

POLICY PAPER

REDSEX, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Network in Cuenca, Ecuador

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The Sexual and Reproductive Health Network of Cuenca (REDSEX) is making collective efforts to articulate different political and institutional, public and private views on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of young men and women. Our main goals are putting SRHR on the political agenda through evidence - based research, informing people, raising awareness, and making SRHR accessible to everyone in Cuenca. The fact that SRHR is now a topic on the political agenda in Cuenca is an important achievement, especially given the cultural context in which sexuality is still a taboo topic (because of the deep religious influence and the patriarchal society in Cuenca) and has always been considered something private, outside the reach of public policy. That is why we believe it is valuable to systematise the process that was carried out and to analyse the key elements of this achievement¹.

About REDSEX

The Sexual and Reproductive Health Network of Cuenca (Red de Salud Sexual y Reproductiva), or REDSEX, started at a key moment in the work on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) at the local and national level, when the National Constitution – made up of a lot of social movements – recognised the exercise of these rights as a condition of good living, including sexual rights as human rights. The defence of SRHR was in opposition to the church, the State, politics and anti-rights groups, as prejudices and taboos remained entrenched in their structures, making it difficult to fully exercise these rights. Ecuador is the third country in the region where adolescent pregnancies, a woman's right to decide, (emergency) contraception, sexual diversity and HIV/AIDS are not addressed or discussed as public agenda topics. Resources are scarce and decision-makers are afraid to work on these issues.

In this context, REDSEX was launched to respond to the need for strategic alliances and to strengthen cooperation within the SRHR framework. The network wanted to make SRHR challenges more visible and to place SRHR on the public agenda as a critical element for tackling poverty and inequalities. Initially, REDSEX consisted of 15 – public and private – institutions. Firstly, the network intended to reduce teenage pregnancies and to eradicate gender violence and discrimination against LGBTI groups; secondly, it was

¹ SENDAS. (2015). Incidencia en la agenda local para la construcción de políticas públicas en derechos sexuales y derechos reproductivos en el Cantón Cuenca .

our intention to ensure that the institutions involved fully complied with health care protocols in assisting victims of sexual violence. Subsequently, it was possible to put SRHR on the local public agenda and that of the academic world, integrating issues such as abortion and LGBTI rights.

A step-by-step process

Over the last two decades, REDSEX has been very successful in putting SRHR on the agenda of local politicians in Cuenca. These results were achieved through a step-by-step process. It started in 2012 by bringing together the different stakeholders involved, aligning their views and ideas, and having them work together in the REDSEX network. Once the network was set up, actions and proposals were integrated to change local public policies. The achievement of the proposed objectives required permanent social control and co-responsibility.

A joint fight for SRHR, showing the need for more sustainable collaboration to improve local politics (2000-2012)

In this initial phase, different stakeholders with significant motivation and interest in SRHR took action – individually and, eventually, collectively – to promote SRHR in Cuenca. In 2007, there was a proposal to modify the National Constitution, so the momentum was there to try and include SRHR in that Constitution. At this juncture, the participation of representatives from Cuenca was important, actively influencing the debate through the dissemination of objective information and the political claim for a rights and gender approach in the analysis and proposals for the National Constitution. Based on the activities carried out by each stakeholder in Cuenca, a network of contacts and inter-institutional relationships was woven, resulting in a willingness to work together.

The non-governmental organisation SENDAS took the lead. SENDAS can be considered a pioneer in Cuenca, as they have been actively promoting gender equality and SRHR for over 20 years. In 2007, they were joined by the University of Cuenca, more specifically the projects CERCA (Community-Embedded Reproductive Health Care for Adolescents) and HUMSEX (Promoting Sexual Health for Adolescents). Both projects are international and interdisciplinary collaborations with, among others, Ghent University and KU Leuven, respectively. Other important stakeholders in this phase were the local Health Council of Cuenca and the Ministry of Public Health.

Because of the shared objectives of these different stakeholders – generating common actions, inviting debate and raising awareness about SRHR – the time was right to join forces, especially given that the new penal code was also being discussed. All of these stakeholders wanted to place SRHR issues on the public agenda and to create more awareness among the population. Their actions required common efforts and resources to be sustainable in the long term, and thus the idea of institutionalising a network was born.

