Human Capital Development and Operations Policy

HCO
Working Papers

An Incomplete Educational Reform: The Case of Colombia

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August 1995
HCOWP 60
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An Incomplete Educational Reform: 
The Case of Colombia.

by
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Mr. Montenegro was the Director of the National Planning Department of Colombia. The author is indebted to George Psacharopoulos and Jeffrey Puryear for very helpful comments on a previous draft, as well as Himelda Martinez and Alberto Calderón for their valuable suggestions.
Abstract

This paper describes the goals, achievements, and setbacks of an ambitious educational reform attempted in Colombia in 1991. More specifically, it takes up three related questions: What was the Reform about? What did it accomplish? What were the reasons for some of its setbacks?

Initially, the paper provides background information regarding the decentralization movement in the eighties, the unfulfilled expectations it created for the social sectors, and the unfinished tasks it left on the agenda of the nineties. In addition, it briefly describes the reforms undertaken by the Colombian government in the early nineties aimed at completely transforming the Colombian institutions. In this area, attention is devoted to a profound constitutional reform and the opening up of the (previously closed and protected) Colombian economy.

Further, the document describes the educational reform's goals and its main results. In particular, it describes the educational institutional, budgetary and regulatory transformations carried out by constitutional and legal changes, as well as by administrative measures. It compares the Reform's outcomes with its initial goals, pointing out its setbacks, most of them obtained as a result of the Congressional discussions.

The paper analyzes in detail the positions and attitudes taken by the main actors involved in the Congressional discussions that were behind the final results: the government, divided into several agencies, the teachers' union, members of Congress, private sector associations, NGO's and mayors and governors.

Finally, as a conclusion, some lessons for other reforming countries are presented.
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Introduction

Today, in the mid-nineties, there is wide consensus regarding the need to expand and modernize the Colombian educational system in order to sustain the country’s rapid economic growth. Additionally, at least among most reformers, and surprisingly there is accord on the main elements of Educational reform: its central goals, its priorities, and how to best use resources. However, there exists a wide and uncharted territory that separates the best ideas from their day-to-day application. Good ideas are only important inputs in a complex process of reform, which is essentially a political endeavor. Vested interests, routine, and inertia are behind an entrenched status quo that makes it difficult to expand education in a country such as Colombia.

Within this context, this paper will illustrate the main obstacles, difficulties, discussions, the reaction of important segments of society, the achievements, and the compromises that were made when the Government of President César Gaviria attempted to push through the political process its initiative of an education reform during the 1990-94 period. The discussion will take up three related questions: What was the reform all about? what did it accomplish? and what were the reasons behind some of its setbacks? Finally, the conclusion will draw some lessons which other countries could learn from the 1990-94 Colombian experience.

Background: Low Coverage and Institutional Confusion

When the discussions on education reform started in the early 1990’s, public basic education in Colombia was characterized by low enrollments, deficient quality, and institutional confusion due to an incomplete process of decentralization that had taken place in the mid and late eighties.¹

Education coverage in Colombia showed poor results: elementary education enrollment was 86 percent, and only 51 percent for secondary education.² Additionally, the dynamic expansion of educational services that occurred during the 1950-1980 period, already displayed some clear signs of losing momentum in the eighties.³ Furthermore, although the quality of public education had not been systematically analyzed, there were strong indications that it was very


² As expected, enrollments in rural and remote areas exhibit very worrisome levels.

³ During the 1950-80 period, the illiteracy rate dropped from about 50 percent to almost 15 percent, and the average schooling of Colombians rose from 1.2 to 6 years. On other educational accomplishments of the National Front system, see Bushnell, pp. 238-200.
poor. It was clear that Colombia would not be able to accelerate its economic development with the stock of human resources that was being formed by its educational apparatus.

Public expenditures for education were low and confused. They amounted to an annual average of 2.5 percent of GDP in the late eighties, a figure similar to those of countries with the same income per capita, but inferior to those of the fast growing Asian countries. Most expenditures on education were financed by the central government through a disorganized system of earmarked transfers to its specialized agencies in the Colombian departments. Contributions of local funds to education were small, and municipalities often used flexible forms of contracting teachers which were in conflict with the labor practices established in the negotiations between the Central Government and unionized teachers.

Education decentralization was already an issue of lively debate in the late eighties. The country had precisely moved in the opposite direction in the seventies. In fact, when municipalities and departments faced teachers' strikes and fiscal disorder because of their lack of resources to finance basic education, the Government did not seek to establish instruments such as local taxes or transfers to enable them to cope locally with their problems. On the contrary, public education was completely centralized, and, as a consequence, every payment and every administrative decision on education was made by the Ministry of Education in Bogotá or by its agencies in the departments. By the same token, all teachers were employees of the Central Government under a unified special labor code.

In the short run, centralization of education was successful in achieving its political goals, especially in putting a damper on the noisy and often turbulent teachers' strikes. However, it was costly in terms of efficiency and institutional development. It was, undoubtedly, behind the

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5 From a political point of view, Colombia is a country divided into 32 departments, which, in turn are divided into municipalities. The department government is presided by a governor. Mayors are elected to run municipal governments.

