

STAKEHOLDERS AND DECENTRALIZATION

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Stakeholders are persons or groups with a common interest in a particular action and its consequences and or who are affected by it. All actors in an institutional context are potential or passive stakeholders. In education, this reservoir holds groups as diverse as:

- parents' associations,
- universities and teacher training institutions,
- taxpayers' associations,
- teachers' unions,
- public contractors,
- employers' organizations,
- publishing firms,
- professional organizations,
- political parties, and others.

All these groups have an interest in where decisions are made with respect to the educational agenda and the organizations that participate in the process of educational provision. All are potential stakeholders.

In the process of discussing a proposal for decentralization, some actors are transformed from potential stakeholders to kinetic or active stakeholders. The kinetic stakeholders generally pursue their interests within the situation (context) of a particular organization within the institution. In this context, stakeholders focus upon particular issues that touch directly upon their interests. It is here that toes are stepped upon and dancing partners found, as stakeholders forge coalitions. The process can have transformational effects as coalitions see interests and possible effects not recognized earlier. The transformations in turn lead to shifts in the organizational context.

Active involvement of stakeholders in organizational planning and decision-making increases the likelihood of successful action.

1. Decision-making can be improved by increasing information both about the range of concerns, objectives and commitments of intended beneficiaries of programs, and about alternative means to meet those objectives and concerns while sustaining the commitment. For example, involvement of parents in design of a new curriculum unit may alert planners to sensitive topics that should be avoided. Teachers may be able to suggest alternative ways to organize the unit.
2. Involvement of groups interested in the process and outcome of programs increases the understanding of those groups about the objectives and constraints, heightens the legitimacy of whatever policies are finally chosen, and contributes to mobilizing support for policy implementation.

Decentralization is a primary method for involvement of stakeholders, but not all stakeholders participate with the same intensity at all moments. For example, a proposal to localize control of primary schools attracts the attention of a different set of

¹ Based on Thomas Welsh and Noel McGinn (1999) *Decentralization of education: why, when, what and how?* Paris: UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning.

stakeholders than does a proposal to give autonomy to upper secondary schools that prepare for the university. Perhaps all children go to primary school; a much smaller proportion from families with higher levels of income prepares for entrance into the university. Teacher unions are much less concerned about decisions that affect the location of decisions about textbooks, than about those that affect salaries and transfers. Central governments in countries with ethnically homogeneous populations feel less threatened by proposals for local control of schools than do governments in countries with diverse, heterogeneous populations. On the other hand, calls for decentralization are more common in countries in which ethnic, linguistic or religious groups have developed strong identities.

How Different Groups of Stakeholders React to Decentralization

The interests of stakeholders with respect to location of decision-making take three different forms and identify three categories.

1. Producers

One category of stakeholders is concerned with decisions about the conception and design of the education process, training of the personnel that will be involved, and production of the facilities and materials that will be used. The focus is the construction or production of the capacity to educate. These stakeholders are known as Producers.

This group of stakeholders includes:

- construction companies;
- companies that produce instructional materials including textbooks;
- vendors of uniforms, food, and other consumables;
- insurance companies;
- curriculum and textbook writers;
- teacher training institutions including universities;
- universities and consulting firms that provide technical assistance services;
- companies that produce and apply tests; and
- domestic and international agencies that thrive on the health or illness of the educational establishment.

The primary concern of these stakeholders is the provision or production of the inputs to the education process. Because of economies of scale, most of these Producers are national organizations, even in countries with a high degree of decentralization. In the United States, in which school districts can use whatever textbook they want, most districts buy complete sets covering all grades from one of five national publishers.

2. Distributors

A second set of interests focuses on the location of decisions about the distribution of the “product” that is available. These decisions are about access to education, and the instructional process (including assessment of learning as part of instruction). Decisions on where to locate schools involve different stakeholders than the decision of whether schools will be built at all. Decisions are made about who will be admitted, and who will be kept. The instructional process per se requires decisions made principally by teachers with varying degrees of indirect control by administrators, supervisors and others. The second broad category of stakeholders is Distributors. They include parent groups, representatives of teachers (i.e., unions), managers of schools, and governing groups limited to decisions about application of official curricula.¹

3. Users

A third set stakeholders is concerned with the use to which the results of education can be put. Education transforms individuals, giving them new knowledge, skills and values. These transformations can benefit both the individuals transformed and those who benefit from improved knowledge, skills and values. Students and their parents can use knowledge and certification to enhance the student's life chances (as well as improving the quality of his or her life). Employers hope that educated employees will be more productive, that is, increase profits. Churches rely on education to support ethical and moral systems. Professional societies benefit from the expansion of their membership and knowledge base.

