fellowship Duration: 30<sup>th</sup> May – 3<sup>rd</sup> August



## About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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# SEARCHING FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN A COUNTRY ROOTED IN CRISIS: A JOURNEY TOWARDS SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN EL SALVADOR

## Fellowship Overview

As one of two interns working on the ground in La Libertad, El Salvador, for an organization called Salvaide, I accompanied local partner NGOs CORDES (the Association for Communal Cooperation and Development of El Salvador) and CRIPDES (The Association for the development of El Salvador) in several already on-going projects addressing the development needs of the surrounding communities.

## Objectives

Due to the variety of projects that Salvaide is involved in, there was a range of issues we were seeking to address:

- Access to clean drinking water among the rural poor
- Access to latrines
- Delinquency and violence among youth
- Food security and access to nutritious foods, especially for women
- Women's financial autonomy

## Background/Context

In the rural communities in the province of La Libertad, widespread gang and gender violence, crime, poverty, unemployment, little access to clean water, and few opportunities for women combine to create an environment where individuals put their lives in extreme danger every day to flee to the United States. Between the years of 1979 and 1992, the country was plagued by an extremely destructive civil war, which was fought mainly between the right wing government and leftist guerilla fighters. Over 70,000 civilians are estimated to have been killed or "disappeared." Though over twenty years have passed since the end of the war, many communities are still recovering from the development setbacks imposed on them by the war.

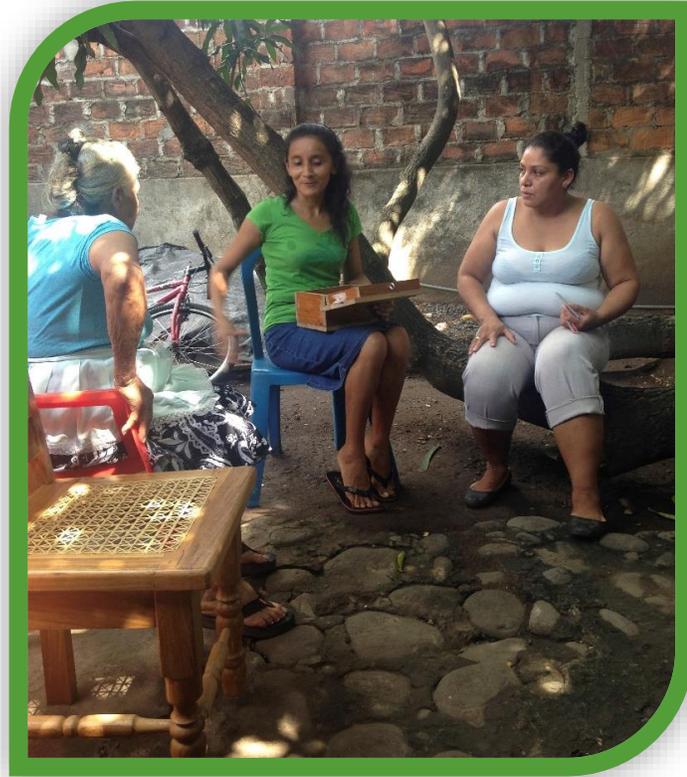


Another dire issue plaguing the communities right now is a severe drought that is affecting farmers' abilities to water their crops as well as straining the supply of drinking water to rural areas. Adding to this challenge, many expensive gated communities are popping up in the area where people water grasses and gardens around the clock and fill and refill pools despite the growing water crisis. There is also a large golf course in construction which similarly draws large amounts of water away from the poor communities. Through an Oxfam-funded WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) project, CORDES is working to ensure that large water treatment tanks are placed in rural and difficult-to-access communities where until recently (in most places), inhabitants were functioning with just dirty bacteria-filled water for drinking and cooking and suffering the consequences of diarrhea and other gastrointestinal

illnesses. In addition, there is no plumbing in any of these communities, so CORDES is looking to make sure that there is at least one latrine for every couple of houses and is assisting villagers in building them as well as doing follow-up visits to assure everything is running properly. Because so many of these communities are "squatter settlements," meaning that the inhabitants do not have formal rights to the land, the local government does not recognize these villagers' rights to clean drinking water, creating an extra obstacle for CORDES in providing support.