6 Private schools were responsible for 40 percent and 10 percent of the country's total secondary and primary enrollment rates, respectively.

stagnation in the previously dynamic expansion of educational services in Colombia. Moreover, it ran counter to an important political movement directed at increasing local autonomy in several regions of Colombia.

It was precisely within this context that the Colombian Congress approved the popular election of mayors in 1985, breaking away from the very vertical and rigid structure of government by which virtually all mayors had been nominated by the Central Government, and in which the electoral system had been characterized by little popular participation and high electoral abstention. As expected, this important step only raised expectations of further transformations. For example, people expected that under the new organization of the State, social services, such as basic education and health, would be managed by municipalities. To this end, Law Decree 29 of 1989 was approved, establishing that mayors would be in charge of certain decisions relating to the day-to-day administration of public education. In the same way, a few years before, Law 12 of 1986 had established that building and maintenance of schools was the responsibility of municipalities.

Nevertheless, the central government remained in charge of financing, controlling, and making crucial managerial decisions concerning the provisions of social services; consequently, the transfer of full responsibility to municipalities was never fully implemented. In particular, the lack of financial mechanisms to empower local autonomy made the decentralization process slow and unclear. Consequently, the completion and deepening of the decentralization process started in 1985 was on the reform agenda of 1991.

When the education reform process discussion began at the end of 1991, the country had recently experienced major transformations in numerous sectors. Immediately after President Gaviria took office in August of 1990, a comprehensive economic reform package was enacted: quantitative restrictions to trade were eliminated, tariffs were reduced, labor regulations were made more flexible, the foreign exchange control system was dismantled, and many steps were taken to fully liberalize the financial sector. Along with these reforms, other processes were set in motion: a program of modernization of State agencies and the privatization of services such as ports, roads, and the construction of power stations, pipelines and refineries.

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8 Another important reason was the lack of sufficient fiscal resources to support the expansion of education. This factor was very severe during the fiscal adjustment put forth between 1985 and 1986.

9 Law 10 of 1990 set up similar measures for the decentralization of health services.


11 A description of these initiatives is found in Rudolf Hommes, Armando Montenegro, and Pablo Roda. 1994. Una Apertura Hacia el Futuro. Bogotá: Ministerio de Hacienda y Crédito Público y Departamento Nacional de Planeación.
Simultaneously, the country embarked on drafting a new Constitution during the first semester of 1991. Among the new features that were introduced by the Constitution of 1991 were: the expansion of democratic mechanisms such as the popular election of governors, the possibility of referendums, and direct popular consultations; the establishment of a form of an accusatory system of justice; the autonomy of the Central Bank and new budget and planning principles and procedures. Needless to say, the decentralization of both responsibilities and fiscal resources was one of the main points on the agenda of the Constitutional Assembly.

To conclude this background note, it is important to emphasize that the education reform discussions took place in a country that was undergoing an extensive and profound political, economic, and social transformation. Moreover, some of the reform's central issues — such as decentralization — were deeply rooted in old Colombian problems. As will be explained later, the stage was set for a struggle between friends and foes of decentralization and local autonomy.

**The Goals of Reform: Easier Said Than Done**

Since its inception, the Government had organized and presented a reform project which included a simple set of ideas that were proposed and defended during its term. The goals of the education reform, as initially included in the Development Plan of 1991\(^\text{12}\) and later presented to Congress in the so-called Decentralization Bill of 1992\(^\text{13}\), were the following:

(i) To "municipalize" basic education, within the context of deepening the decentralization process. Municipalities were to have both the responsibility of managing and running local schools and sufficient resources to adequately perform their expanded roles. Under the new system, the central government would be in charge of policy design, evaluation, and transfer of financial resources to municipalities. Likewise, departments would be in charge of technical support and teachers training.

(ii) To increase efficiency and accountability, schools were to be given autonomy in selecting and managing personnel, choosing some areas of curricula, and managing certain financial aspects. Additionally, parents, teachers, and students were to participate actively in school government.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) The school autonomy proposal was not precisely outlined at the beginning of the discussion, but rather at a seminar organized by the Planning Department to discuss the Education Reform when this issue was debated. See the special issue of *Planeación y Desarrollo*, XXIV (3) Septiembre-Diciembre 1993.
(iii) To expand enrollment, especially in secondary education. (As already mentioned, this level was in precarious situation nationwide). The Government's specific goal was to attain full enrollment in primary education by 1995 and complete coverage of the secondary education population by the end of the century.

(iv) To improve the quality of education and the accountability of teachers and managers. To achieve this goal, competition among schools was to be encouraged, and parents were to have more opportunity to choose between private and public schools. New instruments and procedures for evaluating teachers were proposed. Efforts were going to be made to improve teachers' wages and training and to increase the availability of textbooks and equipment in schools.

(v) To seek more opportunities for private sector participation in providing educational services. With this in mind, the creation of vouchers for poor students was proposed, as well as credits and subsidies to remodel, enlarge, and build new schools. Furthermore, it was decided that hostile regulations and controls imposed over private education ought to be removed.

