

# Integrated Urban Upgrading and Violence Prevention in San Salvador

## Results of an Impact Evaluation

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### Background and context

01. There are more than 1 million expatriates, mainly identified by their remittances

02. CIA: The World Factbook 2014. Data for 2009.

03. World Bank: World Development Indicators.

04. UNODC, 2013

*Previous page:*  
*Infrastructure upgrading in El Salvador*  
*Photo: Joanna Kotowski*

El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, with an area of 21,041 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 6.3 million. Population density is very high, with 291 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>; in the metropolitan area of the capital city, San Salvador, it can reach more than 2,000 people per km<sup>2</sup>.

El Salvador is one of the most violent countries in the world. There are various reasons for this particular situation, which collectively produce conflicts and insecurity. The Civil War (1980–1992) left many scars in the social fabric of Salvadoran society. Social networks were destroyed, with many young ex-combatants remaining in search of a new livelihood. Families were fragmented with many absent members living in the USA.<sup>1</sup> Post-conflict delinquent returnees from the USA introduced the gang culture to the country; since then, the number of youth gang members (the so-called maras) increased gradually, as did murder rates. Youth gangs interrelate with organised and drug-related crime, which is turning the country into one of the principal corridors for the illicit drug and weapon trade. Although indicators suggest that human development is improving, social inequality remains very high. Income distribution is extremely uneven: 10% of households earn 37% of national income whereas the poorest 10% only have access to 1%.<sup>2</sup> El Salvador is classified as a lower middle-income country: the GDP per capita is US\$ 3,720 (2013), almost twice as much as the poor neighbouring countries of Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, but only one third of the South American average. Nearly thirty five percent of the population is considered poor.<sup>3</sup>

Though murder rates dropped since 2009, the country was among those with the highest homicide rates worldwide in 2012:<sup>4</sup>

- Honduras – 90.4 (number of annual homicides per 100,000 population)
- Venezuela – 53.7
- Belize – 44.7
- *El Salvador* – 41.2
- Guatemala – 39.9
- Colombia – 30.8
- South Africa – 31.0
- [for comparison: USA – 4.7; Germany – 0.6]<sup>5</sup>

The development of homicide rates in El Salvador partly coincides with political changes in the country. After winning the election in 1994, the right wing party ARENA pushed a market oriented approach and a restrictive crime control and law enforcement policy (“política de mano dura”). Homicide rates subsequently increased. In the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) candidates won the presidency. The new government switched to a prevention oriented approach (“política de mano extendida”) and introduced some social reforms. Homicide rates first slightly decreased and then dropped significantly after a truce (cease-fire) between the two major gangs – Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 – in March 2012 was signed. Current data suggest, however, that murder rate will double in 2014, as compared to 2013. This trend is attributed to increasingly tough police action against violent gangs, low public support of the truce, and inner-gang conflicts.

Around 90% of murder victims are male<sup>6</sup>, most of them between 15 and 30 years of age. Although exact data are not available, there is evidence that most perpetrators are also young men, though the number of female perpetrators is increasing. Many of the perpetrators are members of youth gangs. The majority of violent deaths happen in urban areas (63% in 2010<sup>7</sup>), with a high concentration in the metropolitan area of San Salvador.

It is not solely homicide that contributes to the sensation of insecurity, however. Particularly in poor communities, insecurity is predominantly attributed to theft, robbery, threats, extortion, and other types of crimes.

05.  
Source: PNC, Prensa Gráfica, own calculations

06.  
According to “Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML) de El Salvador”, in 2013 2,261 of murder victims were men and 218 women.

07.  
PNC data

Homicide rates El Salvador 2000 - 2013

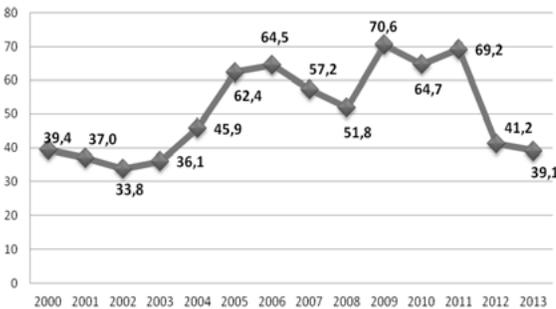


Figure 01: Homicide rates in El Salvador between 2000 - 2013

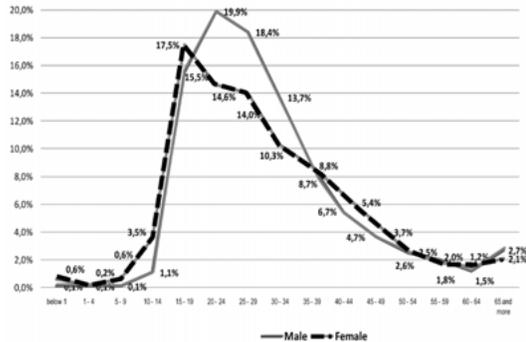


Figure 02: Percentage of homicide victims by age and sex



Left:

The male homicide rate is highest between 15 and 25 years of age.  
Photo: Michael Kleinekathöfer

Right:

FUNDASAL mutual aid project  
Photo: Michael Kleinekathöfer

## The FUNDASAL Integrated Urban Upgrading Project

FUNDASAL (Fundación Salvadoreña de Desarrollo y Vivienda Mínima) is a Salvadoran NGO focusing on the improvement of housing and living conditions in rural and urban areas. Since its foundation in 1968, FUNDASAL has concentrated on construction of low-cost housing for the poor and organising community groups in cooperatives and self-help brigades (“equipos de ayuda mutua”). The first FUNDASAL-supported settlement upgrading project, carried out on-site in the community of Las Palmas in San Salvador (1997-2006), implemented physical improvements, better provisions of urban services, and an organisation for self-help housing and facility construction. During the second upgrading project, *Los Manantiales* (2003-2007), including interventions in 12 interconnected communities in the east of San Salvador, FUNDASAL increasingly introduced socio-educational and youth promotion components; still social development was heavily related to the cautious implementation of physical infrastructure.

