

Small States and Big Institutions: USAID and Education Policy Formation in El Salvador

D. Brent Edwards Jr.

University of Maryland, College Park

This article analyses the institutional power of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the process of education policy formation in El Salvador during 2003-2005. The results show how bi- and multi-lateral institutions are able to leverage financial and intellectual capital to guide the policymaking process and sway which policies are seen as acceptable and desirable. As is shown, one key to this influence is how USAID was able to manipulate the policymaking process by creating key events and producing key informational inputs that led to future events and subsequent opportunities to present and emphasize their research. Additionally, this research underscores how even exceptional leadership and political will at the national level can be insufficient to avoid the agendas that are at times advanced by international institutions. Finally, it is suggested that research on education in small states expand the notion of smallness to focus on institutional capacity, particularly within the context of the “global architecture of education.”

Introduction

The ways in which the power of international institutions manifests in processes of education policymaking is a particularly pressing issue for small states. That is to say, while this is an increasingly relevant issue for states of all sizes (Jones, 2007), it is an especially compelling matter for small states given the limitations of capacity and resources that often accompany their reduced size (Bray & Packer, 1993; Mayo, 2010; Randma-Liiv, 2002). The present article takes this problematic issue as its central focus, and in so doing hones in on the dynamics of policy formulation, with particular attention to the way in which international organizations influence these processes. As will be shown, this is an area that has received insufficient scholarly attention in the literature on small states. Generally, however, it should be noted that the influence which international institutions possess and exercise in the making of education policy around the world has garnered much attention (Dale, 1999; Edwards, 2013; Mundy, 1998; Mundy & Ghali, 2009; Samoff, 2007, 2009; Verger, 2012; Verger, Novelli & Altinyelken, 2012).

In what follows, the present article unpacks and analyzes a specific process of education policy formation in El Salvador. Specifically, this article takes as its object the formulation of Plan 2021, a national strategy document for education which was produced during 2003-2005 and which was intended at the time to guide educational policy decisions through the year 2021.^[1] This is done in order to demonstrate how international institutions can permeate and affect education policymaking processes such that their preferred policies remain on the agenda^[2] – even when faced with a Minister of Education who possesses a significant level of authority before both domestic agents and international organizations. Necessarily, I will shed light on the realities, constraints, and challenges that can beset national educational actors in small states in the formulation of education policy. By breaking down the process through which Plan 2021 was created, the article will go beyond simply showing that actors from the national and international levels are inter-twined in such processes to also show how certain international organizations can subtly and purposively exercise what Barnett and Duvall (2005) define as institutional power (discussed below).

To be clear, a particular definition of policymaking process is invoked in this article. This definition sees education policy formation processes as those (often) lengthy and contested processes in which national level political, governmental, and, specifically, ministry of education representatives engage – along with international actors – in order to formulate or authorize an official policy text which contains the position assumed by the state (i.e., governmental institutions) with regard to the reforms or alterations that should or will be made to the education system (Edwards, 2013). It is, thus, with attention to such phenomena that the issue of institutional power is explored in El Salvador (Barnett & Duvall, 2005).

The research in this article is based on two rounds of data collection. The first occurred between September 2009 and June 2010; the second occurred from August 2011 to May 2012. A total of 19 interviews were conducted with key international and national actors who participated in the process of policymaking; in addition, documents directly related to each aspect of the process of formulating Plan 2021 were also obtained and examined. Interviewees were asked about their involvement in and perspectives of each of the events in the process of policy formation, as well as their view of the overall process. Specific data analysis methods were adopted which facilitate the identification, distillation, and explication of influence (Edwards, 2012). That is to say, the qualitative data analysis strategies employed were selected because they serve to clarify, from a structural and organizational perspective, the dynamics of interaction and the attribution of causality in education policymaking processes that involve actors from multiple levels.

The remainder of the paper begins with a discussion of El Salvador's smallness, followed by a review of the relevant literature on education policymaking in small states. I then discuss the concept of institutional power, as defined by Barnett and Duvall (2005). Next, I present and discuss the results of the study, with an emphasis on the dynamics among key actors from government and bi- and multi-lateral institutions. The penultimate section addresses theoretical implications while the final section offers a few concluding remarks.

The Smallness of El Salvador

With regard to the focus of this issue of CICE, El Salvador's characteristics make it a good case to investigate the dynamics of education policymaking, as Table 1 (next page) indicates. In terms of population size, for example, El Salvador meets the traditional threshold of 10 million (Kuznets, 1960). Geographically, this country is the smallest in Central America. Population cut-offs are, of course, arbitrary to a certain extent, and have changed over the years (Hindmarsh, 1996). While Kuznets (1960) set the limit for smallness at a population of 10 million, others have set it at 5 million (Demas, 1965) and, more recently, 1.5 million (Commonwealth/World Bank, 2000). Moreover, the country is susceptible to natural disasters; is dependent on an export-led growth strategy, large trade partners, and remittances; and is, subsequently, easily affected by fluctuations in the global economy – all traits that tend to be common among small states (Atchoaréna, Da Graça & Marquez, 2008; Commonwealth/World Bank, 2000).

