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Central America: Education Reform in a Post-Conflict Setting, Opportunities and Challenges

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Main Acronyms and Abbreviations

CONACOORE National Commission for Coordination of Education Reform
COPARE   Commission for Education Reform
EDUCO   Community Managed Schools Program
FMLN   Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberación Nacional
PRONADE   National Program of Community-Managed Schools for the Advancement of Education
NGO   Non-governmental Organization
UNDP   United Nations Development Programme
USAID   United States Agency for International Development
UNICEF   United Nations Children's Fund
WDI   World Development Indicators

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Foreword

This study was commissioned by the Education Team of the World Bank's Human Development Network and the Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit of the Social Development Department. The study was also supported by the Central America Country Management Unit.

The study team was led by José Silvério Marques, who is also the main author of this report. Background Reports were produced for each of the three Central American countries analyzed here. The country background reports were produced by local researchers: Abigail Castro de Pérez for El Salvador; Carolina Roca for Guatemala; and Vanessa Castro for Nicaragua.

This study is part of a wider study led by the Education Team, in collaboration with the CPR Unit, on Education and Post-Conflict Reconstruction. The main objective of the study is to review the experience of education system reconstruction in post-conflict countries and to identify lessons that can assist in the achievement of Education for All goals. The Central America study was coordinated by Peter Buckland from the Education Team and Ian Bannon from the CPR Unit. We are grateful for comments from Helena Ribe (LCSHD) and Robin Horn (LCSHE).

CENTRAL AMERICA: EDUCATION REFORM IN A POST-CONFLICT SETTING, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Introduction

The three Central American countries examined in this study suffered violent internal conflicts during the 1980s but faced the 1990s largely at peace and with a renewed sense of hope. As in most post-conflict societies peace brings not just a cessation of hostilities, but also the opportunity for transformation, especially in terms of addressing the root causes of the conflict and building a better future for the next generation. The immediate post-conflict period offers a window of opportunity, often brief however, to undertake these transformations by adopting bold and longer-term reform processes. Transforming as well as rebuilding education systems is often at the center of post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction agendas. The motivation for this study was to try to understand why some post-conflict countries are more successful than others in seizing this opportunity. Although the conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua had different manifestations and resolutions, the fact that the three embarked on post-conflict education reform programs with varying degrees of success offered an excellent opportunity to contrast and to try to learn from their experiences.

The first section of the report examines the impact of the conflicts on the education systems of each country. The second section looks at these countries' education reforms in the post-conflict period. Section three provides a brief assessment of the impact to date of the reforms, including the unfinished agendas. The last section concludes with some proposed lessons that would be applicable to any country embarking on a comprehensive education reform process, but especially so for post-conflict societies. Annex 1 presents a very personal account of lessons drawn from the reform process in El Salvador—personal in the sense of coming from a key actor in the country's reform process.

I. Impact of the Conflict on Education Systems

1. Roots of the Conflicts

Internal dissension that had simmered in Central America for decades worsened in the 1970s and erupted into open confrontation in the 1980s. Widespread poverty, a skewed income distribution and political systems controlled by caudillos or the military (or the two in combination) created fertile ground for armed opposition movements, a situation that was exploited by the East-West enmity. Civil wars raged in the region from the late 1970s through the 1980s.

The seeds of the armed conflict in **El Salvador** (1980–92) can be traced to the 19th century liberal-conservative struggles and competing ideologies, fueled by unequal land distribution. By the 20th century the stage had been set for the first act in the struggle between political parties and militarism, with an increasingly powerful Communist Party (1931) facing off against the fiercely anti-Communist military regime of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez (1932-44). Episodes of electoral fraud in the 1970s closed off political options to resolve growing tensions and thus added fuel to the impending conflict.

The early 1980s saw a heightening of tensions between the anti-Communist doctrine and five separate Marxist-leaning groups groups who united to form the *Frente Marabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN), fomenting a class struggle that aimed to lay the foundations of a socialist state. The result was all-out civil war, waged against a backdrop of dictatorships, military coups, juntas, guerrilla attacks and weak political parties. The civil war would cost over 70,000 Salvadorans their lives and drive tens of thousands from the country.

In **Guatemala** the hostilities broke out on November 13, 1960 following a failed nationalist military uprising. In 1962 a coalition of rebel movements created the *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (FAR), with its adherents running the gamut from dissident army officers to leftist students and political activists. The FAR began building its social base in rural farming communities in eastern Guatemala, and in 1966 the Guatemalan Army launched its first counterinsurgency campaign against the FAR. In the 1970s the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (Guerrilla Army of the Poor—EGP) and the *Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (Organization of the People in Arms—ORPA) burst into the public scene.

The counterinsurgency campaign in the 1980s was marked by extreme violence, particularly in the largely indigenous areas of the Guatemalan highlands but also targeting grass-roots movements in towns and cities. Among the estimated 150,000 people who lost their lives during the conflict were 40,000 to 50,000 who "disappeared", while waves of Guatemalans took refuge in Mexico.

In **Nicaragua** autocratic structures and values had held sway for decades, including a military dictatorship, a centralist authoritarian institutional apparatus, and a protectionist economic model. Sporadic jumps in domestic production between 1950 and 1970 coincided for the most part with booms in world export commodity prices. But the population at large did not share in the benefits: 5% of families accounted for 40% of total income and the nation's most precious asset—land—was concentrated in the hands of just 1,200 owners. The Somoza family alone owned 20% of Nicaragua's best land.

Social and political opposition to the regime mounted in the 1970s against a backdrop of plunging commodity prices and the earthquake that devastated the nation's capital in 1972. The armed movement that had started out in the 1960s as isolated pockets of guerrilla activity spread gradually and took root among the most disenfranchised segments of society. By the mid-1970s the Somoza regime was tottering. Vast sectors of the population were already reacting against the regime's repression, social injustice, and abuses. In addition, fanning the flames of the conflict were disputes with private business owners triggered by the Somoza family's incursions into industry, finance and real estate. The armed struggle intensified and in 1979 the insurrection succeeded in toppling the Somoza government after 45 uninterrupted years in power.

In the 1980s the Sandinistas set out to install a socialist/marxist regime in Nicaragua, but the Government quickly faced violent opposition on its northern and southern borders. Rural Nicaragua became the main base of operations of the "Contras", as the anti-Sandinista fighters became known. As the conflict escalated, the Sandinistas were forced to press their countrymen into military service. Following a bitter civil war that raged throughout the 1980s, the Sandinistas were defeated at the polls at the close of the 1980s and a new government formed under Doña Violeta de Chamorro. The Contras were disarmed and demobilized and Nicaragua embarked on a difficult dual transition process, to consolidate its nascent democracy and to dismantle the state-controlled economy left behind by the Sandinista regime.

2. Education Systems in the Late 1970s

Toward the end of the 1970s the education systems of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua were in bad shape. Less than half of their population could read and write, with illiteracy rates particularly high among women and rural dwellers. Average educational attainment was extremely low, curricula and instruction approaches were ineffective and outdated, enrollment and other education indicators were extremely low, and the administration of education systems was centralized, bureaucratic and inefficient.

Curriculum and instructional approach

The approach to learning in these education systems left much to be desired. Students were passive recipients of knowledge, learning exclusively by rote. There was nothing in the classroom environment to stimulate them or make them partners in a quest for knowledge. Schools had no laboratories or other teaching materials. The vast majority of public school students had no textbooks and were forced to copy their lessons into notebooks. A blackboard and chalk were the only materials to be found in classrooms.

Education quality suffered because of poorly- or un-trained teachers. In **Nicaragua**, for example, close to a third of primary-school teachers had no teaching certification. Fully 90% of rural schools had a single teacher; 80% were one-room schools, covering fewer than four grades; and less than 7% of teachers were fully qualified.

Academic curricula were also inadequate, their contents largely irrelevant to the students' lives and surroundings. The contents and values conveyed in the imported textbooks that had been placed in Nicaraguan classrooms offered students little they could relate to. Insulated from events unfolding elsewhere in the country, schools were detached from the nation's economic and social problems.

Monocultural curricula were the norm. **Guatemala**, where over the half the population is indigenous, had launched a *castellanization* program that echoed the monocultural, and monolingual education mindset prevalent at the time. The indigenous populations of **Nicaragua's** Atlantic Coast Region were similarly neglected.