(vi) To increase, as a result of these reforms, public spending for education: from 2.5 percent of GDP in the 1980s to 3.5 percent in 1994 and to 5 percent at the end of the decade.

Most of this reform was prepared by a group working for the Planning Department which was not directly involved in the management of educational matters. Moreover, a few of its more controversial points were not introduced at the beginning of the discussion but rather in the course of the debates it unleashed. An example of one of these controversial points handled in this manner was the case of school autonomy. Once the Reform was designed the World Bank helped prepare a credit project dealing with secondary education in which most elements of the Reform were included.

The Results: The Long Way from Ideas to Deeds

The Reform required the approval of diverse political bodies. Achieving its goals and ensuring its internal coherence meant waging simultaneous battles in sundry and changing terrains: (i) in the constitutional realm by ensuring that the text of the new Constitution agreed with the desired goals, especially those regarding the intensifying of decentralization and free and open private participation in the education process; (ii) in Congress by seeking the enactment of laws which developed some constitutional mandates, ensured budget appropriations, and regulated specific educational issues; (iii) in the Administration by enacting decrees and taking actions in accordance with the Reform goals.

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Constitution and Education

The educational reform effort brought before the Constitutional Assembly was directed at obtaining two specific objectives. First, to ensure that general norms on education (contained in Title II of the Constitution, 'About Rights, Guarantees, and Obligations') would concur with the Government's ideas. In this area, however, the political tasks were mostly defensive; they centered on avoiding the approval of populist proposals such as the one that would establish "free and mandatory public education for all Colombians" and other similar initiatives. Fortunately, in the final text, Articles 67-69 permits Colombian education to be organized along the desired lines of Reform.

The second and most difficult task of the Government was to obtain a reasonable constitutional text about decentralization. Two main problems arose in this area. First, a sizable group of delegates were determined to obtain a constitutional mandate to increase monetary transfers to departments and municipalities, which would have proven to be fiscally unsustainable. Second, some delegates firmly opposed the Government's idea of matching these transfers with new social responsibilities and obligations for local governments. The Minister of Finance and the Director of National Planning made it clear that enlarged local government resources were only consistent with a parallel and simultaneous reduction of the size and responsibilities of the central government.

It was no surprise that a lively conflict ensued. The Minister of Finance and the Director of National Planning sent a public letter to the Assembly indicating that only if expectations were more modest and a more sober and responsible decentralization scheme was envisaged, would the country derive benefits from the new system, and more importantly, could a financial and administrative disaster be avoided. The President himself intervened by conferring with important Assembly leaders. Finally, a compromise was reached.

Articles 356 and 357 of the New Constitution established the general framework for decentralization to be developed and regulated by law thereafter. Though drafted with rather unnecessary technical complexity, these articles were able to accommodate a reasonable process of strengthening decentralization. They made it clear that basic social services would be managed and run only by municipalities and departments with the support of an enlarged flow of transfers from the Central Government. Nevertheless, the distribution of responsibilities between municipalities and departments was to be established by an organic law, in a separate and complex process. Moreover, Articles 356 and 357 established that the fiscal transfers were earmarked for social spending; some mechanisms and procedures to enhance fiscal control of the enlarge transfers were approved as well.

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16 A popular vote to elect 72 delegates to draft the New Constitution took place on December 9, 1990. The Constitutional Assembly convened on March 1 for a three-month term. The New Constitution was proclaimed on July 4, 1991.
Notwithstanding the various improvements in its final version, it was clear to all who participated in the discussion that this Reform was to have a high fiscal cost and would impose a profound reorganization of the State. As a response to the Government's observations in these areas, the Constitutional Assembly approved a ruling (Transitory Article 20) which enabled the Government to suppress, merge, and restructure any government agency; and another ruling (Transitory Article 43) gave it the power to enact a tax reform by decree-law, without the approval of Congress, in order to meet reform expenses. In other words, the Decentralization Reform was approved by the Assembly with the explicit understanding that the Colombian central government had to shrink considerably, and that Colombians were going to pay for the new system. Moreover, by approving a growing volume of transfers for departments and municipalities, the Constitutional Assembly notified future governments that in order to avoid fiscal disasters, social programs would have to be executed and financed by local entities.

**Congress and Educational Reform.**

Once the Constitutional Reform was enacted, it was necessary to place a draft bill before Congress in order to regulate and propose specific options for reforming education within the general institutional framework established by the Constitution. The draft, which included the government's goals and objectives described above, was prepared by the National Planning Department in agreement with the Ministers of Education and Finance and in the first quarter of 1992 presented to Congress under the name of Decentralization Bill.

Strong opposition arose as soon as this bill was made known. A new bill was drafted by the teachers' union, FECODE, under pretext that the Decentralization Bill did not deal with certain specific aspects of education, which was later called the General Law on Education (GLE) and, in essence, was a counter-reform project which was against decentralization, school autonomy, private sector participation, vouchers for poor students, and in general, opposed the most progressive elements of the Decentralization Law. Needless to say, it included a number of improvements in the financial mechanisms dealing with wages and pensions for teachers.

