

Cash Transfers and Social Protection



**Interview with Carolina Avalos, Executive Director of the Solidarity Network
(Red Solidaria) in El Salvador***

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IPC: How did the idea of the Solidarity Network (*Red Solidaria*) come up in El Salvador? And, what are the main differences or similarities between this program and other comparable programs that are being implemented in Latin America?

Carolina Avalos: The conceptual and technical design of the Solidarity Network, as well as its implementation, developed as a result of the commitment of the President of El Salvador. In his speech of June 1st 2004, the President emphasized the importance of assisting the poorest and most vulnerable families through a social safety net. Between the end of 2004 and the beginning of 2005 we started the conceptual design of the program with the National Social Coordination and the Technical Secretariat of the Presidency. The program was then launched in March 2005. What does it have in common with other cash transfer programs being implemented in Latin America? First of all, it is a conditional cash transfer (which is the technically adopted name), so, as different programs applied in other countries, it addresses monetary transfers to beneficiary families. We call them “education stipends” and “health and nutrition stipends” and they make up the first component of our strategic action. This component also includes an important element of family support and follow-up at the local level. For this, local NGOs are contracted and they have to hire local promoters from that area. By doing so, we enhance the confidence of beneficiary families and establish a closer bond between them and the program. Besides monitoring the program’s co-responsibilities, together with FISDL (the Social Investment Fund for Local Development, which is the program’s implementing agency), the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Health, the NGOs offer a set of training activities to beneficiary families. These activities are a sort of informal lifelong learning session. Workshops are organized once a month and the beneficiary families are trained in various topics, such as: child labour, community participation and organisation, children’s health, safe food handling, domestic violence, etc.

There are two other components that support our strategic action. The first component, which is similar to those present in other conditional cash transfer programs, aims at increasing the demand for social services. The second component seeks to improve the supply of education and health services, as well as basic infrastructure, such as the improvement and rehabilitation of schools, health centres, and access to water, basic sanitation and electricity. It is in parallel with component 1 according to a scheme of priority interventions and to the

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availability of financial resources for investments. The third component, even though we are talking about a social program, contains a productive element that is directly implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture. It includes productive projects that focus on food security and micro credit for the families of those municipalities that are part of our action plan.

IPC: What were the main obstacles faced in the implementation of the Solidarity Network? How were they overcome?

C.A.: First of all, FISDL (the social investment fund) coordinated the preparation of a poverty map, which expanded household surveys to achieve representativeness of data at the municipal level. The poverty map includes the 262 Salvadoran municipalities and was developed by FLACSO (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences). FLACSO applied a cluster analysis methodology with two indicators, income poverty and stunting among first-grade students, to classify municipalities into four categories: severe, high, moderate and extreme poverty. The first two comprise the target for the Solidarity Network. To rank municipalities in each category, there is also an Integrated Index of Municipal Marginality (IIMM), which takes different dimensions into account, such as the poverty gap and unsatisfied basic needs in education and housing. This information allows us to order municipalities and ensure transparency since we target our actions according to this index. This is very important because being discretionary in the intervention could have been a problem, but the poverty map allowed us to organize our action plan with objectivity and transparency. This is one of the main points of the program: geographical targeting. Moreover, with the technical assistance of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, we developed a registry system of beneficiaries in the Social Investment Fund and also designed all the processes linked to component 1 of the program, which include cartographic work in targeted municipalities, a census of potential beneficiaries, digital data entry, quality control, etc. Each one of these steps experienced a trial and fine-tuning process. We planned our program to start with 15 municipalities in 2005. In that year we carried out a pilot project in six of them, which allowed us to test our instruments and monitor the results achieved. We were able to improve all the instruments and processes used because we did not start working with 40,000 or 20,000 households from the beginning. On the contrary, we started little by little in order to test and improve our instruments. For instance, the first census was completely contracted out to external institutions. As a result, monitoring and supervising its application was rather complex. Based on this experience, the Social Investment Fund decided to hire researchers and supervise the process directly for the following censuses. A job fair was organized and people with previous experience in surveys and data collection

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were hired. With that, we could improve the quality of the census from the beginning. This means that the program is flexible and that it can be modified according to the results obtained, the instruments used and the experience acquired. Another example is the NGO for family support and follow-up. Just after the initial field work, we concluded that they needed more training time. With this experience, we could change their terms of reference for the following year, since we work with yearly contracts. In addition, we have systematic feedback activities that make improvements possible. There are feedback workshops with field workers, local FISDL advisors, employees of NGOs for family support and follow-up. These feedback workshops are held regularly, which allows us to improve our work continuously.

IPC: What are the challenges still faced by the Solidarity Network? What are its future prospects, being such a new program?

C.A.: The program is quite recent, but I think it can set a precedent for the future application of targeting methods, inter-sectoral work and coordinated action to avoid fragmentation and achieve greater impacts. It has a multiplier effect because it aggregates many interventions over the same geographical area and encourages the creation of a permanent culture of monitoring and impact evaluation, not only for this program but for all social programs that will be implemented afterwards. As for future prospects, one of our medium-term goals is to design and consolidate a poverty-oriented social policy that has a wider approach and that considers other aspects so as to ensure continuity and sustainability in the actions targeted to the poorest and most vulnerable population in El Salvador.

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