EQUIP2 State-of-the-Art Knowledge in Education

Policy Dialogue

A Guide to Education Project Design Based on
a Comprehensive Literature and Project Review

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INTRODUCTION TO POLICY DIALOGUE

Education policy refers to the laws and regulations that govern education systems. Unlike individual decision making, state decisions often result from many people and organizations interacting with each other within a complex institutional framework (Rui, 2007). The various stakeholders marshal their interests, resources and power and attempt to influence decision-making within educational systems. These interactions can often influence how the state acts or does not act with respect to education needs and interests.

The stakes in education policy can be quite high due to the number of people that may be impacted by decisions; the perceived importance of the issues; and the variety of stakeholders engaged (children and parents, teachers, school principals and administrators, politicians, religious leaders, academics, and private school owners). Societies need ways to address education policy that are consistent with broader development goals and encourage diverse stakeholders to find common ground. Policy dialogue is one way this can be accomplished.

WHAT IS POLICY DIALOGUE?

Policy dialogue comprises activities of direct or indirect communication that can mediate interactions among stakeholders in a constructive manner, giving voice to and optimizing outcomes for all parties engaged. These include, but are not limited to: forums, newspaper columns, mass media, informal conversations, research, online social media, legislative hearings, and lobbying. Dialogue is not the same as debate, where sides have a clear intent to win. It is also not political maneuvering, where stakeholders may be deliberately excluded by one or more parties to achieve an advantage. Dialogue is about talking through the issues and finding areas of agreement. This issue is particularly important in education, given the importance of a quality education for everybody in society.

Successful dialogue is as much an art as it is a technique. It has at least four key features:

1. It is informed,
2. Empowered,
3. Competent, and
4. Credible/legitimate (Alvarado & Somerville 2009).

A dialogue that is built on shared information has a common base of evidence that all parties can refer to and thus makes interests and needs more transparent. Empowerment tries to ensure that all parties come to the dialogue with comparable resources and an equal voice. Successful dialogue depends on participants being competent in voicing their needs, listening to others, and understanding the issues. Finally, the credibility or legitimacy of participants is critical to ensure that the outcome of a policy dialogue is accepted by the broader society. Technical assistance that seeks to promote policy dialogue should actively foster these four characteristics throughout the process.

There are many reasons why development partners may seek to foster education policy dialogue:

- Since Education for All (EFA) was adopted as a global goal, many practitioners have come to understand that access is not enough. In addition to being available, education must be of good quality; beyond going to school, children need to learn. Policy dialogue activities can support stakeholders in a country to develop a deeper understanding about what 'education for all' involves and facilitate opportunities to work together to achieve it.
- Education is more than just a service to prepare our children for the workforce: it is an important tool for the creation of national identity and social cohesion. Through dialogue, stakeholders can agree on the goals and means of education as a right that defines what it means to be a citizen (Ginsburg, Moseley & Pigozzi 2010; Rao, Morris & Sayed 2011).
- International donors and development supporters have increasingly acknowledged the need for successful education policy dialogue as an important component of education in contexts of fragility caused by natural disasters or human conflict (USAID 2011). The initial participatory definition of the goals of education and the nature of interventions have proved to be crucial to building the bases for sustainable development and democracy, and an education system that meets citizens' expectations (Burde 2006; Alvarado 2010). Dialogue is a systematic and non-confrontational way to accomplish these goals.
- Finally, the large and diverse nature of education constituencies is a practical reason for policy dialogue being especially important to the sector. Unlike other policy sectors, success in education depends on the semi-autonomous action of a large number of professionals–teachers throughout the system–who are at the same time active stakeholders and frequently influential members of local communities. Engaging teachers in dialogue acknowledges and leverages their positions of influence (Kirk and MacDonald, 2001; World Bank, 2010).

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE SUPPORT TO POLICY DIALOGUE

This document has been developed as a practice-based primer on providing support to policy dialogue. It acknowledges the different approaches to policy analysis, and seeks to identify some guidelines for effective policy dialogue support (USAID/EQUIP1, 2009) based on international best practices and lessons learned from the EQUIP2 project experience. Policy dialogue seeks specific outcomes, but it is a highly context-sensitive practice. Rather than following a static list of steps, effective support for policy dialogue should seek to apply experience-based guidelines to decision-making to promote better solutions in specific situations.

