



Executive Summary

Report on the impact of forced internal displacement on Salvadoran children and adolescents

This report was constructed based on the complaints filed at the national Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (PDDH), as well as on the counselling provided by their staff to people seeking legal advice for their situation. For its construction, quantitative information was collected from the files and counseling records corresponding to forced internal displacement due to violence during the period of October 2017 to February 2019. A total of 134 files and records of 20 counseling sessions were reviewed. Six focus groups were also conducted. Three with adolescents and youth gathered at the PDDH's Youth Defense Offices, three with teachers working in the public system's kindergarten and elementary education levels, all participants came from the western, central, and eastern zones of the country. This report had the technical accompaniment of Cristosal, a civil society organization that works in defense and promotion of human rights.

Context of violence and forced internal displacement

The context of violence experienced by the country during recent years has been characterized by a variety of crimes that affect not only adults but also children, adolescents, and youth to the point of causing forced internal displacement. According to the data gathered from the reports and guidelines presented to the PDDH, during the period under review the most frequently reported crimes were threats (37.1%), homicide of family members (15.0%), and extortion (8.5%). Although in a lesser proportion, forced recruitment by gangs should be highlighted (1.3%) since this implies the vulnerability of children and adolescents to these groups.

In the consultations that were carried out with adolescents and youth, it was highlighted that these groups are impacted in particular by threats that go from being forced to leave their homes to possible attempts against their lives; in other cases the ultimatum is executed, concluding in the assassination of them or one of their relatives. In addition, they mentioned that the families of children and adolescents affected by forced internal displacement may be victims of extortion by criminal groups as well. It is important to mention that depending on the sex of a person, other actions of the gangs can generate displacement. In this regard, boys, adolescents, and young men may be coerced into joining these groups; while girls, adolescents, and young women are sexually harassed to become "partners" of gang members. The teachers interviewed expressed that children are used for illicit acts as a strategy by the gangs to divert attention from them. They also know that the laws protect children and adolescents in a special way, and that if caught, the consequences -if any- would be less than those for adults.

With regard to the agents whose actions may lead to forced internal displacement

For children and adolescents, sources identify at least four different types. The main ones were gang members, without making any distinction between them, since it is more a question of the one who has control over the area where the victims reside. Secondly, situations of violence associated with public security authorities, both from the police force and the army were mentioned. Young people are targeted even when there is no evidence of criminal links. Abuse of authority, illegal arrests and even physical assaults were highlighted as well. The stigmatization of adolescents and youth has become a present theme, often influencing cases of abuse of authority by the police and/or army, this for having a predisposition to consider them as delinquents or gang members based on their clothing, hair style, circulation at night hours, among others. A fourth group of aggressors mentioned were members of the same family groups. Cases of domestic violence can eventually lead to forced internal displacement as well the links that family members may have with the gangs.

With regard to the characteristics of forced displacement, the report states that these mobilizations can be individually and/or as a family, are usually sudden, and do not give those affected time to take many of their belongings with them. The fear that surrounds the situation in general means that stories are not shared and, because of this, there is not much information available on the subject, which makes it difficult in part to identify specific places where the problem is most prevalent. There is a link between the phenomenon of forced internal displacement and international migration. In many of the cases consulted, people who ended up leaving the country for reasons of violence had previously been forced to mobilize internally to protect their lives and those of their families.

Impacts of forced internal displacement due to violence

It is important to recognize that forced internal displacement cannot be reduced to a change in locations for the people who suffer it but involves a change that breaks the course of life of those affected. In this sense, adolescents are more affected by displacement than children, in part because of the stage of development in which they find themselves: because adolescents have a greater understanding of their environment, of the difficulties faced by their families, they are better able to understand the causes that force them to leave their homes, as well as the dangers and risks that they run before, during and after displacement. Among the psychological effects, it is worth noting that children and adolescents may become shy, have difficulty adapting to change and fear integrating into new spaces; post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression and aggressive behavior are also effects of forced internal displacement.

In relation to the family group, disintegration is one of the most evident effects. Communication is also weakened and both situations impact the relationships among family members. The attitude required on the part of the adults who are in charge of children and adolescents who are displaced must be one of protection, close accompaniment that allows them to feel supported. However, a positive and motivating attitude must also be maintained to generate feelings of certainty that the situation being experienced can eventually be improved. In order for adults to play the role of protection and accompaniment that is suggested, it is required that they also have their own process through psychological attention that helps them to understand the situation in which they find themselves and give meaning to it. To the extent that confidence is provided so that adults can be called upon in case children and adolescents need it, it will be easier to find out how they are coping with the changes and to identify early on any problems or difficulties in adaptation. At

this point, signs of affection are also essential, and affection as a form of reaffirmation and accompaniment.

