

Influencing Education Policy in Guatemala

Groups seek to improve education opportunities for Indigenous peoples and women

Increased funding for education is a key component in the efforts of the government of Guatemala to put the country back on its feet. Ensuring that Indigenous groups and women get their fair share of any increases was the goal of concerned civil society groups. With support from IDRC they researched and published a proposal for a more equitable distribution of education funding that would overcome systemic discrimination.

Guatemala's Peace Accords were designed to lay the foundation for a lasting peace, ending 36 years of domestic armed conflict. Under the Accords the guerillas agreed to disband and the government committed to constitutional and electoral reforms, resettlement projects, and recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples, among other things. It also committed to increase spending on public education.

Education is of critical importance for Guatemala, where over 40 percent of the population is under the age of 15, and the population is growing by more than two percent annually. The Peace Commission and the Parity Commission confirmed the need for increased education funding in order to transform the country's education system to reflect, for the first time, cultural differences in the population. Indigenous communities have traditionally been seriously underrepresented in education spending, and as a result they have the highest illiteracy and drop-out rates in the country.

Education became a major issue during Guatemala's 1999 general election that saw the ruling National Progress Party (PAN) defeated by the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG). A diverse collection of civil society organizations launched the *Gran Campaña Nacional por la Educación* (Grand National Campaign for Education) and circulated a nation-wide petition calling for a large increase in the education budget. The petition gathered some 150,000 signatures. Subsequently the government did increase the education budget,

but by about half the amount demanded. The petition may have had little effect on the national budget, but it did have an impact on public opinion, and concerns over education policy.

Twenty-year plan

Those concerns were reflected in the new government's 2000-2004 Education Plan, which included an explicit policy of increasing the Ministry of Education budget to three percent of gross domestic product (GDP). This policy was adopted by the Consultative Commission on Educational Reform (CCRE), which includes representatives of the government, universities, schools, teachers, churches, Indigenous peoples, and the private sector. The Commission was also tasked with drafting a National Education Plan for the next 20 years.

Among the members of the Commission were two organizations that had played key roles in the *Gran Campaña*: the Coordination Office of Mayan Organizations in Guatemala (COPMAGUA) and the Standing National Commission on Education Reform (CNPRE). Both also served on the CCRE Executive Council. Working together, CNPRE-COPMAGUA were determined that the perspective of Guatemala's Indigenous peoples should have a prominent place in the discussion of education funding. They turned to Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) for support in generating a proposal for a more equitable



distribution of educational expenditures from an Indigenous perspective – “considering the exclusion, poverty and discrimination that the Mayan people of Guatemala has historically suffered.”

The project had three broad objectives:

- ❑ To analyze the planning and execution of the education budget from the perspective of the Indigenous peoples. To meet this objective, the project called for a research report that would identify weaknesses in the education budget structure and pinpoint target population sectors and geographic areas for educational investment.
- ❑ To formulate a proposal, based on the Indigenous perspective, to influence budgetary planning and execution in the context of education reform and the long-term National Education Plan.
- ❑ To influence policy by enhancing the quality of the proposals submitted by CNPRE-COPMAGUA delegates, and by reinforcing Indigenous participation in the education reform debate.

Broader perspective

Although the original emphasis of the project was on ethnic discrimination in the education system, during the course of the project its perspective was broadened to include gender equity. This constituted a fundamental amendment to the concept and design of the project.

Ethnic discrimination in Guatemala’s school system can be observed through various educational indicators. For example, the illiteracy rate for the Guatemalan population as a whole is 31.3 percent. Breaking that number down, however, reveals that for the non-Indigenous population the illiteracy rate is 21.4 percent, while for the Indigenous population it is almost double at 42.5 percent. Statistics on academic failure – a particular problem in rural areas – show the highest incidence in the regions with the greatest percentages of Indigenous people.

The education statistics also revealed another inequity to the researchers. The gross school enrolment rate for boys from 1993 to 1998 was 93 percent, but for girls it was 82 percent. The composition of the student body for the same period was 54 percent boys and 46 percent girls. These statistics convinced the researchers to add a gender perspective to their research. There were some objections, particularly from Indigenous people, who felt that it would be more important to generate strategies and actions to eliminate ethnic discrimination than to worry about the gender issue.

On the other hand, the government and private sector research centres felt that both these issues should be subordinated to the traditional budget categories and to a more global poverty reduction strategy. They argued that any special treatment for one group must necessarily come at the expense of the rest of the population.