The issue of juvenile delinquency and violence is a major factor that is leading families to seek a better life outside of El Salvador. By the age of fifteen and often even earlier, many young boys are pressured into gangs, drop out of high school and are destined to a life in the streets filled with violence and drugs. Similarly, rampant and unprosecuted rape of young women in El Salvador often forces young girls into early motherhood. At fifteen or sixteen, girls end up tied to a life of cooking, cleaning and raising children, armed with only a ninth grade education. CRIPDES is currently running a couple of youth empowerment projects to address these issues. One such project is a high school scholarship program aimed at high achieving teens from the poorest communities. A select few of these students are invited to continue their studies in university programs. Another program that we witnessed in its early stages was a youth program that held weekly Saturday sessions for teens aged 15-24. The training consisted of units that lasted three months at a time with discussions about themes like homosexuality, masculinity, feminism, sexual health, contraception, rape culture/gender violence, as well as workshops on leadership skills and youth-specific laws and policies. The sessions would also feature music and dance lessons, theater classes, and sports games among other activities to offer the teens a broad range of extracurricular activities they may not have previously been exposed to. The program is funded by CRIPDES, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID) and Asociación de Investigación y Especialización sobre Temas Iberoamericanos (AIETI).

Another issue we were tackling is that of food security, in conjunction with financial and social autonomy for women. First of all, most household diets in El Salvador typically consist of rice, beans, corn (in the form of tortillas), and meat. These are the foods most readily available and most inexpensive for the rural and urban poor. Supermarkets, which carry fresh vegetables, tend to be expensive and far away and thus women continue to cook for their families as their mothers cooked for them-- rice, beans, tortillas, and meat. The lack of vegetables in the typical Salvadoran diet, combined with the abundance of American fast food chains, likely contributes to the high rates of obesity in the country. A separate, though related, issue is that women in El Salvador typically



Treasurer of a Women's Savings group collecting monthly dues at a Saving for Change meeting.

have little control over finances and must rely on income from their spouses, where present. We were also told by the community members that there is not a culture of saving money in El Salvador, and in the hands of the men of the house, money is often spent on alcohol and other luxuries rather than saved for medical emergencies, school fees, food and clothing. The poor, and women in particular, have limited access to credit as they have little tangible collateral and thus cannot take out loans from the large banks in the area. To tackle these issues, CRIPDES and CORDES are working together to implement an Oxfam America project called Saving for Change or Ahorro Comunitario. There are close to 200 women's savings groups in the region of La Libertad alone, each consisting of about twenty women. There is a president, secretary and treasurer appointed in each group, and every couple of weeks, each group meets to pay dues and conduct raffles, the money from which goes into a common pot that collects interest and is used as a kind of collective insurance. Group members must also pay fines for lateness and other misdemeanors. The women are allowed to take out loans of a group-determined amount for medical emergencies, food, clothing and gas (though no luxuries) and must pay them back within a group-determined time period. The program is meant to increase social capital, strengthen solidarity and leadership skills among women, as well as to insure against economic shocks, improve saving habits, and offer an opportunity for credit without plunging into debt.

A second aspect of the project, an agricultural pilot, is being newly implemented in some regions of El Salvador. As a part of this project, Oxfam, via CRIPDES, is training women (who are part of the savings groups) and providing them with the necessary materials to grow their own organic vegetable orchards. The women learn organic farming techniques, how to install irrigation filters, and how to build their own chicken coops. The women both sell their produce in local markets as well as use the fruits of their labor to nourish their families, providing a sustainable source of income that is separate from their husbands, and a sustainable source of healthy foods. In talking with these women at various group meetings, we learned that most of

them had never actually cooked with vegetables before participating in this program. In many of the groups, women allowed and even encouraged their young daughters to participate in both the savings and agricultural aspects of the program, instilling savings, responsibility, and agricultural skills from an early age.

