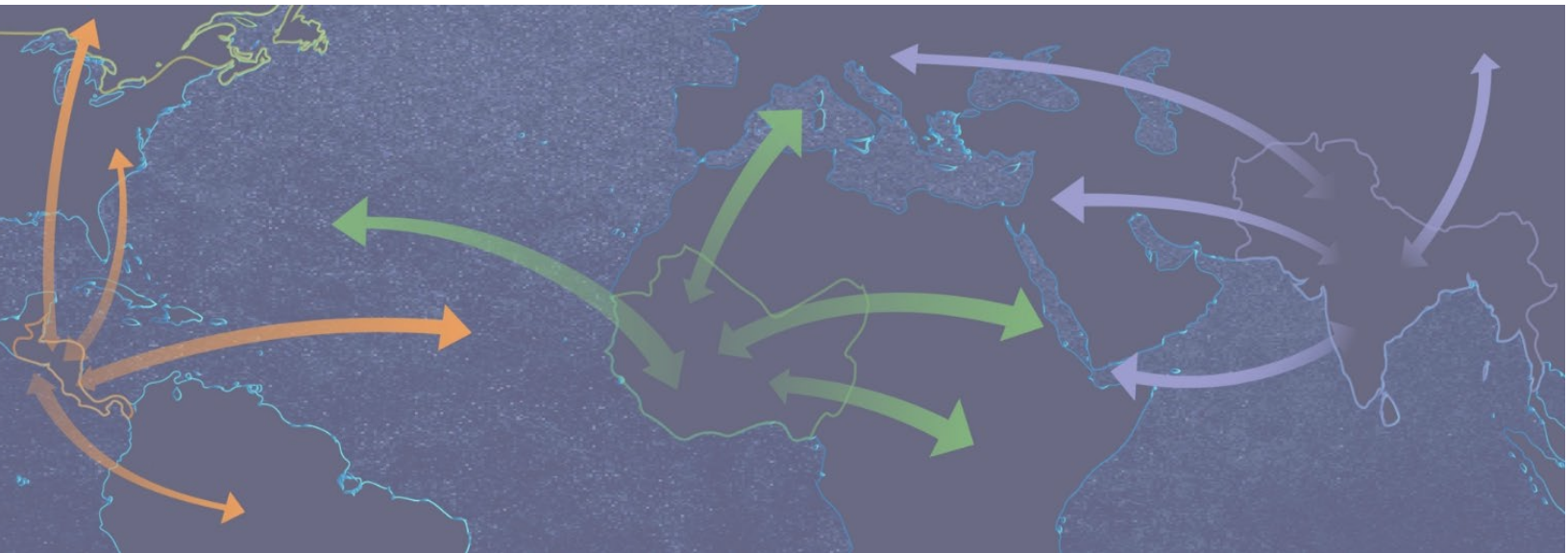


MEMO

Complex Migration Flows and Multiple Drivers in Comparative Perspective

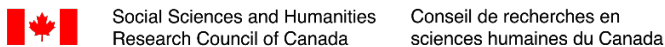


Background country report on El Salvador within the migration system of the Americas

The MEMO research partnership is led by:



And is supported by:



The MEMO Research Project

MEMO is a **multidisciplinary project** to develop a socio-ecological system framework that integrates drivers (main contextual factors) and individual determinants of migration; its primary objectives are:

To map the links between internal, intra-regional and intercontinental migration along complex population dynamics and migration systems;

- To describe and interpret the interplay among migration drivers (environmental conditions, demographic and health factors, economic development dynamics, socio-political issues), accounting for cultural and emotional processes that can shape individual decisions to migrate;
- To provide evidence to inform policy and support an efficient and rights-based governance of international migration.

Differences and analogies of migration drivers and determinants are comparatively established across (and within) the following regional migration systems:

- **The Americas** – focusing on migration flows from the northern countries of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) to Mexico and further North to the USA and Canada.
- **West Africa** – focusing on Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Ivory Coast and their inter-related flows to each other, to neighbouring countries in West Africa and towards Europe and Canada.
- **South Asia** – focusing on Nepal and Bangladesh, internal and cross border flows within South Asia, as well as to Malaysia and Canada. The migration system and population dynamics are described and modelled to capture the plurality of (multi-directional) population flows.

MEMO will contribute innovative analytical tools to support a rights-based governance of migration and related drivers.

Research partner organizations



Background country report on El Salvador within the migration system of the Americas

Beatriz Zepeda (CentroGeo, Mexico)

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1.0 Introduction

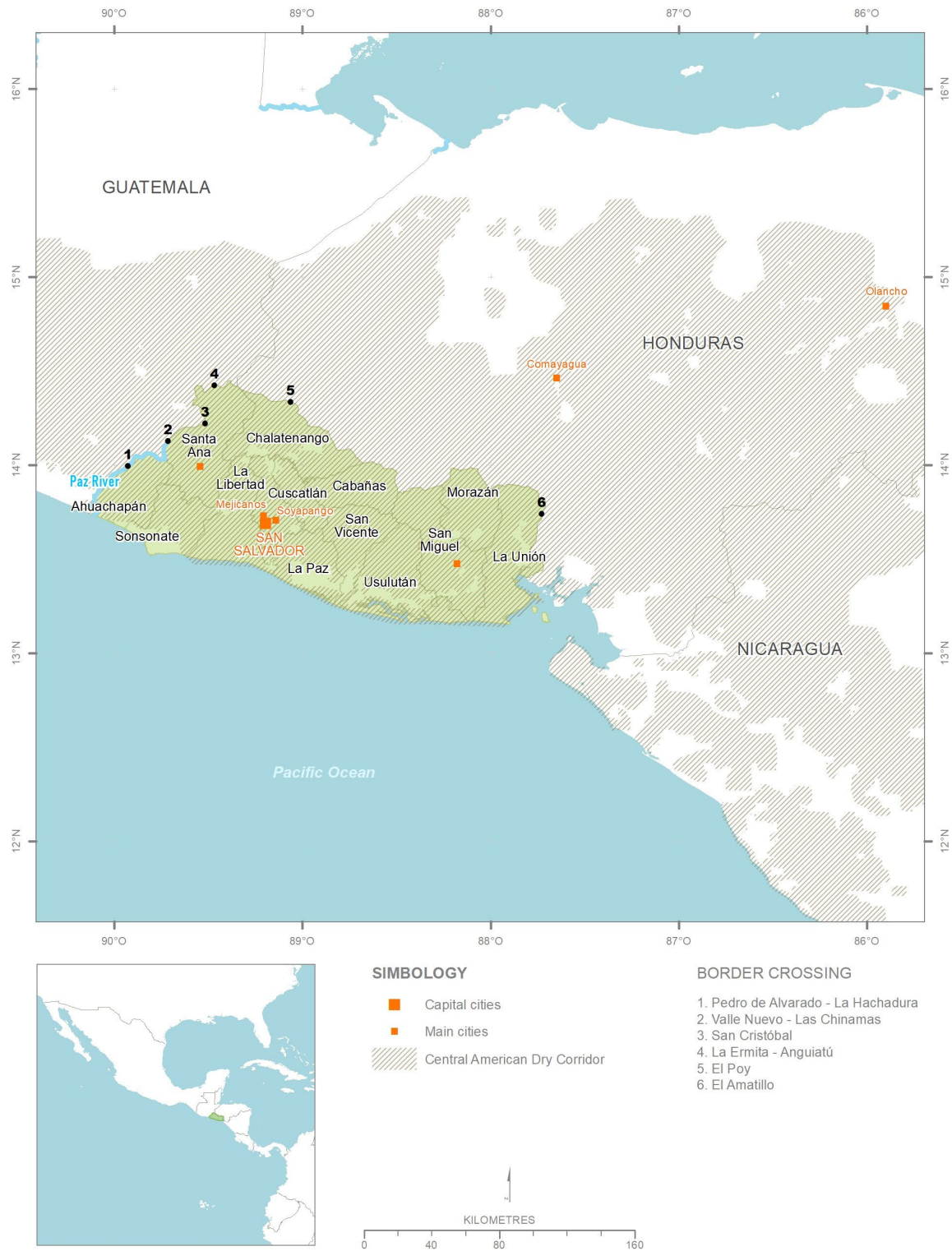
Over decades, El Salvador has been a country of origin of migrant flows, mainly directed to the United States. In recent years, out migration has not only increased consistently, but it has sought new destinations beyond the American continent, especially in Spain and Italy. Other contemporary developments in El Salvador's migration dynamics suggest that important changes are affecting the emigrant profiles and the traditional drivers of Salvadoran migration.

In this report, we look at migration dynamics in El Salvador and their recent transformation. We focus on internal, intra-regional, and intercontinental migration dynamics, and review the literature focusing on decision-making for migration, before identifying the topics we would suggest as part of the MEMO future research agenda. Our aim is to provide a general panorama of what is known about El Salvador's role in regional and global migration dynamics and to point out the still open questions that the MEMO project ought to answer.

To contextualize El Salvador's migration dynamics, we provide a brief characterization of the country and a look at its main socio-demographic and economic indicators. El Salvador is located in the Central American Isthmus. It is bordered by Guatemala to the Northwest, Honduras to the East, Nicaragua to the Southeast and the Pacific Ocean to the West (Map 1). El Salvador has a territorial extension of 21,040 square kilometers (The World Bank, 2023) and its territory is divided into 14 departments, 39 districts and 262 municipalities.

Although the last general population census was conducted in 2007, projections for 2022 place El Salvador's population at 6,336,293 inhabitants, of which 48% are men and 52% are women (The World Bank, 2023). El Salvador is a predominantly young country; 52.2% of the Salvadorans is under 29 years old. With 304 inhabitants per square kilometer, El Salvador is the second most densely populated country in Latin America (The World Bank, 2023, data for 2021). In 2022, 26% of the Salvadoran population was rural and 74% urban (The World Bank, 2023). With regard to the labour force, in 2022, 59% of the working age population was economically active, while the national unemployment rate was estimated at 3.8% (The World Bank, 2023). Informality accounts for 70% of El Salvador's economy and is deemed to be a significant trigger of migration.ⁱ

Map 1: El Salvador and its borders



Source: CentroGeos' elaboration (Gabriela Quiroz Cázares) on DIVA-GIS and CentroGeo data

El Salvador is considered a lower-medium income country. Its 2022 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was USD 32.49 billion, and the GDP per capita was USD 5,127. In 2016, the average monthly income was USD 660.9, but it was significantly lower, USD 361.82, in rural zones (The World Bank, 2023). With a Human Development Index of 0.675, El Salvador is ranked 125th globally and is considered to have attained medium human development (UNDP, 2022). El Salvador’s economy is highly dependent on remittances. In 2022 these accounted for 23.7% of the national GDP (The World Bank, 2023).

