

El Salvador: the road from national nutrition strategy to local implementation



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This article draws on the findings from stakeholder interviews carried out in El Salvador as part of an in-depth country review ('Deep Dive') to support the mid-term review of the SUN Movement. The final report will be available on the SUN Movement website shortly.

Box 1 El Salvador's policies, strategies and programmes that prioritise food security and nutrition

- 2011: National Policy for Food Security and Nutrition (2011–2015)
- 2012: Strategic Plan for National Policy for Food Security and Nutrition (2013–2016)
- 2013: Adoption of Breast-feeding Act; National Policy for the Promotion, Support and Protection of Breast-Feeding
- Plan for the Reduction of Micronutrient Deficiencies and a Strategy for the Treatment of Child Malnutrition in the country's 100 poorest municipalities
- Education and social communication strategy for behaviour change
- Plan for family farming and rural entrepreneurship for food and nutrition security
- 2017: Regulation of healthy food in school canteens
- 2017: Launch of Observatory for Surveillance, Early Warning, Monitoring & Evaluation of Food Security and Nutrition
- 2018: National Policy for Food Security and Nutrition (2018–2028)



Fabricio Gabriel enjoys a meal made by his mother, a beneficiary of a resilience programme, at their home in Calavera, El Salvador

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Introduction

Bordering Guatemala and Honduras, El Salvador is the smallest and most densely-populated country in central America, with a population of 6.4 million. The country has low economic growth (2.3%) and high and rising public debt (70% of gross domestic product or GDP): 29% of the population still live in poverty (based on a USD5.5 per person per day poverty line)¹.

In terms of development, the country has made progress towards consolidating democracy and peace since the end of the civil war in 1992 and in advancing human-development outcomes, mainly through the expansion of access to healthcare and education. However, poverty and inequality, coupled with extremely high levels of violence and ensuing insecurity (El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in the world) still drive thousands of people to leave each year. Recurrent droughts, increasing over time, also limit development and have had disastrous consequences on the basic production of maize and beans among smallholder farmers.

Rise of overweight and obesity

Over the past decade, El Salvador has made steady progress in reducing food insecurity and malnutrition, with the prevalence of stunting in children under five years old (CU5) decreasing from 19% to 14% between 2008 and 2014². Although prevalence of wasting in CU5 remains low at 2%, there has been an increase in CU5 overweight (6%)². Moreover, the adult population also face a malnutrition burden: 23% of women of reproductive age have anaemia and 29% of women and 19% of men have obesity, with associated increase in nutrition-related non-communicable chronic diseases such as diabetes². In 2017, the cost of the double burden of malnutrition was estimated at USD2.5 billion, equivalent to 10% of GDP³.

El Salvador and the SUN Movement

The country joined the SUN Movement in September 2012 with a letter of commitment from the Ministry of Health and the Director of the National Council for Food Security and Nutrition (CONASAN). The Council has gradually gained convening powers with different government institutions and with non-government stakeholders (UN agencies, donors and

¹ www.worldbank.org/en/country/elsalvador/overview

² <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/latin-america-and-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/#profile>

³ <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2017-cost-double-burden-malnutrition-social-and-economic-impact> <https://es.wfp.org/publicaciones/el-costo-de-la-doble-carga-de-la-malnutricion-el-salvador>



A family shares a nutritious meal of chicken soup; however, rural poverty in El Salvador often results in lack of dietary diversity.

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civil society organisations). In 2014, the then newly-elected government ratified and approved the Food Security and Nutrition Policy and Strategic Plan, strengthening CONASAN and its technical arm, the Technical Committee for Food Security and Nutrition, to oversee implementation of the policy and operationalisation of the strategic plan during the 2014–2019 period.

Prioritising municipalities with a high double burden

The country has made significant progress in reducing stunting, as a result of the Food Security and Nutrition Policy. However, the 2016 *National Census of Weight and Size in First Year Scholars (aged 6–9 years old)* revealed that 31% were obese and overweight (obesity was 14% and overweight was 17%) and 9% were stunted in this age-group. The results of the census were crucial for defining programmes and interventions as municipalities with a high double burden were prioritised for implementation after 2017. The expansion of the strategy and implementation model has been reshaped since then, taking into consideration the new data on stunting and obesity and overweight for each municipality.