## Activities

While in La Libertad, most of our activities in the field consisted of attending meetings for each of the many projects described above. These were meetings with the community beneficiaries, local government actors of both the political right and left, and representatives from international NGOs from the United States, Spain, and Peru. In these meetings, we both worked with our CRIPDES/CORDES colleagues to explain not-yet-implemented projects to community members as well as to evaluate already ongoing projects. We also participated in more hands-on activities such as assisting a volunteer group in painting kindergarten classrooms and helping plant and weed an organic vegetable garden at a women's capacity building center called Ciudad Mujer. We helped plant 5,000 chili plants at the CRIPDES office, and while we were at the office, our tasks included translating documents from English to Spanish, many of them relating to environmental concerns like drainage, and disaster preparedness. We were also tasked with creating excel documents for diagnostics taken as a part of the water sanitation project.



A water sanitation community meeting

## Challenges and Successes

For me, the main goal of my fellowship was to help out where needed but mostly to be able to come in with an open mind and to learn as much as I possibly could about what it is truly like to live in El Salvador. I also aimed to learn as much as possible about the nature of development work in the country. Though I expected to be working on one specific project, rather than the variety I did work on, I am really glad that I was exposed to all of them. I would say, unreservedly, that I accomplished those goals, however broad they may have been. However, if given another chance, next time I might push for more information about what the internship would specifically entail so that I could be better prepared before embarking.

## Questions Raised

I think our fellowship was successful for many reasons. For one, we got along quite well with all of our coworkers and, as we both spoke at least near fluent Spanish, we were able to understand and communicate easily with them as well as with community members. Everyone was extremely kind and welcoming towards us, and the head of the office, Arnulfo, went above and beyond to ensure we were safe and comfortable. The projects also lined up well with our interests and studies and I was able to relate what I've learned in my coursework to CRIPDES' and CORDES' work in the field, especially in regards to microfinance which I studied in an Economic Development course.

One aspect that didn't work as well was that we often did not know from day to day which project we were going to be working on, where we were going to go, or what we needed for the day so some days we arrived at work unprepared. It was occasionally frustrating not to have a plan week by week of what we would generally be doing. One other thing is that at times, there was not a lot for us to do on days where we did not go into the field and stayed in the office. Most times we did have documents to translate or spreadsheets to fill, but there were days when we felt somewhat under-utilized.

## Training and Mentoring

While in La Libertad, we did not receive much explicit, on-the-job training as most of our tasks involved accompanying CRIPDES and CORDES employees on meetings and site visits. Two Salvaide representatives did, however, give us a three-day orientation when we first arrived in San Salvador. Miguel took us around to a couple of museums, churches, parks, and the famous war memorial to orient us with some of the history of the country and especially of the war. He also showed us the San Salvador CRIPDES office, and another Salvaide representative, Pedro, gave us an overview of the history of the organizations and provided us with some background on the issues that the projects address.

## What did you learn?

Over the course of two months in El Salvador, I have gained experience, knowledge, and most importantly, perspective. First of all, I have learned that it is important to come into this kind of international internship with a completely open mind, and a flexible agenda. I began to realize, from the outset, that as foreigners with no university degrees stepping into a thirty year old functioning organization run by highly talented and qualified local individuals, there wasn't a whole lot that we could offer to them and we certainly were not going to be changing (in the near term) anything in the community or in the organization. I realized that the most important part of our roles there was to absorb as much information about the issues and the projects and to listen to as many stories as possible so that upon our return we can share and raise awareness of the plight of the Salvadoran people. We can certainly use all of the information we

have learned and the experiences we have gone through to work towards the cause of eliminating injustices and advancing environmental protection in El Salvador in our future careers.

