



# EQUIP2 LESSONS LEARNED IN EDUCATION POLICY DIALOGUE

A Guide to Education Project Design,  
Evaluation, and Implementation Based on  
Experiences from EQUIP2 Projects in  
Zambia, Guatemala, and El Salvador

By Stephanie Lehner and Felix Alvarado



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# ACRONYMS

AO	Agreement Officer (USAID)
AOTR	Agreement Officer's Technical Representative (USAID)
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EQUIP	Education Quality Improvement Project
ICPD	In-Country Project Director
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOH	Ministry of Health
NEA	National Education Accounts
PS	Permanent Secretary
PMP	Performance Management Plans
RFA	Request for Applications
SO	Strategic Objective
SWAp	Sector-Wide Approach
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



In any education system, policies exist that describe, for example, who will be educated, how long for, in what curriculum areas, by whom, where, and how much public and private funding will be needed (Alvarado 2011). Education policies of this kind exist at all levels of the system and provide a transparent definition of a country's, region's, district's, or school's intent to provide quality education for its citizens. The stakes in education policy decisions are high, regardless of the level at which policy is defined, because of many factors—the large number of people affected, the perceived importance of the issues, the proportion of public and private funds spent, and the range of stakeholders engaged (including children, parents, teachers, school principals, administrators, politicians, religious leaders, academics, business community). Therefore, to arrive at a policy that will be both widely accepted and implementable, dialogue among all the stakeholders is critical. Policy dialogue is, as a result, a process of talking through the issues with the stakeholders to arrive at a shared understanding of the goals and means of education and a common stated policy.

For international donors, providing assistance to the MOE at all levels of the system through the process of policy dialogue is one way of supporting developing nations and post-conflict countries, to shape specific education policies to better meet their national needs, the individual needs of their citizens, and global goals for education. For USAID, support for policy dialogue is an essential component of any effort to support large and small-scale, country-led programs that hope to have sustainable impact on literacy levels, or enrollment numbers in primary, secondary, or tertiary education or workplace training programs. In this capacity, donors like USAID are ideally positioned to provide the resources needed to better inform the dialogue process, create a forum for dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders, and bring in the expertise needed to ensure the credibility and legitimacy of the process and the end result. The kind of support and its ability to successfully mobilize multiple stakeholders in a process of country-led education reform is, therefore, the topic of this paper.

The USAID-funded Educational Quality Improvement Program 2 (EQUIP2) has provided assistance to governments in various countries in policy dialogue over the past seven years. For this study, three EQUIP2

projects were selected that were implemented by different agencies within the EQUIP2 consortium, in Zambia, Guatemala, and El Salvador between the time period 2003 and 2011. While the main focus of all the projects was to support developing and clarifying national education policy, the projects in Zambia and El Salvador also supported provincial, district, and school policy dialogue that would lead to improved education access and quality. The review sought to draw out the lessons learned pertaining to designing, implementing, and evaluating effective policy dialogue programs.<sup>1</sup> From these lessons, a set of recommendations are made to inform the future design, implementation, and evaluation of this type of project.

### **EQUIP2 Associate Awards with Policy Dialogue Components**

#### **ZAMBIA: Improving Information and Strengthening Policy Implementation<sup>1</sup>**

**Final Award:** \$26,473,991

**Time Frame:** March 2004 – June 2011

The Zambia EQUIP2 Project began in March 2004, and grew out of a previous ED\*ASSIST and EMIS (Education Management and Information System) project with the Ministry of Education (MOE). Over time, it evolved into a multi-component strategy to strengthen the MOE in its ability to lead and engage with national and international stakeholders to reach education goals. The project comprised several components that provided technical assistance to the education system. These included institutional management and development, policy and research, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, EMIS, ICT infrastructure and web resource development, education leadership development, school health and nutrition, and HIV in the workplace programs.

The Policy and Research Component aimed to assist the MOE to strengthen its ability to develop and implement policies that address education priorities and gaps in access, equity, quality, and efficiency. Housed within the MOE, activities under this component emphasized building the individual and institutional capacity to conduct decision-oriented research, engage in evidence-based decision making, and carry out school-quality-inspired studies at various levels of the education system. Closely coupled with the Policy and Research component, therefore, were the other components whose activities directly and indirectly supported and enabled the policy dialogue process.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources: Strengthening the Capacity of the MOE to Reach National and International Education Goals: The Story of EQUIP2 Zambia; and “Zambia: Improving Information and Strengthening Policy Implementation” viewed at [www.equip123.net/webarticles/anmviewer.asp?a=367&z=28](http://www.equip123.net/webarticles/anmviewer.asp?a=367&z=28) on August 1st 2011.

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<sup>1</sup> This lessons-learned paper is closely linked to the EQUIP2 SOAK: Policy Dialogue

### **GUATEMALA: Social Investment Diálogo 1, 2, 3, & 4<sup>2</sup>**

**Diálogo 1:** 2004 – 2005, **Final Award:** \$650, 000 (Cost share \$2,237,439)

**Diálogo 2:** 2005 – 2007, **Final Award:** \$2,546,711 (Cost share \$1,476,242)

**Diálogo 3:** 2007 – 2009, **Final Award:** \$4,300,000

**Diálogo 4:** 2009 – 2011, **Final Award:** \$5,000,000

The Guatemala Social Investment Diálogo projects were a series of four interrelated USAID-funded activities focused on increasing and improving investment in education (and later on also health). In Diálogo 1 and 2, the project facilitated conversations established and led by the MOE by providing technical assistance. Drawing on a wide range of government and non-government stakeholders, policy dialogue support activities sought to build consensus and generate widespread support on the need for increased investment in education. In Diálogo 3, policy dialogue continued with an intensified research and communications agenda. This led to an increased focus on developing information systems for management, where data and information collected would further support the process of dialogue. Diálogo 4, still in its early stages when interviews for this paper were carried out, built further on Diálogo 3, but with expanded attention to extending the capacity and involvement of stakeholders at all levels of the system, and support for local government and local leadership in education and health.

