

Project context

From 1980 to 1992, El Salvador suffered a violent civil war, in which about 75,000 people – most of them civilians - were killed. The conflict had its roots in the inequality between a tiny elite who dominated the country and owned huge coffee plantations and the majority of the rural population living in extreme poverty who struggled to grow the food they needed.

The Catholic Church worked to support the poor and give them a sense of their rights and their dignity. As peasant farmers living in appalling conditions on the coffee estates started to claim their basic rights, they were violently repressed by the army.

Archbishop Oscar Romero spoke out tirelessly against the poverty, injustice and military repression, until he was murdered in 1980 by a death squad assassin. We celebrate his legacy today through this project which aims to bring peace to Salvadorian communities.

Although El Salvador today is a more democratic country, there are still serious challenges of inequality and extreme levels of violence, along with the ongoing threat of earthquakes, hurricanes and the impacts of climate change.

Project summary

At the end of the civil war, the United States deported thousands of Salvadorians who had fled to the US to escape the conflict. Some of these had fallen into street gangs while in the US. When they were forcibly returned to El Salvador, they found a ruined country with no opportunities to find work or gainful employment. Poor and crowded neighbourhoods provided fertile conditions for gangs to flourish and establish a culture of violence and extortion.

This project seeks to tackle the root causes of conflict in El Salvador's capital, San Salvador. By providing training to the parents, particularly the mothers, as well as counselling and psychosocial assistance, family and community bonds are strengthened which, in turn, leads to a more peaceful society. Training has included activities such as learning to make sweets, piñatas, quilling cards, perfumes, cleaning and haircare products. Whilst this work reaches the root cause of conflict, young people are also involved through the provision of a safe, positive environment in which to grow up. At the Fe y Alegría (Faith and Joy) school, children are involved in sport, music and art classes, as well as a youth leadership programme that supports them to become peaceful leaders and end the cycle of conflict.

Project outline

This project has a two-fold aim, to tackle the root cause of conflict in San Salvador, as well as to prepare young people to transform and resolve the conflict that surrounds them. CAFOD has supported this programme with our partner, the Sisters of Saint Clare, since 2011, developing the project and together gaining a greater understanding of the needs of the community.

During this time, the work has advanced from a skills-based project aimed at promoting peace, to a more comprehensive and inclusive project that



©Tania Dalton/CAFOD. People within the local community have learnt to make sweets to increase their skills and income

tackles the root causes of conflict and strengthens family bonds. Now families can work with professional counsellors and learn about how to deal most effectively with family issues. The project counsellor has previously worked with children who have lost their parents, friends or siblings to the violence.

The overall aim of the Sisters programme is to ensure that children can grow up in a more peaceful environment and build a life for themselves that does not include the violence and gang culture that has overshadowed San Salvador for so many years.

Objectives and activities

- To create a culture of respect and peace contributing to the reduction of violence through the provision of psychological support for families.
- To teach children peaceful methods of communicating and combatting stress caused by conflict in the community.
- To facilitate the strengthening of family bonds in challenging times, to grow and recover together.

Introducing our partner

CAFOD's relationship with the Sisters of Saint Clare dates back many years to the time of war during the 1980s when they tended to the needs of displaced people and victims of the armed conflict. Now, in peace-time they are working in education in some of the poorest areas of the country, including in this violence-torn area of the capital city.

After the success of an initial pilot programme with the youth leaders CAFOD partnered with the Sisters to enable them to meet their deeper community needs, and the project grew to have more of a community outreach focus, targeting the needs of the children's families. Now the programme can have a greater impact on the entire community and make a long-term, sustainable difference to their lives and empower future peaceful leaders.

How you can help

CAFOD believes that this project will make a meaningful and lasting difference to this community. Through the *Romero Circle* we are seeking donations to support its continuation.

£33 a month could provide 10 children with access to art, craft, sport, dance and music classes for one month

£67 from each member of your Circle (£670), could provide 200 children with access to classes for a month

£5,000 a year could provide support to families from one psychologist including workshops, materials and refreshments.

£10,000 a year could provide support to families from two psychologists including workshops, materials and refreshments.



©Tania Dalton/CAFOD. Young students are learning about music

"It's an open door for us when we have problems at home. Since I joined this group I feel good. I don't feel like I did in my house. I feel different now. So I want to say thank you to everyone in this group!"