



ANNEX Strengthening Knowledge Ecosystems

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El Salvador Case Study

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Cover picture:

Aerial View of the west of San Salvador city, El Salvador.



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1. Introduction to the Knowledge Ecosystems Approach

The research project ‘strengthening knowledge ecosystems’ is part of IDRC’s endeavour to strengthen the contribution of research support in ‘high-risk’ contexts. The jointly designed research foresaw case studies to better understand research in conflict-affected contexts and to inform effective pathways and modalities for supporting research in such settings. The project comprises in-depth case studies on Afghanistan, Laos and South Sudan, which were conducted jointly with locally-based research consultants. Additionally, five shorter-term case studies were conducted in Cambodia, Côte d’Ivoire, El Salvador, Ethiopia and Lebanon, building mainly on desk research as well as key informant interviews.

This study looks at ‘knowledge ecosystems’ as a whole, covering the full process of knowledge production from agenda setting, getting funding, and selecting partners to conducting research (i.e. choice of methodology and research design, data collection and analysis, publication), to doing outreach and policy uptake (see the Synthesis Report for more information on the conceptual background of this study).

With this research, we aim to understand best practices of knowledge production and policy uptake of research in high-risks contexts. In order to understand knowledge ecosystems, a political economy approach was adopted, by following four ‘threads’ within these systems:

1. Follow the **persons** to understand the biography and professional life of researchers and academics;
2. Follow the **money** to understand the sources, salaries and flow of funds into research activities;
3. Follow the **organisations** (research and higher education institutions, think tanks, NGOs, etc.) to understand the operational logic and degree of influence with regard to research and policy;
4. Follow the **ideas** to understand the pathways and relevance of scientific content towards outreach and policy in the respective context.

This allowed us to assess the research environments and its actors from various angles, all departing from the respective case study contexts. To this end, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed, covering these four tracks (persons, money, organisations, ideas).

The overall research design for the entire “Strengthening Knowledge Ecosystems” project centered on capturing local perspectives and insights from researchers of the ‘Global South’. In this vein, data collection and recommendation generation for this Annex focused almost exclusively on the El Salvador context seen through ‘Salvadorian eyes’. For the same reason, this report only includes additional sources or references to a limited extent.

Based on this understanding actionable recommendations to strengthen knowledge ecosystems in different types of high-risk contexts are suggested. Thereby, this research aims to contribute to improved and relevant research, academic careers and policy uptake. Thus, we aim to promote resilient, locally-driven research ecosystems, support the research community to conduct conflict sensitive research, and lastly, to improve the opportunities and the security of research partners in the Global South. Overall, this shall valorize research for development outcomes as well as towards democratic governance.





Visualising Characteristics of Knowledge Ecosystems

The knowledge ecosystems assessed in these case studies are all characterised by a low to medium demand of research that is in many cases externally driven. They are characterised by an environment that is not (much) enabling for researchers. In order to visualise these characteristics, we illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of six dimensions of knowledge ecosystems. This helps our understanding of a context and informs our conclusions as to what kind of strengthening measures could be taken by stakeholders and donors to facilitate knowledge production and research, information uptake and evidence-based decision-making in conflict-affected or authoritarian contexts.

The dimensions were developed thinking from a context/researcher’s perspective. The case study contexts are situated along these dimensions based on a qualitative assessment (scale: high/strong – low/weak) to give a rough indication of the system’s characteristics:

A simple scaling of these dimensions of knowledge ecosystems from 1 (low) to 4 (strong) covers the following ranges, informed by a list of indicators (see Synthesis Report for further information) as well as a context-informed decision by the respective case study researcher(s).

DIMENSIONS							
	Infrastructure that is inductive for research (internet, database, ...)	Safety for researchers is guaranteed vs researchers are particularly prone to risks.	Finances available for research and conducive funding modalities, reliable income for researchers	Good governance of research, academic freedom is guaranteed, independence of research	Type of government: democratic government or weak/ authoritarian government	Reliable policy relevance & research uptake (e.g. validation of knowledge, role of local researchers)	
SCALING ↓	1	no research infrastructure available	high-risk context for researchers, very difficult to guarantee any safety for researchers	zero research funds available	zero academic freedom	authoritarian or dysfunctional/ weak government	zero research uptake
	4	fully-fledged research infrastructure for researchers	safe environment for researchers, even if they work on sensitive topics	fully-funded research programme, long-term financing available for researchers	fully guaranteed independence of research	democratic government	fully-implemented science-policy dialogues, research uptake works for majority of issues



