

## Now is the time for environmental strategies



The country faces big environmental problems, and the Government – although moving in the right direction - is not paying enough attention to them. To ensure environmental sustainability, the Government should continue to enact and implement environmental laws, many of which have been debated in recent years, and decide once and for all to make a firm commitment to international environmental protection agreements. The Durban talks on climate change may be an excellent opportunity to develop a national, long-term strategy and work towards ensuring the well-being of future generations.

### Social Watch El Salvador

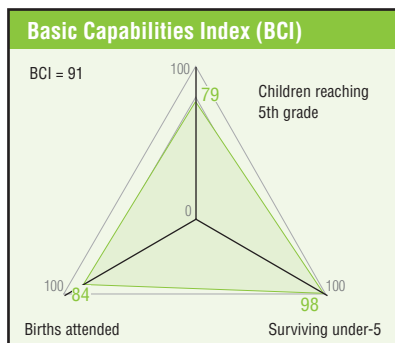
Susana Barrera  
Magdalena Cortez  
Scarlett Cortez  
Ana María Galdámez  
Omar García  
Mario Paniagua

El Salvador is rich in biodiversity. Were these diverse biological resources well-managed, they could provide the basis on which to support the entire population and lift many out of poverty. At the present time, however, they are not being properly administered, and the country's great potential is being wasted. In 2009, an estimated 37% of the Salvadoran population was living in poverty.<sup>1</sup>

A sizeable proportion of the rural population live below the poverty line, and their subsistence strategies depend on and exploit natural resources. The Government lacks a clear policy to guide and provide technical and financial support to existing and new rural settlements whose struggle for existence has accelerated the destruction of forests, soil and water resources. Historically, the lack of a national environmental policy has led to unplanned and indiscriminate dumping of rubbish, the pollution of water with human and industrial waste, and increasing air pollution caused by more and more motor vehicles.<sup>2</sup> Big industries and agricultural exploitation have caused pollution in nature areas, and there has been no suitable treatment for liquid or solid waste.

### The environment and the Millennium Development Goals

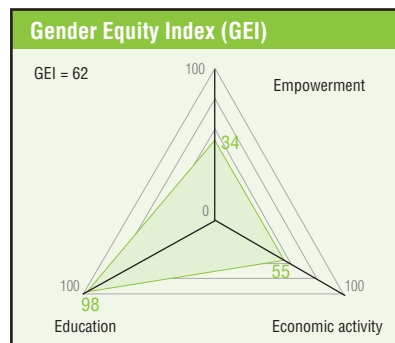
Despite these problems, according to the UNDP, the prospects of El Salvador achieving its targets under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are encouraging. The poverty reduction target and the target for access to sanitation have already been reached, and indicators show the country is very near its target for access to potable water. Less progress has been made towards the other MDG



goals, but El Salvador seems to be on the right path and doing reasonably well.<sup>3</sup>

Measured against the MDGs, El Salvador has incorporated the principles of sustainable development into national policies and programmes and reversed the loss of environmental resources. It has reduced the loss of biodiversity and by 2010 had brought the rate of loss down considerably. The country is on track to cut by half the percentage of the population without access to potable water and basic sewage services by 2015 and to improve the lives of at least one million inhabitants of shanty towns by 2020.<sup>4</sup> According to UNDP, the goal of reversing the rate of loss of environment resources and the target of cutting in half the number of people without access to potable water or sewage services have already been reached.<sup>5</sup>

El Salvador has also reduced consumption of substances that damage the ozone layer, specifically chlorofluorocarbons (CFC gases).<sup>6</sup> It has made good on its commitment to the Montreal Protocol to reduce emissions of CFC gases 50% by 2005, 85% by 2007, and by 2010 was on course for a 100% reduction.<sup>7</sup>



The question of access to potable water and sewage services is less easy to assess, depending on the criteria used to evaluate progress. The traditional evaluation system considers the supply of improved water by pipes, public access points, perforated wells or pumps, protected wells, protected sources and rain water. If these criteria are used, the proportion of the population with access to sources of improved water increased from 63.3% in 1991 to 83.9% in 2000 and 86.9% in 2007. However, if a more rigorous standard is applied that considers only access to water in households, the figures are less encouraging, showing an improvement from 42.2% of households in 1991 to 67.5% in 2007.<sup>8</sup>

### An important step forward

One important step forward came in March 2011 with the enactment of the Law of Land Reclamation.<sup>9</sup> This lays down regulations that impose order on the unrestricted spread of large urban areas, establishes standards for how soils are used and sets up a legal framework to govern human activity in river valleys and the forests that still remain.