Building the REDSEX network (2012-2013)

Gradually, more local stakeholders, who had also promoted SRHR and had an interest in the development of SRHR policies, were approached, including members of the Economic and Social Inclusion Commission of the Municipality of Cuenca, representatives of educational institutions, NGOs, women's organisations and social organisations.

In addition, a coordinating team was formed, consisting of three representatives of different stakeholders: SENDAS (civil society), the University of Cuenca with the projects CERCA and HUMSEX (academia), and the Ministry of Public Health (national government). It was defined that the Cuenca Local Health Council would assume the Executive Secretariat.

Initially, common actions were identified to later propose the constitution of a legal framework that would allow the network to institutionalise these actions. In this context, SENDAS developed a proposal for a Municipal Ordinance that would guarantee the coordination, avoid double efforts and allow the achievement of ambitious goals for Cuenca, based on the sum of all institutional and organisational investments. The main goals of the Ordinance were the implementation of public policies aimed at the promotion, development and full experience of SRHR, as well as equal access to sexual and reproductive health care for the entire population of both urban and rural areas of Cuenca, with an emphasis on adolescents and young people.

It is important to emphasise that the approval of the Municipal Ordinance included a prior lobbying and advocacy process with members of the local council. At this time, the data and evidence generated by the organisations that made up the network were fundamental for capturing the attention of policymakers. While raising awareness among policymakers, it was also important to talk about non-controversial SRHR topics, in order not to polarise the discussion into moralistic positions that could generate resistance. Another key element in this process was the use of citizen participation mechanisms.

Finally, with the approval of the Ordinance, SRHR became a topic on the local political agenda, and an annual budget for the implementation of this regulation was allocated.

From paper to action (2013-2014)

In this phase, two strategies made it possible to sustain and operationalise the Municipal Ordinance and REDSEX. Firstly, a five-year plan was constructed to determine fundamental guidelines and to meet the specific goals of REDSEX. Secondly, the way in which the municipal funding would take place was specified. The management of government funds was quite a challenge due to the complexity of the processes, but specific agreements for the development of the projects were signed. In turn, the institutions were to meet certain legal requirements, e.g. having legal status. Not all small stakeholders had this legal status, so SENDAS, being the NGO with the longest experience, acted as an umbrella for these projects. The University of Cuenca, meanwhile, was responsible for the research and the project budgeting.

Making a difference and setting an example (2014-2020)

During the last phase, the operationalisation and evaluation of the Ordinance, the main challenge was managing the budget in order to achieve the proposed goals. Because of the worrying indicators of sexual health among adolescents and sexual diversity groups, REDSEX has prioritised investments in education and promotion strategies for the prevention of adolescent pregnancies and maternal deaths, as well as in training and awareness strategies on SRHR, LGBTI rights and sexual violence.

So far, a significant budget has been successfully invested in these issues and good results have been achieved, especially in the prevention of adolescent pregnancies. Thanks to the support of the governmental departments of Education and Health, we were able to reach schools, colleges and even parents, thanks to a comprehensive community intervention.

The Ecuadorian State has still not designated a budget to carry out actions with respect to SRHR, but the Municipality in Cuenca has maintained or even increased the budget for SRHR promotion over recent years. This clearly shows how meaningful and effective the work of REDSEX is. Meanwhile, our experience of advocacy and work with respect to SRHR has also been adopted in six other Ecuadorian territories.

Lessons learned

- A network of SRHR stakeholders that can look at data collection and set out advocacy strategies together can stimulate strong SRHR policies. Together they can build evidence for the need of a legal framework and public investment in the issue.
- When proposals for public policies in SRHR arise from a collective action, they reflect the interests and needs of a wider group and are therefore more likely to have an impact and realise a transformation. Furthermore, greater stakeholder participation in decision-making processes will undoubtedly lead to a greater legitimacy of the construction of public policies.
- Political advocacy in SRHR requires a deep understanding of the policy process and context: What are the international frameworks related to the issue? What is the national legal framework? Is there political willingness? What are the political strategies, plans, programmes and policies promoted by the State? Etc.
- Advocacy processes in public policies related to SRHR do not only lead to legal change – or the guarantee of an established budget – but also to a stronger movement of organisations and institutions working on the issue.

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