Between 2006 and 2014, FUNDASAL implemented the Urban Upgrading Programme (*Programa de Mejoramiento de Barrios – PMB*) in several poor settlements. Youth promotion and violence prevention components gained importance, due to the presence of maras and high levels of petty crime in these settlements, but also because problems of extortion and intimidation were prevalent.

The PMB has been an open programme that has intervened in 41 communities<sup>8</sup> scattered across the four municipalities of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (AMSS): Mejicanos, Soyapango, Ilopango, and San Martín. It has three principal components:

- Improvement of the physical environment and infrastructure;
- Organization of community groups in self-construction brigades;
- Social development, including:
  - The organisation and empowerment of community groups;
  - Horizontal information exchange between the different groups and communities;

08. Originally, 42 communities were foreseen to participate in the PMB. Due to time constraints, one of them has been removed from the Programme.

- Social work specifically with children, youth, and women;
- And capacity building for disaster risk prevention.

The German financial cooperation agency, the KfW<sup>9</sup> Development Bank, has supported FUNDASAL for more than 20 years. KfW also co-financed the FUNDASAL upgrading projects with more than 30 million EUR. Instead of supporting mere infrastructure improvements, KfW switched to integrated upgrading approaches in poor urban settlements and, specifically, to violence prevention through urban upgrading. KfW now stands for a multi-sector and multi-level approach, considered to be most

09. Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), German Bank for Reconstruction and Development

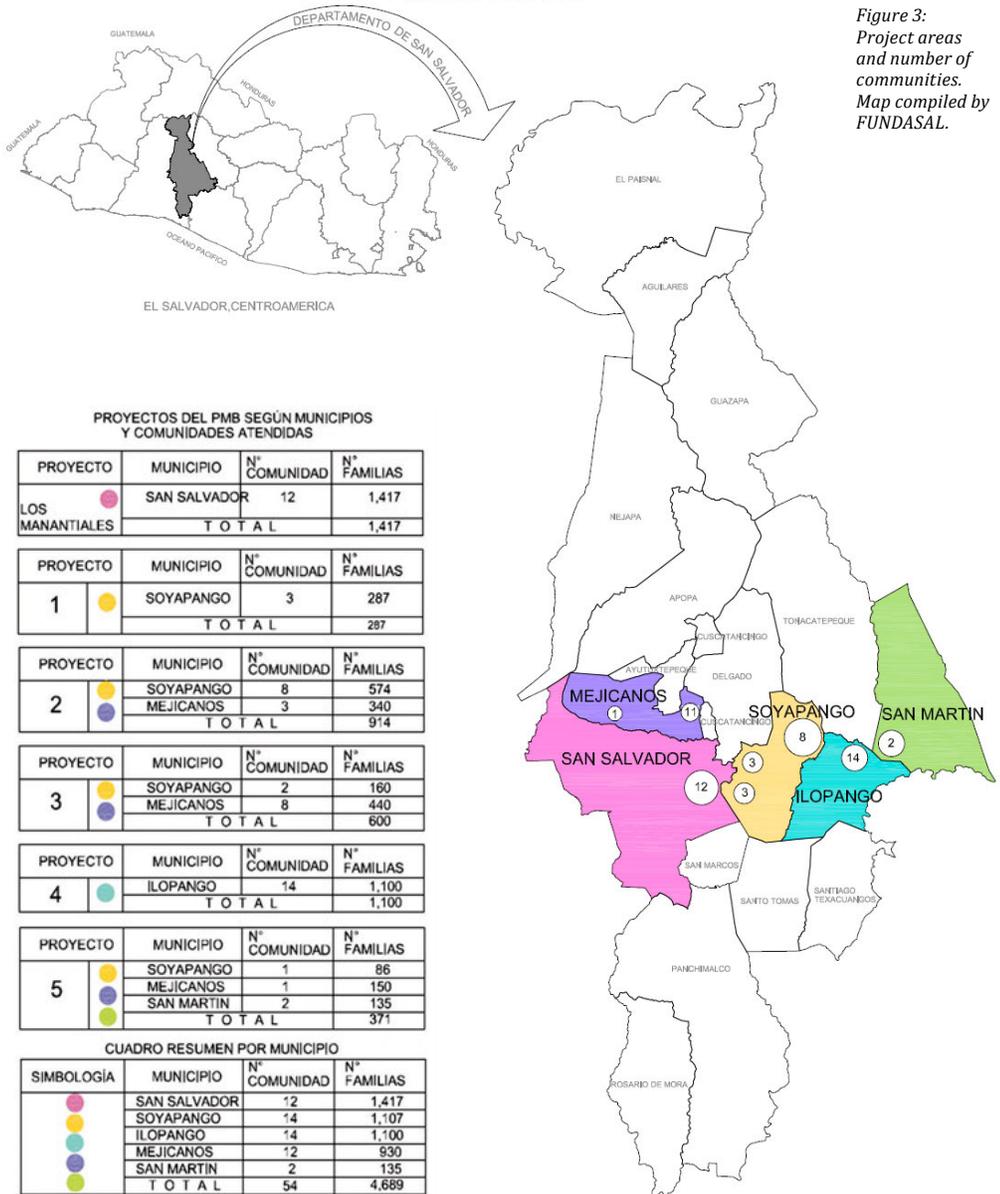


Figure 3: Project areas and number of communities. Map compiled by FUNDASAL.

