

Does Parental Participation in Schools Empower or Strain Civil Society? The Case of Community-managed Schools in Central America

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Abstract

Among the various educational models in Latin America that seek to increase parental participation in schooling, perhaps the most far-reaching is the experiment with self-managed schools. These are publicly funded schools administered by parents. Broad public powers, such as the capacity to decide the budget and make staffing decisions, are given to parents, many of whom have had very limited prior administrative experience. How does this policy innovation impact on civil society? Does parental participation in school administration empower participating citizens or strain civil society? There are various ways of answering these questions. This article looks at some possible ways to conceptualize and assess the relationship between parental participation in self-managed schools and civil society. The article draws from the experience of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, where these reforms have advanced significantly since the 1990s.

Keywords

Education; Community-managed schools; Civil society; Central America

Introduction

The field of education policy reform, like the field of development in general, has undergone an intellectual shift in the past two decades. Scholars and practitioners no longer think of education provision exclusively in statist terms. Twenty years ago, analysts typically thought of education policy dichotomously, drawing distinct lines between public and private schooling and usually preferring the former as the most appropriate means for expanding coverage. Today, this type of dichotomous/preferential thinking is increasingly out of favour. Instead, scholars and practitioners talk about

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state–society mixes. Traditional statist models of education are being asked to integrate more community participation and input from users, and traditional private models are being asked to make room for greater state involvement, at least in the form of more supervision (see World Bank 2004; Wolff 2002).

One of the most innovative examples of ‘mixed’ education policy reforms are ‘community-managed schools’ (CMSs).¹ CMSs are public schools administered by local parents, rather than by state-appointed officials. In Latin America, they have emerged saliently in various Central American nations (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua) and in parts of Brazil, Ecuador and Colombia in the 1990s. CMSs have become one of the most innovative experiments in public education worldwide.

CMSs are predicated on the idea that by empowering and engaging civil society (in this case, communities of parents) in public policy delivery (in this case, education management), the quantity and quality of public policy improve. The purpose of this article is to review the existing literature on CMSs in Central America to gauge whether this type of experiment has indeed met, or has the capacity to meet, the dual goals of empowering civil society and improving public policy.

Community-managed Schools in Central America

Many Latin American nations decentralized their education systems in the 1990s. Most of these reforms involved transferring responsibilities from national ministries to lower-tier government units such as provinces (e.g. Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and to some extent, Venezuela) or municipalities (Chile, states in Brazil) (see PREAL 2005; Gajardo 1999). The idea was that by transferring responsibilities to more local units, spending could become more efficient (under the theory, typical among decentralization advocates of the early 1990s, that local actors know best how to invest and how to watch those investments).

CMSs in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua represented a more far-reaching form of decentralization. Responsibilities were transferred from national governments to schools themselves (Winkler and Gershberg 2000), and within schools, to specially created school councils composed of local parents.

CMSs differ from traditional private schooling in that the state provides the entire operating budget for the school (therefore, there is no tuition fee), and differ from traditional public schooling in that school administration is transferred entirely to local organizations typically composed of parents. In Nicaragua, they also include some teachers and civilian administrators.² These organizations are authorized to spend on infrastructure and, more significant, to hire and fire teachers, as they see fit (see table 1). In traditional public systems, these responsibilities are exclusively reserved for state actors. The most important prerogatives are the hiring and firing of teachers, managing budgets, and maintaining the infrastructure. The Nicaraguan reform went further than the other three reforms in terms of assigned tasks. Councils in Nicaragua obtained the power to establish incentives for teaching staff, collect registration fees,³ design the curriculum, select textbooks, and allocate

Table 1

Alternative models of state–society provision of education: Latin American cases
in the 1990s

	Public traditional	Subsidized (Chilean model)	CMSs (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras)	CMSs (Nicaragua)	Private traditional
Funding	Public (not always central government)	Public (central government)	Public	Public (with capacity to raise private funding)	Mostly private (school fees)
Ownership of establishment	State	Private	Public (in concession to an NGO)	Public	Private
Spending autonomy (infrastructure maintenance)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Personnel autonomy (hire and fire teachers)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pedagogy autonomy (modify curriculum and select textbooks)	No	Some	No	Yes	Yes

Source: Based on DiGropello (2004).

budgets. Another difference is the target zones. The Nicaraguan reforms targeted urban areas, whereas reforms in the other cases targeted rural areas, and in Honduras especially, very remote zones, and in Guatemala, mostly indigenous communities.

Of all forms of parental participation (see Martiniello 2000; Winkler 1997), CMSs constitute the most far-reaching because they confer on parents the greatest degree of decision-making powers in school administration. However, despite this heavy societal presence, the creation of CMSs is also a decidedly state-heavy initiative. The idea emerged at the level of states, in consultation with, or following exhortations by, external actors such as the World Bank, USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, Harvard University and the KfW (Moncada *et al.* 2005; Chambers-Ju 2004). It made use of significant state resources.