Table 1. El Salvador: Selected economic and socio-demographic indicators, 2022

Surface*	21,040 km ²
Total population (projected estimates)*	6,336,293 inhabitants
Male / Female (% of total population)*	48% / 52%
Population density (in 2021)*	306 inhabitants per km ²
Urban / Rural (% of total population)*	74% / 26%
Economically active population (% of working age population)*	59%
GDP (USD)*	32.49 billion
GDP per capita (USD)*	5,127.00
HDI**	0.675
Remittances (% of GDP)*	23.7%

Sources: *The World Bank, 2023; **UNDP, 2022

Like the rest of Central America, El Salvador is extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. Most of El Salvador’s territory is encompassed within the Dry Corridor (*Corredor Seco*), a geographical area 1,600 kilometers long and 100-400 kilometers wide, covering parts of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, that is characterized by long periods of drought, followed by intense rains (FAO, 2022). In 2018, El Salvador was the country that suffered the most severe droughts in Central America (Reyes, 2018). Lately, hurricane seasons in the region have intensified, generating widespread internal displacements. Located on the Pacific Belt of Fire, El Salvador is also often struck by devastating earthquakes.

Until recently, El Salvador displayed the highest rate of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in the world (UNODC, 2019, p. 17). Like Honduras, it is home to some of the most violent *maras* that terrorize urban areas, preying especially on the young and driving them away from their communities. It also presents high recurrence of gender-based and intra-family violence. Widespread insecurity is associated with the weak institutional framework of the justice system, the growing incidence of corruption, and more generally, the absence of the rule of law (Wolf,

2020). In 2022, new measures to crack down on crime and *mara* violence were implemented (see below, p. 13) and they have started to reverse these trends, posing new questions on the relation between violence and migration.

El Salvador has a long tradition of migration to the United States that began in the 1970s and intensified after the outbreak of the civil war in 1979. In fact, after Mexicans, Salvadorans are the second largest group of unauthorized migrants and the fourth largest Latino population in the U.S. Nearly 25% of the current Salvadoran population lives outside of the country and almost 9 out of 10 of those emigrants live in the U.S. This has given rise to a large and powerful Salvadoran diaspora that is recognized for playing an important role in new U.S.-bound migration flows.

While these migration dynamics have been a constant throughout the late 20th and the 21st centuries, new developments have taken place that have brought El Salvador to the foreground of regional migration studies. First, the recent evolution of violence rates in El Salvador affords an opportunity to explore and problematize the relationship between homicidal violence and migration, as well as the interaction of such violence with other migration drivers. Second, the demographic profile of the migrant population from El Salvador is changing; historically it comprised mostly (young) adult and male migrants; currently, ever more women, and, especially, – often unaccompanied – girls, boys, and adolescents are migrating. Finally, Italy and Spain have emerged as significant countries of destination of Salvadoran migration, suggesting new trends in mobility patterns from El Salvador. These developments need addressing both in themselves and as components of the broader regional migration dynamics.

2.0 Migration dynamics

Until the end of the 1970s, in El Salvador, as in other parts of Central America, migration flows were mainly internal or intra-regional and, for the most part, for labour purposes. Triggered by the process of economic modernization, these flows had as their destination the newly booming cities, especially San Salvador and its surroundings, as well as rural areas in the south of the country dedicated to export-oriented agricultural production. These flows were predominantly short-distance, temporary, and composed of young, low-educated, rural males (FONAMIH, 2007, p. 26).

In parallel to these internal labour migration flows, between 1920 and 1969, during what Gaborit et al. (2017, p. 122) have identified as the “first period” of Salvadoran migration, young Salvadoran males migrated internationally, mainly to two destinations in Honduras: the northern coast, to work in the banana plantations owned by the U.S. United Fruit Company; and the valleys of Comayagua and Olancho in search of jobs and farmland (Map 1). Unofficial figures at the end of the 1960s estimated that Honduras was home to about 300,000 Salvadorans, nearly 75% of the

foreign population in Honduras, and representing 15% of the total Honduran population (Ortega 2016; see also Menjívar and Gómez Cervantes, 2018).

Amid regional diplomatic tensions, in 1969 Oswaldo López Arellano's military government expelled the Salvadoran population from Honduras, in the wake of the agrarian reform, a policy that was intended to benefit solely the Honduran population (FONAMIH, 2007, p. 26). This exacerbated the existing hostility between the two countries, and in July 1969, the Soccer War (*Guerra del fútbol*) broke out, putting an end to a long period of Salvadoran labour migration to Honduras. According to Menjívar (2000), between 200,000 and 300,000 Salvadorans were repatriated from Honduras as a result.

From 1970 to 1979, migration from El Salvador to the United States increased, due to both the impossibility to migrate to Honduras and the economic crisis sparked by the breakdown of the Central American Common Market. This period gave rise to the first networks of Salvadoran migrants in the U.S. and inaugurated the era of long-distance international migration that characterizes Salvadoran migration flows to this date.

With the Cold War as a backdrop, between 1979 and 1992, El Salvador was immersed in a bloody civil war that triggered widespread mobility. An estimated 600,000 people were internally displaced, mostly rural population that sought shelter in San Salvador and the provincial capitals. But there were also large international migration flows (Menjívar, 1994). Around 800,000 Salvadorans left the country (Gómez-Johnson, 2015), as streams of poor rural inhabitants fled to neighbouring Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Belize (Jones, 1989, p. 193). According to Landaverde (2016), in 1985, there were approximately 120,000 Salvadoran refugees in Mexico, 70,000 in Guatemala, 20,000 in Honduras, and 17,000 in Nicaragua. Furthermore, there was an important flow of U.S.-bound population originating from better-off, urbanized sectors of San Salvador and the eastern provinces (Jones, 1989). In fact, during this period, Salvadoran migration to the United States increased 307%, encouraged, in part, by the 1986 U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act, that facilitated the regularization of undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants (Gaborit et al. 2017; Masferrer et al., 2020).

Despite the cruelty of the civil war and the indiscriminate use of violence against the civilian population, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the United States granted asylum to only 2% to 3% of the Salvadorans who had requested it, while the rest were considered economic migrants (Obinna, 2019, p. 491). Geopolitical reasons account for this, as the regime these Salvadoran refugees were fleeing was an ally of the U.S. in the Reagan-rekindled Cold War (Gzesh, 2006; Flores-Yeffal and Pren 2018).

By contrast, during the 1980s, Canada became an important destination for Salvadoran asylum seekers. Although during the first years of the war, the Canadian government was reluctant to accept Salvadoran refugees, by the mid-80s, substantial numbers of urban and rural workers from El Salvador were admitted as refugees, joining the authorized highly educated, mostly urban

Salvadoran migrants that had arrived in Canada prior to the civil war (see Mata, 2021). Since then, Canada has continued to accept asylum seekers from El Salvador. Between 1981 and 2016, 59% of the Salvadorans admitted in Canada were granted refugee status (Basok et al., 2023; Masferrer et al., 2020).

The end of the civil war and the 1992 Peace Accords marked the beginning of a new period of Salvadoran migration. The first years after the end of the conflict were characterized by the return to El Salvador of thousands of refugees and self-exiles. By 1996, however, the tide had turned again. The neoliberal structural reforms, imposed on the country after the signing of the peace, brought about unprecedented unemployment and economic hardship. Compounded by the effects of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, two successive earthquakes in 2001, and the increasing violence of *maras* (Box 1, Section 3) this situation gave rise to massive emigration. According to Gaborit et al. (2017), over the period 1996-2005, 100,000 Salvadorans left the country every year.

In 1990 the U.S. government created the Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a program to benefit noncitizens from designated countries who were unable to return to their places of origin because of armed conflict, environmental disasters, or other extraordinary circumstances (Warren and Kerwin, 2017). Salvadorans who had fled the civil war were some of the first beneficiaries of the program. After the 2001 earthquakes that devastated El Salvador, the U.S. granted TPS to about 250,000 Salvadorans. Since then, the TPS has been renewed every 18 months, thereby stimulating family reunification flows, as well as the creation of migrant networks in the U.S. In turn, these networks have fostered new U.S.-bound migration, consolidating the United States as the main destination of Salvadoran international migrants.

The 2010s saw important changes in the profiles of the migrant population from El Salvador. In addition to increasing flows of Salvadoran women, since the late 1980s (Kandel 2002), new flows of girls, boys and adolescents traveling to the U.S. became visible. In 2012, the introduction of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in the U.S., which protected from deportation some noncitizens who had arrived in the country as children, was wrongly interpreted in Central American countries as a policy of admission of minors (see Zepeda et al., forthcoming). Furthermore, human smugglers throughout the region spread the word that arriving at the U.S. border in the company of a child significantly increased the likelihood of a successful entry.ⁱⁱ Streams of minors from all over Central America, including El Salvador, ensued, giving rise to a humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border that was met with more stringent immigration controls in both Mexico and the United States. This forced the migrant population to venture into ever more dangerous routes to avoid detection.

Because of the increasing danger along the migrant trajectory, not only new routes, but also new international migration destinations have emerged. Between 2010 and 2021 Salvadoran migration to Spain increased 389.5%, with an ever-larger number of women migrants seeking to join the labour force, especially in the care sector (Parella Rubio, 2022). In turn, migration to Italy doubled between 2005 and 2020.

The 2010s came to a close with the migrant caravans featuring prominently in the migration panorama of the region. These massive flows of northbound Central American migrants that took place in the context of increasing border and immigration controls implemented by the U.S. and Mexican governments, included significant participation of Salvadoran citizens. In fact, it is in El Salvador that the movement originated. The first – and much more modest and contained – “Caravan of mothers of missing migrants” was organized there in 2004 to compel the Mexican government to search for missing Central American migrants and to protect those in transit through the country (Villafuerte Solís, 2017, p. 221). The massive caravans of the late 2010s built on that experience and brought together Salvadoran, Honduran and Guatemalan migrants. In time, migrants from other Latin American and Caribbean countries, such as Cuba and Haiti would join the caravans in significant numbers, as would citizens from Africa and Asia.

The COVID-19 pandemic put an end to the caravans and substantially altered human mobility throughout the region (see MacAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, eds., 2021). In the case of El Salvador, not only were sanitary restrictions implemented to stop migrant flows, but, as Ayala Durán (2022) has argued, the presence of COVID-19 itself also had a strong negative impact on the Salvadoran population’s intentions to migrate.