Of most interest for the present research, however, are not the positivist quantitative indicators that are often used to classify small states (Hindmarsh, 1996). Instead, given that this article examines the dynamics of policymaking, the central dimension is institutional capacity. Table 1 notes that the MOE in El Salvador could be said to have a moderate level of institutional capacity. Education specialists working in El Salvador have noted, for example, that the MOE has been able since the 1990s to establish its credibility and its reputation as a capable public institution by executing a number of legal, organizational, and technical reforms that improved the functioning of and access to the education system (Gillies, 2010). Yet, as will be shown, the MOE in El Salvador has

Table 1. El Salvador and Standard Dimensions of a Country's Smallness

No.	Dimension	Description
1	Population	6.2 million
2	Geographic area	8,000 square miles (equal to Massachusetts)
3	GDP	US\$ 21.2 billion
4	GDP / capita	US\$ 3,702
5	Remoteness and insularity	Geographic proximity to other countries; free trade agreements with Central American countries, Chile, Columbia, Dominican Republic, Mexico, United States
6	Susceptibility to natural disasters	Periodically affected by hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding, volcanic eruptions
7	Institutional capacity constraints	Capacity increasing over time, especially since the end of the civil war in 1992; MOE has moderate capacity to design and implement reform; as of 2005; MOE possessed credibility and reputation as a capable public institution
8	Limited economic diversification	Historically dependent on agriculture, more recently diversified into manufacturing and services. Currently, agriculture accounts for 11% of GDP, industry for 30%, and services for 59%
9	Country openness	Export-led growth strategy – dependent on a few large trade partners (e.g., the United States accounts for 48% of exports and 37% of imports); large outflow of emigrants (20.5% of the population lives outside the country); large inflow of remittances (received by 22% of families)
10	Income volatility and poverty	Susceptible to changes in the world economy due to export-oriented growth strategy; 38% of population below poverty line

Sources: Central Intelligence Agency (2012), Fajnzylber and López (2008), Gillies (2010), World Bank (2011, 2012a,b). Note: Dimensions drawn from Atchoaréna, Da Graça & Marquez (2008) and the Report of the Joint Task Force of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Bank (2000).

at times had difficulty in managing and controlling the policymaking processes, not least because of the huge influx of development aid and international organizations (but particularly USAID and the World Bank) following the end of the civil war in 1992 (Edwards, Martin & Victoria, forthcoming; Gillies, 2010). This aspect of “smallness” – one that is pertinent not only to the small state of El Salvador – is at the heart of the remainder of this article (Smawfield, 1993).

Literature on Education Policymaking in Small States

A few scholars and reports have commented on institutional capacity and education policymaking in small states. The Joint Task Force on Small States of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Bank (2000), for example, have identified insufficient institutional capacity as a key characteristic that distinguishes small states.^[3] Though discussion around institutional capacity tends to be restricted to the ability of a government to provide public services (Commonwealth Secretariat/ World Bank, 2000), it is also a relevant factor in policy formation. To that end Atchoaréna, Da Graça & Marquez (2008) point out that “small economies and high levels of dependence on external

aid...put many constraints on policy development” (p. 167). Crossley (2008) likewise comments that, “where small states have engaged with internationally inspired development targets...their own development priorities have often been subsumed, overlooked, or ignored” (p. 247; see also Jules, 2008). While perhaps not all small states experience an institutional deficit when it comes to policymaking – Iceland, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates may be exceptions worth exploring – research has shown that many of them do, including those in the Caribbean (Jules, 2008) and the Pacific (Coxon & Munce, 2008).

When it comes to why small nations often face difficulties in managing the dynamics of policy formation, literature tends to point in the direction of certain international institutions. Jules (2006), for instance, speaks directly to the matter of how international organizations – but particularly bi- and multi-lateral institutions and renowned universities – intersect with the setting of education policy in small states. He argues not only that these institutions, because of the financial and intellectual capital that they are able to leverage, can influence which policies are seen as acceptable and desirable, but also that it takes exceptional leadership and political will at the national level to avoid the agendas that are constructed and advocated by these international institutions (Jules, 2006). Jules’ (2006) perspective is particularly insightful because he speaks from experience, having worked as the Secretary for Education and Human Resource Development of St. Lucia, as a member of the team that prepared the Education Plan for the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, and as the chairman of the World Bank’s Vision 2020 Task Force for the Caribbean (see also Jules, 2008). Separately, the World Bank’s own Operation Evaluation Group explains that small country institutional capacity is at least partially limited because “the activities and requirements of multiple donors place a disproportionate burden on already hard pressed administrative capacity in small developing states, with donors seeking to impose their own...priorities and administrative requirements” (World Bank/Operations Evaluation Department, 1999, as cited in Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank, 2000, p. 42).

