

National Policy to Support Early Childhood Development in El Salvador

Country: El Salvador

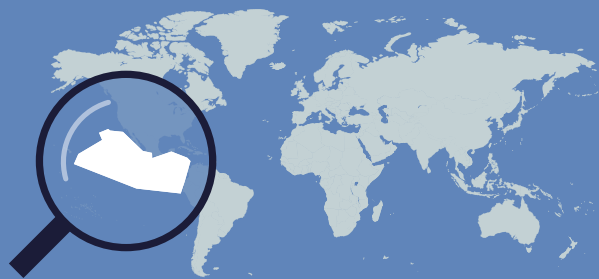
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Topics: Nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive.
Social mobilization, advocacy and communication

Sub-topics: Engaging nutrition champions to position nutrition as a priority at all levels
Early Childhood Development



Overview



The National Policy to Support Early Childhood Development, *Crecer Juntos* (Growing Together), is a holistic and intersectoral national public policy aimed at ensuring that all Salvadoran children reach their maximum development potential during early childhood.

The policy emerged in 2019 as the State's response to the challenge of guaranteeing the necessary conditions to provide children with quality services appropriate to their specific needs on a rights-based approach, a multidimensional vision of development, and the shared responsibility of all sectors in the provision of care, stimulation, education, health, nutrition, protective environments for their rights and special protection.

The policy groups its main interventions by life stage in comprehensive early childhood care packages distributed across four axes:

1. health and nutrition
2. education and care
3. protective environments
4. protection of rights

In this way, integral growth and development can be covered through the articulation of each stage of a child's development to prevent poverty, violence, inequality and lack of opportunities and innovation.

In addition, the *Crecer Juntos* act for the Comprehensive Protection of Early Childhood, Childhood and Adolescence was approved in June 2022, and the law will come into force in January 2023. Child-related institutions will then allocate a budget for programmes to serve, care for and protect early childhood.



Objectives of the action brief

The focus of the interventions is to achieve the following development outcome: “By 2030, the proportion of children aged 0–7 with age-appropriate early childhood development will have increased from 81 per cent to 83 per cent in El Salvador.”

Each of the policy axes has an expected outcome in 2030:

1. Health and nutrition: Reduce the proportion of children with neurodevelopmental disorders.
2. Education and care: Reduce the proportion of children with developmental disabilities.
3. Protective environments: Facilitate access to public spaces for recreation and/or sports and cultural activities.
4. Protection of rights: Increase the number of children protected from situations that threaten or violate their rights.



Period covered

The Office of the First Lady of the Republic took the lead in coordinating inter-institutional efforts aimed at promoting early childhood development. Various State institutions supported a multidisciplinary team that formed part of the coordination forum known as the *Crecer Juntos* Intersectoral Technical Committee for Early Childhood, responsible for defining the route for the formulation of this policy.

The process of building the *Crecer Juntos* policy received technical assistance from the World Bank, the European Union, the Inter-American Development Bank and the United Nations Children’s Fund.

To achieve the expected results, *Crecer Juntos* defined three implementation phases to be developed during 2020–2030:

1. Generation of conditions from the national to the local level (2020)
2. Implementation of the *Crecer Juntos* management model in 96 prioritized municipalities (2021–2026)
3. Progressive implementation in the rest of the municipalities (2027–2030)

The building of this policy came in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, with the *Crecer Juntos* policy taking an intersectoral approach to establishing actions aimed at containing and monitoring the effects of the pandemic on the health of the population, especially among those in early childhood.





What action was taken?

Investment in early childhood has one of the highest returns in terms of economic investment, as medium- and long-term investment results in better physical and emotional health, greater opportunities for learning and school success, strengthened parenting practices among families, better intra-family relationships, and the construction of safe and protective environments.

This is critical to breaking the cycle of poverty in El Salvador and enabling Salvadoran children to reach their full development potential. More than 45 per cent of these children live in multidimensional poverty, more than 40 per cent in overcrowded households, and more than 80 per cent in high-risk areas. Changing this reality requires significant investment, political will and commitment from all actors in society.