FECODE offered the explanation that the GLE was based on three goals: (a) to protect education from the 'chaos' supposedly created by the initial decentralization laws (especially law 29/1989); (b) to increase education resources, mainly those directed at paying teachers, building and maintaining schools; and (c) to improve the quality of education. Undoubtedly, in addition to reacting against the Government's proposal, FECODE found in the GLE an opportunity to fight for the reversal of the decentralization laws approved against its will in the late eighties.

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17 Some months later, Congress approved a new tax system that enhanced Government revenues, and the Government issued a decree package which reformed its institutional structure.

The new Minister of Education did not oppose the preparation of the GLE because in his view, in spite of any previous events in the Reform process, conflicts had to be avoided by all means, and compromises sought. Like most previous Ministers of Education, he very much feared a teachers' strike, and in his opinion, there existed several constraints that made it impossible to push an ambitious reform through Congress. The most notable ones, particularly in 1992, were serious social and political problems such as the national power rationing, TELECOM’s national strike, and Pablo Escobar’s escape from prison. Given this political scenario, the Minister opted for a visible conciliatory approach to FECODE.

Consequently, in 1992 there were two competing proposals for education reform before Congress, both of which had at least some endorsement by the Government. In 1993, and after a lengthy and painful debate, as well as an extended teachers' strike, both Reform Laws were approved. It was no surprise that several concessions were made during the legislative process. Some of the means used to reach an agreement were interesting: when the teachers' strike started, discussions and votes on the competing bills were halted in Congress. Only when an accord between FECODE and the Government was reached, and its content incorporated into the text of both bills, did the strike end and did Congress move ahead to approve the modified proposals. Thereafter, the Decentralization Bill became Law No. 60 of 1993, and the GLE became Law No. 115 of 1994.

The educational reform’s basic results, after its tribulations through the Colombian Congress, were the following:

(i) Approval of a timetable for decentralization, though with some limitations and ambiguities. A three-year transition period was established, during which full responsibility was to be transferred to departments and the larger municipalities. However, certain issues related to complete control by municipalities were either postponed or subject to future regulations. In sum, municipalization of education suffered a setback, and departmentalization prevailed.

(ii) Approval of only a limited form of school autonomy. Though this provision bears a pompous name, Proyecto Educativo Institucional (Institutional Education Project), and grants some school autonomy in managing certain academic subjects, it does not empower principals, parents and teachers to run their schools independent of the highly centralized and complex network of regulations in matters such as personnel and financial management. Today, after the reform, principals and, in general, schools do not have enough autonomy to select, hire, sanction, and fire teachers or administrative personnel. Most of these decisions are taken by education councils, municipalities, and departments where a variety of political and union interests are represented.

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19 Some months before the process was completed, Minister Holmes Trujillo resigned and was succeeded by Minister Maruja Pachón de Villamizar. She was in charge of the Ministry during the teachers’ strike and the final votes in Congress.
(iii) Establishment of some instruments to improve educational quality, albeit with severe limitations. A system of periodic evaluation of student achievement was established as well as that of teachers' performance as a basis for keeping their jobs. The union rejected and opposed in Congress the government proposal that promotions be based on performance evaluation (as opposed to the current practice of presenting credentials and doubtful evidence of formal courses as the sole justification of promotions). However, even for the limited form of teacher's evaluation that was approved by Congress under the Union's pressure, a serious constraint was imposed: tests to determine teachers preparation will be given every six years, according to a regulation to be issued by the Ministry. 20

(iv) Approval of vouchers for poor students, growing fiscal commitments, incentives to build new private and public schools, and investments in texts and equipment. Furthermore, the Decentralization Bill also provided the possibility for education services to be contracted with private suppliers. This regulation made it possible for local government to eventually experiment with charter schools and other contractual forms which could introduce flexibility in the burdensome and fossilized public education sector.

(v) Avoidance of institutional disasters. The most important one was the defeating of the Teachers' Union proposal of cutting out from the autonomy the popularly elected mayors and governors by creating councils that would have been in charge of educational management. Needless to say that unionized teachers would have had a leading role in those councils.

(vi) Resolution of several issues dealing with teachers' wages and pensions. In particular, the GLE established that the constitutionally created transfers for departments would be the financial source for paying wages and other labor benefits of teachers and education managers.

All in all, even though the constitutional mandate for furthering decentralization was observed, some of the Reform's more important and controversial targets were not reached. On the one hand, its more positive element was the approval of a timetable and some procedures for the central government's relinquishing of its monopolistic control on the education process. On the other hand, instead of achieving municipalization, the burden of decentralization was to be assumed mostly by departments, and only residually by the large municipalities. Moreover, sheer political realities prevented decentralization from being carried out during the Gaviria years, as planned. This was a process that was pushed forwards during his government but that has to be continued and implemented in the coming years. According to the Decentralization Law, many decisions have to be made in the near future and a variety of problems can be expected. Fine and not so fine-tuning of both the model and the system of fiscal transference will be inevitable.

20 Predictably after extensive negotiations and consultations with the teachers' union leaders.
Education Reform and Some Administrative Measures.