The present research does not seek to negate the explanations offered in the literature as to why small states may struggle with the dynamics of education policy formation; rather, it seeks to nuance and problematize them in three ways. First, this research attempts to show exactly how financial and intellectual capital can be mobilized by international organizations in the service of their policy preferences. Second, this research aims to demonstrate that the imposition of policy by bi- and multi-lateral institutions, where it occurs, may not necessarily result from direct conflict or because one party somehow coerces the other. Third, this research endeavors to problematize the notion advanced by Jules (2006) that exceptional leadership and political will at the national level is sufficient to avoid the agendas that are at times advanced by international institutions. In order to address each of these tasks, I employ the concept of institutional power.

Analytic Framework: Institutional Power

Barnett and Duvall (2005) – in writing on the rules, structures, and organizations that guide, regulate, and control global governance – elaborate on the concept of institutional power. In their words:

Institutional power is actors’ control of others in indirect ways...[The] focus... is on the formal and informal institutions that mediate between A and B, as A, working through the rules and procedures that define those institutions, guides, steers, and constrains the actions (or non-actions) and conditions of existence of others, sometimes even unknowingly. (p. 15)

With regard to processes of policymaking, then, the task is to determine how A (e.g., an international organization) uses certain indirect institutional arrangements and the procedures that govern and mediate their development to steer the decisions of B (e.g., a Ministry of Education [MOE]) – and perhaps in ways that are unknown to B itself.

Conceptually, as Barnett and Duvall (2005) explain, while the above definition of institutional power hinges on the procedures that govern the direct interaction between institutions, institutional power is also advanced through “socially extended, institutionally diffuse relations” (p. 16). To provide additional specificity to the present analysis, it is suggested that the relations to which they refer be understood as a variety of elements – i.e., events and sub-processes that serve to comprise the contours of policymaking processes (Edwards, 2012). In particular, as Edwards (2012) notes, these can include the conduct, presentation, and diffusion of research and information – often through specific events and committees – as well as advocacy work, processes of national consultation, national commissions, international conferences and seminars, and international agreements. The implication for the present analysis, then, is that the process of forming Plan 2021 must be unpacked to show the ways in which certain international organizations, working through this diversity of elements, are indirectly able to guide, steer, and constrain the actions and conditions of existence of those entities – but primarily the MOE – at the national level that work to develop education policy.

USAID/ES and the Making of Plan 2021^[4]

Given the space constraints of this short article, it is not possible to address every aspect of the process that gave rise to Plan 2021 nor each policy provision found in the Plan’s content. Thus, while I do explain the overall process of policymaking, I hone in specifically on the efforts of the education office of the United States Agency for International Development in El Salvador (USAID/ES) to advance its central prerogative during Plan 2021 development – namely, that more attention and resources be dedicated to students in the most disadvantaged areas. While the focus of USAID/ES’s education office arguably constitutes a beneficial use of institutional power, the purpose of the present article is not to criticize USAID/ES for the content of its agenda, but rather to bring attention to the way in which institutional power manifests. Furthermore, restricting the focus of this article to the prerogatives of USAID/ES is not meant to imply that it is the only instance of institutional power in the process of formulating Plan 2021. Rather, the way in which USAID/ES’s involvement reflects institutional power is meant to be indicative of the state of affairs more generally.

There are eight key elements through which USAID/ES’s institutional power manifested in the process of formulating Plan 2021. Temporally, they began mid-year 2003 and concluded in March of 2005 with the finalization of the Plan’s content. These elements, and their dates, are detailed in Table 2 (next page).

Each of these elements is contextualized and explained below in order to show how USAID/ES, while working through formal and informal institutional arrangements and procedures, was able – indirectly – to influence not only the process of policymaking but also Plan 2021’s final content. First, however, I comment on the Minister of Education who presided over much of the Plan’s formulation, as well as the timing of her entry into this process. An understanding of the timing of her entry and her leadership will help in explaining, both, how international organizations influence policymaking and the significance of that influence.

