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Headline: Global News Dispatches: 4 Stories

El Salvador Is Making Little Effort to Eradicate Illiteracy

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Note to Editors: This is a selection of news wire reports that have been edited to be relevant for audiences for the next two weeks. You are welcome to select and publish individual items or the whole stack.

Headlines in This News Package:

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- **El Salvador Is Making Little Effort to Eradicate Illiteracy**
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El Salvador's efforts to improve the educational level in the country seem to be falling short, with rundown schools, especially in rural areas, and little progress in overcoming illiteracy.

In almost a decade, this Central American country of 6.7 million inhabitants has moved just two percentage points [in its fight against illiteracy](#), going from 11.8 percent in 2013 to 9.7 percent in 2021, the last year with available official data.

Illiteracy is higher in rural areas: 15.2 percent. And among people over 60 years of age, the rate is 45.7 percent

Literacy Efforts in the Freezer

Even more worrisome is the suspension in the last three years of the government's adult literacy program in rural areas, people involved in this effort told IPS.

“It is worrying, the literacy program ceased to exist,” Verónica Majano, executive director of the non-governmental [Association of Popular Education \(CIAZO\)](#), told IPS.

Her organization has been working on literacy programs since 1989, during the country’s 1980-1992 civil war.

And now CIAZO is perhaps the only organization that still runs adult literacy programs in rural areas of the country.

Other institutions that carried out similar projects have given up because they say the education authorities have abandoned the national effort.

“It is not only stagnation, it is a setback; the COVID-19 pandemic affected initial, basic, middle, and higher education, but right or wrong it has continued. But in literacy nothing is happening,” Majano stressed.

The cancellation or suspension of the government’s [Literacy Program](#) has become evident, she said, since Nayib Bukele became president in June 2019.

She added that the effort to teach reading and writing to those who did not have the opportunity to go to school, or who had to drop out for one reason or another, had previously continued regardless of which government was in power, left or right.

She was referring to the administrations of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance, which governed for four terms between 1989 and 2009, and those of the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which was in power for two terms between 2009 and 2019.

The [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#) has pointed out that acquiring and improving literacy skills throughout life is [an intrinsic part of the right to education](#) and brings enormous empowerment and many benefits.

“Literacy drives sustainable development, enables greater participation in the labor market, improves child and family health and nutrition, reduces poverty, and expands life opportunities,” the UN agency states.

According to UNESCO, a country can be declared free of illiteracy if less than 3.9 percent of the total population over 15 years of age is illiterate.

It has also stated that illiteracy is [another form of modern slavery](#).

However, it notes that despite the progress made worldwide, 763 million adults still do not know how to read and write.

Academic Óscar Picardo told IPS that part of the problem in El Salvador is that, historically, the arrival of each new government has meant a change of strategy and vision on how to promote education in general and literacy programs in particular.

This has generated discontinuity with some of the achievements or progress made by the previous authorities, he said.

“The country and the Ministry of Education have had a recurring problem that is still present, which is the absence of state policies,” said Picardo, director of the Institute of Science, Technology and Innovation, of the private [Francisco Gavidia University](#).

He added; “The education system works with government policies, and every five years the whole system is rebooted, the minister changes and plans change, priorities change, but the major problems remain intact.”

The expert pointed out that if progress is to be made in education, and in particular in reducing illiteracy, the problem of school dropouts, caused by poverty and the insecurity generated by gangs, must be tackled.

According to official figures, 1.3 million people aged four to 29 (47.4 percent) reported not attending school in 2022.

The poverty rate stands at 26.6 percent of the population, but in the countryside, the figure rises to 29.6 percent.

Picardo stressed that the so-called “war against gangs” waged since the end of March 2021 by the Bukele administration, which has succeeded in largely dismantling the operations of these criminal groups, is likely to lower the dropout rates and this is already reflected in the figures for the next school year.

“Of course, if the dropout rates decrease due to improved security that would be very positive; hopefully we will see statistics in that regard,” Picardo said.

The “mano dura” or iron fist strategy against the gangs, known here as “maras,” although it has largely dismantled the criminal activity of these groups, has also generated a dynamic of human rights violations and abuses by police and military authority that have been denounced by local and international human rights organizations.

With average schooling of only 7.2 grades, it will be difficult for the Salvadoran populace to pull out of poverty and for the country to find foreign investment that offers better-paying jobs, said the expert.

In El Salvador, there are three grades of initial education, up to seven years of age on average. These are followed by nine grades of basic education, up to the age of 15, and three more of middle school, up to the age of 18. Schooling is considered compulsory until the completion of basic education.

Most other Central American countries face a similar problem to El Salvador, Picardo added, although Costa Rica has always shown better development in the educational and

social areas, in general, and is the only country in the sub-region declared free of illiteracy. The Salvadoran government has made a commitment to reducing the technological gap, with the distribution of thousands of laptops to elementary and high school students, which is an important achievement.

However, the Bukele administration has also been criticized for the low level of investment in improving the conditions of most of the more than 5,000 schools in the country, especially in rural areas, and in remedying the deficiencies in teaching.

Blanca Velazco, a schoolteacher, shared with IPS the difficulties she faces every day in teaching essential knowledge to her kindergarten and first-grade students, who share the same classroom at the Santa Rosa canton school in the municipality of Sensuntepeque, in the northern Salvadoran department of Cabañas.

“My first graders should be reading better by now, but I’ve had a hard time teaching them, because they are together with the kindergarteners, and that shouldn’t be the case,” said Velazco, 47.

She added that at 10:30 AM the kindergarteners leave and she only has 45 minutes to teach the first graders Language Arts and Math.

“Forty-five minutes are not enough,” she stressed. In the afternoon, she also teaches fourth grade.

Winning the Battle Against Illiteracy

In this canton, where some 50 families live, the Association of Popular Education, CIAZO, is organizing five literacy circles aimed at adults, mostly women, who want to win the fight against illiteracy.

Official figures reveal that of those who cannot read or write in El Salvador, 14.4 percent are women and 7.7 percent are men.

One of the literacy circles is made up of a dozen peasant women over the age of 60. Half of them were present when IPS visited the area on Aug. 28, and several of them are visually impaired due to their age, but they are not giving up.

“Sometimes I would go to the offices in the town of Ilobasco, and I felt bad when I saw signs with messages written on them and I couldn’t understand the words,” said Carmen Molina, 66, as she worked on a primer, writing words and solving simple addition and subtraction equations.

She said that as a child she attended school but only got as far as the second grade, and what little she learned was forgotten over the years.

“I didn’t want to go anymore,” she explained, because she had to take breakfast to her

father and siblings to the milpa—the traditional agricultural system that intermingles corn with beans and vegetables. “And then coming all the way back to school was very hard,” she said.

She got up the courage to go to the literacy circle because some of her younger children would ask her what to write on their assignments.

“Some have a harder time learning than others, but in general they have advanced quite a bit, little by little,” said Flor Echeverría, 30, who has been teaching in the circle since the beginning of 2023.

Echeverría commented that she herself only studied up to the eighth grade and did not want to finish ninth grade, the last grade offered at the school she attended.

“At that time the facilities to go to school didn’t exist, everything was even more complicated,” she said.

“It’s nice to dedicate time to share knowledge with people who did not learn to read or write,” she said.

Although some men participate in the literary circle, such as Julio, Carmen’s son, the vast majority are women who have come to understand that learning to read and write is in itself an act of rebellion and also of liberation.