As mentioned before, since the outset of the Gaviria administration, some important elements of the Reform were rapidly implemented by issuing decrees and by making decisions without a political process of consultation and approval. The most important steps were taken by Minister of Education Alfonso Valdivieso, during the first year of Gaviria's term, who personally participated in the preparation and discussion of the Reform.

The most important of these administrative steps, taken from 1991 to 1994, were the following:

(i) Public spending in education increased from 2.7 percent to 3.65 percent of GDP between 1990 and 1994, exceeding the goal of 3.5 percent of GDP established in the development plan. Most of this increase was financed from the national budget ordinary revenues. Additionally, 70 percent of the increase was directed to departments and municipalities in the form of earmarked transfers.

(ii) Price controls and numerous unnecessary regulations imposed on private schools were promptly removed in order to promote an increase in the number and services of these schools. This was an important step that ensured the global coherence of the Reform effort. Prices remained decontrolled during the Gaviria regime.

(iii) A voucher program was set up, aimed at increasing poor student enrollments in secondary education. This was a demand-driven, targeted scheme that started to operate in 1991, and was later incorporated into the laws approved by Congress. Vouchers covered tuition fees in private schools and amounted to approximately US$150 a year per student. In 1994, nearly 110,000 secondary students, most of them from families with incomes below one minimum salary, received vouchers. However, evaluations showed some problems: students given vouchers, were inclined to attend poor quality private schools and the money value of the vouchers did not cover other important costs: books, food and transportation.21

(iv) A system of loans and subsidies to private suppliers of secondary education was established. This program, which sought to promote the construction and expansion of private educational infrastructure, was supported in 1992-93 with budget appropriations of approximately US$20 million which could have helped build, rebuild or enlarge 1,000 schools a year. However, due to the lack of promotion among potential beneficiaries and also the lack of interest of the Ministry, the implementation of this program was very poor. In 1994 the program was virtually abandoned.

21 External analysts suggested that poor families should be compensated for the opportunity cost of losing the income previously generated by the secondary student. To date this recommendation has not been implemented. See World Bank. 1995. Poverty in Colombia. Washington DC.: A World Bank Country Study.
(v) In order to improve the quality of public education, a preparatory year was established for young children entering primary public schools (zero grade). This measure was also endorsed by the New Constitution and the GLE. By 1994, 385,000 children were already involved in the program, 61 percent of the program's initial goal.

(vi) Likewise, to systematically evaluate the quality of education, a program called SABER was designed and implemented: in 1991 a random sample of 15,000 primary students were evaluated as to their knowledge and its relevance to solve practical problems. One year later, evaluations were extended to secondary students. Unfortunately, and contrary to its initial goals, the program was not continued in the years to come.

In sum, this review shows how several of the most important programs, initially designed to last for many years, were only partially carried out or abandoned in the third or fourth year of the Gaviria government. Behind this frustrating outcome was a weak and unstable Ministry of Education which never had complete ownership of the educational reform.

What was the final outcome of the educational reform? Was it successful? If we compare the results obtained by the Reform in the constitutional, legal and administrative arenas with its initial ambitious goals, we necessarily have to conclude that the task was far from completed. Though important targets were achieved, especially in the draft of the Constitution and by setting in motion crucial programs — such as the voucher system and the 'zero grade' program — many others were not attained. The greatest setbacks were the failure to obtain Congressional approval of school autonomy and the municipalization of basic education.

A Closer Look at the Main Actors' Agendas in the Congressional Discussion

The Government and FECODE

We have now reviewed both the goals and results of the educational reform, as well as the gap between them. But exactly how did this come about? The best way to respond is to focus on the Congressional discussions where most of this gap originated. It was there that an increasingly fragmented Government opposed a solid and coherent Teachers’ Union in the midst of a complex political situation. Moreover, the teachers' skillful use of the strike as a weapon within a propitious political environment, proved to be a key element in avoiding educational municipalization and school autonomy.

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22 Fortunately, at the end of the Gaviria administration, the government signed a credit with the World Bank aimed at financing, strengthening, and correcting some of the most prevailing and relevant secondary education problems. In addition, this credit will ensure the continuation of crucial programs such as vouchers and school building and remodeling.
The final outcome of this educational saga can be fully understood when the passivity and lack of involvement of other crucial actors — in both the public and the private sectors — is taken into account.

_The Government_

The position presented during the process of educational reform proved that in practice, there is no such thing as a coherent, monolithic government. Although some cohesion and ideological coincidence was achieved during the administration's first year, there was no full agreement thereafter. Various government agencies participated in the process, each one often with different goals and interests. Moreover, due to the fact that public agendas were put forward by various persons with their own political and professional aspirations, as time passed, bureaucratic turnover tended to make maintaining a coherent government stance more difficult. Furthermore, the very political impact of several problems unleashed by the Reform itself (among which the teacher's strike was the most visible) affected the positions of the various governmental agencies in different and sometimes unexpected, ways. Unfortunately, this fact created incentives which distanced them even further apart, as explained below.

