

# USING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND INFORMED DIALOGUE TO INFLUENCE EDUCATION POLICY: LESSONS FROM EL SALVADOR

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## Abstract

From 2002-2005, the United States Agency for International Development in El Salvador worked with the Ministry of Education of El Salvador and other key stakeholders to support a series of participatory assessments and studies that led to changes in education policy. This was carried out as El Salvador was redefining its national education agenda. Different approaches were used in informing the policy formulation process. These included having international researchers persuade policy makers to analyze new policy options to collaborations between researchers and policy makers to construct new knowledge. This paper discusses several approaches to informing education policy dialogue using participatory research, drawing on experiences from El Salvador, and shares lessons learned.

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## Introduction

Many countries are seeking to improve their education systems to ensure that children acquire the traditional basic skills while many others are actively seeking to develop new competencies for competing in a global market. Changing education systems so that children develop the skills they need is a complex process of planning, persuasion, implementation, monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting and improving interventions usually as part of an education policy reform. Decision-makers who formulate policy need to understand the causes of current problems and design strategies to remedy them. Good ideas are only good if they can be used, however, so stakeholders must embrace the changes. The challenge is to ensure that education reforms include stakeholders from the highest level government officials, to the schools, students and parents who directly benefit from the services and the private sector that employs educated citizens. It is easier to engage the first category of stakeholders than the other two. Yet unless all categories are involved, the process can be self-defeating. To bring about change in an education system means that all stakeholders must change the way they think and do things: the change could be miniscule or enormous.

Good education policy-making therefore requires making informed decisions based on an understanding of the challenges and potential strategies for meeting them as well as ensuring stakeholder buy-in. The first challenge assumes a process whereby policy-makers are informed by research, but more often than not, resources are wasted on a trial and error. The second challenge of involving stakeholders is rarely met as a small group of decision-makers typically make, impose and implement policy decisions on education stakeholders. Neither the rationale for the policy, nor an understanding on how to implement it nor simple agreement with it are always in place. Any of these conditions can thwart implementation.

This paper proposes that when the policy analysis and decision-making process is informed by research findings and involves stakeholders, the education policies developed may better respond to the education development needs of the country. The paper briefly describes several frameworks for informed, participatory policy formulation and discusses some experiences of education policy formulation in El Salvador that use this approach with different degrees of success. It proposes some lessons learned that may be helpful for education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, or anyone involved in educational change.

### **The Benefits of Participatory Research and Informed Dialogue on Policy Reform**

Haddad (1994) defines policy as “an explicit or implicit decision or group of decisions which may set out directives for guiding future decisions, or initiate, sustain or retard action, or guide the implementation of previous decisions.”<sup>1</sup> Policy formulation theory proposes several frameworks for process and defines the main steps as: i) an analysis of the situation and generating and evaluating different policy options; ii) making the policy decision; iii) planning implementation, and iv) monitoring and assessing the results and impact.

Each stage can be carried out in different ways. For example, in the first step, options can be generated and analyzed in terms of the level of participation, the use of information, and the depth of analysis of the situation and the options for change. Reimers and McGinn in *Informed Dialogue* (1997), define policy analysis as a synonym of research: “actions by persons that involve the compilation or organization of observable facts or data, and the arrangement of the data using analytic techniques, and the ability to explain or interpret the data in terms of non-observed concepts or constructs” (p.4). Policy analysis serves “to define problems and identify effective solutions for them...using research results or systematic methods to collect and analyze information for the purpose of generating understanding.” Policy-makers must analyze information from various sources, including results of similar interventions in other contexts, and/or relevant research. However sound policy decisions may also require the point of view of stakeholders which is not always represented in research findings. The point of view of key stakeholders is not the same as developing a shared understanding of a situation, which is important for each stage of the policy process. Stakeholders responsible for the later stages of the process (planning for implementation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of the results and impact) must be involved as a shared understanding of the situation emerges. If they are not, their interpretation of causes and solutions may be very different, or they may simply not be persuaded of the need for this policy intervention. A shared understanding of the problem among stakeholder

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<sup>1</sup>Haddad, W. *The Dynamics of Education Policy Making*, p. 4.

groups raises the likelihood of agreement and shared efforts in the detailed design and implementation of the interventions.

