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## Money From Salvadoran Immigrants Aids Farming Cooperative Back Home

By Krissah Williams  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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SAN PEDRO MASAHUAT, El Salvador -- Marta Sonia Ayala hunched over a metal table in a room that resembles a large restaurant kitchen, scooping heaps of a light brown powder into plastic bags. Later, she placed the bags of *frijolito* -- beans ground into flour -- in a heat-sealing machine, placed colored labels on them and shipped them to 22 stores throughout the country where they would sell for \$1.35 a pound.

At the end of the month, Ayala and 47 other workers will each collect about \$120 for their work. "Now I have my salary secure," Ayala said. In this rural town, few people earn steady paychecks.

Ayala's job is part of an experiment in changing how Salvadoran immigrants in the United States help people back in El Salvador. The intent is to redirect some of the estimated \$2 billion that Salvadorans abroad send home each year -- with less going to such things as clothing, home improvements and soccer fields and more going to support businesses that can create jobs.

"Our country is now surviving because all the families are just waiting for money, and I hate to say it but [many] of these people don't work. We need to change that. The people who are sending this money are in my generation. The younger generation is not going to do that," said Elmer Arias, a Northern Virginia restaurant owner and president of the Cuscatlan Latino Center, a group that has donated \$10,000 to the cooperative here.

"We need to invest this money in a more productive way," Arias said.

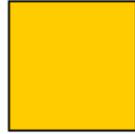
Arias said the Cuscatlan Latino Center, an Arlington-based alliance of 10 Salvadoran immigrant groups known as hometown associations, is planning to expand into other kinds of businesses, including, perhaps, a bakery and a chicken farm in El Salvador. It is also trying to persuade Salvadoran groups in Los Angeles and Las Vegas to participate in similar projects.

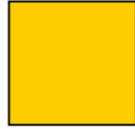
The group got involved with the co-op here after being approached by the Pan-American Development Foundation, a Washington-based nonprofit group founded in 1962 by the Organization of American States.

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The foundation was asking hometown associations to join its economic development efforts in El Salvador. After unsuccessfully trying to interest groups in Los Angeles, which has the largest community of Salvadorans in the United States, it turned to the Washington region, which has the second-largest.

Some groups were skeptical, said Amy Coughenour-Betancourt, the foundation's deputy director. "There is an emotional side to giving. There is something extremely satisfying about building a soccer field for your community and buying uniforms and awarding a trophy."

"Giving long-term isn't as immediately satisfying. This project is a test," she said.

The foundation's idea resonated with Arias, community activist José Ramos and others in Northern Virginia. In January 2003, they formed the Cuscatlan Latino Center to partner with the Pan-American Development Foundation.

To find someone to manage the project, Arias called a cousin living in El Salvador who had worked on development projects. She referred Arias to CONFRAS, a federation of Salvadoran farming cooperatives that represents 11,000 farmers.

Rural cooperatives -- groups of farmers that collectively plant, harvest and divide the sales of their crops -- are an important part of El Salvador's agricultural industry and date to the country's agricultural reform in 1980. That year, wealthy landowners were forced to divest part of their holdings and rural farmers formed cooperatives to work the land they were given. Today, there are about 2,000 cooperatives in El Salvador.

Many of the farmers live in poverty despite their landholdings because they do not have the machinery or other resources necessary to produce and market their products in mass quantities.

CONFRAS donated 20 acres of land here and agreed to manage the plant at no cost. The organization's officials helped set up the operation and hired people to train the workers. Its officials visit the plant on weekends. J. Francisco Ramos, manager of CONFRAS, said the group agreed to participate because it thought the project would demonstrate what its workers could do if they can get money to buy the right equipment.

"They can process the food they produce, [but] it is not easy because it requires technology," Ramos said. Forty-eight CONFRAS members who live near the project were selected by the cooperative to participate.

The foundation contributed \$50,000 from a U.S. Agency for International Development grant it received to promote small businesses in Latin America. The Cuscatlan Latino Center donated \$10,000, half of which came from fundraising parties and raffles and the other half from a group of Washington area beer distributors.

About \$15,000 was used to install an irrigation system and \$20,000 to buy machines needed to cook, grind and package the food, according to the Pan-American

Development Foundation's Remittance Outreach Coordinator Dale Crowell. Another \$20,000 was spent on people hired to teach the 48 workers how to raise organic crops.

The cooperative also spent about \$5,000 on brochures, marketing and a poll of Salvadorans living in the United States to find out which items they would buy. The cooperative hopes to one day export products here. At the top of the list was loroco, a white flower that is a popular ingredient in pupusas, the traditional Salvadoran tortilla dish stuffed with cheese, beans and other fillings.

The processing plant's sales for its first year will reach about \$42,400, almost enough to cover the worker's salaries, according to CONFRAS. The Cuscatlan Latino Center plans to raise \$15,000 more for the plant to pay continuing operating costs and to buy equipment. The foundation does not plan to contribute more. The goal is for the cooperative to be profitable on its own.

The cooperative planted its first crops in March. Already the 20 acres are filled with plantains, passion fruit, hibiscus, cucumbers, lemon and coconut trees and, of course, loroco vines.

On a recent Saturday morning, a man in his 60s hauled a brown basket full of cucumbers grown on the farm to a shade tree, where he and two women washed them. Another man sold lemon trees from a nursery full of flowering plants. A farmer walked along, inspecting the crops. He stopped at the loroco vines, explaining that the crop is valuable because it is hard to cultivate and must be stretched across stakes.

At the end of a rocky driveway, near the nursery, sits a three-room concrete building. The largest room is for washing, cutting and cooking the vegetables and fruit. Two large metal tables sit in the center of the room. An industrialized sink and oven sit against a wall. The machine used to grind corn into meal and rice into flour is in one corner.

A second room is an office with two desks and two phones. The third is a store for walk-in customers who want to buy jams and jellies made from the fruits grown on the farm.

Ayala and another worker stood in the processing room, packing the *frijolito*. She pointed proudly to a wire rack holding packaged rice flour and the flour made from the starchy yucca plant. Both sell for about \$1.50 a pound.

"We are moving forward. Our lives have changed with the support of our friends in the United States," Ayala said during a break, as she sat in a lawn chair in front of the plant, swatting at a fly. Her long black hair was pinned in a bun and her flowered skirt draped over her knees. She was selected to work at the co-op because she is a community leader. She works 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., with an hour lunch break.

Ayala, who is 55 and has eight children, said that 15 years ago her husband caught a fever and died. She picked cotton and harvested chilis, tomatoes and onions in the local farmers market to help support her family. Most days, her income was less than a dollar a day. Four of her children got jobs in a T-shirt factory, making \$5 a day. Another got a job

driving a bus. All completed the ninth grade. Ayala could not afford to spend the \$30 a month it costs to send children to high school.

Her youngest children, who are 15, 16 and 17, still live with her. Her 17-year-old daughter is about to complete the ninth grade and has started pleading with her.

" 'Mama, I want to study,' she says. I am thinking how I am going to do it," Ayala said. "This job has helped me a lot because I have a way to send my children to school."

*A Spanish-language version of this report is being published in El Tiempo Latino.*

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