Table 2. Key Elements in Plan 2021 Policy Formation Process

Element	Timing	Description
1	Mid-year 2003	USAID/ES publishes a request for proposals (RFP) to carry out a study of basic education in El Salvador.
2	October-November 2003	Academy for Educational Development (AED) produces the basic education sector assessment (BESA).
3	December 2003	A series of roundtable discussions is conducted in San Salvador, El Salvador on future directions for education reform.
4	February-April 2004	A study on inequity in the Salvadoran education system is financed by USAID/ES and completed by an international consultant.
5	May 2004	The World Bank creates a “summary diagnostic” which combines all recent studies on the education system in El Salvador.
6	June 2004	A public event is held by USAID/ES on the issue of educational inequity.
7	August-November 2004	A Presidential Commission – appointed by the newly elected President, Antonio Saca – produces a report which elaborates a vision for the development of education in the country.
8	January-February 2005	The MOE works intensively to elaborate Plan 2021.

Leadership of the Ministry of Education (MOE)

In June of 2004, immediately after Antonio Saca took office as the president of El Salvador, a new minister of education was appointed. Interviewees repeatedly spoke to her exceptionally strong leadership style and the fact that she was certain about her reform priorities. Her adeptness and savvy were the result of over 15 years of experience working not only with the MOE in a variety of high-ranking positions, including National Director of Education and Vice-Minister, but also with international organizations. As one international consultant working with the Academy for Educational Development (AED) stated, “in terms of management style, [she] knew very well what she wanted and, like most effective doers, she had a ... very clear focus on those things. The rest of the things might be interesting, might be good, but she was going to focus on her agenda” (INTACT20).^[5] Similarly, an international educational expert with more than 10 years of experience working in El Salvador with USAID and AED characterized the Minister in the following way:

It’s pretty safe to say that if [the Minister] didn’t want to do something, it wasn’t going to get done, and it wasn’t going to be in her plan. The Ministry, particularly under her...was very much in the driving role. The donors had probably less influence in Salvador than they had in many countries...Under [this Minister], the donors were, in effect, sidelined. They were told what to do. They were given, you know, here’s our plan, Plan 2021, it has these elements, you guys, USAID, you’re going to help us with this, you guys, the Spanish, you’re going to help us with this and this and this. You don’t need to chat with each other. You don’t need to have donor roundtables or anything like that because we’re the Ministry and we’re going to tell you what we want...Now, you don’t have to do that, but you’re not ...dictating the terms of this relationship. (INTACT21)

Undoubtedly, then, in the post-June 2004 landscape, the perception is that the process that gave rise to Plan 2021 was the domain not of international actors but rather of the MOE – and, particularly, the Minister herself. The problem, however, is that, albeit unofficially, many of the elements which fed into and influenced the content of Plan 2021 were produced before Meza took office. Moreover, after June 2004, a number of USAID’s formal and informal institutional arrangements, which were out of the control of the Minister of Education, would have an indirect impact. It is for these reasons that the making of Plan 2021, despite particularly strong leadership from the MOE, was susceptible to the institutional power of USAID/ES, as will be shown.

USAID/ES and the Elements of Formulation of Plan 2021

Element 1: Mid-year 2003, knowing that the presidential elections were less than a year away, and recognizing that a study had not been done in many years on the state of the education system, the new education director for USAID/ES put out a request for proposals (RFP) to conduct research on the basic education sector. With this action, USAID/ES education team set out to produce “studies that would be useful [to policymaking in the new administration] – not just more research” (INTACTFG1). However, while the RFP called for an investigation of many aspects of the basic education sector, a specific purpose of the RFP was to initiate a process of research and dialogue that would place the idea of educational equity at the center of policy discussions. As USAID’s education director stated:

The equity thing...was my particular issue...I was in a position with some power and I used that power to try to influence equity issues...The RFP that came out in 2003 did have a lot of that [(i.e., emphasis on investigating the state of education for the poorest)], and I was hired before that; for the first task, I had to write it. (INTACT2)^[6]

The contract for this study was awarded to AED, a global non-governmental organization (NGO) that specialized in health and education research and project implementation. Before proceeding, it is important to note that this RFP initiated the long process that would produce Plan 2021, albeit unofficially.

Element 2: Between October-November of 2003, AED managed the production of the study. To be sure, the resulting Basic Education Sector Assessment (BESA) covered a range of issues including teacher quality, management information systems, preschool education, and education finance, among other things. Unmistakably, however, both the introductory framing as well as the recommendations of the report – both authored by USAID/ES’s education director – were designed to draw attention to equity. The following statement gives an indication of this: “The challenge for the new administration is to demonstrate true commitment to the education of the poor...it is clear that policies applied over the past decade have not placed a high enough priority on providing quality learning opportunities for poor children” (Schiefelbein et al., 2005, p. 9). Moreover, three of the study’s ten recommendations relate directly to the issue of equity. These recommendations encouraged the government to (a) “promote access to preschool education... from the 40% of households with the lowest incomes”; (b) “set priorities to improve the quality of basic education in...zones inhabited by lower-income children”; and (c) “promote initial access, regular attendance, and retention in school for children from the 20% of households with lowest incomes” (Schiefelbein et al., 2005, pp. 16-18).