The creation of CMSs typically followed this path. State officials would visit localities, meet with local parents, and encourage them to form their own NGOs. Once formed, the NGOs would begin to receive administrative training provided by state officials or in some cases private or external programmes. After completion of training, the state began to transfer public funds to these NGOs so that they could begin to provide educational services.

Some of these schools were launched in existing private spaces (private households, local churches); in other cases, the NGOs themselves built new school facilities. In short, these organizations were voluntary, although not spontaneous. At every step of the process, heavy-handed state intervention was necessary.

Existing Research: Ignoring the State–Civil Society Linkage

Most studies on CMSs have focused on the impact of parental participation on school-based domains. For instance, studies have looked at the impact of participation on pedagogy (e.g. student performance), on the demand for schooling (e.g. student attendance and retention), on school administration (e.g. efficient management of school processes and resources, teacher attendance and morale), and school facilities (e.g. better-maintained infrastructure, meal services). (See, for example, PREAL 2005: 16; Meza *et al.* 2004; Rápalo and Marshall 2004; CERCA 2004; Kremmer *et al.* 2004; Espínola 2001; Winkler and Gershberg 2000; Paes de Barro and Silva Pinto 1997; Fuller and Rivarola 1998; King and Ozler 1998; Jiménez and Swada 1998; Winkler 1997.) The findings are generally positive: student retention, teacher attendance, and academic achievement seem to improve, or at least do not worsen, in comparison to traditional schools (see López 2005; DiGropello 2004; Espínola 2001).

Far less research has explored a different yet equally crucial question: the reform's impact outside of schools, or more specifically, on council members and their interaction outside of schools. Elacqua and Fábrega (2004) have looked at schools' impact on parents, but they focus on a *sui generis* form of participation (the Chilean voucher system, which has few replicas elsewhere in Latin America) and on one specific domain of parental activity (the use of information by parents in their decision to send children to school).

Regarding CMSs, the crucial question that remains is: does participation in schools change the proclivity of parents to be more civic-minded outside of schools? This is an important question for at least two major reasons. First, if school performance is contingent on the rise of accountability, as principal-agent theories suggest (see Savedoff 1998), it is important to find out whether participation makes parents more willing to exercise accountability (monitor performance, identify problems, propose solutions, sanction underperformers).

Second, studying these reforms further can also help clarify an important debate in the social sciences: can civil society emerge through deliberate public policy (see Mettler and Soss 2004)? Specifically, can states (or international organizations) be progenitors of effective organizations of civil society? Given that CMSs are a state creation (with assistance from international donors), if we were to find that these schools indeed stimulated parental civiness, then we would be providing evidence on behalf of the argument that public policy can enhance civil society.

This finding would challenge a tendency within political science to be sceptical of state efforts to create and foster civil society organizations. A conventional argument is that the more autonomous the organizations of civil society, the greater their capacity to carry out civic functions. Putnam's

(1993) famous study of civil society in Italy concludes that the most democracy-enhancing organizations of civil society were those that remained autonomous of state interference – in fact, they emerged prior to the rise of the state. Oxhorn's (1995) study of civic organizations in shanty towns in Chile suggests that these truly thrive in the context of opposition to the state and under adverse economic conditions. When the state turned selectively repressive and economic conditions deteriorated, the need for self-help increased, creating the necessary fuel for popular-sector activism. A study on poverty by the World Bank goes so far as to define civil society as 'those groups, networks, and relationships that *are not* organized by the state' (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 129; emphasis added).

The tendency to expect civil society to be autonomous of the state is not preposterous. If society is to exercise accountability of state officials, and thus compel the state to provide public services and better governance, it must somehow remain independent of clientelistic ties with the state (Schedler 1999: 340–1). Too much state interference with civil society, especially if accompanied by heavy conditionality, can produce what James Scott calls the 'domestication' of society (1998: 184). In an era in which both the right and the left have marshalled compelling evidence about the pernicious effects of state interventions, it is reasonable to be sceptical of the state's capacity to generate civil society.

Yet, the expectation that civil society organizations emerge and thrive independently of the state seems unrealistic, especially in resource-scarce localities. We know from the literature on social movements that the capacity to mobilize resources is a fundamental ingredient for the rise of civil society (McAdam *et al.* 2001). For Watts (2000), for example, the four major pillars that form the core of development – assets, citizenship, local group membership, and universal human rights – are unimaginable in the absence of state entitlements. Looking at the relationship between states and social movements, Foweraker and Landman (1997) also find evidence of a mutually reinforcing relationship. Social movements cause states to create human rights (i.e. civil society can promote certain state outputs), but simultaneously, the prior existence of some human rights is also necessary for the rise of social movements (i.e. some state output is necessary for organizations of civil society to function). Furthermore, Keck and Nera Abers (2006) argue that 'state weakness' (defined as the inability to implement decisions, or what they call 'throughput') can have a debilitating effect on the prospect of social or grassroots control of the state; successful policy implementation requires coordination between activists both within and outside the state. Localities that are rich in resources, such as urban centres containing middle-class neighbourhoods and diversified economic activities, may be able to mobilize resources independent of the state. But localities that are rural and marginalized are not so lucky. Expecting organizations in these localities to generate the necessary resources to create organizations, without the help of states, seems utopian. In short, the relationship between state and civil society can be either generative (they reinforce each other's well-being) or degenerative (fewer state resources can impair civil society, especially in resource-scarce communities; see also IDB 2005: ch. 10).