### **Common Obstacles to Formulating and Implementing Policy Effectively**

Informing policy decisions with research while remaining highly participatory are challenges for any decision-making process. Few bureaucracies and/or organizations allow for open dialogue and participation, especially on important policy topics, rather, they are commonly responsive to unforeseen needs, urgencies, and ad hoc demands, instead of pro-active planners. Information is therefore often used to respond to requests or publicize information or to make a programmatic, short-term decision. If research is carried out to inform policy or program decisions, this is rarely systematic. Few bureaucratic cultures are conducive to conducting policy analysis as described in this paper (as the organization, analysis, and interpretation of observable facts or data). Moreover, even if research is used to inform policy-making, this may not be sufficient for implementing policy. A new policy discourse may not change others' ways of making sense of the world unless those people who are directly affected are included in a decision-making process and dialogue.

### **Policy Formulation using Participation and Research**

This paper argues that policy formulation and implementation can be greatly enhanced and more effective if research and stakeholders play a part in it. It supposes that certain principles can apply in almost any context and that a conceptual framework for different ways of using research and participation in policy formulation and to analyze different experiences may therefore be useful.

Reimers and McGinn (*Informed Dialogue*, 1996) describe three models that are relevant here because they can accommodate experiences from El Salvador for the purposes of this discussion and analysis. Each model discussed below differs from model of policy-makers defining policy without research. None of these models is necessarily "better" or more "effective" than another. They are simply different and, depending on the context and factors at play in a given moment, one could be more useful than another.

#### ***Persuasion Model***

This approach to informing policy decisions assumes that researchers produce knowledge that they use to persuade policy makers to shape policy in a particular way. But, as McGinn and Reimers (2002) suggest, there may be several obstacles: i) policy makers may not be convinced by the researchers' methodology; ii) the availability of research is not sufficient to ensure that policy makers use the research. The proposed solution is marketing, or overcoming obstacles by persuasion: a "carefully crafted sales job that creates the feeling of inclusiveness and co-ownership of the reform process" and, in the best situation, "is inclusive and is in fact co-owned by all the stake-holders, as long as the consultative nature does not extend to the basic choices but creates ownership of the decisions after the fact."<sup>2</sup>

#### ***The Collective Interpretation Model***

This model gives priority to the interests of the decision-makers rather than the researchers (McGinn and Reimers, p. 83) who present the data. This model assumes that the policy maker is as able as the researcher to determine the most important information as s/he

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<sup>2</sup>*Informed Dialogue*, p. 81, remark by Luis Crouch.

understands the political context of the policy options. Here, then, policy makers and researchers work together at every different stage; decision makers are the ones to “shape this knowledge by negotiating which topics are important and which bodies of data are more pertinent to inform certain issues” (Reimers, F. and McGinn, N., 1997, p.105). The researcher serves the decision-makers who decides how the research should be used.

### ***Policy-Maker-Driven Research***

This model proposes a close relationship between policy-makers and researchers whereby they work together to build their knowledge. It acknowledges the political nature of the policy formulation but optimistically suggests that “more effective ways can be found to merge this process with technical analysis” (Reimers, F. and McGinn, N., p. 108). This model may be ideal for ensuring that research findings continue to be used to inform policy decisions and for strengthening ownership, but it also has its constraints, including the lack of academic training of many policy makers, time and resources.

