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EDUCO: A COMMUNITY-MANAGED EDUCATION PROGRAM IN RURAL EL SALVADOR (1991-2003)

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Background

El Salvador's Education with Community Participation Program (EDUCO) began in 1991, from State and local communities' efforts to create pre-school and basic education services in rural areas.

EDUCO became a key strategy against education crises and challenges after the 12-year civil war. During the 1980s, the conflict generated violence, ideological polarization, severe infrastructure damage and tremendous population migration within and outside the country. Between 1978 and 1988, average real incomes decreased 37 percent, 67 percent for the poorest 20 percent of the population (Reimers 1995).

Well before the 1992 Peace Accords, the El Salvador Government¹ recognized the importance of expanding basic education especially in rural areas, decentralizing educational services and reducing public sector education inefficiency (MINED, 1994). In the context of increasing social consensus and economic recovery, public investment in education grew from 1.5 percent of GDP in 1992 to 3.0 percent in 2000 and innovative initiatives led to a nation-wide Educational Reform Process (MINED, 1995).

Fieldwork by the Ministry of Education (MINED) in 1990 found that many rural communities had taken the initiative and organized themselves to provide basic education to their children during the conflict. The research generated several recommendations:

- promote linkages between schools and communities;
- train teachers whether or not a school building exists;

- provide basic educational materials;
- eliminate all requirements for uniforms and financial contributions from families; and
- promote school feeding programs.



This vision, genuine MINED commitment, active community involvement and financial and technical support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Bank and United States Agency for International Development helped create EDUCO.

EDUCO is based on creation, legalization and provision of support to local organizations involving parents (Asociaciones Comunales para la Educación – ACE), which help develop new education services in their communities.

MINED transfers financing to ACEs to hire teachers and purchase goods and services for their schools. In 1991, 263 ACEs participated, each hired a teacher, and 8,416 students benefited. In 2003, the program included over 2,000 ACEs and rural schools, 7,000 teachers and 362,000 students. ACEs administered about US\$50 million dollars (approximately 12 percent of the national education budget).

¹ Since 1989, the ARENA Party (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista) has led three administrations: 1989-1994; 1994-1999 and 1999-2004. After being an armed group, the FMLN became a political party in 1992. Its presence has grown in local governments and the National Congress.

Results and Impact

In El Salvador, as in many developing countries, rural areas have low access to services, high poverty levels and persistent problems enrolling and keeping children in school (Centro ALFA 2002; PREAL 2001). EDUCO's efficiency and effectiveness can be analyzed against the goal of adequate educational opportunities for rural children.

Three main aspects of EDUCO's **efficiency** are considered:

1. *EDUCO is fast and agile in creating education services.* A key challenge for education authorities was to expand pre-school and basic education services in rural areas. The inefficient traditional strategy for opening new public schools took 3-4 years to find and secure land, build a school, appoint teachers in a centralized manner, and finally enroll children.

EDUCO used a completely new strategy: organizing, legalizing and training communities and transferring resources to hire teachers, always within just three months. Communities used existing local infrastructure (schools, community houses, or properties belonging to a community member); sometimes EDUCO has provided support for building new classrooms with community participation.

2. *EDUCO changed MINED central office roles* from bureaucratic to normative, ensuring financial resources, providing technical assistance and support, and supervising resource use through selective audits. Responsibility and public resources were transferred to communities for to hire, purchase, acquire professional services and materials, and pay for basic services.

Centralized procurement and payments can deliver scale economies, but the EDUCO model avoids centralized storage, distribution and personnel costs, and increases the probability of inputs reaching schools in an appropriate and timely manner.

3. *EDUCO has decreased teacher absenteeism and increased learning time.* Historically, rural teachers attended school an average of three days/week or less. ACE supervision practically eliminated absenteeism. Parents have been very effective in linking teacher hiring and performance: being in school and focusing on teaching and learning.

MINED has supported and trained teachers and supplied dynamic didactic materials, helping increase teachers' motivation. EDUCO data show that decentralization allows better monitoring of teachers, and with teachers' constant attendance, motivates parents to send children to school.