This literature thus points to a complicated development dilemma. Organizations of civil society in resource-scarce localities, where development is more desperately needed, require state assistance and funding, and yet, such state assistance may compromise the capacity of these organizations to conduct tasks associated with effective civicness. Do CMSs constitute an example of a policy innovation that solves this dilemma?

At present, it is impossible to answer this question conclusively because research thus far has been insufficient. Yet some preliminary answers have been provided. The rest of this essay looks at how different researchers have attempted to address this question and reviews some of the preliminary answers available thus far.

Four Tests of Civil Society Empowerment

To assess the extent to which CMSs constitute a fruitful form of state-aided rather than state-suffocated form of civil society empowerment, we must first develop ways to measure degrees of civil society empowerment. I propose four tests that CMSs must pass in order to conclude that civil society empowerment is taking place:

1. *the disruption test* (in creating the CMS, was the state motivated to promote civil society, as opposed to being motivated by a desire to undermine other groups in civil society?);
2. *the inclusion test* (did reformers include a broad range of viewpoints in the design and implementation of reforms?);
3. *the accountability/bargaining leverage test* (did these organizations manage to develop their own interests independent of the state and take action to defend these interests, make claims on the state, even challenge state officials and successfully reverse adverse state policies?); and
4. *the transformative/spillover test* (did the experience of participating transform the participants into more actively involved citizens, eager to participate in activities of civic life other than just education provision?).

To conclude confidently that these reforms are empowering state society would require answering positively as many of these tests as possible. This list of tests is not meant to be comprehensive, but simply a suggestion of tests that in my opinion must be added to anyone's own list of tests. At the moment, the evidence of empowerment based on these four tests is promising in some cases, as the following sections reveal, but in other cases, the evidence is inconclusive, non-existent, and occasionally negative.

Disruption test

An important test of whether states can foster civil society has to do with what I would call the degree of societal debris. If a new policy initiative causes extensive disruption within existing organizations of civil society (societal debris), then it is fair to question the idea that states are being conducive to civil society. Testing the degree of societal debris is difficult, however,

because all reforms create disruptions in civil society: change always harms some of the beneficiaries of the status quo. Teachers' unions are arguably the biggest cost-bearers of education reform in general (IDB 2005; Kaufman and Nelson 2004; Grindle 2004; Corrales 1999; Murillo 1999) and CMSs in particular (see Gershberg 2004; Hanson 1997).⁴ By empowering schools to hire and fire teachers, the reforms threaten teacher job protection, undermine the collective bargaining capacity of unions, and change the relationship of teachers with their community (the cordial parent-teacher relationship becomes a possibly adversarial employer-employee relationship).⁵ Because of these costs, it is unrealistic to expect unions to become supportive of these reforms, regardless of the level of compensation received, and in that regard, all four reforms started out with some societal disruption.

Before discussing the issue of disruption, it is necessary to clarify the motivations that influenced policy-makers to create these reforms. There were at least three push factors common to all four cases, and one political factor central to only two cases. The push factors common to all cases were:

1. *Appeal to both neo-liberals and social democrats.* The idea of decentralization in general appealed simultaneously to the two largest ideological groups gaining salience in Central America in the early 1990s: neo-liberals and social democrats. Decentralization appealed to neo-liberals because it offered the central state the opportunity to generate efficiency in social service delivery, and maybe even some fiscal savings. Decentralization appealed to moderate leftists because it promised the chance to advance notions of participatory democracy. Because the reforms united these two groups, they became more palatable.
2. *Urgent development needs, especially in education.* In the early 1990s, these four countries lagged significantly behind in almost every education-related factor: coverage, quality and completion rates (PREAL, 2003). The notion of being behind the region created a sense of urgency among officials to make a huge push in favour of education, at least in terms of coverage.
3. *Large bargaining leverage by external actors.* Central American nations grouped all the right conditions that in general tend to grant bargaining leverage to international institutions: serious financial need, significant poverty rates, small country/economy size, and peace processes under way. These conditions are the perfect environment to attract the attention of multilaterals and to make governments more susceptible to the ideas pushed by multilaterals, all of which were eager to decentralize social service provision and help countries implement education reforms.

However, with respect to the political intentions of state officials, there is variation across Central America on:

1. how intent states were in disrupting these unions; and
2. how states dealt with the aftershocks.

