EL SALVADOR
Territorial community teams
Acknowledgements

This document was produced as part of the Technical series on primary health care on the occasion of the Global Conference on Primary Health Care under the overall direction of the Global Conference Coordination Team, led by Ed Kelley (WHO headquarters), Hans Kluge (WHO Regional Office for Europe) and Vidhya Ganesh (UNICEF). Overall technical management for the Series was provided by Shannon Barkley (Department of Service Delivery and Safety, WHO headquarters) in collaboration with Pavlos Theodorakis (Department of Health Systems and Public Health, WHO Regional Office for Europe).

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Valuable comments and suggestions to the first draft were made by WHO collaborating partners and regional and country office staff, in particular Hernan Luque, Regional Advisor for Organization and Management of Health Services, WHO Regional Office for the Americas; Hilda Leal, Health System and Services Advisor, WHO Country Office, El Salvador; Daniel Gallego, Traditional and Integrative Medicine, Consultant, WHO Regional Office for the Americas; and Luke Allen, WHO primary care consultant.

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily represent the opinions of the individuals mentioned here or their affiliated institutions.
Background

El Salvador is a Central American country of about 21,000 km²; in 2015, it had a population of 6.4 million inhabitants (giving a population density of about 300 inhabitants/km²). Administratively, the country is divided into 14 departments and 262 municipalities. In 2015, urban dwellers made up 62.4% of the population, life expectancy was 73 years and the Human Development Index was 0.666.

In 2009, the total number of first-level health care facilities was 377 health units, and most of the communities in the poorest municipalities received basic care packages through outsourced services supplied by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In response to this situation, the government undertook a national investigation and analysis of access gaps, the results of which led to the reorientation of the health system towards primary health care (PHC), through a model based on family and community health. The new model included a strong presence of first-level-of-care health services, organized in health networks.
Intervention

The new health care model and expansion of the first level of care

In undertaking the health reform, the national authorities established eight strategic axes, one of which was the Integrated Health Services Delivery Networks (1). To strengthen, expand and bring the first level of care closer to the population, the health authorities prioritized the 100 poorest municipalities (2). Family Community Health Teams (‘ECoS F’, or Equipos Comunitarios de Salud Familiares) were created and distributed strategically, and became the cornerstone of the service network. Each ECoS F team comprised a medical doctor (general practitioner), a professional nurse, a nursing technician and three health promoters. These teams were responsible for an average of 600 families in rural areas, and for 1800 families in urban areas.

The new model was implemented in stages, with priority being given to the poorest and most marginal municipalities, and with careful human resources planning for the gradual deployment of the ECoS F.

In addition, for health promotion and disease prevention, Specialized Community Health Teams (ECoS E, or ECoS Especializados) were created as part of the second level of care. These teams comprise a pediatrician, an obstetrician-gynaecologist, an internal medicine specialist, a physiotherapist, a health educator, a nutritionist, a psychologist, a nurse, a nursing assistant, clinical laboratory professionals and dentists. Each ECoS E serves an average of 30 000 inhabitants in rural areas and 42 000 inhabitants in urban settings, and their services complement those of the local hospital.

At the first level of care, the ECoS F characterize the assigned population and geographical area of responsibility (e.g. villages, cantons and municipalities, as appropriate). They visit families and complete the relevant forms for each family. Based on the analysis of the information obtained from the family forms and the assessment of the participating community, the ECoS F team carries out the characterization and “dispensarization” of people, based on their level of health risk and their social determinants (3). The Spanish term “dispensarización” has no obvious equivalent in English. It refers to a proactive
programme that provides active, continuous and controlled PHC in line with the health needs of the individual and the family; monitoring of the programme and its effects; and assessment of results. These elements are used to plan interventions (including health promotion) throughout the life-course, taking into account the PHC pillars of intersectoral action, social participation and equity. The interventions at the first level of care comprise about 300 health actions, grouped into health promotion and education, preventive care, care for prevalent diseases and community-based rehabilitation.

As part of the strengthening of this first level of care, the 377 health units in 2009 were increased to 752 Community Health Units (UCSF) in 2017, with the UCSF categorized into 420 basic, 293 intermediate and 39 specialized units. There are 537 ECoS F teams and 39 ECoS E teams, caring for more than 1.5 million people (408 662 families) in 186 municipalities (70.9% of the country’s territory). The covered municipalities include 100 that are part of the Rural Solidarity Communities Program (a social programme that assists families in extreme poverty), 14 that are part of the Urban Solidarity Communities Program (a national programme that aims to provide an integral approach to addressing and improving the conditions of human poverty, habitability and social exclusion in precarious urban settlements) and 50 that are part of the Territories of Progress Program (which currently constitutes 29 territories covering 207 of the 262 existing municipalities in the country – a population of at least 3.2 million people) (4).