Guideline #1: In preparing for policy dialogue, it is important to recognize that specific interests are not the same as social needs.

By definition, policy dialogue brings together parties that often do not see eye-to-eye on educational issues. The existence of different, or even conflicting, interests should not be seen as a limitation or a problem, but rather as a reason for dialogue.

In preparing to provide support for dialogue, it is important for development partners to acknowledge that stakeholder interests are not the same as needs. Interests are gains they wish to obtain, either for the long term or the short term. Interests are intimately tied to stakeholders, and they may remain unchanged across a variety of issues. For example, a business stakeholder's interest in maximizing profit may lead to seeking an advantage in government contracting. However, it might equally lead to promoting education for all as a way to obtain a more productive workforce.

Needs, on the other hand, are related to the issues themselves and to society at large, rather than to the stakeholders. For example, if access to a quality education is valued as a human right, having a good school within reach can be seen as a need for society, beyond what any individual stakeholder may wish. Of course, this is a value-laden proposition: if society did not appreciate education per se, we would not perceive it as a good and pursue it as a need. However, in the context of fostering education policy, the value of education for all can be safely assumed to be a given.

While stakeholders' interests may include their needs, it is important to appreciate the difference between these two in fostering dialogue. While needs are aims that can be presented as shared among many stakeholders, it is their interests that lead them to become involved. As a means of finding common ground among stakeholders, support for dialogue should help clarify mutual needs, and, ultimately, satisfy specific interests. This approach points to two areas for practical work in providing support to dialogue: on the one hand, helping each stakeholder figure out the limits and

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differences between their own interests and shared needs and, on the other hand, helping all stakeholders work together to find the best way to address their joint needs.

Guideline #2: Keep your eye on the prize: help stakeholders focus on the outcome

Stakeholders in a policy dialogue are often deeply invested in the issues being discussed. The greater the perception that an outcome will affect key interests, the more they will be engaged on an ongoing basis. Nonetheless, the vested interest may also prevent them from recognizing wider social needs.

Keeping the focus of dialogue on the greater good is especially important as societies move from concerns about access to education—the substance of the original EFA challenge—to the more ambiguous issues of education quality (Ginsburg, Moseley & Pigozzi, 2010). EFA defined a universal goal for all stakeholders engaging in education policy: ensuring all children entered schools and completed a primary education. This challenge has expanded, as concerns have grown for ensuring that children not only go to and remain in school, but actually acquire the knowledge they need to live a productive and fulfilling life.

Agents supporting dialogue can help stakeholders keep their focus on mutual objectives (World Bank, 2011). For example, in supporting dialogue, development partners should think about how to present the common goal of education quality to all stakeholders in a compelling and positive manner. For teachers it might be by focusing on professionalism, while for legislators it could be about 'getting more bang for their buck.' Suggesting such objectives is also critical to move dialogue forward.

Guideline #3: Policy processes are different from policy outcomes, and both are important

Both stakeholders and development partners have powerful reasons to wish that policy dialogue lead directly to concrete outcomes. But dialogue is a demanding activity. It requires that stakeholders invest time, money and political capital. Therefore, they need to have something to show for their efforts. Development partners equally need to justify the resources spent in providing support for dialogue overseas to their legislators, funders and citizens.

However, policy dialogue resembles more the rearing of a child than the production of widgets in a factory (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002). An approved policy can be thought of as the outcome of a dialogue process, just as a well-adjusted adult

can be thought of as the outcome of careful nurturing. In each case, the interactions between parties—parents relating to their children, participants in dialogue learning from each other—are frequently as important as the more concrete outcome, and neither is part of a simple step-by-step process. Trust is built through interaction, and so is mutual understanding. Both are important to build continuously throughout the process. Stakeholders only have a chance to understand each other when they spend time together, talk to each other and become acquainted. The more opportunities, both formal and informal, for this to happen, the more likely they will understand their shared needs. Support for dialogue, should try to ensure that sufficient time is provided and a positive environment exists for people to build trust.