El Salvador has recorded for decades a net negative migration balance. With over one quarter of its total population abroad, El Salvador is strongly dependent on remittances, which constitute the country’s largest form of revenue (Wiltberger, 2014). Hailed as “heroes” by successive administrations for their contribution to the country’s economy, migrants are fundamental to the Salvadoran economy and therefore, an essential resource that Salvadoran governments, past and present, have little interest or incentive to bring back home.

2.1 Migrant stock

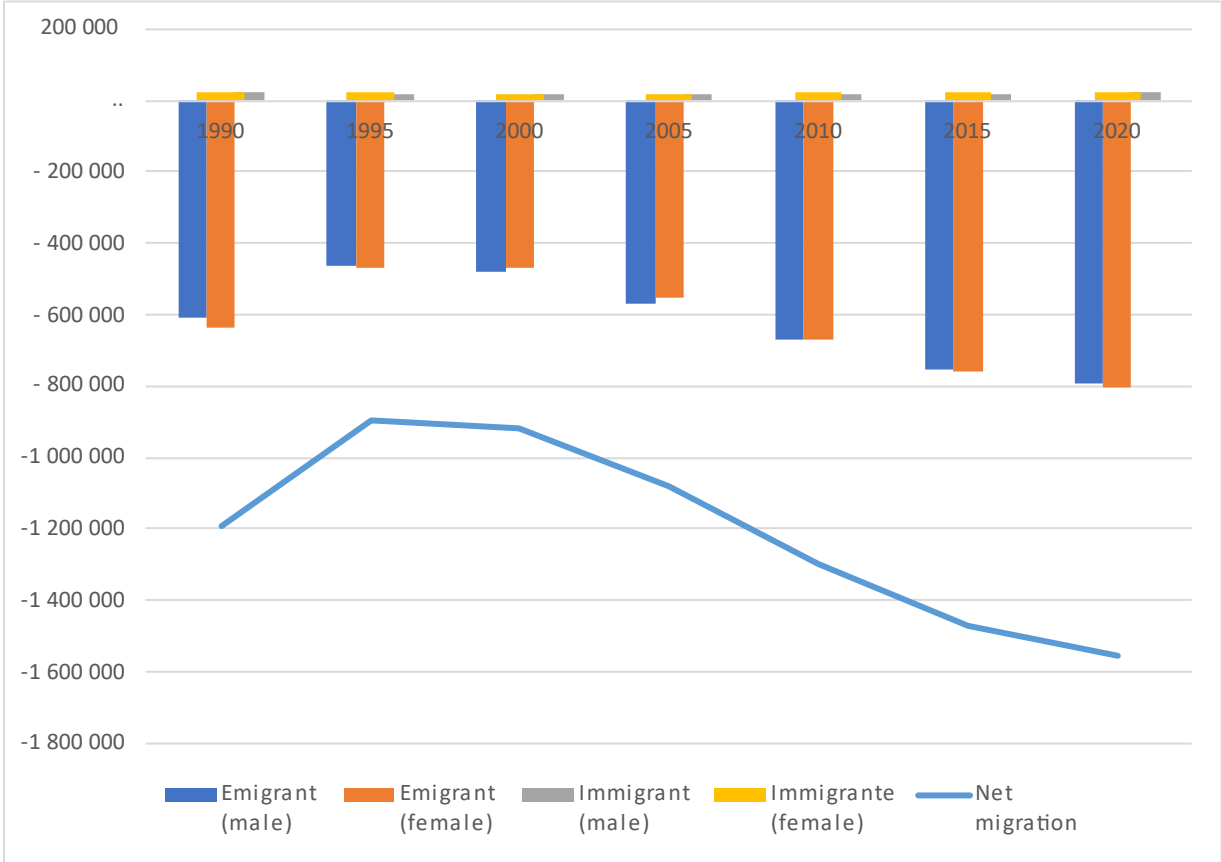
At least since 1990, net migration in El Salvador has been negative. In 1990, and being the highest figure in the 1990-2020 period, 47,360 persons immigrated to El Salvador, which amounted to 0.88% of the total population (UNDESA). Thereafter, immigration dropped and by 2020, with 42,767 persons, immigrants represented 0.68% of El Salvador’s population. Throughout the entire 1990-2020 period, female immigration to El Salvador has been about 10% higher than male immigration (Figure 1).

While immigration to El Salvador is counted by the tens of thousands, emigration is counted by the hundreds of thousands. Except for the 1990-1995 interval, when emigration dropped because of the end of the civil war and the expectations brought by the signing of the Peace Accords, migration from El Salvador has risen constantly from 893,566 in 1995 to nearly 1,600,000 people in 2020, corresponding to 25.4% of the population (UNDESA).

Female participation in Salvadoran out migration flows has been slightly higher than male participation, albeit in a much lower proportion than in the case of immigration. With a record

share of 53%, 1990 was the year in which emigrant women outnumbered the men by the largest margin. Since then, the 51%-women-to-49%-men relationship has been maintained.

Figure 1. El Salvador. Net migration 1990-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data

El Salvador's immigrant population stems mainly from the neighbouring countries: Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The data (Table 2) point to a predominantly regional, short-distance migration dynamic. Within this general trend, the steady growth of Nicaraguan migration throughout the 1990-2020 period is worth highlighting.

Table 2. Migration to El Salvador. Top five countries of origin, 1990-2020

Country of origin	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Honduras	15 774	12 650	9 525	10 362	11 198	11 676	11 878
Guatemala	8 235	7 224	6 212	7 367	8 521	8 885	9 036
Nicaragua	3 893	4 219	4 545	6 024	7 502	7 823	7 956
United States	8 033	6 306	4 603	4 871	5 176	5 397	5 488
Mexico	2 457	1 948	1 438	1 541	1 644	1 714	1 742

Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data

In the case of out migration, six main destinations are identified: United States, Canada, Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica and Italy. Regional migration flows caused by the civil war are evident in the number of emigrants to Mexico, Guatemala and Costa Rica, all of which fell sharply after 1990. Although some of the flows to the U.S. and Canada were also motivated by the internal conflict, they did not decrease after the end of the war; rather, they have continued rising since 1990, suggesting a trend of permanent migration and family reunification. The other striking case is that of Italy, where the Salvadoran population grew 23 times between 1990 and 2020, making it the sixth most common destination, and almost with the same frequency as Mexico and Costa Rica.

While these observations are significant, they should not obscure the clear dominance of the United States as the main country of destination of Salvadoran migration. The U.S. as a recipient of Salvadoran migrants exceeds by far every other country, and it has done so since 1990. In that year, 465,433 Salvadoran immigrants were counted in the U.S., the equivalent to 8.67% of El Salvador's population. In 2020, 1,410,659 Salvadorans immigrants to the U.S. were recorded, a sum representing 22.41% of El Salvador's population (Table 3).

Table 3. Migration from El Salvador. Top six countries of destination, 1990-2020

Country of destination	1990		1995		2000		2005		2010		2015		2020	
		%		%		%		%		%		%		%
Total population	5 367 000		5 748 000		5 958 000		6 038 000		6 114 000		6 231 000		6 293 000	
United States	465 433	8.67	649 970	11.3	838 090	14.06	997 858	16.5	1 192 423	19.5	1 352 357	21.7	1 410 659	22.41
Canada	27 145	0.5	32 598	0.5	38 826	0.65	39 970	0.66	43 655	0.71	47 785	0.76	51 776	0.82
Guatemala	236 655	4.4	124 346	2.16	12 037	0.2	14 364	0.23	16 691	0.27	18 301	0.29	20 683	0.32
Mexico	301 106	5.6	4 931	0.08	5 786	0.09	6 925	0.11	8 866	0.14	10 427	0.16	16 807	0.26
Costa Rica	56 257	1.04	26 046	0.45	8 857	0.14	6 451	0.1	13 701	0.22	13 900	0.22	16 682	0.26
Italy	724	0.01	3 013	0.05	5 302	0.08	8 882	0.14	11 705	0.19	13 021	0.20	16 672	0.26
Other	154 529	2.88	92 199	1.6	40 144	0.67	44 343	0.73	50 044	0.81	57 104	0.91	65 779	1.04
Total	1 241 849	23.1	933 103	16.1	949 042	15.9	1 118 793	18.5	1 337 085	21.8	1 512 895	24.2	1 599 058	25.4

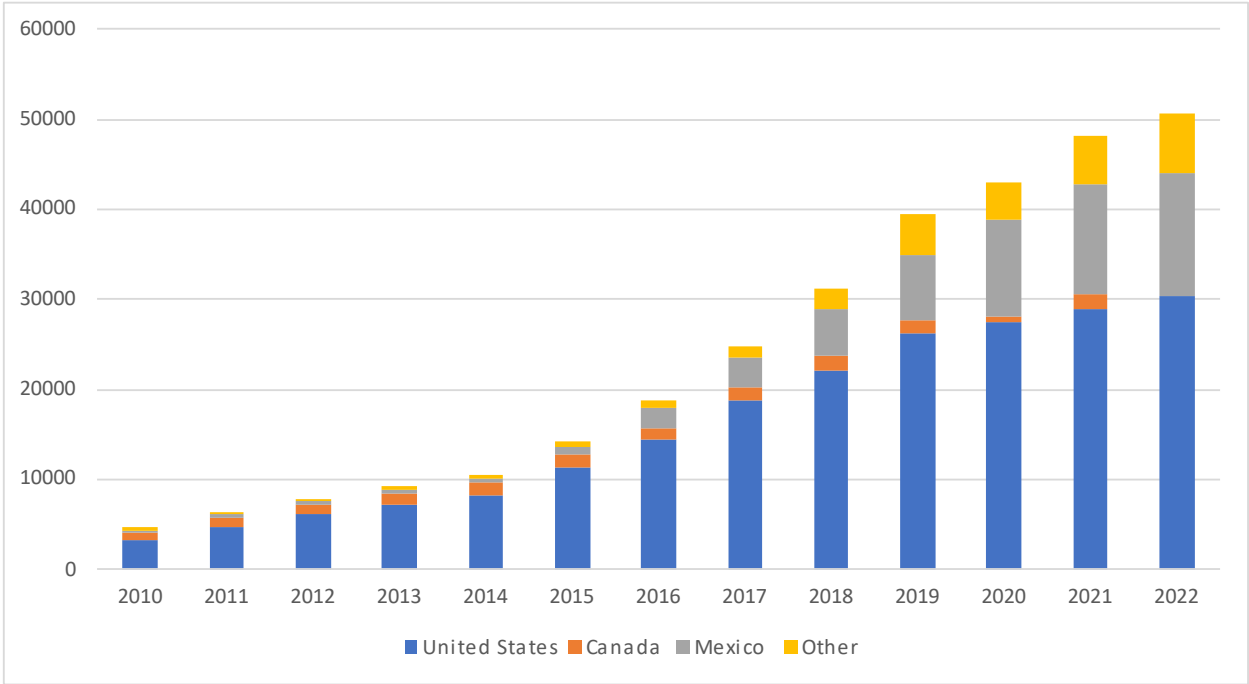
Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data

Of the Salvadoran citizens currently living in the U.S., 195,000 count with Temporary Protected Status (TPS), at least until June 2024 (Warren and Kerwin, 2017), while 22,940 are under the protection of the DACA program (USCIS, 2022). According to Obinna (2019), historically, the Salvadorans in the United States have settled in Los Angeles County, California, and in Harris County, Texas. Nonetheless, recent studies show greater diversification and wider dispersion, as rural counties in Maryland, Virginia, New York State, Arkansas, and Illinois, appear to attract the new incoming population.