System coverage and efficiency

At the close of the 1970s education in these three countries was elitist, imbued with the legacy of military strongmen, and cultural exclusion. Extremely inefficient education systems had shut out the vast majority of the population. As Table 1 illustrates, between one third and one quarter and two thirds of children were not enrolled in primary schools and barely half or less of the children who did enroll completed the primary level. On average, it was taking children almost twice as long as it should to complete the primary cycle. The situation was different in Costa Rica—with no armed forces and a deep-rooted democratic tradition, that country had near-universal primary education enrollment and a comparatively efficient system.

Table 1: Central America: Education Indicators in the Late 1970s

Country	Net Primary Enrollment Ratio (%)	Primary Completion (%)	Years to Finish Sixth Grade
Costa Rica	93	78	8.0
El Salvador	72	58	10.2
Guatemala	58	49	11.2
Nicaragua[1]	44	21	n.a.

1/ Data from the late 1970s: n.a. = not available.
Source: Background Reports.

Education system administration

In keeping with the political and economic structure and mindset of the time, public education systems were highly centralized, bureaucratic and had a strong urban bias. Urban areas—particularly capital

cities—received a disproportionate share of education funding. Teachers and parents had little involvement in the administration of education systems.

Personnel administration was inefficient. Duplication of efforts, neglect or vague understanding of responsibilities, and a slow bureaucracy were just some of the symptoms. In **El Salvador**, for instance, large numbers of public school teachers switched schools every month, particularly in the countryside, causing students to lose class days and producing high repetition rates. While payroll costs ate up most of the education budgets, a full one-quarter of employees in the ministries of education were non-teaching staff. Teacher assignments and labor issues were resolved in the capital, and every personnel action required reams of paperwork.

In sum, by the late 1970s education systems were inequitable, centralized, bureaucratic and inefficient. The vast majority of the poor, particularly rural dwellers and indigenous communities, were excluded from the system. If some urban public schools managed to deliver a reasonably good education this was by no means the norm. There were a number of reasons for education system inefficiency, including: (i) little time allotted for teaching; (ii) curriculum shortcomings and a total lack of interface between school, community and family; (iii) a mix of ages in the same grade; (iv) a shortage of qualified teachers; and (v) funding constraints resulting in low salaries, lack of textbooks, and shortages of supplies and materials— in a sense, not that different from the problems affecting most low-income countries at the time.

3. Impact of the Conflicts

Death and destruction

If the conflicts were devastating for these countries at large it took a particularly heavy toll on the poor. Education budgets suffered as public funds were diverted to the war effort. Rural areas were the scene of the worst fighting. Teachers were killed and school buildings destroyed. Masses of children and young people living in the conflict zones stopped going to school as communities were internally displaced or individuals fled to the United States (El Salvador and Nicaragua), to Mexico (Guatemala), or joined "resistance communities" in the highlands (Guatemala). The conflict soon spread to urban areas, particularly university campuses.

Throughout the 1980s **El Salvador** was immersed in a severe and violent conflict, with marches, protests, kidnappings, assaults, protracted hostilities, takeovers of churches and embassies, assassinations and death squads. In an environment of fierce social and ideological battles with no political or democratic spaces, disputes were resolved by violence or pressure tactics. The twelve-year armed conflict had multiple repercussions on the education system. Although there are no statistics to document the number of schools damaged, students who fled the system or teachers who perished, Salvadoran academics familiar with the era paint the following picture of the conflict's impact:

- Shellings and military confrontations triggered a mass exodus or wiped out entire communities, as occurred in El Mozote. Poor urban settlements mushroomed, leaving more and more people with unmet education and other basic needs.
- The confrontations and shellings damaged schools, particularly in the countryside, preventing children from attending class.
- Fearful of the strife, many teachers were unwilling to accept posts in schools in conflict zones (Chalatenango, Morazán, Guazapa, Usulután), worsening the problem of education system coverage.
- Since appointments to key senior Education Ministry posts were driven by ideological considerations or political patronage, it was impossible to effectively serve many parts of the conflict zones, further eroding education coverage.

- • The quality of basic teacher training suffered as teacher training institutes closed or were neglected.

An estimated one-third of education communities in **Guatemala** were affected in some measure by the civil war. Rural areas were hardest hit as schools came under direct attack, teachers and pupils were killed, communities were terrorized and emptied, and teachers refused to take jobs in rural schools. Rural schools that did manage to secure teachers found it difficult if not impossible to retain them. There was little or no real supervision in rural areas and limited tracking and evaluation of student learning.

In **Nicaragua** the Contras left a trail of death and destruction in rural areas, primarily in the mountainous border regions to the north and areas around the San Juan River in the south. The conscription of young men and women to fight the Contras left its mark on the education system for years to come, with high secondary school dropout rates and many deaths in the age group that had been pressed into military service.

Politicization of education systems

The conflicts politicized the education systems. In some cases, teachers' unions and students—mainly university students—took active part in the clashes and were the targets of repression. In Nicaragua the Sandinistas used the education system as a tool to advance their socialist agenda.

In the 1980s in **El Salvador** the University of El Salvador was plunged into a deep crisis because of its links to the ideological left that were overshadowing its educational mission. Some of its faculty emigrated and/or joined the guerrilla forces. The largest teachers' union, *ANDES 21 de Junio*, adopted a stance openly critical of the regime, distancing itself from the government and espousing positions akin to those of the guerrillas.

Guatemala, too, saw its teachers' unions become politicized, particularly at the secondary school level. High schools and the national university actively opposed the government. Student and teacher leaders were persecuted, killed, or disappeared.

In **Nicaragua** university autonomy was effectively abolished. The Sandinista leadership, professing a "community of purpose" between government and university, saw no need for autonomous higher-education institutions. Believing education to be a political mission, the Sandinista administration deployed a variety of instruments to instill ideological contents via the classroom. The Literacy Campaign that mobilized over 80,000 young people, thousands of teachers, government agencies, the private sector, and religious groups had a definite political thrust and was used as a way of winning young people's sympathies. Some of the literacy materials developed were designed to gain legitimacy for the Sandinista ideology and its values and symbols. The content of official primary-school readers and social sciences texts (notably history books) was clearly intended for ideological purposes. The announcement that private establishments too would have to follow the new curriculum was viewed as a threat to parochial education and to parents' right to choose where and how their children would be educated.

To be sure, there were improvements in the education system during the Sandinista era despite the crisis into which the system was plunged.[1] A USAID report on those years points out the significant increase in pre-primary and primary enrollments, with marked improvements in rural areas.[2]

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[1] Nicaragua was a donor favorite in the education sector during the "romantic" period of the Sandinista government, when a number of bilateral donors held high hopes for the revolution that had deposed the Somoza dictatorship. Since the end of the Sandinista period, although international support for education has played a major role, it has received support from fewer bilateral donors.

[2] USAID. *Nicaragua Primary Education Subsector Assessment*, Managua, May 1991.

Alternative education structures

As the most strife-torn rural areas found themselves abandoned by the official education system, some local and spontaneous alternative education structures emerged. **El Salvador**'s *Escuelas Populares* set up in regions where the fighting was fiercest were run large ly by communities and local educators, many of whom had completed only two grades of basic education themselves. The main mission of these schools, most of them supported by foreign NGOs and church groups, was to teach local children to read and write.

Nontraditional community schooling options took shape in **Guatemala** as well. These included facilities set up in "resistance communities" whose residents had fled or been driven from their homes. In some remote communities, regular teachers or community educators gave instruction as best they could under dangerous circumstances and as hostilities raged on around them.

Funding

As the conflicts played out in **El Salvador** and **Nicaragua,** defense budgets soared and education budgets were slashed (Table 2). In El Salvador, defense spending doubled as a share of GDP between 1978 and 1989, while education spending dropped to less than 2% of GDP. Nicaragua's defense spending increased by five times coupled with a marked drop in education spending. In **Guatemala**, the lower intensity of the conflict produced a more modest increase in defense expenditure, but even here spending on education fell from an already low level, to a paltry 1.4% of GDP by 1989.

Table 2: Impact of the Conflict on Education Spending, 1978 and 1989

	El Salvador		Guatemala		Nicaragua	
	1978	**1989**	**1978**	**1989**	**1978**	**1989**
Education Budget						
% of total budget	19.8[1]	17.6	11.9[1]	11.8[3]	11.6[1]	9.4
% of GDP	3.4[2]	1.9[2]	1.8[2]	1.4[2]	3.8[2]	2.5
Defense Budget						
% of total budget	8.8[1]	27.9	9.9	13.6	11.0[1]	41
% of GDP	1.5[2]	2.9[2]	1.3	1.9	3.6[2]	18.9

1/ 1980 data; 2/ Percentage of GNP; 3/ 1990 data.
Sources: UNESCO and Background Reports.