Many obstacles

Dr Bienvenido Argueta, who evaluated the policy influence of the project for IDRC following its completion, says that once the project got underway the researchers ran into a number of obstacles. First was the difficulty in accessing reliable sources of information. “Databases, education statistics and budget figures generally take no consideration of ethnic and gender issues,” he says. The second problem was the limited time available to complete the study in order to have an impact on the education budget. He points out that it takes time to build alliances, to inform and mobilize key sectors of the population, and to present proposals properly.

Finally, simply identifying decision-makers in the field of education finance policy was difficult. This was “because of the dynamics of national politics in recent years, with the constant turnover in senior government positions, and a steady shift of power from the executive to the legislative branch,” according to Dr Argueta. The Planning Unit of the Ministry of Education, for example, had seen four



directors come and go in the space of 18 months. The Ministry's draft budget was not only scrutinized and cut by the Ministry of Finance, it was also completely overhauled by the Finance Committee of Congress.

Despite these issues, the project team produced and published a report entitled "Financing of Education in Guatemala". It included several analyses of education budget planning and execution, and projections disaggregating – to the extent possible – investment by gender and ethnic group. Accompanying the report was the "Proposal for the financing of education in Guatemala with an emphasis on ethnic and gender equity." The report and the proposal were delivered at a public event in the presence of the Minister of Education and the CCRE.

Strategy was weak

The CNPRE-COPMAGUA team recognized that their dissemination strategy for these publications was weak, says Dr Argueta, and that they did not have an adequate plan to forge broader partnerships with the various Indigenous groups in Guatemala. This was true of the alliances in the CCRE and in the *Gran Campaña*, where the proposals were more easily negotiated with the teachers' union and the University of San Carlos of Guatemala. This situation was due, among other things, to the lack of experience and the technical and financial limitations of CNPRE-COPMAGUA. Also, the research team itself did not feel that it was involved in the dissemination strategies.

The weaknesses in terms of outreach and dissemination were further highlighted by the fact that there was no specific strategy targeted at women's groups, or any attempt to build a broader alliance on gender and ethnic equity, according to Dr Argueta. "The communications strategy placed no particular emphasis on women's groups. In general, the absence of strategies for reaching women's groups was repeated with respect to men's groups." And most seriously he notes: "It is

obvious that there was no proper approach made to the Congress, or to officials of the Presidential Office for Planning and Programming (SEGEPLAN) and the Ministry of Finance."

Most of the attempt at policy influence was directed toward the technical staff of the Ministry of Education. At the same time, people who bring pressure on government through civil society organizations, such as members of the CCRE and the *Gran Campaña*, were made more aware of the need to incorporate ethnic and gender issues into the education budget.

Dr Argueta's evaluation concludes that the major changes during the project were of a technical nature, especially in the institutional strengthening of CNPRE-COPMAGUA. "The study and the proposal took about one year, which means that the political, economic and social impact was not evident in the short run," he says. "Nevertheless, the fact that marginalized sectors of the population are participating more actively in the public policy debate is recognized as a step forward for Guatemalan democracy."



Some lessons

The analysis of policy influence in this case study is based on Evert Lindquist's typology of policy influence, as presented in his paper "Discerning Policy Influence: Framework for a Strategic Evaluation of IDRC-supported Research."

Expanding policy capacities: The greatest learning was represented by the acquisition and strengthening of the capacities of CNPRE-COPMAGUA and the research group, for justifying and preparing antidiscrimination policies. As a result they were able to generate information and produce knowledge, both in the research and in the proposal. They learned to introduce new concepts and issues on the agenda for debate by players who had previously little to say about the issue. In this respect, says Dr Argueta, they were able to influence other research centres with the capacity to do research and to propose courses of action to the government relating to public policy. Even IDRC program officers involved with the project say they learned some fundamental lessons especially about working with the grass-roots Indigenous organizations.

Broadening policy horizons: The researchers point to a growing understanding of the rationale underlying financial programs and qualitative programming in education. The qualitative analysis of the education sector required the establishment of goals and effective financial programming, which in turn demanded new concepts and new approaches. In addition, with respect to education funding, there was a favourable environment for communication and negotiation with various players in civil society. The research group also noted that it was very difficult, but at the same time very instructive, to address financial analysis from the gender perspective.

Affecting policy regimes: One of the fundamental lessons had to do with the process of giving legitimacy to policy by making it responsive to the national interest and not only to sectoral and party groups. This required skills of a different kind in order to have political influence. In turn, this involved a process of learning how to simplify the communication of complex qualitative analyses and hard data taken from the budget and education statistics. The team also learned to prioritize issues, to identify the "who, what and how" of preparing and executing the budget. They also deepened their skills in preparing "power maps" for influencing policy, although these still have to be refined.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC's work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation_policy