

## **Participation of Civil Society in Autonomous Schools**

Sven Andersson  
Lund University  
andersson\_s@hotmail.com

Managua, Nicaragua  
August 2001

Paper written for the project “Empowering Parents While Making Them Pay: Autonomous Schools in Nicaragua,” funded by the Tinker Foundation. New York: New School University, Milano Graduate School of Management & Urban Policy. See: <http://www.newschool.edu/milano/cdrc/schoolreport/index.html> for the project web site

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

This study examines the role that Civil Society has had on the Autonomous Schools movement in Nicaragua. Since its initiation, several studies have evaluated the success of the autonomous school reform from an “internal school perspective.” That is, from the basis of its primary stakeholders such as parents, students and teachers. This study examines the reform externally, examining the relationship between the school councils and civil society. It is part of a larger study titled, “Empowering Parents While Making Them Pay: Autonomous Schools in Nicaragua” by Dr. Alec Ian Gershberg, Associate Professor at the Robert J. Milano Graduate School of Management & Urban Policy at New School University.

Research was conducted in three stages. The first stage consisted of testing the questionnaire in the field and reviewing available literature. The second stage used preliminary analysis to extract elements of interest or aspects that could be amplified in the next stage. In the final stage, interviews were conducted in Matagalpa (Sébaco, San Dionisio and Esquipulas), Leon (El Sauce and Achuapa) and Boaco (Boaco and Teustepe) with key stakeholders to evaluate the participation of civil-society in the autonomous school movement. Interviewees include mayors, priests, union leaders and representatives of various NGO’s as well as people from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education (MECD). Less comprehensive interviews were also conducted in the municipalities of San Juan del Sur, San Ramon and Santa Rosa de Peñon. In total 26 in-depth interviews were conducted in ten departments. Thus, while the results are not generalizable, they are suggestive and help to deepen our understanding of the involvement of key potential stakeholders who currently lie, mostly, outside of the school’s social and administrative dynamic.

In considering civil society and its role on education the MECD states: “The education is a task of all. It is a fundamental task of the family, the churches, and the political parties, the unions, voluntary associations, mass media, private companies and civil society in general. The work of education will not be effective without the involvement, support and supervision of all the institutions of the community.” This study used this framework to evaluate the role of civil society in education.

According to preliminary research, private enterprise and mass media were not involved significantly in education at the local level. A parallel research team conducted research on the role of family. Following MECD’s description of the individual pieces of civil society participating in education the remaining actors outside of the family include: churches, political parties, unions and voluntary associations. This study focuses on ex-mayors and vice-mayors as local representatives of the political parties

The 1990 elections were followed by a dismantling of organizations with ties to the Sandinistas. Organizations that participated in school reform at that time were suspected of being linked to the Sandinistas and were therefore viewed negatively. As assistant to the former education minister, Dr. Humberto Belli says for example, "Involvement of civil society was not associated with the initial project (autonomous school reform). The initial project included teachers, students and parents. Initially, Save the Children wanted to carry out a project involving participants from civil society, but we didn't allow them. The civil society was too politicized when the project began, and if people from ANDEN (the Nicaraguan teacher's union) and the opposition party would have participated, this would have led to more revolts." According to another former high-level MECD employee, "there is little participation from Civil Society, there are incidences of participation, but we go back to the same key issue- the paradigms of the MECD are not open to the participation of the civil society. The Ministry of Education wants to continue to be, although it speaks of autonomy, it wants to continue to be the exclusive director of education, to set the norms, to be the controller."

In its beginnings the autonomous school reform was more focused on finance rather than pedagogy, and was conceived as such by the general public. This focus meant that for many parents autonomy signified school fees and for many teachers, the hope for higher salaries. The largest teacher's union (ANDEN), which is associated with the Sandinista (FSLN) political party, also perceived the reforms in this manner: "We saw the decentralization and school autonomy from the pedagogical optics- how the reform affected education, the learning process and academic results. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education saw it from another perspective. They saw it in terms of administrative efficiency, that is, the less the State has to contribute to a school, the more efficient the school."

