

PUBLIC EDUCATION WORKS

LESSONS FROM FIVE CASE STUDIES IN
LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

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Lessons from five case studies in low-and middle-income countries

In recent decades, governments have made considerable efforts to provide education for all. However, a large gap remains between international commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goal 4, and the actual achievement of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. As a result, certain actors often critique public education as ineffective and inefficient, and thus incapable of addressing this issue. They argue for privatisation as a solution, deeming private providers as more innovative and effective than public ones. However, shortcomings in public education often arise not from lack of capacity, but lack of political will.

This review of examples of public education in low- and middle-income countries shows that, in direct contrast to widely disseminated (and empirically unvalidated) ideas, public education can be highly effective, efficient and transformative and, crucially, it is possible to develop quality public education everywhere. The possibility is particularly relevant at a time when COVID-19 has exposed the unsustainability and inefficacy of education privatisation, while inviting us to reimagine education governance.

This research brief offers an overview of research that analysed five case studies of strong public education across diverse settings – from Namibia to Brazil to Vietnam – highlighting the research’s central findings and contributions.¹ It is a short version of a longer working paper analysing these examples in-depth, and it is accompanied by a policy brief focusing on short lessons for policy-makers and other stakeholders.

The brief offers examples that illustrate effective and feasible public approaches, examples which pave the way for a pragmatic and realistic transformation in education systems. The case studies included in this research are not exhaustive: examples of public schools providing a quality education and steering social transformation, often despite serious obstacles, exist in every country. Instead, these examples show that public school systems can be very successful. They inform five cross-cutting lessons learned about supporting strong public education systems. They offer inspiration to educators, citizens, civil society, policymakers, international organisations and donors to renew their efforts for free public education, and move away from the policies of the last two decades focused on private involvement and partnerships, which have largely failed to achieve systemic improvements in quality and equity.

¹ For a complete discussion of the research process, findings and references, please refer to (add here the full reference of our research paper)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research project aimed to identify, document and analyse positive examples of public education around the world. The project adopted a deductive approach, first developing a working criteria set of what constitutes a positive example in public education. The criteria set was developed collectively with researchers and civil society organisations. Overall, positive examples provide clear and concrete examples of an effort to realise the right to education, presenting

lessons learned and/or ways to replicate such approaches. Equity, as enshrined in the rights to equality and non-discrimination, is a cornerstone of the experiences. Quality is seen in educational practices, including a broad range of parameters. Finally, as “success” comprises many aspects, the cases do not address and illustrate all elements. The cases thus represent different aspects of “success”.

In order to choose the cases, a “success” framework was formulated, drawing in particular from the understanding of existing human rights law unpacked in the Abidjan Principles on the right to education.² The criteria for success were organised in three clusters:

1

TRANSVERSAL PRINCIPLES

These are transversal criteria and all cases should address one or more of these elements – inclusion, equity and quality (with a social and participatory perspective).

2

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Practices concerned with how education is managed (at school or government levels), namely financing, transparency and accountability, teachers’ working conditions and participatory /democratic governance.

3

PEDAGOGY

Practices concerned with how education is delivered, namely a holistic curriculum and a formative assessment.

Education experts from academia and civil society were consulted to identify successful examples of public education that are rights-aligned. Over forty cases were identified and exploratory research was conducted about them with documentary research and preliminary interviews. The cases were assessed regarding their relevance in relation to the analytical framework and feasibility. The final sample also aimed to present a variety of positive practices and geographic diversity as well. Finally, five cases (addressing six countries) were chosen: Bolivia and Ecuador, Brazil, Cuba, Namibia, and Vietnam. The cases were investigated through secondary pre-COVID-19 education data collected from journal papers, working papers, books and book chapters, theses and project reports. The analysis aimed to elucidate the educational issues and challenges addressed by the cases, the cases’ public approach to such problems, as well as some lessons that can be drawn from them. Finally, local civil society organisations and 13 international ones reviewed the cases. The cases have also been peer-reviewed by academic researchers.

² See more on <http://www.abidjanprinciples.org/>

THE CASES

Five case studies offer positive examples of public education around the world and shed light on different aspects of quality public education:



1

The principles of Buen Vivir applied to the educational systems in Ecuador and Bolivia expose how education is thought of as a tool for conceiving and building a new society. They exemplify an alternative indigenous/non-western reasoning applied to education to promote a new form of “sustainable development”.