In Nicaragua and El Salvador, most evidence suggests that a key objective of the reformers in the early 1990s was to weaken the stranglehold of existing

unions, strongly affiliated with opposition parties (the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador). In Nicaragua, the government hardly negotiated with the leading teachers' union, ANDEN (affiliated with the Sandinistas) (see Kubal 2003; Gershberg 1999, 2004). Furthermore, the government sought to weaken ANDEN by creating new teachers' unions, CNMN and CONFENITEC, to compete with ANDEN (see Grindle 2004).⁶ These unions remained powerful allies of the government and undercut the monopoly held by ANDEN. In El Salvador, the government sought a similar strategy, founding an alternative teachers' union, SIMES (see Candrai 2001, in Chambers-Ju 2004).

However, unlike in Nicaragua, this alternative union failed to draw significant membership from ANDES. This might explain why the Salvadorean state took a less hardline approach towards the unions during the implementation phase and why in the end the government decided not to expand EDUCO beyond rural areas.⁷ The government created a series of National Dialogues, in which unions were invited to participate. There is no question that the government dominated these negotiations. It did so by producing high-quality, technical reports on the need for, and benefits of, EDUCO, which made its position more unassailable. But at least, existing unions were given a chance to participate in discussions. Some teachers' unions pursued obstructionist policies (a series of strikes). But given that the government was presenting an image of openness to dialogue with unions, this tendency towards obstructionism did not win the unions any public approval.

In Guatemala and Honduras, the state did not seek to disrupt existing unions or to create new unions to compete with teachers' unions. The most important evidence of this is the government's decision to compartmentalize the reforms. The state in Nicaragua and El Salvador created the reforms with an eye towards universalizing them throughout the entire education system, which threatened the existing unions. However, in Guatemala and Honduras the state decided from the very beginning to introduce the reforms mostly in areas where there was no education service, and thus, little chance of affecting teachers' unions. No major changes were introduced in the existing public school system. In Honduras, an earlier plan to carry out a more profound decentralization reform of the entire education system (the so-called 'Education Modernization Program', 1990–3) was jettisoned, in part because it generated enormous societal protests (Moncada *et al.* 2005). The chosen reforms created schools that would act instead in parallel to the public system, covering the areas that the existing system was not covering, and thus proving to be more palatable. Furthermore, the minister in charge of the reforms in Honduras was a leading member of the unions.

In short, in terms of degree of disruption of civil society, the Nicaraguan and Salvadorean reforms were the most deliberately disruptive. However, in terms of how these two states dealt with this societal debris, the Salvadorean state was perhaps less hardline, creating opportunities for unions to participate in national dialogues.

One final factor to consider under the disruption test entails *concessions* and *compact compliance*. Concessions refer to any type of political or material assets (e.g. allowing certain schools to remain in the old system, offering teachers

higher salaries, improving material conditions of teachers in both traditional schools and CMSs) offered to reform losers. Compact compliance refers to whether governments adhere to any agreements, especially regarding teacher salaries. The importance of these factors has to do with the political logic of 'bundling'. Kaufman and Nelson (2004) argue that it makes sense to bundle equity-oriented policies with efficiency-oriented reforms, simply because equity-based initiatives tend to be more popular and consensual. Following this logic, one could argue that decentralization reforms, which by definition create 'uncertainties for teachers' and thus opposition, will be more palatable to teachers if they also include some 'uncertainty-abatement' mechanism. Compensations and compacts can be used as uncertainty-abating mechanisms. It remains to be studied how adequately the state has offered concessions and complied with compacts during the implementation stage.

Inclusion test

Since the rise of modern democratic thought in the eighteenth century, theorists have recognized that even in democracies perfect inclusion is unfeasible and, sometimes, inadvisable. Some actors cannot be included in the decision-making process because of irreconcilable disagreements with the goals and content of reforms. Nevertheless, reform leaders ought to try to maximize inclusion in the decision-making process, for at least one practical reason: included actors are more likely to develop 'stake ownership', whereas excluded actors are likely to feel resentful towards the reforms and the reformers, and thus sabotage the policy. In Chile in the 1990s, one of Latin America's most far-reaching education decentralizers, the government, held three major 'national dialogues' on education reform (in 1994, 1997 and 2000), paving the way for smooth implementation (Picazo Verdejo 2003).