2.2 Asylum

The number of Salvadoran refugees and asylum seekers has increased dramatically between 2010 and 2022, with the United States being the main country of asylum. In 2010, there were 3,169 Salvadoran refugees in the U.S.; by 2022, this figure had grown nearly ten-fold to 30,417 (UNHCR). After the U.S., Canada was historically the second most frequent country of destination for Salvadoran asylum-seekers. By 2018, it had fallen to the fourth place, after Mexico and Italy, and in 2022, it was not even among the most frequent countries of destination.

Figure 2. Salvadoran refugees by country of destination (2010-2022)



Source: Authors' elaboration on UNHCR data

A look at the number of asylum seekers from El Salvador (as opposed to persons already granted refugee status) further shows the intensification of northbound flows, with the preference of the U.S. as a country of destination, and the emerging importance of asylum as a migration strategy for Salvadoran citizens. Between 2010 and 2012, the number of Salvadoran refugees exceeded the number of asylum applicants, albeit in a diminishing proportion each year. By 2013, the

relationship was reversed, as 10,289 asylum applications from Salvadoran citizens were received, over 3,000 more than the number of El Salvador refugees in the U.S. that year. From then on, the number of asylum claims grew exponentially: over 16,000 in 2014, over 28,000 in 2015, over 55,000 in 2016, and over 91,000 in 2017, a sum that more than quintupled the number of actual Salvadoran refugee status recipients in the U.S. that year. Since then, the number of asylum applications from El Salvador has continued to increase, being between five and six times higher than the number of refugees. The highest number recorded to date was over 131,000 asylum applications from Salvadoran citizens received in the United States in 2021 (UNHCR).

Despite being a country of origin of hundreds of thousands of asylum applicants fleeing *maras* and other forms of violence, in 2019 El Salvador was pressed by the Trump administration to sign an Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) – a third safe country agreement by another name – as part of the U.S. strategy to curb migration from Central America. The ACA obligated El Salvador to receive and grant asylum to returned migrants from Central America who had transited through its territory before reaching the United States.

The agreement was short-lived, as it was formally suspended by President Biden in February 2021 (Reichlin-Melnik, 2021). Ultimately, the ACA appears to have been inconsequential, for even as it was supposedly in place, the number of asylum applications in El Salvador remained extremely low. Indeed, throughout the 2010-2022 period, no more than 20 persons from the same country ever applied for asylum in El Salvador. Except for 2010, when there were 15 applications from Eritrean citizens, most applicants came from countries in the region: Nicaragua, Venezuela, Honduras, and, for the first time in 2022, Cuba (UNHCR).

3.0 Internal migration

Until the 1990s, El Salvador's population was predominantly rural. The arrival of peace and the new economic model that came along with it brought about land-ownership atomization, the decrease of agriculture's share in the GDP, and a general pauperization of the rural population. These changes led to accelerated urbanization, bringing El Salvador's urban population from 49% in 1990 to 58% in 1998. Thereafter, urbanization continued to grow steadily, reaching 74% in 2022 (The World Bank, 2023).

Most of the internal migration from the countryside to the cities originated in the northern and southeastern departments, and had as destination the southwestern region, home to San Salvador, the capital city. According to Kandel (2002), in 2002 San Salvador and its surrounding metropolitan area, which represented less than 3% of the national territory, hosted nearly 32% of the country's population. Smaller cities, such as Soyapango, Santa Ana, San Miguel, and Mejicanos, also experienced significant population increases since the 1990s.

3.1 Climate- and natural events-related migration

In recent years, internal migration in El Salvador has been associated with hydroclimatic events. Practically, the entirety of El Salvador's territory is encompassed within the Dry Corridor and is therefore cyclically ravaged by droughts and extreme rainfall. Moreover, El Salvador ranked 16th on the *Climate Risk Index 2019* (Eckstein, Hutfils and Wings, 2018, p. 33).

High temperatures and droughts have been related to migration, as they affect agricultural production and negatively impact the livelihoods of the rural population. Ibáñez et al. (2022) found that Salvadoran agricultural workers react to weather shocks by either relocating within local labour markets or migrating internationally. Báez (2017) and Christian Aid (2019) also associate droughts with internal, short-distance migration in El Salvador, while they stress that it is mainly the rural, young, male population that migrates in response to climate stress.

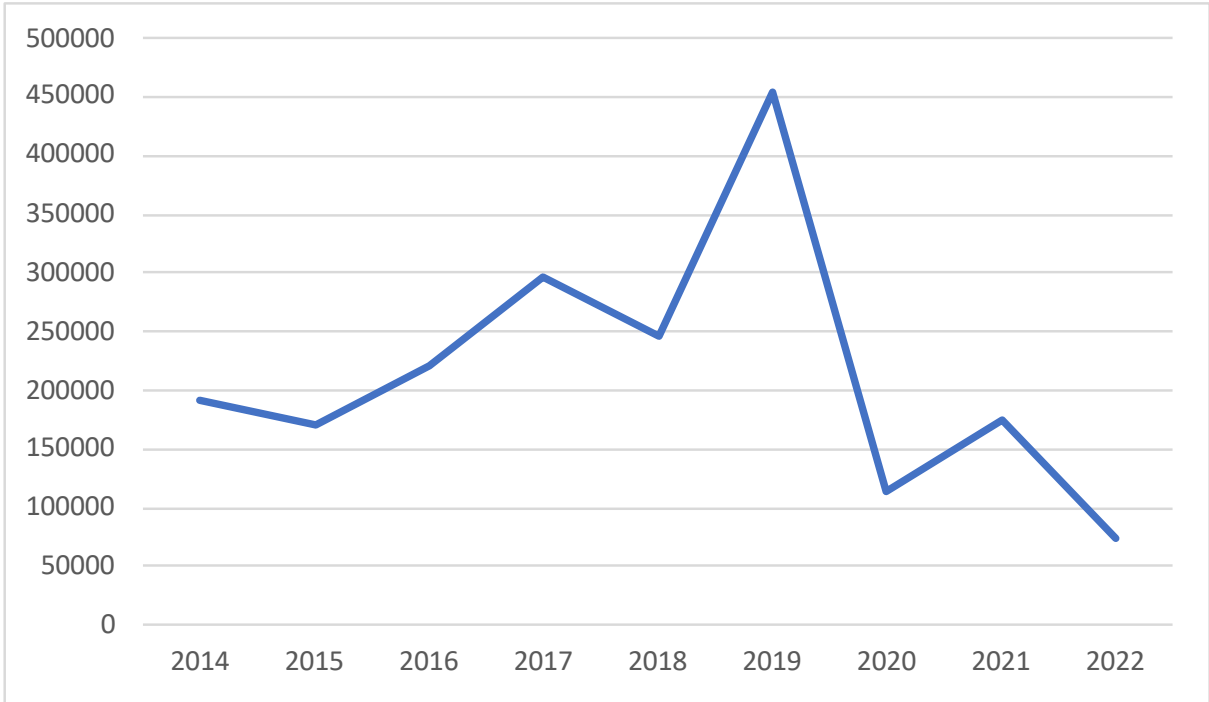
Most researchers, however, dwell on the relationship between climate events and international migration. In the case of El Salvador, there does not appear to be either consensus or conclusive evidence on the exact nature and direction of such relationship. While Halliday (2006), Ibáñez et al. (2022), and Warner et al. (2010) suggest there is a strong link between climate shocks and international migration, Yang (2008) claims that the adoption of international migration as a risk-management strategy depends on whether the shock is specific to a household (idiosyncratic) or shared with other households (aggregate). Millock (2015), in turn, argues that the type of migration that can be expected depends on the type of environmental event that triggers it. Thus, slow-onset or recurring events, such as droughts, may – but do not necessarily – trigger internal migration, whereas rapid-onset events, such as hurricanes, and natural disasters, like earthquakes, tend to decrease mobility. This hypothesis runs contrary to Riosmena's (2023) reading who, after reviewing the literature on the topic, concludes that there appears to be an association between rapid-onset events and international migration. The upsurge of Salvadoran migrant flows reaching the U.S. border in the aftermath of hurricanes Eta and Iota in late 2020 would seem to confirm this link.

Despite these disparate opinions, there is a consensus on the insufficiency of climate-related events alone as an explanatory factor of migration. In fact, most authors stress that climate shocks interact with multiple other factors, including socioeconomic structures, the reach of social protection schemes, the weakness of existing climate adaptation mechanisms, and the prevalence of significant multidimensional poverty levels and income inequality (Escribano 2021). Moreover, as Millock (2015) states, migration is but one of several potential strategies to cope with environmental stress. In short, evidence from El Salvador suggests that there is neither a direct nor an inevitable link between environmental events and migration, be it internal or international.

3.2 Forced internal displacement associated with violence

As regards forced internal displacement (FID) associated with violence, El Salvador exhibits some of the highest figures in the American continent. Since 2014, when data became available, the number of internally displaced persons associated with conflict and violence grew from 191,000 to 454,000 in 2019 (The World Bank, 2023). In 2020, the number fell sharply to 114,000, most probably as an effect of the general restrictions to mobility that the COVID-19 pandemic entailed; but it rose again in 2021, albeit in a much lower proportion when compared with past trends.