Characteristics of El Salvador's Knowledge Ecosystem

This short case study focuses on El Salvador's knowledge ecosystem. It mostly draws on a short desk research, as well as eight qualitative semi-structured interviews with selected actors and researchers from public and private higher education institutions, research centres and think tanks in El Salvador. It analyses the main challenges Salvadorian researchers face and discusses recommendations to tackle them. Challenges in the Salvadorian knowledge ecosystem range from general patterns of many high-risk contexts, such as severe financial and structural constraints, to a limited research capacity, as well as an extremely violent context and threats from criminal groups. Additionally, since the current government is in place, the freedom of speech is increasingly (or at least is perceived to be) limited, as journalists and researchers face criticism and security

risks when reporting on political issues or criticizing the government. This situation has led to self-censorship, both of the media and academia. Together with existing structural and financial constraints, these factors create additional barriers for the effective knowledge ecosystem in El Salvador.¹

Strengthening the knowledge ecosystem in El Salvador in the long run requires two main areas of attention: first of all, it requires **strengthening the production of high-quality research in the country, and secondly, it requires improving the research-policy uptake in El Salvador**. In the case study below, the main problems, as well as concrete recommendations to tackle these, are formulated. Wherever possible, concrete recommendations for IDRC, and other research funders are identified.





2. El Salvador: Spotlight on research in a violent & increasingly politicized context

2.1. Context

El Salvador has been independent from Spain since 1821 and since the 1930's, it has been ruled by a military government. During the 1980s, El Salvador was in a state of civil war due to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrilla groups revolution against the repressive military rule of the previous decades, which was backed by the United States. With the 1992 United Nations mediated Chapultepec Agreement, a new political system was introduced.²

Since then, the political sphere has been dominated by the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the left wing FMLN, which was turned into a political party. During the presidency of ARENA until 2009, the country was characterized by economic growth due to the strong emphasis on free markets. Between 2009 to 2019, the leading FMLN was committed “to the disadvantaged sectors of the population via increased spending in education and health”³, which led to concerns regarding the government fiscal solvency. In addition, the country has been characterized by social inequality, high criminal violence and corruption. These issues and the rising dissatisfaction with previous governments led to the election of Nayib Bukele in 2019, who made it his goal to fight criminal violence and corruption. He was initially associated with the FMLN, but after expulsion from the party, he was elected to presidency as a candidate of the small GANA (Grand Alliance for National Unity) party, which was derived from ARENA.⁴ Nayib Bukele has been criticized for increasingly concentrating his own power and attempting to perpetuate himself in power, and, thereby, has been considered a threat to democracy in El Salvador.⁵

In general, patterns of many high-risk contexts are present in El Salvador. Additionally, since the current government is in place, the freedom of speech is (or at least is perceived to be) limited, as journalists face criticism and security risks when reporting on political issues such as corruption of the government or organized crime. This situation has led to self-censorship, both of the media and academia. On the other hand, the freedom of academia and non-governmental organizations is also hindered by threats from criminal groups. These factors create barriers for the effective knowledge ecosystem in El Salvador.⁶

Additionally, the availability of reliable and high-quality data is limited due to the insufficient local capacity for knowledge production, and critical findings are generally not taken into account by decision makers. Essentially, the production of knowledge in El Salvador occurs in a highly politicized context.

2 Schultze-Kraft, M., Flemion, P. F., Browning, D. G., and Varela, R. S. (n.d.). El Salvador. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/El-Salvador>

3 Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020). BTI 2020 Country Report — El Salvador. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung. Available at: https://www.bti-project.org/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2020_SLV.pdf, p. 4.

4 Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020).

5 Among others: Vivanco, J. M., Pappier, J. (2021). The U.S. can stop El Salvador's slide to authoritarianism. Time to act. Human Rights Watch, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/21/us-can-stop-el-salvadors-slide-authoritarianism-time-act>

6 Freedom House (2021). Freedom in the World 2021 – El Salvador. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2021>





Research actors in El Salvador

Article 53 of the Constitution of El Salvador establishes the State's obligation to promote research and scientific work. However, in practice, the Salvadorian research and knowledge production ecosystem is characterized by a lack of public funding and, therefore, a prevalence of private actors and funding. This can be seen in the higher education knowledge ecosystem, as there are a total of 24 universities, only one of which is public. In addition, there are eleven specialized institutes, five of which are public, and six technical institutes, three of which are public.⁷

The University of El Salvador (UES) is the oldest university in the country, and the only public university. The UES covers a wide range of subjects such as natural as well as social sciences. The history of the university includes substantial phases of low funding and severe repression by the government and the military. At present, the university has a significant budget deficit. In addition to the public university, there are three major private universities: the José Matías Delgado University (UJMD), the José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) and the Universidad Francisco Gavidia (UFG).