Especially controversial in the reforms, was the topic of school fees, an issue that became the most important focus of debate in debating the reforms. So controversial was the issue in fact, that that it often led to confrontation. As one mayor put it, "There are some families who have their 100 Cordobas, and they have three or four children in school. Imagine then with a fee for four children of 20 Cordobas per child. They are paying 80 Cordobas and they are unemployed and don't have resources and no way of making money. The parents end up having to take their children out of school because of the pressure and put them to work." It could be argued that it is the school councils (the parent's committee) that establish the fee policy. However, one mayor says that the school council rarely represents the majority of the poor parents since it is normally the parents with a relatively good financial situation that are elected to the school councils. "There are councils where parents really participate, they work, but there is a problem. It is generally the parents with money that are elected. For the ones with money, fifty Cordobas is easy, but for the parents who make tortillas and sell milk, I can assure you that they are not going to pay the fee." Although the controversy around the fee issue has settled it is still a polemical issue. A large number of schools are not able to collect enough money from the community to finance a quality education for their children. One mayor (PLC) expressed it this way: "We consider that at the local level, at the level of each autonomous school, the autonomy is not sustainable. Why? Because they are not

able to collect the minimum fee that the school council establishes. They are not able to buy, for example cleaning material. They are always dependent on activities that do not fully compensate, so they must beg. The integration has not been effective. There is no integration of the family, the social environment around the school- everything depends on the government transfer. If the government did not give the transfers to the autonomous schools they would have difficulties.”

The lengthy legislation process of the reforms (eight years) also has led to difficulties. As one top official closely related to the MECD describes it, “Really it (the autonomous reform) needs a legal scheme, that is to say, unfortunately the conditions under which the reform was introduced allowed for enormous support. However there was not the necessary capacity for a legal scheme.” The fact that the reform did not pass through the legal process affected the way it was received. There is reason to believe that the implementation was not as spontaneous and democratic a process as frequently argued. The same official states that “the ideal situation would have been to begin with a legal framework, but the Minister of Education at this time, Dr. Humberto Belli, saw that this would be difficult. The political conditions were not there and the autonomy would have stagnated and it would have not have advanced.” Dr. Humberto Belli describes how he thought when the strategy of the reform was planned, “No matter how well intentioned the policy debate on financial equity and cost efficiency at that moment, as a point of departure it made eminent political sense to increase salaries first, and fix the process of autonomy later (Arcia and Belli 1998).” This indicates a political philosophy where political consensus is less important than political changes.

More practical than focusing on political consensus, was to focus on the financial aspect of the reform. This led to the creation of the so called “formula,” described as: “The basic mechanism for financing autonomous schools is a fiscal transfer determined by a formula which includes a basic amount per student, plus compensatory funding tied to student retention to address one basic aspect of school performance (Arcia and Belli 1998).” This system seems to have created not only conflicts between different stakeholders but also led to schools having more students per classroom- another source of potential conflict regarding the reform. Of overcrowding a vice-mayor (PLC) says, “In terms of this problem (classroom overcrowding) the autonomy reforms have been negative. To have a high quality learning environment it isn’t good to have more than 30 students. Here we often have 50 students in a class.” The main architect of the reform, Humberto Belli, expresses similar concern, “Another piece of evidence on managerial and operational efficiency comes from a quick a comparison among two secondary schools in Managua: Modesto Armijo (autonomous), and Maestro Gabriel (centralized). In 1997 the autonomous school had 3,500 students and 89 teachers, while the centralized school had 3,600 and 149 teachers (Arcia and Belli 1998).” Efficiency is often measured as a relationship between the value of an input compared to the value of an output. By having a greater number of students with a teacher the quantity of inputs is reduced, leading to a reduced cost. The value of outputs however, is not measured in Nicaragua. The output is therefore ignored in Nicaragua, often citing the lack of a form of measurement. An official related to the MECD says, “For the moment we don’t have any instrument that could tell us... The National Evaluation System has recently tried to structure itself, get

together, to see if we could get an instrument to tell us how things are working. Maybe it could be standardized tests. What we can evaluate for the moment is that the teacher is present and punctual. That is already a great accomplishment.” Several stakeholders I talked to perceived a decline in quality, which may lead to resistance against the autonomy reforms.

## **Mayors**

Interview with mayors in several municipalities showed limited participation in autonomous schools with some exceptions. Local mayors were most likely to be involved in education on local and national holidays, special events, coordinating the construction and reparation of school facilities (especially projects by the social investment fund, FISE) and in establishing small scholarships for poor gifted students. Mayors in small towns often played a more important role than more urban mayors. Several mayors were confused about what their role should be. A PLC mayor says, “Our coordination with the autonomous schools is zero. What I can say is that my desire and my participation have been to support the authorities of MECD in cases of special events and cultural activities and to distribute resources to the school in times of real need. I know very little about autonomy and as an authority I have never been invited to learn. We are always ready to participate as an authority in cultural, social or religious cases. We participate, but the thing is not so defined. We participate, but we do not know our role.”

In some cases it is questionable how much the mayors really know about the autonomous schools and in many cases, like the previous one, mayors admitted to not knowing much. One ex-mayor (FSLN) speaks of how he visited several conferences with other mayors and that it was very common for mayors to not know anything about school autonomy. He says, “I worked for four years as a mayor, and met nearly all of the mayors in Nicaragua. Many of them did not understand the concept of school autonomy- it was never explained to them. Some of the mayors have only first or second grade educations and do not know how to read.” This lack of knowledge about school autonomy among mayors is of course concerning. There is the potential for mayors to play a strong and important role in autonomous schools in facilitating the involvement of local government and the community.