The state of education in the late 1980s

Following a decade of strife the Guatemalan and Salvadoran education systems had fallen even farther behind their Costa Rican counterpart. Illiteracy rates were five times the level in Costa Rica, primary and secondary enrollment ratios roughly three-quarters and one-half, respectively, of Costa Rica's (Table 3). Nicaragua's impressive enrollment gains, however, placed it between Costa Rica and the other two countries.

Table 3: Impact of the Conflict on Enrollments, 1989 (percentages)

Country	Illiteracy Rate	Primary Enrollment	Secondary Enrollment	Post-secondary Enrollment
Costa Rica	7	100	41	27
El Salvador	35	86	25	16
Guatemala	39	78	23	n.a.
Nicaragua	18	94	33	7

n.a. = not available

Sources: WDI, UNESCO and Background Reports.

Education system efficiency in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua was very low, dropout and repetition rates far exceeding Costa Rica's (Table 4). Education quality was poor by various standards: contents, teaching and learning materials, teacher training, educational and psychological services, school buildings and equipment, learning environment, and evaluation systems. Education matters were centralized in the education ministries, which were ill-equipped to regulate, supervise or evaluate their school systems.

Table 4: Impact of the Conflict on Education Efficiency, 1990 (percentages)

Country	Completion (Grade 5)	Primary School Dropout Rate(Grade 5)	Primary School Repetition Rate(Grade 1)
Costa Rica	85	18	11.3
El Salvador	58	42[2]	27.3[1]
Guatemala	50[1]	50[1]	27.3[1]
Nicaragua	65	35	29.5

1/ 1995; 2/ 1991.
Source: The State of Education, 1980-2000, UNESCO

In sum, education systems that had been weak to begin with at the start of the 1980s were severely debilitated following ten years of conflict. Problems common to the systems toward the end of the 1980s were low enrollment rates, underfunding and inferior education quality. School management was highly centralized in ministry headquarters. In the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan systems too little account was being taken of those nations' cultural and linguistic mosaic. Education systems, including teacher appointments, had become politicized during the hostilities.

II. Education Reform in the Post-Conflict Era

1. The End of the Conflicts

The first move toward peace in Central America was the Contadora Group declaration signed by the foreign ministers of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela in January 1983. On May 25, 1986 regional leaders met in Esquipulas, Guatemala, for the first summit of Central American Presidents. In the Esquipulas Declaration that emerged the Presidents affirmed their commitment to sign the "Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America."

A peace plan unveiled in 1987 by President Arias of Costa Rica bearing the title "Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America" was adopted by the Central American Presidents at their second summit on August 6 and 7 in Guatemala City. The peace plan earned President Arias that year's Nobel Peace Prize. This watershed agreement, dubbed Esquipulas II, charted a course for national reconciliation in the post-conflict phase.

Following the Esquipulas II accord countries stepped up efforts within their own borders to bring the conflicts to an end. On the international front, the easing of tensions as the Cold War faded was being felt in the Central American region as well. When Alfredo Cristiani was elected president of **El Salvador** in June 1989 negotiations with the FMLN intensified, only to be cut short the following November by a guerrilla attack on the capital. At the special presidential summit on December 10 and 11, 1989 in San Isidro Colorado, Costa Rica, the Central American leaders reaffirmed their commitment to Esquipulas II and called on the FMLN to immediately cease hostilities.

Negotiation and reconciliation processes in the region then got back on track, with United Nations support. The February 1990 election of Violeta de Chamorro as president of **Nicaragua** marked the end of the Sandinista regime. In **El Salvador** the government and the FMLN reached a peace agreement on January 16, 1992. In **Guatemala** contacts intensified between the National Reconciliation Commission and the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG) which had united the various rebel groups, culminating in the Oslo Agreements which ultimately gave birth to a peace accord in late 1996. All three countries immediately launched reconstruction programs, one component of which was education system reform.

2. Education Reform

As peace returned to the three nations each of them embarked on education reforms. Education was held up as one of the keys to the rebuilding of harmonious coexistence, development of a peace culture, and national reconciliation. Another goal was to quickly expand coverage and provide access to parts of the population that had lacked education services as well as to produce a quantum leap in education quality. All three countries embarked on major education reform programs, although the results and gains have been uneven.

In **El Salvador** the *Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social* (Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development—FUSADES) issued a set of proposals toward the end of the 1980s to tackle the country's severe economic and social problems, including those plaguing the education sector.[3] After extensive public discussions these proposals became a plank in the electoral platform of presidential candidate Alfredo Cristiani. Following his 1989 election Cristiani invited the FUSADES team to join his administration and implement the program they had developed. The multilateral banks were approached for support in charting an education reform that would be appropriate to the country's circumstances (it was still at war), giving priority to the needs of rural El Salvador.

There were no specific education goals or targets in El Salvador's peace accords. The country had already begun to overhaul its education system but an assessment was needed of the real state of the education system, especially in the conflict zones. Two months after the peace accords were signed, for the first time in twelve years officials of the Ministry of Education visited the zones that had remained under guerrilla control, in the Department of Chalatenango. After observing first-hand the operation of the *Escuelas Populares* they put together a plan to support this initiative. It was decided that a portion of USAID assistance would be used to set up an accelerated program to train "community educators" and

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[3] Contributions to the FUSADES proposals from Chile's Fundación KAST were fundamental in charting the education reforms, including the EDUCO program.

purchase educational material for these schools. The community teachers were enrolled in EDUCO teacher training programs (see below) which were already in operation. An open national dialogue was launched on community-based education approaches in El Salvador and strategies were mapped out to mesh these with the formal education system.

Another noteworthy development in those years was the creation of the National Commission for Coordination of Education Reform (CONACOORE), which for a number of reasons would prove key to revamping the nation's education system. CONACOORE:

- Provided a forum for ongoing dialogue;
- Advocated group decision-making with careful attention to technical considerations and conditions on the ground;
- Provided capacity for monitoring the state of education across the country, through up-to-date reporting; and
- Propelled a shift from a vertical management approach to one combining matrix, vertical and horizontal dimensions, with the attendant delegation of decision-making and responsibilities.

At the same time, the Ministry of Education launched a campaign "Education Matters" to encourage schools to seek and welcome support from the community, the private sector, NGOs, and private agencies or foundations. Equally important, the campaign aimed, above all, to instill a sense of ownership in the Ministry of Education's own staff.

With World Bank financial and technical support the Ministry of Education drew up a roadmap for boosting rural enrollment rates through the Community-Managed Schools Program, better known by its Spanish acronym EDUCO. Two prominent features of this initiative are strong community participation and decentralization of Ministry of Education structures, especially financial administration. Newly empowered communities now appoint and hire teachers and arrange their benefits. The Ministry quickly reaped the benefits of this far-reaching decentralization. It now had a filter—the local community—through which to deal with issues that had created such an onerous workload in the past: permanent teacher appointments, transfer approvals for teachers wanting to switch schools, processing of sick-leave requests and dealing with teachers' personal problems and working conditions in individual schools. Since communities were in day-to-day contact with their children's teachers they were in the best position to supervise local school matters.

It was no easy task to bring the EDUCO program on stream. The Ministry of Education had been one of the main, if not the main, focus of political cronyism through teacher appointments, whereas EDUCO put parents in charge of teacher selection. The largest teachers' union, *ANDES 12 de Junio*, initially interpreted the program as a move to privatize education. For the union, EDUCO represented a loss of power and a step backward in what the union termed its "teacher gains", since the performance of EDUCO teachers, hired on annual contracts, was to be assessed every year by parents and provide the basis on which to decide whether or not their contracts would be renewed. Incompetent teachers would be dismissed. It was the end of an era of job security and tenure that teachers entering the system had come to expect. After teacher strikes and work stoppages, and following a process of dialogue, the EDUCO program ultimately found acceptance along with a host of other education reforms.

At the same time, the Ministry of Education was undergoing a reorganization to decentralize operations to the country's 14 Departments. The single purpose of the exercise was to improve day-to-day support to the country's schools and provide a single conduit—school supervisors, whose selection criteria and job profiles were rewritten—for directives and for matters related to school programs, projects and activities.