In the process of implementing the *Crecer Juntos* policy, the First Lady of the Republic, Gabriela de Bukele, has introduced important changes in the public health, education and culture systems and child protection institutions through various programmes to improve the care provided by the State to children from early childhood through adolescence, along with their families.

The target population of the policy includes children 0–7 years of age, which represents approximately 12.5 per cent of the population of El Salvador – a total of more than 800,000 children. Nationwide, policy beneficiaries include children, their families, their communities, and other actors within the multidimensional context of childhood.

Through three new laws, the strengthening of the regulatory framework helps guarantee the sustainability of the *Crecer Juntos* policy:

- The *Nacer con Cariño* (Born with Love) act for respectful childbirth and sensitive, loving care for newborns. This act also encourages, supports and protects breastfeeding as a main action to guarantee the food and nutrition security of babies.
- The *Crecer Juntos* act for the comprehensive protection of early childhood, childhood and adolescence. This act seeks to guarantee the exercise and full enjoyment of the rights of every child and adolescent from early childhood, including the right to a dignified life, so that all children and adolescents can enjoy “balanced food and nutrition sufficient for their optimal growth and development.”

- The *Amor Convertido en Alimento* (Love Made Food) act for the promotion, protection and support of breastfeeding. This guarantees the right of all children to be breastfed from the first hour of life, exclusively for the first six months, and complementarily for up to 2 years of age or more. Breastfeeding is one of the food and nutrition security strategies proposed due to its benefits for the baby, the mother and her family, ranging from good nutrition, bonding and household budget savings.

The policy management model is structured on the basis of a dynamic interplay among the regulatory framework, participation mechanisms, the organisation of territorial structures, the management of incentives and the generation of information.

The model is organized in tiers consisting of coordination structures with specific roles and attributions, as well as consultative mechanisms to support implementation within three tiers:

1. Strategic level: national
2. Tactical coordination level: departmental
3. Territorial operational level: local/municipal

Crecer Juntos is a national agreement that makes it possible to strengthen the installed capacity of all State institutions that will implement actions.

Some of the sources of funding that have been considered are:

- state revenue
- external debt





- social development projects through cooperation, partnerships and alliances with civil society, international cooperation and the private sector

Although the formal impact assessment of *Crecer Juntos* will be carried out at the end of the policy's implementation in 2030, process evaluations have identified many positive impacts, including:

- Public awareness has been increased regarding the relevance of the results of the early childhood policy.
- The regulatory framework has been strengthened with the three new laws.
- Since the *Nacer con Cariño* act came into force in 2021, there have been encouraging results; according to health records, 89 per cent of newborns started drinking their mother's milk during the first hour of life.
- There has been positive inter-institutional and intersectoral coordination achieved by the technical roundtable and the governance model of the policy. With the implementation of the *Crecer Juntos* policy, Government institutions are working together with the support of international organizations.
- Changes have been made in the way education, health and early childhood, childhood, and adolescent care services are provided through the training of public servants. A network of teachers, judges, antenatal educators, breastfeeding counsellors and other staff with up-to-date knowledge is now in place.
- Progress has been made in achieving key results and indicators, such as reducing child mortality, increasing

early education coverage, reducing the digital divide, strengthening professional skills, etc.

- The Government has provided the necessary tools and resources to the ministries of Education, Health and Culture and child protection institutions to ensure increased coverage of early childhood centres and nurseries.

The policy has helped improve the lives of children and families through innovation. To mention a few:

- Harnessing the power of technology and digital innovation for lifelong learning through the pandemic created a resilient education system and narrowed the access gap among the most vulnerable.
- The transformation of the maternal and child health system has not only increased health indicators, but it also has fostered parenting skills and strengthened family relationships, affective bonds and the emotional well-being of both babies and families.

Among the conditions necessary for successful replication are collaboration among all sectors and actors and a strong political will to prioritize early childhood as the best strategy to promote the country's human capital.