Because of the need for time to develop relationships, when support for dialogue is limited to support for outcomes, there is a risk that processes will not 'mature' and outcomes either will not satisfy stakeholder interests and/or needs, or that outcomes will be ignored. Agents supporting dialogue can help by creating opportunities for stakeholders to spend time together in a non-confrontational environment. Examples might include study tours that examine experiences in other countries, thus focusing everybody on a common, non-contentious subject. Similar opportunities might be presented in workshops that address technical issues in informal contexts. In addition, structured dialogues can be useful in laying out rules for acknowledging conflict without breaking down the conversation. Such dialogue would explicitly and systematically handle issues with high levels of agreement first, a strategy frequently adopted in peace negotiations.

Guideline #4: Acknowledge that dialogue and negotiation are related but distinct.

Another critical distinction to make is between dialogue and negotiation. While in negotiation, parties come together with a clear intent to win. Dialogue is open ended; therefore parties have the chance to discuss and learn about the issues and develop their understanding of each others' positions. Under ideal circumstances these interactions would enhance everybody's engagement with the common need.

At the same time, dialogue and negotiation are not mutually exclusive. Informed dialogue can help ensure that critical issues at the interface between needs and interests stay at the forefront of discussions, rather than a focus on resolving conflicting interests without considering the common need and the common good. This does not mean that dialogue precludes dissent. The dialogue process acknowledges differences, and establishes mechanisms to address it constructively.

Indeed, false consensus built on insufficiently discussed issues can be as difficult to resolve as open confrontation (Power, 2007).

Development partners can play an important role in moving the process from negotiation to dialogue. As independent parties, donor agencies can serve as guarantors when there is mistrust among stakeholders. As facilitators they can promote the use of techniques that lead participants to accept partial solutions as progress, rather than making success dependent on agreement on all points. As technical advisers they can provide input that helps everybody focus on the shared core issues. For example, policy dialogue support projects in post-conflict countries have helped both governments and leaders of rebel forces focus on the very real and shared problems of incorporating informal teachers into the national civil service and providing pedagogical support to rural schools in sparsely populated areas, rather than on their respective political and ideological differences.

Guideline #5: Your advantage is technical

As suggested above, one of the main reasons for development partners to become involved in policy dialogue is to provide technical support. This is both a responsibility and an opportunity. It is a responsibility because engaging with local stakeholders in policy dialogue is complex and potentially disruptive (Brock-Utne 2000). Clear benefits should be available to justify involvement. International technical expertise that brings lessons from multiple other contexts to bear on specific cases can provide one significant benefit. Expertise in effectively organizing and synthesizing large-scale consultation processes is another.

Providing technical support for policy dialogue also offers considerable opportunities for supporting educational development in societies (AED, 2010). When trust is built, development partners can help open avenues for discussion that stakeholders might not have recognized. For example, in post-conflict societies where concerns about their legitimacy lead stakeholders to emphasize education coverage, development partners can help introduce critical but frequently postponed issues, such as the need for standards and assessment to ensure quality.

Guideline #6: Share information

Information is power. Parties to a negotiation about policy recognize this issue, and frequently attempt to control data and information flows as a way to increase their advantage vis-à-vis other stakeholders. Governments are in an especially advantageous position in this regard, as they regularly collect large amounts of data about a variety of issues, such as the demographic trends that drive demand for education and about

educational services delivery and performance. At the same time, government officials may be reluctant to share such information with other stakeholders, claiming official privilege of one sort or another.

There are several reasons why support for dialogue requires an opposite approach, towards data and information sharing (Moses, 2004; Winkler & Herstein, 2005). First, as pointed out previously, dialogue is not about advantage to one side, but rather about all parties talking through the issues. If stakeholders are to engage productively, they must fully understand the issues and therefore have access to the relevant data (Dzinyela, 2001). For example, a ministry of education and a teachers union can be equally well served by having access to the same accurate information about the number of teachers, their qualifications and their location. Furthermore, having access to data removes at least one excuse for parties that are reluctant to engage in dialogue.