2

The schools of Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) are an example of increasing education access and quality to rural populations through the work of social movements with the government. The case also depicts the work of a participatory governance that draws from a critical approach, or Freirean pedagogy.

3

The Cuban educational system is an example of the centrality of teachers to promote high education quality with equity, which is based on intense training and support in schools.

4

The education reform in Namibia, which was focused on reforming teachers’ training, illustrates how education can be thought of as a tool for social change and how teachers can, and should be, a central element in this effort.

5

The Vietnamese educational system is a case with remarkable performance that is centred on teachers. This case is focused on how accountability can be framed in a developmental way to foster teacher professionalism, instead of performativity.

BUEN VIVIR AND INDIGENOUS PRINCIPLES TO EDUCATION IN BOLIVIA AND ECUADOR

1

After adopting new constitutions, Bolivia and Ecuador have implemented education reforms that aim to promote social changes towards more equal, harmonic and sustainable societies, based on the indigenous principles of “Buen Vivir”. Both countries positioned education as a strategic axis for national change and strengthened the role of the state as the main actor responsible for it. Bolivia included the “decolonisation of thinking” as a way to promote cultural change and a building of the new educational system, and Ecuador opted for policies aimed at guaranteeing the right to education, mainly focused on access and management.³

1. RELEVANCE: BUEN VIVIR AND NEW WAYS OF FRAMING EDUCATION AND “SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT”

The concept of “sustainable development” has gained prominence in the past few years, especially through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, neoliberalism has become the global dominant political and economic approach, which usually frames development within economic parameters and according to western frameworks. Policies often rely on market-based and privatising strategies and approaches, including in education. However, other alternatives to and perspectives on “development” are possible.

One of these is the concept of “Buen Vivir” (or “Good Life”), which fosters the values of indigenous peoples and aims for harmony among people and nature. These concepts have informed policies and national legislations in Bolivia and Ecuador. Education is thus recognised as a right and is centred in the holistic development of people; it is framed as a tool to transform economic and social structures, as well as cultural affirmation. It has a strategic role in creating alternative models of society and development. As a result, the meanings and goals of education are shifted towards principles of equality, equity, interculturality, national sovereignty and regional integration. In practice, there is a strengthening of the public and of relationships between the state and social movements, social organisations and indigenous peoples.

2. THE APPROACH: EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The reforms of education in Ecuador and Bolivia, drawing from the principles of Buen Vivir, illustrate southern alternatives to education. Education is an indispensable condition for Buen Vivir and the creation of a new way of living together, of citizenship, in diversity and harmony. It is thought of as a means to learn how to live in society and create the political, social and economic pillars for the society envisaged by the Constitutions. Education became recognised as a lifelong right, with the aim to eliminate inequality.

In Bolivia, the reform is described as an “education revolution with a teacher revolution”, with an aim of promoting the “decolonisation of thinking”. Education must consolidate the plurinational state and a society based on Buen Vivir with social justice. It must reinforce multiculturalism, and strengthen the identity and culture of each indigenous nation and people. In practice, this was translated into new policies regarding access, curriculum and teacher training.

In Ecuador, the national education plan had four axes of action: curriculum, human talent (focused on teacher training), funding and management, and accountability. The education for “interculturality” became a central element, as it is understood that inequality in Ecuador is connected to the exclusion of ethnic groups and cultures in the country. Teacher training was reformulated, as well as teachers’ career plans.⁴

These new approaches have also constitutionally emphasised the budgetary priority of education, establishing it as the first financial responsibility of the State (art. 77 Constitution of Bolivia) and as a priority area for state investment (art. 26 Constitution of Ecuador). Both constitutions include specific mandates regarding the incorporation (Bolivia) or promotion (Ecuador) of gender equity in education (art. 79 and art. 27 respectively).

Ecuador has eliminated access barriers (such as entry exams and fees) and banned payment by families to schools. The school meal program was also enlarged and grew from the provision of meals from 80 school days to 200 school days. Bolivia has made remarkable advancements: formerly excluded indigenous groups were included in schools; the country was declared “free of illiteracy” in 2008; financing grew to 8,19% of GDP in 2018; and school dropout rates decreased to 2,5% in 2018.