Element 3: In December 2003, with the BESA in hand, USAID/ES organized a series of roundtable discussions^[7] in San Salvador attended by “more than 70 key individuals from the education

sector” on future directions for education policy in the country (Schiefelbein et al., 2005, p. 22). These roundtables are salient to the overall process of formulating Plan 2021 for three reasons. First, as one education specialist in attendance from the MOE has stated, the roundtables were “an important factor” because they served “to reinforce...relevant themes...[and] to create a common platform of concepts, ideas, problems, and solutions” (MOENL7). Second, they “provided a good ‘point of departure’ – a clear signal, ‘guys, we’re moving forward from here’,” as one international education specialist put it (INTACT20). This sentiment was echoed by Salvadoran education specialists, who shared that the roundtables, in the months following, continued to be “cited... as an instrument of reflection, dialogue, and consultation that provided inputs to the making of Plan 2021” (MOENL10). Third, the roundtables were important to the overall process because the education director of USAID/ES was able to generate consensus on the need for further research on key issues of interest. Thus, following the roundtables, the education director of USAID/ES led an informal, inter-institutional group of researchers that included counterparts from the MOE and AED.

Element 4: Between February and April 2004, while a member of the “research committee,” as this group was known, the education director of USAID/ES financed an in-depth study conducted by an international researcher specifically on educational inequity in El Salvador (Rosekrans, 2006). Although the BESA contained recommendations and language that pertained directly to issues of equity, USAID/ES perceived the need for an additional study that would demonstrate in a more detailed fashion the inequitable distribution of educational access, educational resources, and educational outcomes across El Salvador, and particularly in the rural and impoverished areas. The idea was that this report would provide sufficiently convincing and detailed information such that it could be directly useful to and influential in the setting of priorities and the design of education policy in the new political administration. As the education director for USAID/ES stated:

We took advantage of the moment to stick in the data, the reality of what was really going on on the ground and the needs of the country, and the equity issues in terms of where the resources needed to be. It was kind an opportune moment of intervention in the thought process of these actors. (INTACT2)

In order to increase the probability of the study’s impact, USAID/ES ensured that the findings – based on econometric analysis – were written in such a way as to be intelligible to non-researchers (Edwards, 2013).

Element 5: With May 2004 came the creation of a “summary diagnostic” by the World Bank, at the request of the departing Minister of Education. Located in this diagnostic was each of the studies that had been performed over the previous eight months (including, but certainly not limited, to those financed by USAID/ES) on various aspects of the education system. The importance of this document is that, when “the newly-appointed Minister took her position [the following month], she and her team decided to use the [summary diagnostic] as one of the main inputs for the new 16-year strategic plan, Plan 2021” (Rosekrans, 2006, p. 8). The future Vice-Minister of Education in the Saca administration shared that a conscious decision was made not to perform additional investigation because both he and the incoming Minister of Education “valued very much the research and studies” which had been produced in the eight months leading up to the change of administration (MOENL7). The external studies were seen as sufficient.

Element 6: In June 2004, just after the inauguration of President Saca, USAID/ES decided to host another event – a public forum – in order to raise awareness on the issue of equity. In

attendance were over one hundred policymakers, government officials, MOE staff, and social policy experts, as well as the media. At this event, in addition to a presentation of findings by the author of the equity study, there was discussion by a group of distinguished Salvadoran education and development professionals. The second component of the event featured a World Bank consultant who spoke on multiple issues, including compensatory programs in Mexico, focusing more resources on poorer students, why that was important, and how it could be done. In the end, creating this event, inviting the media, and showcasing both studies and specialists which highlighted equity issues was, as the education director of USAID/ES put it, all “a way of building a momentum around paying attention to equity” (INTACT2). Interviewees repeatedly indicated that these efforts had the desired effect, both within the MOE as well as within the Ministry of Finance, representatives of which also attended the public forum.

Element 7: After June 2004, there are two more elements in the production of Plan 2021. The first of these is the Presidential Commission (or simply Commission) which was created by Presidential decree in late August 2004. This commission – composed of 16 high-profile and notable individuals from Salvadoran society – was given the task of producing a document that would contain a vision for the development of the education system in El Salvador in the years to come. The process of developing the vision would produce consensus among key actors, and would also provide the resulting content of Plan 2021 with a measure of credibility, given the stature of the Commission’s members, and the fact that the MOE would take the Commission’s vision into consideration when establishing the orientation of Plan 2021 itself. In the end, the Commission did produce a wide-ranging proposal for how the education system should develop, and it contained both macro-level goals as well as specific targets. In order to develop this document, however, each member of the Commission was given a copy of all the studies which had been conducted during the previous year. In addition, the Commission listened to presentations made by specialists on certain issues. USAID/ES’s education director and the author of the equity study made one such presentation in order to emphasize the fact that spending on education in the poorest regions of El Salvador was regressive (Edwards, 2013). The net result is that, in its proposal, the Commission reproduced the same suggestions that first appeared in the recommendations of the BESA from a year earlier.