In addition to the universities there are other institutions that conduct research and seek to impact policymaking based on the evidence and knowledge they produce, such as think tanks and research centres. This includes public / government-run research centres, such as the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) and the Centro Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria y Forestal (CENTA), as well as several private think tanks, such as the National Foundation for Development (FUNDE), the Foundation for Studies for the Application of Law (FESPAD), and the Salvadorean Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES).

Finally, there are also a few regional or international think tanks present in El Salvador, such as the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), and the Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural (RIMISP). In addition, international non-governmental organizations also contribute to the knowledge production in El Salvador. This includes, for instance, the Global Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) located in Germany and the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) in the United States.

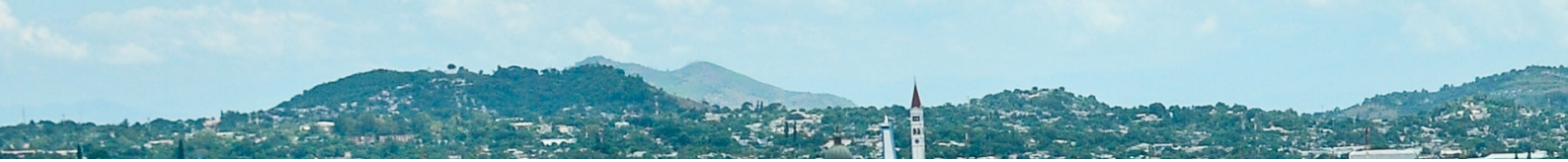
Data Collection Context

Besides the desk research realized, this study attempted to conduct several interviews with key actors in the research landscape to receive first-hand information and confirm the hypotheses developed. However, due to the limited time of the research, the time difference, and the availability of actors, it was rather difficult to schedule interviews with the relevant research institutions, especially state institutions, in El Salvador.

Over 20 institutions were contacted and invited to an interview / asked to fill out a questionnaire. Unfortunately, only seven institutions responded and conceded an interview or sent responses to the questionnaire. As far as the received feedback allows to deduce motives, this lack of response can be attributed to several reasons:

1. Lack of time: Many investigators expressed that – although they appreciated the interest in the Salvadorian situation and thought the topic of the study was timely and helpful – they do not have the time and resources to respond to interview requests or detailed questionnaires. Most of the researchers are employed as professors and sometimes have additional research projects on the side, which makes it hard to reserve time for these kinds of unplanned and unpaid activities.

⁷ MINEDUCYT (2019). Resultados de la información estadística de Instituciones de Educación Superior 2018. Ministerio de Educación, Ciencia y Tecnología. Retrieved from: <https://www.mined.gob.sv/educacion-superior/?wpdmc=informacion-estadistica-de-educacion-superior>, p. 15.



2. Sensitivity of the topic: Another reason might be the sensitivity of the topic and the perceived risk to stir disagreement with the government's position on certain issues. Although we contacted many state institutions, such as ministries and state academies, no one was willing to respond to this call, despite multiple attempts.
3. Summer time and holiday absences: Finally, the research for this short country study was realized in the months of June, July and August 2021, when many people are on holidays. It is therefore also possible that this was one of the reasons for the lack of response.
4. The respondents for this study included researchers from the only public university in El Salvador, from two private universities, two state-related research institutions, as well as two international NGOs / international think tanks. Out of the respondents, five were male and two female, most of them were researchers themselves, some also had (senior) administrative positions related to research within their institutions.

2.2. Follow the People

According to the interviews conducted, the main motivation to become a researcher in El Salvador is usually the interest in better understanding the context, or more general intellectual curiosity, as well as a desire in improving the situation in the country regarding certain questions or challenges.

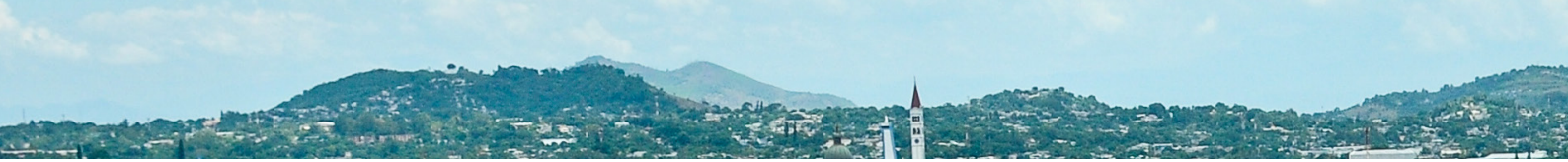
However, there is **not a clear career path** for researchers, or— put the other way round – no research career, as such. Research is rarely in the centre of academic knowledge production. A career as a researcher is an 'accessory' in El Salvador, as an academic career is mostly based on teaching, rather than on research. Some interviewees define the proportion as high as 90% teaching vs. 10% research.

