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Teachers and taxis: corruption in the education sector in Honduras

"...Ghost teachers? Have you heard of taxi teachers? We have those. They work multiple jobs and are constantly riding taxis to somehow magically be present everywhere, at the expense of pupils, of course, who seldom see their teachers."

Honduras invests large sums in education, but powerful teachers' unions and political appointments hinder reforms in a sector vulnerable to corruption and lacking in civil society monitoring. For current decentralisation plans to impact positively on education services, local auditing skills need to be improved, parents must be given a bigger role, and unions must adhere to codes of conduct.



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The quote about 'taxi teachers' is from a participant at a U4 workshop in Honduras in October 2007. Ignominious as it may seem, the anecdote illustrates one of several corruption challenges in this country. Rigged with corruption, its educational system struggles to fight malpractice within teachers' unions, ministerial management structures and schools, in order to provide more and better schooling to young Hondurans.

The resulting scenario is one where, despite significant increases in available funds, the sector has not

advanced accordingly. The Government Strategic Education Plan promises investments of more than USD 1 billion in education in 2008. Currently, around 7,4% of GDP goes to the sector, according to the Secretary of Education (SoE – equivalent to Ministry of Education in other countries), raising the country's position to the 4th largest investor in education in Latin America. Cancellation of foreign debt has also released funds for the same purpose. Disappointing, however, is the country's investment per pupil: it continues to be one of the lowest in the world, while around 90% of the State's education budget is spent on teacher salaries.

In October 2007, U4 conducted 15 interviews with government officials and civil society representatives, and visited three public schools. These meetings covered a wide range of topics, from budgetary issues to the new education law and the activities of teachers' unions. The points presented in this U4 Brief reflect the views and experiences of those interviewed, and should not be treated as an exclusive understanding of the situation in the country – which is certainly one of complexity and intertwined links. Therefore, those interested in curbing corrupt practices are forced to undertake a broad scope of initiatives, such as implementing an effective information management system to generate reliable data on the educational structure while also strengthening civil society, for example through parents' associations.

Unfettered power

Debates about education take place within a highly politicised arena in the country's capital, Tegucigalpa. However, instead of resulting in better access and more participation for civil society in the decision making process, the debates currently only include the government and the unions. This has actually held back important reforms. The high degree of politicisation is partly due to powerful teachers' unions with high membership levels. There are 6 unions in the country serving around 50,000 teachers. Between 2,500 and 6,000¹ of them have pending issues about their posts (such as irregular paid leaves or unjustified absence while still on the payroll). Given the importance of their votes during elections, and the influence they have on other voters, the executive power understandably bends to the unions' will. Much of the country's educational agenda set by the SoE can be halted at the desk of some union boss. Maintaining the unions' *status quo* (e.g. their powerful grip on teacher postings) has proven to seriously impede improvements in Honduras' education system. Teacher strikes are notorious not only for halting education reform, but also for causing general mayhem in Tegucigalpa.

The unions' customary antagonist position was widely acknowledged during the interviews conducted by U4.

1 The numbers stem from a SoE census in 2007. However, the results are not yet published and numbers vary according to the source.

Education in Honduras - basic figures

- Primary school (1st to 6th grades) enrolment rate: 92,5%
- Primary school (7th to 9th grades) enrolment rate: 39,7%
- Secondary school enrolment rate: 24,2%
- Number of teachers in primary education: 34,069 in 1999
- Teachers in primary education (*public schools*): 30,544
- Teachers in primary education (*private schools*): 3,525
- Pupil/ teacher ratio (primary school): 33
- 2008 national education budget: 7,4% of GDP
- Education offered through public schools: 88,64% of total

Sources:

- Secretary of Education, presentation given at U4 workshop, 2007.
- EFA evaluation report 2000 for Honduras http://www.unesco.org/education/wefl/countryreports/honduras/rapport_2.html
- UNESCO http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=3400&BR_Region=40520

Informants referred, for example, to challenges related to the new Education Law presented to the Congress in October 2007 by *Foro Nacional de Convergencia*, (FONAC) – a civil society organisation active in the education reform process. In order to improve dialogues and partnerships, the law has been through a new round of consultations with the unions in 2008. The causal link between unions' antagonism and the slow process of approval of the law is not totally clear. However, this slowdown clashes with social approval obtained after a period of 2 years in which the updating of the old law from 1966 was openly debated at regional levels among teachers, parents and other civil society associations.

In addition, there are stories of corruption involving unions. Common cases include teachers requested to pay illegal fees to be relocated, or having to go to court to guarantee their post after selection processes (a responsibility of unions in partnership with the SoE). Scandals related to the sale of teaching posts were in the headlines when U4 conducted the interviews. "The problem is not only within union ranks or how they address school management decisions", says one union staff. "There is collusion between government officials and union director committees. So when a problem gets reported to the responsible authorities, depending on who is involved, it is rarely taken forward."

Poor management systems

Control and accountability could be better exercised if the ministry could rely on accurate data about the education system. There is virtually no information management system in place.² To start remedying the lack of information, in May 2007, the SoE conducted a teacher census (misnamed Social Audit since parents

2 In 2000, the SoE did make an attempt by centrally introducing an *integrated system of finance information* to increase transparency in budget processes. However, the system must be adapted, and staff must be trained before it can be implemented regionally.

helped with data gathering) to get a clearer picture of the number of teachers available in the country. The exercise also generated data on teachers' status, e.g. to see how many were on leave or deployed in schools other than those where they were originally posted – a common practice usually referred to as “lent teachers.” At the time of interviewing, the census results had not been published, but it was claimed that the malpractice of inflating teacher payroll figures is constantly done to justify high expenses at the SoE.

Improving the pool of human resources in the several departments of the SoE, where limitations currently present a serious hindrance to implementing effective management information systems, could have a positive impact on decentralised management processes. Despite what is perceived as genuine commitment to move things forward, Dr. Marlon Breve, the Secretary of Education, acknowledges the weaknesses: “We are better equipped in terms of human capacity at the ministerial level, but the same does not happen at local levels. We have not been able to provide salaries or a career structure to attract highly qualified people.” Moreover, a large proportion of civil servants are made redundant with each election cycle – a practice that does not contribute to improving human resource capacity in the long term. Therefore, civil service reforms are extremely urgent if Honduras is to build and retain competent and experienced civil servants. It also constitutes corruption when ruling political parties – as soon as they take up office – dispose of large numbers of civil servants in order to employ their own supporters instead. This also leads to the loss of any human resource capacity built up during the previous government cycle.

Decentralise corruption?

The SoE is undergoing a process of decentralisation. Around 51% of the education budget is expected to be devolved during 2008. The idea that decentralisation will allow service users – pupils and parents – to hold school management accountable, is a strong justification for the push.³ However, the same mechanism that may facilitate parents' monitoring activities conceals a not-so-welcome side effect. In a country with poorly qualified local bureaucrats, this could lead to an increase in malpractice due to either incompetence to manage Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) funds, or as a result of downright corruption. For 2008 – according to the Presidential Commission for the PRS – approximately USD 27 billion Lempiras (equivalent to USD 1,43 billion in January 2008) are budgeted for projects in education, health and social services. Around 3% of this amount is expected to be directed to regional administrations through decentralised projects.

3 For more resources on decentralisation processes in the education sector, see UNESCO (2007): *Educational Governance at Local Level*, Paris <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001544/154408e.pdf> and Levacic, R. (2006): *Formula Funding of Schools, Decentralization and Corruption: a comparative analysis*, in Hallak, J. and Poisson, M. eds (2006): *Governance in Education: Transparency and Accountability*, IIEP, Paris. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/cgi-bin/ulis.pl?catno=148766&data base=ged&gcp=0&lin=1>

Central auditing

The SoE has another battle to fight regarding its controlling role. It counts on a small auditing unit, with not enough staff to conduct permanent monitoring of schools. It has recently started to receive contributions from the Supreme Court of Auditors. With around 400 staff, the court counts on sufficient human resources to support the SoE's internal auditing. However, the court's relatively small budget compared to other countries in the region (USD 8 million), could limit its ability to assist the educational administration with capacity building for local auditing purposes. The efforts to enlarge the pool of government officials able to engage in auditing are likely to have a positive impact.

Procedures at the regional level

At the regional level, if decentralisation is carried through, a lot of up-front effort has to be put into increasing monitoring skills among local SoE staff. Despite clearly existing rules for procurement and procedures at the national level, the situation locally is quite different. There has been concern over the acquisition of 10,000 computers as well as stolen educational material such as school books – some of which have, ironically, been found on sale in market stalls close to the SoE headquarter. Other complaints have included inflation of pupil numbers by school headmasters in order to qualify for extra funds under a government programme giving schools an annual state fee (sometimes referred to as “capitation grant”) according to the number of pupils. Other complaints refer to mismanagement of parents' contributions to schools – funds which actually often cover most of schools' expenses except salaries.

Another aspect deserving attention is the political nature of appointments of education management staff at the sub-national level. Placements tend to be made by union bosses or politicians on a reward-, instead of merit-, basis. Therefore, appointed officials become impermeable to any positive reform initiatives (or sanctions) from the central level, and their abuses very often go unchecked.

Poor civil society monitoring capacity

Decentralisation processes will also raise expectations around civil society stakeholders. The ‘social audit’ exercise, mentioned previously, was a buzzword among participants in the U4 workshop. However, civil society's ability to monitor local institutions may be overestimated in the case of Honduras. Though Citizens' Transparency Commissions have been formed in some regions – empowering the population to provide a supervisory role in schools – these commissions are not nearly as effective in other locations. According to FONAC, around 85% of the country is covered by citizens' commissions. However, the majority has not yet engaged in any monitoring. The few examples of monitoring which exist is mostly directed at municipal authorities, and not schools.

Households' limited role

Households have so far played a minimal role in schools – usually limited to financing school expenses. Household-generated income is an important component to supplement school budgets. However, even these contributions have been linked to corruption: some school headmasters charge fixed, compulsory sums from parents despite government funding programmes designed to ensure free education. Parents' contributions not only finance renovations, which most schools badly need, but also teaching materials and school security services.

Parents' influence, unfortunately, does not go any further. Political management at school level remains far outside their reach. Also, due to little understanding of monitoring processes among non-state actors in general, bringing education management and parents' associations closer through decentralisation, does not automatically guarantee good (or any) monitoring.

Voicing demands

Even if it is unlikely that parents' associations, or most other civil society organisations willing to engage in monitoring schools, will already have the skills to conduct audits, they can become an important forum to voice demands on educational services. Now that Honduras is engaging in a decentralisation process, it becomes particularly important for parents and CSOs to know who is the local civil servant in charge. It will prevent them from being inappropriately used to add a false impression of a management being accountable and playing-by-the-rules, when below the surface there are recurring issues of incompetence and corruption.

At the school level....

... a plethora of bad practices serves as negative example for children. U4 workshop participants mentioned unjustified high rates of teacher absenteeism or late arrival to classes, abuse of power and mismanagement of funds by headmasters, poor management of school meals, diversion of free school books (with parents having to photocopy books for their children) and a lot more. In a country that has greatly contributed to the United States' pool of illegal immigrants, teachers are famous for emigrating while leaving a substitute to teach in their absence. That often means any family member, with no teaching qualifications, showing up to classes and collecting pay checks. The so-called

“taxi teachers” represent another form of corruption: favouritism. Rigged allocation of teaching posts result in those with political ‘godfathers’ getting more than one posting regardless of the location of these (one case referred to a teacher who held two jobs in two distant regions) – all to the detriment of children, who get less teaching hours.

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In theory, these problems should be remedied by the Honduras Teaching Statute from 1997 – regulating teacher and educational staff practices. Though it introduces additional problems (such as a guaranteed pay rise for teachers until

2009), the Statute has ethics components built into it, and should thus fill in the void of a non-existent code of conduct for teachers. U4 visits to schools also showed a dire situation regarding facilities: dirty yards, derelict classrooms in need of repair, noise and poor lighting. Of the three schools visited, only one was in good condition. Though such numbers do not allow for generalisations, the troubled scenario described in this Brief constitutes a bleak learning environment for children – and a major challenge for development in Honduras.

Looking ahead

However, a little hope for change has been generated at the SoE level, as some corrective measures have already been taken. The SoE has approached the unions to curb their antagonist role by engaging them in regular working meetings. The new round of consultations around the education law is an expression of the intent to create a common agenda through dialogue. If not yet a total success, at least one positive effect has been achieved: an 85% reduction in the number of teacher strikes. In terms of human resources capacity, there are new initiatives on professional development being implemented at local and central levels, followed by the introduction of Education for All (EFA) funds. Regarding monitoring activities, the Secretary recently opened a hotline for public reports of illegal charges at schools. However, action needs to be immediate, given Honduras' well known cycle of priority changes following elections. There seems to be scope for much more – and the current government still has two remaining years in office to change the face of education in the country.