³ Burgos, C.M.C. (2017). ⁴ Van Damme, W., Aguerrondo, I., Burgos, C. C., & Campos, M. R. (2015).

3. LIMITATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The cases of Ecuador and Bolivia illustrate how education is seen as a tool to enact a societal project, whilst it is also a product of this specific social context. Thus, the values, social structures and culture are all reflected, included and valued in the education system and, at the same time, education is planned to work in favour of a desired society. Second, teachers are central to the reforms, seen as active and creative subjects that can enact the desired educational changes. Third, the curriculum aims at developing a new way of living, one that is sustainable and committed to social justice, in harmony with nature and society. Finally, the case of Bolivia illustrates how the improvement of public education is able to limit or reverse privatisation (at least to a point), by attracting the families that had opted for private schools. This reversal did not depend on the regulation of private schools, but rather improving and strengthening public education.

However, translating alternative educational and social principles into systems and policies is challenging. Both countries have gone through internal struggles, resistance and external pressures. Furthermore, some ideals might lose their transformative potential when translated into formalised systems that must fit into other structures. In Ecuador, for instance, the resulting system kept several characteristics from former structures and is more adept to international trends; it became equalised with a narrow understanding of quality. Nonetheless, these experiences illustrate how local knowledge and solutions can emerge and offer alternatives to current hegemonic practices.

PARTICIPATORY AND INCLUSIVE RURAL EDUCATION WITH BRAZIL'S LANDLESS RURAL WORKERS MOVEMENT (MST)

2

Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement – or Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Portuguese, is a Brazilian social movement for agrarian reform that has established a network of schools in its communities, promoting the inclusion of rural children and advocating for the improvement of public rural schools. With principles of radical democracy and social justice, its pedagogy draws from Freire's critical pedagogy.⁵ The school work is done with the community, with localised curriculum and management. The schools also offer education to young people and adults who dropped out of school.⁶

1. CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE: EXPANDING ACCESS TO RURAL CHILDREN

Providing quality education for rural populations is fundamental both for the provision of education as a right and as a tool for social and economic development. However, offering free quality public education for rural populations is a challenge for many developing countries. There are often insufficient schools, and the content and pedagogy are often disconnected from the rural context. Private alternatives have been gaining attention as possible solutions in the last few years, such as low-fee private schools. In Brazil, the right to education has been historically denied to rural populations and, in response to this situation, rural social movements have been working to have their rights ensured by working with local governments to open and improve schools in rural areas and acting in policy advocacy.

2. THE APPROACH: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

The MST is one of the largest social movements in Brazil, which identifies unproductive pieces of land and creates settlements to start farming them. Once a settlement is created, a school is also funded. This is based on a holistic understanding of development and aims to ensure the right to education of historically excluded rural populations. The MST schools are publicly owned, funded and run, and have strong linkages with local communities with a democratic governance structure. The MST works with the state to ensure that these schools receive adequate support and financing, whilst also advocating for rural education policies.

The schools offer early years education, literacy for adult workers, and access to universities. Reflecting its worldview and social goals, the MST schools' educational approach draws from the Freirean "popular education". It means they are based on humanist and collaborative principles, combine theory and practice, are focused on local realities, and aim to create critical citizens that can enact social change. Concerning governance, the schools follow the principles of a democratic and participatory governance. Community members are actively engaged in the management of a school, through formal and informal channels, and they monitor policies and present demands for change.

The MST has more than 9,000 settlements in almost all states of Brazil, in which 933,836 families live. In 2019, there were about 1,500 MST functioning schools, and some have been awarded prizes. The MST schools have also provided schooling for more than 160,000 young people and adults.

⁵ Paulo Freire was a prominent educator from Brazil (1921 - 1997) and one of the most influential writers on the theory and practice of critical education. Freire proposes a critical pedagogy, which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed, aiming for reflection and liberation. ⁶ Tarlau, R. (2019).

3. LESSONS LEARNED AND LIMITATIONS

The MST schools have been very successful in expanding education access and offering quality education to rural populations. The case is an example of participatory governance, engaging local communities, and these schools exemplify how social movements can actively propose solutions and collaborate with governments to promote access to education. The participatory approach allows for the emergence of new and relevant solutions, advancing a radical democracy that is lived in and through schools. Governments can collaborate with local groups and social movements to expand the offer of education for rural populations, ensuring access and inclusion.

