

EL SALVADOR

Anticipation of food insecurity

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

El Niño is anticipated to result in prolonged periods of drought and decreased rainfall in El Salvador, particularly affecting food security. Eastern and central parts of the country are especially vulnerable to reduced precipitation during El Niño events, likely affecting 25 municipalities in La Paz, La Unión, San Miguel, and Usulután states. Experts predict a 90% probability of the El Niño event intensifying between December 2023 and January 2024 and weakening in mid-2024 (FAO 2021; OCHA 07/08/2023; Ministerio de Medio Ambiente 07/2023; El País 10/08/2015). In the past decade, several El Niño events affected the Dry Corridor (including El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) and lasted between 12–36 months (FAO 2021).

El Niño is expected to result in below-average rainfall across El Salvador. As at July 2023, river levels had dropped. Between April–May, the country experienced four heat waves, affecting the eastern region the most (AA 03/07/2023; Ministerio de Medio Ambiente 07/2023). The temperature of the ocean has increased, directly influencing the formation of tropical storms and hurricanes (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente 07/2023).

The country is still dealing with some of the effects of El Niño in 2015 and previous climatic shocks, such as Tropical Storm Julia (IFRC 26/10/2022). El Salvador has a score of 4.3 in the INFORM Climate Change Index and a 5.6 exposure to droughts. It means the country is classified as a medium, but its risk and vulnerability scores are likely to increase according to 2050 projections (EC accessed 27/09/2023).

The impact of El Niño will particularly affect urban poor and rural households, with food, water, and livelihoods being the main needs. As at August 2023, food prices had risen above the five-year average. The 2015 El Niño event also resulted in almost a 60% loss of crops in the country, mostly maize. As at 2020, around 58% of people in rural areas of El Salvador also lacked access to drinking water. At the same time, the expected below-average rainfall will severely affect rural communities' livelihoods, likely resulting in migration into urban areas (FAO 14/09/2015 and 2021; CEPAL/UNDPF 26/04/2023).

Anticipated scope and scale

El Salvador is currently going through the rainy season, but as at July 2023, rainfall levels in the country were 29% lower than normal. The rainy season is expected to end in October, when the dry season starts in central and western El Salvador (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente 07/2023).

El Niño is likely to affect crops, mostly maize, reduce the availability of food and income in rural communities, and contribute to a countrywide increase in food prices. El Niño in 2015 resulted in a financial deficit of US \$ 6.6 million in El Salvador; this amount will likely be higher in 2023 and 2024 (FAO 2021).

The combined impacts of El Niño, violence, and poverty will likely drive rural people to migrate towards Mexico and the US. In 2017, 64% of unaccompanied Salvadoran minors deported in 2016 belonged to rural households (FAO 2021).

Humanitarian constraints

Insecurity and violence in different regions persist, particularly in Ahuachapán, Cabañas, La Libertad, La Paz, Morazán, and San Salvador, where armed groups are present. These are likely to constrain the access of communities to humanitarian aid and vice versa (InSight Crime 22/09/2023).

The government-imposed state of emergency since March 2022, which has since been regularly renewed, implements curfews every night, restricting mobility. The state of emergency was declared after a spike in homicides among armed groups and gangs resulted in 87 deaths. It enables authorities to suspend some civil liberties, such as prohibiting certain gatherings and carrying out arrests without warrants (Crisis24 14/07/2023; OHCHR 28/03/2023; AI 03/04/2023).

KEY FIGURES

25

MUNICIPALITIES AT HIGH RISK OF BEING AFFECTED

27%

OF THE POPULATION LIVING IN POVERTY

58%

OF RURAL HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER

4.3

INFORM CLIMATE CHANGE RISK SCORE

FUNDING AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

- UN agencies (WHO, UNICEF, IOM)
- FAO, Mesa de Prevención de Riesgos
- National Red Cross

CRISIS IMPACTS

Decreased food availability

The 2023 planting season was scheduled for May but was delayed by one month, starting in June. As a result of insufficient soil moisture, the growing process has been slow. Satellite images show that the central and eastern maize-growing regions of the country are experiencing poor growing conditions because of high temperatures. The total area planted with the main crop, maize, is expected to be below average given current drought conditions and high production costs. This is expected to result in below-average food availability in the country through 2024 (FEWS NET 05/2023; FAO 19/06/2023).

Food prices

Although there has been some stability in food prices in the period 2022/2023, in July, they were significantly higher than the five-year average and above July 2021/2022 prices in almost all states. This situation is expected to place financial stress on households and hinder their ability to purchase food (FEWS NET 08/2023).

On the other hand, extremely impoverished households living in the country's Dry Corridor (eastern and central El Salvador) will experience worsening economic conditions as a result of previous shocks, such as Tropical Storm Julia, which destroyed more than 7,000 hectares of farmland in 2022 (IFRC 25/10/2022). As a result, these vulnerable households are expected to resort to negative coping strategies, including selling productive assets and relying more heavily on credit. These measures may come at the cost of reduced food quality and quantity, placing households in a state of severe food insecurity.

Increased displacement

El Salvador already grapples with climate-, insecurity-, and economy-induced displacement within the country and outside its borders. The declining viability of rural livelihoods, such as farming, as a result of consecutive failed harvests will likely drive many farming communities to migrate to urban centres or across borders in search of food and water (FAO 2021; New Security Beat 29/08/2017).