### **Experiences of Education Policy Dialogue**

The experiences described here took place during 2003-2005 in El Salvador. The 2004 presidential elections had returned the ruling party, ARENA, to power. New ministerial appointments would close a period in which the Ministry of Education (MINED) had been working to implement a ten-year plan (1995-2005) that had been developed shortly after the end of the twelve-year civil war in 1992 to expand access and improve quality. The war had prevented around 20% of the country’s children from going to school, schools were in great disrepair and there were not enough qualified teachers. Several participatory assessments were carried out in 1993 and 1994, by Harvard University, a Salvadoran University (Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas, or UCA) and a Salvadoran research organization (Fundación Empresarial para la Educación, or FEPADE)) with financial and technical support from USAID/El Salvador. These assessments were used as the base for discussion with stakeholders from many ideological and societal groups in a series of workshops. An advisory committee was put together to lead the process. Also, meetings were held with the presidential candidates and other top policy decision-makers to discuss findings and recommendations for the education sector. The 10-year education plan took into account many of the recommendations from these participatory assessments. This experience was considered valuable both nationally and internationally, and set a precedent in El Salvador for widespread stakeholder participation in education policy dialogue. The lessons learned include the following: i) dialogue and communication with key stakeholders are essential to overcoming social and cultural barriers to reform; ii) joint research teams including Ministry of Education officials, local NGO specialists, and national academics help build new partnerships and increase ownership of results, and iii) focus groups and roundtable sessions provide valuable feedback to the Ministry of Education about stakeholders’ perceptions and priorities.<sup>3</sup>

As the Ministry of Education was ending its planning cycle, USAID/El Salvador was also concluding its five-year strategy. During this period of 2003-2005, USAID/El Salvador supported a “bridging” education project, Excellence in the Classroom at the Local Level

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<sup>3</sup>Some of these lessons learned are written up in the Social Development Notes, Note No. 79, March 2003, by Madalene O’Donnell and Parmesh Shah of the Participation and Civic Engagement Group in the World Bank.

(EXCELL), implemented by EQUIP<sup>4</sup> from June of 2003-June of 2005. This project aimed primarily at making school principals into pedagogical leaders to improve education quality. The project included participatory research and dialogue to inform education policy.

During this same two-year period (2003-2005), USAID/El Salvador was developing a plan for supporting the education sector for 2005-2009. To do this, USAID/El Salvador decided to carry out an assessment of the education system, focusing on pre-school-9<sup>th</sup> grade (primary education) using some of the same strategies used ten years before.

The context in 2003 was different in many ways than the context ten years previous, yet some factors were similar that made a similar process relevant. While the majority of the education stakeholders agreed that access was the main problem in 1993, ten years later the majority of stakeholders pointed to quality as the main problem. Furthermore, while overall indicators on access, completion, repetition, and drop out had improved greatly, those figures by socioeconomic groups varied greatly, pointing to issues in equity that had not been a policy priority. Polarization between the two ideologies had diminished substantially, yet there were several different influential groups with very different ideas about the best strategies for improving education quality. There had not been evaluations of many of the strategies implemented to improve quality during the previous ten years that would help to identify specific areas for improvement. In sum, while there was a general consensus on the overall problem being quality, there were many different views about the specific policies or interventions required to make a change in quality. The issue of specific policies focused on equity had not been part of the policy dialogue.

Participatory research and informed dialogue shaped education policy decisions although there was often less ongoing collaboration between decision-makers and researchers and more persuasion. Some decision-makers helped to shape the research agenda and constructs to analyze the data, in addition to interpreting the data and formulating recommendations with researchers. At this time there was also a change in government, and the incoming Minister of Education had worked in the education sector as an advisor and researcher. Using information for decision-making was a familiar practice to her, which opened up an opportunity for participatory research and dialogue to inform policy decisions.

### **Sector Assessment for Basic Education**

In 2003, USAID/El Salvador began a process to determine what areas of the education system should be supported in the 2004-2009 strategy. Several criteria were considered, including the 2004-2008 Central America and Mexico Strategy that had previously determined that USAID would focus primarily on Basic Education and complement rather than duplicate the work of other donors in education in the region. Within this, USAID/El Salvador was to work closely with the host government to determine the priority areas for support.