### **EL SALVADOR: Strengthening Basic Education<sup>3</sup>**

**Final Award:** \$11,365,146. (Cost share \$3,920,419)

**Time Frame:** December 2005 – September 2012

The EQUIP2 Strengthening Basic Education Project is still ongoing at the time of this study, and comprises activities to assist the MOE's efforts to achieve El Salvador's national education goals. Activities take place under two key components. In component one, project activities support and inform dialogue around key education policies aimed at increasing social investment in education, decentralization, and improving basic education opportunities. The project has established an information system for the MOE and developed National Education Accounts among other tools to assist the MOE in improving the accountability, transparency, and investments in education. In the second component, project activities focus on improving basic education by developing Spanish language national textbooks and by improving school administration under a school management improvement program tailored to school principals, department directors, and technical teams at the central level of the MOE. The project also supports the MOE's efforts to tackle mismatches between education supply and demand in rural and urban areas by developing a comprehensive strategy to bring about school consolidation and the creation of school clusters. The two components are interrelated and activities that happen at the school level inform policy dialogue in the MOE, and vice versa.

2 Sources: M. Bernbaum, 2010, Guatemala Project Descriptions (unpublished draft); and <http://gec.aed.org/latinamerica/abelinkguate2.htm>

3 Sources: <http://www.equip123.net/webarticles/anmviewer.asp?a=510>



# METHODOLOGY USED TO CARRY OUT THIS REVIEW

As with all the papers in this EQUIP2 series, this review used a qualitative approach to better understand human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. The main methods used in the study included interviews and document reviews. It is important to point out that this review is not an evaluation of each Associate Award, but rather an investigation of how each project was implemented, the challenges faced, and the factors that limited and enabled project activities as seen by those involved over the life-time of the project.

## PREPARATION OF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL, SUMMARY /MATRIX, CONSENT FORM FOR EACH PROJECT

To prepare for this review, an interview protocol was first developed and piloted and consent forms issued. In addition, a summary and a matrix were developed for each country case. The information for the country summary and matrix was taken primarily from the Request for Applications (RFA) and corresponding proposal and was used as a reference point during the interviews.<sup>2</sup> Key topics raised in the interview protocol may be found in the textbox below.

## TOPICS ADDRESSED IN INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. EQUIP2 project's development hypothesis (or what the project wanted to accomplish related to its goal) related to the program and the assumptions underlying the hypothesis.
2. Key project activities related to the policy dialogue part of the program: what they were; why they were selected; the assumptions linked to the activities and their validity; whether the activities led to the expected outcomes; if not, why.

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<sup>2</sup> The summary and matrices for each project contain information on: life of project funding, project start and end dates, the country and education context, role of other donors, the project purpose and key activities.

3. Adequacy of time frame and funding for what the project wanted to accomplish related to the policy dialogue part of the program.
4. Extent to which the project built in sustainability, the extent to which sustainability was achieved (or not), and why.
5. Whether the project led to outcomes that were expected and, if not, why.
6. Adjustments made, if any, to: project activities, budget, and timeframe.
7. Project monitoring and evaluation: indicators selected to assess project impact and track activity progress in the policy dialogue part of the program; which were most useful and why; how the information collected was used; are there other indicators that would have been more useful.
8. Successes and challenges related to implementing the program: aspects of the project that were most successful and why; biggest challenges encountered in managing the project and how addressed.
9. Ability to adapt to changing circumstances/as needed reprogram or change aspects of the program.

## INTERVIEWS CARRIED OUT USING THE PROTOCOL AND SUMMARY DOCUMENTS

Interviews took place during 2010. At this point all three projects were still active and, though only some interviewees had been with the project since its inception, most of the interviewees were active on the project at the time of the interviews. A summary of interviewees from each project is found in Table 1.

**Table 1: Total number of people interviewed by country and affiliation**

	Total	Project Staff	MOE	USAID
Zambia	7	5	2	2
Guatemala	4	3	0	1
El Salvador	7	4	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>

After all the interviews were completed, notes and transcripts were analyzed to explore why and how certain factors supported effective policy dialogue or acted as barriers to the process. These factors were then condensed into lessons learned and in the conclusion, are used to generate a series of recommendations for consideration when designing, implementing, and evaluating projects focused on supporting policy dialogue.





# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EQUIP ASSOCIATE AWARDS

The analysis of the interviews and project documents from Zambia, Guatemala, and El Salvador provided many useful insights into an often uniquely challenging arena where policy dialogue support is a complex set of processes and activities with a wide variety of stakeholders. Of particular note were eight central lessons learned that each project highlighted as pivotal in the project's success. Each lesson learned did not guarantee project success, but contributed, along with many other contextual factors, to providing the setting in which the process of policy dialogue could be better supported.

## 1. PROVIDE LEADERSHIP TO ACCOMPANY A MINISTRY-LED PROCESS

Each project recognized that supporting Ministry-led policy dialogue requires project leadership that is capable of positioning the project within the MOE, accompanying the process by listening to and understanding the needs of the stakeholders, and mobilizing the skills and technical contributions necessary.

The importance of finding this type of project leadership was demonstrated in Zambia where initial engagement in policy dialogue stalled for over a year under the leadership of the first two In-country Project Directors (ICPDs). Only with the leadership of the home office project director and the recruitment of a third ICPD—a Zambian already known and highly respected within the MOE—did the policy dialogue agenda truly take hold. As a national, referred to as a Senior Technical Advisor rather than ICPD and embedded physically within the MOE offices, the ICPD together with the home office director worked on a day-to-day basis to build confidence and trust in the project. Over time this strategy gained them access to the offices of MOE staff, including that of the Permanent Secretary (PS). By spending many hours talking with the PS as well as MOE counterparts at all levels, the project was able to work alongside, rather than lead, the

MOE and accompany them as they sought to research and analyze policy issues when they arose. When the project successfully responded to the PS's need for data and information to present at the Annual Sector Review and deliver the Education Statistical Bulletin, the project secured its place at the policy dialogue table and in the PS's team. Other stakeholders and the donor community at large also no longer saw the project as competition, but as supporting the leadership of the MOE and the decision making process within the MOE overall structure and the extensively SWAp donor environment. When, in year 4, the project increased in scope and complexity and needed a new ICPD with different credentials, the project took care to identify someone who was respected and trusted within the MOE, as well as possessing the technical capabilities necessary. With the advent of a new ICPD—as well as at other times when key actors changed (i.e., the life of the project saw three Ministers, two new Permanent Secretaries, two Planning Directors, a reorganization of the MOE structure)—the project had to periodically take time to establish new relationships and allow the role of the project in the policy support agenda to reemerge. Instrumental at these times was the full support and understanding of the USAID mission staff whose own timelines did not always follow the political timeline of this complex, relationship-dependent policy dialogue process and who had to learn to take a back seat in an MOE-led agenda.