Additionally, often more senior researchers, or those with a PhD and/or studies abroad, will climb the career ladder rather quickly, and be "promoted" to executive positions within their respective institutions, such as "head of research", "program directors", or even executive directors of the institution, where they end up doing more administrative work than research themselves. This fuels the lack of experienced researchers, and increases the deficit of senior researchers that could train a new generation of young researchers. Generally, the public university is in an even more precarious situation, as many of the private universities at least receive some core funding from their roof organizations (such as the UCA (the José Simeón Cañas Central American University) as a Jesuit University).

This leads to a **lack of funding for research** as such within the university system (see also following chapter).

As a result of these financial limitations, research topics are often chosen according to the **agenda of external funders** and external opportunities, although researchers expressed that the institution's strategic orientation and the personal interests of the researchers are taken into account "as much as possible".

Another aspect is the **lack of national PhD programs**. There are only few PhD programs in the country, which leads to many researchers leaving the country to study abroad. This, however, bears the risk that PhD holders might not return to El Salvador after completing their degree (among others due to a lack of opportunities, research positions, and incentives in the country), which leads to a severe brain drain. This again increases the lack of qualified researchers to improve the overall situation in the country. Due to this overall shortage of PhD holders in teaching and research positions, some PhD programs don't even find enough supervisors with a PhD to supervise and mentor the advanced students, which circles back to new students and researchers not getting the necessary training (in research methods) to break out of this vicious circle.



Further challenges identified:

1. Security risks in access to certain territories for field work

Additionally, along Guatemala and Honduras in the Northern Triangle of Central America, El Salvador is considered one of the most violent and unsafe areas of the world. The three countries rate among the top ten states with the highest homicide rate per 100'000 inhabitants, with rates even higher than those currently affected by armed conflict.⁸ During the last decade, urban violence, criminal violence, and drug-related violence have acquired increasing visibility and impact and have become some of the most severe forms of violence in the NTCA. The areas most affected by insecurity and violence are the peripheral, poor neighbourhoods with limited access to basic services and where the state has little presence. These areas are home to the most vulnerable populations, whose rights are not guaranteed and, in many cases, have traditionally been excluded and discriminated against. Homicides are only one of the faces of violence. Enforced disappearances, forced recruitment to gangs, forced prostitution, and trafficking of girls and women for sexual exploitation make up a larger pattern of violence.⁹

The rise of violence in Guatemala, as in El Salvador and Honduras, is in large part attributable to criminal groups (maras or pandillas, e.g., the Mara Salvatrucha, Barrio 18)¹⁰ and organized crime that has grown increasingly powerful, further exacerbated by the war on drugs implemented in Mexico since 2006.¹¹

The state's ineffectiveness to provide security to its citizens has several detrimental consequences, among which is a prosperous "violence economy" that includes the massive purchase of arms and flourishing of private security companies. In Guatemala, private security companies are multiplying in the face of the security situation, and their agents are doubling or tripling the number of national police officers. Many of these companies operate illegally and without control by the authorities.

The severe security situation leaves researchers with very little access to rural and peripheral areas of the country, as travelling is extremely risky. But also moving around in the main cities is not free of risk as the extremely high numbers of assaults and murders in the cities show. This has a limiting effect on research.

2. Current political circumstances

Most of the researchers interviewed agree that the already fragile institutions and political situation has even worsened during the current administration of President Bukele. While political actors (in El Salvador, as in many fragile contexts) have usually disapproved of research that goes against its political positions, now the attacks against institutions and researchers that are perceived to oppose the political position have become more severe, more personal, and even violent. Researchers have experienced strong attempts by government actors and agencies to undermine the results of academic research. These attacks have included calls to defund or prohibit a certain institution, and have come from members of the Parliament, as well as from the president himself.¹²

This situation has caused a certain degree of self-censorship among the research community and severely debilitates the political play of forces and the accountability of the administration.

