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NEW LIFE COMES TO SALVADOREANS

By Leonard S. Kenworthy

(1,100 words)

NOTE: The writer, a member of the faculty at Brooklyn College, New York, served for some time on the Paris staff of UNESCO, and has written various books on international personalities and problems. His first-hand report is released by Worldover Press.

San Salvador.

What would life be like in a typical area of the world? Would the majority of people really be ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-clothed, illiterate, and ill? Could life be made genuinely better for them with a bit of help from the United Nations, the United States, or some group of interested private individuals?

These are questions I can answer at least partially after first-hand experiences in the Cuscatlan Valley Demonstration Project in El Salvador. This is the valley selected by the U.N. as one of three typical regions of the world --- the other two being in Egypt and India.

No one knows just how many people live in the Cuscatlan Valley, for statistics are not the long suit of the Salvadoreans. But it is estimated that there are over 100,000 persons in the 1313 square miles covered by this project. Most of them are young, very young. If the figures for Salvador as a whole apply to this area, and they doubtless do, 40 per cent are from 5 to 14 years of age, and only 4 per cent are over 60. The population is mestizo --- a mixture of whites and Indians, plus a few pure Indians.

Most of these people live in tiny one-room houses made of adobe or dried cornstalks, covered with grass or banana-leaf roofs. The floors are usually of hardened clay or mud. In addition to the family there are other occupants --- pigs, chickens, dogs or ducks. There is little ventilation, and toilets are non-existent. Water has to be brought from a considerable distance and is usually unsanitary. Household equipment is meager --- a table, a tiny stove on the floor, a shelf for food, a bench or stool, and possibly a rope bed or two which several persons share. At least this is the average home.

These people live chiefly on a diet of corn and beans and rice, with some local fruit, such as bananas, pineapples, and papayas. Meat is scarce and the few eggs are usually sold for cash. Milk is seldom seen. Doctors and nurses were practically not to be found before the U.N. came into this area. Only one town had a doctor and there was only one nutrition center in the entire project. There is still no hospital. The usual life expectancy is somewhere between 28 and 30 years.

There is work for most of the men on the coffee fincas and in the sugar cane fields, or in the small towns in cottage industries, small stores and shops. But wages are abysmally low --- from 40 to 80 cents a day. The soil was once rich and still is, in spots, but it has been pilfered and plundered. Trees have been cut and none planted. Transport is difficult, schools are scarce, illiteracy is perhaps as high as 80 per

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ent. Recreation is pretty much limited to fiestas or to the nearby canteen with its bright lights, juke box, and drinks. In the towns it is a little more abundant, with perhaps a movie showing third-rate films, and a poolroom. A grim picture of life in 1954? Yes, but it is the picture of a large proportion of the world's people.

Progress Arrives in the Valley

Fortunately there is another and far more important side to this story of a Salvadorean valley. It is a story of progress, fostered by the Salvador government, with aid from the U.N.

The Demonstration Area Project began in the fall of 1951 as an integrated effort on the part of the local government; the World Health Organization through its regional office, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau; the Food and Agriculture Organization; the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; the International Labor Organization; and the U.N. Children's Emergency Fund. On a wide front they are waging war against poverty, disease, undernourishment, and illiteracy; and for better health, better sanitation, better employment, better food, and better education.

One of their first battles was against a centuries-old enemy of Salvador --- malaria. In September of 1951 the W.H.O., UNICEF, and the Salvador government combined efforts and sprayed 20,000 houses with D.D.T. Six months later 19,000 houses were sprayed again, and in 1953 the same number were sprayed for a third time. This was done at a cost of only \$1.60 per house. Malaria has not disappeared, but the reduction in deaths has been spectacular.

Another battle was begun by the same forces in 1951 against tuberculosis. All told, 400,000 were tested and an extensive program of vaccination undertaken. The water supply was improved, but only through a slow procedure of education and cooperation with local citizens. When interest was aroused, machines and pipes were brought in for wells. Already eight water systems have been installed, and several wells dug. Within two months 300 latrines were built in towns, and teachers and pupils of 50 schools built outdoor toilets. The program will continue through the schools.

Four teams, each consisting of a doctor, a public health nurse, a health educator, and from two to four auxiliary nurses, all Salvadorians, started a widespread health survey, at first reaching 40,000 persons. Adequate data are now beginning to appear, on which to base more detailed future work. Experts from abroad have helped the Salvadoreans --- a Peruvian doctor, a Colombian sanitary engineer, an inspector from Puerto Rico, a statistician from Mexico. The over-all Director of the project is Dr. Juan Allwood Paredes, the Director of Public Health in El Salvador, a graduate of Johns Hopkins Medical School.

Since earthquakes have visited the region, better town planning and earthquake-resistant homes are being worked out in damaged sections. UNICEF has been carrying on a feeding in the schools, with the children helping to plan the meals, buy the food, keep accounts, prepare and serve meals --- to help them when they become adults.

In this area, as in large parts of the world, less than half the children ever attend school, and those who do, drop out, as a rule, at the end of the third grade. Hence UNESCO has a team of four specialists working in eight villages, concentrating for the moment on teachers' training, and on primary and adult education. The I.L.O. has been at work to provide a basis for better labor laws. But basically, the need is still for improved agriculture. That is where the F.A.O. comes in, so intensive surveys are being conducted in soil classification and in farm management.

People do not quickly change their ways, but all these projects are beginning to make a dent. It has been proved that life can be made better, and if that can be done here, it can be done elsewhere, too.