Once the Ministry reorganization was firmly on track and area directors and supervisors had been trained, attention turned to the schools' own internal organization, which was to be modeled on the EDUCO program's organization and *modus operandi.* This was the genesis of the School Steering Boards (CDEs) created in every school in the country, made up of the principal, a representative of the teaching staff, a student representative and a parent representative. This structure was gradually put in place in public schools across El Salvador.

Now that each school's internal legal structure had been formalized, the second phase—decentralization—could begin. Its aim was to transfer funding for actions that could help improve the quality of education. One program launched at this time offered incentives to schools for directly managing the funds transferred from the Ministry (quality bonus, teacher training allowance, excellence bonus, food voucher scheme in EDUCO schools, etc.). The funding-decentralization phase set the stage for other activities and services for the schools and ushered in new planning approaches that featured collective decision-making with an eye to the schools' real needs framed within a medium-term perspective.

3. Education Reform in Guatemala

In contrast with El Salvador the **Guatemala** peace accords contained very specific education-sector goals and targets. Among these commitments were the creation of a joint committee to craft an education reform that would take due account of the country's cultural and ethnic diversity, promote the use of indigenous languages in the delivery of public services at the community level, expand and foster bilingual and intercultural education in the school system, and boost public spending on education. The agreements called also for a "national civic education program for democracy and peace" to instill respect for human rights, rebuild the political culture and encourage the use of peaceful dispute resolution mechanisms. However, some observers noted that not all the Guatemala peace-accord goals emerged from discussions within Guatemalan society or a shared national vision—quite a few were introduced by international actors or other outsiders directly or indirectly involved in the negotiations.

The Commission for Education Reform (COPARE) envisaged in the peace accords came into being on March 20, 1997. Key pieces of the reform design were a diagnostic assessment of the education system, a philosophical and conceptual framework, and an outline of policies, strategies, and conditions that needed to be fostered to make the process work. COPARE embraced elements of the Indigenous Peoples Accord which laid out the core tenets of education reform, which was to be "attuned to Guatemala's cultural and linguistic diversity" and to: (i) decentralize and regionalize the education system; (ii) give parents and the community a say in education contents; (iii) rid the system of discriminatory education contents; (iv) integrate Mayan concepts of education, foster bilingual intercultural education, and respect and encourage the study and understanding of indigenous cultures; (v) build in education contents that promote national unity and respect for cultural diversity; (vi) increase the Ministry of Education budget to further the reforms; and (vii) promote the creation of indigenous institutions of higher learning. With support from the international community and civil society a series of programs took shape to modernize the nation's school system and improve education coverage and quality.

Starting in 1996, area Education Bureaus were created in each of Guatemala's Departments. These deconcentrated bodies were tasked with planning, directing, coordinating and implementing education actions in their respective jurisdictions. Steps were taken to unify the functions of the education supervisor and of the teaching technical coordinator, the number of schools for which any one officer would be responsible was reduced, and new school districts were established. Communities now could propose candidates for teaching posts and have a say in teacher hiring. School boards were created to encourage the community to become involved in school matters and to decentralize education. The PRONERE initiative (National Program for School Achievement Assessment) launched in 1997 and run by Universidad del Valle de Guatemala improved the system used to assess school achievement. In 1998

a Financial Management Unit (UDAF) was created in the Education Ministry and the Integrated Government Financial Management and Control System (SIAF/SAG) began operation, enhancing the Ministry's resource allocation and financial management capacity.

Guatemala borrowed from El Salvador's EDUCO experiment in designing the National Program of Community-Managed Schools for the Advancement of Education (PRONADE), launched in 1993. PRONADE's goal is to increase enrollments and steadily improve education quality in order to keep rural children in school until they complete at least grade three of the primary cycle. With decentralized administration and finances this program supports the organization and operation of Ministry-funded self-managed schools. Another initiative, the "Schools for Excellence" program, aims to strengthen the core curriculum in mathematics, reading and writing, democracy and human rights, cross-cultural studies, girls' education, and environmental education.

In terms of bilingual education, Guatemala unveiled the "B'e Quality Schools" program in 1998 as a pilot project to systematize methodological approaches to improve education quality and deliver more relevant bilingual services. The founding purpose of these schools (the Mayan term B'e means destination, voyage, passage, journey) was to entrench active learning methods that lend themselves to bilingual, intercultural, multiethnic education. A curriculum-enrichment program introduced around the same time was *Franja de Lengua y Cultura Maya* (Mayan Language and Culture Initiative), which advocates and assists with formal instruction in Mayan languages and culture in Guatemalan schools as a fundamental means to strengthen cultural identity and promote interethnic coexistence in the nation. By 1999 the Mayan Initiative had been expanded to include up to third grade of primary school, taking in 800 children and 17 teachers in the municipalities of Santo Domingo Xenacoj, Santiago Sacatepéquez, San Juan Comalapa and Patzún. Support still is being provided for the Program for the Integrated Development of the Mayan People designed in 1989 by the Linguistics Institute of Rafael Landívar University with USAID funding and for World Learning's Bilingual Intercultural Education Project in the Department of Quiché, likewise funded by USAID, which is striving to improve the quality of education delivered to rural children.

The other noteworthy venture over this period was the Great National Campaign for Education, under whose umbrella 77 agencies and organizations, including universities, churches, media, indigenous organizations, academic and research centers, foundations, business groups, international agencies and civil society human rights organizations are pursuing a common strategy: to persuade Guatemalans that education is a way out of poverty. This is a movement with a long-range horizon which will operate until the goals of universal, relevant, quality pre-primary, primary and secondary education with equity are achieved. Two of the campaign's central goals are to: (i) achieve substantive, sustained increases in Ministry of Education funding as a percentage of GDP until education's share reaches 7% or, at a minimum, UNESCO's recommended 6%; and (ii) track enrollment increases to ensure that coverage is improving at every level of schooling and that the system is delivering better quality, more relevant education with equity.

4. Education Reform in Nicaragua

Following the demise of the Sandinista regime in **Nicaragua** it became clear to the education community that the country needed a thorough reform of its education system. Sandinista education leaders themselves had pointed out the weak points, both technical and practical, of the reforms their administration had attempted in the 1980s. The following were some of the acknowledged shortcomings: reforms driven by events rather than planned; curricula rewritten quickly as an emergency task; reforms adopted without clear principles, goals or objectives and changes in curriculum content without altering the traditional curriculum architecture. Among other missteps cited was the injection of partisan views, ideological contents, values, symbols, even slogans, into textbooks of the era.

Nicaragua's education reforms in the 1990s followed a three-pronged, sequenced approach. The first step was to dismantle the education system constructed by the Sandinista government. While quantitative improvements had been emphasized by that Sandinista administration, the focus in the early 1990s was the dismantling of the inherited education structure—including some parts that were working well. The second prong of the reforms was to depoliticize the system, to rid it of ideological contents implanted in the preceding era and make way for other values and contents with a religious, conservative bent. In the third stage a practical model took shape in line with the logic of the new administration's economic and education policies: market-based development model, priority on primary education, human capital and skills building, and attention to technical and higher education. The reforms had five guiding principles:

- Comprehensive curriculum reform;
- Modernization and decentralization of the state's role, giving parents greater responsibility for school choice and in curriculum and school administration;
- Decentralization, school autonomy and increased role for the private sector;
- Decision to leave the education system open to Christian values; and
- Priority to basic and preschool education

Curriculum changes in the early 1990s were adopted hurriedly. The first move was to rid the system of textbooks and material that might contain ideological propaganda or sectarian political views, particularly in history textbooks and social-science texts generally. Over the course of ten months all the books published by the previous government were destroyed and replaced in every school. Mathematics, science, and spanish were strengthened while other subjects such as political economy were dropped. Civics courses were added to the curriculum to teach and encourage students to respect national traditions, values and symbols. As a move toward academic freedom the requirement that all schools use the same textbook for a given subject was dropped. The next major step was the wholesale adoption of new textbooks. Between the second semester of 1990 and the first semester of 1991, 4,400 primary and secondary schools received 7.6 million new textbooks, copied from texts from other Latin American countries.

Teacher training was a parallel focus of the reforms. In 1990, 7,000 of Nicaragua's 18,000 primary-school instructors were uncertified. Teachers typically were taught only traditional, passive instruction methods that did nothing to engage their students. Some of the course topics keyed to the education reforms were primary and secondary school curriculum change, values formation, and how to redirect students into technical streams. Between 1991 and 1996 a total of 45,881 educators received training in curriculum-change topics.