Despite the advances and lessons, the MST case and the countryside education in Brazil face challenges. Since 2016, rural schools have been closed, mostly due to the austere investment cuts that have resulted in the violation of the right to education. The relationship between the movement and governments often involves tensions and disputes, and positive outcomes depend on having governments that are more open to dialogue with social movements. However, the case offers inspiring lessons for a democratic and transformative education.

EDUCATION IN CUBA: QUALITY AND EQUITY IN A TEACHER-BASED SYSTEM

3

Cuba has a national education system that is internationally recognised for its quality and equity, with high performance in tests and universal access. Education is seen as a right and educators are well-trained and supported by schools, principals, the government and the local community, following national policies and guidelines. In the Cuban case, education is embedded in a socialist system, with a series of policies for education and other social areas. Cuba is an example of a fruitful interplay between education and external factors, especially the reduced inequality in the country and universal quality education for generations, which create a positive cumulative effect that improves schooling for children.⁷

1. CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE: THE CHALLENGE OF QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION WITH EQUITY

In the past decades, low- and middle-income countries have been expanding their education systems to guarantee the right to education for all. Although combining quality and equity is fundamental for the protection of rights and the promotion of sustainable development, many countries have faced the challenge of expanding the offer with quality and equity. In response to this challenge, the idea that market-based strategies and private providers should be engaged to improve education access and quality has gained traction internationally. Opposed to this international trend, Cuba is an example of a public education system with high performance and universal principles of equity and inclusion.

2. THE APPROACH: SOCIAL POLICIES AND TEACHERS TO PROMOTE EQUITY AND QUALITY IN EDUCATION

Cuba has had sustained high levels of investments in education in a comprehensive and carefully structured system that is embedded in other social policies that promote social equity. Education policies (such as adult literacy and quality rural education) and policies from other social areas (such as preventing child labour) are specifically designed with the goal of quality education with equity for all. Teachers play a central role in this system, with intense pre- and in-service training, and supervision and support from school principals. Accountability is teacher-based, meaning there is a close relationship between school actors in which teachers are held responsible for advancing learning. Teachers also work with the same students for a long time, promoting a commitment to their learning, and test results are made public but there are no rankings to prevent harmful dynamics of competition and rankings.

⁷ Carnoy, M. (2016)

3. LESSONS LEARNED AND LIMITATIONS

The Cuban case is a reminder and clear illustration of how education is not isolated from other social areas and is not likely to drive social development on its own. It also points to how education improvement can be done with, and through, teachers. Cuban teachers receive continuous training and support, being empowered for quality and change, which contrasts with the proposals of short or fast-track certificates for teachers. Finally, teacher accountability is done with support in a participatory way.

Nonetheless, there are limitations and caveats to the Cuban case. Repressive measures by the Government are widely reported, which limit civil and political rights, democratic freedoms are restricted, and education is often placed as a tool to maintain citizens' loyalty to the regime⁹. Furthermore, some of the aspects discussed here depend on wider cultural and political vision, such as Cuba's efforts, over decades, to create a more equal society, which has created greater equality in schools and elevated the quality of education. Relatedly, teacher recruitment depends on the wider social context of salary regulation and social valuing of education. However, the Cuban case does not offer silver bullets or quick solutions, but rather points to how decades of concerted effort have built up quality education. It indicates alternative ways of offering quality education with equity for all, with consistent investment and focus on teachers.

TEACHER TRAINING IN NAMIBIA: TEACHERS AT THE CENTRE OF EDUCATION REFORM

4

After the Namibian independence in 1990, the creation of an education system that would break with the former one became a priority. In contrast to the education that was marked by authoritarian practices that reinforced racial segregation in schools, the new system aimed to promote access, equity, quality and democracy. With a learner-centred pedagogy, teacher training was set as a cornerstone of the reform, placing teachers as creative agents in schools.⁹

1. RELEVANCE: EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN POST-COLONIAL CONTEXTS

After becoming independent, many African countries perceived a need to reform their education systems, as the former ones were marked by colonial aspects, seen especially in the curriculum and in teacher training. However, despite recognising the relevance of these reforms, planning and implementing them has proven to be challenging. Part of the challenges involve financing and finding ways to truly bring about change. At the same time, since the 1990s education has been thought of as a means for "development", usually focusing on economic development. The "new orthodoxy" that has become internationally adopted, tends to promote a technical view of education and eliminate its social purposes and the critical role teachers play in improving teaching and promoting social change. Namibia is one of the countries to have gone through the process of reforming education after its independence in the recent past, framing education as a way to move on from former authoritarian approaches.