Element 8: The last element addressed here in the production of Plan 2021 was the concretization of its content.^[8] This occurred between January and February 2004 and, as MOE officials described, it required the formation of numerous technical teams to work on the design of the specific programs that would give shape to Plan 2021 in practice. What stands out is that, as the Vice-Minister of Education stated, the work at that time had to do with the “operationalization of ideas” (MOENL7). He recounts that each “group took the relevant informational inputs ... and then put together all the necessary documentation for that area” (MOENL7). Because the majority of the informational inputs which were taken into account were produced by bi- and multi-lateral institutions,^[9] the implication is that the main task of the MOE in the finalization of Plan 2021 was to translate into programmatic terms the major themes that had been raised by the studies which had been conducted over the previous year and a half, in addition to the report of the Presidential Commission. This explains why the content of Plan 2021 itself – unveiled in March 2005 – reflects the issues which USAID/ES had been indirectly promoting via research studies since late 2003. For example, among the Plan’s principal goals, one sees that the MOE decided to focus on “increasing basic education services, with priority given to the poorest sectors” (MOE, 2005, p. 19). Moreover, one of the “priority actions” was to “augment grade offerings in the most poor rural municipalities” (MOE, 2005, p. 20).

Nevertheless, the MOE certainly still played a key role. In particular, it not only had the difficult task of the actual elaboration of the documents that bear the name Plan 2021, but also the duty to design the mechanisms that would make its new programs a reality, and the responsibility of ensuring that these programs were feasible in budgetary terms. Yet institutional power was still prevalent in the process that produced Plan 2021. The key to perceiving the impact and importance of institutional power in this process is to understand that the Presidential Commission as well as many other elements in the policy formation process since mid-2003 were influenced either directly or indirectly by USAID/ES, such that the perception held by the incoming MOE officials regarding which issues merited attention was itself affected. This is discussed in more depth in the next section.

Discussion: Institutional Power and Agenda-Setting

The eight elements presented above show the repeated manifestation of institutional power. This is clear when one considers that institutional power operates indirectly, through both formal and informal means. This is a key point because at no moment in time did USAID/ES have direct control over the MOE. Rather, institutional power worked through intermediary organizations (e.g., AED), informal arrangements (e.g., the research committee), incidental interaction (e.g., Presidential Commission), informative events (e.g., roundtables, public forum), and, perhaps most importantly, informational inputs (e.g., BESA, equity study). Thus, in these ways, USAID/ES was able to influence the overall process, impact the agenda for reform, guide the thinking of the MOE, and impact a portion of the reform agenda for Plan 2021.

This display of institutional power helps to nuance how we understand the influence of international organizations in education policy formation. That is, though Jules (2006), in his writing on small states, correctly argued that bi- and multi-lateral institutions (as well as prestigious universities) are able to leverage financial and intellectual capital such that they can guide the policymaking process and sway which policies are seen as acceptable and desirable, the present research contributes by showing a particular manner in which that can happen. As discussed, in this case, USAID/ES contributed to and manipulated the process by creating key events and producing key informational inputs that led to future events and subsequent opportunities to present and emphasize their research. Of course, neither those events nor the research bore the name of USAID/ES alone; in each instance, actions were either taken in partnership with the MOE and/or AED or were financed by USAID/ES while being guided and modified to reinforce its cause (as with the research report in Element 4).

Relatedly, the present research speaks to the commonly mentioned notion of imposition. To be sure, research on policy formation generally, as well as scholarship on policymaking in small states specifically, refers to imposition and defines it as one actor coercing another, perhaps by threatening to withhold something, such as development aid (Dale, 1999; Lukes, 2005; World Bank/Operations Evaluation Department, 1999, as cited in Commonwealth/World Bank, 2000). In the case of Plan 2021, however, we see that international influence manifested in ways that were not so direct. USAID/ES materially affected the process by strategically structuring events through which its perspectives and preferences would embed (Samoff, 2007). At least in part, USAID/ES was able to do this for structural reasons.