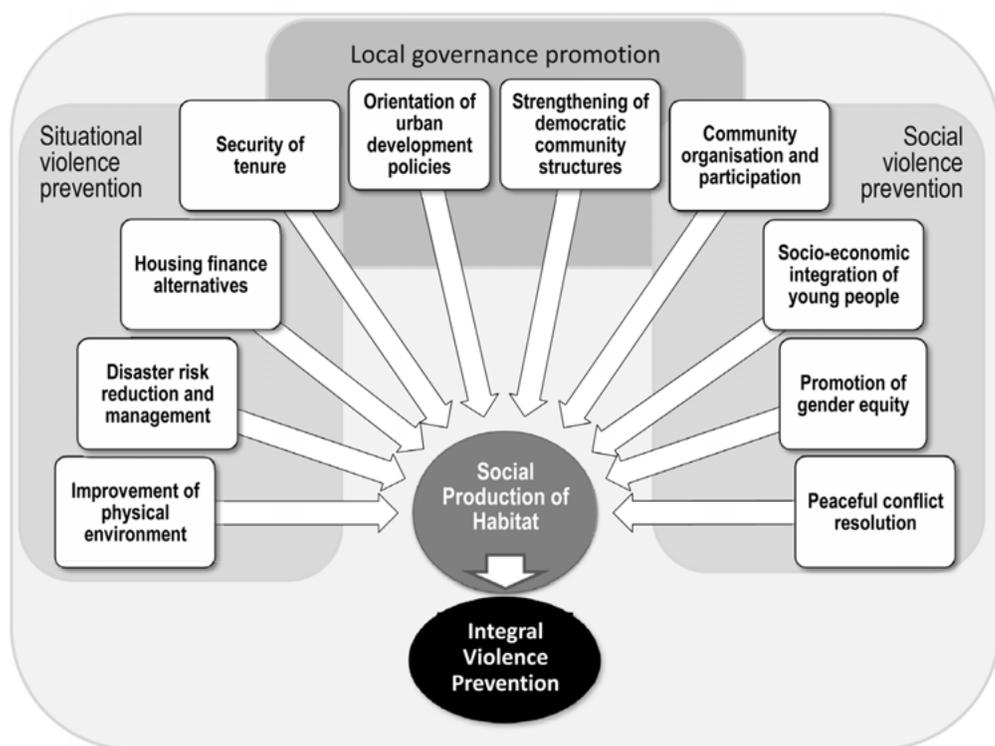


Figure 4:  
Integral  
approach to  
social production  
of the habitat  
and to violence  
prevention

effective when facing urban violence, which consists of three interlinked components:<sup>10</sup>

- Situational violence prevention, by improving the physical / spatial environment;
- Social violence prevention, by promoting community involvement;
- And local governance promotion, by focussing on improvements of the institutional and political landscape through capacity building, aiming at the reduction of structural violence and social injustice.

The FUNDASAL-PMB (Programa de Mejoramiento Barrial – Urban Upgrading Programme) concept is focused on the social production of habitat; it provides several elements that are very similar to this integral approach to violence prevention:

KfW is co-financing urban upgrading programmes in many other countries and is keen to observe and assess the impacts of this approach, especially with regard to the interrelation of the three levels of violence prevention. SUM Consult from Germany was in charge of conducting an evaluation of the PMB experience in El Salvador in 2012 on behalf of the KfW.

## Evaluation process and results

The main evaluation objectives were:

- To identify principal approaches, lessons learnt and impacts of the

10.  
KfW Banken-  
gruppe: Violence  
Prevention  
Through Urban  
Upgrading,

FUNDASAL–PMB project and its contribution to violence prevention; and

- To contribute to the reorientation of urban upgrading in poor settlements, focused on more effective prevention of violence through the promotion of community development and social cohesion (“convivencia”).

Neither the urban upgrading projects implemented until 2006 nor the PMB concept designed in 2005 explicitly included violence prevention as an integral component. However, the integrative FUNDASAL approach to social and physical development was considered appropriate for the promotion of peaceful neighbourhood development and violence prevention, and implicitly contributed to social cohesion and conflict reduction.

The major project achievements of the programme are summarised below under the areas of situational, social, and structural violence prevention. Their contribution to crime reduction and control is likewise appraised.

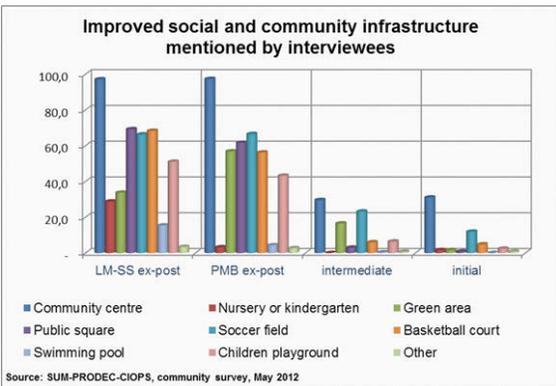
### Physical works and sustainability

Improvement of social infrastructure and public services accounted for the bulk of the programme investments including:

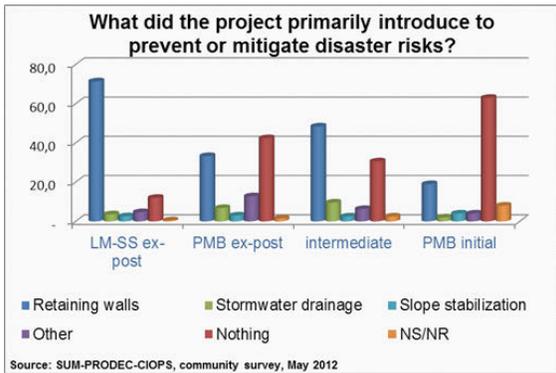
- Social and community infrastructure (community centres, playgrounds, and sports fields);
- Disaster prevention (retaining walls, river bank stabilisation for flood control, and similar works);
- Water supply and sewerage;
- Improvement of deteriorated urban spaces (roads, stairs, footpaths);
- And the introduction or completion of public lighting.

