



Parents, children and teachers gather in San Salvador to view the products included in the School Package for 2012.

CREDIT: SALVADORAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

School shoes for all

When classes resumed after the Easter holidays on April 12, around 1.3 million children in El Salvador went back to school with a special spring in their step. Each had received a pair of new school shoes, made locally by skilled footwear manufacturers from high-quality materials, as part of a state package to help struggling families.

After a successful launch of the concept in 2010 and 2011, the Salvadoran government decided to repeat the School Package project this year. It offered a collection of clothing and materials, as well as the shoes, entirely free of charge to all children attending state-run centres of education between the stages of pre-school and ninth grade.

In 2004, the government began working on a new national education plan, laying out what changes it wanted to make by 2021, the year in which the Central American country will celebrate the bi-centenary of its independence from Spain. In the most recent Education Index that the United Nations publishes, based on adult literacy rates and the proportion of children attending school, El Salvador's position is disappointing, 115 out of 179 countries and the government is determined to make progress. It quickly

The government in El Salvador has included well made leather shoes in a package of goods it has put together to encourage children to attend school.

came to the conclusion that the only way to make the plan work was to encourage families to send their children to school and the aim of the School Package is to help parents do this without suffering too painful an impact on tight family budgets. Each package contains two uniforms for each child, writing materials and, of course, shoes and is calculated to be worth around \$50 per student.

Help for families

A woman from the town of San Esteban Catarina, in the department of San Vicente in central El Salvador, Clara Luz Cornejo, has spoken to the country's ministry of education about the difference the initiative has made. As well as her own four children, Ms Cornejo is also responsible for making sure four of her own younger siblings and three nephews



The government has spent a total of \$75 million to provide children in state schools with uniforms, shoes and equipment free of charge. CREDIT: SALVADORAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

and nieces make it to school on time and looking presentable; eleven children in all. "Our work is on the land," she said, "and we have always worked hard. Sometimes, when we have a bad winter, the crops (corn and beans) are no use and we lose a lot, but we have always done whatever we could to make sure the children had what they needed for school. Just for my own four children, it was easily a couple of hundred dollars for shoes, uniforms and exercise books. So I think the School Package idea is a great help."

Where the money goes

With a total investment of \$75 million, another aspect of the schools initiative is that local manufacturing firms should benefit if possible. The spend breaks down as \$18.6 million in fabric for the uniforms, \$24.1 million for finished garment manufacture, \$9.5 million for equipment for children to use in the classroom and \$18.5 million for shoes. An order of

1.3 million pairs of leather shoes for schoolchildren has certainly been a fillip to footwear manufacturers across the country. Government figures say more than 5,000 businesses have been involved in putting the 2012 package together, but that more than 70% of these are artisans, craftspeople who work in their homes using traditional methods and materials. More than 1,300 of them are micro-enterprises, 141 are small businesses and only medium-sized manufacturers. Around 240 of the businesses involved are footwear manufacturers, spread throughout El Salvador; they will share the \$18.5 million that the education ministry has devoted to shoes out of the overall School Package budget.

Shoe businesses saved

One of the footwear manufacturers involved, Gustavo Romero, has gone so far as to say that the school shoes project has saved his business. "We had a business model that, for a variety of reasons, was finished," he told Salvadoran media at the end of the 2012 programme. "So we set up an association of 142 small and micro-enterprises, and there are now 10 others who want to join us."

Mr Romero went on to say that the education ministry had provided valuable support to help these small players work their way through the administrative process that is required for participating companies. "We've been given the role of delivering the shoes to schools in parts of El Salvador that are hard to reach," the footwear manufacturer continued, "and there are now 88 different schools that we are contracted to work with. We've been able to offer work to young people who were unemployed and there are now 35 people working in our factory."

Work for skilled craftsmen and women, the creation of employment for young people and good quality shoes on the feet of children from poor families combine to make this idea seem like money very well spent. ☺



More than 200 footwear manufacturers across the country, mostly small companies, shared the responsibility for making 1.3 million pairs of children's shoes for the project this year. CREDIT: SALVADORAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION