

Improving capacity for evidence-informed education policy in the Philippines

VakaYiko grant supports training at the sub-national government level

A grant from the VakaYiko project is supporting the Ateneo de Manila University in a capacity development programme for evidence-informed education policy making at sub-national government level in the Philippines. Here, Anne Lan K. Candelaria PhD, Assistant Professor in the university's Department of Political Science, describes the programme and its relevance to local-education policy making in the Philippines.

Gaps in local-education policy making in the Philippines

It cannot be denied that education is a universal concern. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) estimates that in 2014 a total of US\$8.8 billion was invested by various governments in their education systems.

In the Philippines, basic education is a constitutional right; no school-aged child can be denied access to a public elementary school or a public high school. This requires the government to provide approximately 20 million children currently in the country with a free 10 year basic education. To put this into perspective, the Philippine government currently operates 46,407 public elementary and high schools, as well as supervising 547,574 teachers¹. With these large numbers it comes as no surprise that in 2015, the Department of Education

was allocated P367.1 billion pesos (approximately US\$8.34 billion), which reflects an 18.6% increase from the budget of the previous year².

However, centrally managing a huge education system is not easy. Despite the increase in budget over the years, there are still concerns around several issues such as lack of classrooms, poor quality of books and high dropout rates, to name a few. Another challenge of a centralized management is the tendency of national agencies to dominate the policy environment and control data related to education.

What is emerging is the fact that, despite education being a central government function, local government's share in education expenses has increased by as much as 73% from 2002 to 2008³. In fact, local spending on education has

outpaced inflation and population growth. This means that more and more local governments are increasing their investments and role in education development despite the fact that education is not a local responsibility.

Filling the gaps in capacity building

We have developed a capacity-building programme that addresses three existing gaps in capacity building training: (1) the gap between evidence and policy making at the sub-national level of government, (2) the gap between two very important stakeholders in education reform – the gate keepers of evidence (the Department of Education) and the local policymakers, and (3) the gap between the local executive and the local legislative body.



Calbiga town mayor Melchor Nacario (second from left) working with his team during the face-to-face training for Samar

¹Based on data from the Department of Education ²According to the report of the Department of Budget and Management

³Based on a study conducted by the World Bank and the Australian AID (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade or DFAT) in 2012



In education, there are three important areas around which decisions are made:

- 1 Infrastructure, for example the provision of classrooms and equipment
- 2 Professional development and pedagogy, for example teacher training and curricular revisions
- 3 Relationships (including interpersonal relations), such as those between policymakers and implementers.

Many locally implemented capacity programmes in education focus on either the first or second factors, and rarely on the relationships between different parties. However, it is this third element that ensures the successful implementation and management of the previous two.

This capacity-building programme, therefore, uses a combination of training and mentoring to improve the relationship between policymakers and implementers. Not only do we intend to introduce the use of evidence in informing policy making but also, and more importantly, we aim to increase the demand for data and information to be more accessible across agencies of government, especially between national and local governments. Our programme also addresses the need for the executive and legislative bodies at the local level to learn together and understand what this data means and how it can be

used from a policy perspective. To do so, it is necessary to organize a workshop in a “safe” venue – meaning that the programme is a learning space where participants can collaboratively learn without the politics. The output of such learning then sets where the executive and legislative bodies can collaboratively set policy directions that can lead to actual policies and subsequently be translated into local projects and programmes.

Tapping into policy networks

To understand policymakers we must consider the environment in which they operate. They are influenced by their networks, which include both formal and informal institutions. Their decisions are also influenced by informal relationships formed as they interact with one another within their policy sectors, such as education. In the Philippines, these policy networks are relatively closed groups and the relationships are built around trust and willingness to share resources.

The Ateneo de Manila University is acknowledged in the Philippines as one of the most respected institutions in engaging on international issues. Its academic programmes have prepared many generations of students for careers in development, governance and policy. Established in 1859 by the Jesuits, it is known for producing many

graduates that make a lasting mark on the country’s political, economic, social and cultural landscape. The current president of the country is in fact an alumnus of the university.

In particular, the Department of Political Science’s working group in Education Politics and Policy is an active member of the Coalitions for Change project, supported by AustralianAID/DFAT and The Asia Foundation, with the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines (ULAP). Aside from this, it has also engaged with the Department of Education regarding the development of curriculum for its K-12 programme, considered to be the most radical education reform of the country to date.