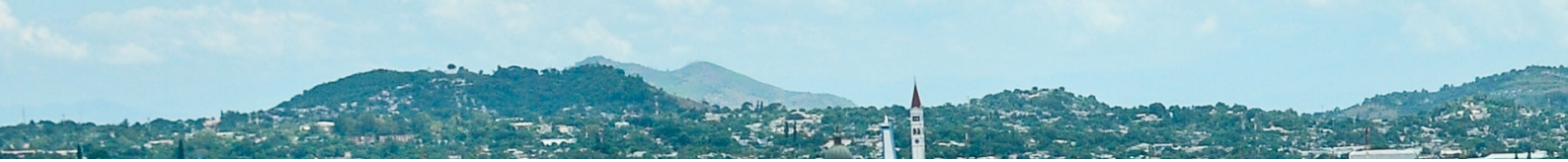
8 Ranieri (2019)

9 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Organization of American States (2016)

10 The main maras or gangs with a presence in the TNCA are the Mara Salvatrucha and the Barrio 18 gang. The Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS13, has been classified as a transnational criminal organization and currently extends from Central American countries to the United States and Canada, including Mexico. On the other hand, the Barrio 18 gang also operates in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States (Ranieri 2019: 10).

11 Dotson and Frydman (2017)

12 The most prominent example is the dispute of President Bukele with his former professor on the COVID response, as reported for example in the national newspaper El Mundo. <https://diario.elmundo.sv/la-disputa-del-presidente-bukele-con-su-exprofesor-un-investigador-del-covid-19/>



3. Inaccuracy of information due to the lack of access to information

Another challenge to research in El Salvador that is connected to the previous aspect of the increasingly authoritarian regime, is the inaccuracy of information due to the lack of access to information.

This is the case especially regarding information produced by government institutions and government sources, and particularly with aspects related to public policies. Examples mentioned during the interviews are the national strategy on COVID, or the National Health Plan. Both documents have been “reserved”, meaning blocked from public access, for the coming seven years. This complete lack of access to certain information not only hinders research, but constitutes a serious affectation of transparency in government information that in the long term impedes accountability of the policies.

Researchers mitigate these obstacles or risks through different strategies, depending on the challenge encountered. The general security situation is being mitigated by establishing rigorous security protocols, as well as, in some instances, by trying to connect as much with the affected population before travelling to a certain area or region. The lack of funding and the lack of access to information is being mitigated by using alternative international funding sources, using alternative methodologies and tools for information gathering and analysis. However, many researchers still identify the current political and security situation as a strong impediment to being able to do research properly.

2.3. Follow the Institutions

In general, the **Salvadorian knowledge ecosystem** is extremely underfunded and highly dependent on external financing.

The Salvadorian university system (both private universities as well as the only public university) overwhelmingly focus on teaching; research plays a minor role. As in other high-risk contexts, the main reason for both public and private universities’ focus on teaching is because tuition fees are the main source of revenue for universities. As far as this research could identify, there are no full-time researchers, but most researchers depend on teaching and consultancy work to supplement their research activities.

The lack of public funding not only leads to universities focusing on teaching, but also to a dependence of research on external funding. Research in El Salvador is funded mostly through projects, mandates, and consultancies, often with external and foreign funding, either through academic cooperation with foreign Universities, or by the bilateral development cooperation. This defines to a certain extent the research agenda (questionnaire 2), and, as there is a tendency to rather short-term projects, leads to the inability to plan long-term and a certain institutional insecurity. Participants of this study explain that research topics are often chosen according to the agenda of external funders, although the institution’s strategic orientation and the researcher’s interests are taken into account at least occasionally and to a certain extent. The strategic agenda of the institutions dictate the conditions for funding and whether external funding is accepted. However, most respondents agree that the interests and agenda of funders do dictate the research undertaken, also as this is the only way to ensure research intake by policy actors.

It is not clear if certain fields of research get more attention by external funders, or not (while one participant said that social sciences receive most funding, another participant expressed the opinion that it receives least funding, and others expressed that this problem affects all areas in the same way).



Also **think tanks** and other research-related institutions face similar challenges, most of them needing to rely on external projects and mandates for their research work, with only very few having access to other funding support, such as a foundation that is behind the think tank. These very few are lucky enough to depend a bit less on external funding and therefore are able to work better according to their strategic priorities, rather than spontaneous opportunities.

2.4. Follow Ideas

El Salvador faces many **barriers and risks to policy adoption of research findings**. While the inclusion of scientific research into policy and political decision making is often a challenge, especially in high-risk countries, all interviewees agree that this process is particularly affected by the current political situation and conflictive atmosphere in El Salvador.

