

# Peace, Reconstruction, and *Repoblaciones* in El Salvador: The Case of Comunidad Rutilio Grande

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## Abstract

The peace accords signed in early 1992 between the Government of El Salvador and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) brought a tentative peace to the country and allowed it to begin the process of national reconstruction. An important aspect of this process includes the return of uprooted Salvadorans to *repoblaciones*, or re-populated communities, in rural areas throughout the country. Utilizing Comunidad Rutilio Grande as a case study, this paper addresses three issues related to the process of national reconstruction. It considers the impact of the refugee experience in shaping the community organization of the *repoblación*. It focuses on the role of the international community in assisting redevelopment at the local level, a process which thus far is occurring within the framework of the country's active Popular Movement, and, finally, it identifies the processes by which the refugee communities establish linkages at the national and sub-national levels to overcome their geographic isolation.

Key words: *El Salvador, peace accords, repatriation, repopulated communities, rural development, Popular Movement.*

## INTRODUCTION

El Salvador's long civil war caused massive displacement of people in the country's rural areas in addition to more than 75,000 mostly civilian deaths. It rendered agricultural pursuits impossible in the many conflict zones, removing the basic source of sustenance for much of the population. In addition to the lack of personal security, the war-induced disruptions to the economy prompted many to flee their homes and regions. Most estimates indicate that more than 500,000 Salvadorans abandoned the country altogether, while a similar number were displaced internally. By removing some areas from agricultural production, the war also exacerbated the demand for agricultural land caused by continuing rural population growth in the face of already high densities and the lack of an agricultural frontier (Thomas and Hoy 1988, 39-40). The conflict further aggravated the country's substantial environmental problems, firmly linking them to its social conditions, while further reducing the quality of life and serving as another "push" factor out of rural areas (Hall and Faber 1989).

The peace accords signed on January 16, 1992 by the Government of El Salvador and the opposition Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) offered many Salvadorans hope that they could put the twelve-year civil war behind them and set about the arduous process of national reconstruction. The realization of the accords was made possible by the mediation efforts of former U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuellar and the changed global climate occasioned by the end of the Cold War (Acevedo 1992, 42-45). They were hailed by the FMLN as a "negotiated revolution" that would produce deep changes in Salvadoran society (Univisión 1992).

The accords include a very specific timetable, beginning with implementation of a cease fire on February 1, 1992, and a verification methodology under the auspices of the specially-created United Nations operation in El Salvador, ONUSAL. Other aspects of the peace accords address such issues as reducing the size of the nation's military forces and placing them under civilian authority, revamping the country's judicial system to remove it from military control, eliminating the police units believed to have been associated with the death squads, reconstituting the FMLN into a recognized political party, and pursuing development and reconstruction plans that are intended to remove the causal factors of future civil wars (*Acuerdo de Paz* 1992). It is those development and reconstruction plans that will achieve the "negotiated revolution," should they actually be implemented. They also constitute the dimension of the peace accords that is of greatest interest to this paper as they offer the possibility for many thousands of uprooted Salva [end p. 57] dorans to return to their homes in rural

communities throughout the country.<sup>1</sup>

The promise of peace and the longevity of the refugee experiences of those who fled--for up to ten years in many cases--inspired the beginnings of a return migration. As peace negotiations progressed, the number of returnees grew, giving rise to the term *re poblaciones*, connoting the fact that new communities were being established on the sites of former, now destroyed villages. Nearly 200 such communities now exist. They include an estimated 6,000-10,000 people. Many of those in the earliest wave of returnees were repatriated refugees from the camps in Honduras and, later, Nicaragua and elsewhere. They found that little awaited them upon their return; basic infrastructure, where it had existed, was often another casualty of the war.

This research focuses on the efforts of the *repatriados* (returnees) to reestablish their communities. It raises three issues in a preliminary manner. The first issue concerns how, if at all, the refugee experience affected the socioeconomic and spatial organization established by community members upon their return. Second, the role to be played by the international community in shaping and aiding redevelopment plans at the local level is addressed. Finally, and of greatest consequence, the question of how *re poblaciones* establish linkages of various kinds at the national and sub-national levels to overcome their geographic isolation is explored.