Consequently, a crucial variable to examine when testing the degree of civil society empowerment is how rich, genuine and frequent were the consultations between the state and different parts of society, both before and during the implementation of the reform. El Salvador was probably the most inclusionary case of the four. There were national dialogues at the start of the reform (which included members of the ruling party, presidential candidates, civic leaders, church officials, and representatives from opposition parties) and repeated consultations during the implementation period (see Meza *et al.* 2004; Reimers and McGinn 1997). Even the teachers' unions participated. A report based on interviews with leaders of El Salvador's three major teachers' unions (ANDES, UGES, Bases Magisteriales) claims that most interviewees felt included in the decision-making process (PREAL document on El Salvador). This might explain why El Salvador had more cooperative state–union relations than the other cases during implementation.⁸

Honduras may have come second in terms of inclusion/consultation. In 1994, the government created the Foro Nacional de Convergencia (FONAC), an organization charged with promoting national dialogue on behalf of education reform. In 1999–2000, more than 16,000 individuals and 300 organizations participated in a series of consultations, lasting 14 months, that

generated a consensus document on behalf of education reforms.⁹ Nevertheless, the typical opinion of most affected actors in Guatemala and Honduras is that reforms were imposed from above. More comparative research is needed on the degree of inclusion and the extent to which included actors made concessions.

Inclusion is also important at the level of composition of the school councils and the distribution of responsibilities among council members. Technically, council membership is open to all parents and members of the community, which is decidedly a highly inclusionary feature. However, it is important to examine the formal and informal rules of entry, the distribution of responsibilities, and rotation mechanisms among members. The key question to ask is whether the existing councils reflect existing power structures in society (i.e. do they give more power to actors who already have the most power in each community), or do they instead distribute powers and responsibility to non-dominant groups such as women. No major study has been done on the composition of councils, and thus, it is difficult to judge whether CMSs pass this test of inclusion.

Accountability/bargaining leverage test

Another crucial test of empowerment is whether the civic group in question is capable of defending its interests in the face of adverse state-related variables. In Seligman's (1992) terms, the question is whether the councils can act as a 'countervailing force' against state excesses or failings. As Goetz and Gaventa (2001) argue, state endorsement of a particular reform affects the response of society. Research in Guatemala has shown that local actors (mayors) are more likely to pay attention to social services (environment protection) if the national state provides the necessary resources (Gibson and Lehouc 2003).

Because CMSs are enormously dependent on state resources, their performance is strongly affected by the competence of state officials and the adequacy of state resources (see PREAL 2005). Many anthropologists warn that very often states want to promote 'citizen participation' in the service of neo-liberalism. This refers to situations in which the state – unwilling to provide necessary services and resources for citizens – asks citizens themselves to assume the burden of their own self-care (see Paley 2001, 2002). In the case of CMSs, this form of citizens' 'empowerment' at the expense of state services could easily occur if the state agencies in charge cease to fulfil their part of the bargain, that is, provide sufficient resources on time, provide adequate training, facilitate the work of the councils, etc. CMS arrangements, like all social policies, work best if both the participating citizens *and* the state are engaged and committed, rather than if only one of the parties is.

CMSs are susceptible to two major types of state-derived challenges. The first is the rise of an uncommitted administration. Competitive democracies, by definition, experience changes in administration on a routine basis. These changes can create problems for empowerment on two counts: foundationalism and contrarianism. Foundationalism refers to any new administration's urge to introduce its own programmes. New administrations may have little

incentive to retain old policies. After all, new administrations enter office convinced that they were elected to deliver change. Contrarianism refers to the desire of new administrations to separate themselves fully from their predecessor, and thus dismantle (not just neglect) old policies. In ideologically polarized party systems, a change of administration can produce an even more acute form of contrarianism. Government disengagement can also occur as a result of declining financial support from the donor community. These programmes came into existence as a result of significant financial backing from donors. From the very beginning, both donors and governments knew that donor assistance would dwindle over time; donors hoped that after providing the start-up capital, states would over time take charge of the programmes. However, it is not clear that state interest in the programme has increased over time. Quite the contrary: state commitment seems to erode as donor support dwindles. The existing programmes may not necessarily disappear (their survival will depend on the bargaining leverage of the existing schools to defend their programmes), but it also means that interest in expanding these projects, or even investing resources in them, will suffer.

The second state challenge is bureaucratic dysfunctionality, defined as the failure of state officials to meet their administrative obligations (e.g. provide the necessary resources in a timely manner, carry out training of council members, respond adequately to requests for technical assistance). Often, bureaucratic dysfunctionality occurs because of ministerial neglect (the minister in charge devotes no attention to the coordinating units in charge of working with CMSs) or simply overburdening (e.g. new administrations may add new responsibilities to existing agencies, without relieving them of previous duties). In all four cases, regional/municipal units were created to promote CMSs, provide training to the newly formed school councils, and oversee abuses in the system. How well these units function affects council performance. If these units are overburdened, they may fail to provide the necessary technical support that the school councils need to carry out their activities. If they are underfunded, they will leave councils strapped for cash. Preliminary interviews with school councils reveal that they are receiving insufficient money, significantly limiting the functions of the council (Rápalo and Marshall 2004).

Under adverse state-related conditions, two empowerment outcomes are possible. One is for empowerment to decline automatically. Witnessing an uncommitted and possibly hostile state, school councils or local parents may simply lose interest in carrying out their assigned functions. If the government is not committed, why should they be? An alternative reaction is for a sudden surge of empowerment. Affected actors may respond by trying to mobilize on behalf of the reforms – hoping to push the government to turn more supportive.