*Physical upgrading of neighbourhoods.  
Photo: Joanna Kotowski*

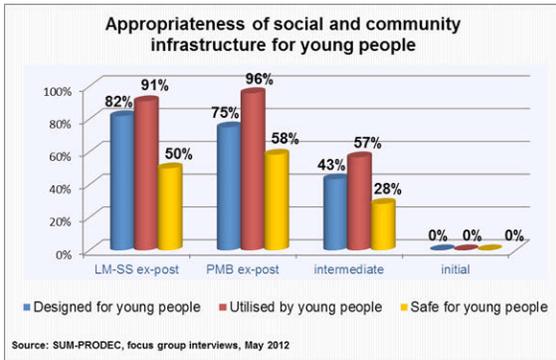




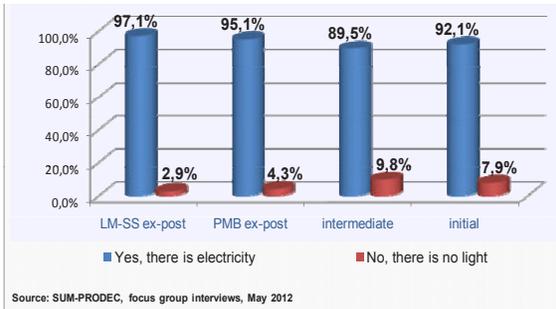
Source: SUM-PRODEC-CIOPS, community survey, May 2012  
 Figure 05: Improved social and community infrastructure mentioned by interviewees



Source: SUM-PRODEC-CIOPS, community survey, May 2012  
 Figure 06: What did the project primarily introduce to prevent or mitigate disaster risks



Source: SUM-PRODEC, focus group interviews, May 2012  
 Figure 07: Appropriateness of social and community infrastructure for young people



Source: SUM-PRODEC, focus group interviews, May 2012  
 Figure 08: Public lighting in streets and footwalks

As expected, a high share of inhabitants in the “ex-post” communities<sup>11</sup> mentioned improvements of social and community infrastructure, in comparison with respondents from the currently intervened settlements. Primarily, respondents acknowledged the improved community meeting rooms or small centres, improved green areas, public spaces, sports- and children playgrounds in making this difference. Knowledge of these interventions also demonstrated the identification of community members with the project and a certain level of ownership.

Another area of huge investment was disaster risk prevention or mitigation. Many communities were highly exposed to climate threats, mainly related to heavy rains, subsequent landslides, and flooding. They were also vulnerable to other natural catastrophes like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The respondents recognised the construction or improvement including retaining walls as means of disaster risk prevention, probably because these were the mostly visible interventions.

Based on the identification of local needs, the project- together with the responsible municipal departments - intervened in 34 communities by upgrading roads, in 33 communities by improving water supply and sewerage, and 18 other communities by expanding the electricity network. Moreover, the project supported the communities in achieving legalisation of tenure, directly benefiting some 3,650 families.

Community leaders largely associated the following elements with violence prevention:

- Social facilities providing space for cultural and preventive activities;
- Participation of young people in the prioritisation and design of the facilities;<sup>12</sup>
- Sport and recreational facilities mainly utilised by young people;

- Revitalized public space appropriate for neighbourhood meetings and as communication areas;
- Public lighting contributing to improved visibility.

11. Refer to methodological remarks at the end of this article.

The interviews suggest that the upgraded social and community infrastructure was really designed for and utilised by children and youth. However, the low security level, mentioned generally as a negative aspect in the communities, affected the use of facilities by this cohort. Due to the lack of security guards or municipal policy patrols, insecurity in public space is still an issue today.

Public lighting, frequently portrayed as an important element of situational violence prevention (also by community representatives), was not considered to account for improved crime control or violence reduction in the analysed communities. There was only a slightly better public light provision in the intervened communities, compared to those in the process of or expecting intervention.

12: Selected young people were allowed to determine what a priority was for them and what was not, when investments in children- and youth-related infrastructure were discussed.

Other elements that contributed to peace enhancement and violence prevention were:

- Disaster risk mitigation by reducing physical and environmental insecurity;
- Rearrangement and rehabilitation of footpaths and roads, improving communication and connectivity between peripheral neighbours and the city;
- Sanitation by recovering health and hygiene;
- Increased water connection and coverage by reducing conflicts between neighbours;
- Renovation of social facilities and public spaces by reducing crime opportunities and facilitating cultural, recreational, inter-community exchange, and preventive programmes.