The 1993 participatory assessment supported by USAID/El Salvador had been relatively successful in terms of generating stakeholder participation, support, and national consensus for education priorities. It had also been done before the election and had helped the Ministry of Education to define its priorities and assist USAID in determining how to focus

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<sup>4</sup>The American Institutes for Research and the Academy for Education Development were the main partners in this project.

its support. For this reason, USAID/El Salvador, in 2003, decided to carry out a similar process, yet with more limited funding. A (mini) sector assessment would take place only for pre-school/kindergarten through 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The assessment team members were international and local education experts, several of whom had also been on the participatory assessment team of 1993.<sup>5</sup> The team reviewed relevant evaluations, studies, and policy documents, held in-depth interviews and focus groups with stakeholders from the government, NGOs, think tanks, school and community members, teachers, administrators, school principals, and others. A first draft assessment covered pre-school, basic education, inequalities in education, teacher education, decentralization, standards and testing, education finance, and donor coordination. Following the draft, each topic was discussed during a three-day forum to reach a consensus on priorities or goals, for the education sector.

The 200 forum participants included decision-makers and stakeholders from the MINED, Salvadoran public and private universities, local NGOs and think tanks, donor organizations, teachers, principals, students, and parents. Participants were encouraged to sign up for specific sessions before which they were to read 25-page assessment chapters. A facilitator led the discussions and tied the assessment findings into the discussion as much as possible.

The first round table session held was with a select group of influential decision-makers who are out-spoken on education policy. A second session was then held for each thematic area of the assessment: Equity in Education Opportunities, Teacher Education, Curriculum and Standards, Decentralization and School Autonomy, and Education Finance. As the World Bank had carried out an assessment of Secondary Education, its researchers held a session on Secondary Education as part of the series. Sessions consisted in half an hour presentation of the main findings after which five to ten-person subgroups were organized. A facilitator from each group used a problem tree as a conceptual and visual tool for orienting the discussion and getting concrete results. The problem and its cause were defined clearly and possible solutions proposed so far as possible. Extensive dialogue led the different groups to build upon the findings in the assessment, enrich the analysis and provide viable interventions to improve policies and programs. For example, a discussion of decentralization led one group to determine that EDUCO<sup>6</sup> had initially been designed to address educational access and quality but had then become simply a modality for hiring teachers. The recommendation for the future education plan was to revive the quality components of EDUCO.

In addition to the roundtable sessions, each participant received a questionnaire designed to gather opinions on policy priorities. Participants were asked to rate interventions (on a scale from 1-100) in terms of their probable effect on improving education quality (or more

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<sup>5</sup>Fernando Reimers (International advisor, also the main advisor in 1993), Richard Kraft (international), Ernesto Schiefelbein (an international expert also from the 1993 team), Renan Rapalo (international), Jose Luis Guzman (national expert from the 1993 team) and Anabella de Palomo (national expert).

<sup>6</sup>An internationally recognized "program" implemented by the Salvadoran Ministry of Education beginning in 1993 titled Education with Participation of the Community (EDUCO). The program was aimed at expanding access and improving teacher performance by delegating the hiring and firing of teachers to the community.

specifically, student learning) and the viability of its implementation. Some of the most highly-rated results included: i) training pre-school teacher to support reading and writing; ii) increasing the provision of books and stories to classrooms; iii) expand pre-school to incorporate the poorest children, and iv) assign the best teachers to first grade. Each intervention has been adopted as part of the education plan developed in 2005.

Two issues highlighted in the assessments findings became part of the education policy dialogue and priorities in the new education plan: expanding educational opportunities to the poorest sectors and ensuring that all primary school children become numerate and literate. Several factors helped to generate support for these decisions. First, data was gathered on educational access and repetition and analyzed by socio-economic groups, pointing to inequities. Data on reading and writing was also gathered by national test scores and in classrooms, which highlighted the lack of capacity of most third graders to read and write even at a basic level. These findings were highlighted in the main forum presentation and in each of the roundtable sessions. Furthermore, the international experts on the team met with some high-level decision makers and influential stakeholders for in-depth discussions on these problems and policy options that have been used internationally and/or were considered potentially effective. An interview with one international expert on these topics was published in one of the main newspapers. All of these actions involved persuasion and “selling” ideas and contributed to informing public opinion and generating support.