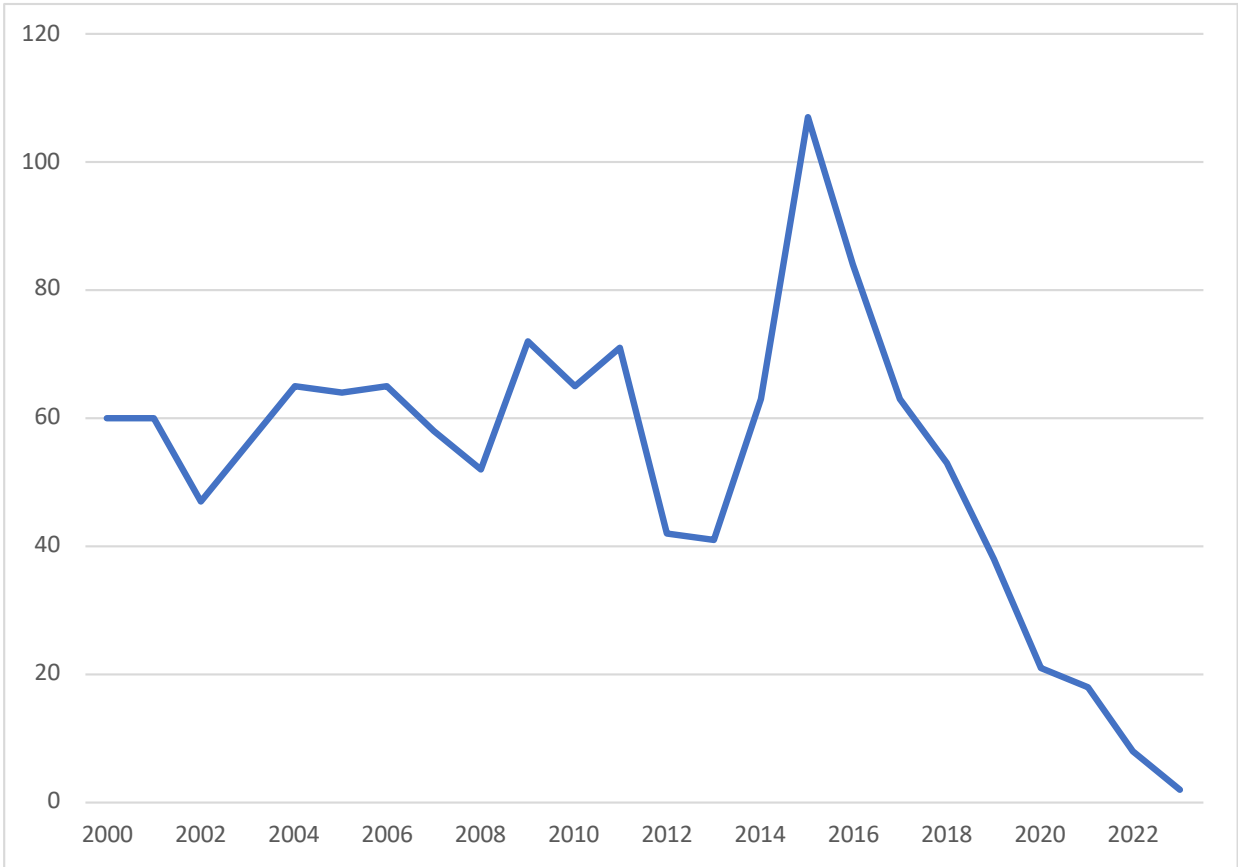
Figure 3. New displacements associated with conflict and violence in El Salvador, 2014-2021



Source: Authors' elaboration on The World Bank data

Ever since the 1990s, violence rates in El Salvador had been among the highest in the world. They were also strongly related to FID and, as will be discussed below, to international migration (Morales Gamboa, 2020; PDDH-Cristosal, 2020; Sardiza Miranda et al., 2019; SSPAS, 2021; Wolf, 2020). In the period 2000-2022, the rate of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in El Salvador was consistently above the average global rate of 6 homicides per 100,000 persons. However, since 2015, it began to decline dramatically year after year and, at the time of writing (October 2023), El Salvador's cumulative homicide rate stands well below the global homicide rate.

Figure 4. Homicide rate per 100,000 persons in El Salvador 2000-2023



Source: Authors’ elaboration on The World Bank data (for the period 2000-2022) and Mora, 2023 (for 2023)

Several factors converged to give rise to high violence rates in El Salvador. First, the civil war had long-lasting effects on the civilian population that suffered extreme violence and abuse at the hands of all parties to the conflict. This compounded the structural violence and exclusion that have long characterized Salvadoran society, and which are the fertile ground upon which all other forms of violence breed (Menjívar and Gómez Cervantes, 2018). Next, El Salvador is plagued by violent organized criminal bands, such as the Cachiros, the Perrones, and other groups involved in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking --often for Mexican drug cartels. These organizations strive for territorial dominance and engage in violence to attain it (Farah, 2011; 2016; InSight Crime, 2021). Finally, there are the *maras*, violent street gangs, whose brutality has terrorized Salvadoran society, and especially the young population, for over two decades.

Box 1. Maras

The street gangs known as *maras* were originally formed by marginal youths in Los Angeles, California in the 1980s. Following the adoption of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in the United States in 1996 and the massive deportation of unauthorized Central American migrants that ensued, the uprooted youths reproduced in their

new countries the gangs that had given them a sense of belonging back in the U.S. Named after the Los Angeles streets where they were first founded, the most prominent *maras* in El Salvador are now Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) –a name that appears to make reference to its Salvadoran origin–, Mara Barrio 18 Revolucionarios and Mara Barrio 18 Sureños (ECAP, 2019, p. 84).

Mara violence derives from a double uprooting: first, from the country of origin in Central America, which most of the members had left as young children and barely knew, and second, from the United States, the country they came to consider as their home. Due to this context of uprooting, *maras* fundamentally constitute peer communities, providing their members with cultural and social identity.

Rather than economic gain, *maras* seek to establish strong hierarchical communities based on loyalty bonds and the complicity surrounding inenarrable acts of violence. As sub-cultural groups, *maras* are strongly territorial and resort to extreme violence to assert and retain control of their dominions, that now stretch far beyond their original marginal neighbourhoods. Murder, extortion, and rape are among the repertoire of violent actions with which they target especially El Salvador's younger population (PDDH-Cristosal, 2020, p. 8). Faced with credible threats to their lives, El Salvador's young men and women, as well as the LGBTQ+ population often find that the only way to survive persecution from the *maras* is leaving their communities.

In March 2022, President Nayib Bukele implemented radical measures to curb *mara* violence. Since then, over 60,000 alleged *mara* members have been incarcerated and homicide rates in El Salvador have plunged. Other impacts of these measures are still unfolding.

Although youths are particularly vulnerable to *mara* violence, they are by no means the only group that suffers from it. A 2018 report on internal mobility and violence by El Salvador's Ministry of Justice (Gobierno de El Salvador, 2018) stated that the surveyed population reported violence as the third most frequent cause of internal mobility, well over other causes, such as education, health or natural disasters. The official report further concludes that at least one member of 1.1% of all the Salvadoran families living in the country in 2016 had been forced to change their place of residence because of violence suffered between 2006 and 2016. While this figure represents a reduction of nearly a half of the 2.1% total El Salvador households that reported having changed their place of residence in 2012 because of threats to their lives (Cantor, 2014), it is still significant.

As with environmental factors, violence alone does not produce mobility; rather, it interacts with other socioeconomic, political, and institutional elements, such as poverty, job insecurity, corruption, and a weak judiciary to generate vulnerability and hamper the adoption of protection strategies. Violence as a cause of migration is therefore better understood in the context of social exclusion and economic precariousness (Winton, 2019).

Violence by *maras* affects mainly the urban population and generates urban-urban mobility. Inkpen et al. (2021) observe that violence is related to internal migration or forced displacement, rather than to international migration. Yet as Escamilla García (2021) has shown, in the case of

Salvadoran youths, although relocating internally might be the first strategy to escape *mara* violence, internal relocation often results in new contexts of violence, similar to those they were originally fleeing, leading them to turn to international migration as their next option (see also Roth and Hartnett, 2018). Moreover, because of El Salvador's small territory, internal relocation tends to be ineffective as a survival strategy, since "the gangs' embeddedness in communities, local governments, and the security forces, makes it practically impossible for displaced persons to relocate safely within the country" (Wolf, 2020; see also Gómez-Johnson, 2015; Knox, 2017).

Violence has increasingly been cited as one of the main causes of forced migration from Central America. According to Alba Villalever et al. (2023), in 2018 most forced migrants from Central America in transit through Mexico mentioned *maras* (54.5%) and gangs (29%), as the main agents of persecution. For their part, Flores-Yeffal and Pren (2018), assert that the Salvadoran civil violence index, considered together with personal economic conditions, results in a good predictor of first-time unauthorized migration from El Salvador.

Until the late 2010s, the Salvadoran government had been reluctant to admit that forced internal displacement caused by violence existed in the country (Sardiza et al., 2019). However, in 2020 the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador, supported by organizations such as UNHCR, approved the "Special Law for the Attention and Integral Protection of Persons in a Situation of Forced Internal Displacement", that recognized the problem for the first time and created mechanisms to support the displaced population.

In addition to this law, and as part of President Nayib Bukele's citizen security plan, in March 2022, the Legislative Assembly approved the implementation of a state of emergency for a period of 30 days. Since then, the state of emergency has been extended several times and, at the time of writing, it is still in place. It includes measures such as the mass incarceration of people accused of belonging to the *maras* and the authorization to use lethal force against gang members, who are also deemed terrorists (Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 2020). While the international community has strongly criticized these measures for their severity and for being in violation of human rights law, they enjoy wide social acceptance in El Salvador (The Guardian, 2023).

According to an official *communiqué*, one year after the inception of the state of emergency, there were 215 days in which no homicides had been committed and 66,000 detentions on charges of gang membership. Moreover, between 2021 and 2022, the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants dropped from 18 to 8 and, according to El Salvador's National Police data, the cumulative rate for 2023 is now 2.3, the lowest in Latin America (Mora, 2023). In turn, human rights organizations have vocally denounced multiple and gross human rights violations committed under the state of exception, with the office of the Ombudsperson for Human Rights (PDDH) reporting 7,900 complaints for arbitrary detentions, and civil society organizations denouncing the deaths of at least 132 persons under custody (Amnesty International, 2023).

Although no information is available yet to assess the impact of the state of emergency on forced displacement and international migration, the persecution of gangs in El Salvador has set off alarm bells in the neighbouring countries, Honduras and Guatemala, where it is feared that gang members may take refuge and unleash new waves of violence (Barreno, 2022; Cueto, 2023). Additionally, out-flows of people who oppose the state of exception and its implications for human rights in El Salvador have also been reported.ⁱⁱⁱ

To sum up, internal migration dynamics in El Salvador are characterized by the rural-urban mobility that has sustained urbanization since the 1990s. As the works reviewed in this section reveal, forced displacements, be it for causes associated with conflict and violence or because of the effects of climate and other natural phenomena, are also an important factor to explain El Salvador's existing internal migration dynamics. While the available evidence is insufficient to establish a direct relationship between internal displacement associated to climate events and international migration, there are sounder indicators of the correlation between violence, especially that exerted by *maras*, and international mobility from El Salvador, from 2000 to 2021. Although the impacts of the state of emergency decreed in 2022 to combat *mara* violence are still to unfold in full, the current situation affords the MEMO project a privileged vantage point to explore the relationship between violence and migration in more depth and contribute to its understanding in both the Salvadoran and the regional contexts.