These issues are raised to stimulate discussion on the possibilities that they represent rather than to attempt to provide definitive answers. Additional research is clearly necessary but the effort will be well worth undertaking as the end of the Cold War renders possible the resolution of many civil wars in the developing world, of which EI Salvador is just one such conflict. These issues represent areas--refugee migration, failure to meet basic needs, environment and rural development--in which geographers can and should make contributions to enhance the possibility of post-war success.

### **COMUNIDAD RUTILIO GRANDE**

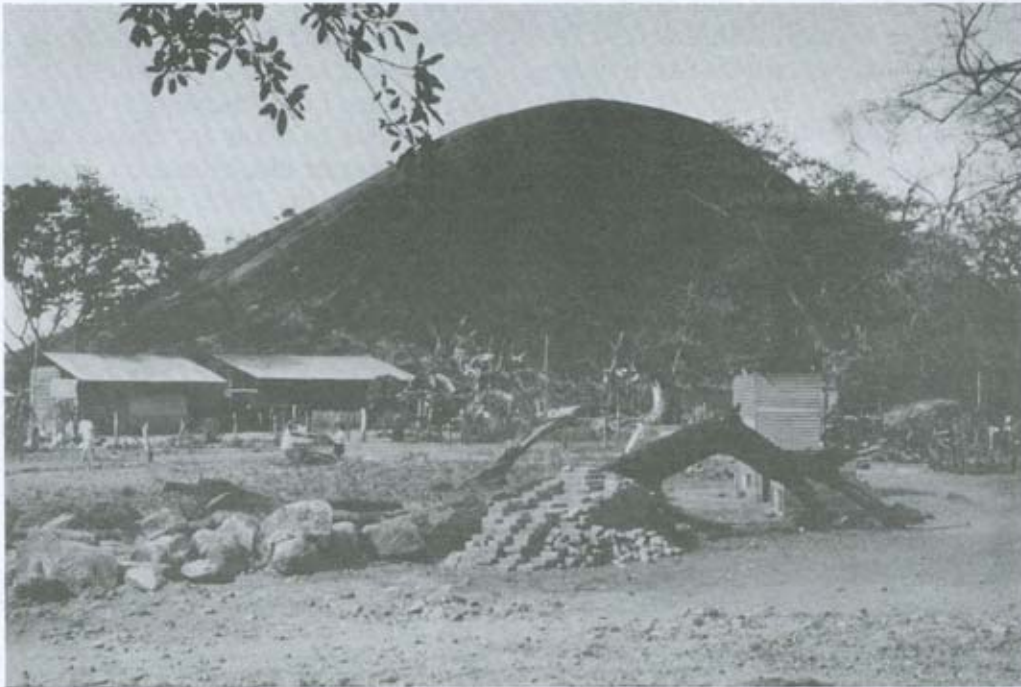
The Comunidad Rutilio Grande, one of many new *re poblaciones*, is named for a Roman Catholic priest who was murdered nearby, one of many civilian casualties of the civil war.<sup>2</sup> It is located in the northern part of San Salvador Department, west of Aguilares, from which it is separated by many miles of dirt roads. Refugees returning from Nicaragua established the community in March, 1991 and, as of March, 1992, it had 65 families (350 people), including 120 children under ten years of age (Figure 1). Originally, 85 families returned from Nicaragua; the other 20 left the community to live with relatives who offered support elsewhere in EI Salvador.<sup>3</sup>

The community was led by an elected seven-member *directiva* that included two women. A president coordinated *directiva* activities, assisted by a vice-president who also served as the region's liaison with CRIPDES, the Comité Cristiano Pro-Desplazados, a Salvadoran non-government organization (NGO) that works with the *re poblaciones* at the national level. Other members chaired committees including those for Discipline and Human Rights (a combination of activities also encountered in other communities visited), Health Promotion, Education, and Production, the latter charged with coordinating agricultural production. The seventh member served as treasurer.