I have also learned a great deal about the relationship between national, local and international NGOs. CRIPDES and CORDES have many international funders, such as Oxfam, SHARE, Aeroman, UNICEF, AEICD (Spain), the Swiss government and others. I now understand how valuable a local NGO like CORDES is for an international NGO like Oxfam, since CORDES supports skilled native individuals with knowledge of the prevailing conditions who carry out and monitor projects on the ground. Having the Salvadorans who work at CORDES taking primary responsibility for the everyday interactions with the beneficiaries also eliminates the sense of “wealthy white westerners swooping in to rescue the poor people of the third world”—a sentiment often prevalent in development work. It is also very important that CORDES has this partnership with international bodies. Of course, monetarily, foreign NGOs are highly valuable as CRIPDES and CORDES rely heavily on international support to be able to fund their own projects. In addition, the exposure abroad these large international bodies and governments bring to the hardships in the tiny country of El Salvador is immeasurable.

I have also learned about just how devastating it can be, for our coworkers especially, to have lived through a tragic twelve year long civil war that tore their country apart, to have then dedicated their lives to re-building that country and to once again see their homeland be ravaged with gang violence, such that no one is safe and everyone is living in constant fear. With homicide levels in July 2015 not seen since the 1992 peace accords marking the end of the war, El Salvador is now the most dangerous country in the world outside of a war zone, with murder rates reaching one murder per hour last week. In a country of just five million people, the percentage of those killed this month is astounding. Almost everyone we spoke to had a friend or relative who had risked everything to flee illegally to the United States, or was thinking about doing so themselves.

## Community Implications and Further Work

### **Contribution to the delivery of health/and or social services for poor or marginalized groups**

Through the installation of water sanitation tanks in slums, CORDES is ensuring that everyone, no matter income or living conditions, has the right to clean and safe drinking water. In the long term, hopefully the local and national governments will recognize the universal right to clean water. Through land conservation and crop diversification projects, CORDES is teaching farmers to farm organically and sustainably so that in the short term, poor Salvadorans will have fresh nutritious food, and in the long term, farmers will have more risk-averse crops, and resources will be better preserved as climate change brings more uncertain, and often extreme, weather patterns.

Through women’s savings groups, CRIPDES is giving women the opportunity to be a part of a community where they can build a mutual savings fund with other women, and, in some cases, the chance to develop their own vegetable gardens from which they can earn income and feed their families. In the long term, hopefully women will continue to form these types of groups and will pass on good savings habits to their children. Other ongoing women’s empowerment projects are contributing to a rising feminist movement in El Salvador which should lead to

generations of women and girls who are aware of their rights, don't feel as though they are inferior to men, and are educated and skilled, able to work outside of the home.

Through youth empowerment programs in the short term, vulnerable teens will be kept off of the street for at least a couple of hours a week and will be able to learn about some controversial issues that are not taught in school. In the long term, the goal is for these programs to lead to decreased violence and gang activity, increased gender equality, and tolerance of homosexuality. Because most Salvadorans tend to be very religious, many families, schools and churches teach that to be gay is a sin.



A vegetable garden as part of the Oxfam Saving for Change agricultural program

### How might your fellowship make a difference for the people you worked with?

For our mentors/coworkers at CRIPDES and CORDES, who welcomed us with open arms and jumped at every opportunity to teach us something new, I'd like to think that our fellowship did make a difference. First of all, I think that forming a partnership (even though it is through Salvaide) with a world-renowned university such as McGill is important and will benefit them going forward. Secondly, I think that being able to share their experiences with as many foreigners as possible, especially two students interested in going into development-related careers, is important for them. They are proud of the amazing grassroots level work that they are doing in El Salvador and were eager to show it to us. They trust that we will go on to hold

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the country dear to our hearts and will keep what we have seen in mind in our work in the future.