2. THE APPROACH: TEACHERS AT THE CENTRE OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Once independence took place, education reform was centred around four main goals: access, equity, quality and democracy. Teacher education was treated as the centrepiece of a national educational reform programme, seen as fundamental to break the cycle of authoritarianism and inequities. This contrasts with an approach that frames teachers as deliverers of content or as a barrier to change. Second, there was a focus on qualitative change (tackling quality, inequality and the social purposes of education), unlike countries that have focused on quantitative indicators (such as more schools and more teachers). Teachers were trained to implement a student-centred pedagogy and to create democratic schools. Relatedly, the curriculum should be relevant and respectful of cultural traditions and communities.

Between 1990 and the early 2000s, the country made great strides in education: enrollment in primary education increased from 60% to 95%, there was a 30% increase in the teaching workforce, and 3,000 new classrooms were built by 2006¹⁰. Access to secondary education increased significantly and Grade 12 student enrollment for the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Higher level (NSSCH) increased from 904 students in 1996 to 16,308 in 2017.

⁹ Dahlström, L (2002). ¹⁰ USAID (2006).

3. LESSONS LEARNED AND LIMITATIONS

In contrast to the understanding that education is a technical matter which is mostly at the service of economic development, the Namibian education reform is an illustration of how education is connected to deeper and wider social issues. In the context of a recently conquered independence and a transition from the Apartheid, the new country envisaged that education should play a central role in changing society. Teachers are central actors in this educational shift, and training them to enact change is fundamental, which should happen together with other reforms, such as curriculum, evaluation and management. Current globally-promoted market-based practices and approaches go against this premise. Instead, they harm the professionalism of teachers by reducing their work to delivering standardised content, training for tests or leaving them in precarious working conditions, thus hindering the possibility of teachers to improve the quality of education.

However, in spite of the advances and improvements resulting from both education and other social policies (such as policies for the protection of children), there are still considerable challenges in Namibian education concerning learning outcomes and access. Some studies have indicated that the new teacher training has had a positive impact on teachers, but that it has not affected practice as much as expected.¹¹ Thus, other policies are needed to advance change, to continue improving education quality, and to tackle teacher absences, poor pupil performance and the inadequate physical conditions that exist in many schools and classrooms. Nonetheless, this case points to the relevance of investing in teacher training and empowering them as agents of social and educational change.

VIETNAM: ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION QUALITY

5

Vietnam has been achieving impressive results regarding school enrolment, completed years of schooling and learning outcomes, and gained international attention after performing exceptionally well in PISA (2012 and 2015). Several policies have created the conditions for such improvement, especially a “double approach” of growing access and improving quality. This has been achieved mainly through teacher training and a creation of a framework for accountability that involves all school stakeholders and is focused on professional development and quality improvement.¹²

1. CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE: CHALLENGES AROUND EDUCATION QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

After becoming independent, many African countries perceived a need to reform their education systems, as the former ones were marked by colonial aspects, seen especially in the curriculum and in teacher training. However, despite recognising the relevance of these reforms, planning and implementing them has proven to be challenging. Part of the challenges involve financing and finding ways to truly bring about change. At the same time, since the 1990s education has been thought of as a means for “development”, usually focusing on economic development. The “new orthodoxy” that has become internationally adopted, tends to promote a technical view of education and eliminate its social purposes and the critical role teachers play in improving teaching and promoting social change. Namibia is one of the countries to have gone through the process of reforming education after its independence in the recent past, framing education as a way to move on from former authoritarian approaches.

