

Gilma: *We don't feel very safe as young people to be out and about, to leave our homes, to involve ourselves in things.*

Because we don't know what will happen when we meet the police and authorities.

So, we have to be extra careful when we leave, we have to be extra thoughtful.

If we leave our homes, we have to leave with every identification document in order and ready to present calmly because yeah....

There's always a feeling of insecurity.

Meghan: *That was Gilma Johana Hernandez Rivera, translated by Steffy Martinez Reyes.*

At the end of last year I travelled to Guatemala and El Salvador to visit some MCC partners and projects.

I reached out to the MCC reps for the area to see what stories they wanted covered during our visit. And they said we needed to speak with youth in El Salvador about how they're being impacted by the State of Exception.

I'd never heard this term before, but soon learned that it's similar to a state of emergency.

It's a martial law that allows a country's leader to transcend the rule of law in the name of the "public good."

El Salvador has been dealing with a lot of gang violence over the past several decades.

Things came to a head just over a year ago when over 60 people were murdered by gangs in one day.

In response, the President announced the State of Exception.

While gang violence has quieted since then, another issue has arisen.

People are being arrested and taken away from their communities with no explanation or evidence. People have no recourse because the government is above the law.

The most impacted are the country's youth.

Today on the show, we hear from some young people in El Salvador. They share their struggles under the state of exception and what they're doing about it.

How they're fighting stereotypes and working to build community. MCC's local partners are supporting the youth as best they can.

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

MCC's partner A New Dawn Association in El Salvador (or ANADES) works with over 400 young people between the ages of 13 and 29 who live in the municipalities of San Julián, Cuisnahuat, and Mejicanos.

I met some of the young people they're working with—Gilma, Katia and Heider—and talked about how life has changed for them under the State of Exception.

Gilma: *There should be a difference, right? Because they're supposed to just take away the people who are gang members. But that's not necessarily true because we know that innocent people are getting swept up. So, we don't feel more secure.*

Now there's two threats. We don't know if something's gonna happen to us with the gangs that are still around or something's gonna happen to us with the authorities.

Katia: *Yeah, you'll see patrols coming up and down the road. And you know, you have to be really careful about how you're out and when you're done. We know young people who have been grabbed and taken by authorities. You know, it's tempting to say those people must have connections with gangs. But really, you're not sure and you don't know, right? And so you don't know if **you're** gonna be grabbed by someone from the government and you don't have the certainty to know that you can go out and about without feeling like you might get picked up because who you are and where you're at. And people say they feel a sense of peace and tranquility because there's not gang members out. But we feel as young people that's true, but there's the threat of arbitrary detention and being picked up for who we are, what we do and that sort of almost replaces one fear for the other.*

Meghan: *In this community, everyone knows someone who's been taken.*

Gilma: *There's a lot of people in my community taken away from their family members. I have relatives who have also been taken away and they're still incarcerated, they're still in prison up to this point.*

It's about the same for men and women. Same treatment, same suspicion, the same. They're checking everyone.

Meghan: *The suspicion is amplified for young people when they are gathered in groups.*

Heider: *People think that if we gather in groups of young people, we must be gang members. So having to deal with that stigma and dealing with that everywhere we went. And so we've done a lot of work on that since the beginning. We have done that with meetings with activities—doing things for the benefit of our community. Doing marches and protests to say, we're not in gangs.*

Gilma: *And so yeah, there's a lot of fear and a lot of nervousness about meeting together. Like, is it worth it?*

Meghan: *ANADES recognizes youth are facing stereotypes. So, they support young entrepreneurs by promoting social and economic initiatives. They provide relevant training. They encourage young people to engage in their communities with the hope this will combat stereotypes and encourage youth to get involved in municipal and national networks.*

Heider: *A lot of the activities we do here in ANADES are meetings and what we call convivencia in Spanish, activities of being together with other groups of collectives of youth from different parts of ANADES. We get together and we do trainings and we work together, figure out what each of us are going to do in the community, both as collectives and individuals.*

When we first started in this, I wasn't someone who would be able to talk in a group. And so, part of what I've really enjoyed about this whole process is I've learned how to speak for myself, and how to engage with others.