Several lessons can be drawn from the public forum and roundtables to improve this process in the future.<sup>7</sup> Education stakeholders commented that this process generated more awareness and facilitated a dialogue. Making information available prior to the sessions was essential, as was having facilitators focus the discussions and work towards a consensus. However, lack of diversity among participants was a drawback. Politically motivated during the pre-election period, the MINED was careful and concerned that findings and discussions could be manipulated for political purposes. Teacher union members, representation of traditionally confrontational or opposing non-government organizations, or political party representatives were not involved in the process, which necessarily limited the diversity of the views, the variety of interpretations and the buy-in from stakeholder groups.

The timing was both a limitation and an opportunity. Findings were shared while a new government was running for election. The new ideas were therefore available to be incorporated into the next national education agenda. Given the election, the administration had different priorities. Researchers did meet with the highest officials and integrate their concerns into the research agenda for the assessment, which helped to ensure a certain degree of support from these decision-makers. Lastly, this was not an isolated process. The suggestions for further research generated in the sessions became the major input for the research agenda to be carried out under USAID/El Salvador’s basic education project (see next section). This provided an opportunity to do further research on key topics and strengthen the arguments and solidity of the interventions in specific issues. Another important outcome was the decision to hold a seminar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education with the key education policy makers. This had been done ten years before and had been useful for developing a bond and consensus in this group and giving them an opportunity to enrich the policy analysis process with research findings and have the time and

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<sup>7</sup>Some of the lessons learned mentioned here are from a write up carried out by consultant Teresa Campos, through a task order with Creative Associates.

space for analyzing the options together. The seminar did take place a year later, in December, 2004.

One of the most important outcomes of this participatory assessment was that it led to a more encompassing sector-wide assessment that involved the major donors and local think tanks and NGOs. The Minister of Education who was to finish his term in May of 2004, wanted an assessment of all aspects of the education system, for which he requested support from other donors (the main one being the World Bank that was carrying out an assessment of secondary education) to integrate the assessments, the studies and the evaluations into one complete sector assessment. USAID/El Salvador and the World Bank provided support for two international consultants and funding to local NGOs and think tanks for this process. During the last month of the administration's mandate, discussion sessions were held in order to provide feedback to the findings. When the newly-appointed Minister took her position, she and her team decided to use the "Integrated Sector Assessment" as one of the main inputs for their new 16-year strategic education plan, Plan 2021, highlighting sector-wide policy priorities from early childhood education to higher education.

These assessments were carried out in a moment of transition, primarily of the Salvadoran government, but also for USAID and other donors support to the education sector. This made it more challenging to maintain ongoing discussion between researchers and policy makers (as in the "policy-maker-driven research" model). There were, however, opportunities to provide decision-makers with research findings and persuade them towards policy options based on these findings, such as specific interventions for improving quality and equity, as well as to generate public support for these policy issues.

### **Participatory Research and Informed Policy Dialogue under the USAID/El Salvador Basic Education Project**

The participatory education assessment helped to identify areas that required further research. The participatory research component of EXCELL was designed to inform education policy dialogue. Six studies were planned to take place in a two-year period although the study topics were not predefined: the research agenda was to be defined jointly with key education stakeholders. For this reason, the list developed as part of the roundtable sessions was used as an initial input. Shortly after this agenda was developed, a "research committee" was formed including MINED personnel from the Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation Unit, Planning Unit, and others, EXCELL researchers and members of the USAID/El Salvador Education unit. Other stages of the research had much more broadly-based participation, but the committee established to define the research objectives, methodology, constructs, and data was limited, and included personnel that contribute directly to shaping policy decisions. This research was carried out under one administration (before the new Minister was appointed in June of 2004) which allowed for continuity on ongoing dialogue and collaboration. Much of this was done using "negotiation" and "policy-maker-driven" approaches.