2. THE APPROACH: EXPANDING ACCESS AND QUALITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WITH FINANCING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

With consistent public financing, Vietnam has worked to address both quantity and quality. Education has been set as a national priority since the 1990s, which has been matched with a growing financing that was invested in improving facilities and other factors that influence school quality. Despite oscillations, the investment has been consistently high, between approximately 15% (in 2009 and 2018), and approximately 18% (in 2008 and 2012). As a percentage of GDP, it rose from 3.57% in 2000 to 5.6% in 2013, but fell to 4.1% in 2018.¹³ Teacher training has improved in the past years, making teaching more professionalised and a socially respected profession. Professionalism is also related to a freedom to choose pedagogical strategies and a strong school-based support from principals and peers, focused on classroom teaching quality. There was also a development of a national policy that created the framework for an accountability regime that engages all school stakeholders. Evaluations are continuous, including self-evaluations and feedback from peers, superiors and parents. All of this is leveraged to improve teaching planning and quality. School principals have a pivotal role in this system, leading to professional development. Accountability, thus, focuses on processes, participatory practices and professionalism.¹⁴

¹¹ Dahlstrom, 2002, Arreman et al., 2015. ¹² London (2021). ¹³ World Bank (2021). ¹⁴ McAleavy et al. (2018).

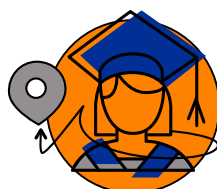
3. LESSONS LEARNED AND LIMITATIONS

Vietnam has made remarkable advances regarding education access and quality. Accountability is central in this system, with a much deeper and wider meaning than the currently disseminated results-based accountability. It is a form of professional development based on feedback that comes from all school stakeholders and a way for improving education quality, based on classroom-level coaching. It is assumed that processes matter for quality, instead of having a narrow focus on the measurement of outcomes. Quality is closely monitored with participatory practices that are related to a high level of professionalism, seen in the reflexive and creative practice that involves self-evaluation and evaluation from peers and superiors to identify challenges and discuss alternatives.

However, there are limitations and unclear aspects that require further inquiry. Some commentators have argued that Vietnam's PISA results could be inflated by the exclusion of some students.¹⁵ Relatedly, despite financing improvements, parents also contribute considerable amounts to their school through the practice of "socialisation". The elevated household contribution can harm access and equity, and the commercialisation of education can put at risk the coherence and performance of the system.¹⁶ Vietnamese teachers also report limitations in policy implementation, with persistent issues of quality. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese experience points to meaningful approaches to education quality that promote the professionalism of teachers with participatory accountability.

CONCLUSION: FIVE APPROACHES TO BUILDING QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR ALL

In different ways, the case studies illustrate the transformative potential of public education, showcasing a range of practices that promote quality and inclusion. While every context is specific, five cross-cutting lessons learned emerge:

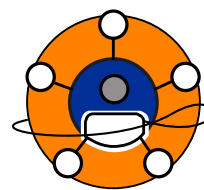
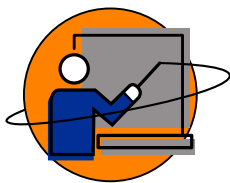


1. LOCALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION SYSTEMS MOTIVATED BY SOCIAL JUSTICE CAN DRIVE POWERFUL SOCIAL CHANGE

The approaches revealed in each case emerge from the local realities, needs, and cultural values, with education systems designed to address specific social contexts. Public education has an intimate relationship with society, being both a product of its context and a tool for social change. The local social purpose of education drives meaningful, acceptable and adaptable learning. It creates a shared commitment and propels innovation, instead of defaulting detached conceptions of quality or standard content from school-chains, which are often irrelevant or harmful to local dynamics. At the same time, education is not solely responsible for such developments; it remains a part of wider efforts and intersectoral and intersectional policies.

- In Ecuador and Bolivia, education seeks to create a new way of living and a new approach to social development, valuing the knowledge of indigenous people and cultivating the Buen Vivir worldview.
- In Brazil, historically excluded groups mobilise towards initiatives whose purpose is social inclusion and equality. Education aims to promote citizen engagement for ensuring rights, focusing on the most vulnerable and marginalised people.

¹⁵ McAleavy et al. (2018). ¹⁶ London (2021).



2. TEACHERS SERVE AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE WHEN VALUED, TRAINED, AND EMPOWERED IN BOTH SCHOOLS AND STRATEGY

In successful public education systems, teachers are treated as active and creative professionals, and are trained, supported, and empowered to play an active role in schools. They are central to education planning and to evaluating pedagogical processes. Professionalism is fostered as a reflexive practice and as a relationship of commitment embedded in communal and internal dialogues. This contrasts with approaches that position teachers as deliverers of content, dependent on standardised curricula and large-scale tests, or fast-track training solutions.