In several cases parents and teachers have been confused about the limits of authority within the autonomous schools. Teachers felt abused by parents who feel they had interpreted authority in the wrong way. In many of these cases, the mayor played the role of mediator in resolving these conflicts. The mayor was used as the final recourse when the principal and the delegates of the MECD were not able to resolve conflicts between parents and teachers. Frequently in these cases, the mayors defended the teachers and attributed the dispute to the parent’s aggressiveness.

Interviews indicated that conflicts between mayors and MECD delegate also occurred. In some cases the conflicts centered on a power struggle between strong school councils a supportive mayor and MECD delegates. One mayor commented that the role of the delegates is determined by the character of the local school council. He says, “It depends

on the local school council and if they accept the interference of the MECD. The educational politics are decided by the state, but if the school council accepts that they (MECD) interfere, then they interfere. But there are others (school councils) that do not accept such interference.”

A leader from an important national NGO expressed that there was a need for MECD delegates to play a more important role in their involvement with school councils. “There is a need to change the profile of the local delegates. They are the ones that should be in the school permanently helping the principal to promote the participation of the parent community.”

Several mayors commented on the political aspect of education. The selection process for delegates, which often emphasizes political affiliation rather than professional merit, has led to problems according to several mayors. Says one mayor:

What I would do is depoliticize the educational system. I am referring to the process of selecting delegates. I am referring to the process of selecting delegates solely on the basis of politics. Delegate positions are often referred to as the “office of trust” here. It (the selection criteria) is not established by law and it is necessary to establish parameters. They should be among the best and most competent. If a delegate is of the wrong political party he does not get the position. It is like a set policy. For example, the new delegate from municipality X is very competent but if a representative from another party wins the election the delegate will be replaced and the continuity will be lost. He has hardly learned the job and he will be replaced.

Another mayor attributes the issue of politics to be about ideology, “I am liberal and belong to the party of the current national administration. But the truth is that only the socialist parties, the Sandinistas care about education.”

Despite complications in politics and lack of knowledge about school autonomy and limited involvement, many mayors expressed a growing consensus regarding school autonomy. One mayor says that the autonomous schools were “originally an imposition and the parents were against autonomy because they had to pay. Now they understand the movement more clearly.” Dr. Humberto Belli describes a similar increase in support, “The public policy debate on school autonomy in Nicaragua still revolves around the issue of school fees. By setting caps and responding to complaints the MECD is slowly developing a recipe tailored to Nicaraguan conditions without missing the direction of the reform itself (Arcia and Belli 1998).

Mayors were asked about their level of participation in the autonomous schools and barriers to that participation. A lack of resources (mainly financial) was cited as by many mayors as being barriers to participation along with a lack of knowledge about the meaning of school autonomy. Other mayors said that the nature of autonomy itself meant that they did not want to interfere with the school and led to limited involvement. Says one mayor, “Every (autonomous) school is a world of its own. We come if they call us.

We have a responsibility, but we are not school principals. We want to participate without being invasive because it is necessary to respect their autonomy.”

According to mayors, poverty and school desertion are among the problems found in autonomous schools. They saw that funds were diminished along with enrollments due to the funding formula as being especially problematic. Mayors also saw how poverty prevented many poor gifted students from continuing their studies. Several mayors had established a small scholarship fund for such students, but the funds were often far from adequate.

### **Priests**

Priests, both Protestant and Catholic, also have a limited role in the autonomous schools. Catholic priests gave priority to Catholic schools. Priests said they were often asked to be present for school inaugurations. One priest expressed a concern about interfering in schools similar to that as the mayors, “We have very good relations with the autonomous schools but it is not necessary to interfere because they are autonomous. They come to ask for notebooks and pens and they ask me to take part in religious celebrations.” The priests said that they would like to play a role in educating youth about morals and ethics in the schools.

### **Suggestions for Change**

Civil society plays a limited, but important role in the autonomous schools. There are, however problems that are preventing more effective and frequent participation. The most serious problems include political patronage and a lack of understanding about the autonomous schools. To address these issues I make the following suggestions:

1. Produce a guide that can serve as a framework for participation of civil society in schools. This guide should contain the rights and obligations of civil society regarding education and suggestions for improving participation and interaction. Develop an information campaign promoting the guide.
2. Depoliticize the MECD delegate position by changing the selection process to emphasize experience and education rather than political affiliation.
3. Actively encourage the involvement of mayors, NGOs, religious organizations, and other community based organizations in schools in order to increase the level and range of services and support available to marginal student populations, as well as to better integrate schools into the fabric of community and municipal life.