The object of the first phase of the reforms (1990-91) had been to sift through and erase previous education contents, but it had skipped the pedagogical stage of technically sound curriculum change, having simply imported textbooks to replace the previous ones. A nationwide consultation process was organized to decide on education priorities and to reach a consensus on an education philosophy and policy that would help support the country's new socioeconomic system. The consultations culminated in a national congress under the banner "Education for All is Everyone's Business." Although Ministry of Education officials participated in this exercise, in the end it elicited little support or interest on the part of civil society or opinion-shapers.

In the ensuing years Nicaragua took more resolute steps to see its "new education" agenda yield tangible results. A package of policies and approaches to develop and reform the educational system mapped out in 1992 targeted the first four primary grades and a policy on curriculum change was adopted in 1992. Education policies were one piece of the government's umbrella social-sector policy announced in 1993,

their focus being to increase promotion and retention rates, enhance education quality and boost preschool, primary and special education enrollments. The "new education" campaign received a boost in 1994 when the government unveiled a set of key priorities: decentralize the education system, increase retention rates in the early primary grades, and teach young people moral values. More recently, the 1996-2000 National Sustainable Development Plan unveiled a clearer blueprint to solidify comprehensive education reform. Among its goals are increases in education enrollments, universal primary education, improvements in education quality and higher retention and promotion rates, with a focus on primary grades. The plan, however, has failed to serve as a linchpin of educational change.

Nicaragua's education reforms over the course of the 1990s did secure a number of gains, including:

- Education policy and overall government policy became more closely aligned;
- The role of education as a driver of social change became more clearly understood;
- Concrete measures were taken to improve education system efficiency;
- Consensuses on some education policies and goals were worked out in Education Forums; and
- Substantial external funding was secured to help implement the reforms.

However, shortcomings on the implementation side of these reforms kindled opposition and clashes and kept the reforms from achieving all their goals. To begin with, the new authorities' approach as it assessed the preceding decade's gains tended to ignore or minimize some of the undeniable strides made during those years. Second, the wholesale replacement of previous education contents by importing textbooks and leaving textbook choice to the schools impaired curriculum planning capacity in the national system and held back the development of home-grown texts. Lastly, the reforms were implemented for the most part vertically and, in spite of their enormous importance to society, the country let slip the opportunity to map out a bold and broad education reform process based on a national consensus.

5. Education Funding

Once the conflicts had come to an end all the countries were able to reduce their defense spending (Table 5). The most dramatic reductions were in Nicaragua and El Salvador (El Salvador now has the lowest defense expenditure of the three countries). This left more money for education budgets, which shot up in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Even so, education spending in Guatemala and El Salvador as a percentage of GDP is still well below the Latin American average of about 4.5% or the world average of 5%, according to UNESCO.

Table 5: Education and Defense Budgets,1989 and 2001

	El Salvador		Guatemala		Nicaragua[1]	
	1989	**2001**	**1989**	**2001**	**1989**	**2001**
Education Budget						
% of total budget	17.6	19.4	11.8[3]	13.8	9.4	14.0
Total % of GDP	1.9[2]	3.1	1.4[2]	1.9	2.5	6.2
Defense Budget						
% of government budget	27.9	4.9	13.6	7.0	41.0	9.0
Total % of GDP	2.9[2]	0.8	1.9	0.9	18.9	3.8

1/ Nicaragua's national income estimates in the national accounts are believed to be considerably underestimated, which distorts indicators presented as a share on GNP and GDP; 2/ Percentage of GNP; 3/ 1990.
Sources: WDI, UNESCO and Background Reports.

Support from the international community

International community support was crucial for the education reforms in **El Salvador.** International assistance for education change dates back to the dawn of the Cristiani administration when the country was still at war. As noted earlier, the World Bank, USAID, UNICEF, and subsequently the IDB provided substantial support for the reform process. World Bank assistance was critical for the expansion of EDUCO, overhaul of the traditional school system, transfer of education funding to the schools, secondary education improvements, and modernization of the Ministry of Education.

In the mid-1980s the international community began to lend support to **Guatemala** to expand the coverage of its education system, especially to reach the indigenous population. The PRONEBI program, in particular, aims to deliver pre-primary and primary bilingual bicultural education to indigenous schoolchildren.

At the Consultative Group Meeting held following the signing of the peace accords, the donor community offered considerable support to the government and civil society organizations to help Guatemala achieve the peace accord mandates and targets in the education sector and indigenous development. Key priorities that would be supported included programs to boost pre-primary and primary enrollments through decentralized, participatory approaches; improve education quality; expand and improve bilingual and multicultural education programs; and a special focus on girls' education.

Donor support for the education sector has slowed since 2000, a product of the gap between the government's formal position on education policy and actions on the ground, and fulfillment of the peace-accord education reform mandates. Underlining this lower support has been concern on the part of the donor community over lack of progress in expanding Guatemala's tax base, which was called for in the peace accords and which donors identified as a key indication of the national commitment to comply with the peace accords. Without an adequate domestic revenue base, donors have questioned the government commitment to expand and fiscally sustain efforts and programs to improve the coverage and quality of education services.

Throughout the 1990s the international community played a central role in **Nicaragua** as well. A teacher training program funded by the Netherlands and UNESCO was the first project designed to assist the Ministry of Education. In 1993 USAID reviewed a Ministry proposal to fund education reform and the following year saw the launch of the BASE I initiative, in which 30 model schools served as pilots for the new education methods. The following year the World Bank provided support for a Government campaign to expand pre-school enrollment and launched the APRENDE I project. Apart from community pre-school support this project included components to further decentralization, modernize area education bureaus and assist in the publishing and printing of textbooks for use across the primary school system. APRENDE I is also continuing to fund the printing of bilingual books for the Atlantic Coast region, most of them published in English and Miskito. The Nicaraguan Ministry of Education has received funding from the European Union for sports programs and for housing construction for rural teachers, from Finland for bilingual education, from UNDP for school lunch programs, and from Japan for school construction and repairs. The follow-on BASE II program currently covers 177 multigrade and regular schools, a large percentage of them bilingual institutions.

In sum, the vision of education reform embraced in El Salvador, the political commitment forged in the country and a broad-based consultation process made the education reforms workable. Conceived within FUSADES, this vision was subsequently embraced by Cristiani administration officials, many of whom had come out of FUSADES and were deeply committed to seeing the reforms implemented. As a mark of President Cristiani's political resolve, the Education Minister was swiftly replaced to make sure the

reforms had the leadership they needed. Guatemala's situation was different—although its peace accords did spell out specific education goals it had no national vision or blueprint for improving education or a firm political resolve to see such a vision realized. Lacking sustained financial support, especially in terms of an appropriate domestic revenue base, the country's piecemeal programs were bound to have only a modest impact on the education system.[4] In Nicaragua, the government's concern with erasing the Sandinista legacy left little room for the development of a shared vision of how to advance education and mobilize support for education reform. For the most part reforms were put into place vertically, missing the opportunity to build them with a consensus of representative sectors of society.

III. The Impact of Education Reforms

1. Coverage and Efficiency

The revamping of Central American education systems has done more to increase enrollments than to improve education efficiency. Both literacy rates and average educational attainment have been rising in recent years, as illustrated in Table 6. **Guatemala** and, to a lesser degree, **Nicaragua**, still trail **El Salvador** whose attainment figures are three years higher, on average, than those of its two neighbors.

Coverage

Coverage in **El Salvador**'s education system has improved considerably in recent years, especially in pre-primary and primary education. In a short space of time gross pre-primary enrollment has risen to 41%, in large measure because of the expansion of the EDUCO program. The country has made considerable progress toward universal primary enrollment and has improved secondary coverage somewhat. There has also been some modest progress in reducing illiteracy rates.

Table 6: Impact of Education System Reforms, 1995 and 2001 (percentages)

	El Salvador		Guatemala		Nicaragua	
	1995	**2001**	**1995**	**2001**	**1995**	**2001**
Illiteracy rate	**23.0**	**21.0**	**35.1**	**30.6**	**24.6**	**21.0**
Males	18.6	16.0	27.4	23.7	25.7	21.7
Females	24.3	22.0	42.7	37.1	23.5	20.4
Average educational attainment (years)	**6.7**	**8.2**	**3.2**	**5.0**	**4.5**	**4.9**
Gross enrollment						
Pre-primary	31.3	41.0	n.a.	41.0[1]	34.0	28.0
Primary	89.0	96.0	87.5	99.8	101.0	106.6
Secondary	34.3	37.7	26.2	32.7	35.5	57.0

1/ net enrollment; n.a. = not available.
Source: Background Reports.