### ***Studies to Inform Public Dialogue***

The first study carried out as part of the research agenda addressed equity in education opportunities. While gender inequity in terms of access and education outcomes is not a

marked problem,<sup>8</sup> socioeconomic inequities are clear in national indicators broken down by income groups. The “roundtable” sessions had made it clear that a better understanding of the causes of inequities in access and education outcomes was needed, but the committee did not share a clear consensus about this research. Several MINED personnel voiced the opinion that sufficient research had been done on poverty and its effects on education opportunity, and that there was no more to learn on this topic that could inform policy decisions. After much discussion and dialogue, the committee agreed to do a study on education and human development, or how education contributes to improving human development at a micro-level. Terms of reference were agreed upon in the committee, and an international researcher hired to work with the Ministry of Education (MINED) personnel and the local researcher (from EXCELL). At that point, more specific objectives were developed aimed at examining differences in education inputs (mainly resources) and education outcomes (school completion and achievement). The international researcher, local researcher, and MINED personnel worked collaboratively to provide/organize the data. The researchers did the analysis but discussed it with the MINED personnel. Findings evidenced regressive spending to the poorest children (i.e. less poor children receive more public resources, especially when human resources, or teacher quality, is taken into account). Other findings addressed socio-economic and family (education) disadvantages to achieving the same education outcomes given the same inputs.

A public forum was held to discuss these findings at which Mexican researcher was invited to discuss how similar findings in Mexico led the government to implement compensatory programs, or programs focusing more resources and additional support to the poorest children. The Salvadoran Minister of Education spoke about the MINED’s plans to improve education opportunities. Working groups were formed and discussed the study’s findings and commentaries and suggested policy and program interventions to improve equity of education opportunities.

At that time, the government had announced a Presidential Commission to give inputs for Plan 2021, which consisted of influential business leaders and intellectuals. A special meeting was held to present the study to this group, which led to in-depth discussion of these problems and potential solutions.

Several lessons learned in this process may help inform similar processes. One of these has to do with the introduction of new ideas. Previous education policy dialogues in El Salvador had not examined inputs and outputs that improve the quality of education opportunity. International researchers introduced the constructs for analyzing the equality of opportunity by persuasion. Once persuaded, all stakeholders became engaged in the analysis. Another important lesson learned concerns the presentation of the information. The first draft of the study, that used advanced statistical methods, was incomprehensible to most members of the research committee, decision-makers and stakeholders. The international researcher was asked to make the study much more accessible and, ultimately, more influential.

This led to a new understanding of equality of education opportunity in the policy dialogue. It was also successful in terms of getting this issue on the new education agenda as a priority

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<sup>8</sup>Gender inequality in education in El Salvador tends to be revealed more by qualitative research, such as differential treatment in the classroom, yet is not reflected in national indicators.

and generated support from important allies such as the members of the Presidential Commission that would continue to emphasize it and help to generate solutions.

The two most challenging aspects of this process were sustainability of the local technical skills to do this type of analysis and of an ongoing discussion with stakeholders to implement interventions to improve the equality of education opportunities. This could have been remedied in part by involving a local NGO, think tank, or university from the outset of the process.

### ***Studies to Inform Private Dialogue***

International researchers used elements of the persuasion model in their work, but other studies drew more upon the collective interpretation and policy-maker-driven models. The first of these studies was about the uses and needs of information to improve education quality. The idea for this study arose from a discussion with the research committee that included members of the MINED Planning Unit and Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation unit interested in looking at how research was being collected and used at different levels of the education system. The discussion of the concerns and goals of these officials shaped the study design. As data was collected and analyzed, the members of the research committee helped interpret the findings. The findings illuminated ways to improve information collection and use, some of which involved structural changes. The choice of the MINED staff was to discuss this document internally first with staff members from their units, and to make recommendations to higher-level MINED officials. This instigated a process of reflecting upon the use of information which led in turn to carrying out more extensive assessments and eventually to moving towards structural changes.