The people within the communities we worked in were all very excited to see us and curious about where we were from and what we were doing. As Salvaide is the only Canadian NGO focusing exclusively on El Salvador (and from my experience El Salvador in general tends to be neglected in development work in comparison to the rest of Latin America), I think it is nice for these community members to know that people from Canada actually do care about their situations, and are willing to assist Salvadoran NGOs in improving circumstances, rather than trying to impose fancy or top-down solutions.

The people outside of the communities we worked in might, and should, care about the positive environmental impact our work is contributing as well as our work towards decreasing inequality in El Salvador. Right now, the entire country is ensnared in violence and people will care if anything is being done to try to ameliorate that situation, even CORDES' work to prevent violence and rape among youth.

### **What would be the next steps to translate your findings into policy action?**

Because there are so many different development issues we observed and worked with, some confounding, some completely independent, there is no one policy recommendation, but I can make a few recommendations that touch on just some of the issues we looked at.

As for the issue of access to clean drinking water and latrines, I think it is important that both the local and federal governments provide some kind of support to the rural poor because as of now, rural communities' interests are not represented very well in politics. The government should recognize the universal right to clean drinking water and should pass laws to make it illegal for wealthy developers to draw so much water away from the poor to build lavish gated communities and golf courses, especially in this time of severe drought.

In regards to youth engagement issues, the government should require that currently taboo topics like sexual health, contraception, and sexuality be taught in schools. This would help to mitigate issues like teen pregnancy, rape, gender violence, teen suicide, depression, and lack of female education.

In order for CORDES and CRIPDES to make some of these policy changes possible, it is important for them to keep detailed computerized records of their findings. These are two fantastic organizations that have been doing amazing grassroots level work for about thirty years, but we observed that most of their work is done by paper and pencil and, oftentimes, is not transcribed into permanent electronic archives. The organizations should continue to solicit international support, but should also draft proposals to lobby local and federal governments about the issues they are trying to address.

## Program Evaluation

This fellowship has solidified my desire to continue studying International Development and to eventually make a career out of it. I have always had a keen interest in Latin American issues and development, but now I can say with some degree of certainty that I would like to focus the rest of my studies on Latin American issues.

What I valued most about this fellowship was that it allowed me to get an extremely raw glimpse of the realities of poverty in El Salvador as well as the realities of development work there. Because there were only two of us, and we were not part of a large volunteer group, we really were able to shadow our coworkers in all aspects of their work, including attending private meetings with government officials. I value as well the whole new perspective of the world that I have acquired and the opportunity to leave my comfort zone and grow as a person. I had seen real poverty before (for about a week in Peru), but I have never been so immersed in such conditions. I was able to get to know and become friendly with so many kind, intelligent, spirited, passionate people who happened to be living well below the poverty line. Now, in my course studies, when I am reading and researching and learning about poverty, I will have specific faces and personalities in mind.

I would advise future fellows to arrive with a completely open mind and to be ready to be immersed in any sort of project. Be agreeable, willing to learn, and open to new perspectives. Don't be surprised if the projects you end up working on are completely different to the ones you had planned on.

I found it quite useful to interact with the other fellows and to hear about everyone else's situations. It was comforting to hear that everyone else was experiencing similar kinds of culture shock. It was also interesting to hear about the different types of projects that everyone was doing, and to discuss similar challenges.

I would recommend this placement to another student, though potentially not now, during this time of extreme violence. It was a fulfilling, rewarding, and challenging experience. Participating student(s) would have to be very open to working on different types of projects, should have a high level of Spanish and should be aware of the dangers of living in El Salvador. I would also recommend this placement to pairs of students going together. If Megan and I were not living together, it might have been somewhat lonely, as there are no other interns at CORDES and, in the housing arrangement where we were placed, there were few opportunities to meet anyone else our age.