Additionally, when information about the issues is not freely shared, dialogue can be diverted by disagreements about whose sources are to be used, and why, instead of focusing on the policy issues themselves. For example, discussions between a legislature and the ministries of finance and education about funding for education may become derailed if parties can't agree on the correct number of students by age group. Finally, monitoring agreements requires information. Therefore, credible data available to all stakeholders are critical to monitoring implementation and performance of policies, and requiring accountability from implementers (Alvarado & Somerville, 2009).

Enhancing the availability, access, and quality of data and information for all parties is an outstanding way for development partners to support dialogue. Not only do they have access to international expertise and experience that can be applied to the development of better information systems; they also have the relative independence that can give the information credibility in the eyes of all those engaged in dialogue.

It is important to note that information for dialogue differs from information for institutional planning and management in an important respect. Public institutions frequently have expertise to interpret information that goes far beyond that of other stakeholders. An important way in which development partners can help dialogue is by 'translating' and presenting information in ways that make sense to non-expert participants (LeCzel, 2006; Winkler, 2004). Recent developments in information technologies, such as widely available geographical information systems and interactive web intelligence dashboards, as well as printed data and information

discussion guides, are some of the resources that donors can contribute to foster dialogue.

Guideline #7: Build capacity

Capacity building refers to two distinct dimensions of dialogue: (1) The need for stakeholders, both institutional and individual, to further develop skills, attitudes and practices to engage effectively in dialogue; and (2) the ability to develop and deploy skills, attitudes and practices conducive to successfully implementing agreements reached through dialogue (Ansell, 2002; Pelkonen, Terävainen & Waltari, 2008). The discussion below focuses only on the first type of capacity building—that for engaging in dialogue—as a dimension where donor support can be very valuable.

Capacity for dialogue has three aspects: (1) capacity to listen to others; (2) capacity to voice one's own perceptions, needs and interests; and (3) capacity to interpret issues. Capacity to listen is perhaps the most critical aspect of dialogue and distinguishes it from political debate or negotiation. In dialogue, parties need honestly to engage with each other's position and attempt to understand each other, rather than simply win a rhetorical argument. Development partners can often help by providing methodological support—training in rules of parliamentary engagement, for example—but also content support, for example through background papers that help parties understand each other on the issues.

Capacity to voice is also important (Global Forum on Local Development, 2010). Frequently, parties begin dialogue from very different positions of power. Some may be unaccustomed to being heard, while others may be unaccustomed to listening to others. Development partners can help to facilitate dialogue by providing time, space, and other assistance, while helping build the self-confidence of the weaker parties to present their positions.

Finally, capacity for interpretation of the issues is necessary for productive dialogue. This issue is intimately linked to the availability of shared, good quality information, but goes beyond this to the capacity for understanding what that information says about the issues. Donors can provide support to this process by mobilizing expert advice, preparing policy briefs that analyze the issues, and sharing these in a manner that levels the playing field among stakeholders.

Guideline #8: Change takes time: be patient... and flexible
Education policy is governed by complex, multi-layered sets of relationships and institutions. Creating meaningful change throughout the system can be a long, difficult process. Success usually comes from slowly elevating the discussion over time.

Three implications about development assistance for education policy dialogue are important for those seeking to support the dialogue process through development projects. First, it is important to understand and respect all stakeholders (USAID, 2010; Zosa-Feranil, Green & Cucuzza, 2009). Second, support should be based on conservative expectations about what can be accomplished in the short term, defining limited but concrete outcomes that are achieved collaboratively and lead to longer-term goals. Finally, assistance should be flexible and persistent. It is inevitable that challenges will be faced, plans will be derailed, and efforts will be wasted. Development partners and stakeholders should be prepared to start over when initiatives stall or need new direction. It is important not to focus primarily on short-term gains, but to keep the end game in view and work towards it. Donor agents that understand the lessons of unintended consequences of the dialogue process can work with stakeholders to develop flexible approaches and play important roles mediating between the ordinary pressures of an administration intent on moving funding pipelines and presenting deliverables, and the realities of a social and political environment that works according to its own long-term process.

