El Salvador’s EDUCO: A Community– Managed Education Program in Rural Areas

The smallest country in Central America, El Salvador has the region’s second-largest population (6.3 million). Between 1980 and 1992 a 12-year civil war tore the country apart. Peace agreements were reached in 1992 with United Nations mediation and a commitment to help the nation mend its devastated social fabric. Since then, the history of the country has been one of transition from war to peace.

El Salvador’s EDUCO Program—Education with Community Participation—actually began during the final period of civil war to serve the poorest and most isolated rural communities. It made families and parents the driving force for educational leadership, providing preschool and basic education in rural areas through joint efforts by the state and local communities. The EDUCO experience has rapidly expanded educational coverage for poor rural children without compromising quality. EDUCO schools now account for about 40 percent of the overall rural enrollment in public preschool and basic education.

Background

During the 1980s, Salvadoran society experienced a deep-rooted crisis due to the effects of the war. The armed conflict generated lack of security, political violence, and deep ideological polarization. The country paid a high cost for war—more than 80,000 dead, severe damage to infrastructure, and heavy migration of the population within the country and abroad. Between 1978 and 1988, the average income decreased 37 percent in real terms—for the poorest 20 percent of the population the decline was 67 percent.

In education, the 1980s were a lost decade. Illiteracy rates reached 29 percent for the population 16 years of age and older, one of the highest rates in Latin America. Just 70 percent of children aged 7 to 15 were enrolled in basic education (grades 1–9), and only 18 percent of young people aged 16 to 18 were in secondary education (grades 10–12). The figures were even worse in the poorest sectors. One out of two seven-year-olds in the poorest 20 percent of the population was enrolled in school, while nine out of 10 children in the wealthiest 10 percent were in school by that age.

It is important to stress that even before the signing of the peace accords, the government of El Salvador recognized the importance of expanding access to basic education (with special emphasis on rural areas), of promoting decentralization of educational services, and of overcoming the inefficiency of the public sector in education. With growing social consensus and economic recovery in the 1990s, public investment in education grew consistently, and a series of innovative initiatives led to a nationwide educational reform process.
Implementation of EDUCO

EDUCO, one of the first of the reform initiatives, was established in 1991 when the Ministry of Education decided to implement a pilot program to channel education funds through parents’ organizations, focusing on the poorest rural communities. The program is based on the creation, legalization, and provision of support to parents’ organizations at the community level (Asociaciones Comunales para la Educación—ACE), which support the development of new education services in their communities. These organizations were acknowledged by the ministry to have the authority to receive and use public funds from the central education budget to hire teachers and cover the basic operational costs of educational services.

From its initial design, EDUCO has had three goals:

- To expand education services for preschool and basic education in the rural and poorest communities of the country
- To promote community participation in the provision of education services
- To establish a curricular link between preschool and the first grades of basic education.

The pilot program created 263 new classrooms to enroll 8,416 children in grade 1 of basic education. The success of the 1991 experience led the Ministry of Education to institutionalize the program, which gradually became the model for expanding educational access in rural areas. In 2003, enrollment was greater than 362,000 students; more than 2000 ACEs were managing a similar number of rural schools; and more than 7,000 teachers had been hired. The ACEs administered about $50 million dollars allocated to them in the national budget (approximately 12 percent of the education budget).

Currently, the enrollment in EDUCO schools is about 40 percent of the overall rural enrollment for public preschool and basic education. This represents an installed capacity in the poorest rural areas where, at the beginning of the 1990s, education services were simply not available. It also has built up the social capital of communities. There is evidence that the services provided by the EDUCO program are more efficient than those of the traditional one, and that the quality of education is greater when community participation is effective.

Building capacity

The strategy of the EDUCO program is to set up community organizations for education (Asociaciones Comunales para la Educación—ACEs) whose members use funds from the Ministry of Education to hire teachers and meet other educational expenses. The process of creating an ACE takes no more than three months. At first, EDUCO took advantage of existing local infrastructure (schools, community buildings, or property belonging to community members); in other cases it built new classrooms with community participation.

The ministry ensures that financial resources are available to communities and provides support in the organization, legalization, and training of the community associations. It also helps to select and train teachers and provides teaching materials. For their part, the ACEs are
responsible for administering their funds, hiring teachers, and managing the educational services in their communities.

Thus several key processes—hiring, purchasing, acquisition of professional services and materials, and payment for basic services—are now the responsibility of community organizations. For schools within the EDUCO program, the ministry’s role has become one of ensuring financial resources, providing technical assistance and support, and supervising the use of the resources through selective audits.

**Achieving sustainability**

EDUCO gradually decreased its initial financial reliance on a World Bank loan, and by 1996 the program was fully funded by El Salvador’s national budget. In 2001, the government transferred to the ACEs a total of $45 million, which represented 2 percent of its total budget and 10.5 percent of the budget of the Ministry of Education. The ministry reports that “ACE members dedicate annually 1,044 hours to various tasks: management training (200 hours), bank account management (16 hours), payment of teacher salaries and social security (96 hours), purchase of school consumable materials (72 hours), advisory consultations with school supervisors and district and regional coordinators (120 hours), community and ACE meeting and assemblies (180 hours), school visits and supervision (360 hours).”

**A scalable solution**

EDUCO met its original objectives—and did so much faster than previous programs. Meanwhile, it promoted innovation within the education system, with positive effects on quality. The impact of the EDUCO program is seen in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

Its improvements in efficiency include:

- Greater agility in creating services
- The benefits of decentralized, community-level decision making
- Improvement in teachers’ attendance rates, leading to an increase in learning time for students
- The tendency to promote at least similar, and sometimes better, academic achievement than in the traditional public schools.

Its effectiveness as an engine of social change is also significant, particularly in terms of meeting the needs of rural children, especially the poorest, and building a mechanism to promote community participation for greater educational quality.

EDUCO enjoyed some important support. Among the driving factors of the program are the leadership and commitment of both the government authorities and the communities; the capacity of institutions to introduce innovative approaches (in the legal, administrative and curricular areas); and the technical and financial support related to loan-funded activities by the
World Bank. EDUCO also had the flexibility to make adjustments while implementing the program.

Based on the experience of El Salvador, the governments of Guatemala and Honduras decided to promote similar programs: the Programa Nacional de Auto-Gestión para el Desarrollo Educativo (PRONADE) in Guatemala in 1995, and the Programa Hondureño de Participación Comunitaria (PROHECO) in Honduras in 1999. In 2003, the total number of children enrolled in the three programs was more than 800,000. Approximately 8,000 schools were participating. Community associations with 50,000 parent members had hired more than 22,000 teachers.

EDUCO and similar initiatives have the potential to enhance the capacity of the region’s governments to satisfy the education needs of rural areas, help reduce poverty and existing inequities, and support broad economic and social development.