

A Wake up Call for El Salvador

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When it comes to health indicators in El Salvador, good news is hard to find. The country lags behind high-achieving Costa Rica and blends in with the rest of the Central American nations. For example, the life expectancy of Salvadoran men is nine years fewer than Costa Rican males, partly on account of a significant rise in cases of heart disease and type II diabetes. Effectively treating such medical conditions in the general population often proves to be prohibitively expensive for a small and poor country like El Salvador. Without enacting drastic policy changes, the situation could reach epidemic proportions.

Poor diet can at least partially explain this public health threat – simply put, Salvadorans are eating more fast food and exercising less, a proven formula for development of chronic diseases and other serious health problems. Medical researchers have determined that obese people cut eight years from their life expectancy, and type II diabetes costs seven years. Individuals with both conditions will likely lose about 11 years from their projected lifespan. In the absence of a concerted, government-led effort to encourage healthier eating habits, El Salvador may find itself in a similar situation to Arabian Gulf countries where one out of four male adults already has type II diabetes.

The spread of obesity and diabetes is exacerbated by the relatively inexpensive and now widely available fast food operators that have invaded El Salvador. It is a challenge to drive in San Salvador, the nation's capital, and not see fast food restaurants enticing people to consume less nutritious, high-calorie foods that are gradually endangering their health. Like the citizens of other nations, Salvadorans are now exposed to a wide variety of imported media, with a disproportionately large segment disseminated from the United States. Not surprisingly, social researchers have found that the consumption of imported fast food products provides instant gratification, along with a perception of assimilating “cool” aspects of Western culture.

How can a small Central American nation protect itself from health challenges that threaten its national security from within? El Salvador must look to preventative medicine as the foundation upon which a more effective public health system can be built. Currently, as in many countries (including the US), many Salvadorans seek medical care only when they are sick. Often they wait too long, and the expense of treating chronic and debilitating diseases drains the scarce resources available. It is far cheaper, for example, to treat an individual who has hypertension than to delay treatment until he or she has developed serious heart problems. It follows that principles of disease prevention should be applied to addressing public health challenges.

For starters, El Salvador should promote policies encouraging citizens to consume a healthy diet. It is estimated that 20% of the country's female citizens are overweight. The Pan American Health Organization predicts a shocking 144% increase in the incidence of type II diabetes by 2025. The nation clearly has a health crisis in its future— along with the fiscal costs that will inevitably accompany such a situation.

El Salvador could also emulate its regional neighbor, Costa Rica, which has invested in preventative medicine on the community level and has worthy results to show for it. At the local level, Costa Ricans are encouraged to establish ongoing relationships with community health centers to address their ongoing health needs. Meticulous records are kept that allow health practitioners to monitor and treat patients before they become seriously ill. Pregnant women are expected to have routine medical and prenatal exams, and, upon delivering, their infants are monitored and treated accordingly. When a medical condition requires additional essential or specialized treatment in a major medical center, the community health practitioners almost always initiate a transfer.

Costa Rica, too, is beset by the proliferation of fast food restaurants and the resulting increases in rates of obesity and type II diabetes, but its long experience as a practicing advocate of preventative medicine gives it crucial experience in addressing such challenges. El Salvador must be proactive and aggressive in formulating policies to combat these public health threats. Working closely with FUSADES in San Salvador, one of the most respected think tanks in Central America, the government should enact programs that will educate the public on the benefits of a healthy, balanced diet and the serious consequences of poor nutrition. In addition, the government should consider imposing health taxes on fast food products and use the revenues to finance the educational initiatives. Many countries have imposed such taxes on tobacco products because of their impact on public health. Fast food is potentially just as dangerous to the well being of consumers and should be approached in a similar way.

This is a wakeup call to El Salvador. The time to act is now.

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