CONASAN began implementing the National Strategic Plan (2013–2016) at the departmental level. The objective was to develop multi-sector and multi-stakeholder platforms at government sub-

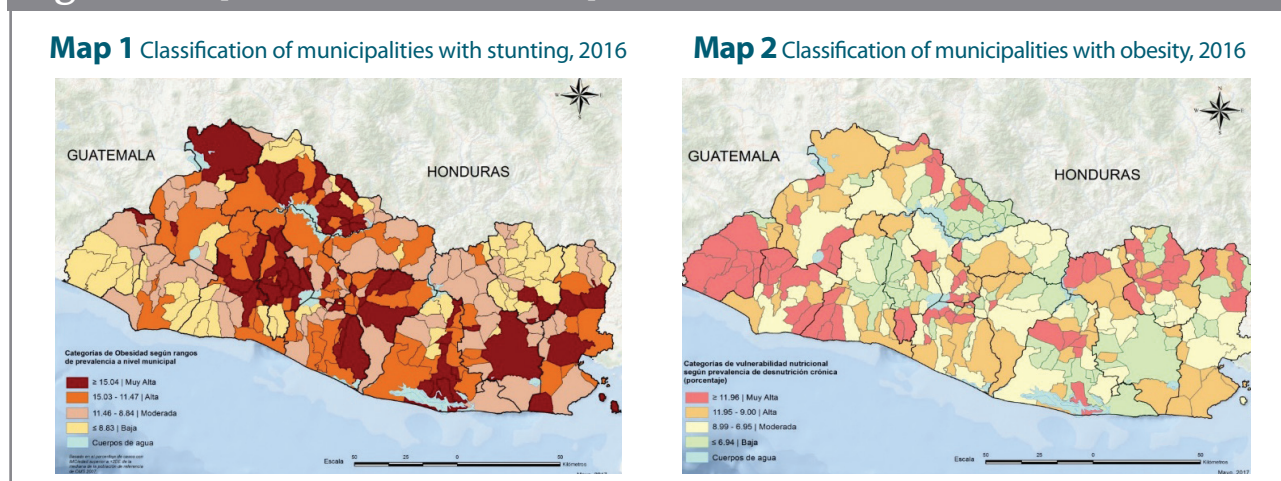
national levels (departmental and municipal) for the execution of sub-national plans by replicating the national model.

Sub-national implementation

In 2014 CONASAN launched the first departmental nutrition council (CODESAN) and five municipal nutrition councils (COMUSAN) in areas with a high prevalence of stunting in school-aged children.

The CODESAN, an example of multi-sector and multi-stakeholder collaboration, is formed by the local governor and stakeholders from Basic Health Service Units, agriculture and education departments, other governmental institutions, Women's Development Institute, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the church and farmers' associations. The main council functions are to design and implement a costed nutrition plan based on a situational analysis, raising awareness of the importance of nutrition, implementing the plan, monitoring and evaluation and finally, validating the list of beneficiary families for the programme activities. A pilot for the first municipal multi-sector nutrition action plan took place in Chalatenango Department, which was then tailored in terms of specific actions in other departments (see Figure 2). Since 2014, CODESANs have been rolled out in seven departments (representing half of all the country's departments). Depending on the Department/Municipality

Figure 1 Maps used to determine municipalities with double burden



Source: National Census of Weight and Size in first year scholars (2016) www.conasan.gov.sv/11-05-2017/conasan-resumen-de-resultados-iv-censo-nacional-de-peso-en-escolares-de-primer-grado-de-el-salvador-mayo-2016/

and the results of the census, they decide whether to apply double burden interventions or not. Similarly, COMUSAN is formed by municipal hall, central and departmental government representatives, community stakeholders, local NGOs, the church, women and farmers' associations and all implementing actors. NGO nutrition activities within the Departmental and Municipal Food and Nutrition Security Strategic Plan must be registered at municipal and departmental level. Monitoring and evaluation procedures are in place for registering nutrition interventions and beneficiaries, providing a single record across sectors of all household members. COMUSAN has utilised this data to develop a mapping system for monitoring families vulnerable to food or nutrition insecurity, establishing a registration monitoring tool for more efficient use of resources among service providers.

Key factors for success and lessons learned

A number of factors were identified by sub-national stakeholders as contributing to strengthening nutrition at the local level; in particular the development of the COMUSAN and design of an operational plan with interventions and a clear monitoring and evaluation plan; the implementation of a local registration and information system; and the costing of the investment required for its development and sustainability. A clear mandate for a participatory planning process at the sub-national level facilitated stakeholder alignment behind a

set of common results through ownership, with the national leadership of the SUN Focal Point. Furthermore, shared co-responsibility between government and NGO stakeholders, including local leaders, also created accountability mechanisms and helped maintain commitments during changes in government.

Among the lessons learned from this implementation strategy were the importance of the convening power of CONASAN throughout the process, as well as continued political support from the national executive level.

Remaining challenges

Challenges for the future lie in involving more relevant stakeholders, such as the private sector, due to the lack of legal frameworks that would enforce participation; development of mechanisms to coordinate sectors at different levels; and lack of financial resources from national to local levels that would strengthen the sub-national platforms, as well as technical units to support implementation of local nutrition plans.

The development of multi-sector and multi-stakeholder local platforms for food security and nutrition for efficient implementation, together with the generation of nutrition data, monitoring systems, as well as community empowerment and sensitisation, remain a long-term investment for the country and those communities in need that are facing multiple forms of malnutrition in El Salvador.

Figure 2 Municipal action plan for Las Vueltas, Chalatenango