Both factors – hostile and dysfunctional administrations – are thus the main state-based menaces to CMSs. In Central America, political support from the highest levels of the state was strong at the beginning. The question is whether this initial support endured, and more important, whether state support included not only permission to operate, but also availability of resources.

There have been very few studies on how these councils have responded to adverse state conditions. Theoretically, it seems that in bargaining with a hostile or dysfunctional state, these councils are at a clear political disadvantage. Most of these communities are so poor, remote and young that it seems inconceivable they could win any major battles against a hostile, uncooperative or unresponsive state.

Nevertheless, my own research on the Guatemalan case reveals that these communities are not entirely helpless. In Guatemala, a few years after their launch, CMSs faced the first type of state challenge: the inauguration of a hostile administration in 2000. However, PRONADE survived the 'shock'. Part of the explanation for PRONADE's survival suggests the existence of civic empowerment.

Unlike El Salvador and Nicaragua, Guatemala experienced a significant change in the ruling party at an early stage of the reform. In 2000, less than four years after the launch of the programme, President Alfonso A. Portillo took office. There were many signs that the Portillo administration was hostile to PRONADE. Portillo spoke against it on a number of occasions.¹⁰ He tried to insert his own appointees into key PRONADE positions, which many CMS advocates interpreted as an attempt to weaken the programme.

Although Portillo had a leftist, pro-guerrilla background, his party, the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), campaigned on an anti-reform populist-conservative platform that mobilized a right-wing constituency (Arana 2001). The FRG's main leader was Efraín Ríos Montt, a general who had governed in the early 1980s, considered by many to have been instrumental in escalating Guatemala's civil war. Because the constitution barred Ríos Montt from serving as president, a deal was made in 1995 between him and Portillo – Portillo would run for president and Ríos Montt would become head of congress (see interview with President of the Republic of Guatemala, Alfonso Portillo, 10 June 2003 [www.observatorioelectoral.org]).

The administration thus came to office with several ideologies dear to both the old left (represented by Portillo) and the old right (represented by Ríos Montt) that were adverse to PRONADE. These were a certain desire to recentralize power under the state (foundationalism), an effort to undermine the programmes of the previous administration (contrarianism), and an effort to colonize many bureaucratic offices (see Borrell 2000), which probably increased turnover rates and affected the performance of state agencies in charge of supervising PRONADE and training councils.

There is evidence that the Portillo administration initially did not consider PRONADE a national priority. The number of communities joining PRONADE actually declined during the first three years of the Portillo administration, 2000–2002 (see table 2). Spending on education in general, after increasing in 1996–2000, stabilized under Portillo (see table 3).¹¹ The budget approved for PRONADE in 2000 and 2001 was 46 per cent and 61 per cent lower than initially requested, and Educational Service Institutions (ISEs) lost the right to train teachers (Lavarreda 2002). ISEs are NGOs hired by the implementation unit to assist civil actors to become organized and skilled in managing schools. After peaking at 25 in 1998, ISEs declined

Table 2

The evolution of CMSs in Central America

	El Salvador		Nicaragua		Guatemala		Honduras	
	Comm.	Students	Schools	Students	Comm.	Students	Comm.	Students
1991	236	8,416						
1992	845	32,288						
1993	871	41,952	20					
1994	1,334	74,112	915	300,771				
1995	1,341	113,728	910	303,598	45			
1996	1,700	168,928	968	298,372	477	55,000		
1997	1,759	193,984	1,074	327,906	900	103,000		
1998			1,334	367,212	2,117	153,000		
1999			4,135	639,047	2,815	205,000	500	22,350
2000			4,165	653,346	3,437	258,000		29,070
2001					3,423	310,248		
2002					3,410	321,248		
2003	2,047	362,880			4,162	386,038	1,843	69,000

Sources: KfW-Pronade Office in Guatemala; Government of El Salvador (1997); Rivas (2001) for Nicaragua (including pre-school, primary and secondary) Meza *et al.* (2004).

Table 3

Guatemala: education spending (quetzals)

	Public spending	Education spending	Education spending as a percentage of GDP
1996	10,138.1	1,508.7	1.6
1997	11,546.0	1,908.7	1.8
1998	13,557.0	2,617.2	2.1
1999	15,702.0	3,285.3	2.4
2000	16,516.0	3,629.2	2.4
2001	16,988.0	4,445.2	2.7
2002	16,936.0	4,598.4	2.5

Source: Fuentes Aragón (2003).

to 16 by 2000 (Ministry of Education 2003; CIEN 2002). All this evidence points to an administration that was far less committed to PRONADE than its predecessor.