In Guatemala over time, the project team also sought to develop a very close and supportive relationship with the MOE, in particular the Minister of Education. The initial challenge for the project leadership (that included the ICPD as well as a team of technical advisors) was to show the Minister of Education that the project was a resource that she could tap into to strengthen her capacity to lead the discussions on education policy at a national level. This was achieved by establishing an approach whereby the project leadership committed to accompanying the Minister of Education, rather than trying to lead, in the process of policy dialogue. The project team worked behind the scenes to provide her with the information and data she required to lead informed discussions with Congress and other stakeholders. By taking this approach, the Minister of Education gained credibility and standing and the project ultimately became more visible and better positioned to engage with other stakeholders in the process. As a result, the project was invited to help Congress as it embarked on the process of education reform. In this role, the project was asked to provide capacity building to the Education Committee in Congress, advise the social marketing campaign of the rollout of Vision Education, and share research with the Social Cabinet of the Executive Branch. However, without USAID support and understanding this approach would not have been possible. To

enable this Ministry-led process, USAID was required to allow the project technical team to provide a responsive and reliable support mechanism and technical and financial resource to the Minister and her leadership in the education sector when the need arose.

Each example provides a description of effective project leadership for a Ministry-led process, where political and technical acumen are essential, as well as the ability to build and maintain relationships with a wide array of stakeholders, particularly very senior MOE leaders. Project leadership, in the form of the ICPD, key technical staff, and home office management, must therefore be trusted, reliable, and technically credible in the eyes of high level staff in the MOE, other Ministries, the government, other influential stakeholders, and with the donor community. In the early stages of implementation and throughout the project, project leadership must be equipped with enough local knowledge and understanding to identify the key decision makers, and enough credibility to position the project within the policy dialogue process. Once engaged, project leadership must begin demonstrating to the various involved parties the technical capacity available and the supportive role the project can usefully adopt, while reassuring the donor that the process is moving forward even when tangible results or spending are not evident. In addition, moving a Ministry-led process forward requires the support and understanding of the donor, who may have to adopt a more secondary role allowing the project team to be as responsive as possible to the MOE, their demands, and their own timelines.

## 2. BE PATIENT AND FLEXIBLE

The previous lesson pointed toward a need for patience and flexibility as the project leadership builds relationships and allows a role for the project to emerge within the MOE policy dialogue process. This need for patience and flexibility in policy dialogue support extends throughout the project implementation, and makes it perhaps the most important lesson learned in this review.

In Zambia, the initial proposal outlined a broad set of illustrative activities to support policy dialogue to take place over five years. The open proposal design was a deliberate attempt to provide a flexible and undefined framework within which to develop a Ministry-led process of policy dialogue and capacity building with a relatively long time frame. This process, as it evolved, created space for the project to work with the MOE on new issues and better identify and address the systemic needs of the sector, rather than be limited to a preconceived scope of work. As a result, the range of

activities, goals, and areas of engagement in policy discussions evolved over time, led by the MOE and key stakeholders and not by the project. This proved very successful but presented some particular challenges, for both project implementers and USAID oversight. With an undefined proposal and a slowly evolving workplan of activities led by the MOE each year, the illustrative activities laid out in the proposal and corresponding budget became less and less relevant as time went on. Problems arose early on in the project when, after an initial high level of spending on equipment, burn rates decreased dramatically and USAID began to limit the release of funds. While the technical team at USAID understood the more seasonal nature of spending of MOE-led support, the financial/contracts personnel were less understanding. Only with a new tranche of funding through FTI that allowed greater spending flexibility was the project able to take off. In later years, project activities grew in complexity, requiring more staff (from 3 at the beginning of the project to 25 by the end), and became increasingly decentralized and diversified where many different levels of the system across many districts became engaged. To manage both these short- and long-term spending flows, the project was largely contingent on the strong support of the Agreement Officer's Technical Representative (AOTR) and the Mission Director at USAID Zambia. Through frequent consultation with the mission, and within the more flexible legal framework of a Cooperative Agreement<sup>3</sup>, it was possible to rewrite program descriptions, review seasonal burn rates, and explore other funding options as needs arose.

Like Zambia, the policy dialogue aspect of the proposal in El Salvador gave some illustrative areas of focus that had been identified by USAID but made it clear that the intention was to work with the Ministry after project start up to elicit specific areas of need. Initially, the project supported the policy dialogue and research agenda of the MOE to implement the Education Plan 2021. However, new political leadership brought changes in MOE personnel part way through the project and as a result the Plan 2021 was dismantled and a new policy agenda grew. These changes necessitated a process of building new relationships. Crucial to this process, was the ability of USAID and the project leadership to work at the pace of the new Ministry partners and to prove their technical expertise, credibility, and non-partisan standing with the new political power. USAID, working closely with the project had to create a new space to work with a different bureaucracy and political power and to figure out how to support them in their own agenda of policy dialogue. Project activities slowed down so that they could better accompany the MOE as it worked on the government's New Education Plan. This

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<sup>3</sup> The term Cooperative Agreement in this paper refers to the written agreement that exists between USAID and the implementing agency outlining how they will work together to achieve specific objectives.

process of strategic planning and engagement took six months but served to build trust between the project team and the new administration and open a dialogue on other issues. Although overall funding was deemed sufficient, administering funds at the appropriate time and ensuring burn rates met USAID expectations proved difficult because of a lack of synchronization between the MOE's timetable and USAID schedules. To facilitate this, excellent communication and rapport between the implementing project staff and the USAID AOTR were crucial. The fact that El Salvador was also awarded through a Cooperative Agreement served the project well by enabling flexibility in both the focus and scope of activities and to some degree, the budget allocations. By working together cooperatively it was possible to support this Ministry-led process with responsive funding release and negotiated budget revisions.