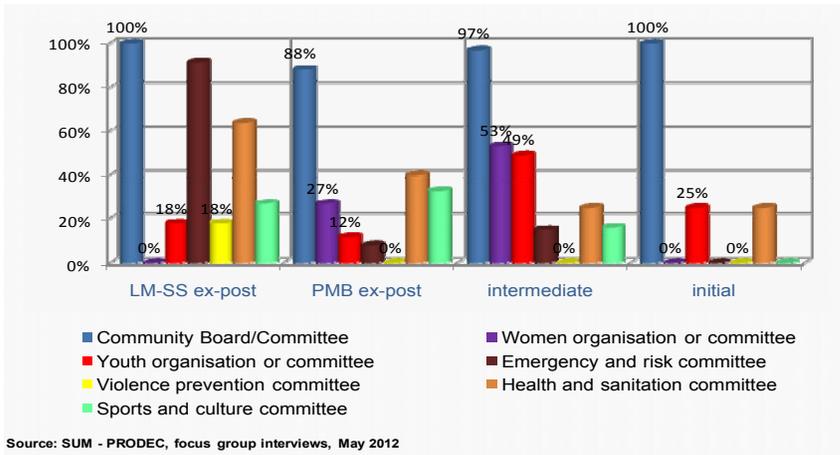
The intervened communities noted better maintenance of public spaces and facilities, as compared to the communities where intervention had not yet occurred. This might indicate improved sustainability of investments, as well as a contribution to crime and violence prevention. According to the broken windows theory<sup>13</sup>, urban disorder and vandalism attract additional destruction, delinquency, and anti-social behaviour. In contrast, maintaining urban space in a well-ordered condition may inhibit delinquency from developing into more serious crime. Where deficiencies of maintenance were detected, like in Los Manantiales, the oldest of the six evaluated projects, more attention was required to avoid the physical and social deterioration of these communities.

13. Wilson, James Q. & Kelling, George E, 1982

## Social, educational, and community development work

FUNDASAL supported the development of community organisations at local, community, and municipal level. Almost all participating communities developed their own community council or local representing body (93% of coverage); around one third now have youth (32%) or women's

Figure 09: Identified community organizations



organisations (34%); in 32% of the communities, there is now a functioning health and sanitation committee; 27% of communities likewise have emergency and risk mitigation committees now. Ten of the 53 participating communities have established a sports and culture committee (18%). But only 4% explicitly established a security, violence prevention, or conflict mitigation committee.

The comparison of communities at different stages of project intervention reveals additional insights. All communities show a strong presence of local representative boards. As a matter of fact, the existence of a strong and committed community organisation was a precondition for FUNDASAL's project entry; but their functioning might decline over time. Youth organisations – not considering youth gangs – were not very active

Figure 10: Participation in mutual aid construction groups: all respondents and youth.

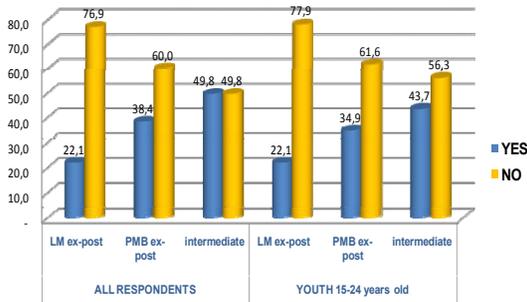


Figure 11: Learning through mutual aid construction groups (respondents from finalised and ongoing projects)

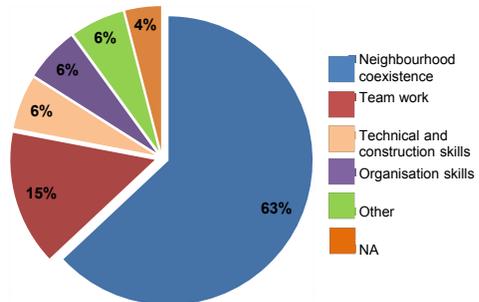
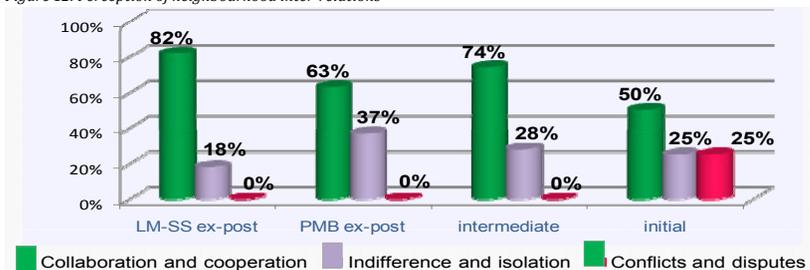


Figure 12: Perception of neighbourhood inter-relations



in settlements where FUNDASAL did not intervene; the highest presence of youth organisations was reported in communities with current project involvement. Ultimately, the existence and functioning of youth committees depended very much on adult support, which was provided by FUNDASAL. Violence prevention committees have been established in only two of the twelve Los Manantiales communities, and in none of the other PMB settlements. FUNDASAL did not support the establishment of such committees nor did it provide orientation to community leaders to do so.

A particularly successful component of FUNDASAL's work was the organisation of mutual aid construction groups. In the 49 communities (not counting the four initiating ones), FUNDASAL mobilised 264 groups, 5.4 per settlement on average. Usually, 10-20 family representatives participated in the groups and rotated according to a jointly agreed schedule. Some families also sent a representative who was not a family member or subcontracted unskilled workers. FUNDASAL data suggest that half of the families would personally involve themselves in group work; others would rather delegate or subcontract. This was confirmed by the survey: in communities where FUNDASAL still was involved ("intermediate evaluation"), participation in mutual aid groups was reported by half of the respondents. In the remaining groups ("ex-post evaluation"), only 22%-38% of the respondents affirmed to have participated in the self-help groups; it seems that over time the participants' memories fade or, less likely, the population has changed.