Despite the university’s institutional strengths, we recognized that our network was limited. Therefore, for our capacity-building programme to be effective, we sought the partnership of ULAP, the umbrella organization of all leagues of local government units and locally elected officials in the country. Officially formed in 1998, it has pro-actively worked in the convening of local governments, national government agencies, private, civil society, and academic partners to come up with collaborative programmes and policy agenda that aim to empower local governments for meaningful devolution. Since its inception, ULAP has been a dependable network for many international

“After our workshop in June, we presented what we learned and our project proposal to the mayor and the local school board. There was an initial resistance to the proposal for the creation of an M&E team because it seemed like we were questioning and auditing the Department of Education. For our second meeting, we emphasized that evidence is important to improve our programmes, and the district supervisors became supportive and agreed with the creation of the M&E team.”



and national programmes that target local governments. In a way, ULAP functions as a ‘network of networks’ because it represents the interests of, and lobbies for the demands from, local governments. It also pushes for the attainment of genuine local autonomy and ensures the smooth and efficient delivery of basic services to local communities. Hence, while the content of our capacity building programme may seem novel among local policymakers, our partnership with ULAP provided the programme with a sense of familiarity. ULAP also gave critical inputs in the design and language of the modules and workshop, in terms of translating concepts and theories into current policy agenda and implementation. Putting premium on the participatory process of module development made the capacity programme more localized and sensitive to the needs of our participants.

Our partnership with ULAP, an institution with strong presence and influence in the country’s policy network, made the programme not only useful but also meaningful.

Experiential learning as an approach to building capacities

The design and implementation of our capacity building is based on the assumptions of experiential learning, a theory developed in the early 1970s by David Kolb, an American educational theorist. Experiential learning asserts that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience – in this case, policy making. The cycle of learning begins with a concrete experience the participants had, followed by an opportunity to reflect on that experience and to conceptualize and tentatively draw conclusions from it. This process ultimately leads to future actions by experimenting with



ULAP's National Executive Board with Philippine President Benigno C. Aquino, III (bottom row, fifth from right) and Department of Interior and Local Government Secretary Mar Roxas (bottom row, sixth from right).

various ways of proceeding.

Design

Ours is a two-phased capacity-building programme.

The first phase involves the face-to-face delivery of four modules:

- **Module 1** introduces evidence-informed policy making (EIPM) and why it is important in local education governance.
- **Module 2** introduces useful evidences in education, including the discussion of performance indicators commonly used by the Department of Education.
- **Module 3** discusses the principles of data management, including an overview of action-based research and its ethical considerations.

- **Module 4** introduces the Policy Lean Canvas as an alternative tool for weighing policy decisions and alternatives. Rather than discuss cases, we invited civil society partners who have worked with various local governments on education programmes to share their own stories. This helped participants understand not only the programmes, but more importantly how data can help in the planning, monitoring and evaluating of such. We also requested the respective officials of the Department of Education to present and to explain their data to the participants. It ends with a special note on ‘Learning from Policy Failures’ as a necessary step towards the improvement of their internal systems and processes of policy making.

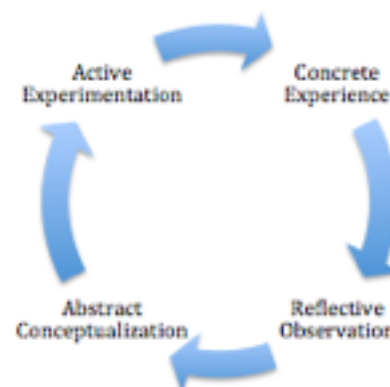
The second phase implements a three-month online and face-to-face mentoring engagement between the participants and the institution partners as they go through the adoption and implementation of proposed evidence-informed policies to address collectively identified concerns in education. As a culminating activity, the participants will be invited to present their experiences and EIPM journey in a roundtable that will be organized towards the end of the project.

Participants

“Our participants are actively experimenting with EIPM as a better way of developing local policy to help education concerns of their respective communities.”

About VakaYiko

The VakaYiko consortium is a three-year project managed by INASP and funded by DFID under the Building Capacity for Use of Research Evidence (BCURE) programme. As part of the project, grants have been awarded to seven organizations in low and middle income countries to build capacity for research use through projects that enhance our understanding of how policymakers can be supported, through practical measures, to make more effective use of evidence. These organizations are the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS), Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, the Center for Public Policy Alternatives (CPPA), the Gender Centre for Research and Training (GCRT) in Sudan, Jimma University in Ethiopia, Politics & Ideas in Argentina, and the Universidad del Pacifico in Peru. For more information see www.inasp.info/en/work/vakayiko.



Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning informs the design of our EIPM capacity-building programme as an experiential learning opportunity

We have chosen a combination of elected and civil servants who are involved in executive and legislative work, particularly within local education. All of them have been immersed in local policy work for a number of years. By 'local' we refer to the sub-national government levels of towns and provinces.

Our oldest participant is an 80-year-old Vice Mayor who has been involved in local politics for more than four decades and our youngest is a 32-year old Provincial Governor who served as the youngest member of the Philippine Congress when she was elected in 2007 at the age of 24. We also brought in school district supervisors and division superintendents, civil servants from important departments in local government such as the planning officer, and representatives from local civil society groups. As a result, the value that our capacity programme generates is the learning that comes from the interaction between these three important players in local policy making.