These facts are also confirmed by analytical evidence (see Sawada and Jimenez (1998) and Sawada (1999)) which finds that students in EDUCO schools miss less school days due to teacher absences than traditional school students. In particular, teachers are absent from EDUCO schools on average for 1.09 days per month, compared to

1.35 school days/month of traditional school teachers.

The program's **effectiveness** comes from its ability to promote community participation and impact educational achievement and social development.

1. *Community participation increased.* ACE members dedicate 1044 hours annually to their schools: "management training (200 hours), bank account management (16 hours), payment of teacher salaries and Social Security (96 hours), purchase of school consumable materials (72 hours), advisory consultations with school supervisors and district and regional Coordinators (120 hours), community and ACE meeting and assemblies (180 hours), school visits and supervision (360 hours)" (MINED 2001).

Communities have given and received value added in various aspects of local development:

- (a) Transparent management of funds at the community level;
- (b) Improved teacher and students attendance (as noted);
- (c) Supportive relations between teachers and parents;
- (d) Parental presence in classrooms;
- (e) Support in preparing educational materials;
- (f) Time after school and homework support for children;
- (g) Community activities to improve school environments;
- (h) Increased motivation of community members to benefit from literacy programs, parent education and other adult education activities;
- (i) New alliances with NGOs and municipalities;
- (j) Collaboration with existing development programs in health, water supply and other sectors (Reyes, 2002 and Lindo, 2001).

2. *EDUCO has accelerated expansion—especially in the poorest rural areas—and increased attendance by rural children without compromising academic achievement.* Between 1992 and 2000, net enrollment in grades 1-6 increased from 76 to 82 percent in rural areas, and from 88 to 89 percent in urban areas, decreasing the urban-rural gap from twelve to seven percent (MINED, 2002). This can be attributed to EDUCO: in 2002, 37 percent of all rural public school children attended EDUCO schools (50% for pre-school and 35% for basic education: 40% for grades 1-3; 25% for grades 4-6 and 22% for grades 7-9).

EDUCO's original design focused on coverage, not quality. However, greater community participation and improved provision of educational inputs should improve outcomes.

The existing analytical evidence finds that, after holding constant for EDUCO students' backgrounds and taking into account possible selection biases, the average performance of EDUCO and traditional students in achievement tests is, in fact, the same (Jiménez y Sawada, 1998). Academic achievements in some EDUCO schools even exceed those of children attending traditional public schools.

EDUCO's Driving Factors

These include: leadership and commitment of government authorities and communities; legal, administrative and curriculum innovations; flexibility to make adjustments during implementation to overcome obstacles; and technical and financial support from international agencies, particularly World Bank loans.

Commitment and Political Economy for Change

In 1990, MINED was bureaucratic, politicized and inefficient, ill-placed to meet the challenges of providing education for more than 500,000 children aged 7 to 15 who were not in school. Resources were scarce, so new funding was needed and existing sources had to be used more efficiently. Finally, there was clear acknowledgement that incentives to motivate teachers to work in isolated rural or distant areas were lacking, which had weakened educational services.

The 1992 Peace Accords promoted social consensus that favored institutionalization of EDUCO and the broad education reform process. The Education Minister was able to achieve great consensus within the education sector. The technical team that led EDUCO identified with the teachers, parents and children involved in the program. Complementary dialogue and agreements occurred between MINED and the teachers unions and opposition leaders. This helped overcome fears and negative perceptions about the program (Córdova 1999).

Institutional Innovation

Institutionally, there was openness to new “outside the traditional box” paradigms and mechanisms. EDUCO’s legal framework for ACEs used existing laws, and transferred funds through regular accounts in a private bank, which was highly innovative. MINED developed a financial administration program to ensure that legal requirements for use of public funds are met. The program rapidly included activities to promote, organize, legalize, train and monitor the ACE’s and train and support teachers.