In total, one third of survey respondents confirmed to have participated in construction groups. The closer the experience, the more palpable it was. The results also corroborated a high participation of young people in self-help groups.

Asked for the benefits of working in mutual aid construction, the majority of respondents highlighted the positive effects on peaceful neighbourhood coexistence. Some mentioned the possibility of working in a team that acquired construction and organisational skills.

Participation in the project experience, and in particular mutual aid construction, tended to result in a more collaborative neighbourhood environment. In the intervened settlements, community leaders described neighbourhood interrelations as rather cooperative after collaborative projects. As opposed to the communities in incipient stages, none of the focus groups from the ex-post or intermediate phases reported prevailing conflicts or disputes. Almost unanimously, focus group participants confirmed that the mutual aid approach would lead to more social cohesion and less conflict.

Examples from other contexts confirm the positive effects of organised community work. In Rwanda, for instance, the traditional Umuganda approach was introduced as part of efforts to reconstruct the country after the civil war. Each month, communities came together to conduct a variety of public works; close to 80% of Rwandans took part in these events.<sup>14</sup> Since 2007 in Mexico-City, the local Government has implemented a community-based settlement upgrading programme, which involve community organisations in the planning, management, and execution of rehabilitation works in deteriorated public urban spaces.<sup>15</sup>In

14. <http://www.rwandapedia.rw/explore/umuganda>, accessed 14.07.2014

15. <http://www.uclg-cisdp.org/es/observatorio/programa-comunitario-de-mejoramiento-barrial-pcmb>, accessed 14.07.2014

Honduras, after positive, community empowering experience in rural areas, the German financial cooperation started to support urban upgrading projects implemented by the community (PEC – *Proyectos Ejecutados por la Comunidad*).

A direct influence of project interventions on knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and practices related to conflicts and violence could not be observed among the surveyed communities, however. When comparing selected statements in projects of different intervention status, no clear differences were identified. Only some respondents confirmed to report offences to police or prosecutors (2.5%). Two thirds would not interfere in neighbourhood disputes and only one third would offer dialogue in the case of conflicts.

All communities were highly exposed to youth gangs: 56% of respondents confirmed this fact and 36% perceived an increase in the gang presence. Despite these high figures, knowledge of prevention programmes continued to be low (on average only 30% of respondents were aware of such an offer), but the majority of respondents (74%) expressed the need for more educational and economic opportunities for young people, in order to address youth violence levels.

### **Social organisation and governance**

The level of internal and inter-community organisation improved considerably in the project settlements. Leadership powers became better distributed, as more women and youth began participating in local decision making processes. Moreover, as a result of horizontal exchange, the social movement MAPUS (*Movimiento de Asentamientos Populares Urbanos*) was initiated. MAPUS engaged with local and national government representatives, requesting land and housing rights. The strengthening of democratic structures at community level was not part of FUNDASAL's core interventions. In fact, this is a key responsibility of municipal administrations. However, in some communities, the municipal contribution to local organisational development was substantial; in others it was almost nothing. But the responsibility of municipalities for the provision of urban and social services likely increased alongside other project interventions.

### **Did these programmes impact crime and reduce violence?**

Opinions of police officers collected during the evaluation suggest that crime levels in Los Manantiales and the other project communities had been considerably reduced. There is no baseline data at community level to validate these statements. However, residents confirmed this trend: 24% of interviewees from the “ex-post” communities perceived that security conditions in their settlement had improved. Only 13% and 17% of the “intermediate” and “initial” intervention project respondents respectively thought security conditions had improved. At the same time, a lower percentage of respondents from “ex-post” communities (32%) stated that insecurity had increased, as opposed to 50% of informants from the other cohorts who observed increasing insecurity levels.

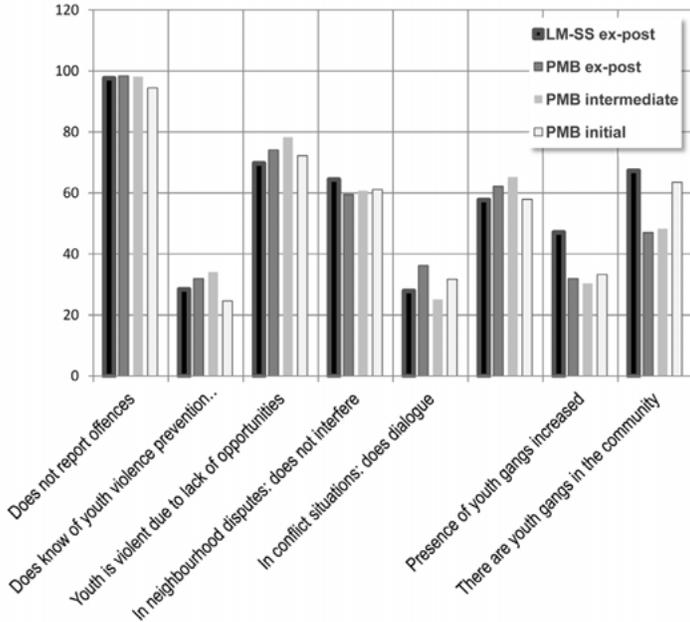


Figure 13: Selected knowledge, attitude, perception and practice statements regarding conflict and violence in different projects.