For many years, the Colombian Ministry of Education has been a weak institution. The position of a Minister of Education has been second rate within the Presidential Cabinet. As it has been used by presidents to pay off some of their political debts, some ministers have not been well prepared to perform their duties properly. Moreover, it has been commonplace for the objectives of ministers and senior managers to be limited to achieving regional political goals, and their preference almost always has been to avoid teachers' strikes and other major problems.\(^{23}\)

The Ministry's bureaucracy was of very poor quality at the end of the eighties. It was not prepared nor was it capable of dealing with the technical or legal matters of an ambitious reform. Without adequate salaries, the glamour, and the prestige of the high positions of the economic ministries, most of the top Colombian education experts migrated to the United States in the eighties and now work at the World Bank and other multilateral institutions. The available personnel were incapable of supporting any serious, ambitious process of modernization. In fact, whenever an energetic minister wanted to have an impact on this sector, due to the Ministry's meager salaries, they had to surround themselves with outside consultants paid by UNDP or the Planning Department, who were in charge of the duties that career bureaucrats were incapable of

\(^{23}\) Without concrete goals and a policy agenda for education, most Ministers usually try to avoid conflicts by immersing themselves in permanent negotiations with unions, contractors and bureaucrats. Thus, in a characteristic Colombian way of governing, which follows an old corporatist tradition, a consensual approach known as "concertación" is maintained. In this approach, the Minister or the Government's representative does not provide leadership but only chairs an unending chain of meetings geared towards reading consensus. Therefore, it is no surprise that a stationary situation prevails.
performing. When the dynamic Minister and his or her external consultants exited, the tedious and timeless sea of bureaucratic mediocrity settled in again.

At the beginning of the Gaviria government when the Reform was being prepared, a serious effort was made to improve the quality of the Ministry. Young professionals were hired and, gradually, an island of excellence emerged within the Ministry. However, as ministers changed and ideological continuity was not observed, most of this improvement was reversed. In the end, the Ministry was more or less in the same situation it had been in four years back.

These realities explain why the educational reform had to be prepared in cooperation with other government agencies, mostly the Planning Department, the Ministry of Finance, and the Presidency. After most of the Ministry of Education officials involved in drafting the Reform had departed, and almost a year after the Government's inception, without ownership or commitment, the Ministry increasingly showed vacillation and concern for the political consequences of a confrontation with the Teachers' Union. Consequently, from a position of shared leadership, the Ministry gradually began to assume a mediatory role between the Planning Department and the Ministry of Finance, on one side, and FECODE, on the other. The fate of the more ambitious and politically challenging parts of Reform were doomed thereafter.

The Planning Department played an important role in designing the new educational system.24 (Since this Department was in charge of preparing the National Development Plan, it was deeply involved in setting up many initiatives of the Gaviria government to be thrust into the political or administrative processes by the various ministries). In fact, early in the Government, several officers of the Department, well aware of the human capital theory and the new growth theories, were already convinced that a serious education reform was required in order to speed up economic growth in Colombia. However, due to its technocratic orientation and, especially, to the established political direction of the Ministry on educational matters, the Department could not act on behalf of the Government during the political process of discussions. In addition, in 1991 and 1992 it had to pay attention to many other important reforms that were being debated in Congress.

Similar observations can be made regarding the role of the Ministry of Finance during the dialogue on the education reform. In 1992, its major political challenge was the tax reform, and it was also at odds with the Ministry of Education when the latter assumed a position of neutrality regarding crucial educational matters such as decentralization and school autonomy.25

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24 Miguel Urrutia describes well some of the Department characteristics: 'When in 1967 the Department was reformed, the precedent was set that recruitment to all high posts in the agency required postgraduate studies, and, to reach head of division, the aspirant had to be at least a Ph.D. candidate... Thus the Planning Agency has been essentially a technical department, advising the President on economic policy, and its officers remain out of politics'. See Miguel Urrutia. 1994. "On the Absence of Economic Populism in Colombia," in Rudiger Dornbush and Sebastián Edwards, eds., The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 369-392.

25 Regarding the technocratic orientation of this Ministry, see Urrutia 1991 p. 384.
In sum, during the deliberations of these reforms, the Ministry of Education seemed to be caught in a cross fire: on the one side, the reformers in various parts of Government, and on the other, the Teachers' Union and other groups opposed to change. Furthermore, when the Union perceived that the main goal of the Ministry of Education was to avoid conflicts — namely a teachers' strike — it could effectively obtain concessions and further the Minister's passivity by keeping up its strike threat.

**FECODE**

The Teachers' Union (FECODE) played a very important role. Many years ago, this Union, whose membership comprises more than 200,000 teachers, was a powerful instrument in modernizing the teachers' labor regime and in improving their conditions. However, as time went by, it became a reactionary body and constituted one of the main barriers to educational modernization in Colombia. FECODE is a powerful Union; it is well-financed and its leaders enjoy stability and maintain nationwide control over their organization. They are in constant communication with the Minister and the Vice Minister of Education, and direct contact with national and regional politicians, frequently expressing their views before Congressional committees. In these fora, most of their leaders — traditional Marxists — contend that the wave of recent reforms in Latin America are negative, neoliberal and oppose the interests of the people. In the past, some of FECODE's leaders were involved with extremist and guerrilla organizations, and, almost without exception, they possess simplistic and outdated political ideas. More specifically, in the education sector they oppose decentralization, school autonomy, parents' involvement in the process, vouchers, and choice initiatives. They perceive all these changes as threats to the cohesion and unity of their movement.