The country also has an Environment Law and a battery of specific laws to support it, including the Law of Protected Nature Areas, the Forestry Law and the Law of Forest Wildlife Preservation. In addition, El Salvador has subscribed to the Montreal Protocol and is committed to applying international standards to the management of dangerous materials.

1 The World Bank, *El Salvador*, (San Salvador: 2011), <data.worldbank.org/country/el-salvador>.

2 M. A. Alvarado, *Diagnóstico de la situación medioambiental de El Salvador*, (3 October 2006), <www.ecoport.net/Temas\_Especiales/Desarrollo\_Sustentable/Diagnostico\_de\_la\_situacion\_medio\_ambiental\_de\_El\_Salvador>.

3 UNDP, "Avance hacia los ODM en El Salvador," in *Millennium Development Goals 2007*, <www.pnud.org.sv/2007/odm/content/view/15/101>

4 UNDP, *Segundo Informe Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio, El Salvador*, (2009), p. 39; also see: <www.unhabitat.org/stats/Default.aspx>.

5 Ibid.

6 UNDP, *Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio*, <www.pnud.org.sv/2007/odm/content/view/1/82/>.

7 UNDP, *Segundo Informe Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio*, op cit.

8 Ibid.

9 El Salvador Noticias, *El Salvador con nueva ley de ordenamiento territorial*, (12 March 2011), <www.elsalvadornoticias.net/2011/03/12/el-salvador-con-nueva-ley-de-ordenamiento-territorial/>.

Taking a broad view, even though in practice not enough resources are being allocated to make it possible for these laws to yield significant concrete results, the very fact that a regulatory framework has been put in place must be regarded as a big step in the right direction.

### The impact of climate change

Climate change is another dimension of sustainable development in which El Salvador must undertake serious long-term planning. The country, and indeed the whole region, will have to consider how to prepare for and cope with the effects of climate change.

Climate change is creating a whole range of problems for the countries in Central America, arising from the adverse impacts of weather-related phenomena on production, infrastructure, and people's means of support, health and safety. Increasingly, the environment is less and less able to provide resources or play a key role in sustaining life.

As an example, Central America has been blessed with a rich endowment of water resources, but these are unequally distributed among the various countries and regions and between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. There are great variations in water

availability from year to year and even within the same year. According to climate change forecasts, the use of and demand for fresh water could rise by as much as 20% in a scenario based on the premise that in the near future there will be a proliferation of local solutions to the problems of managing economic, social and environmental sustainability. But in some scenarios that are less careful about protecting ecosystems, demand could even go up by 24%.<sup>10</sup>

El Salvador is particularly vulnerable to climate change. Of all the Central American countries, El Salvador could be hit the hardest, followed by Honduras and Nicaragua.<sup>11</sup> Demand for water currently exceeds the 20% threshold that is accepted internationally as the critical level for pressure on water resources. Thus, El Salvador falls into the same category of water dependence as Egypt and some countries in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>12</sup>

The outlook for agriculture is equally uncertain and worrying. According to some studies, the principal effects of climate change will be greater CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, higher temperatures, changing rainfall patterns and increasing pressure on water resources --though the tolerance of higher limits and endurance of the country's crops may have a mitigating effect.

### Conclusion

To achieve environmental sustainability, El Salvador must make a commitment to international environmental agreements that will enable it to put a brake on activities that harm the environment. In addition, it should design and implement national policies that include guidelines that promote full respect for human life and for living things.

El Salvador has a unique opportunity to tackle these problems. It should assume leadership of the Central American countries at the climate change discussions in 2011. It has already taken a firm step in this direction with the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources currently engaged in consultations to design and coordinate a national climate change strategy that should enable El Salvador to take firm positions at international forum.

Confidence and support are also needed when it comes to adopting new strategies like the "National Policy on Water Resources in El Salvador," a Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources initiative aimed at ensuring that the country's present and future generations will have enough water for all their needs. ■

<sup>10</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), *La economía del cambio climático en Centro América*, (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.