



The geometry of policy implementation: Lessons from the political economy of three education reforms in El Salvador during 1990–2005[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We analyze how international trends and changing structural limitations intersect with political, institutional, and technical aspects of education policy. Our purpose is to better understand how these issues variously combine to encourage or impede policy implementation. The research for this study focused on three cases of education policy from El Salvador during the period 1990–2005. These policies related to the Education with Community Participation (EDUCO) program, gender equality in education, and the teaching of values. Our findings show that it is not only actors, ideas, and constraints from the international realm that impact national-level political and institutional dynamics, but rather also that national-level political preferences and other local-level constraints can facilitate or impede the selection and implementation of a policy's technical elements. Our case studies provide multiple examples of how these elements combine, and with various consequences for implementation.

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1. Introduction

In the present essay, we examine the implementation of education policy in El Salvador in relation to a number of different policy ideas that either were—or eventually became—internationally popular with regard to reform currents. In looking at this issue within the political economy of El Salvador, we attempt to augment understanding around how international contexts, actors, and ideas intersect with national and local ones—and with what implications for the conditions under which one can expect education policy to be broadly enacted. By engaging in this research, we hope to contribute to the literature that addresses the nexus of international reform currents and national-level adoption and implementation of education policy (Brown, 2014; Dale, 1999; Edwards, 2013a; Rappleye, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow, 2012; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2009; Verger and Novelli, 2012; Verger et al., 2012).

Three separate cases are at the center of our analysis. These are, first, the “Education with Community Participation”¹ (EDUCO) program, second, the policy of gender equality in education, and, third, the policy initiative around civic values education. In addition to being reflective of international trends, all three policies were implemented to varying degrees in practice. Based on over three years of data collection, we are able to explain why each policy was implemented to a greater or lesser degree.

For the purpose of analysis, we restrict our study to the years 1990–2005, a period during which the education sector alone received over \$552 million in development assistance and loans from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank (Gillies, 2010).² We chose this period because it was when the above-mentioned policies (a) initially emerged in the Salvadoran context, (b) were incorporated into official education policy at the national level and (c) were put in practice. This time period thus provides an opportunity to empirically examine various aspects of policy implementation. Additionally, as will be explained, by focusing on this time period, we are able to consider how international policy trends as well as developments in the political–economic context during the 1980s initially and subse-

[☆] The title for the present manuscript was inspired by Robert Cowen's (2009) use of the phrase “geometry of insertion” in relation to policy borrowing.

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¹ All quotes originally in Spanish have been translated to English by the authors.

² In comparison, consider that the total budget for education in 1992 was approximately USD\$109 million (MINED, 1994).

quently shaped reform possibilities, and with what implications for practice. Finally, it should be noted that, while the present research is primarily concerned with policy implementation, previous research of ours has focused exclusively on international influence in the process of policy formation for the three initiatives examined here (Edwards et al., 2014).³

There are seven distinct sections in the present essay. In the first, we review previous literature that has addressed the influence of international trends and actors on policy implementation. In the second, we summarize our data collection and analysis strategies. The third section discusses the analytic framework employed. We then use the fourth section to characterize the Salvadoran country context in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The fifth and longest section contains the findings from our three cases. The presentation of each case begins with an explanation of how the policy connected with international trends of the time and then proceeds with the results of the research as far as implementation is concerned. In the sixth section, we engage in cross-case discussion, while in the penultimate section we discuss implications and offer a few hypotheses based on the findings of this study. In the final section we then provide a few concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

When it comes to the influence of international trends and actors, scholars have tended to look at their impact on policy development processes (Azanova, 2006; Edwards, 2013a, forthcoming-b; Edwards and Brehm, 2015; Ginsburg and Megahed, 2011; Jaramillo, 2012; McCormick, 2012; Rappleye, 2011; Verger et al., 2014) as well as policy traveling and promotion (Carney & Bista, 2009; Edwards, 2012a, forthcoming-a/c; Edwards and DeMatthews, 2014; McNeely, 1995; Steiner-Khamsi, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow, 2012; Verger, 2012; Waldow, 2009). Others have examined local level interpretations and the unintended consequences that result from the implementation of projects and reforms that have been supported by international development organizations (Maclure, 1994; Mukhopadhyay and Sriprakash, 2011; Rose, 2003).