Despite this unfavourable context, PRONADE survived the Portillo years and by 2003 had begun to grow again. Part of the explanation for its survival was school council and community empowerment: despite the lack of support from the state, communities continued to run their schools autonomously

and carry out the functions the reform had assigned to them. Furthermore, they mobilized support for the reform: in September 2001, a large group of parents, teachers and principals linked to PRONADE schools from Suchitepéquez, Sololá, Totonicapán and Retalhuleu threatened to go on strike. They were protesting against irregularities in payment disbursements.¹² This was a crucial strike, coinciding with the peak of the government's hostility towards PRONADE.

Furthermore, during the lean Portillo years, when the number of PRONADE schools was shrinking, the number of students enrolling in PRONADE actually increased (table 2). This continued expansion of enrolment is evidence of councils' capacity to carry out their duties. It shows that the councils were registering students and offering services. It also shows that parental demand for PRONADE's services remained high. By 2003, the Portillo administration seemed to change its mind, becoming more supportive of the reform.

In short, the PRONADE case shows that councils can become sufficiently empowered to run their schools despite a hostile administration, thereby saving the project from possible extinction (see Crosby 2003). The degree of existing empowerment was probably not the only reason why Portillo softened his opposition to PRONADE. Yet, it is clear that the programme had become sufficiently popular, autonomous and large to resist the president's attack.

Nevertheless, the point remains that CMSs remain susceptible to adverse state-related variables. A true assessment of the degree of empowerment of parents requires a closer look at how they respond to these and future challenges. The Guatemalan case suggests that if the challenge is temporary, these communities are already empowered enough to survive. But if the challenge is stronger and more long-lasting, the outcome is less certain.

Transformative/spill-over test

The final test of empowerment in my list is perhaps the least researched: the extent to which CMSs transform the civicness of participating parents – make them more engaged citizens. Asking this question is ultimately a test of the democratic effects of participation. For Diamond, a crucial test of the civicness of participation is whether participation by one individual in one group leads to participation in another group, rather than merely insularity (1999: 232–3). As Fioramonti argues, the idea that civil society leads to democratization practices and democratic participation in the public sphere should 'be treated as an empirical variable rather than as a theoretical assumption' (2005: 82). It is important to ask, therefore, what the democratic side effects are of participation in school councils.

In all Central American cases, except perhaps Nicaragua, CMSs emerged in poor, rural or remote communities, where it is safe to assume that levels of human and social capital were low. It is conceivable, therefore, that many councils have incorporated previously disengaged peasant parents. The result is the emergence of a group of simple folk suddenly carrying out complex, deliberation-intensive tasks: preparing budgets, hiring and firing

people, issuing diagnostics, exchanging correspondence with state officials, etc. Parents collectively are not taking over the functions of directors. Parents themselves do not supervise teachers, discipline students and implement policy on a day-to-day basis – this would be too much of a burden on their time and skills – but they do provide consultancy, deliberation, and even supervision of school directors. Does this type of activity have any type of democratic spill-over effects? Specifically, does this experience make parents more likely to become involved in other community-related activities? Does it make them more likely to respect their peers, other school actors, or politicians? Does participation increase the capacity and motivation of parents to hold school entities, and even state actors, more accountable?

William Nylen (2002) examined similar questions in the context of ‘participatory budgets’ in two Brazilian cities (Belo Horizonte and Betim), and his conclusions are discouraging. Participatory budgets were initiatives launched by local elected officials from the Workers’ Party to encourage citizens to attend neighbourhood meetings to discuss and vote on budgetary priorities in public works and social services. Nylen wanted to know, among other questions, whether the experience of participating in these meetings actually empowered participants, i.e. whether the experiment made the ‘disengaged’ become more ‘engaged’ in community life. He discovered that, regrettably, they did not. The meetings attracted mostly the already engaged (citizens who were active in civic affairs prior to joining), and thus it is impossible to speak of widespread empowerment of new actors.

However, there is reason to doubt that CMSs will replicate this outcome of engaging only the already engaged because the motives driving people to participate in CMSs are different. In the participatory budget experience, participation is voluntary, and thus highly conditioned by intensity of preference *vis-à-vis* a particular public policy issue. The model thus attracts the same type of citizen that is already attracted to active public life, and hence, Nylen’s sobering finding that only the already engaged became engaged.

The councils in Central America’s CMSs, on the other hand, are not composed exclusively of activists, but of parents. Many of them might have been leaders in a community, but not necessarily all of them. Most parents may feel encouraged to participate, not necessarily because they already have a public interest in mind, but because they have a private interest to protect – ensuring their own children’s education. If so, CMSs are the perfect arena to test the spill-over hypothesis because much of the participation there is privately-minded rather than publicly-minded, at least initially.

Nevertheless, no studies have looked at the spill-over question. Perhaps the closest study has been CERCA (2004), a USAID-funded study of parent participation in 13 public schools selected from four Central American nations and the Dominican Republic. The authors examined the reasons why parents volunteer their time in mostly traditional public schools. Their findings suggest that indeed the participating population is subject to lesser biases in the direction of greater degrees of engagedness than in the Nylen study. First, participation is more extensive than originally expected: even in very poor communities, parents are willing to participate in school activities.