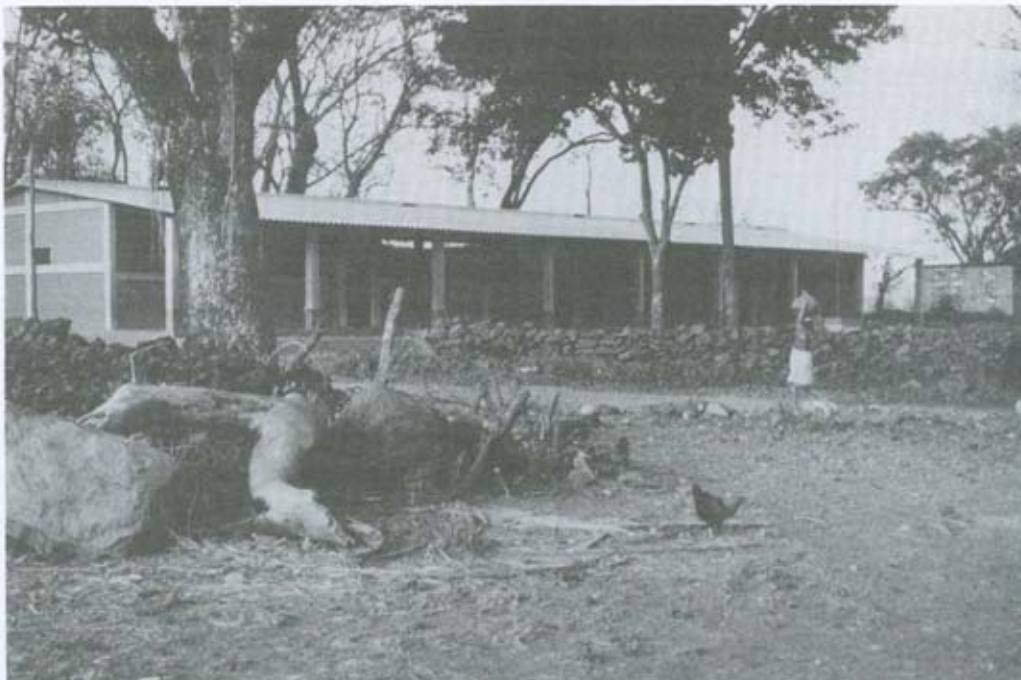
In 1992, the community included 150 *manzanas* (1 manzana = 0.7 ha) of property, much of it not suitable for cultivation. Since the refugees' return in March 1991, 30 manzanas of land were put into production to raise corn, rice, and some beans. With the advent of the 1992 rainy season, expansion of those three crops was anticipated, with the addition of tomatoes and soybeans. Other projects in the planning stage include cattle raising (a feed station has already been built), a pig farm, and a fruit orchard.

Many other accomplishments aside from production were quickly realized. In the area of health promotion, a program having roots in the community's Nicaragua experience, 25 people were undergoing training in San Salvador to work with preventive health care. The program was to include dental care. Medicine, though in short supply, was provided by the Salvadoran Catholic Church. People were already coming to Rutilio Grande from surrounding communities for medical attention from the *directiva* member charged with responsibility for health

promotion who, though not a doctor, had received some medical training while in Nicaragua. Respiratory problems were the most common illnesses reported, exacerbated by the dust from the country's pro **[end p. 58]**



**Figure 1.** The central plaza, Comunidad Rutilio Grande, northern San Salvador Department, El Salvador.



**Figure 2.** The new schoolhouse, Comunidad Rutilio Grande. The four-room building, the most substantial edifice in the community, was completed in December, 1991, only 9 months after the establishment of the *replaci3n*, indicating the great significance attached by community members to education.

[end p. 59]

longed dry season and by smoke from the burning of wood as fuel.

The community established education as an early priority. The school, completed in December, 1991 was the most substantial building in the village (Figure 2). It had one teacher provided by the national teachers' union, paid by the government. She helped six "popular teachers" who were trained by the Archdiocese. The school, which was attended by 110 students, including five from surrounding communities, offered classes through the sixth grade. Beyond the sixth grade, students were required to attend schools outside of the community, which involved great effort due to the relative isolation of the settlement.