Learning by doing

Although EIPM as a concept may sound new to participants, it didn't take long during training to recognize that they were already doing some aspects of it, although there had been no 'label' to hold on

to. The face-to-face training allowed them to reflect on their past and current policy practices using EIPM and the other concepts presented as framework. The training's focus on activities, rather than inputs, provided them with ample time to work in groups and share their insights and 'conceptualization' during plenary sharing. The result of this stage is a plan to implement something that is not entirely new but definitely better, and our participants are actively experimenting with EIPM as a better way of developing local policy to help education concerns of their respective communities.

Challenges as learning opportunities

Pragmatic and political timing

While the vibrancy and dynamism of local politics and policy work is exciting, these conditions can also provide challenges in the implementation of capacity-building programmes such as ours. Our implementation timetable as well as our training itinerary has been revised multiple times due to many unforeseen local circumstances such as weather disturbance, security, accessibility of roads and airports, as well as urgent activities that local policymakers had to attend to. We

therefore made our implementation design as flexible as possible to be able to accommodate the pragmatic concerns of the participants, including the need to finish training days earlier than usual due to the high risks of travelling back to their towns after sundown.

We also took into consideration the 'political' timing of our programme. First, March, April and May are



About Ateneo de Manila University

box: Established in 1859, the Ateneo De Manila University is a Filipino Catholic Jesuit university that seeks to preserve, extend and communicate truth and apply it to human development and the preservation of the environment. For more information see www.ateneo.edu.



budget preparation months. The workshop, which provided an opportunity for the participants to talk about their most important challenges in education using the most recent local data, gave DepEd and the LGUs concrete inputs for planning and budgeting purposes. And because this budget will be implemented in 2016, key sustainability strategies were also taken into consideration. Second, local elections are held every three years and we organized training for the second year within the three-year term of office. This is the optimal time to lobby for the implementation of something novel, such as EIPM implementation, because the policymakers have the luxury of time to experiment without worrying about election-related concerns.

Mainstreaming

Capacity-building programmes developed outside of the formal state institutions remain at the margins. To avoid this, we included the participation and support of the Department of Interior and Local Government, particularly its lead training arm the Local Government Academy (LGA), early in the conceptualization stage. The team strongly felt that the modules developed should be mainstreamed through existing capacity training institutions such as the LGA since it will be more prudent to ‘position’ this training as complementary to an existing programme already within government. As a result, the NEO (Newly Elected Officials) programme was chosen because it is not only one of the most long-running programmes of the LGA, but it is also considered as pre-requisite to many other training programmes for local governance.

Unintended outcomes

We are already seeing some early behaviour changes. The most important change is perhaps the participants’ openness to be assessed

by peers and colleagues. We have seen this change during the plenary sharing that happens at the end of each major workshop session.

This is important in policy making because openness is a good indicator of transparency. We learned from the participants that it is more difficult to be open to the comments of peers and colleagues than those coming from political opponents, media and the citizens. The organizational environment in local governments is hierarchical and bureaucratic and so criticism from lower parts of the organizational structure is rare. To be willingly engaged in an exchange of ideas and accepting critique from peers, and more importantly, from those lower in the chain of command, is an important feat.

Another unintended outcome is the programme’s role in bridging national agencies’ resources (including data) and programmes to the needs of local governments. We realized that many concerns raised during the workshops could be managed by tapping into existing policies and programmes led by the national government. We incorporated short presentations of these programmes and accommodated many questions from the participants, which we fielded to the national government agencies concerned. We are currently working on including the most important agencies to participate in the programme’s roundtable discussion, which will happen at the end of the project.

The EIPM capacity-building also impressed upon the trainees that evidence is an effective tool to strengthen political will and overcome initial resistance to implement certain interventions. Indeed one of the participants from Bayambang said: “After our workshop in June, we presented what we learned and our project proposal to the mayor and the

“Solving the problems of education is only possible if there is a supportive atmosphere both from the top and below that will allow changes to happen”

local school board. There was an initial resistance to the proposal for the creation of an M&E team because it seemed like we were questioning and auditing the Department of Education. For our second meeting, we emphasized that evidence is important to improve our programmes, and the district supervisors became supportive and agreed with the creation of the M&E team.”

In the end, our capacity programme intends to strengthen the use of evidence as a facilitative means to pursue politically sensitive choices, which includes adopting public policies that will sustain effective development in education beyond the usual inputs. Solving the problems of education is only possible if there is a supportive atmosphere both from the top and below that will allow changes to happen. No matter how elegant the policies sound, it is useless if it does not gain traction on the ground. The face-to-face training gave elected officials, career bureaucrats and civil society groups the opportunity to learn from each other constructively. The mentoring phase has given them the space to begin working together and test the most viable policy alternative to help address a common concern in education.