Guideline #9: In dialogue, seek the critical mass
"Leadership is necessary, but leaders are incidental." In providing support to policy dialogue it is important to keep the buy-in by individuals in positions of leadership at the forefront of the process. Ensuring that credible and committed representatives remain at the dialogue table is essential for success, especially in the implementation process. But, successful policy development is about systemic change that goes beyond the leaders to engage a critical mass of teachers, lower-level ministry officials, and ordinary citizens who share a new vision about a policy issue.

Increasingly researchers find that complex social processes—such as the effective rule of law, valuing education highly in a society, or widespread violence—depend on social systems reaching a 'tipping point' when a sufficient proportion of individuals moves in the same direction and produces change in the social structure. This is an important insight for supporting policy dialogue. It is not enough to have 'the right people' in the room. The question is to what degree participants in dialogue are linked to the broader society in a way that can reach and mobilize the 'critical mass'

needed for change. Understanding the internal structure of stakeholder networks through methodologies such as Social Network Analysis (SNA) can help get a handle on this important question (Knoke & Yank, 2008). For the same reason, it is not enough to disseminate messages through mass media, if these do not mobilize a 'critical mass' of networked citizens.

Networks are the comprised of social and cultural persistence, and of resistance to change. Critical mass is the reason process is as important as outcome and patience is an indispensable ingredient for policy dialogue. It is processes of dialogue that build and rebuild networks and over time networks can become a critical mass of committed citizens.

CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE POLICY DIALOGUE SUPPORT

The challenges considered in this section are those that limit or put at risk the provision of support, not those that arise from dialogue itself.

Time pressure

As has been argued above, policy dialogue is as much about process as about outcomes and requires time for relations to develop among stakeholders. When stakeholders or supporters face overly tight deadlines they may agree to decisions and outcomes that they may be unwilling or unable to honor later. While some time pressure may be helpful to keep a conversation going and participants engaged, making an artificial deadline only engenders a false sense of accomplishment.

Development partners' attention to time frames can unintentionally complicate the dialogue process. Because donor representatives have annual work plans to report against and budgets to spend, they may be inclined to pressure participants and shorten processes to have results to show. One way partners can address these challenges in timing is to develop scenarios defining both pessimistic and optimistic outcomes along with the respective time frames.

Historical contingencies

Stakeholders may engage honestly in productive dialogue, yet not obtain tangible results if the broader context changes. For example, education sector stakeholders may agree to a budget increase that addresses historical inequities in educational investment, only to be set back by a fiscal crisis denying the ministry of education the resources required to fund the increase.

Programs in support of dialogue need to identify risks and define associated contingency plans, but also recognize that even under the best circumstances they will not be able to identify all potential challenges. Planning may reduce uncertainty, but will never do away with it entirely. This should be factored into schedules and budgets along with risk assessments.

Competing goals

Dialogue is just one among a variety of activities that institutions engage in, or that development partners support. Despite its value, stakeholders may decide that in the short term other means of engagement—such as direct negotiation—may be good enough for their ends. Similarly, over time development partners' home offices may change priorities and leave country representatives and their commitment to support a dialogue process stranded. Program managers can minimize such risks to dialogue by raising awareness about its importance among institutional leaders; highlighting the relationship between support for dialogue and institutional priorities (World Bank, 2011); and programming funds flexibly so policy dialogue results can be accomplished through a variety of mechanisms (Gakusi, 2010).

Tunnel vision

Even in the best of cases, policy dialogue is an indirect way of obtaining results. It is about establishing the conditions that sustain and institutionalize interventions, and dialogue strengthens the legitimacy of such policies. Therefore, it is important that efforts supporting dialogue be preceded by, or start with, awareness-building and information-sharing about the aims, potential, and limitations of such an approach. Doing this initial groundwork for policy dialogue can foster consensus within the donor agency and among stakeholders themselves.

Resource limitations

Support for policy dialogue is a low-cost, high-value activity. While the support to policy dialogue frequently requires expensive unit inputs (e.g., high-cost technical advisers, facilitators, and sophisticated research or communications resources), establishing a conversation among stakeholders, whether directly or indirectly, is generally a lot cheaper than providing or strengthening actual education services. The structure of donor budgets or their procurement criteria may complicate funding for a policy dialogue support activity. A cost-benefit analysis is one way to provide a stronger argument in favor of policy dialogue support, while also pushing those in charge of implementation to clarify their goals and define the value of expected outcomes.

