

## El Salvador: Introducing the Standard Days Method into Community-Based Programs

Project Concern International (PCI) and the Integration and Reconstruction Committee (CIRES) are non-governmental organizations working in rural El Salvador to improve community health, sanitation and education. For these organizations the introduction of the Standard Days Method\* (SDM) was a way to integrate family planning into their programs and increase male participation in reproductive health. Their experience showed that it was possible to integrate family planning information and services into water and sanitation projects, and that community volunteers could effectively provide the SDM. PCI's efforts to inform men was successful, and survey results showed increased support in male participation in family health and women's decision making about family planning methods. The project also found high acceptance of the SDM and that increasing SDM availability helped reduce unmet need. Forty four percent of women using the SDM were new family planning users.

### Background



Poster explaining the connection between family planning and community resources.

PCI and CIRES, collaborated with the Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University on a study to introduce the Standard Days Method in rural areas of El Salvador. Both organizations have worked for more than 10 years to improve the well-being of low-income rural populations through health, sanitation, education and micro-enterprise initiatives.

In this project, PCI worked to incorporate family planning into their water and sanitation programs, and CIRES to increase family planning options by introducing the SDM. Both organizations also sought to increase male participation in family planning.

### Need for the SDM

El Salvador, the most densely populated country in Latin America, is poised for continued rapid growth as more than 55% of the population is under 25 years of age. Although significant strides in increasing family planning use have been made in recent years, the need continues to be great. For example, it is estimated that 34% of women between 15 and 44 years of age have an unmet need for family planning. One strategy for addressing unmet need is to increase the number of methods

available. Although awareness of most methods is over 90%, fewer than 5% of women have heard of natural methods. A qualitative study conducted in 1999 in 12 rural communities found that use of natural methods such as the calendar rhythm was common. However, couples using these methods did not have accurate information regarding their fertility, which is essential if these methods are to be effective.<sup>1</sup> The study also found that health professionals offer natural methods only when the client specifically requests them. In addition, health centers lacked standard protocols for natural methods and appropriate teaching materials.

## Introducing the SDM

Establishing community development boards and including men as extension workers and participants are part of PCI's water and sanitation and community education programs. A model program called "Planning Together" was designed and tested by PCI. The program emphasizes gender equity and integrates family planning information into water and sanitation efforts. The SDM was included in PCI's community education program, and community volunteers were trained to provide SDM services. The program also aimed to increase male participation by developing a network of volunteers to conduct home visits in the evenings and to involve more men as facilitators and community leaders.

CIRES integrated SDM information and counseling into the family planning services they provide through their health promoters and sanitation volunteers.

## Research Objectives

Through this collaboration, PCI and CIRES sought to determine the most effective way to incorporate family planning into their community-based programs and to provide information to facilitate introducing the SDM into governmental and non-governmental programs. The study objectives were to:

- Test the incorporation of education and family planning referrals into PCI's water and sanitation community program.
- Determine the feasibility of incorporating men in family planning outreach and services.
- Determine if community agents can successfully provide the SDM.
- Explore user satisfaction with the SDM and levels of correct use and continuation.
- Measure knowledge and acceptance of the SDM at the community level.
- Test the effects of disseminating information of the SDM in the community.

## Study Methodology

PCI and CIRES evaluated the introduction of the SDM into their community programs by conducting admission and quarterly interviews with a cohort of SDM users over a period of one year. In-depth interviews and focus groups were also conducted with men and women using the SDM, community leaders, and project staff.

In addition, PCI conducted baseline and endline household surveys to measure changes in family planning attitudes, knowledge and practices at the community level. Both men and women were interviewed. The endline survey was conducted eighteen months after the baseline interviews.

## Salient Findings

### SDM Users

One hundred forty three women between the ages of 18 and 35 chose the SDM from among the family planning methods offered and were included in the study. Most (80%) lived in rural areas and had less than a primary school education. Forty four percent were new family planning users. In the two months prior to the study, 62% of couples were not using any family planning method; and 16% were using a combination of rhythm and withdrawal.

Of the women who entered the study, 43 or 30% exited due to having cycles out of the 26 to 32 cycle range. In addition, there were 17 pregnancies of which 16 were due to incorrect use of the method. The majority of pregnancies occurred during the first two cycles of use, when women were still learning to use the method. Survival analysis show a continuation rate of 86 at six months. Most couples who used the SDM were highly satisfied. Over 90% considered it easy to learn and use. The primary reason for discontinuation was out-of-range cycles. About one third of the couples chose to use condoms during the fertile days, the remainder abstained.

### Study Participants

Status	No. of women
Entered study	143
Exited due to cycles out of range	43
Pregnancies	17
Lost to follow-up	7
Completed 13 cycles	88

Source: Final project report

### Integrating Family Planning in PCI's Water and Sanitation Projects

Study results show that it was possible to integrate family planning information and services into water and sanitation projects. During the course of the project, 38% of the men interviewed stated that they had participated in a group talk and 27% indicated that their partner had also participated. Home visits were also effective in providing information and education as 29% of those surveyed said that they had been visited by a volunteer.

