

# Lessons from the American “Tom Thumb”: How social movements defended the right to health in El Salvador

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*What would happen if we organized ourselves, confronting our oppressors without arms, without words? Thousands – no – millions of eyes just staring at them. No chants. No clapping. No smiles. No pat on the back. No political songs. No singing at all. I don't know, but I ask myself, what would happen?*

– Mario Benedetti

Social movements in the defense of human rights have a long and important history. Since the days of the conquest, human rights have been central to Latin American demands. Looking back, one might even say that the struggle for human rights lies at the core of Latin American history. This makes it essential for us to understand the history of prior social movements that have either assured the fulfillment of human rights or – at least – prevented their violation. With respect to health, Latin America offers a variety of experiences showing how social mobilization can assist in creating health policies and health care systems that guarantee the right to health.

This article describes the journey that El Salvador (America's “Tom Thumb”) began in the late 1990s. A broad coalition of social movements, community groups, unions, and citizens blocked reforms designed to privatize Salvadoran public health services. They also advanced a participative

agenda to establish a national health system and promote pro-health social policies. Without question, this experience has much to teach us about the struggle for health rights in Latin America. One key lesson is that social organizations and movements can protect health rights while also promoting initiatives that change policy, systems, and institutions in a way that protects the universal right to health.

## **The context of social movements: The 1990s garage sale**

The 1980s in Latin America was a decade of social movements. The political strength of popular, rural, women's, union, indigenous, student, and youth groups grew. The process of political organization, community work, and social mobilization challenged not just the political institutions but also the development models, big capital, and the ways of thinking and values that sustain social injustice. People began to look at the Latin American reality with an eye toward ensuring social equity, acknowledging differences, and improving quality of life. Research was undertaken into health conditions, communication, education, popular culture, economics, and alternative models of development. Environmental studies made their first appearance. This intellectual activity was inspired by a desire to transform the quality of life, the asymmetries of power, and the social inequities that denied human rights. These movements developed a variety of

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strategies: demonstrations and citizen protests incorporating civil disobedience, the creation of autonomous and self-governing communities, community work, popular education, and neighborhood organization.

Some turned to armed insurrection with varying results. After a bloody war, armed struggle in Nicaragua brought the Sandinistas to power. In El Salvador, it led to a national uprising led by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) took over unoccupied land and created agricultural communities that are home today to almost two million people. Others chose to abandon their arms and to work for negotiated reforms of the political system that would incorporate the middle class sectors into the power structure. This was the case with the M-19 movement in Colombia.

The fight for equity and human rights challenged existing economic interests, and big capital did not take long to react. The IMF and World Bank showed up with the series of regulations, recommendations, and obligations that came to be known as the Washington Consensus. They pressured the countries and governments of Latin America to launch counter-measures designed either to defeat the movements or to coopt them in such a way as to weaken the movements while legitimating the framework of liberal democracy. They made use of international mediation in national conflicts, direct political negotiation, political reforms, repression, or dirty wars. These dirty wars were fought by specially-created armed groups such as the Contras in Nicaragua and paramilitary groups in El Salvador; both would later on end up collaborating with criminal gangs (*maras*).

The destruction of progressive social forces took place alongside the institution of neoliberal economic reforms. These included promotion of the free market, more "flexible" labor laws, public service privatization, and the weakening of the state. These measures sought the end of the protectionist state and the establishment of free competition. This model was implemented during the presidencies of Fernando Cardozo (Brazil), Calderón Sol and Paco Flores (El Salvador), Alberto Fujimori (Peru), and Cesar Gaviria (Colombia).

As a result of this counter-offensive, the 1990s was a decade of negotiation, national dialogue, and compromise. But all the while neoliberal measures and reforms were being implemented. During the 1990s, certain Latin American governments strengthened reforms of national health systems that were designed to privatize public hospitals, dismantle primary health care, reduce public budgets, and establish insurance systems as the sole way to access health rights. However, new social movements were also emerging. Neoliberal reforms were fought and various alternative policies developed.

### **Social movements against the privatization of health care in El Salvador**

After an intense military confrontation in 1992, the Salvadoran government started a peace process with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). This was undertaken with promises to promote democracy, to allow the participation of the FMLN as a political party, to institute political changes, to convoke a constituent assembly to reform the Constitution, to develop national policy with a special focus on human rights, and to introduce economic and social programs to reduce poverty and inequity.

During the presidency of Armando Calderón Sol (1994-1999), a series of privatizations were undertaken as part of a program to modernize the state. The popular movement did not oppose these measures in a unified way. Things were different however, in 1999, when the right-wing ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista) government of Paco Flores (1999-2004) reintroduced a proposal to restructure the hospital and primary healthcare systems and to initiate the privatization of the public health system; these initiatives were pushed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. However, this time the power balance shifted somewhat in favor of the popular movement and the resistance to free market policies.

The restructuring was focused on outsourcing the medical services (via third-party contracts) previously provided by the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS). The ISSS doctors' union (SIMETRIS) had been opposing these measures since 1998 when it struck for better salaries and the right

to participate in the restructuring process. The ISSS workers' union (STISSS) joined the doctors and together they launched a national campaign against health privatization.