Source: SUM-PRODEC-CIOPS, community survey, May 2012

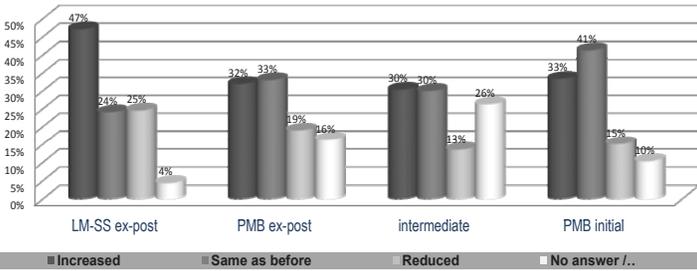


Figure 14: How do you perceive the security level in the community as compared to 5 years ago?

Source: SUM-PRODEC-CIOPS, community survey, May 2012

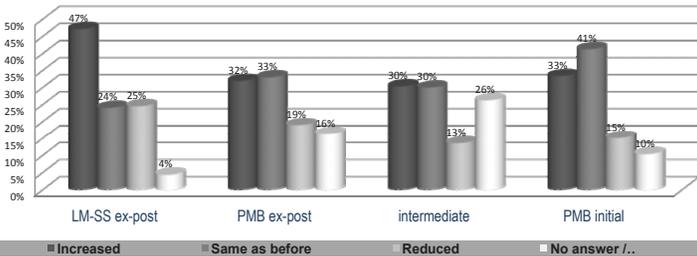


Figure 15: How do you perceive the presence of youth gangs in the community, compared to 5 years ago?

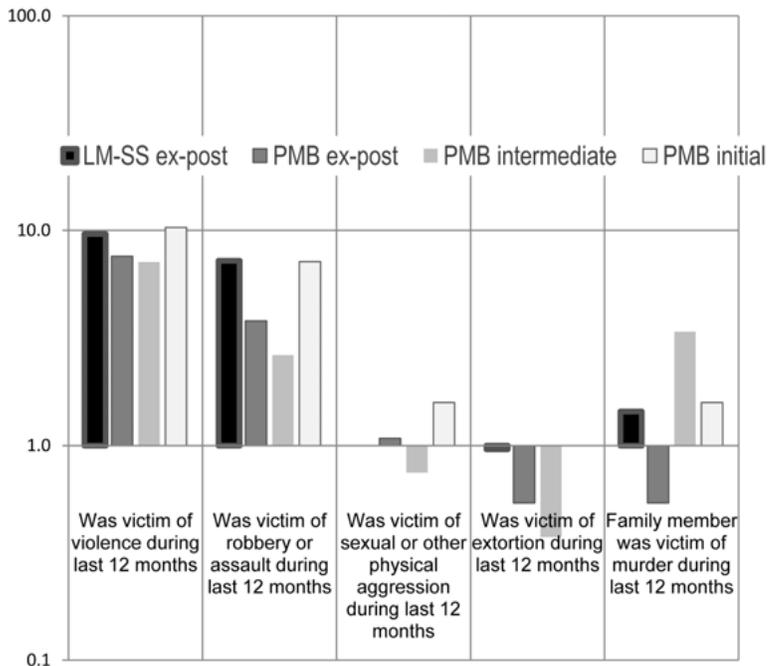
Source: SUM-PRODEC-CIOPS, community survey, May 2012

These perceptions are not necessarily related to the presence of youth gangs: the highest incidence was reported in the “oldest” programme communities (Los Manantiales), and in the incipient ones. Also in Los Manantiales, the highest percentage of respondents (47%) affirmed that the presence of maras had increased. Many interviewees did not respond to this question, a sign of fear and intimidation.

Crime and violence continues to be a reality in the programme communities. When comparing victimisation reported by informants from the four cohorts, a slightly lower occurrence of robberies, assaults, and aggression in the “ex-post” and the “intermediate” status communities was observed and was different from the initial communities. There is no clear difference between the projects regarding cases of murder, and there was no extortion reported in the initial communities as opposed to the other ones. Project staff reported that they had to pay “gate-money” in intervention communities.

It can be summarised that evident effects of the Urban Upgrading Programme on crime and violence prevention and reduction could not be corroborated. In fact, representatives of community organisations are very clear on this. They affirm important programme contributions such as infrastructure, health, and housing improvements, a better integration into the urban network, and also generally peaceful neighbourhood development. But, from their point of view, the programme’s contribution to public security and safety has been rather low.

Figure 16:  
Crime and violence  
incidence reported  
by community  
members (%  
responses;  
logarithmic scale)



Source: SUM-PRODEC-CIOPS, community survey, May 2012

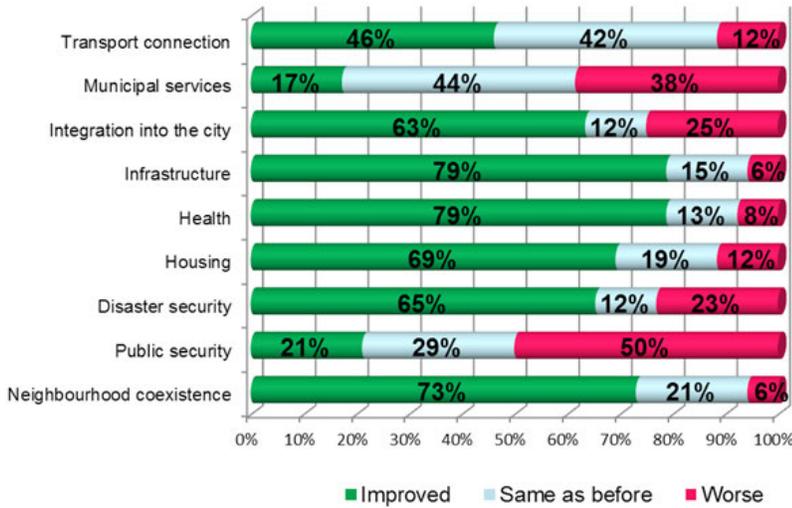


Figure 17: Perception of changes generated by the Urban Upgrading Programme (ex post and intermediate project communities)