For the Government, investment in childhood is necessary. For decades, early childhood was not a priority; however, for President Nayib Bukele and the First Lady, the transformation of the children's care system is being consolidated as programmes and projects for the benefit of this sector advance, in order to ensure a better future for children.





What would the country do differently?

When the current leaders took office, the main challenges for the implementation of the policy were to establish the mechanisms for coordination and multilevel linkages and to establish processes for accountability and social control, as there was a vacuum in this aspect in relation to previous administrations.

To address these challenges, the heads of institutions worked to prioritize the actions needed to ensure that every child reaches his or her full developmental potential.

The issues and the approach were articulated with representatives of public and private sectors, civil

organizations and academia, among others, for the elaboration and implementation of the policy. Cross-sectoral coordination was addressed through the creation of a multisectoral technical roundtable, an open consultation process from the early stages of policy design that fosters ownership among all actors.

An essential element in achieving the objectives is vocational training. For this reason, various strategic and operative instances were identified and a group of policy managers was formed. These *Crecer Juntos* managers are on the ground every day to make the policy a reality.



Adaptation and applicability

El Salvador assumed its role as guarantor of children's rights through the creation of the *Crecer Juntos* policy and law, which allocates the means and resources for the provision of services that will accompany the life trajectory of children in the country.

The alliance among State, family and society is fundamental to promoting *Crecer Juntos* and is based on the inclusive vision that "every boy counts and every girl matters," that all children have rights, and

that scientific evidence is relevant in decision-making.

Guaranteeing the economic livelihood of families; eliminating restrictions in the supply of services; improving household capacities to face crises; reducing possible educational and technological gaps; strengthening new modalities to promote early childhood development; and guaranteeing quality attention related to care, learning, health, nutrition, and protection of children 0–7 years of age constitute





a priority and a shared responsibility among the State, the family and society.

Overall, the legal framework for early childhood has been strengthened to ensure that the services and care proposed by the National Policy to Support Early Childhood Development are provided and that they reach every child and are sustained over time. Three new laws are included in the El Salvador legal framework: the *Nacer con Cariño* (Born with Love) act, the *Crecer Juntos* (Growing Together) act, and the *Amor Convertido en Alimento* (Love Made Food) act.

Several lessons were learned throughout this process:

→ The answers often come from within, and understanding your beneficiaries can lead to strategic and efficient solutions.

→ Investing in early childhood is among the most effective strategies for creating an equitable and prosperous society.

→ Flexible system management can translate into resilient actions.

→ A collaborative process increases efficiency, productivity, purpose and overall impact.

→ The necessary conditions for successful replication include a strong political will to prioritize early childhood – understanding it as the best strategy to promote a country’s human capital – and collaborative work among all sectors and actors.



Next steps

By 2023, the development of a training master plan will continue, aiming to level and standardize the knowledge and competencies of all professionals in state institutions related to the policy. More than 200,000 professionals in the public and private sector who work in early childhood, childhood and adolescent education are being trained. This training was begun with early childhood teachers, inspiring them to rediscover their vocation, because there is no education without love. Police, armed forces, judges, health personnel, mayors, governors, public prosecutors, local rights committees, and arts and sports educators, among others, also are currently being trained. Training is compulsory, free of charge and offered both in person and online.

The law approved in June 2022 implies a new institutional framework:

→ The National Council for Early Childhood, Childhood and Adolescence

→ The new *Crecer Juntos* Institute for Comprehensive Early Childhood Care

→ The early childhood care centres (*Centros de Atención a Primera Infancia*) will provide an academic programme for preschool and nursery education based on the developmental stimuli that children need, regardless of their place of residence or their circumstances. Currently 97 per cent of Salvadoran children have no access.

→ In addition, the Unique Identification Number will be implemented from birth for better control of children’s health.

→ New courts specialized in early childhood, childhood and adolescence will be incorporated into the justice system.

→ The School Meals Act will be reformed.



Further information

Crecer Juntos website:

 <https://crecerjuntos.gob.sv>

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