As already mentioned, and according to the responses received, El Salvador lacks a state policy that promotes higher education and encourages critical research. But more importantly, research is generally **not taken into consideration by decision makers**, especially if it goes against their (political) interests. The concerns of political decision-makers are focused on the short term and electoral popularity, and rarely based on evidence or long-term scientific research (questionnaire 2).

Also, some respondents (especially from social sciences) express that research that opposes the political opinion of those in power often provokes at least harsh questioning, criticism, and opposition that can lead up to non-acceptance, denial, and disavowal of the results. These reactions, as mentioned previously, can come from scientific positions in a form of self-censorship, as well as from political positions (questionnaire 2), and include attacks from high level politicians and the president himself.

This leads to **potential personal risks** for the researchers (such as disrepute and defamation, as well as political attacks and professional repression, up to even security threats) when expressing or publishing research that goes against the opinion or political position of the government.

The only concrete **example of research that was indeed taken into consideration** by political decision makers, identified by one of the participants of the study, was related to research conducted for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of El Salvador, where the researchers found that their research was received and implemented (questionnaire 4). This example seems to confirm the assumption also expressed by other participants, that, while research generally is not taken into consideration by political decision makers, subjects related to natural sciences, seem to be more successful in policy uptake than social science (questionnaire 2). This acceptance and even encouragement of natural sciences, was also confirmed by a respondent who expressed that the Ministry of Education commissioned a study to incorporate environmental issues and climate change in the framework of the reform of the curriculum of training in social sciences from the first cycle to the baccalaureate (questionnaire 6). It therefore seems that for rather technical issues and questions related to natural sciences, the government does take the results of research into account, but if the results are focused more on social and political issues, or whenever they go against the governments' interests, then they do not.

The **limited scientific journalism** which exists in the country is not focused on actual dissemination of scientific research, especially when it comes to results that show scientific foundations adverse to those of the policies, but rather to fuel public debate when it is of interest to the public or when it is convened by a renowned organization. A concrete, and very striking recent example mentioned in one of the interviews related to the public policies concerns the management of the COVID 19 pandemic in the country. In the early months of the pandemic, 13 research institutions teamed up to form a consortium and assess the projections of the pandemic. While the government at that point was making extremely negative



projections with over 3mio deaths, the research put together by the consortium indicated that these projections were way too severe, and that the impact of the pandemic in El Salvador would be less deadly. While they were able to present the research results to the government, no action was taken from the government's side to correct or adjust the envisaged policies. In the end, the results researchers had predicted turned out to be correct, which leaves the question why the government did not take into account the research results presented, in order to use public funds more efficiently.

Indeed, El Salvador was one of the country's that reacted to the pandemic with a high degree of repression. The president of El Salvador ordered the detainment of people breaking the mandatory lockdown measures. To this end approximately 88 so-called detainment centres were established, which were overcrowded and unsanitary, where people were not isolated and sometimes kept for over a month.¹³ Even though the Constitutional Chamber found that there was no legal basis for holding people in containment centres as a form of punishment, the president publicly disregarded these rulings. In addition, President Bukele encouraged an excessive use of force by the security forces.¹⁴

The freedom of expression was also restricted during the COVID19 pandemic, as journalists were confronted with barriers to the reporting on the pandemic.¹⁵ For instance, journalists were prohibited from questioning government health officials during a press conference¹⁶ and were forced to delete photos of the situation at a COVID hospital.¹⁷ The access to information also declined as the Access to Public Information Agency (IAIP) suspended its activities during the lockdown, thereby reducing the transparency of the government spending, including in regards to expenditures related to COVID.¹⁸ As mentioned above, the national strategy on the pandemic is still under reservation and cannot be accessed by the public or even researchers. One possible explanation for the government not taking the results of the research on the pandemic into account is the diversion of government funds to repress rather than address the pandemic in an efficient way.

13 Amnesty International (2020). When protection becomes repression: mandatory quarantines under covid-19 in the Americas.