Although Guatemala faced many of the same challenges as both Zambia and El Salvador in ensuring a flexible and responsive Ministry-led process, it also had to contend with relatively short programming timeframes broken up over four distinct but related projects (Diálogo 1, 2,3 and 4). Lasting for between one and two years, each project was designed to stand alone and, though building on the previous project, did not anticipate a follow-on project to continue the work. Diálogo 1 was only to serve for one year; activities focused on developing a social media campaign around the importance of education to generate support for a policy to increase investment. However, the nature of the work, even within this short time frame changed. The project evolved from social marketing around investing in education to a close accompaniment of the Minister and Ministry in their Vision Education process. The new workplan grew to include stakeholder consultation and monthly retreats, as well as capacity building workshops for stakeholders on education issues. Moreover, the timetable of activities in the Vision Education process was determined by the Ministry and the stakeholders, not by a pre-defined project calendar. This meant that implementation extended beyond the original one-year project. The USAID Mission was flexible and supportive in this first year phase, and saw value of what was being accomplished by the MOE with USAID support. However, this change in the projects workplan meant that the burn rate was very inconsistent and the vast majority of the budget was expended during the last month of the project. Persuading USAID to hold and release a large amount of the funding at the end of the project proved to be very difficult. In addition, by the time the Diálogo 1 was coming to an end, Diálogo 2 was being designed and awarded. However, the final award of Diálogo 2 was late, leaving a 2 month gap at a time when the Minister and Congress were counting on USAID assistance. This funding gap put the project team and their credibility at

risk. From the USAID perspective, the short programming in Diálogo 1 and timing for Diálogo 2 was intentional. USAID wanted to learn from Diálogo 1 so it could develop a second strategy in Diálogo 2. From the MOE and project side, however, the time frame and funding proved inadequate, restrictive, and potentially very damaging. Although project timeframes and funding streams continued to be challenging throughout all the projects, it became increasingly so when the Cooperative Agreement mechanism used for Diálogo 1 and 2, was replaced by the contract mechanism in Diálogo 3 and 4. It became more difficult and time consuming to negotiate change to the program activities or funding stream as the process became increasingly bureaucratic. As with the other projects when changing circumstances required adapting the program, the AOTR's support and assistance, as well as excellent communication between project staff (both home and field offices) and USAID was crucial to the successful implementation of the project. Moreover, USAID technical staff was instrumental in providing continuity from project to project and in ensuring that the design of all four projects followed a longer term vision.

Each example illustrates clearly the time sensitive nature of policy dialogue support. Although the outcome of policy dialogue support may look simple (i.e., a policy statement), the process of getting to this outcome is enormous and complex. In the initial stages of each of the projects (and taking up to a year), was the need to build and establish relationships with key stakeholders—a relationship where the project and its staff must build confidence and trust by demonstrating reliability, responsiveness, and credibility. In Zambia, Guatemala, and El Salvador, this took time and relied on the project and donor being flexible and especially receptive and responsive to the immediate needs of high-level MOE personnel around many different policy areas when they arose. To facilitate the erratic nature of the project activities and their changing scope, the project teams had to overcome two challenges linked to funding. First, the project had to ensure that funds were available at the opportune moment to support the MOE when they needed it, and second, manage fluctuating burn rates and ensuring sufficient long- and short-term funding. In addition, to support this process adequately, the project design, implementation plan, budget, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework needed to be developed to acknowledge both the time it takes to achieve the desired outcome(s) and the multitude of activities and directions that the process may require. The degree to which project plans (implementation as well as M&E) and budgets could be altered and adapted depended on the degree of USAID's flexibility, and relied specifically on the understanding and support of the USAID AOTR, Mission Director, and Agreement Officer (AO).

### 3. REMAIN FOCUSED ON THE PROJECTS STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE(S)

With a high degree of flexibility and uncertain timelines in policy dialogue support projects as illustrated in the previous two lessons, comes the challenge of remaining focused on an end result or strategic objective (SO). Moreover projects that support policy dialogue tend to have high-level and far reaching SOs that may or may not be directly attributable to the full range of activities that will take place (i.e., improve access and quality of education provision).

In Zambia, the initial development hypothesis was heavily linked to the focus of the project on developing the EMIS (and the previous EMIS/ED\*ASSIST project), in that more information would lead to better decision making in the education system. The information would come primarily from EMIS, and the central MOE would be the main body to use the information to initiate change throughout the system. After a year, where the project team worked to win the confidence and trust of the MOE, the MOE's concept of how the project could support policy dialogue became clearer and a more complex development hypothesis evolved. The project team, with the MOE and USAID, reflected on the how change happens and moved towards a hypothesis that acknowledged a need to develop and build the capacity of a more decentralized system of policy dialogue and decision making. This more complex hypothesis led to a workplan whereby activities diversified to reflect an understanding that change occurs when all levels of the Ministry are engaged in data collection, research, analysis, policy dialogue, and making improvements in the system. Building this relationship, working to articulate this development hypothesis, and establishing how each project activity could be framed under this hypothesis took time, and although delayed the initial implementation of activities, provided the focus needed for the longer-term implementation of the project.

In Guatemala, the development hypothesis developed and evolved over the course of each of the four projects. Initially, the hypothesis was fairly simple; increased funding, and better spending of that money, would lead to more, improved education. This hypothesis led to an approach that provided the central Ministry with the information it would need to make better decisions and leverage more funding from public sources. Early on in the project and throughout implementation, this development hypothesis evolved as project, USAID technical staff, and national stakeholders gained an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the processes that the project was attempting to affect, and the strategies that would work. Project staff, as well as the MOE, realized that although more funds were needed, to leverage support

for increased funding from the private sector the MOE needed to show increased financial transparency and accountability. The MOE asked the project to provide the technical expertise to develop the systems and capacity to make information on education spending and resources more accessible to this influential audience. In addition, project activities diversified to generate dialogue, information, and action in a critical social mass (across all levels of the system and society) to provide the demand for increased investment in education (and, later also in health). As with Zambia, as project activities changed and diversified, the evolving development hypothesis helped link each new activity and the original SO.

