

Nicaragua: Better education and health

Franziska Pfister

If one enters the regional hospital of Matagalpa in Nicaragua, a large wooden board with colourful diagrams catches one's eyes. When looking at them in more detail, one can see that they illustrate patients' answers to questions about the quality of the hospital's delivered services: How do they assess the nursing provided by the hospital's staff? How do they assess the medical care? Or also: What can be improved? The development of the answers can be followed over several months. Even specific departments within the hospital, such as the paediatric or surgical department, can be compared. This new transparency is felt by both patients and employees alike. Among others, it can be attributed to budget support, through which foreign donors like Switzerland directly contribute to Nicaragua's state budget.

Fulfilling core tasks

Central America is a priority region for Swiss development cooperation. For several years Switzerland has been cofinancing Nicaragua's national budget. Budget support is based on agreed preconditions and accompanied by a continuous dialogue with the government. Since 2005 the following donors have been contributing together with Switzerland: Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the World Bank and the EU. In 2008 their joint contributions amounted to some 115 million US dollars, which is equivalent to roughly 10% of Nicaragua's budget. Switzerland's contribution is 5 million dollars. Due to differences in opinion budget support to Nicaragua has been suspended in 2009.

A large share of Nicaragua's expenses is determined by the constitution and national debt. Together with the running expenses this only leaves limited room for the government to manoeuvre. This is why the contribution by the budget support group is highly valued, as it provides the government with more flexibility when it comes to fulfilling its core tasks. The priorities are laid out in the national development plan, which in turn is also the basis for budget support. A distinct focus is the fight against poverty. The government which has been in power since the beginning of 2007 has confirmed this priority which was determined by its predecessor and has made it more substantial by means of specific programmes. They include expanding water supply and sanitation, alphabetisation campaigns or improvements in the areas of education and health, for example, reducing maternal mortality.

Improved working atmosphere thanks to transparency

The employees of the regional hospital in Matagalpa describe today's working atmosphere as more quiet and pleasant, in spite of an increased number of patients and little additional financial or human resources. The transparency mentioned at the beginning of the report is an important factor in this context, as the director of human resource of the regional hospital is stressing repeatedly. Today she knows her hospital's budget and knows what the expenses are made for. She also has her say in the planning of the budget. She is better informed when it comes to purchasing

medication or the costs of specific services such as an X-ray or ultrasound examination. In addition, she knows, how many treatments the hospital administers within a given space of time. The previous government was not interested in this kind of numbers, as it was not interested in public services, but rather wanted to privatise them. This is no longer the case: Today, the recommendation among friends is no longer to go to a private clinic when treating certain health problems, but to go to the public hospital.

Successes in the public health sector

Progress in the public health sector goes beyond improved transparency towards both patients and employees: Chronic malnutrition of children under 5 as well as child and maternal mortality have been reduced. Considering the often impassable situations these are no minor achievements. A large area of Nicaragua possesses hardly any communication infrastructure and can only be reached with great difficulties. Particularly during the rainy season large areas in the East of the country (along the Atlantic coast) are cut off from the rest of the world. They therefore present particular challenges when it comes to introducing health centres or other institutions.

In recent years many communities trained voluntary health officers (“brigadistas de salud”). Those are a first point of contact in the case of medical emergencies, for example a malaria infection. But the large share of their tasks deal with prevention issues, such as in the field of nutrition. Thanks to their education they enjoy a certain status. They can admit children to hospital or persuade pregnant women to go to a maternity house (“casa materna”) or hospital on time. In these institutions the women are taken care of in the last two weeks before giving birth and then transferred to a health centre or hospital at critical moments. The women also receive information about important topics such as hygiene, nutrition and birth control. Moreover, a timely admission prevents long walks on foot or arduous transports in hammocks or on stretchers in the case of complications during birth. Institutionally attended births bear less risks than house births for both mother and child. Health officers and maternity houses have contributed an important part to the reduction in maternal mortality which has been achieved in the past years. The increased room for manoeuvre achieved thanks to budget support provided additional resources for infrastructure.

“Take the prescription and heal yourself”

The services provided by the maternity houses are for free – an important aspect considering that a large proportion of these houses are located in areas with high or extreme poverty. As of late, poor groups of the population are also entitled to other free health services. They no longer have to pay for X-rays or ultrasound checks, for example. This is a noticeable improvement for an agricultural worker who earns some 30 to 40 Córdobas (a little less than 2 USD) per day and, for example, used to pay 400 Córdobas for an ultrasound. Today, it is also less likely that people are sent home with a prescription after a consultation and then left to their own devices. Rather the regional hospital, for example, offers them a comprehensive service, including dispensary. Select medication is free as well. Considering this marked dismantling of social barriers it is not surprising that the number of treatments administered has increased: Since the introduction of the free consultations, the

regional hospital of Matagalpa, for example, noted an 18% increase in the number of patients.

Improving the public health sector is a popular undertaking in development cooperation. This is not without negative consequences for the authorities. They not only receive support, but also have to negotiate with countless representatives of international donors. On average 1,3 donors' delegations visit per day. For each of them the government involves at least five, generally high ranking, officials. Some leading employees in the health centres spend a quarter of their working time for such missions, workshops or conferences. Increased efficiency can be achieved through more coordination, cooperation and reducing the donors' demands.

Education for all

If in the context of budget support donors make better arrangements and coordinate their visits, this also contributes to freeing resources, which can, for example, be used for social tasks. Expectations are high, particularly in the areas of education and health: The budget foresees an increase of 15% in the area of education and 16% in that of health. While last years' improvements in the area of income poverty are controversial, there is clear progress at the "educational and health frontline". Chances for poor children to attend school have increased. Abolishing the autonomy of individual schools was a reason for the disappearance of many fees which before had to be paid for specific services, such as writing an exam, or so called voluntary contributions to the schools. And if today poor students cannot buy the required uniform, they no longer have to wear it. Furthermore, the schools also deliver additional services, such as distributing meals.

A remaining challenge in the educational sector is the classes' quality. "Teachers used to be busy collecting the fees for classes, material and other things. They were not concerned with pedagogic or educational issues. This mentality has deep roots and it will take a lot of time to change it. We are in a transitory phase", says Rosa Verena Tellez, Principal of the Institute Pablo Antonio Cuadra in Esquipulas, one of the 13 communities in the district of Matagalpa. However, the quality of the classes is to a large extent determined by the teacher. 40% of all the 160 teachers in Esquipulas are not trained didactically ("maestros empíricos"). At the secondary level some of them have a university degree, for example in agronomics or computer science, but they lack pedagogic and didactic qualifications. Particularly in rural areas of Nicaragua this type of teacher are the rule rather than the exception. They teach under difficult circumstances and often work with several classes at the same time. At the moment, however, not only teacher training is being professionalized but also a national curriculum which includes Nicaraguan school books is being developed. As it is, there are many classes where there is only one book available for the teacher. In future, the children and schools shall be better equipped and more students will be in a position to follow the example of María Gabriela Jarquín: She visits the communal library in Esquipulas in the afternoon in order to research for her homework.

The author, Dr. Franziska Pfister, is an environmental scientist and works among others also for Gerster Consulting. This article was written in cooperation with Sonja Beeli and is part of a series commissioned by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) to take a closer look at budget support from various points of view. They reflect the author's personal opinion.