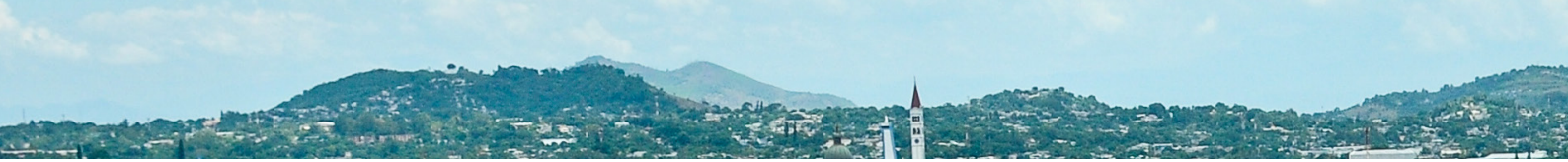
14 HRW (2020). El Salvador – Events of 2020. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/el-salvador>

15 Frontline Defenders (2020). Defending Rights in Times of COVID: A regional review of the conditions for defending human rights and freedom of expression in Mexico and Central America. Retrieved from: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/diagrmacion_brief_eng_final.pdf, p. 6

16 APES (2020). Por cuarta vez Gobierno impide preguntas de periodistas en conferencia de prensa. Asociación de Periodistas de El Salvador. Retrieved from: <https://apes.org.sv/alertas/por-cuarta-vez-gobierno-impide-preguntas-de-periodistas-en-conferencia-de-prensa/>

17 APES (2020). Soldados obligan a periodista a borrar material informativo. Asociación de Periodistas de El Salvador. Retrieved from: <https://apes.org.sv/alertas/soldados-obligan-a-periodista-a-borrar-material-informativo/>

18 Freedom House (2021). Freedom in the World 2021 – El Salvador. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2021>



2.5. Recommendations on Strengthening the Knowledge Ecosystem in El Salvador

Strengthening the knowledge ecosystem in El Salvador in the long run requires two main areas of attention: first of all, it requires **strengthening the production of high-quality research in the country, and secondly, it requires improving the research-policy uptake in El Salvador**. In the following section, the main problems, as well as concrete recommendations to tackle these, are formulated. Wherever possible, concrete recommendations for IDRC, and other research funders are identified.

Problem 1: The lack of a dedicated research career path

As explained above, El Salvador lacks a true 'research career' and research is generally undertaken as a side activity. Also due to the funding mechanisms based on tuition, universities in El Salvador focus on teaching and neglect research. As a consequence, Salvadorian academics have to focus mostly on their teaching commitments, which severely limits their ability to conduct research. This in turn has a negative influence on the quality of teaching offered. As without scientific research, Salvadorian researchers and professors cannot develop intellectually.

Solutions expressed by interviewees:

Interviewees express that it is necessary to strengthen the academic career as such, offer better continuous training in scientific and technological research, as well as in methodologies, and provide the necessary funds (and thus time) for researchers to focus on research, and not only on teaching. Prioritizing research in the higher education system would be an important starting point to tackle many of the structural problems identified.

Recommendations to IDRC:

Research funders, such as IDRC could offer / include in funded projects continuous training in scientific and technological research methodologies, targeting especially on younger researchers, and provide the necessary funds for this type of training.

Problem 2: Brain drain and lack of local capacity

The current situation in El Salvador (lack of opportunities, general political and social situation of the country) are leading to a massive brain drain, reducing capacity in the country.

Solutions expressed by interviewees:

Interviewees express that it is necessary to strengthen the academic career as such, including the structural problems identified above. Additionally, the general political and social situation needs improvement in order to encourage young researchers to stay or return to their countries.

Recommendations to IDRC:

Research funders, such as IDRC could fund scholarships and other career development opportunities that include the obligation to return to the country after finishing the studies or (research) stay abroad. However, taking into account the difficult security and political situation in the country, this might only be possible to a limited extent (for the moment). Generally, the political and social situation needs improvement in order to encourage young (and well educated) researchers to stay in or return to their countries. (See also other recommendations on the strengthening of local capacities in the next point).



Problem 3: Lack of links with international research networks

Salvadorian researchers feel they are not very well connected to the existing research networks, and therefore, aren't able to properly take advantage of them.

Solutions expressed by interviewees:

Partnerships with other universities (abroad) and joint research projects might help build capacity in El Salvador and connect Salvadorian researchers with the international research community. Supporting and strengthening local capacities could also be achieved by strengthening the inclusion of local researchers in international research projects, especially those funded by international monetary institutions.

Recommendations to IDRC:

Concretely, mentorship programs, in which international senior researcher “mentor” Salvadorian young researchers, might help bridge the lack of skilled senior researchers in El Salvador, and prevent the brain drain El Salvador is experiencing currently.

Also, major donors, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others, could institute a policy of mixed teams for their studies (between local, potentially young, and international, experienced researchers, be it for assessment studies in the preparatory phase of a project, the implementation phase, or the evaluation and assessment phase. Thus, young local researchers would be able to learn from international, more experienced researchers, and knowledge strengthening, and sustainability concerns would be addressed. Additionally, such teams would ensure a better context sensitivity and “rootedness” in the context.