How does a small group of ultra-leftists control and lead 200,000 conventional, middle-class people — most of them members of the traditional political parties — such as the average Colombian teacher? How is it possible that this control could be maintained for so many years? Although it is difficult to respond to this question, most surely part of the answer lies in three factors: their effective concentration on improving the labor conditions of its constituency; the less than perfect democratic practices within the Union; and the excessive politicization and 'ideologicization' of every matter brought to their consideration.

Notwithstanding the above factors, the stability of FECODE's leaders, in contrast to the high turnover at the Ministry, cannot be downplayed. While the same group of leaders has controlled the Union for decades, maintaining a solid and unchanged vision of the sector, the average tenure of a Minister of Education is less than eighteen months. Moreover, each new minister usually brings different priorities and, as mentioned before, his or her main commitments are usually oriented towards achieving a few short-term political goals.

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The Congressional Leaders, Private Sector, and Local Authorities

The Government's division and FECODE's strength do not by themselves, explain the Reform's final outcome. An additional and crucial element to be taken into account was the passivity and indifference of important players, some of whom paradoxically were to be favored by the educational reform. Neither the private sector, nor some congressional leaders, mayors and governors, actively supported it.

Congress

Congress could have settled the discussion between centralization and municipalization, or between school autonomy or central school control, simply by voting according to the senators' and representatives' convictions. But that did not happen: when the teachers' strike started, Congressional leaders balked at taking any action. They would not move ahead without a previous accord between the Government and FECODE. They simply called for negotiations and many of them offered themselves as mediators. Given the strength of the teachers' strike and the national political situation at the time, they opted for a non-confrontational stance. Consequently, the Government lost a democratic means of settling the dispute, and was forced — within a very difficult political environment — to seek an agreement with the Union.

Apart from these political considerations, most Congressional leaders have vested interests in maintaining the centralization of education and of most social services. This explains why some of the important ones were either indifferent to or against the Reform. They profit from the status quo through bureaucratic control of positions or through the pork-barrel possibilities of a centralized budget system. Even though most of them were outspoken and aggressive in defending local autonomy (since senators and representatives are effective mediators between Congress and their regions), in practice, they opposed decentralization. Local autonomy means that decisions regarding job nominations and investments are made at the municipal or departmental level, where the fixed-term, popularly elected mayors and governors show increasing independence from the congressmen, their previous bosses.

The Private Sector

The main producer associations ('gremios') were remarkably indifferent to the education reform. The same must be said with regard to the ill-fated SENA (the public institution in charge of technical education for workers) reform for the training of workers of Colombia, in 1992. There are at least three reasons to explain this attitude.

(a) Neither the main business leaders nor their children have ever attended public schools. For most urban upper-class Colombians, public education is something remote, a subject related to social assistance and charity, and by no means directly related to their businesses and activities. Therefore, they showed no personal interest or commitment to the reform's fate.
(b) At the beginning of "Apertura" (the opening up of economic and political structures, carried out by the Gaviria government), the private sector did not appreciate the economic importance of the education reform. This was because of its closed-economy mentality — nurtured during decades of protection and successful lobbying — by which profits were usually the result of securing government favors and not the result of increasing productivity or improving labor quality. Only when it felt the rigors of international competition some months later, did the Colombian private sector begin to concern itself with education and training of its workers and managers.

(c) Because many other reforms were discussed simultaneously in the country, most of the active 'gremios' paid no attention to the proposed changes to basic education. When the new Constitution was approved in July 1991, it had to be developed and regulated by a series of specific laws. Consequently, dozens of important bills were presented to Congress in the ensuing months. Furthermore, the aforementioned tax bill, which included higher income and value added taxes, was sent to Congress. For all these reasons, it was difficult to get people to focus their attention on the education reform which was perceived, in comparison to other reforms, as a relatively less important initiative.

Additionally, parents organizations and community groups — all to be benefited by the educational reform — were not involved in the political battles waged in their name. Atomized, dispersed and without an effective system of representation, they could not express their views in a political system dominated by powerful players.\(^{27}\)

Some private school associations, however, did show interest in the Reform's fate. They intervened in favor of crucial decisions when the teachers' proposals threatened their autonomy and their financial stability. Specifically, these associations were against FECODES's proposal of extending the labor conditions of public teachers to all those working for private schools.

**Mayors and Governors**

During the initial stages of the Reform, local authorities at the Municipal and Departmental levels showed little interest in the discussion; this is one of the most perplexing elements of this curious saga. Although the struggle that was being waged was directed at expanding their own resources and responsibilities, they did not assume a very active role. At least three reasons help explain this fact.