In El Salvador, during the project design, three different organizations were responsible for the implementation of activities ranging from direct policy support to text book development, teacher training to school improvement planning. There was limited articulation of an overall development hypothesis, and much less a coordination of activities beneath it. Activities were parceled out to different groups with little effort made to strategically link the various aspects to the policy dialogue piece of the project, or vice versa. Each organization effectively worked separately on different components of the project. In the initial years of the project this meant that a separate development hypothesis for policy dialogue support was developed by the single organization responsible for its implementation, without reliance or strategic connection with other components led by other organizations. Although this allowed for a clear hypothesis and a degree of independence, it limited the project's ability to fully utilize the work of other project components in its support for policy dialogue. In the later years therefore, a coordinating body between USAID and the two organizations was established. This body developed a single integrative workplan between organizations that was at the same time embedded in the MOE's own workplan. This integrative plan was reinforced by an M&E framework between the project and USAID. In a project with such independent partner organizations this integrative framework proved fundamentally important in bringing together, at least partially, their achievements into a collective whole.

Coordinating all activities and clearly articulating how each component of the project directly or indirectly supports the achievement of its strategic objectives over both short and longer terms proved challenging in all three projects. Project teams sought to meet this challenge to varying degrees by:

- Articulating a development hypothesis that linked activities, results, and SO(s), and

- Designing a workplan and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework that anticipated how each activity would contribute to the project results and overall strategic objective.

By articulating a development hypothesis, the project and its partners defined the plausible relationship between the various intermediate results of activities and the overall strategic objective. As the project progressed and new realities and contexts emerged, the development hypothesis was revised and redefined. By remaining focused on the overall strategic objective, the project ensured that a varied and complex set of activities, with a large array of stakeholders, over a long period of time, continued to work towards a common goal. In addition, the projects used the development of an M&E plan to help draw the various organizations and activities together under the SO on policy dialogue support. By using the M&E framework, varied project activities in different components were able to clarify if and how their results supported the overall SO. In all three projects, this aspect of the project proved challenging but, when achieved, helped to coordinate activities, and use diverse project activities to build momentum toward a common goal. Moreover, remaining focused on the strategic objective helped to offset personnel changes (MOE, donor, and project staff) by establishing a clear and constant project goal.

#### **4. ENGAGE MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS AT ALL LEVELS**

The evolution of each project showed a tendency for initial activities to focus on building relationships and capacity at the central MOE before engaging with multiple stakeholders at all levels within and outside the education system. This move toward engaging more stakeholders was challenging and required a variety of approaches to meaningfully engage different stakeholder groups, and yet was essential to providing the foundation of sustainable systemic change.

In Zambia, the project initially focused on supporting a few key people within the central MOE. Project activities revolved around collecting and presenting information for their use. As the project evolved, there was increased focus on mobilizing different levels of the MOE in the policy dialogue by building the capacity of the system at all levels to collect data and share information in the decision making process. As a result, the project supported: a program of professional development for data analyzers, school leaders, and administrators; developed an enhanced and decentralized EMIS system that catered to the provincial and district levels; and facilitated a

national research symposium to broaden the research community. All these efforts together helped to involve a larger group of stakeholders in the process of policy dialogue, while also raising awareness around the policy issues being reviewed.

In Guatemala, the perceived stakeholders were quite different from those in Zambia. Unlike Zambia, public institutions in Guatemala are relatively weak and ill-positioned to implement large scale education reform. The project, therefore, had to facilitate and broker agreements among elites, both inside and outside government structures, as well as build widespread support among the overall population. To do this, the project supported the Minister of Education, collecting and presenting the necessary financial information to persuade Congress and the Executive that increased funding in education was necessary and desirable. A national mass media campaign, resulting from a project partnership with *Empresarios por la Educación* (Business Leaders for Education), was launched to promote key messages about education and provide the momentum for change in the general population. At the same time, the project developed a working relationship with *Gran Campaña por la Educación* (Great Education Campaign), a national initiative of the four main universities in the country, bringing together over 80 civil society and donor organizations to promote increased investment in education. Using this strategy, the MOE with support from the project mobilized the support it needed outside as well as inside government to increase public spending in education.

In El Salvador in the first three years of implementation, a comprehensive set of activities were developed to support the engagement of the different stakeholders in the long-term vision for education led by the MOE. Information and debate was encouraged among a wide array of stakeholders by publishing data in newspapers supplements, carrying out open polls and consultations, and holding seminars on education issues.

These examples highlight how policy dialogue and policymaking are part of a larger process of reform. Even when a policy statement has changed or been developed, the likelihood of moving from this policy statement to institutionalized change depends to a large degree on how the statement was arrived at, who was involved, and what level of understanding and support has already been achieved across a wide audience. In these three examples, the projects and their MOE partners recognized the need to engage, not only the high-level MOE staff, but also a wide group of stakeholders at other levels. To reach different levels of the system and outside it required supporting the dialogue with oftentimes different information (i.e., implications for EMIS/DEMIS), forums (e.g., social marketing, district level activities),

and in establishing the projects credibility across the various stakeholder groups. Although this added a higher degree of complexity to the project implementation, it ensured that a ‘critical mass’ was mobilized to provide momentum to the resulting process of change.

## 5. COLLECT AND SHARE INFORMATION

As the previous lesson highlights, timely access to policy-driven, good quality, reliable data and information are critical to initiate and inform discussions and decision making in the process of policy dialogue support at all levels of the system and outside the system.

In Zambia, increasing the reliability, quality, and use of data for education decision making was a crucial element in the process of policy dialogue support at all levels of the system. The approach was multi-faceted. At the more central level, the project and MOE recognized that by tapping EMIS data and presenting it in more dynamic and accessible ways it was possible to support the national policy dialogue process more effectively. Throughout the project, EMIS proved to be a valuable tool to generate data/information around many specific issues and support dialogue as it happened. In one example during the early stages of the project, Zambia decided it wanted to provide education for all at the secondary school level. Through an analysis of data on primary school growth, secondary school enrollment predictions, and current secondary schools (including previously uncharted community schools), decision makers came to realize that a phased approach was more sustainable where community schools were absorbed into the system. In this instance, and others like it, delivery on EMIS data, analysis, and reports usefully informed discussions and helped build credibility both for the project and the central MOE. But EMIS was not perceived as the only source of data and information for sharing. In addition to EMIS, there was a need to expand the research community to generate and provide policy-driven research. To support this, the project helped to institutionalize an annual national research symposium for the academic community. Through this community, more in-depth studies, driven by current policy debates linked to education quality and provision were generated and shared. Although policy dialogue support at the national level was a central part of the project, so was providing more and better quality data to the decentralized system so that policy issues could be better analyzed and discussed in regions, districts, and schools. This decentralization of EMIS was supported by developing an Education Leadership and Management course for school principals in which action-research-type learning methodologies are employed as part of

their school improvement planning process. As a result, the project has built capacity across the whole system to not only utilize data and information, but also generate it in support of policy dialogue and informed decision making around education quality.