Problem 4: Lack of public funding of universities by the state

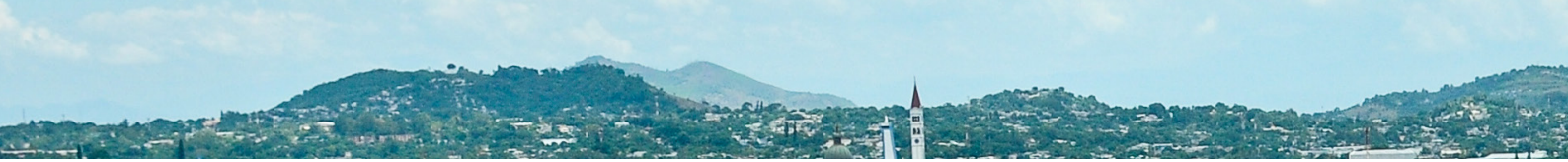
The lack of (public) funding is one of the main impediments of (independent) research. The dependence on external and project based research impacts its independence and long term development.

Solutions expressed by interviewees:

Interviewees express that it is necessary for the Salvadorian State to provide (more) core funding to universities to minimise dependency on private and project-based donors. Also, it would be useful to restructure the remuneration system and to allow researchers to dedicate more time to research.

Recommendations to IDRC:

No concrete recommendations were made for research funders. However, in the bilateral cooperation, state institutions could be encouraged to “match” external funding, or to increase public funding of the (higher) educational system and universities generally.



Problem 5: Lack of knowledge – practice transfer.

Generally, the policy uptake by politicians and decision makers in El Salvador is rather low, occasional, and responds to political interests. According to respondents, Salvadorian politicians and decision makers seem not to understand the value of research and are not convinced of its use for the design, implementation, and evaluation of policy.

Respondents are cautious in formulating recommendations regarding an improvement of the knowledge – practice transfer. Some note that “these being political questions” it is not “up to them” to respond

Solutions expressed by interviewees:

Some respondents suggest that improving the communication between the different state and research entities could improve this situation overall.

Recommendations to IDRC:

International donors and research actors could, for example, encourage exchanges between the different actors in El Salvador, for example through mentorships, exchange programs, and ‘internships’, involving government officials, university professors, researchers. Building relations between the research community and the Salvadorian policy makers might create a better mutual understanding of the respective perspectives and foster cooperation in the future. Instead of donors taking an active role here, and in order to keep ownership of such processes locally-led and not too much externally-driven, donors could also identify and fund a consortium of organization (academic/NGO/policy) who would take a lead in encouraging exchanges.

Problem 6: General political situation perceived as unfavourable to independent research

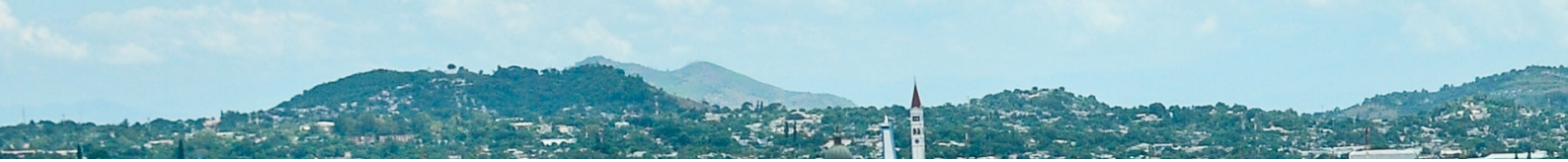
Finally, the current political context is perceived as unfavourable to independent research. The increasing repression of dissident voices in the public sphere and the growing authoritarian tendency of the public administration (and the president), are major reasons for a reduced independent research and a lack of research uptake by political actors and other decision makers.

Solutions expressed by interviewees:

Several respondents identify the strengthening of civil society actors and of critical voices, such as human rights defenders, through relevant research projects, as a way to strengthen civil society and independent research more generally.

Recommendations to IDRC:

Donors should – as much as possible – identify independent (research) actors and encourage critical voices through relevant research projects, especially in those that include a collaboration with external / international partners, and can therefore ‘protect’ critical voices from attacks from the executive branch.



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swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It analyses the causes of violent conflicts and develops strategies for their peaceful transformation. swisspeace aims to contribute to the improvement of conflict prevention and conflict transformation by producing innovative research, shaping discourses on international peace policy, developing and applying new peacebuilding tools and methodologies, supporting and advising other peace actors, as well as by providing and facilitating spaces for analysis, discussion, critical reflection and learning.

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