INDICATORS FOR TRACKING POLICY DIALOGUE SUPPORT

Institutional learning depends on tracking policy outcomes (Chapman & Quijada, 2008). This idea applies to policy dialogue as well. An indicator system that tracks support to policy dialogue should be sensitive to policy outcomes (the desired policies), policy processes (the development of relations among stakeholders), policy inputs (the support provided to policy dialogue), and policy context (the risks and constraints faced by the dialogue process).

Given the ongoing nature of policy dialogue, a useful set of indicators must not just detect the status of issues and dialogue, but also the trends—progressive or regressive—in these.

Table 1 details an extensive list of possible indicators along the continuum from inputs to outcomes in policy. The actual number and choice of indicators will be the result of a compromise between available information, reporting parsimony, management needs, and availability of resources. Efforts should be made to include indicators from all dimensions; to conduct baseline, follow-up, and impact data collections and assessments; and to favor the use of routinely collected data over case-specific data collections.

Table 1. Illustrative Variables and Indicators for Tracking Policy Dialogue Support

Dimension	Illustrative Variables and Indicators

Policy outcomes	• Specific measures of education quality, access, retention and equity:
	  – General
	  – By sex
	  – By ethnicity
	  – By geographical location (urban, rural, specific)
	  – By socioeconomic status or income

Policy Context	• Measures of risk and constraints on policy outcomes: – Internal to stakeholders (e.g., degree of power, level of resources, degree of commitment, degree of centrality, degree of connectedness)

	– External to stakeholders (e.g., level of fragmentation or connectedness, number and nature of competing issues, overall availability of resources) – Derived from support to stakeholders (e.g., level of commitment of support, resources that can be mobilized)

Policy Outputs	• Presence or absence of issue-specific government policy statements:
	  – Law
	  – Written policy
	  – Institutional regulation or administrative tools
	  – Statements by leaders and administrators to the media
	• Presence or absence of issue-specific government policy actions:
	  – Applications of law, regulation or administrative tools (absolute number, proportional to cases)
	  – Issue-specific budget allocations and expenditures

Policy Processes	• Level of progress and trend in policy formation (to be measured against a rubric, can both progress or regress from one stage to the next):
	  – Issue acknowledged
	  – Issue in discussion
	  – Agreement in ends
	  – Agreement in means
	  – Agreement on resources
	• Inclusiveness in policy formation:
	  – Number and nature of stakeholders involved (absolute and as proportion of all stakeholders)
	  – Degree of centrality of stakeholder representatives (degree to which representatives are linked to others in society)
	  – Density of stakeholder networks (number of links between stakeholders and others in society)
	  – Exhaustiveness of stakeholder networks (proportion of total stakeholders engaged in dialogue)

	• Intensity of policy dialogue: 　– Frequency of interactions 　– Duration of interactions 　– Power of stakeholders (relative to each other) 　– Degree of mobilization of stakeholders • Efficacy of policy dialogue: 　– Rate of progress and conclusion of issues treated
Policy Inputs (dialogue support provided)	• Progress in policy and social network mapping: 　– Stakeholders identified 　– Stakeholder interests identified 　– Stakeholder power determined 　– Stakeholder networks mapped • Dialogue activities planned and organized (e.g., fora, workshops): 　– Number, frequency, topic, participants • Information resources provided: 　– Type of data available 　– Type of information available 　– Degree of standardization of information 　– Degree of credibility and/or legitimacy of information 　– Presence/absence and/or type of information tools developed 　– Type of information accessed 　– Type of information used (cited, referred to) and/or applications made of information 　– Monitoring and evaluation measures available 　– Monitoring and evaluation measures used • Communications resources provided: 　– Degree of development of a communication strategy: developed, implemented 　– Degree of progress in communication tools: developed, in use 　– Degree of progress in content use: disseminated, perceived, understood, applied

	• Dialogue institutions established:
	  – Degree of permanence of institutions (remain until issue resolved)
	  – Level of inclusiveness of institutions (engage all relevant stakeholders equally)
	  – Level of efficacy of institutions (contribute significantly to resolving issue)

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