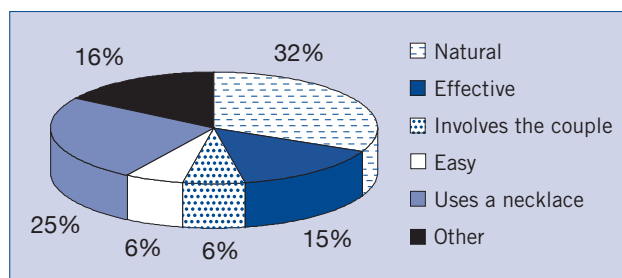
Results also show that community volunteers were effective in disseminating information about family planning in the context of a water and sanitation program. Seventy three percent of those interviewed knew that family planning information and services had been integrated into water and sanitation efforts, and over 90% of these respondents thought that it was beneficial and necessary. Discussion of family planning related topics among friends, family members and neighbors also increased from 1% at the time of the baseline survey to 20% after the intervention. For the first time PCI became an important source of family planning information; 22% of men

and women identified PCI as a source of family planning information after the intervention.

### SDM Knowledge

Community volunteers were effective in disseminating information about the SDM. Survey results found that 64% of women and 48% of men in the community had heard about the method. People remembered that the method was natural and associated it with CycleBeads, a visual tool that helps women use the method.

### SDM Characteristics Recalled Spontaneously by Respondents in the Final Survey



Source: Final project report

### Male Participation in Family Planning

PCI's concerted multi-faceted efforts to reach and inform men about family planning was highly successful. It demonstrated that it is possible to increase male participation if men are offered correct information about family planning and if they are sensitized about their responsibilities to care for their family's health. Between the initial and final surveys, support increased for women to make the final decision about a family planning method, and for men to participate in family health. Virtually all of the men using the method (45%) received information on the SDM—almost half were counseled directly by a provider.

### Attitudes Regarding Male Participation and Family Health Care

Attitudes and Practices	Initial Survey n=341	Final Survey n=364
The woman should make the final decision about what method to use*	54%	62%
The man should have little involvement in family health*	60%	16%

Source: Final project report \* P ≤ 0.05

Knowledge of when during a women's menstrual cycle she could get pregnant increased among both men and women, but increased more among men.

### Correct Knowledge About a Woman's Fertile Time

	Initial n=341	Final n=364
Men	57%	85%
Women	58%	76%

Source: Final project report

### Couple Communication

The number of couples in the target community discussing family planning-related topics, such as management of the fertile days, risk of STIs, and the man's role in reproductive health increased significantly following the intervention.

### Topics Discussed by Couples Before and After Intervention

Topics of Conversation*	Initial Survey	Final Survey
Number of children	42%	51%
Family planning use	27%	35%
Method selection	28%	35%
Managing fertile days	12%	26%
Risk of STIs	21%	41%
Couple's role	6%	19%

Source: Final project report \* P ≤ 0.05

### Family Planning Use

One of the benefits of introducing the SDM into community projects is to provide information and services to hard-to-reach couples who tend to have unmet need for family planning. According to the household survey conducted in PCI communities after the intervention, contraceptive prevalence increased significantly from 45% to 58%, with about 4% of women using the SDM. There was a moderate increase in methods used with cooperation from both partners such as the condom and fertility-awareness-based methods.

## Conclusions

This project demonstrated that it is feasible to introduce the SDM into community projects when organizations have sufficient financial and human resources and are committed to making the necessary organizational changes to facilitate this innovation. In fact, the image of both PCI and CIRES was enhanced due to the recognition of their pioneering role in implementing a new service model that expanded its community water and sanitation program to include family planning and offering a new contraceptive method.

The role of volunteers in disseminating information about the SDM was particularly important in its acceptance. When provided adequate training and supervision, community volunteers were able to effectively provide the SDM. Couples that chose the SDM were satisfied with the method and there was a notable improvement in couple communication.<sup>2</sup>

#### Endnotes:

\*Standard Days Method and CycleBeads are trademarks of Georgetown University.

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University, PCI/PROCOSAL, Estudio Cualitativo previo a la implementacion de los estudios operativos del MDF en El Salvador, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. Introducing family planning into water and sanitation community projects. 2004.

*For more information on this project, contact Rebecka Lundgren at [lundgrer@georgetown.edu](mailto:lundgrer@georgetown.edu), Gail Emrick at [gemrick@projectconcern.org](mailto:gemrick@projectconcern.org), Betty De Galvez at [betty\\_galvez03@yahoo.com.mx](mailto:betty_galvez03@yahoo.com.mx) or visit [www.irh.org](http://www.irh.org).*

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The **Institute for Reproductive Health** conducts research and provides technical assistance on expanding access to natural methods of family planning and improving options for women and couples worldwide.

#### For more information, contact:

Institute for Reproductive Health  
4301 Connecticut Ave., Suite 310, Washington, DC 20008  
[irhinfo@georgetown.edu](mailto:irhinfo@georgetown.edu) [www.irh.org](http://www.irh.org)