Second, the most important reason cited for participating was interest in the success of their children (a private interest) and, to a secondary degree, an appreciation of the benefits of education in the future success of learners. A less frequently cited motivation was interest in the community. It seems, therefore, that citizens who participate in schools do so because of their interest as parents, not necessarily because of their interest as activists.

There is reason to believe, therefore, that parental participation in school councils is likely to be less exclusively biased in the direction of the already engaged than in Nylen's study. This makes CMSs perfectly suitable for studying the impact of participation in combating levels of disengagedness and thus testing the democratization hypothesis. However, this type of research has yet to be undertaken.

Conclusion: What We Know, Suspect and Don't Know about the Effects of Participation on Participating Parents

At present, both enthusiasts and sceptics of the notion of civil society are posing a similar question: does participation in civil groups actually foster democracy as much or as infallibly as some theories suggest? This article has argued that the rise of CMSs in Central America provides a fruitful opportunity to address this question. Many scholars have attempted to address it, but not one single study has provided a definitive answer, in part because no single study looks at this question from all possible angles. The article suggests that answering it requires looking at it from at least four possible angles, or tests of civil society empowerment. Based on the research of others and my own, the following can be concluded.

First, the Nicaraguan and the Salvadorean reforms were the most disruptive of civil society. Of the two, the Salvadorean reform, through a policy of widespread dialogue, seems to have done more to 'clean up' the societal debris caused by the reform. Second, all four cases show that despite low levels of pre-existing human capital and institutional facilities, participating citizens, in most cases very simple folk, have been able to carry out their duties, in most cases quite complex ones. The fact that in all four cases the number of CMSs and enrolments increased as rapidly as they did suggests that the councils are carrying out their functions. This is more than one would have expected based on the low levels of education and local assets of participants, especially in Honduras and Guatemala. Third, the survival of the Guatemalan experiment, despite significant evidence of adverse external conditions (a hostile administration), suggests that council empowerment extends beyond the mere capacity to carry out assigned tasks: it also means that councils are capable of fighting for their interests, including mobilizing other citizens and even forcing the state to change its stands.

All of the above points in the direction of different forms of empowerment, but there is much that remains unknown, and even negative. In terms of inclusion, it is unclear whether councils are providing opportunities for non-dominant citizens to have positions of influence. In terms of bargaining with the state, it is unclear how resilient the councils will be in the event of more serious state-based challenges, such as discontinued funding. And in

terms of promoting civic-mindedness, we know virtually nothing because conclusive research remains to be done. However, it is fair to conclude that the councils offer the right conditions for testing this question of empowerment because their composition does not seem to be heavily biased in the direction of a population that is ineligible for this kind of test. Rather than the already engaged, the councils attract mostly privately-minded citizens, who participate because they are interested not so much in their community as in the advancement of their children. This is the perfect population for testing whether participation at a small scale can have transformative effects at a larger scale.

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Notes

1. Also known as self-managed schools, school-based management or autonomous schools.
2. In contrast, self-managed schools in Colombia have less parental participation: the management of schools is given to pre-existing educational institutes (the *concesionarios*) that may not incorporate parents (Peña 2004; Villa and Duarte 2002).
3. School fees were eliminated or reduced considerably starting in 1996 due to parental discontent. As of 1999, some 42.8 per cent of schools did not collect any fees. Among schools that still collect fees, these represented 5 per cent or less of the total school budget in the majority of cases (Gershberg 2004).
4. For a discussion of the potential winners and losers of education decentralization, see Manor (1999).
5. In El Salvador, EDUCO teachers are rehired every year, and ANDES membership has been blocked from expanding.
6. For a discussion of how states can use the strategy of creating rival groups as a way of weakening existing groups (in the context of economic stabilization policies), see Treisman (2004).
7. While EDUCO did not expand, El Salvador created *Comités Directivos Escolares* in many urban public schools. These committees had less power than EDUCO's councils, but they still represented yet another form of decentralization.
8. The direction of causality between inclusion and cooperation is unclear. Were unions consulted because they were cooperative, or did unions turn cooperative because they were consulted? Considering that the tendency in Central America and throughout Latin America is for unions to be opposed to school-based reforms, I am more inclined to believe that the cooperative stand of Salvadorean unions was more of the result, and not the cause, of consultations.
9. The title of the document was 'Propuesta de la sociedad hondureña para la transformación de la educación nacional' (see PREAL 2004).
10. See: <http://www.inforpressca.com/inforpress/homes/h1399.htm>.

11. The Peace Agreements called for an increase of education spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP.
12. Carta Informativa Semanal, available at: <http://www.asics.org.gt/carta38-2001.htm>.

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