EDUCO was also a catalyst for institutional change in MINED (MINED 1999). With World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank funding, MINED modernized, including: (i) reviewing the legal framework, (ii) reducing administrative staff; (iii) transforming three regional offices (little Ministries) into 14 Departmental Offices with operational responsibilities, and (iv) creating School Administration Boards (Consejos Directivos Escolares - CDE) in all public schools in the country (backed by the Teachers’ Law of 1997). The CDEs integrate school directors, teachers, parents and students. Since 1997 CDEs have managed financial resources

transferred from the central level, purchasing educational materials, equipment, maintenance and teacher training.

Learning and Experimentation

EDUCO’s pedagogical strategy incorporated innovations: multi-grade classrooms and accelerated education for grades two to six. The program flexibly added grades in response to demand, contributing to increased enrollment and retention and making efficient use of teachers. The (recently incorporated) accelerated education program caters to overage children (two or more years over the official age for schooling), allowing students to complete basic education sooner. Both programs have specialized curricula, instructional materials, teacher training strategies and classroom evaluation practices.

Countries worldwide have learned from EDUCO. The program has been presented in numerous ministerial meetings, and received study tours from Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, Chile, Nicaragua, Panamá, Dominican Republic, México, Brasil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Ghana, Mauritius Islands, Madagascar, Chad, Morocco, Senegal and Mauritania (MINED, 1999).

Lessons Learned

Innovative strategies to develop education options for the poorest. EDUCO demonstrates that education services can be provided for poor rural children in an agile and relevant way, maintaining quality. With teachers, children and communities at the center of the program, educational services were provided where needed, meeting program objectives – unprecedented in

education history in El Salvador. Many believed that EDUCO service quality would be lower than traditional schools, EDUCO children performed as well as similar children in traditional schools on standardized achievement tests in mathematics and language, and better where community participation is effective.

Sustainability of local development education programs. It would have been difficult to begin without certain key inputs, including funding to hire teachers. Timely World Bank loans and technical assistance ensured this initially. MINED successfully institutionalized the program, incorporating the total cost of EDUCO in its budget from 1997. Organized communities are key for program sustainability. Parents’ organizations enjoy credibility and a strong interest in ensuring that the services remain over time.

Value added of communities. Initially, program opponents mistakenly believed that the objective was to shift State responsibilities and the financing burden to families. MINED never intended this, and



provided support to communities. Data and participant testimonies indicate that community participation built social capital that benefited the program and communities. One example is that EDUCO communities recovered more rapidly from the 2001 earthquakes.

Renewing Teachers' Commitment. Teachers' unions tried to block EDUCO, opposing a link between teachers' job stability and performance. Fortunately, the program pressed ahead. EDUCO teachers have developed a commitment that had been lost in rural schools. Teachers and parents have established constructive, positive relationships centered on ensuring better education for children.

The increasing demand for education. The program offered services for first grade only the first year, then added pre-school and grades 2 and 3. Studies indicated that adding higher grades would improve retention, so grades 4-6 were added. The initial design did not contemplate going beyond grade 6, but high demand from communities sparked reassessment. Later, grades 7 - 9, and even secondary grades were added.

Summary

World Bank financing and technical assistance has supported long-term, broad education reform in El Salvador, including EDUCO.³ The Bank project team won the 1997 World Bank Achievement Award for Excellence. EDUCO's accomplishments were celebrated by the Presidents of El Salvador and the Bank, with over 1000 ACE members.

Based on El Salvador's experience, Guatemala and Honduras began similar programs: Programa Nacional de Auto-Gestión para el Desarrollo Educativo (PRONADE) in Guatemala in 1995, and Programa Hondureño de Participación Comunitaria (PROHECO) in Honduras in 1999. In 2003, the three programs enrolled over 800,000 children in 8,000 schools, with 22,000 teachers hired by communities and over 50,000 parents participating in associations.

About the Authors

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³ Bank commitments for education in El Salvador will total US\$271 million (1991-2005), supporting the whole reform process - curriculum, educational materials, teacher training, evaluation, school transfers and institutional modernization. The allocation is approximately 12% (Dos Santos, 2000).

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