Studies that analyze international influence in the process of implementation itself are many fewer in number. This is probably due (a) to the difficulty for researchers of getting inside and collecting data on this process and (b) to the fact that those actors in international organizations who work on reform are more concerned with influencing the process and ensuring implementation than they are with documenting and researching that process empirically. Moreover, to the extent that international organizations are interested in investigating policy implementation, it is typically only to assess outcomes through econometric studies that do not, and cannot, by their nature, unpack the implementation process. For their part, many officials and politicians seem to hold “a strange assumption that once a directive or plan or strategy is on paper, and has been affirmed by an authority, action and outcomes will ‘automatically’ follow,” as noted by Penny et al., (2008, p. 282). For these government functionaries, research on the process of implementation is often less of a concern than attending to the next high-priority issue.

Where scholars have examined international actors in relation to the process of implementation, they have done so in a way that focuses on the ingrained nature of international organizations (Samoff, 2013) and on the vulnerability of policy implementation due to the financial dependency of developing country

governments on external financing (Samoff, 2004, 2009). To that end, Nagel and Snyder (1989), in their study on Liberia, underscored “the direct or indirect involvement of international funding agencies in so many of the problems of coordination and control” (p. 9). From their research, they identify three ways that international funding “decouples” education systems, making it difficult for reform to be implemented. The first is that development institutions themselves are guided by different interests and policies, thereby creating “policy conflicts and discontinuities among multiple agencies and within a single agency over time” (p. 10). Second, historically, each development project has tended to have its own structure—“as a result of development agencies’ preferences for establishing new units and agencies in the education sector” (p. 10). Finally, there is competition to control development funds, both “among recipient units [in the government] . . . and among international funding agencies themselves” (p. 10). Of course, these dynamics, together with the additional problems caused by the funding cycles of international organizations and the associated monitoring and documentation requirements (Samoff, 2009), tend to destabilize education sector management generally as well as the implementation of policies themselves.

Moving beyond the general dynamics that affect policy implementation, two studies stand out in particular. The first, by Rhoten (2000), begins by taking as its focus the international trend of decentralization during the 1990s, and then proceeds to investigate the extent to which it is implemented (or not) in various states in Argentina through an approach labeled “global-local conditions of possibility”. This approach “considers policy as a complex series of changes that operate at several interacting levels, within several interrelated contexts, and along several interconnected dimensions” (p. 597). Ultimately, Rhoten (2000) shows how the interaction of political interest, institutional capacity, financial resources and, uniquely, the self-identify of sub-national political units play into the adaptation and implementation of an internationally popular policy trend.

The second study, by Penny et al. (2008), examined various components of the education reform program that was pursued by the government of Uganda in the late 1990s and 2000s as it sought to provide fee free education and to achieve universal primary education. What these authors find is that, while not all reform components were successfully implemented as intended, those that were—including new systems for textbook production and school-level grants for facilities improvement—reflected a combination of political will, institutional arrangements that facilitated cross-organizational collaboration and the channeling of resources, and, finally, well thought out policy specifics. As such, the authors comment that “effective education reforms are those that are technically sound, administratively and financially possible and politically feasible” (p. 271). Additionally, however, as these authors point out, international trends and influence played a structuring role in important ways. Examples of this influence include, first, the Sector Wide Approach to planning,⁴ which had recently emerged from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as a way to ensure wide participation in development planning, and, second, the fact that, for the involved development partners, “it was a priority to get the institutional architecture right for . . . coordination” (p. 272). A salient point here, then, is that political will from national actors is essential, but also that such political will can be both constrained (as in the case of the sector wide approach) and enabled (as in the case of donor coordination) by the structures that key international actors promulgate.

³ To that end, the policy origins discussion for each case presented here draws on Edwards et al. (2014).

⁴ See Brown et al. (2001) for more on this approach.

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