Displacement also affects the family's economy as many adults lose their jobs or leave their businesses and therefore their sources of income. The data from the complaints and counseling records also reflect this impact. Of the 170 people registered, 82 were economically active before the events that put them at risk, and 44% lost their source of employment as a result of being displaced or at risk of being displaced. In addition, due to the suddenness of the mobilization, families are not prepared to absorb the new expenses they will have to face and even if they had savings, these could be exhausted before the family could be stabilized. Teachers expressed that the victims turn to their family networks for financial support, whether they live within the country's borders or abroad; in this sense, they specified that when families do not have the possibility of obtaining remittances, it is their entrepreneurial spirit and the desire to get ahead that helps them get out of the crisis they are in.

One of the effects on the communities of origin is that they become depopulated, which increases the vulnerability of those who do not mobilize in the face of criminal acts. It was also mentioned that there is a direct impact on the community social fabric, since when the victims are known in the neighborhood, their escape leaves a significant void; in addition to the concern about not knowing if in a new place of housing they will be able to find neighbors to support them. On the other hand, in the new areas of settlement, there is a greater concentration of population that can lead to a shortage of resources, greater environmental pollution and conflicts between neighbors. To this last element, there is often mistrust towards the people who integrate into the communities, a mistrust mediated by the climate of citizen insecurity that the country is experiencing.

About this particular aspect, boys and girls recognized the connection between physical and mental health, in the sense that the stress caused by the experience of displacement can generate new physical problems or aggravate pre-existing conditions. Among the health problems that were identified are migraines, diabetes, cardiovascular problems, and it can also contribute to the development of diseases for which one already has a genetic predisposition, such as cancer. It is important to mention that it is not only the experience of displacement itself that can affect the health of the victims, but also the health conditions of the places where they arrive to live, the fact that they live in temporary shelters that do not meet the minimum conditions or that they live on the streets while they manage to find help.

With respect to confinement, according to the PDDH data it is mostly adults who are trapped in their homes for reasons of violence. However, it must be considered that behind these adults there are children and adolescents whose development is affected by having to stop leaving their homes to protect their lives. Restrictions on going out affect development by not allowing them to develop like their peers, limiting the opportunity to relate to other people and to integrate into the world. The inability to leave their homes has led to most of their relationships being sustained digitally through social networks or electronic media.

The teachers consulted agreed that one of the biggest impacts of forced displacement has on children and adolescents is school dropout, as attending school is the main activity carried out during this period of their development. In this regard, they felt that although the Ministry of Education (MINED) has a policy of accepting any student who must move from one school to another at any time of the year, it does not solve the problem. At a local level, it was mentioned that in some schools the number of spaces available may be scarce, generating frustration and problems of over-age which in some cases lead to bullying by classmates. Relationships between peers can also be impacted by the difficulty of telling one's story for safety reasons. The lack of

information of the situation one is going through can cause misunderstandings and difficulty in establishing interpersonal relationships. For those who manage to enter a new school the constant changes can cause a drop in their school performance and grades.

Trust in Institutions and State Response to Displacement

Victims of forced internal displacement are afraid to report situations of violence they have experienced because they believe that State institutions have been infiltrated by gang members and information can be leaked which can put them at greater risk of reprisals. They also commented that people in situations of forced displacement do not know which institutions they can turn to for help.

Based on the data collected, the PDDH is one of the most trusted institutions, with the highest percentage of rapprochement for the filing of complaints (90% reported during the period under review). This may be due - in part - to the mistrust that sources mentioned regarding public safety institutions and the possible leakage of sensitive information that puts the complainant at risk. It may also be due to the fact that the complainants also search for support and help (economic, protection, advice, among others), which is perceived to be easier to obtain at human rights institutions. For people who seek shelter outside national borders, they also need documents such as formal complaints records to support their cases.

State measures to prevent forced displacement

It is important to design and implement projects that provide information on the subject. Sharing relevant information about the institutions that can provide support and the kind of assistance available. Inclusion of information through traditional or digital media, to raise awareness on forced displacement, so that people can recognize what it entails and can identify situations of this type, as well as victims, so that they can access resources in time. In order to prevent the violence that may arise from the actions of state security forces, it is important that the professionalism of these entities be prioritized and that their actions be in accordance with the law regardless of the circumstances. This must be accompanied by information so that the population knows their rights, the laws that protect them, and the powers and limits of the members of the police and the military in order not only to avoid abuses of authority and actions outside the law, but also to promote the rapprochement of these agents with the population in order to build and recover trust.

In general, forced internal displacement affects the individual at different levels and in different capacities, impacting the life plan of children and adolescents in various ways. In this sense, the role of accompaniment, affection and care played by the adults in charge of children and adolescents impacted by displacement, as well as their assistance in the elaboration of their experiences, is transcendental. This will ensure that many of the consequences of the situation of displacement can be overcome and life projects reconstructed. As a society, they cannot be left in the dark about what is happening, but on the other hand, responsible use must be made of the information available and the way in which it is transmitted so that it is understood without causing further violations and re-victimization.