This group of stakeholders is called Users because their primary concern is the use-value of education. These stakeholders have most to say about the content of education, and about its finance. Their concerns are prompted by how education relates to their objectives and not primarily to technical aspects of education itself. Producers using criteria such as quality of production and ease of language, for example, would make selection of textbooks, while Users might be more likely to apply criteria related to specific content. Employers might be less concerned about hours spent on a particular subject and more about whether graduates had proper work habits.

Any given person or group may occupy more than one of these stakeholder categories. For example, a person may be both a parent of a student (a User) and work in the ministry of education (a Producer and a Distributor). The owner of a construction firm is a Producer, and may also be a User concerned with the quality of graduates that s/he can hire. The arousal of these interests will occur in different moments of time, according to the process or cycle of decision-making.

Stakeholder Involvement in Decentralization

Varies According to Tasks

The overall interest of any stakeholder can be categorized in terms of the tasks of the organization that are affected by the policy in question. Education organizations are designed to carry out four major categories of tasks. These tasks can be characterized as referring to Access, Retention, Classification, and Placement. Education organizations:

- recruit, select and admit students;
- attempt to keep them in the system long enough to have some transforming effect;
- sort them into different tracks and levels; and
- certify them for and place them in (institutions of) the larger society.

The broad interests of stakeholders take a specific form according to the kind of task that is under discussion. Each of these tasks is affected by proposals for decentralization.

Some stakeholders call for decentralization with the objective of increasing access to education. Producers benefit directly from expansion of education and therefore are likely to support these kinds of proposals. These stakeholders can be mobilized to support expansion of educational access. Producers will also have some interest in decentralization policies that impact on the retention of students in the system, as improved retention in the short run has the effect of increasing the number of students in the system.

Those involved in distribution are more interested in policies that affect the activities associated with policies of Retention and Classification within the system. Teachers, for example, are primarily concerned with issues that affect the way they

“distribute” education, that is, work with students. These concerns are often defined in terms of quality, but primarily affect the work that teachers are expected to do. Most teacher unions are organized primarily to provide what are considered suitable working conditions and compensation for teachers and to protect their jobs. The managers of education systems also may be concerned with quality, but again focus their attention on the way the work of education is carried out, that is, on the process of distribution.

Some groups that appear to be interested in distribution issues, for example those who call for increased efficiency in education, in fact are concerned primarily about the production process. Although a nod is given to improving quality, almost always the policies they back involve doing the same with less rather than more with the same. Teachers, on the other hand, can be mobilized to do more with the same, as has been demonstrated in the ability of school-based management policies to increase teacher work and student learning with no increase in teacher pay. In effect what is happening here is that teachers are allowed to have a major say in the production of education, and not just in its distribution.

Although parents are Users of education, the benefits of decentralization are not uniform. In a poor country that has not yet achieved universal education, an association representing low-income parents will define access to schooling of any kind as the major objective. They are likely to oppose decentralization proposals that do not increase spending on school construction and hiring of teachers. An association representing middle and upper income parents, on the other hand, might favor a decentralization policy that increases access to higher quality schooling without increasing the overall supply of schools.

Employers also are not a monolithic group, nor is their position with respect to the value of education constant over time. Low technology employers tend to favor policies that produce many graduates with basic skills. When unemployment is high, employers in general are likely to seek to reduce spending on education. They might favor a decentralization policy that relieves the central state (and therefore themselves as a source of tax revenues) of the cost burden. High technology employers tend to favor decentralization schemes that promise to improve knowledge and skill levels, even if that does mean not increasing the number of graduates. At the same time they are likely to favor central involvement in assessment and the imposition of standards.

Efficiency is primarily a concern of groups that want to contain or reduce spending on education or on the level of education in question. User groups that promote decentralization reforms in the name of improved efficiency may be seeking to shift resources from one level of education to another, or from education to some other sector.

ⁱ The distinction between production and distribution of education is useful in countries in which "private" schools have complete autonomy with respect to decisions about instruction but are constrained to follow publicly produced curriculum.