4.0 Intra-regional migration dynamics

The analysis of El Salvador's intra-regional migration dynamics requires a previous clarification since there are several regional contexts where migration flows take place. First, there is the cross-border region formed by the economies and societies of the adjoining borders of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Second, there is a Northern Central American region composed of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, as well as the broader Central American region, which also includes Nicaragua and Panama. Finally, it is possible to conceive of the region as the entire American continent, spanning from Chile, in the south, to Canada in the north. In all these cases, migration flows can be characterized as regional; nonetheless, they are very different in nature, magnitude and intensity.

The following pages look at the main intra-regional flows that involve El Salvador and focus on the short-distance cross-border migration within Central America, the authorized long-distance labour migration to the United States and Canada, and the unauthorized long-distance migration bound for the U.S. and in transit through Guatemala and Mexico.

4.1 Short-distance cross-border migration

Until the 1970s, migration from El Salvador was predominantly short-distance and to the closest countries in the region, especially Honduras and Guatemala, where intraregional labour markets fostered circular mobility. The first data on the flow of Salvadoran workers in these countries date back to 1950, when 20,300 Salvadorans were recorded in Honduras and 9,800 in Guatemala (Elizaga, 1969), most of them as workers in American-run banana plantations. Today, there is significant integration between the economies of the three countries of northern Central America, promoted by the Central American Integration System (SICA), as well as by the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA), signed with the United States in 2004, and in force since 2006.

Intraregional mobility has also been facilitated by the 2005 CA-4 agreement, an intergovernmental arrangement that allows the free circulation of citizens from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua in those four countries for recreational and non-commercial purposes (SELA, n.d.). Under the CA-4, authorized cross-border circular migration took off, but so did unauthorized cross-border labour mobility that ultimately created precarious labour markets, as Ramos (2008) documents for the case of Nicaraguan and Honduran workers in San Miguel, El Salvador.

While, officially, the CA-4 remains in force, intraregional mobility has been significantly curtailed by the migration interdiction measures adopted since 2018 across the region in response to the first migrant caravans, and, later, to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, flows of migrants from El Salvador have been prevented from entering Guatemala (Arroyo, 2020; Reina, 2020), and Salvadoran and Honduran migrants have been detained and deported from Guatemala (Cumes 2019). This has not only affected the local cross-border economies, but more importantly, it has signaled the collapse of the regional free mobility regime that the CA-4 once represented.

4.2 Authorized long-distance cross-border migration

Although long-distance migration from El Salvador is mostly unauthorized, there are small numbers of Salvadoran citizens who every year travel to the United States and Canada to perform low-skill jobs under the existing temporary worker programs.

In the U.S., both the H2-A visa for agricultural workers and the H2-B visa for non-agricultural workers, created in 1986, allow their bearers to stay in the country for up to six months (Chaves and Aragón, 2021). Although they are legally available to many nationalities, over 90% of these visas are ultimately granted to Mexican workers. From the 258,000 H2-A visas issued by the U.S. government in Fiscal Year 2021, El Salvador was awarded less than 300 (Martin, 2021; Ramón, 2021).

In February 2020 the U.S. and the Salvadoran governments signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen the participation of Salvadoran workers in the U.S. temporary

workers program, and to create ethical recruitment mechanisms (U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, 2020). A significant increase in the number of temporary work visas ensued. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS, 2022), between October 2021 and August 2022, more than 4,200 H2-A and H2-B visas were granted to Salvadoran workers. Further negotiations in 2023, resulted in an additional increase of 20,000 H2-B visas earmarked for Haiti and the Northern Central American countries. In El Salvador, these work visas are administered by the Salvadoran Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Urban Strategies, in Washington, and private international recruiting companies, such as Joven 360.

With regard to Canada, in the last few years, a small number of Salvadoran citizens has obtained temporary visas to work under the official temporary workers programs. Varying between 15 and 60 per year in the 2015-2020 period, the number of these visas awarded to Salvadorans rose to 100 in 2021 and reached its historic maximum of 195 in 2022 (Canada, 2023).

Finally, in 2019, in the wake of the migrant caravans, Mexico extended its program of Regional Border Visitor Cards (Tarjeta de Visitante Regional Fronterizo) to Salvadoran and Honduran citizens, in addition to the Guatemalan and Belizean citizens who, until then, had been the sole beneficiaries of this type of permit. The card grants permission to stay in Mexico's southern border states for as long as 7 days but does not authorize undertaking paid activities. However, as it happens with most Guatemalans who work across the border with Mexico, some Salvadorans make authorized crossings of the Mexico-Guatemala border with the TVRF to then work in Mexico without leave, giving rise to informal labour markets where precarious work prevails. In 2019, 828 TVRF were granted to citizens from El Salvador, 204 in 2020, 1,502 in 2021, and 587 in 2022 (UPM, n.d.). These labour migration flows are composed mainly of young men from rural areas.

4.3 Long-distance unauthorized migration

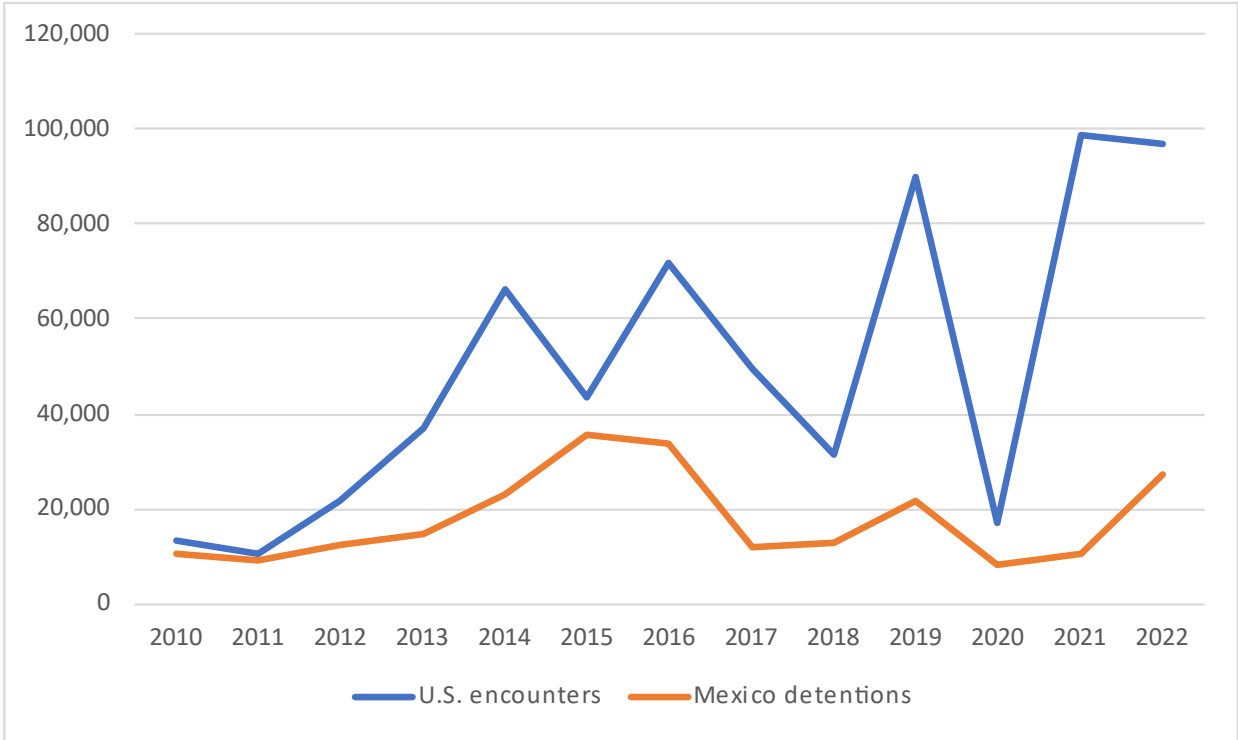
Low income, unemployment, violence, family reunification and social networks are all cited as causes of international migration from El Salvador. This migration is mostly unauthorized and has increased significantly since the beginning of the 2010s.

Because of its covert nature, unauthorized migration cannot be accurately quantified. Nonetheless, it is possible to gain some insight into the size and/or intensity of unauthorized migration flows by looking at official migrant detention statistics, in this case, in Mexico and the United States. It is important to state that the Mexican and the U.S. authorities record different events. The Mexican National Migration Institute registers the number of persons detained; by contrast, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) notes the number of encounters with unauthorized migrants. This means that several attempts to cross by one single person will be recorded independently by CBP, resulting in a much higher figure. In view of this, it can be said that while the Mexican data refer to the size of the flows, the U.S. figures reflect their intensity.

Figure 5 shows the number of Salvadoran citizens detained by Mexican immigration authorities and the number of encounters of Salvadoran citizens at the U.S. southwest border (the border with Mexico) recorded by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. In both cases, the figures show constant increases between 2011 and 2014, when the unaccompanied minors' humanitarian crisis was felt most strongly. The measures implemented in Mexico to stop the migration of minors are reflected in the drop of 2015 U.S. encounters and the rise in Mexico detentions in the same year. A new peak was reached in 2016 and then again in 2019, in the context of the migrant caravans, with 89,811 encounters in the U.S. and a much lower sum of 21,494 detentions in Mexico. The flow decreased severely again in 2020, as a result of both the mobility restrictions imposed to curb the COVID-19 pandemic and the migration control policies put into effect in the U.S., Mexico, and Guatemala. However, it peaked again in 2021 to reach the highest level of the entire period and it remained high throughout 2022.

The increase in the number of detentions might be an indication of the flows triggered by expectations that the incoming Biden administration would eliminate the Trump administration's most extreme migration interdiction policies. Yet, it may also reflect a stricter implementation of Title 42, a law adopted during the pandemic by the U.S. government that allowed federal officials to expel migrants swiftly, sending them back to their home countries or their more recent transit country, to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Title 42, which was in place until May 2023, denied the migrants the possibility to even apply for asylum, but made it possible for them to re-enter the U.S. without facing legal consequences. Since most migrants returned under Title 42 were sent to Mexican border towns, the frequency of re-entry attempts may have inflated encounters statistics.