In El Salvador, the project assisted the MOE in developing a state-of-the-art system and tools to track the amount, source, use, and distribution of education funds. This included the creation of an EMIS, the development of National Education Accounts (NEA), a series of open forums to discuss education issues, and the collection of solid evidence about the state of education from studies, working papers, and policy briefs. These activities to collect and share information led to some specific results. An important contribution of the NEA in El Salvador was to strengthen the recording system and the reporting of education indicators internally and internationally. Using the NEA data, the MOE improved the records of spending in education presented annually to UNESCO and Millennium Challenge Accounts, as well as to internal audiences. Following the 2007 NEA Report, which demonstrated that families invested in their children's education at the secondary level more than did the government, the MOE established a subsidy policy to boost student enrollment at the secondary level and to reduce the high dropout rate. In 2009 using data about families' expenses in education, the government decided to provide uniforms and school supplies to all students in basic education to support Salvadoran families for the year. Using these data and ongoing research, the MOE was able to illuminate the issues, options, challenges, and dynamics within the status on expenditures in education. The NEA, the EMIS, the studies, research, and the policy forums helped to draw clear connections between financial information, public policy, and current and prospective education reform initiatives and support a more informed policy dialogue within the Ministry.

Support for policy dialogue in Guatemala was a new initiative with a strong EMIS base. During *Diálogo 1* and *2*, the project team sought to complement the largely quantitative EMIS data with a more qualitative understanding of education finance and the range of issues that the society at large felt important in terms of increasing public spending on education. Information was gathered at the school level in the form of case studies and photos in locations where communities and the business sector were making independent efforts or working with government to raise funding for education. These were later to be used in a social marketing campaign seeking to raise awareness on the importance of education. However, this effort was slow to get off the ground and never came to fruition despite its very promising start. However, literature reviews and country studies

carried out by consultants did form the basis of sharing information for informed decision making centrally. Furthermore, in Diálogo 3 and 4, a national integrated information platform was established with the ministries of education and health that proved instrumental to further support the policy dialogue on investments in education (and health), as well as to serve as a management tool. Through the use of cutting edge tools (e.g., mapping applications, interactive dashboards), the information platform was used to translate and present information and knowledge to multiple audiences (at all levels of the system) and serve as a catalyst for change in society and political behavior.

Each of these examples illustrates how vital data and information are for supporting policy dialogue at all levels of the education system. Each project recognized the need to support the development and further enhancement of the systems and structures that can be used to gather, analyze, share, and use data. Critical in all three projects was a working EMIS or national data platform to provide timely data at the central. However, increasingly important was the need for EMIS throughout the decentralized system where information could be both generated and used to directly benefit the learner through an informed school improvement planning process. In addition to this more quantitative form of data and information gathering and dissemination, there is also an argument for providing more qualitative data and information, from smaller scale studies and research at the more decentralized levels. These types of research, data, and information oftentimes provide the real-life narratives of what is happening in schools and communities, and gives substance to a sometimes very statistical argument. However, more than just providing data and information is the need to tap the information at the right time, to present it in a way that convinces its readers of its significance, and provide data to different stakeholders at all levels of the system. Involving the latest technologies (e.g., geographical information systems, interactive Web intelligence dashboards) can therefore also form an essential component of any policy dialogue support project.

## **6. BRING IN HIGHLY SKILLED AND EXPERIENCED ADVISORS AS NEEDED**

Engaging a wide array of stakeholders in a dialogue that articulates new policy around education can be complex and potentially disruptive. The project is responsible for ensuring that there is not only good reason to embark on policy dialogue support, but that the technical advisors brought in are qualified and experienced, with new dimensions, credibility, and expertise

from, for example, other international contexts, or similar work at national scale in other countries.

In Guatemala, local experts were crucial—and as USAID policy—the first option in many cases. As part of the project leadership, they brought the technical knowledge and established the credibility required for successful project implementation. However, drawing on local experts was not without problems. Given the history and nature of the political system in Guatemala, almost everybody with the necessary technical background would have to accept criticism from some sectors of the government. The project had to walk a fine line between choosing the best technical expertise for the project while ensuring that the person recruited would draw the least criticism. Because they were in a position to stand up to political pressures to select or bypass particular technical personnel, USAID, as donors, played an important role in recruiting and selecting local experts. As a result, the project was relied heavily on USAIDs overall understanding of what skills were needed, as well as their support and involvement in pushing the selection process forward.

In El Salvador, the range of technical expertise required was diverse over the years. Under the EQUIP2 mechanism it was possible to recruit a wide variety of both international and national technical advisors across many different policy areas, e.g., curriculum, EMIS, decentralization, education reform, community participation, National Education Accounts, and M&E. With more than 15 years of in-country experience, the implementing agency was able to source experts that were recognized and trusted. In one particular example, under the leadership of the ICPD, a high-level team of three international experts, well respected in the region, was created to lead the policy dialogue activities that supported the Presidential Monitoring Commission, an independent body created by the President of El Salvador in 2005 to monitor the progress of the country in education. This team of three international experts interviewed hundreds of representatives of the education community nationwide, met with the legislative branch and with other ministries, and visited schools and universities to understand the situation of the education sector. The product of these consultations was a series of working papers on education reform issues that were later discussed with the Presidential Commission, the MOE, practitioners, with society in open forums and with the press. The team gained the credibility and trust from the MOE, the Presidential Commission, and the education community in general and many of the recommendations of these reports were included by the MOE in their programs and policies, as well as informing their discussions around education reform. Moreover, when the

government changed in late 2008, this team of three provided the technical assistance necessary to demonstrate how the project could be sensitive to new government priorities, and support the new MOE staff as they defined their own policy agenda.