Source: SUM-PRODEC, focus group interviews, May 2012

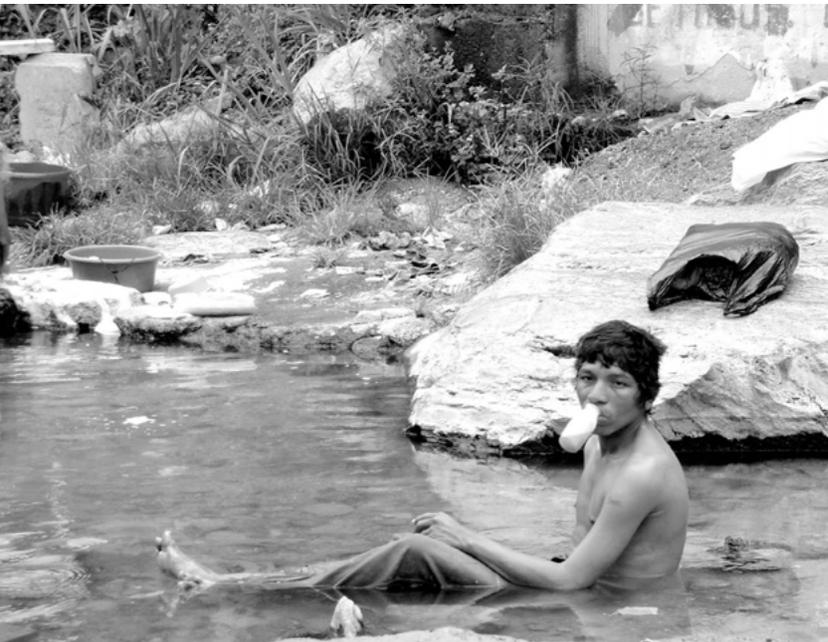
### Conclusions and recommendations

The FUNDASAL Urban Upgrading Programme has had (and continues to have) very positive effects on infrastructure improvements, health conditions, community organisation, and peaceful neighbourhood development, particularly through the mutual aid type of construction works. Construction brigades proved to be an effective tool for promoting community organisation and integration (including young people), providing skills and income opportunities, and generating peaceful coexistence and social cohesion between neighbours. The programme however has not really addressed the incidence of crime and violence. In light of the extremely difficult and conflictive framework conditions, this aim might have been too ambitious. But the programme could have done more in this respect, if an explicit strategy for prevention of urban violence would have been designed from the very beginning. For future programmes of similar scope, the evaluators therefore recommend:

Manifestation of unemployed young Salvadoreans. Photo: FUNDASAL



- Explicit integration of components aiming at improvement of the social, cultural, and physical conditions that generate insecurity, with a particular focus on young people who most likely are attracted to gangs and crime. Such an explicit focus could involve, for instance, the improvement and social control of public space; cultural activities in crime hot spots; conflict management training; inter-gender and inter-generational sports, cultural, and educational activities; democratic community organisation; life skills, vocational, and employment training; and the establishment of community-based violence prevention committees.
- Replicate the mutual aid (*ayuda mutua*) construction methodology as a viable strategy for improving community development, adapting it to local conditions.
- Involve all relevant community organisations and local stakeholders in project concept development and the elaboration of community-based violence prevention action plans, strengthening democratic and transparent procedures.
- Create confidence between communities and public security agents and involve, if possible, police officers in project activities (“community policing”).
- Promote the inclusion of integrated upgrading approaches in local, national, and regional urban development and violence prevention policies.



*Young drug addict*  
Photo: Joanna Kotowski

## Annex: methodological remarks

The impact evaluation was carried out between March and October 2012 and encompassed six urban upgrading projects in different stages of implementation, covering 53 communities of the metropolitan area of San Salvador (AMSS), with almost 4,550 families or 22,000 people, including approximately 6,000 young people between 15 and 24 years of age. The evaluation team integrated nine national and international experts (including the author). FUNDASAL professionals participated in the whole process with information and logistical support, but were also involved in the discussion of evaluation steps and results. Methods and instruments applied by the evaluators involved:

- Anonymised survey with 786 respondents (of which 62% were women and 51% were young people) in the intervention communities of Los Manantiales and PMB;
- Fifty six focus group interviews with 461 participants who discussed key topics and jointly filled out a questionnaire (14 groups with community leaders, 16 women's groups, 15 youth groups, and 11 mutual aid construction groups);
- Interviews with representatives of inter-communal organisations;
- Interviews with municipal representatives, with other local and national stakeholders, as well as representatives of donor organisations;
- Interviews with staff of FUNDASAL;
- Situational, organizational and documental analysis;

*Grandma and niece in San Salvador proudly showing a paper about her son who won a championship as a sportsman.*  
Photo: Joanna Kotowski.



- Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the different projects, which allowed for a comparison between the projects, despite various implementation phases:
  - Ex post 1 - Los Manantiales in San Salvador (LM-SS), finalised in 2007, and benefiting 12 communities in total;
  - Ex post 2 - 2 PMB-projects in Soyapango and Mejicanos finalised between 2008 and 2010, which benefited 14 communities in total;
  - Intermediate - 2 PMB-projects still in implementation in Soyapango, Mejicanos, and Ilopango, which were scheduled to benefit 23 communities;
  - And Initial: 1 PMB-project, initiating in 2012 in San Martín, Mejicanos, and Soyapango, that was set to benefit 4 communities.

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