Table 1. Coverage and change over time: ECoS, UCSF and human resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First level of care</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipalities with ECoS</td>
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<td>164</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People covered by ECoS</td>
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<td>1 897 078</td>
<td>1 921 891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families cared for by ECoS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>378 068</td>
<td>378 325</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECoS F</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>537</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECoS E</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCSF</td>
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<td>708</td>
<td>713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized UCSF</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human resources for health</td>
<td>7724</td>
<td>10 718</td>
<td>12 669</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ECoS E: Specialized Community Health Team; ECoS F: Family Community Health Team; UCSF: Family Community Health Unit.
Source: Ministry of Health.
Key elements of reform

Human resources for the first level of care

Another essential element was the allocation and distribution of health human resources in the first level of care. To continue making significant progress in the allocation and distribution of human resources, the hiring of health professionals increased. Despite not meeting the established goal of 25 health workers per 10,000 inhabitants by 2015, in comparison with the 2010 baseline, several departments had tripled their health human resources in terms of absolute numbers; these departments included La Unión, Morazán, Cabañas and Chalatenango. Yet these departments still face the challenge of continuing to improve the equitable distribution of health personnel in the areas of medicine, nursing, and maternal and child health (5).

The government has promoted an intense process of training in PHC and family health (including for PHC managers). All training has been implemented in a decentralized way, and has led to the development of new competencies in all of the ECoS F team members. A combination of conceptual content, and methodological and operational tools has allowed the teams to develop a new vision of individual and collective health, facilitating the implementation of the health care model.
Incorporation of ICT in the first level of care

Strengthening the first level of care required the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT) in health, as part of the work process of the ECoS F teams. Each team was equipped with a tablet per area of affiliation; also, a mobile application (app) was created that allows the data-entry and updating of family forms. This technology makes it possible to develop georeferenced maps with all the necessary information to facilitate the work of ECoS F personnel in local communities. For example, it allows users to generate specific maps of populations of interest by age, sex and health status (e.g. pregnant women, and people with diabetes, hypertension or chronic kidney disease), as shown in Fig. 1.

These maps facilitate the characterization and analysis of the population for which the ECoS F is responsible, the dispensarization and follow-up of patients, the development of intervention plans, the estimation of service demands, and the timely coordination of actions with other providers within the service network.

Fig. 1. Example of a community risk characterization map (using the family file and georeferencing system)

Source: Information Technology and Communications Division, Ministry of Health.

The information updated on the tablets is uploaded periodically for backup and consolidation at the regional and national levels, through a network of points that provide wireless access to the institutional intranet.¹ This ready availability of information has enabled timely, almost real-time, decision-making that takes into consideration the characteristics of the social determinants of health for the population, as well as the specific needs of the allocation and distribution of human resources for health, supplies and medicines in the first level of care.

This app was developed by the staff of the Health Ministry’s ICT Directorate, using fully open access software, and the app has been made available under the same terms (6).

¹ As of June 2018, information on the family record had been updated in 90.77% of the families via the tablets distributed; the updating will be completed before the end of the year.
Enabling factors and barriers that were overcome

Several related initiatives have enabled the advances described here. These initiatives include policy strategies such as the strengthening of health infrastructure (with an investment of US$ 401 million in 401 health facilities) and investments on several fronts, including equipment for the entire Health Ministry’s service network, supply of medicines, a unique health information system and health surveillance.

The National Health Forum (7) is a right-to-health social movement created with the goal of supporting the health reform process through community participation. The forum helps to ensure social accountability, and participates in the managing committees of the health services networks.

At the beginning of the reform period (2009–2014), the Government invested heavily to strengthen the first level of care. After 2014, the budget was limited due to both a fiscal crisis (which decreased the flow of resources) and political polarization (which made it impossible to allocate the necessary budget increase to expand the initiative).

Another barrier to implementation was violence in urban areas, which caused high staff rotation at the first level of care. The provision of services was disrupted by threats and violent acts targeting health staff and the local population; these acts included blockages of health facilities, physical attacks, sexual abuse and even murders. Phenomena such as invisible urban borders were common, which affected access to health services. For example, people living in gang-controlled areas often could not access health services that were located in an area controlled by a rival gang.
Impact

Significant advances in health are evident, eight years after the initial implementation of the health reforms. The maternal mortality ratio was reduced from 51 deaths per 100 000 live births in 2009 to 42.3 in 2015 and 27.4 in 2016 (8), as shown in Fig. 2. Authorities attributed this reduction to the application of strategic interventions such as the elimination of direct out-of-pocket payments for care and geographical barriers, the establishment and increased availability of ECoS F in impoverished areas (particularly in rural ones), the expansion of the health services network, and greater access to qualified health personnel.

Fig. 2. Reduction in maternal mortality ratio (per 100 000 live births), El Salvador, 2010–2015

References


COUNTRY CASE STUDIES ON PRIMARY HEALTH CARE