Figure 5. Salvadoran citizens detained in Mexico and U.S. southwest border encounters, 2010-2022



Source: Authors' elaboration on UPM and CBP data

As mentioned above, the composition of long-distance flows has changed over time, with an initial predominance of the young, male population, being later joined by young women. By 2014 the flow comprised a significant number of unaccompanied boys, girls and adolescents. In subsequent years, and especially since 2018, the stream has been formed by a mixture of young men, unaccompanied minors, women traveling alone, and entire family units fleeing poverty and violence.

Because of the mounting difficulty to reach the U.S. border, unauthorized migrants are forced to transit along more dangerous routes and are particularly vulnerable to the abuses of corrupt authorities and criminal actors. In order to increase the chances of a successful crossing, but, more importantly, to protect themselves from organized crime, migrants from El Salvador often resort to migrant smugglers, also known as *polleros* or *coyotes*. As Brigden states, “[t]oday, the primary purpose of hiring a door-to-door *coyote* is not to evade border patrols, but to evade criminal violence” (2015, p. 254).

Prior to the restrictions imposed to stop the first caravans, migrants from El Salvador did not require the services of an intermediary until they reached the border with Mexico, as the CA-4 agreement granted them free transit through Guatemala. At the time of writing, smugglers may be hired directly in El Salvador to arrange the entire journey, in Guatemala or in Mexico. According to the 2019 Survey on Migration on Mexico’s Southern Border (Emifsur) (El Colegio de la Frontera

Norte et al. 2020), in the 2009-2019 period, between 52.1% and 61% of the Salvadoran migrants that were returned by U.S. authorities hired the services of a smuggler to cross the border. After 2016, when the highest share of 61% was recorded, the proportion of migrants resorting to a smuggler began to decrease slightly and then, in 2019, more abruptly to reach the lowest value of the period, 48.5%. It is no coincidence that this drop took place in the same year as the caravans, since one of the reasons that seems to explain these massive population movements is, precisely, that they afford the migrants visibility, security and protection at a reduced cost (Rosas-López et al., 2023; Wurtz, 2021).

Coyote fees are high, and they have increased in the past years mirroring the mounting risks and difficulties involved in the journey. In 2015, a door-to-door service from El Salvador cost between US\$ 6,000 and US\$ 7,500 (Brigden, 2015, p. 247); four years later, after the implementation of the enforcement measures that followed Donald Trump's advent to the presidency, the service from El Salvador to Houston cost US\$ 9,500 and an additional US\$ 1,500 if the delivery was to be made beyond Houston (Greenfield et al., 2019). By 2021, a Mexican smuggler explained that his fees varied according to the service provided, the place of origin and the destination. For a Salvadoran – he said – it all depended on “how far up [north] they needed to go; if they just want[ed] the ‘leap’ to the other side [of the Mexico-U.S. border], it cost them US\$ 13,000” (Olivares Alonso, 2021).

Intra-regional migration dynamics in El Salvador consist, therefore, of different types of mobility, which are also interlinked. While short-distance cross-border movements respond to the logic of cross-border integration, they have been severely affected by the developments in unauthorized long-distance cross-border migration and the policy measures implemented to curtail it. In turn, the increase in travel permits available in Mexico and work visas available in the U.S. for Salvadoran citizens in the aftermath of the migrant caravans reveals the connection between unauthorized and authorized long-distance cross-border migration dynamics, as well as the limited responses politics has been able to offer to the growing pressure to create legal migration pathways.

5.0 Inter-continental migration dynamics

Migration from El Salvador is concentrated in the American continent, with the United States as the main country of destination and host to an overwhelming 88% of the total Salvadoran migrants. But as U.S. immigration control becomes more restrictive, making northbound migration both more difficult and dangerous, migration flows from El Salvador have begun to turn to countries across the Atlantic. Migration to Spain, for instance, has increased notoriously, especially among women. According to Parella Rubio (2022) Salvadoran female immigration to Spain increased 389.5% between 2010 and 2021.

Yet, among the extracontinental destinations of Salvadoran migration, it is Italy that occupies the first place and will expectedly continue to gain prominence in the coming years. In 1990, the Salvadoran population in Italy represented 0.01% of El Salvador's total population; by 2020, it was 0.26%. Although the 2020 number of Salvadoran migrants in Italy was still modest (16,672), it represented a 2,600% increase vis-à-vis the 1990 figure. Moreover, Italy receives a similar number of Salvadoran migrants as Mexico and Costa Rica. Because of the Salvadoran social networks that now exist in Italy (Bonomi, 2018; Calvi and Uberti-Bona, 2020), it is not unlikely that this country will soon overtake both Mexico and Costa Rica as the third most frequent country of destination of Salvadoran migration.

Changes in mobility patterns across the globe have also been reflected in the presence of extracontinental migration flows in northern Central America. Most of these flows transit through Honduras and Guatemala (Yates and Bolter, 2021); nonetheless, a few trickles down to El Salvador, as the current presence of African and Indian migrants in transit to the U.S. shows.^{iv} Yet, most "atypical" transit flows in El Salvador do not stem from other continents, but rather from other Latin American countries, especially in the Caribbean. Méndez Barquero (2021) has documented that the dismantling of a migrant smuggling network in Costa Rica and Panama, which took place in 2015, led to a regional crisis, as countries in the region closed their borders to prevent the stranded migrants from entering their territories. Ultimately, it was agreed to carry out air shuttles to transport over 5,000 Cuban migrants from Costa Rica to El Salvador, whence the migrants were finally transported by land to Guatemala and Mexico, before being sent to the United States. The asylum policies of the U.S. towards Cuba made it possible (Donnelly and Hagan, 2014). The next stream of Haitian migrants faced starkly different conditions, since neither the U.S. nor any of the other countries in the region had such a policy of openness towards them. At present, significant numbers of Cuban and Nicaraguan citizens transit through El Salvador in their attempt to reach the United States, where they are considered legitimate asylum seekers.

6.0 Decision-making for migration

The literature on decision-making for migration from El Salvador highlights several factors that influence Salvadoran citizens' ultimate decision to leave. The first is social networks. In her classic study on Salvadoran migration to the United States, written shortly after the end of the civil war, Cecilia Menjívar (1994) argued that, although the root causes of Salvadoran migration to the U.S. combined economic and political factors, it was ultimately social networks that facilitated it. Six years later, Soltero and Saravia (2000) reached a similar conclusion: having networks of support in the U.S. increased the chances of international migration, while having them in El Salvador decreased its likelihood. Like Menjívar (1994), Soltero and Saravia (2000) observed that the causes of Salvadoran migration were both economic and political, yet they stressed that disentangling one from the other proved elusive.

Family reunification is also thought to be an important driver of Salvadoran migration to the United States. Cardoso et al. (2016) argue this is especially true for deported fathers who decide to re-emigrate. In their view, deportees with children in the U.S. “have greater U.S.-specific human capital than deportees without children in the U.S.” (p. 216). Moreover, they argue, when compared to other social connections to the United States, transnational family structures proved to be “the most significant factor influencing intent to re-migrate” (p. 216). Family reunification was also found to play an important role in the intentions to re-migrate of Salvadoran deportees interviewed by Dingeman (2018), especially those who identified more strongly with the U.S. and were met by a hostile environment upon their return to El Salvador.

Several authors look specifically at youth migration from El Salvador and its possible drivers. With an interest in the effects of community-based projects on the intention of young Salvadorans to migrate, Roth and Hartnett (2018) state that while participation in community-based projects may help reduce the intentions to migrate, it does not completely offset them, particularly among their younger interviewees and those who had been victims of violence. In their reading, violence and deprivation are powerful push factors that must be reckoned with, when planning community-based interventions to dissuade youths from migrating. For their part, Lamiño Jaramillo et al. (2021) conducted a comparative study between Honduran and Salvadoran youths participating in an agricultural educational program. Their findings show that Salvadoran youths had a larger disposition to migrate than their Honduran counterparts. Yet the study also found that the young people of both nationalities, who did not participate in the educational program, also displayed a higher willingness to migrate than those involved in the program. In Lamiño Jaramillo et al.’s view (2021, p. 80) this confirms that investing in agricultural educational programs effectively reduces youth intentions to migrate.

In a recent study, Ayala Durán (2022) investigates the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Salvadorans’ intention to migrate. He argues that, contrary to what is often claimed, the main driver of migration from El Salvador continues to be economic: unemployment, underemployment, and income gaps are the historical incentives. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded an already difficult situation, as people feared losing their jobs, and the country’s economic performance forecast was poor. The author ultimately claims that the pandemic had a strong negative effect on Salvadoran’s intentions to migrate, not least because while the economic outlook became less promising, the cost of migration – in terms of smugglers’ fees – increased by over 100%.

Finally, most of the current academic research on Salvadorans’ decision-making for migration revolves around the role of violence. In their quantitative study, Flores-Yeffal and Pren (2018) found that El Salvador’s civil violence index, together with personal economic conditions was a good predictor of first-time unauthorized migration from El Salvador. Nonetheless, they also observed that contextual variables in the U.S., such as a high unemployment rate and an increase in the Border Patrol budget, deterred the decision to take a first unauthorized trip. Contrary to the

established consensus, Flores-Yeffal and Pren did not find any evidence that social capital, i.e. migrant networks, had an effect on the decision to migrate. In the authors' view, this lack of evidence of a widely accepted relationship requires further problematization.

In turn, Inkpen et al.'s (2021) nuanced reading of the relationship between violence and migration highlights (1) the increasing difficulty in separating economic migration from migration for other causes, notably, violence; (2) the strong correlation between violence and migration, especially internal migration; and (3) crime victimization and the presence of gangs as factors that significantly influence the intention to migrate. They conclude that violence causes internal migration, rather than international migration, and that instead of violence as an abstract notion, it is victimization that is strongly associated with Salvadorans' desire to leave.

Similarly, Escamilla García (2021) stresses the interlocking of economic factors and violence in the decision to migrate, making it impossible to speak primarily of economic migration or violence-induced migration. In his study of Salvadoran youth, the author shows that young people resort to domestic networks for internal relocation when trying to escape gang violence and labour exploitation. Yet domestic networks lead the youths into new contexts of violence and poverty, making internal relocation a disappointment, and the resort to international migrant networks inevitable. These findings are in line with those of Wolf (2020), Gómez-Johnson (2015), and Knox (2017), according to whom El Salvador's small territory makes local relocation unsafe, an inefficient strategy to escape violent contexts, and, ultimately, a poor alternative to international migration.