The second study, which focused on how the MINED was addressing Special Needs Education, was also driven by policy-maker interests. It served to clarify concepts and to identify strengths and limitations in its implementation at the policy and classroom levels. A teacher guide to help identify and work with special needs children grew out of this, and was distributed to a large number of schools. This study did not lead to a public debate on special education or to any policy changes, however.

Finally, near the end of the basic education project, a descriptive study was carried out to identify the main characteristics of teachers using primarily qualitative research methods in which MINED staff and local researchers had not been trained. The aim was to analyze national level quantitative data on teachers and to complement this with focus groups, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews to understand teachers' motivations, interests, limitations, and goals. Again, MINED personnel and decision-makers were the principal shapers of the research. MINED staff were then trained in qualitative research methods and participated in recollecting, processing, and analyzing the data. The study led to the first draft of a document used for stimulating discussion about teacher education policy among an elite group of education stakeholders.<sup>9</sup>

Since USAID/El Salvador's education activity was coming to a close shortly after this initial forum, a local education think-tank was charged with improving the study based by sharing it with specialists in the field for feedback as well as generating further policy dialogue.

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<sup>9</sup>MINED officials decided not to disseminate the study as it was controversial and had not been entirely vetted by MINED officials.

However, it is uncertain whether they will meet this challenge for want of resources and ownership since they were brought in at the end phase of the process.

Each of the three studies involved researchers and policy makers in the design and interpretation of findings to generate policy options. Different factors influenced the degree to which persuasion, negotiation, or collective construction was used at each phase of the research and policy analysis process. These cases seem to demonstrate that the more policy-maker involvement there is there is also more uncertainty about the research being used for policy decisions. Because of the buy in, however, the effects of these more collaborative models may be seen in the longer term, rather the more immediate effects of the persuasion model. In all of the cases, the participatory research and dialogue on constructs and findings contributed to identifying new priorities and options for policy decisions. To help ensure the usefulness of the finding, more attention should be given to sustainability or the follow up on the studies' use.

### **Harvard Seminar to Inform Plan 2021**

The experiences described above address the ways that participatory research influences education policy. The following discussion focuses on using information that policy makers themselves seek to inform the process of designing policy.

In this case, the policy-makers included the Minister and staff engaged in developing a 16-year strategic education plan. While some policy directions had already been defined, many tasks remained, such as clearly defining goals and benchmarks and concrete programs and interventions for meeting the goals. In addition, although policy directions were somewhat clear, more definition was needed on the areas to emphasize, for example the grade at which to begin interventions.

The idea for this seminar had emerged from the roundtable with high-level education stakeholders in the participatory sector assessment carried out one year earlier. USAID/El Salvador financed about 15 people to attend a four-day seminar at Harvard Graduate School of Education. The planning process for the seminar involved several discussions between the Minister of Education and other top-level officials, members of USAID/El Salvador, and Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty. An agenda was developed based on Ministry interests and organized into three main areas: i) poverty and equity; ii) competitiveness; iii) standards, evaluation, and indicators to monitor Plan 2021, and, iv) long-term planning. Harvard Professors and other experts and practitioners were scheduled to discuss international research findings and policy implications for these topics. Several weeks before the seminar, the members of the group<sup>10</sup> received readings provided by the speakers and were asked to send questions that they wanted to have addressed in the sessions. Questions ranged from *what should be taken into account for pre-service teacher education* to *how a school for developing citizenship can be developed in El Salvador*. Planning sessions were also built into the seminar to work specifically on the education plan.

During the seminar, several tools were used to focus the discussion and build consensus. For example, the group collectively defined the criteria that should guide education policy and

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<sup>10</sup>The group included the Minister and Vice Minister of Education, the National Directors, members of the Presidential Commission for Education, and representatives of important NGOs and think tanks that work in the education sector.

then defined several long-term and short-term education priorities, as well as questions to think about in trying to make policy decisions on these priorities. For example, a long-term priority was to assure that all children have eleven years of schooling. The questions included the viability of this priority considering current secondary school enrolments and whether it would be better to focus on alternative modalities for schooling or only on traditional schooling. Also, in terms of introducing English as a second language, questions arose about the best time to introduce this in schooling. These questions were used as a basis for discussion in sessions with Harvard faculty and other specialists and in the planning sessions.