- In Vietnam, teachers receive support from the school principals, with a developmental form of accountability that promotes monitoring and cooperation between school stakeholders.
- In Namibia, teachers have a central role in education reform, fundamental to enacting the aimed social changes of inclusion in a post-Apartheid society and towards a student-centred approach in schools.

3. PARTICIPATORY AND SUPPORTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY PROMOTES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION QUALITY

Across the case studies, accountability is a participatory process that engages several stakeholders. It has a developmental approach, which advances teachers' professionalism and community engagement focused on improving education quality. Instead of relying on high-stakes, test-based accountability, school leaders assess and assist teachers, who also evaluate and support each other, and parents offer and receive feedback, creating a loop of reciprocal accountability.

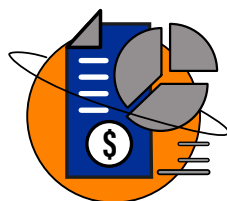
- In Vietnam, teachers receive feedback from peers, supervisors and parents, which is used for professional development.
- In Cuba, test results are not made public. Instead, they are a tool for monitoring students' learning and for informing teachers' professional development.
- In the MST work in Brazil, citizens learn about their rights and how to monitor policies and demand for social and educational rights.



4. ENGAGED COMMUNITIES ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Community engagement occurs in different forms in the seven examples examined, but always as an active and relevant part of an ecosystem that elevates the quality of education. Local communities are part of the creation of locally relevant solutions. In contrast to approaches that treat students, families, and communities as consumers of education with passive roles, stakeholders are active in these case studies. Democracy is not an abstract concept, but rather a concrete relationship and practice lived and experienced by stakeholders. As a by-product of such engagement and consequent improvement, some cases saw a reversal of education privatisation.

- The MST initiative in Brazil includes local engagement with policy and advocacy, in which parents, students and communities learn about and exercise their rights, actively diagnose issues, search for solutions, and interact with other stakeholders to promote change.
- In Vietnam, parents are part of the accountability system, helping teachers in achieving quality.
- In Bolivia, schools improved with local engagement and the perception of public schools also changed, leading to the return of some families from private to public schools.



5. SUSTAINED EDUCATION FINANCE DRIVES SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH ENHANCED QUALITY AND INCLUSION

The elements for quality mentioned above require a sustained financial commitment by states – even in the context of constrained resources. The Education 2030 Framework for Action set two benchmarks: allocate at least 4% to 6% of GDP to education, and/or allocate at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure to education, a goal reached by many of the analysed cases. Most importantly, they illustrate a long-term commitment and a trajectory of increasing financing at the scale of each country's possibilities, even when not reaching OECD standards in absolute terms in the short term. Retrogression in commitment and funding can have devastating impacts and austerity is not an approach taken in these successful cases. Finally, the experiences show that communities should be engaged in monitoring and demanding adequate financing.

- Cuba has consistently spent more than 5% of GDP in education since 1994, and more than 10% since 2007.
- Vietnam adopted a commitment to invest “20% of all public spending” in education (McAleavy et al. 2018). Despite not reaching this goal and having oscillated throughout the years, the investment has been consistently high, from as high as 18.05% in 2008 to 15.24% in 2009, followed by a yearly rise, reaching 18.79% in 2012, and then dropping to 14.47% in 2018 (World Bank, 2021a). As a percentage of GDP, it rose from 3.57% in 2000 to 5.6% in 2013, but fell to 4.1% in 2018 (World Bank, 2021).
- Ecuador has increased its expenditure in education from 1.15% of the GDP in 2000 to 5% in 2015, and 5% of public expenditure to 12.8% in the same period. Thus, despite remaining below the targets, the trajectory and constant increase in funding has been key to the country's educational progress.

Public education must be the way forward for building more equal, just and sustainable societies. This study has showcased positive examples of public education in different settings and contexts. The cases challenge the disseminated idea that public education needs privatisation for quality, and point to a rights-aligned and socially committed definition of quality – including the aim for social inclusion and equity, the engagement of community and local actors, valuing teachers and respecting local culture.

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