To be sure, those structural aspects that enabled USAID/ES's influence need to be problematized. Consider the implications of the gap in time between when the new minister – who officially presided over the construction of Plan 2021 – was appointed and when the process to formulate Plan 2021 initially – albeit unofficially – began. This gap in time allowed USAID/ES to take

preliminary steps that would impact the discussion around and agenda for reform before, during, and after the change in administration. On one hand, there is a benefit to the fact that USAID/ES and other international institutions remained engaged across multiple administrations. That extended engagement can facilitate continuity and stability. On the other hand, however, it inherently shapes the nature of the discussion around education reform in ways that are not explicit. Moreover, incoming administrations tend to operate within the pre-existing discussion, especially when that discussion is founded on a series of studies which are produced by renown consultants or credible institutions and which are then bolstered by high-profile public events that guide consensus on which issues are most pressing (and, often, which solutions are most appropriate) (Berman, 1992; Hall, 1993).

Such was the case in El Salvador. This is of note because the Minister of Education which entered in June 2004 was particularly experienced, knowledgeable, and confident. As Gillies (2010) notes, “the Minister of Education was regularly identified in public polls as the most trusted and capable cabinet officer. It would be difficult to overemphasize this point as MOE’s power to negotiate reforms is greatly enhanced by this reputation and credibility” (p. 76). Despite these and similar claims that, “under [the Minister of Education], the donors were, in effect, sidelined” (INTACT21), the present article has shown that institutional power combines with the timing of political transition such that, contrary to Jules’ (2006) assertion, even exceptional leadership is not immune. USAID/ES did not dictate the terms of the relationship, but it was able to indirectly influence process, agenda, and content in meaningful ways.

In light of the above points, future research should investigate institutional power further to ascertain the prevalence of the forms of manipulation found here – forms that may be common among small states, given the limited administrative, financial, and technical capacity they often experience. Where such manifestations of institutional power are not present, comparative lessons should be drawn as to those characteristics that enable small states to overcome or mitigate the strategic actions of international organizations and the structural limitations that such institutions are able to use to their advantage.

Theoretical Implications

Despite the micro-level lens employed in this research, a few implications for theory can be drawn. In particular, this research on Plan 2021 demonstrates the importance of understanding policymaking in processual and relational terms, as those terms encourage us to see how events generate events which impact the formation of policy (Robertson, 2011). External influence often does not insert itself through one direct action, but rather through a series of events and actions which link together and bridge across national political administrations such that, as Samoff (2007) points out, the perspectives of the funders are effectively entrenched. Finally, shedding light on the dynamics of policymaking in El Salvador and the way that USAID/ES carefully and intentionally operationalized its influence through intermediary elements gets at what Cowen (2009) labels the ‘geometry of insertion’ – i.e., the careful positioning, sequence, and intensity of elements – in education policy formation such that ideas from international actors or locations enter national policy spaces.

While the preceding comments have focused on the contributions of the present research to scholarship that brings more of a political economic perspective to the study of education policymaking, the findings of this article also have implications for another theoretical perspective – namely, world culture theory (WCT). To that end, there is one particular point that can be made: We see that national education policy does not always follow from a common world culture

which holds up certain liberal values and policies over others and which has been rationalized, institutionalized, and spread by international organizations and their representatives (Chabbot, 1998; McNeely, 1995; McNeely & Cha, 1994; Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997).^[10] While WCT posits that states automatically, unproblematically, and for purposes of legitimacy enact policy priorities that reflect the content and norms exhibited by and contained in international agreements (e.g., Education for All, Millennium Development Goals), the constitutions of multilateral organizations (e.g., UNESCO), and international development professionals and their networks, the present research suggests that agency and intention are central to policy formation. Indeed, as was seen here, the education director from USAID/ES purposively and repeatedly used her power to raise the profile of the issue of inequitable education funding and to insert that issue on the agenda and in the thought process of key Salvadoran education specialists within and outside the MOE. Moreover, it bears mentioning that the issue of inequitable education funding is not an issue at the global level; rather, it was her “particular issue” (INTACT2). The push for that priority thus did not emanate from a world culture, but was driven by the personal preference of a key institutional actor.

To summarize, the implications can be stated in the following way. First, education policy formation may at times have more to do with institutional power and personal agenda and less to do with global culture than WCT theorists propose, particularly in small states, though more research is necessary to further clarify this point. Second, for political economy scholars, the manipulation of education policy formation by international actors may be less evident, more complex, and more indirect than is readily obvious, especially as policymaking spaces within small states (and states of all sizes) find themselves in new and different constellations of actors and are penetrated in new and different ways by of ideas from elsewhere (Robertson, 2011).

Conclusion

The analysis here of Plan 2021 has shown how an international institution – in this case, USAID/ES – has been able to permeate and affect education policymaking in the small state of El Salvador. More specifically, this article has highlighted three aspects of that policymaking: (a) how USAID/ES combined the strategic use of financial and intellectual resources with institutional power to engender a focus on equitable education finance to marginalized areas; (b) that manipulation of process and information – more than imposition, in the traditional sense of direct coercion – accurately characterized the dynamics among international and national actors; and (c) the fact that strong and determined MOE leadership was not sufficient to control policy formation, due both to the issue of finance and capacity as well as to the structural issue that USAID/ES’s involvement spanned both administrations and provided it with the opportunity to sustain and ingrain its perspective through crucial elements in the process. Given the questions that these findings raise, this article can be seen as research that encourages further exploration, as opposed to offering closure on the issue of institutional power and policy formation – both generally and in small states.