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\(^{27}\) According to Olson: 'other things being equal, the larger the number of individuals or firms that would benefit from a collective good, the smaller the share of the gains from action in the group interest that will accrue to the individual or firm that undertakes the action. Thus, in the absence of selective incentives, the incentive for group action diminishes as group size increases, so that large groups are less able to act in common interest than small ones.' See Mancur Olson. 1982 *The Rise and Decline of Nations*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
First, departments and municipalities had serious problems in organizing themselves effectively to further their interests. For example, popularly elected governors had only recently taken office and lacked any form of organization for political action. By the same token, although the thousand Colombian municipalities had a formal organization, it was a weak one, which did not have the technical capacity to effectively participate in the deliberations. More important, it did not have an efficient political mobilization capacity, due to the wide range of the mayors' political and ideological views, let alone their great geographical and cultural diversity.

Second, as mentioned before, the Decentralization Reform was discussed amidst a complex process of massive institutional reform. Therefore, the limited and unorganized political capacity of the governors and mayors was dissipated amongst other important projects presented to Congress.

Third, it has been traditional for local authorities to distrust both Central Government and FECODE, the main actors in the educational reform struggle.

Summing up, this brief review of the passivity and indifference of so many important actors explains why a fragmented central government, lacking the support of the very same ones who were to benefit from the reform, was almost alone in its quest for decentralization, school autonomy, private sector involvement, and parents' participation. The practical result was that the only effective interlocutor of the Government during discussions of Reform in Congress was the Teachers' Union. The lack of effective participation of mayors, governors, private school associations, and other groups in the political discussions ensured that the most progressive elements of the Reform were not enacted. Unquestionably, the Reform's major political drawback was its deficient marketing and sale amongst its own beneficiaries, largely because the government could not exert all its political strength in this area because it was waging other important battles elsewhere.

The legacy of the Gaviria government's educational reform presents important achievements and also interesting lessons on the political roots of some of its shortcomings. New governments will be forced by development needs to place education modernization at the center of their growth strategies. Most surely, for these governments, the interesting set of events related to the attempted reforms undertaken in the early nineties will be a rich learning source.

**Lessons Drawn from the 1990-1994 Colombian Reform Effort**

Among countries, just as among people, experiences and problems are in many respects unique. Very often, what is suited and viable for solving one country's difficulties is not fit for another. Therefore, it is certainly difficult to draw general conclusions from the particular set of Colombian attempts to reform its education system during the 1990-94 period. However, in spite of the obvious limitations, not to dare extract some lessons from this rich experience would be unjustified timidity. In the near future, other countries, Colombia included, will continue its
struggle to reform their educational systems, and will face similar problems. The following points might be useful in this endeavor:

(i) First of all, the whole Government has to show unity and support for a simple, clear and coherent set of educational proposals. The Minister of Education, with full support of the President, has to provide strong leadership in the process. Following the example of the most successful reforming countries, the quality of Ministers of Education and the bureaucracy in charge of that Ministry need to be optimal. Moreover, job stability, good salaries, and social prestige have to be instilled in the jobs of the professionals working for this Ministry.

(ii) One of the most important lessons of the Colombian experience is that in order to be successful, reformers should be able to involve various affected groups in the reform process. Instead of only having a two-way dialogue (government-teacher's union), several other groups such as parents organization, local authorities, community leaders and private educators should also be actively involved in discussions. Only then can the reformists government have an opportunity to obtain broad support and can society get an educational reform that truly serves its general interests.

(iii) Teachers' unions, which in many countries present attitudes refractory to change and modernization, must be dealt with in a positive and creative manner. In this regard, as a starting point, it is fundamental that governments comply with their financial and labor obligations to teachers so as to create an atmosphere of respect and trust. Additionally, extensive dialogue, often with the participation of community and parent association leaders, is required in order to soften the Union's extremely defensive attitude towards innovative ideas. In this context, it could also be useful to organize seminars, courses, and travel study programs to expose union leaders to other countries' experiences. Likewise, it is important to encourage the opening up of the Union's structures and make it more responsive to the needs and ideas of vast groups of teachers.

(iv) New mechanisms need to be created productively involving mayors and governors in discussions regarding decentralization. In this area, central governments could, for example, foster initiatives to strengthen the existing organizations of mayors and governors so that they would have sufficient technical and financial support thus allowing them to participate in the deliberations dealing with their fate.

(v) The completion of the educational reform process will not be successful without the active participation of the private sector, especially the industrial and financial associations as well as NGOs and parents' associations. In particular, community and local groups interested in educational reform, can be effective accelerators of this process and could actively militate behind mayors and governments demanding expanded decentralization and local autonomy. Central governments can also stimulate the participation of important interests such as of these groups in crucial discussions, in order to help create a consensus on important issues. Future educational reforms cannot be hindered again by these groups' indifference.
(vi) Given the existence of a variety of rich experiences in the ongoing processes of reform in many countries, it is very important to maintain a system of study and research so as to compare different problems, solutions, and their outcome. To achieve these goals, it is important to distribute information regarding reforms, foster data exchange, organize seminars, conferences and other forms of dissemination. In this area, multilateral organizations, think-tanks, and other groups have an enormous field of productive action.
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