These examples highlight the very real need for high-level technical advisors—as individuals and as part of team—throughout a project, both to support the policy discussions and to help highlight areas of potential dialogue. In addition, technical advisors, whether individuals or part of team, can provide long-term continuity in this kind of project, building trust and credibility with the full range of stakeholders, and bringing not only the technical knowledge and experience, but also the skills needed to engage effectively. However, bringing in highly skilled international and local experts for specific areas of policy dialogue is not simple. Often this high-level expertise is expensive and in high demand and the project has to ensure that there are sufficient budget and mechanisms to recruit them for project processes that are often on a non-linear timeline. Recruiting the right technical advisor at the right time is challenging, but possible if the right budget and programming support is made available.

## 7. BUILD CAPACITY

For many countries informed policy dialogue is limited by a lack of capacity in the processes of dialogue (i.e., forums, leadership, management, systemic processes and structures) and support for the process (i.e., information, data, and presentation systems). Sustainability depends on embedding these processes and structures, and the funding necessary at all levels of the Ministry, and building local capacity for all the supportive functions of EMIS, research, and analysis. For these projects, working with the MOE to build capacity and ensure sustainability was an integral part of the project design.

In Zambia, capacity building has taken place at both the national macro-level as well as through micro-level work at the school, cluster, and district levels to sustain the policy dialogue process long term. Although the process of policy dialogue is highly dependent on the enhanced EMIS system and the staff who manage it, the challenge has been more than merely maintaining and staffing the physical network of computers at all levels of the system. In addition to ensuring that the MOE procure all necessary equipment for its regional offices, the project has supported the MOE in its efforts to build staff capacity to collect, analyze, and use data. Through a series of professional development courses at the decentralized regions, districts,

and schools, as well as centrally, the course has institutionalized a system of education improvement planning at the national, regional, district, and school levels. Moreover, the MOE has now made it obligatory for all future school principals to take this Education Leadership and Management course, which places informed school improvement planning, implementation, and M&E at its core. In addition, new forums for discussing policy issues have been established to support dialogue at all levels of the system. Data and information from the EMIS are currently presented at the Joint Action Review, a forum where the MOE presents education goals and results before a group of donors and stakeholders to highlight new policy initiatives, and impacts and present new standards in education provision. In addition, at the national level, the annual national research forums create a space for academia and researchers to engage, while local forums create space for district- and school-level policy discussions and target setting.

In El Salvador the reliance on good quality data meant that one priority of the project was to ensure that the MOE had the capacity to maintain and run the EMIS and National Education Accounts. Before the elections of 2008, the project supported the MOE in establishing an EMIS and NEA unit. In addition, the Presidential Monitoring Commission received training on how to conduct policy dialogue forums, seminars, and polls. With a dramatic change in staffing at the MOE in 2008, the capacity of new staff became a priority. The project had to continue to work with the EMIS and the NEA units and address the needs of new staff in a different policy climate. While central MOE is a focus for capacity building, the project also recognizes the need to build capacity of the highly decentralized education system overall. Consequently, many efforts are being made to develop and strengthen the skills of MOE staff at the central, department, and school levels.

Zambia and El Salvador illustrate that for international donors, ensuring that relatively short-term engagement in policy dialogue support results in a sustainable process post-project depends on to what extent activities focus on building capacity within the MOE and beyond. Although it is important to ensure that the physical capacity of the system can sustain data collection, analysis, and sharing, it is also critical to build the capacity of the system to support the process of dialogue, through an institutionalized set of processes and structures that ensure that there is a forum for dialogue and the capacity to lead it and engage in it. However, limiting the projects' potential long term success in this area was the turnover of staff at all levels of the system.

## 8. MATCH PERFORMANCE MONITORING PLANS TO PROJECT PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Monitoring and evaluating these Ministry-led policy dialogue support projects proved challenging. Project, MOE, and USAID requirements for M&E did not always coincide. In addition, to accurately and meaningfully capture the impact of activities meant finding indicators and measures that capture not only the concrete results and outcomes, but also the processes by which these outcomes were achieved.

Early on in Zambia the project found it difficult to reconcile the need to report on numerical indicators required by USAID's Performance Monitoring Plan (PMP) with the need to develop an M&E system within the MOE that could meaningfully measure specific project successes in an overwhelmingly country-led process. Therefore, with USAID approval and support, rather than completely predefine a PMP the MOE and project team designed an M&E system that would tell a story about the impact of policy dialogue support on education quality in Zambia. The PMP and the reports it generated did not tend to emphasize numerical targets, but more the changes to the system and the progress made within the process of dialogue through a narrative. This approach relied heavily on the support and involvement of the USAID AOTR, who was closely positioned to the project and understood and could use the reports effectively to report on progress and impact within the USAID arena.

Unlike Zambia, where the ICPD and home office project team were responsible for developing the M&E, in El Salvador there was specific funding allocated to developing indicators to monitor the policy dialogue aspect of the project. Within the EQUIP2 alliance, one of the partners was a company that specialized in M&E for USAID projects. This company developed not only an M&E plan for the project but also to report on USAID mission indicators. Along with this partner, the project recruited an M&E local position. In addition, there were sufficient resources to train the MOE in the use and collection of the indicators both at central and school levels. This emphasis enabled the project to use the M&E component in a meaningful way, and draw together effectively the various strands of the project to report collectively on its strategic objective and respond to USAID requirements.

In Guatemala, the project team and USAID mission also had to work hard to define indicators that were not only meaningful in terms of project M&E within the MOE, but also met USAID requirements and were attributable to project activities. Eventually, the project decided on an M&E approach

that would provide both a narrative of the impact project activities had on attitudes and a report on indicators of project engagement in policy dialogue. When in Diálogo 4 a budget for M&E was allocated, more meaningful M&E indicators and tracking was achieved. However, by this stage in the project some opportunities for reporting on meaningful indicators had been missed and when USAID later reallocated M&E funding to other project activities, the M&E component could not be fully implemented.