Water was a persistent problem. During the dry season, people (usually women and girls) walked three km to carry water in jugs. A well was built but no pump had been acquired at the time of visitation, though funding for its acquisition was being sought. All work was communal. Together, community members constructed the 61 houses, the four-room school, and such other infrastructure as existed (Figure 3). Future projects were to include the construction of better housing, although the current stock represented an improvement over what initially was built. A child/day care center was also planned for children up to seven years of age. Other plans included an auto-mechanics school; purchase of additional land to accommodate an expanding population; a clinic, that would also be available to those in surrounding communities; a second school, to allow for classes up to the ninth grade; greater electrification, requested of the government (in 1992, a generator was in use only from 6 p.m. until 10 p.m.); and a water tank and distribution system to provide piped water directly into the houses.



**Figure 3.** Typical houses, Comunidad Rutilio Grande, northern San Salvador Department, El Salvador.

The impact of the community's refugee experience was evident in many ways. The great emphasis placed on education and health immediately following return reflected the people's desire to continue the progress made during the extended period in Nicaragua. Members of the *directiva* indicated that they had learned much about working better collectively and democratically to discuss and formulate new ideas. They also felt that they had

improved their administrative and organizational capacities in Nicaragua while others developed more applied kinds of skills like auto mechanics, machine repair, and tractor operation. As refugees, they had also formed a collective of Salvadoran refugees that implemented several projects while the group remained in Nicaragua [end p. 60]. These included a women's organization, a small Salvadoran restaurant, and a cattle ranch (CRG *Directiva* 1992). Similar feelings were expressed by repatriados in other repoblaciones that were visited (San Antonio los Ranchos in Chalatenango, Las Américas in Cuscatlán, and Ita- Maura in La Libertad) and by residents of the Comunidad Segundo Montes, as reported by Kagan and Kagan (1991). Overall, the refugee experience seems to have contributed to a sense of collective empowerment that provided the impetus for the settlement's desire to pursue its goals communally.

Aid is critical if the community's many plans are to be implemented. Members of the *directiva* stressed the importance of international assistance in achieving their goals, calling on "international aid in solidarity with the collective work of the community." Sources of funding to Comunidad Rutilio Grande included the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, the United States-El Salvador Sister Cities program, DIAKONIA (a Swedish NGO with a Salvadoran counterpart), the Roman Catholic Church, and the governments of Sweden, Spain, and Japan. Funds from the latter group were channeled through CIREFCA, the International Conference on Central American Refugees, which raised more than \$150 million for the region's refugees, repatriados, and internally displaced persons, beginning in May, 1989 (Wiley 1991, 197). Rutilio Grande's schoolhouse was constructed with funds from a variety of aid sources. The community has devised specific requests, such as the pump and water piping system, to encourage additional grants.

Funding, however, was not the only kind of aid of interest to the repoblaciones. An international presence has been established through repeated stops by representatives of IGOs and foreign NGOs, frequent post-cease fire appearances of ONUSAL personnel and, recently, visits by members of citizen "delegations" from First World countries, coordinated through such organizations as the United States-El Salvador Sister Cities program (Figure 4). The latter, founded in 1983, established bonds between individual rural Salvadoran communities and cities in North America and Europe. It actively encourages visits to sistered towns in El Salvador in addition to providing direct development aid and promoting educational programs about Salvadoran realities among citizens in the First World country (National Center for U.S.-El Salvador Sister Cities 1991).

Collectively, direct contact with foreign visitors served to bring substantial aid-in-kind, often hand-carried, into each repoblación but more importantly, it increased the people's sense of security while reducing their effective isolation. Visitors quickly realized that their presence was welcomed for more than the gifts they may have been bearing. Despite the ceasefire, substantial mistrust of the government remains among residents of the repoblaciones, whose initial flight had been, in essence, to escape the cross-fire effects of government counter-insurgency efforts. The company of foreigners was viewed as additional insurance that past atrocities would not be repeated.

The establishment of linkages at the national and sub-national levels was especially important if the economic and social viability of the repoblaciones is to be developed and maintained. In a climate of, at best, benign neglect from government agencies, these linkages were being forged by a complex system of national NGOs collectively known as the Movimiento Popular or Popular Movement.

