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Economic Impacts Emphasize Need for Greater Drought Planning and Management in El Salvador

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In terms of drought management and preparedness, El Salvador is one of the most underdeveloped countries. Although the direct and indirect effects of drought are often costly for the country, no official drought policy exists. One of the most important direct effects of drought is the loss of high percentages of basic grains (beans, corn, rice, and a type of sorghum called *maicillo*); these grains (except for *maicillo*) form the basic diet. Among the indirect effects of drought is the reduction of national production as an effect of electric power rationing due to drought and sabotage of the national electric system.

During the last 21 years, drought has involved the entire national territory at least four times (in 1972, 1976, 1987, and 1991). Losses of beans and *maicillo* reached their highest levels in 1987, when farmers lost 83.8% and 56.8%, respectively, of the total harvest of these two crops. Rice and corn losses were greatest in 1972—56.1% and 57.5%, respectively (see Table 1).

The 1991 drought caused several reductions in water levels at hydroelectric power plants, and the sabotage directed at the electric transmission system by the guerilla movement during the civil war brought about electrical rationing that lasted between four and six hours daily. Local industry resolved the situation by generating its own electric power—with an unavoidable cost increase—and/or adjusting labor hours to the time the electricity was delivered.

In the four drought cases, the loss of harvests affected agricultural prices, causing general price increases and worsening poverty. (The electrical crisis caused increases in electric tariffs, which also affected prices in general and caused increasing poverty.) Droughts must be evaluated not only for their effects on national production but also for their effects on the provision of basic needs. General price increases affect family budgets and cause poverty to increase.

According to official statistics, poverty affects about 70% of the population in urban areas. In 1988, about 50% of all families had energy deficits, and about 20% had low food supplies. Among children less than 5 years of age, 30% were affected by low growth rates and 15.2% suffered from malnutrition. Malnutrition affected about 50% of the population as a whole.

Drought preparedness in El Salvador is hindered not only by inappropriate agricultural techniques but also by the civil war. The weather forecasting system has lost 138 stations as a consequence of the civil war; at present, only 32 weather stations—down from 170 in 1975—are still functioning.

The typical official answer to the problems of drought preparedness is the creation of credit lines to finance the agricultural sector. Lamentably the global effect of this financing is not felt in agricultural production. Irrigation systems are not available for small farmers, and the government has declared that only a few areas of the country have the right conditions to receive irrigation projects.

The National Emergency Committee is charged with managing disasters, but up to this point, the Committee's efforts in preventing and managing droughts have been modest. Drought is not seen as an important disaster in El Salvador, probably because floods and earthquakes are the most important natural risks. Drought management and preparedness must be improved to prepare the Salvadorian economy for the development process. This process has implications for ecological systems, price stabilization, and poverty reduction.

	1972	%	1976	%	1987	%	1991	%
Corn	3055.90	57.50	2982.54	32.80	478.10	3.60	2673.70	20.30
Maicillo	851.00	27.30	107.54	15.60	2912.00	83.80	747.30	20.80
Beans	132.60	42.20	173.99	25.00	697.30	56.80	17.90	1.50
Rice	31.80	56.10	560.39	15.70	201.20	18.00	241.00	15.20

Table 1. Agricultural production losses caused by droughts, in millions of pounds. Compiled from reports of the Ministry of Agriculture, El Salvador.