Another tool was a survey for participants to determine the relative importance of different interventions and how they related to short-term priorities. The results of this survey were processed and presented to the group and discussed. The participants also visited a number of schools and organizations in the area, including: a pilot school for children of poor families that sought to develop early literacy and interpersonal/civic skills from a young age; an organization working in civic education; a pre-service teacher education university, and a special project for technology in education at Massachusetts Institute for Technology.

The seminar was considered one of the four principal inputs that contributed to developing the new 16-year strategic education plan, Plan 2021.<sup>11</sup> Certain policies and programs in Plan 2021 were informed by research findings and international experience and by considering the different perspectives represented in the seminar group. Another, unplanned, outcome of the seminar was the creation of relationships and trust in the group that would lead to ongoing communication and coordination as this new strategic plan was implemented. Some seminar members were charged with monitoring the implementation of Plan 2021.

In this case, policy-makers' interests defined the agenda. The positive outcome was that policy issues were thought through, which included questioning assumptions and redefining priorities in some cases. Yet, as mentioned in the discussion of the models, constraints in both time and resources limited the degree to which the policy making process could benefit from this seminar. Due to time constraints of these stakeholders/policy-makers there was little opportunity for preparation, such as readings and discussions among this group prior to the seminar. Furthermore, due to limitations in time and resources, the seminar was only three days, which didn't give adequate time to cover all the priority issues in depth. While the policy-makers did have more ownership over the process than in the other approaches, the time and resource constraints turned out to be limiting factors.

### **Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

- There are various ways to inform policy decision-making using dialogue and research. Timing and circumstances contribute a great deal to this. Elements of any of the models that have been discussed may be useful at different stages of the process, and the political context is a key factor that can create limitations and opportunities. To identify opportunities and overcome limitations, a careful analysis can be carried out prior to initiating participatory research and dialogue on policy issues in order to understand the internal dynamics of the decision-making process and identify both allies and opponents (Grindle, M. 2000).

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<sup>11</sup>The other three inputs were the Integrated Assessment, a consultation process carried out at a national level, and the Millennium Challenge Account Goals.

- The role of the external researcher should be carefully determined on the basis of timing and context. Each of the models discussed in this paper give the external researcher a role to play, whether to introduce new concepts or constructs, participate in shaping research designs, helping to use specialized research methods to process information and interpret results, contributing to developing national capacity, or exchanging points of view based on his/her experience. The role should be carefully analyzed and defined at the outset.
- Tools are valuable for focusing discussions and for collectively constructing knowledge and building consensus. Tools could involve surveys, facilitated discussions, problem trees, frameworks, or any other means of leading a discussion toward the understanding of complex situations. For example, instruments that lay out policy options and gauge potential effectiveness and viability can help to focus discussion and generate consensus. Also, making complex research methodologies and findings comprehensible to laypersons can make valuable information much more effective for informing policy decisions.
- Paradigms change slowly and often require a process in which people critically reflect on their existing assumptions (Boggino, N. and Rosekrans, K. 2004). The process can be incremental or stimulate people to call their existing assumptions into question. It is helpful to have divergent perspectives represented to provoke the validity of deeply-held assumptions. The context may limit this: timing and using tactics to steer away from ideological discussions and center on common views must be kept in mind. Moreover, this is a reiterative process of dialogue and collective construction of knowledge, systematization of decisions, and more collective construction. Project cycles, political cycles, and resource constraints can all be limitations in this regard. Finally, paradigms can limit research design but dialogue can help to change the paradigms regarding research priorities.
- Education systems change slowly and require a complex process of planning and implementation. The challenges facing education systems currently require new knowledge about policy priorities and effective interventions for making the desired changes. The degree to which this knowledge can be created and shared collectively may make the difference in how this knowledge translates into new educational practices.

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