The use of the term "popular" is frequent in local jargon and, in El Salvador at least, refers to almost anything that rises directly from the people and lacks formal connection to the state apparatus. "Popular" teachers are trained by "popular organizations" and teach in "popular schools" at the local level, although they may lack the credentials of formal, state-approved institutions. Similarly, many "popular health aides" followed a less formal path to their training. Encouraging signs were also evident in agriculture where environmentally sound training in organic farming methods was available to members of many repoblaciones through programs offered at La GECA in Chalatenango, an experimental agriculture school, and by FUNPROCOOP, a "popular" organization that provided administrative and technical support to cooperative societies (Cortés 1992).

The *directivas* at the local level worked with the various organizations of the Popular Movement. The appropriate member regularly interacted with representatives from each organization and may also have received training from them that would not be locally available. This did not always occur as a top-down process, as indicated by the situation involving human rights. A non-government Human Rights Commission exists in association with the Popular Movement. It was cooperating with ONUSAL in an attempt to reconstruct the events surrounding past violations in order to prepare cases for the Truth Commission, an entity established through the Peace Accords to investigate the worst atrocities committed by either side during the long civil war.<sup>4</sup> The *directiva* member responsible for human rights helped with these investigations at the local level, with assistance from other community members because of the volume of work involved in the task. This bond between grassroots and national-level activity enhanced local awareness of human rights issues, despite the relatively low educational levels of most rural Salvadorans. In Comunidad Rutilio Grande, more than 100 past violations involving events that led to people's initial flight from the region were under investigation, (CRG Directiva 1992).



**Figure 4.** The Sister Cities Summit took place March 22 and 23, 1992 on the campus of the University of El Salvador, San Salvador. It brought together approximately 300 participants from El Salvador, the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia in a celebration of international solidarity for peace.

El Salvador's Popular Movement has many organizations working at functional (education, health, displaced persons, cooperative societies, etc.) and spatial (national, regional and local) levels. Umbrella committees (*coordinadoras*) join many of the organizations together to coordinate efforts, share expertise, and raise funds. The two latter activities also link the Popular Movement in general to the international community, particularly in the fund-raising arena. As indigenous NGOs, the various groups involved with the Popular Movement provide the kind of low-overhead, rapid response, grassroots approach that international NGOs and lately, more First World governments, seek as the preferred channels for development aid (Bolling 1982, 189-92).

## CONCLUSIONS

El Salvador's *re poblaciones* represent a development-from-below approach toward resolving the serious lack of basic needs for a substantial number of rural Salvadorans. The negotiation of the peace accords allowed for a cease fire after twelve years of war and simultaneously created the space necessary for such a grassroots effort to progress. The failure of the accords would almost certainly preface the failure of the *re poblaciones* as well, since

most of them occupy territory in regions formerly under conflict between the warring parties. [end p. 62]

The right to occupy and use land in these formerly conflicted areas was an issue identified as a major stumbling block to the success of the accords during the early stages of their implementation, indicating the essential fragility of the peace process (Samoyoa 1992). Other impediments were enumerated by the FMLN in May, 1992 (FMLN 1992). The overall slow progress in implementation prompted high-level United Nations intervention in August, 1992 to breathe new life and flexibility into the process, particularly with regard to established deadline dates (Telemundo-CNN 1992). The March 1993 report of the Truth Commission represents only the latest in a series of potential deterrents to the maintenance of peace in the country.

With lasting peace, however, the opportunity for crisis resolution appears promising. Local community goals at Rutilio Grande and elsewhere are realistic and attainable if the obstacles the Peace Accords attempt to remove are actually overcome. Among these are land tenure and credit issues, and matters of political stability and human rights. There is considerable optimism expressed over the prospects for accomplishing these ends, including by many within the FMLN itself (Samoyoa 1992). Simultaneously, however, there remains substantial skepticism on Salvadoran streets, audible in casual conversations, particularly among the many with a well-established mistrust of the ARENA government.

Many of the necessary ingredients for lasting peace are in place. Locally, an organizational framework and democratic ethic carried forward from the refugee experience represents an advance over pre-flight forms of organization and sense of community. The strong individualism characteristic of many rural areas has not been cast aside; rather, a recognition of the benefits of communal effort and strength in numbers has taken its place alongside traditional rural independence.

Globally, bonds have been forged with an international community desirous of helping to achieve peace in El Salvador, as well as elsewhere in Central America. Provision of some resources, though not nearly enough, is underway, particularly from NGO sources. The international presence contributes to a sense of security and recognition. Additional research is needed to document that presence and gauge its impact, as well as to study North-South resource flows and their distribution patterns to individual *repoblaciones*.