The campaign initiated by the doctors brought together anti-privatization organizations that had been created during earlier struggles. These included the Integrated Labor Organizations Movement (MOLI), a coalition of more than 12 public sector unions; the Salvadoran Workers' Union Central (CSTS) with seven union federations, three confederations, and 37 labor organizations made up of the construction, informal, and *maquila* (assembly industry) sectors; and the Labor and Social Coalition (CLS). The CLS was a coalition of workers and municipal organizations that brought together civil society to oppose privatization, state repression, and laws promoting labor flexibility; it also supported an increase in the minimum wage. MOLI and CLS represented a broad range of groups including municipal employees and teacher unions, as well as non-union organizations (students, rural associations, and grassroots community associations).

The Civil Society Forum's NGO coordination group joined the coalition, as did the Tri-Partite Commission. This latter organization was formed in 1998 to defend public health and was composed of SIMETRISSS, the doctors employed in the public hospitals (MSPAS/AMENA), and the professional association of Salvadoran doctors (Colegio Médico). The doctors and health workers took advantage of this newly created network of civil associations to launch two of the most important strikes in the history of El Salvador and one of the longest anti-privatization campaigns in Latin America.

The first workers' strike against health privatization began in November 1999 and lasted until March 2000. Dozens of marches and massive rallies were organized in the major cities; more than 50,000 people participated in some of these actions. People came from all parts of the country, including the rural areas of Chalatenango and Bajo Lempa. Public sector unions organized nearly a dozen solidarity strikes. The NGOs formed an *ad hoc* body made up of some 30 NGOs and the Civil Society Movement Against Privatization (MSCCP) in order to support the health workers' strike. This massive

public support for the anti-privatization movement forced the government to give in and negotiate with STISSS and SIMETRISSS.

But by mid-2002, the ARENA government – in association with the Private Business Association (ANEP) – once again tried to outsource ISSS's medical services. This provoked a longer strike, which lasted from September 2002 until June 2003. The new strike was again supported by a network of community and political organizations. The Civil Society Forum and the Citizens' Alliance Against Privatization were joined by other NGOs including women's groups, unions, rural cooperatives, and students. These groups played a major role in the mobilization of a wide range of sectors that were against privatization. They blockaded the country's major highways and held numerous rallies, some of which involved more than 200,000 people (for example, the famous "white protests").

The FMLN supported the protests and mobilized the party's rank-and-file, elected officials, Congressional representatives and mayors, and its media channels. The party's most important action was the introduction of a law that would ban privatization.

The second strike forced the government, once again, to end its efforts to outsource medical services in the ISSS.

### **Changing the guard in El Salvador**

In 2004 and 2008 the FMLN received electoral support from community organizations organized into coalitions. Ultimately, this led to the 2009 election of Mauricio Funes, the FMLN candidate, as President of El Salvador. The new left-wing government began to implement the social initiatives that had been promised during the campaign. One of these was the National Health Forum, a mechanism for social participation. In 2010 the government held public forums in five regions around the country with the goal of developing a new public health system that would cover more of the country's population.

Because of the support provided by community movements during the anti-privatization campaigns, these movements were now chosen to organize the public forums in collaboration with the Department of Public Health and Social Security (MSPAS). The

forums accomplished several things. The health budget grew from 2.2% to 5% of GDP. The new system was designed to address social determinants of health, to look at health in a holistic manner, to guarantee the right to health, and to fully implement a system based on primary care.

This process of popular mobilization was influential in the declaration of health as a public good that is part of the new health policy “Building Hope” (“Construyendo la Esperanza”) Health is defined as a basic right and an integral part of human development. The right to participation is integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of health policies and actions.

### **The value of organization and mobilization**

The rich experience of social movements in El Salvador provides us with important lessons. These are particularly pertinent in the Colombian context where privatization policies in health care have been in place since 1993. A similar social mobilization is urgently needed in Colombia.

The first important lesson is the pressing need to coordinate actions and reach agreements among a wide range of organizations in order to make political changes. The Salvadoran experience shows that a broad alliance can be created including groups such as public sector health workers, health users, farmers, health professionals, neighborhood groups, students, and NGOs. Such an alliance can develop a strong community-based mobilization to pressure governments to stop to measures that are against the public interest, in this case the privatization of health services.

We also see the importance of raising awareness not just among specific groups but also among the

broader public. We need to make sure that our demands and mobilization reach the maximum number of people. The fight against the privatization of health services started off with doctors but ended up involving the whole of Salvadoran society.

Finally, the Salvadoran experience shows how social movements can push politicians to turn their promises first into laws and then into social programs. The Civil Society Movement Against Privatization convinced the FMLN party to formalize the movement’s demands into a law that was passed by the Salvadoran Parliament. When the FMLN took office, this law was implemented in the creation of a new national health policy.

Perhaps this experience answers the question posed by Benedetti in his poem: *What would happen?* Without a doubt, it shows that organization and social mobilization have the power to stop the privatization of health and create policies that meet the true needs of the people.

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