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[4] The peace accords committed the government to raising Guatemala's ratio of taxes to GDP by 50%, from around 8% at the time the accords were signed (the lowest in the region) to at least 12% by the year 2000. Although the tax base has improved somewhat and the target was rescheduled, the last two governments have been unable to mobilize the necessary domestic political consensus to approve tax revenue measures to meet the tax target in the accords.

Guatemala too has shown considerable progress in terms of coverage over the past years. Enrollment rates climbed at every level, notably for primary and pre-primary schooling and there has been a noticeable decrease in illiteracy. In 2001 the government was delivering 88% of primary education services, with community-managed schools playing an important role in coverage expansion. The private sector has been the chief provider of basic and diversified secondary schooling, delivering over 50% of total school services at those levels.

By 1990, after ten years of sustained improvements, **Nicaragua's** 90% primary gross enrollment ratio topped the other Central American countries reviewed here. This progress was maintained in the 1990s, coupled with a marked increase in the secondary school enrolment rate and continued progress in reducing illiteracy. Enrollments in pre-primary education, however, did not keep pace with a worrying drop in enrollments at this level.

Dropout and repetition rates

In contrast with coverage indicators, the impact of the reforms on education efficiency during the past five years (1995-2001) are more modest and uneven among countries (Table 7). El Salvador has made progress in reducing repetition rates but with only a modest improvement in dropout rates. Guatemala recorded an increase in the dropout rate but the repetition rate barely budged. Nicaragua's dropout rates are still a major concern as are very low promotion rates; although grade repetition rates have come down sharply it is largely due to the automatic promotion policy introduced.

Table 7: Primary Education Efficiency, 1995 and 2001 (percentages)

	El Salvador		Guatemala		Nicaragua	
	1995	**2001**	**1995**	**2001**	**1995**	**2001**
Dropout rate	5.1	4.9	7.7	8.4	21.2	20.3
Repetition rate	14.0[1]	10.6[2]	15.3	15.2	23.4	13.0

1/ 1992 data; 2/ 2000 data.
Source: Background Reports

In recent years **El Salvador** has introduced a series of special programs to keep more children in school, raise promotion rates and deliver better-quality education. For example, the Alternative Classrooms program is designed to offer greater flexibility in rural education through a multigrade, participatory methodology. The Accelerated Education program aims to address the problem of children over-age for grade by providing special assistance to children who fall behind. The government is also raising the amounts of its various transfers to schools, including quality bonuses, excellence bonuses and food vouchers, as strategic incentives to enhance education quality and encourage children to stay in school.

In **Guatemala**, promotion rates climbed at every level of the system between 1995 and 2001 but so did dropout and repetition rates, which are still high in primary schools. Fewer than 3 of every 10 children who start school make it past sixth grade. The numbers are worst in rural parts of the country, where only 3 in 10 children reach third grade and only 2 in 10 (1.7 for girls) are promoted out of sixth grade. This would suggest that efforts to boost enrollments need to be complemented by incentives to reduce school dropouts.

In **Nicaragua,** primary-school repetition rates declined in the 1990s, dropping close to 3.5 percentage points between 1995 and 2001. There was a marked improvement in first and second grade repetition rates, which dropped from 30.2% in 1989 to 13% in 2001. Much of this change undoubtedly stems from the Ministry of Education's decision to introduce automatic promotion. By 2001 the dropout rate was

down to 20.3%, in part due to the government's program of tied transfers to the poorest households and teacher incentives. But students still were taking a long time to finish their primary studies—an average of 10.3 years in 2001.

Education system administration

Education systems have become decentralized or deconcentrated, with a significant increase in parental and teacher involvement in school affairs. Education ministries in the countries examined here decentralized some services to varying degrees but only in **El Salvador** did such efforts go hand in hand with substantive modernization and decentralization efforts in the Ministry of Education itself. El Salvador bolstered area education bureaus, improved the teacher supervision and training system, and transferred resources and responsibilities directly to the schools.

2. Unfinished agendas

There are still serious issues to resolve. **El Salvador** has made major strides with its education reform but still has to tackle the challenge of enhancing education quality across the system and making secondary and higher education more accessible to the country's poor. Pre-primary schooling also needs to be put within the reach of the poorest communities so children's academic performance will be stronger when they enter the basic education cycle. The country needs to redouble efforts to improve the coverage and quality of education, to reduce the numbers of children who are over-age for grade and further reduce repetition and dropout rates. This is particularly crucial in basic education, although gains being achieved at the primary level are stepping up the pressure for access to quality education at the secondary level.

Education funding shortfalls in **Guatemala** have worsened since 2000 despite increases in education spending in both absolute and relative terms since 1996. The system's coverage is still low even after significant improvements in primary enrollments and a rising literacy rate. Although early results of curriculum change, training, and complementary health and nutrition programs, the school achievement assessment system now in place, and initiatives for the production and delivery of school materials and equipment are encouraging, there is a need for comprehensive education reforms to enhance quality and improve management of the system. Bilingual education coverage is insufficient. As a result of migration and population movements triggered by financial need or by armed clashes it has proved very difficult to expand bilingual education services for children who speak Mayan languages.

The lack of a clear vision and longer-term strategy for education reform, based on a national debate and consensus-building process, has constrained education progress in Guatemala. Progress has been further hampered by weak government commitment to implementation of the peace accords and lack of domestic resources to fund and sustain and expansion in the coverage and quality of education services. As a result, reform strategies and programs adopted by the previous administration have been put off, reversed or lost momentum.

In **Nicaragua** the Chamorro and Alemán administrations set out to improve education efficiency, which had deteriorated in the final Sandinista years. Although some progress has been made, especially in terms of coverage, serious gaps remain. Enrollment rates in the Atlántico Norte, Jinotegas and in parts of Matagalpa are still far below the national average. To improve education quality there is a need for better achievement tracking systems, greater parental involvement in their children's education, and better textbook distribution. There are also serious organization and governance problems in the system. For one thing, since the country's higher education and technical education systems are administered by independent bodies there are, in effect, three separate education structures, leading to fragmentation and lack of policy coordination. There are no clear lines of authority within the Ministry of Education itself. The combination of a centralized Ministry of Education apparatus and a push for decentralization and

autonomy has hampered education system operations, preventing the necessary integration and coordination throughout the Ministry's functional units. The Ministry's core processes, organizational logistics and management tools are ill-defined and outdated.

In sum, the impact of education reforms has been positive, El Salvador having progressed further than Guatemala and Nicaragua. Education now is much more participatory and classrooms more democratic. Students and parents have a greater influence on education quality and classroom environments. Most increases in education funding have been earmarked for pre-primary and primary schooling, with an emphasis on rural areas. There are now more community-managed schools and more bilingual education services have been introduced. Independent school achievement assessment systems have become more widespread and education ministries modernized. As civil society becomes more conscious of the importance of education, communities are taking greater interest in the school system and pressing for improvements. Education systems have become less politicized as stakeholders increasingly focus on quality improvements and expanding the systems' reach.

The fact that education reform advanced more swiftly in El Salvador was perhaps because that country managed to forge a national consensus on the reforms' importance and priority, firmly supported by three successive ARENA party governments (the same Ministry of Education authorities having served throughout that period), and external donors who provided continued technical and financial support. In Guatemala and Nicaragua no such clear vision of education reform took shape nor was the political commitment as strong, probably accounting for a lack of coordination and coherence in implementation, inadequate funding and weak support for the reforms.

IV. Lessons Learned

Impact of the conflict

Conflicts in the three Central American countries examined here had different manifestations. El Salvador was the scene of fierce fighting between the government and FMLN forces throughout the 1980s. The strife in Guatemala was less intense but more protracted. In Nicaragua the Sandinistas and Contras waged a violent and destructive war following the fall of the Somoza regime. But all three conflicts had a similar effect on national education systems.

- **Education services for the poor, which were severely inadequate to begin with, were hit hardest by the fighting, particularly in rural areas.** Rural dwellers endured forced mobilizations and felt the direct impact of hostilities as schools were destroyed, teachers were killed or disappeared, students and parents lost their lives, the population was displaced to other parts of the country or across borders, communities lived in fear, and huge amounts of school time were lost.