Each project highlights the challenges of developing an M&E plan for projects in policy dialogue support. First, the scope of engagement in a largely Ministry-led dialogue limits the degree to which project activities can truly be attributed to higher order objectives and outcomes. Second, the time line for effecting change at this level of outcome is often longer than that of the project. And third, many other factors outside project control can have an impact on these types of macro-level outcomes (i.e., political change, economic stability). Policy dialogue support, therefore, is more meaningful when it measures and defines complex process indicators rather than only results and outcome indicators, and embeds the process of M&E within the MOE so that long-term change can be anticipated and measured even when the project has closed down. With broad goals and a multitude of activities that may or may not lead to concrete results, projects need time and a lot of resources to successfully develop a meaningful approach that is embedded within the MOE and actively supports the policy dialogue process. However, in doing so, projects must still be responsive to the reporting needs and requirements of the donor. How they achieve this is a complicated and highly demanding aspect of project management. In cases where funding allowed for dedicated M&E personnel, this aspect of the project proved more manageable.





The analysis of the interviews and project documents provided some important insights into the design, implementation, and monitoring of these three projects focused on support for policy dialogue. The lessons learned enable us to conclude with some recommendations for USAID, implementing partners, and country partners that could prove useful when considering future policy dialogue support interventions.

## PROJECT DESIGN:

- Intentionally open design should be required in the proposal development stage, where flexible programming and broad project options and budgets should be anticipated. The initial proposal, and ongoing workplans should reflect an understanding that there will be an evolving, Ministry-led process of policy dialogue that will be complex and unpredictable. Partnerships will change, diverge, and expand depending on the policy under discussion and the various viewpoints brought to the table, and areas of engagement will change over time. Within this flexible/open design the project design should clearly state its development hypothesis. Although the hypothesis may change over the life of the project, it provides a focus of agreement for all partners, beneficiaries, and donor as to the overall intended objective of the project and creates a framework on which all project activities should hang as they evolve.
- Activities that provide timely information and research are crucial both to initiate and support policy dialogue and must be part of the initial project. This may take the form of EMIS (central and district levels), research, surveys, data platforms, and data presentation tools (dashboards). Not only do these parts support the process of dialogue, but also provide credibility and tools to respond to the interests and needs of the wide array of stakeholders.
- Projects will benefit from a PMP, where results are negotiated and agreed as the workplan is developed and the areas of support for policy dialogue become more apparent. PMPs should be part of a broader goal of M&E that views the process of policy dialogue as important as the policy outcomes.
- Because of the increased need for flexibility in project design and funding flows, there is a case for favoring a Cooperative Agreement over a contract

in these types of projects. However, of equal importance are the roles of the implementing agency, AOTR, and AO and their relationship in terms of being able to support changing activities, results, and funding flows within some overall agreed-upon parameters. Through good communication structures, all parties need to have a clear understanding of project goals and focus on the activities that lead to this goal as primary measures of performance.

### **PROJECT FUNDING:**

- Projects overall budgets are not as important in determining project success as pipelines. Within limits, project activities can be scaled to fit an overall budget. However, flexible and responsive funding streams and budgets are needed to anticipate and support irregular pipelines and resource flows. Policy dialogue projects tend to have a life cycle that requires few resources during start up, but rapid growth and close-out costs come way into the project. Not recognizing this can cause huge problems where there is pressure to overspend at the beginning, and then limit spending when it is most needed.
- In a process of policy dialogue where timing is of great importance, breaks in funding caused by gaps between new phases of the project (e.g., Guatemala), or by hold-ups in reprogramming or pipeline approval can have a serious impact on project credibility and effectiveness. Where ever possible, flexible funding allocations (whether donor or country) can ensure that new activities can develop from policy dialogue and provide new leverage and increased credibility, and should be considered an option in budget approval.

### **PROJECT STAFFING:**

- Project leadership requires a broad and deep understanding of the country and education system, the ability to navigate through the political landscape, and highly skilled, knowledgeable, and reputable expertise on specific policy issues. Project leadership will therefore encompass a team of people, that includes the necessary combination of political, technical, and management skills. Assembling this team will require drawing on both international and local expertise, and ensuring that allocation of resources to pay these highly skilled and sought after individuals is realistic.
- Locking in specific expertise in the initial stages of the project may be premature, policy priorities will change, and technical expertise should be identified on an as-needed basis.

### PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION:

- Time to understand, build, and maintain positive relationships, and develop a network of relationships with all stakeholders is essential and must be built into the project. This includes relationships between implementing partners and donor, as well as with the beneficiaries and other stakeholders.
- Activities and engagement to support policy dialogue take time and will change over time. Excellent and regular communication among implementers, donor, and beneficiaries is essential where a Ministry-led process is the goal. Establishing mechanisms to support this must be part of project planning, i.e., regularly scheduled meetings between project and MOE teams, and establishing brain trusts/advisory committees.

### MONITORING AND EVALUATION:

- Adequate funding, time, and staffing are required to embed an M&E system within the MOE that will respond to reporting requirements and improved project implementation, and evolve over time as engagement changes, diversifies, and expands.
- Agreeing on appropriate indicators that can be both attributable to project activities and responsive to donor requirements is challenging but possible if all parties understand that the process of policy dialogue is as important as the outcomes of policy dialogue, and that many external factors out of project control can derail or accelerate the process.
- The M&E plan must recognize that the most meaningful indicators in policy-dialogue-type projects measure the more qualitative process of building networks, informing dialogue, and engaging in dialogue. Establishing and institutionalizing these kinds of processes are better measured using indicators that are not simplistic results that can be counted but rather described in more narrative forms (i.e., establishment of links, persistence of links, density of links, centrality of agents in networks, relation of links and actors to key topics).

### SUSTAINABILITY:

- Sustainability depends on embedding the processes and funding conducive to policy dialogue within the Ministry, and building local capacity for supportive functions of EMIS, research, analysis, and M&E. This is further strengthened by ensuring capacity is developed at all levels of the Ministry—from district to national—as well as outside the Ministry—to ensure that a wide range of stakeholders can initiate and engage in policy dialogue too.
- To adequately support an ongoing process of policy dialogue the information systems must be institutionalized by ensuring that there is

ongoing capacity building for information collection, analysis, and use. Institutionalizing data use must move beyond the Ministry and generate a shared sense of legitimacy and usefulness in a wide audience, where data are used to stimulate and initiate discussion.





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