

HEP+ Guatemala: Health Sector and Policy Reform for Decentralization

Why Decentralization?

Under the global Health Policy Plus project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Health and Education Policy Plus (HEP+) program in Guatemala is strengthening in-country partners' capacity to navigate complex environments for effective policy design, implementation, and financing for improved health, education, and nutrition outcomes. Guatemala has undertaken a major decentralization reform process to improve the efficiency, quality, and equity of health and other social services. A key pillar of health sector reform, decentralization can improve the efficiency and quality of health services by allowing for improved distribution of services, more efficient use of funds, improved funding for local service provision, more culturally pertinent services, and lower service wait times. By equipping both national actors and local actors to participate effectively, decentralization also promotes accountability and good governance.

Our Work and Achievements

Since 2017, HEP+ has supported the ministries of health and finance, presidential secretariats for executive coordination and planning, municipal associations and governments, and the Guatemalan Congress to launch and implement the national strategy for decentralization, leading to improved governance, efficiency, and transparency in public health spending. Our work includes the following six key areas:

1. Supporting increased local funding for health. After HEP+ provided technical assistance in reducing funding barriers and enforcing

prioritization of human capital investments, municipal investments in health initiatives increased from 250 million quetzals (GTQ) in 2016 to GTQ 1,284 million in 2020, not including funds earmarked for COVID-19 response.

2. Advocating for legal reforms for decentralization. HEP+ helps to promote an agenda that creates a legal mandate for decentralization and creates opportunities to bridge the gaps in service provision for all sectors with impact on public health. During the 2020 government change, HEP+ established communication channels with new authorities, which kept decentralization on the 2020–2024 national policy agenda. The project supported the government to develop its [National Decentralization Agenda](#), which outlines how decentralization will promote local development, resource efficiency, citizen participation, and transparency. After its development and enactment, prioritized ministries produced their own decentralization plans. In those plans, 18 competencies were selected by those ministries to be transferred to local governments.

3. Empowering stakeholders and decisionmakers. The project collaborated with newly elected leaders to build their understanding and support of decentralization and collaborated with the Presidential Secretariat for Executive Coordination to convey noteworthy decentralization achievements during National Rural and Urban Development Council meetings.

4. Measuring and improving local capacity for the delegation of health responsibilities.

HEP+ tools support local governments in their efforts to understand their capacity to take on decentralization responsibilities and to conduct scenario analyses to decide how to optimize efforts to efficiently improve capacity. HEP+ also supports training at the municipal level to improve capacity, ensure ability to take on new functions, and implement effective local solutions. For example:

- HEP+ supported the development of two diploma courses for 50 prioritized municipalities, during which participants were trained on municipal capacity strengthening.
- HEP+ created the [Decentralization Process and Measurement System](#)—which uses a weighted composite index to rank local government capacity—and has assessed 340 municipalities' abilities to take on delegated functions. After HEP+ intervention, the number of municipalities deemed capable of implementing the newly delegated functions doubled.
- HEP+ is collaborating with the Association of Municipalities from the Orange River Basin to create a water quality testing laboratory and training center, supporting local water quality monitoring in 10 municipalities and aiming to be the first municipality association to receive delegated powers.
- After HEP+ intervention, the National Program of Medicine Accessibility authorized the establishment of 298 pharmacies across the country to manage municipal pharmaceutical needs.

5. Supporting governance for local health project efficiency and targeted health initiatives.

HEP+ supports and guides the design, regulation, and operation of policy,

technical, and territorial decentralization roundtables that plan and coordinate functions that should be made available to local levels by central-level ministries. For example, we:

- Developed a proposal to create water and sanitation management units at the central and local levels that decentralize and facilitate water and sanitation project authorization procedures. With the creation of these new offices, approximately 400,000 Guatemalans from 22 different communities will have better access to potable drinking water and benefit from future sanitation projects.
- Supported the development and implementation of the Guide to Develop Municipal Investment Plans in Nutrition and Food Security, which has enabled authorities to pass three local food and nutrition security policies that allocate municipal funds toward actions to reduce malnutrition in children under two years of age.
- Developed guidelines to establish departmental contraceptive security subcommittees under the National Contraceptive Security Commission. As a result, the Ministry of Health launched 11 subcommittees, 8 of which HEP+ helped establish.

6. Creating a dialogue network.

HEP+ facilitates dialogue between the Presidential Secretariat for Executive Coordination, ministries of finance, economy, and health, and the National Youth Commission to understand and address barriers to decentralization progress. This effort has previously identified misleading and inaccurate assumptions in Guatemalan society about the legality, feasibility, and repercussions of decentralization, and HEP+ confronted and debunked these misunderstandings through workshops, seminars, magazine articles, and policy courses.

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