- **In Guatemala and Nicaragua indigenous communities, which had suffered through many decades of exclusion and lack of access to education, bore the brunt of the hostilities,** since the bulk of the indigenous population lived in rural areas.

- **As the conflict raged on, education became politicized.** Since the warring factions understood how the schools could be used to convey and advocate ideas, messages, and values and knew how important teachers and schools were to rural areas, both sides had a stake in gaining control of the schools. The end result was the politicization of the learning space, destruction of infrastructure, and death and persecution of teachers, and students stopped going to class or their parents pulled them out of school. In **El Salvador** and to some extent in **Guatemala** the universities played an active role in

the conflict and teachers' unions became politicized. In **Nicaragua** the Sandinistas used the school system to advance their socialist agenda. Education became a battleground and the students pawns in the conflicts.

- **Education spending suffered as de fense spending rose**. Compounding the problems discussed above were funding shortfalls that further debilitated education systems. Enrollments that had been very low to begin with fell further in some countries. Education system efficiency and quality deteriorated. Illiteracy rates began to rise again in Nicaragua. Teacher salaries eroded and as morale plummeted, dropout rates worsened. Education facilities and teaching materials deteriorated alarmingly.

Opportunities afforded by the peace

The termination of hostilities opened up opportunities to undo errors of the past and adopt far-reaching education reforms. The three countries embarked on education reforms to depoliticize education, enhance parental involvement, and regain and improve enrollment and efficiency levels. Although the three countries have had varying measures of success in these efforts, an analysis of their experiences suggests that all of them, to one degree or another, seized the opportunity afforded by the arrival of peace to:

- **Build consensuses and foster dialogue to move forward with reconciliation and reforms, including education reform.** Once the peace accords were in place, country decisions to reach agreement on specific major national issues set the stage for public consensus-building processes to decide on the basic thrust of the education reforms, policy priorities and map out action plans to carry out the reforms.

- **Tackle "taboo" issues openly.** The conflicts in the three countries reviewed and the political negotiations that ultimately led to peace brought hitherto taboo topics out into the open, including: inequality, racial and cultural discrimination, cultural hegemony, the situation and rights of indigenous peoples in Guatemala and in Nicaragua's Atlantic Regions, the distribution of land and wealth, and other concerns that found their way onto national debates. These issues could, for the first time, be openly discussed as these societies struggled to understand the root causes of their respective conflicts. Some of these issues, although now openly debated, still remain to be fully addressed and continue to pose major challenges for sustainable and more equitable development in the three Central American countries.

- **Decentralize the system and encourage parental involvement.** One has only to look at the conditions in which education services were (or were not) being delivered during the period of hostilities to see the importance of decentralizing functions, authority, funding, management and decision-making capacity to schools; of deconcentrating ministerial core functions to regional or area levels; and of involving the education community to create an enabling environment for community-based school management. The decentralization and community-based management approaches imbedded in programs such as EDUCO and PRONADE, if supported and fiscally sustained, are unquestionably the most impressive gains of the reforms.

- **Increase education spending as military funding needs diminished.** The fiscal space afforded by the end of the conflicts and the reductions in defense spending, however, appear insufficient to sustain the reform process. A greater domestic revenue mobilization effort is clearly needed, especially in Guatemala but also in El Salvador, with their weak tax bases, to ensure appropriate funding levels as coverage expands and to fund quality improvements.

Missed opportunities

Countries let some opportunities afforded by the peace process slip by. Teachers' unions in some countries are still fairly politicized, protected by civil service statutes that give teachers rights but create virtually no obligations. Moves to develop "peace culture" programs, notably UNESCO initiatives, have not had the support they deserved. As combatants were demobilized in the post-conflict environment and new democratic freedoms took root, crime and violence increased, and the schools were not immune. This issue has yet to be effectively addressed. Not all the countries have devised ways to make sure that their education systems reach the poorest segments of their populations, not just for pre-primary and primary schooling but at higher levels as well. Where measures are in place they have not always received adequate funding. Generally speaking the countries have weak social safety nets and too few of the kinds of tied-transfer programs that can make it easier for the poor to get an education.

The experiences examined here offer general lessons for any country that decides to embark on a comprehensive education reform process, but especially for post-conflict countries that have a brief window of opportunity to push through bold and radical reforms and undo errors of the past. Annex 1 lists general lessons learned from El Salvador's education reform process which, although by no means finished, can be judged an impressive success. For countries emerging from conflict, the following specific lessons can be drawn from the experience of the Central American countries discussed here.

Do's:

- Develop a clear vision on education reforms, forge a strong political commitment to see the reforms carried through and, to the extent possible, avoid breaks in continuity of authorities tasked with implementing change, or as a minimum the basic priorities, policies and aims of the reforms. Detailed peace-accord targets, particularly if imposed from outside, are no substitute for the vision or political resolve required to propel education reform, as experiences in El Salvador and Guatemala can attest.

- Start the technical preparation of the reforms as early as feasible. The design of strategies, policies and programs is a complex technical undertaking that should be based on a thorough diagnosis of the state of the education system, and should clearly evaluate costs and options. This work need not wait for a formal end to the conflict, especially since the window of opportunity to implement bold reforms is likely to be brief.

- Build a broad-based consensus on education reforms, depoliticize education systems (rewriting teacher statutes if necessary) and build on and learn from successful experiences regardless of their origin.

- Pay attention to the dialogue and consensus-building process. Consultation and discussions are not sufficient if participants feel the process is not serious, or that they have little chance to influence the strategy and goals of the proposed reforms. Equally important, government officials and the champions of the reform must believe in the process and play an active and constructive role—it is not enough that they merely show up at large meetings, they must be seen to engage and respond to concerns and suggestions. Too many consultation and consensus-building processes fail because they are seen as mere public relations exercises.

- Move swiftly to earn trust and secure the support of critical stakeholders. This is particularly important when education systems are highly politicized or controlled by teachers' unions opposed to reforms that threaten, or are perceived to threaten, their privileges. Countries should take advantage

of the window of opportunity afforded by the peace process before pressure groups regroup to defend their interests against the reforms.

- Decentralize education systems and involve parents in their children's education, not just to help with homework but also to empower them to improve the classroom environment and academic performance. To make empowerment meaningful, transfer resources to schools and parents, for schools to manage their day-to-day operations, but also for parents to have more control over the coverage and quality of their children's education. Without genuine decentralization it will be far more difficult, if not impossible, to elicit broad support for education reforms and make sure they are not hijacked by teachers and/or bureaucrats bent on protecting their own interests.

- Modernization and effective decentralization of the Ministry of Education are essential to complement the transfer of resources and responsibilities to schools and parents. This is often the forgotten ingredient of education reform programs, which if not effectively addressed, risks derailing or delaying the reform process, thus closing off the brief window of opportunity that bold reform programs need to succeed in post-conflict settings.

- Decentralization—to empower parents and communities, and to modernize the Ministry of Education—is essential, but avoid getting caught in wider and more philosophical debates on national decentralization strategies, especially if driven by donors. In the context of small countries such as those in Central American, decentralization essentially amounts to municipalization, which risks obscuring or delaying more urgent decentralization needs in the education sector, while actors wait for the debates to be resolved. El Salvador was able to move effectively on education decentralization while resisting political and donor calls for more comprehensive, national decentralization strategies. Nicaragua's lack of progress during most of the 1990s in decentralizing the education sector, arguably, may have been influenced, or at the very least not helped by, an ongoing debate, nationally and with the donor community, on the need for and elements of a national decentralization strategy.

- Using a variety of economic levers, target education spending to help the vast disadvantaged sectors of the population. The combination of well-targeted public funds and decentralized management approaches can do much to increase enrollment rates in a relatively short space of time. Among the initiatives that have had some success in boosting enrollments and attendance are nutrition and school lunch programs, the "Glass of Milk" program, and schemes that offer grants or allowances to help poor families keep their children in school.

- In multicultural societies, encourage bilingual education as a major inducement to children and young people to attend school. Just as important, perhaps more so, the education these students receive needs to be culturally relevant and may be especially important where there are ethno-cultural dimensions to the conflict and the exclusion that preceded it. Multicultural education can thus become an important tool to reweave the social fabric torn apart by the conflict.

Don'ts:

- Do not ask more of an education system than it can deliver or assign it dauntingly difficult tasks. In Nicaragua the Sandinistas attempted to wield education as a tool to transform society by creating the "new man" and "new woman", which they saw as essential to escape underdevelopment and quickly achieve a more egalitarian society. This meant putting on the back burner more modest goals such as increasing coverage to previously excluded groups, improving efficiency, equipping students with

basic literacy and numeracy skills, and teaching students how to think critically and absorb knowledge.