To that end, two suggestions are offered. First, and most obviously, while it is to be expected that institutional power is always present^[11] in processes of setting education policy, it is suggested that not all international institutions are able to exercise institutional power in the ways seen here by USAID/ES.^[12] Those institutions whose knowledge products enjoy particular clout, and those who have worked in and been integral to both a country’s development and education policy for many years (as has been the case with USAID in El Salvador [Gillies, 2010]) likely are able to leverage institutional power to a greater extent. Relatedly, given that institutional power operates through informal arrangements and intermediary organizations, it is those institutions which are

extensively networked which may be more potent when it comes to influencing the prevailing thinking at the national level regarding general priorities and specific policies for reform.^[13]

Second, and finally, it is suggested that future research should take the lead of Hindmarsh (1996) in questioning the ways that we understand smallness, and what the implications of that are for how we understand education policymaking. As seen in the present article, though El Salvador qualifies as a small country on a number of commonly accepted dimensions, the “smallness” that has been central to this analysis has centered more on El Salvador’s capacity and the way that has interacted with structural constraints and processual manipulation. The suggestion is thus that the smallness of a country be considered not only in relation to quantitative indicators but also, and perhaps more importantly, in relation to the “global architecture of education” and the ability of a country (or its ministries) to autonomously engage (or not) in it (Jones, 2007, p. 325). Though indicators of GDP or income, for example, may be related to a conception of size as based on capacity, certainly a positive correlation does not always exist. In-depth and long-term case studies may be well suited to uncovering this aspect of smallness, how it may or may not change over time, for what reasons, and with what implications for education and policymaking.

D. Brent Edwards Jr. *is a doctoral candidate in International Education Policy at the University of Maryland, College Park. During the 2011-2012 academic year, he was a visiting scholar at the Central American University in San Salvador, El Salvador in conjunction with a Fulbright Research Grant. Previously, during the 2010-2011 academic year, he was a visiting scholar at the University of Amsterdam’s Institute for Social Science Research. His research, which focuses on how processes of education policy formation are affected by international influence, has appeared in Comparative Education Review; Research in Comparative and International Education; Education, Citizenship, and Social Justice; The Urban Review; as well as multiple book chapters.*

Endnotes

1. The year 2021 was chosen for its symbolic value as the 200th anniversary of the country’s independence from Spain.
2. Given this focus, issues of policy implementation are outside the scope of the present essay.
3. It should be noted, though, that the group of 45 small nations on which the Joint Task Force focused are developing, and thus omits small developed countries that may differ in this regard, such as Iceland, Greenland, the United Arab Emirates, Cyprus, Malta, and Switzerland.
4. For extensive citations to other literature on education policymaking in El Salvador, see Edwards, Martin, and Victoria (forthcoming).
5. Interviewees’ responses and observations are referenced in this article using author-assigned interviewee codes and numbers.
6. It should be noted that USAID/ES’s education director was able to highlight this issue because it meshed with USAID’s regional strategy at the time (USAID, 2003).
7. These roundtables were co-financed by the World Bank and the MOE.
8. Concurrent with the Presidential Commission, a process of national consultation was carried out in El Salvador. USAID/ES contributed to this sub-process by partially financing the consultants who facilitated reflection and gathered the information. Then, in December 2004, a seminar financed by USAID/ES was held at Harvard University in order to foment reflection and discussion among a small group of prominent individuals on educational issues that were of priority to the Salvadoran Minister of Education. For more on these events, see Edwards (2013).
9. Indeed, it should be noted that, in addition to USAID/ES, the World Bank and the Spanish bilateral cooperation also produced reports which were taken in hand by the MOE as it produced Plan 2021.
10. The development of world culture theory has recently taken center stage in debates about policy

formation. For a critical perspective, see Carney, Rappleye and Silova (2012). See Jepperson (2001) for an alternative account of its evolution.

11. The extent to which it is successful is, of course, another matter.
12. Other scholars have also suggested that research should discern the differences of engagement, influence, and purpose of various international organizations (e.g., Berman, 1992; Ginsburg, Cooper, Raghu & Zegarra, 1990; Steiner-Khamsi, 2010; Verger, Novelli & Kosar-Altinyelkin, 2012).
13. For an indication of the extent to which USAID has been intimately networked in El Salvador for many decades, see Quan (2005).

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