7.0 Findings and future research agenda

In keeping with the MEMO project general approach to the analysis of country-specific migration dynamics, we present a synthesis of the main periods of immigration, emigration and transit migration in El Salvador and attempt a brief characterization of the migrant populations involved.

Immigration to El Salvador is not significant. In recent history, the most important population inflows to El Salvador have been those of returned and repatriated Salvadoran citizens. This was the case in 1969, when Honduras expelled the Salvadoran population in the wake of the agrarian reform, and in the period following the 1992 Peace Accords, when thousands of Salvadoran refugees and self-exiles returned to the country encouraged by the newly negotiated peace.

Transit migration does not comprise major streams either. Geographic location makes Honduras the natural passageway for both South American and extra-continental flows to the United States (Map 1). In this context, transit migration flows through El Salvador are rather rare and small.

The dominant feature of El Salvador's migration dynamics is emigration, of which several periods can be identified. The first one began in the 1930s, when cross-border labour migration to

plantations in Guatemala and Honduras took off. These flows were composed of young, rural males and constituted a regular and continuous stream until 1969, when the war between Honduras and El Salvador broke out. A second period began in the 1970s, with a new wave of long-distance labour migration that was a direct consequence of the Soccer War. This stream consisted of young, male, agricultural labourers headed for the United States in search for new job opportunities. This was also a constant flow, credited with being the origin of the significant Salvadoran migrant networks that exist in the U.S. today (Menjívar, 2000). A third period is marked by the outbreak of the civil war in 1979, a conflict that caused widespread mobility. In addition to internal migration from the countryside to the cities by rural men, women, and family units escaping violence, it unleashed large flows, mainly of rural population, to neighbouring countries, as well as long-distance migration to the United States and other countries in search of asylum. Migration flows to the U.S. and Canada were composed of urban, middle-class sectors, along with young middle-class men evading conscription.

After a short spell of return migration, emigration took off again due to the general impoverishment and high unemployment rates brought about by the structural reforms adopted after the signing of the Peace Accords. Supported by the existing networks of Salvadorans in the United States, young males began to emigrate, as did young women in ever growing numbers. This was the beginning of a new state of affairs, where emigration, rather than being episodic, became a permanent feature of Salvadoran population dynamics, marked by particular events that have led to higher peaks in out migration figures. This was the case after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the two consecutive earthquakes in 2001.

Since 2010, the stream of emigrants has constantly grown and become increasingly diverse in its composition. In 2014, the presence of unaccompanied boys, girls, and adolescents at the Mexico-U.S. border signaled an important change in the migrants' profile from El Salvador that would become a permanent feature. This was further evidenced by the 2018-2019 migrant caravans that gathered thousands of Salvadoran men and women of all ages, LGBTQ+ individuals, women traveling with their children, unaccompanied minors, and entire family units looking for protection while traveling *en masse* to the United States.

7.1 Dynamics between the main migration corridors

Short-distance cross border migration in El Salvador creates a well-contained regional dynamic that follows its own local logic. Unlike Honduras and Guatemala, which have coasts on the Atlantic, El Salvador is not a natural stop for extra-continental migrants on their way to the north of the continent. Therefore, it has not witnessed the large migrant in-flows of population from Latin American countries, Africa or Asia that are reaching in rising numbers the other two countries of northern Central America.

While a part of the Mesoamerican migration subsystem and the North American migration system (Durand, 2016 and 2023), El Salvador displays particular features that set it apart from its

neighbours, Guatemala and Honduras, such as a longer tradition of migration to the U.S. and a larger diaspora in that country. This is expressed in the constant streams of Salvadorans who migrate every year to the U.S. for family reunification.

7.2 Gaps in our knowledge and future research agenda

Salvadoran migration, especially to the U.S. has been widely researched. As a result, there is a large corpus of academic works on which to build a future research agenda. Interestingly, however, the most recent production questions several of the shared understandings and existing consensus around the causes and triggers of Salvadoran migration. Engaging with two common issues – relating to the role of social networks and the interactions between various migration drivers – from a new perspective appears as a promising research avenue.

The role of social networks and social capital in Salvadoran migration should be further examined. While there is evidence that having family members or relatives in the U.S. is an important factor in the decision to migrate (Cardoso et al., 2016; Dingeman, 2018; Menjívar, 1994; Soltero and Saravia, 2000), there is also significant evidence that this is no longer the rule. Understanding what accounts for these parallel developments is essential to comprehend the features of Salvadoran migration flows to the United States. Furthermore, exploring the role of social networks in Salvadoran's decision to migrate becomes essential to understand the recently emerging migration trends, especially the increasing importance of Spain and Italy as destination countries.

The interaction between different migration drivers should also be further analyzed. Far from establishing a single, most important, migration driver, it is necessary to understand how the various drivers at play interact and interlock over time. Problematizing the artificial distinctions between voluntary and forced migration, as well as between economic migration and migration associated to violence (Escamilla García, 2021; Menjívar and Gómez Cervantes, 2018; Winton 2019), while a complex task, might also help to produce useful insights to base our understanding of contemporary migration in the region.

Furthermore, there are several questions that merit consideration relating to historically, well-established processes, but that remain overlooked, such as governance and remittances, along with new developments, including asylum seeking as a migration strategy and the role of *mara* violence as a trigger of migration:

The role of (bad) governance as an umbrella driver of migration must be discussed not only in the case of El Salvador, but of the northern Central American region as a whole. Natural disasters, economic crises and violence, to name but three often cited causes of migration, are not exclusive to El Salvador; nevertheless, these factors do not trigger migration in every country where they occur. Preparedness to respond to extreme climate events, the capacity to implement measures to mitigate the impact of economic shocks, the rule of law, and a strong judiciary to combat violence and corruption are all features of states where economic, environmental and social

stressors do not necessarily lead to emigration. It is essential to problematize the link between governance and migration beyond the obvious denunciation of corrupt, autocratic, and self-serving governments.

The role of remittances as an incentive for Salvadoran (and other Central American) governments to promote migration, rather than to create the conditions for people to stay is another topic the MEMO project ought to discuss thoroughly. Representing over 23% of the national GDP, remittances are a fundamental component of the Salvadoran economy. There is, therefore, a perverse incentive to keep remittances pouring in, which has also been accompanied by efforts from the international community to channel them into productive investment and development projects. An alternative, or perhaps a parallel approach, would consist of quantifying El Salvador's losses as a result of migration, in terms of human capital and possibilities of social reproduction.

Discussing asylum-seeking as an alternative strategy to undocumented migration is also pressing. Given the rising numbers of asylum seekers from El Salvador in Mexico and the U.S., it is necessary to explore the role that asylum-seeking plays in people's migration trajectories, as well to analyze the reach and limitations of asylum as alternative to other legal migration pathways.

Finally, and with specific relevance to El Salvador, the impact of violence on forced internal displacement and international migration in the light of the state of exception is an emerging topic on which nothing has been written yet. Since a significant part of the literature cites *mara* violence as one of the main drivers of Salvadoran migration, be it internal or international, the state of exception – as objectionable as it is – affords an opportunity to gain a more subtle understanding of the relationship between *maras*, violence, and different migration flows from and within El Salvador.

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Appendix: El Salvador migration dynamics

Synoptic tables

Table A. Key events for internal migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
1979-1992	El Salvador U.S. U.S.S.R.	Civil war	70,000 dead Over 25% of the population displaced
1992	El Salvador	Peace Accords	Exiles and refugees return
1998	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras	Hurricane Mitch	Flooding Displacement Death of 15,000 people
2001	El Salvador	Earthquakes	Loss of life and infrastructure
2005	Guatemala Honduras El Salvador	Hurricane Stan	Flooding Displacement
2005-today	El Salvador Guatemala Honduras	Mara violence	Forced displacement
2022	El Salvador	State of emergency	Crack-down on maras

Table B. Key events for intra-regional migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
1979-1992	El Salvador U.S. U.S.S.R	Civil war	Political violence Forced displacement International migration
1990	U.S.	Temporary Protected Status (TPS)	Non-immigrant permission to stay because of extraordinary circumstances for Salvadorans who had fled the war
1992	El Salvador	Peace Accords	Normalization of political situation Exiles and refugees return to El Salvador
1996-today	U.S. El Salvador Honduras	Massive deportation under IIRIRA	<i>Mara</i> violence begins
1998	El Salvador Honduras Guatemala	Hurricane Mitch	Loss of lives and infrastructure Flooding Internal displacement
2000	El Salvador Honduras Guatemala	Violent crime and drug trafficking increase	
2001	El Salvador	Earthquakes	Loss of lives Loss of infrastructure

			Internal displacement
2005	El Salvador Guatemala Honduras	Hurricane Stan	Loss of lives Loss of infrastructure Flooding Loss of rural livelihoods Internal displacement
2012	U.S.	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) created	Migration of Salvadoran unaccompanied minors begins
2014	U.S. Guatemala El Salvador Honduras	Unaccompanied minors crisis	Over 66,000 unaccompanied girls, boys and adolescents arrive at the Mexico-U.S. border
2014	Mexico	Plan Frontera Sur	Increased border controls after the unaccompanied minors' humanitarian crisis
2018-2019	Central American and extra-regional migrants	Migrant caravans	Massive migrant flows that reached the U.S. border
2019-2020	U.S.	Migration interdiction measures: MPP and Title 42	Massive detentions at the border Humanitarian crisis on the Mexican side, because of all the returned migrants
2020	Global	Covid-19 pandemic	Mobility restrictions
2021	U.S.	Joe Biden's presidency begins	Expectations that migration controls would be relaxed trigger new large northbound flows from Central America

Table C. Key events for intra-continental migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
2011-2015	U.S. Cuba	Barack Obama’s policy toward Cuba	Large flows of Cuban migrants at the U.S. Mexican border
2018-2019	South American African Asian	Migrant caravans	Massive migrant flows that reached the U.S. border
2019-2020	U.S.	Migration interdiction measures: MPP and Title 42	Returns and deportation from the U.S.
2020	Global	Covid-19 pandemic	Mobility restrictions
2021	U.S.	Joe Biden’s presidency begins	Expectations that migration controls would be relaxed trigger new large northbound flows from South America and extracontinental migrants

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Endnotes

ⁱ Mayu Brizuela in a personal communication.
ⁱⁱ Mayu Brizuela in a personal communication.
ⁱⁱⁱ Mayu Brizuela in a personal communication.
^{iv} Mayu Brizuela in personal communication. The Salvadoran government considers migration data to be “reserved”; therefore, no official data on transit migration could be consulted for this report.