- Do not disregard the education gains achieved by previous administrations, whatever their political or ideological bent. In Nicaragua a government intent on dismantling the system inherited from the Sandinistas then faced the daunting task of rebuilding the system virtually from the ground up. El Salvador chose a different route, capitalizing on the *Escuelas Populares* experiment to design and launch its EDUCO program.

- Do not politicize education contents or the thrust of education reforms. A key step in charting any such reform is to involve respected citizens, experts or individuals known to have a keen interest in education, and do not let political considerations stand in the way of fully tapping the critical mass and expertise of technical teams involved in the reforms.

- Do not try to implement reforms before the people who will have to make them work on the ground—primarily teachers, school administrators and parents—have been properly consulted and involved in setting the reforms' guiding principles. Technical and financial support from external donors can play a vital role in helping to implement the reforms, but it cannot substitute for a national consensus and country ownership.

- Do not forget how much teachers can do to improve education efficiency. No education system can operate well without qualified and motivated teachers whose pay, to the extent possible, should be commensurate with their academic background, experience and effort.

- Do not create conflict and fragmentation within the education system, undermining the consistency and integration that must prevail throughout the various levels of the system. Problems in one level will affect the other parts of the system. All the levels of the education system—universities, technical, secondary, primary and pre-primary—need to be integrated and seen as a whole; they all have a role in proposing and implementing solutions.

- Do not put through programs or projects that are not comprehensive, financially sustainable, carefully planned, and ready to launch on the academic, pedagogical and administrative sides.

- Do not ignore or neglect to look into neighboring countries' experiences, successful or not, to save time and resources when implementing innovative programs and projects. Bolster horizontal technical assistance.

Annex 1: Lessons from El Salvador's Education Reform Process: A Personal Account

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The following are suggested reform ingredients based on **El Salvador's** successful education reform: [5]

- ✓ *Political backing*: A key step in any education reform is to win political backing at the highest level, engage the President and social-sector ministers and, above all, involve the opposition, by way of committees and specific actions. This is critical for the success of the reforms themselves and to chart the future course of education in the country.

- ✓ *Education is the answer*: This slogan of education reform in El Salvador was coined to instill a respect for education across all segments of society. Education reform is not just the job of the Ministry of Education—it will work only if all stakeholders in society are given a voice and can be heard.

- ✓ *Reform begins in the classroom*: Bureaucracies, political debates and national and international funding aside, real reform starts in the classroom. This is why it is so important that the education community, spearheaded by each school's principal, teaching staff and parents, take ownership and work hard once the system gives them a real entrée into school affairs. The impetus for this must come from the highest echelons of the Ministry of Education. At the top of the list of necessary changes is a paradigm shift in the focus of education toward the student and student learning, systematically tackling the leading causes of school failure—repetition and dropout rates, and student and teacher absenteeism. Reforms need to be constructive, putting the student front and center and, when the circumstances are right, giving students some say in their own schooling.

- ✓ *Cut education red tape*: One of the greatest and most enduring enemies of education reform is the bureaucratic culture that suffuses government structures. Reams of paperwork, signatures and sign-offs, long, cumbersome procedures—this kind of bureaucracy needs to be banished. Fortunately, today's rapidly evolving information and communications technologies are there to help.

- ✓ *Democratize education*: One core tenet and working principle of El Salvador's education reform was the need to democratize education, both the vision and the praxis. Democratic values entail consensus-building, managing dissent, dialogue, participation, transparency, freedom with accountability, and universal access. The EDUCO program is a stellar example of education democratization in action.

- ✓ *Consult, deliberate, then decide*: "Decision making" and "must decide" have long been policy buzzwords, but a necessary prelude to "doing" is to consult and reflect, to make sure the ultimate decision will be the right one. One feature of El Salvador's education reform was a series of genuine broad-based consultations across many quarters. From this process emerged the guiding principles and prime focus of the reform effort—enrollments, quality, modernization, and values.

- ✓ *Information for transformation*: Today, as always, continued timely information is a key element in successful education reform. Through ethical and strategic alliances the media can be

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[5] This annex was prepared by Abigail Castro de Pérez, who was Director of National Education Planning in the Ministry of Education of El Salvador during 1990-94, Vice-Minister of Education during 1994-98, and Minister of Education during 1998-99.

enlisted to support the reform process, involving them in specific tasks. Information, one of the paradigms of the emerging global society, has never been more important.

✓ ***Education first, then education administration***: In the classic debate between educators and administrators the latter camp mistakenly argue that, without their support and without money, no teaching can take place. As the centerpiece and *raison d'être* of an education system, educating should ***always*** come first. Administration is important, to be sure, but it should be at the service of education delivery.

✓ ***Education policy = national or state policy, not government or party policy***: The great error of many countries, and the reason why their poverty and wealth gaps are not narrowing, is a tendency to take the short-term view and prize government policies over state policy. Revamping an education system is a long-term venture that needs to be underpinned by policies that can move it forward. It takes more than half a decade or a decade for the changes to be felt. As we well know from the political tradition of countries such as El Salvador, a change of administration has sometimes meant starting from scratch with projects and programs to imprint on them the incoming government's stamp. On occasion a new administration puts its own interests and priorities ahead of concerns about continuity with previous gains, initiatives already under way, and whatever efforts are achieving changes for the better.

✓ ***The sum and the parts***: In education the whole matters more than the parts. Too close a focus on one need or program may mean neglecting another—hence the importance of a holistic vision and comprehensive strategic planning for the reform to work in every sector. The recent trend is to emphasize rural and basic education, particularly to address education needs in post-conflict environments, but urban school systems, high schools and post-secondary education need attention as well.

✓ ***New teachers, new ideas***: Any decision not to actively involve teacher training centers in education reforms can have unhappy consequences down the road, since these institutions are the lifeblood of the system—on them depend the molding of dedicated educators and the sustainability of future changes. Input from these institutions regarding curriculum reform, textbook publishing and education materials, and changes in teaching methods is particularly important.

✓ ***Capitalize on in-country capacity***: There is a widespread tendency to put greater trust in international consultants or prestigious foreign universities and institutes than in homegrown resources. Although outside experts and institutions are vital to help an education ministry, and the country at large, build and upgrade technical capacity, the country's own resources and institutions should not be overlooked. To ignore those assets is to foster dependence and forfeit the opportunity to develop and embed the requisite critical consciousness in the local counterparts.

✓ ***Constantly supervise the use of educational development tools***: Once a country on the road to education reform has made it through the most critical phases it could be tempted to sideline other activities that might seem like minor concerns at the time. Education reforms demand constant, meticulous supervision under a continuous improvement system. By way of example, too-sporadic supervision of how teacher training is being put to use or of the education materials schools are receiving can provide fuel for future critics and set the stage for failure.

✓ ***Work on both tangibles and intangibles***: At times of upheaval there is a tendency to focus on improving intangibles, which may seem like the obvious place to begin, but the physical

underpinnings of education systems is important as well. When attention is focusing on existing schools there needs to be more room in reform initiatives for urgently needed expansion and rehabilitation of school infrastructure, to provide children and young people with decent facilities in which to study and learn.

✓ ***Reward merit and teaching performance***: When broaching the critical issue of rewrites of legislation governing teacher salary and benefits it is very important to establish, from the outset, mechanisms that prize and reward good performance and academic merit over seniority considerations or past union gains, even if this means tougher efforts to work out political agreements between education ministries and teachers' unions.

✓ ***Reforms take teamwork***: In countries such as El Salvador with widespread poverty and exclusion, government social-sector agencies need to plan and work in concert. Examples of such joint endeavors in El Salvador are the Healthy Schools (*Escuelas Saludables*) program, a combined venture of the education, public health, public works and environment ministries; the Family Secretariat's school lunch program; initiatives by National Water and Sanitation Administration and the Social Investment Fund for Local Development, which are learning from each another and pulling together with the schools to heighten impacts on the education system.

✓ ***Tap direct sources in the reform process***: The proper point of departure when designing and fine-tuning reforms is a good understanding of the actual needs and circumstances of the schools and communities themselves. While studies and research can help, it is important to be directly in touch with parents and school communities—only they know just what effect the changes are having. Written reports and officials sitting in offices cannot fully assess the impact of reforms or say for certain whether they are working on the ground.

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