Food security and malnutrition

As at February 2023, at least 869,000 people were expected to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse food insecurity levels in 2023, and 218,000 will need nutrition assistance. The effects of El Niño are likely to raise these figures (OCHA 07/02/2023). According to the WHO, El Salvador is one of the countries at higher risk of suffering from the effects of El Niño, which may trigger food insecurity, increase malnutrition, and enhance vulnerability to infectious diseases, especially among children and vulnerable groups. This will affect their long-term health and development (WHO 04/08/2023).

Livelihoods and services

El Niño has already caused severe financial losses for coffee producers in San Miguel and Usulután, leaving major impacts in the longer term for their crops and livelihoods. Weak rainwater flows have also considerably decreased hydropower generation, forcing El Salvador, Nicaragua, and other Central American countries to import energy (La Prensa Gráfica 30/08/2023; El Nuevo Siglo 06/07/2023).

DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

El Niño phenomenon

El Niño has affected the Dry Corridor of Central America in the past decade. In 2015 and 2018, it affected El Salvador, causing crop losses, food insecurity, food price increases, livelihood losses, and other economic consequences (FAO 2021; PL 14/04/2023). The current El Niño event is already affecting El Salvador and is expected to last at least until the first part of 2024.

COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Upcoming elections

El Salvador is scheduled to hold presidential elections in February 2024. There is already political tension because current President Nayib Bukele has launched his candidacy despite constitutional laws not approving a second re-election. Both the EU and the Organisation of American States will monitor the elections (Infobae 21/09/2023; France 24 26/06/2023). Civil unrest is likely to increase during the political campaigns at the same time that the country is facing the effects of the El Niño phenomenon.

People on the move

Thousands of people pass through El Salvador yearly with the aim of reaching the US. People usually go from Corinto in Morazán state (east of the country, one of the regions most affected by high temperatures and low rainfall) to the capital city of El Salvador (central) and onwards to La Hachadura (western) on the border with Guatemala. Access to justice is limited for migrants and people on the move; there have been reports of missing people and arbitrary detentions (El País 09/07/2023; UN 13/04/2023). The number of returnees has increased from 3,239 between January–August 2021 to nearly 10,400 in the same period in 2022, and to 7,602 in 2023, creating a corresponding growth in needs (OIM accessed 29/09/2023; OCHA 07/02/2023). People on the move are more vulnerable to the effects of El Niño because they often lack shelter and water access, increasing the risk of dehydration.

Poverty

An estimated 27% of the country's population of 6.3 million live in poverty conditions. Inequality increased from 38 to 39 (following the Gini index, where a higher score on a scale of 0–100 signifies higher inequality) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the causes of poverty include illiteracy, dropping out of school, a lack of access to well-paid jobs, and violence. This is worse in rural areas, where multidimensional poverty affects 58% of households, more than double the percentage in urban areas (22.5%) (FAO 2021; WB accessed 26/09/2023; OCHA 07/02/2023).

Violence and insecurity

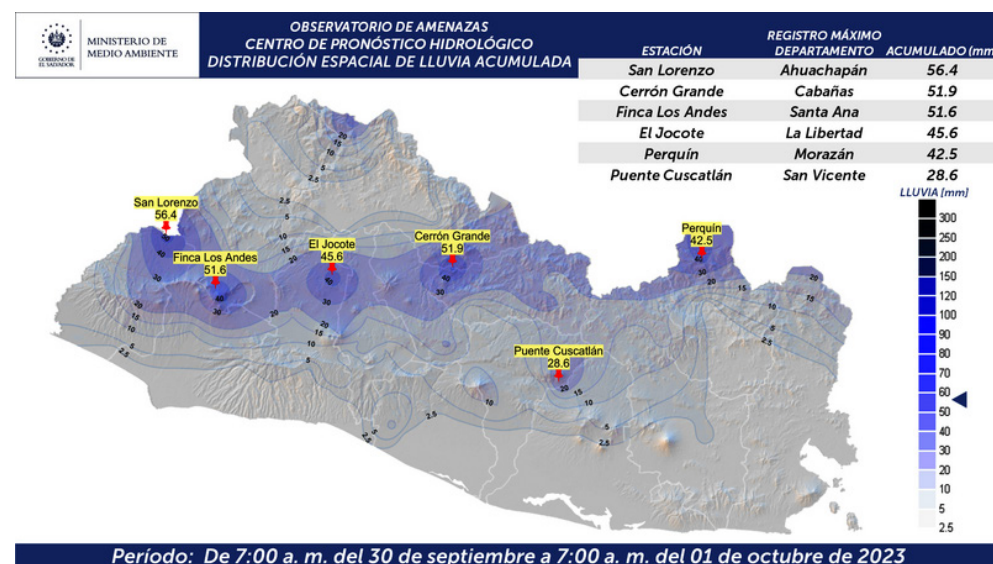
The country has been in a state of emergency for more than a year. Although the homicide rate has dropped from 107 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 to 2.4 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2023, violence and insecurity persist (Swissinfo 21/09/2023). According to recent police reports, there are three main armed groups in the country: La Mara Aalvatrucha MS13, el Barrio 18 Sureños, and Barrio 18 Revolucionarios. There are also 54 smaller and adjacent armed groups, particularly in rural areas (InSight Crime 22/09/2023). This is likely to cause displacement and aggravate the situation of rural communities.

FUNDING AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture have created a plan to help coffee producers facing the effects of El Niño (La Prensa Gráfica 29/08/2023).

La Mesa Permanente para la Gestión de Riesgos en El Salvador, the government institution for the prevention of disasters, has been monitoring the situation and sharing prevention measures (MPGR 15/06/2023). Regardless, as at September 2023, the government response for vulnerable communities was not clear.

Below-average rain in Eastern Salvador as at 29 September



Source: MARN (accessed 29/09/2023)