I've also really enjoyed the trainings. We had one about building small gardens. Another workshop I really enjoyed was learning how to do beekeeping and produce honey. And for me, that was amazing because we learned how to keep ourselves safe, how to take care of the bees and produce good honey and I really, really loved that. That training was really powerful for me.

Gilma: *I have a chicken farm where I raise little chickens to sell. That's my enterprise.*

Also, because of ANADES, I participate in a youth collective and in the local human rights committee for children and youth of San Julián.

Meghan: *Once the young people have done the training and begin growing their small businesses, it can be a challenge to get community buy in. Many people have stereotypes about youth, often assuming they're gang members.*

Heider: *Yeah, it was a real challenge for us. In part, we had to change the perspective of our community to us as youth in order to accomplish our goals.*

And so you know, it has gotten better. I think the work we have done has made people less suspicious of us. It's helped people have less stereotypes about us because of the work we have done. So they don't think certain ways about us because of the way we dress, or because we're young because the way we talk. And so we have been able to change how people think about us youth. No longer as a threat but as people who participate and show leadership in our country.

I think a lot of us have been able to find our voice and understand what kind of people we are and the kind of contribution we can make to our communities.

Katia: *So we started off working on trainings with ANADES and the first things we were working on was our own leadership and working together. We learned about the basic things we needed to run a good social enterprise. Everything from thinking about a needs assessment and also about administration, like when money came in, how to administrate that well how to like keep track of our expenses and our accounts and that was also really helpful for me in my own life.*

Meghan: *Young people work with ANADES to start small businesses. The work and additional income gives them some financial independence. Working in community gives them more confidence and helps break down stereotypes people have about youth.*

Order has been imposed on these young people in many different ways. And none of it has felt safe. I wanted to hear, what does community safety look like to them in an ideal world?

Heider: *I think an ideal community is one that cares for everyone in it. And so, when I think about that, I think one of the greatest changes I want is solving the problem of alcoholism in our community. People start drinking, sort of bathing their sorrows and dealing with their lives through alcohol. And also the machismo that takes violent root in households. So, the first thing I would change is to create a community that cares for everyone.*

Gilma: *For me, a safe community is one that is peaceful. We need a country that's at peace and safe with itself. We need to sort out the conflicts and all the things that are driving insecurity and instability.*

We need that to be solved at the national level because we can't just be in peace, just secure by ourselves and alone as a community. That needs to be something shared among other communities and at the national level as well.

Katia: *Community safety is wherever a community takes care of each other and everyone supports one another. Because when community aren't supporting each other, people suffer. Individuals suffer but also the community suffers as well too. And so for me a community that is safe and secure is a community where everyone is supporting and looking out for and taking care of each other.*

Meghan: *These young people have thought deeply about this. It was moving to hear their thoughts and take a moment to envision things were different. To imagine the kind of communities they would like to help build. The future of the state of exception in El Salvador is still uncertain, and there's a long way to go until the future the youth imagine can become a reality. But they're thankful for the support they've received to help make those dreams come closer to true.*

Gilma: *I want to say thank you to MCC for supporting these projects and our community. I think about how hard I'm working on my little chicken farm and how much that represents the future that we need in this country.*

Youth need opportunities so we don't have to migrate, we don't have to leave. Our businesses are connected with something social and that allows us to think about staying and we really want to stay and believe in staying. Thank you so much because it gives us a future that we can think about and that we can dream about.

Meghan: *That was Gilma Johana Hernandez Rivera, Heider Leonel Piñta Hernández and Katia Adamary Menjivar Pérez. Their accounts were narrated in English by Karla Vasquez, Cándida Estefanía Martínez Reyes and Gabriel Alejandro Valle Rodriguez.*

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)