The glue that will hold this entire process together is provided by the Popular Movement. Its national and regional structures allow for the distribution of scarce resources and dissemination of information and expertise while concurrently encouraging the upward flow of ideas and identification of needs. Without these domestic NGOs, the *repoblaciones* would be isolated to a degree much more in keeping with their geographic realities. They would lack access to information and material and, individually, would find it exceedingly difficult to bond with the international community.

The Popular Movement collectively represents the classic "middleman," yet this aspect of its being remains little studied, particularly by geographers. Most of the literature currently available about Latin American popular movements was written by sociologists and political scientists (see Foweraker 1990 and 1991, Frank and Fuentes 1991, Guido and Fernández 1991, Knight 1990, and Rubin 1990). They have focused on the changing nature of popular movements over time, their relationships with state apparatus, their social class composition, their crisis response mechanisms, or, occasionally on gender issues (see Stephen, 1992). While their contributions are very noteworthy, the spatial dimensions of Popular Movement activities require the special attention of geographers, especially those concerned with grassroots development in the Third World.

Study among countries has also varied, with some, including Mexico, receiving substantial attention while others, such as El Salvador, have largely been ignored. The political climate differs substantially among the region's states; this has likely affected relationships between states and Popular Movements and undoubtedly influenced the strategies, including spatial strategies, adopted by the latter. Mexico's popular organizations have long sought accommodation in a variety of ways with the durable PRI governments at national and sub-national levels as a means of achieving their goals (Foweraker 1990). The Salvadoran movement developed under vastly different

conditions and appears to maintain a higher degree of separateness from the state. How such differences have shaped the nature of the movement there, its operational methods, and its spatial characteristics merits additional research, the results of which may further illuminate the paths to success for the country's *re poblaciones*. [end p. 63]

## NOTES

1. As of March, 1993, when the final revisions for this article were prepared, El Salvador's peace process was continuing to progress despite numerous delays in the implementation of several of the accords. A number of controversial aspects remain unresolved. On March 15, 1993 the Truth Commission issued its long-awaited report on the major atrocities committed during the civil war and assessed responsibility for approximately 85 percent of them at the hands of the government. The country's legislative assembly quickly passed an amnesty law to prevent prosecution of those parties on both sides who were accused of war-related atrocities.
2. The author visited Comunidad Rutilio Grande in March, 1992, when the cease fire was in its seventh week. He accompanied a delegation from Long Island, New York that is "sistered" with the community through the SHARE Foundation's Sister City Program.
3. In Nicaragua, the refugees were dispersed among several projects that incorporated both Salvadoran refugees and Nicaraguan nationals. Most worked with the Omar Toreja agricultural project near León; others were with a restaurant project and a women's project. It is important to note that Nicaragua allowed freedom of movement to the refugees whom it hosted. Most spent at least five years in the country.
4. These efforts resulted in contributions to the report ultimately issued in March, 1993 by the Truth Commission.

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## Resumen

Los acuerdos de paz que firmaron el Gobierno de El Salvador y el Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) trajeron al país una temporada delicada de paz y lo permitió iniciar el proceso de reconstrucción nacional. Un aspecto muy importante de este proceso es la repatriación de salvadoreños exiliados a repoblaciones o comunidades repobla- [end p. 64] das en las zonas rurales del país. Este estudio utiliza la Comunidad Rutilio Grande como estudio de caso para discutir tres puntos importantes relacionados con el proceso de reconstrucción nacional. Primero, considera el impacto de las experiencias como refugiados de los repatriados en su capacidad de formar la organización comunal de la repoblación. Segundo, se enfoca en el papel de la comunidad internacional como fuente de ayuda para el redesarrollo al nivel local, un proceso que ocurre hasta el momento dentro del Movimiento Popular. Finalmente, identifica los procesos a través de los cuales las comunidades de refugiados establezcan relaciones con instituciones nacionales y subnacionales para superar los problemas de aislamiento geográfico.

Palabras claves: *acuerdos de paz, repatriación, repoblaciones, desarrollo rural, Movimiento Popular*. [end p.65]