School-based management (SBM) is an approach to education governance that transfers authority from higher levels of the education system to teachers, principals, and parents. Areas of authority transferred can relate to how the school budget is spent, curriculum development, the procurement of textbooks, infrastructure improvement, the monitoring and evaluation of teacher performance, and even the hiring and firing of teachers (World Bank, 2007). Committees made up of parents, teachers, and principals are the most common vehicle for operationalizing the transfer of authority.

Since the early 1990s, SBM has been a very popular governance model that has been pursued widely in international development because of its promise for increasing community participation, improving teacher accountability, engendering greater efficiency, and enhancing education outcomes, among other reasons (Edwards, 2012; Edwards & DeMatthews, 2014). It has been promoted by a wide range of multi- and bilateral development institutions, as well as by influential think tanks, including the World Bank, UNESCO, the Global Partnership for Education, the Asian Development Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, and the United States Agency for International Development, to name only a few.

Within the overall focus on SBM, a recent more recent trend has been to implement SBM models in conflict-affected contexts (CACs). In this area, there are at least three organizations that have explicit policies for supporting SBM—namely, the
International Network for Education in Emergencies, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Interestingly, it should be noted that there are no organizations that oppose the use of SBM in CACs.

Perhaps the most well-known SBM model emerged from El Salvador in the early 1990s and is known at Education with Community Participation (Educación con Participación de la Comunidad, EDUCO). This policy has received a tremendous amount of attention. It was not only widely circulated and adapted by other countries in the 1990s, but was also featured in the World Bank’s 2004 World Development Report as the best example of how to ensure that schools can be held accountable for results (Edwards, forthcoming-a). The core of this model was that parent councils were responsible for hiring and firing teachers, in addition to procuring didactic materials and contributing to the maintenance and construction of schools. As with SBM more broadly, EDUCO has been suggested as relevant for CACs because a reliance on the community can help to fill the gap in the government’s capacity at the local level for providing social services (Beleli et al., 2007; UNESCO, 2011).

However, while EDUCO is seen among international development professionals as being very successful, there is a hidden history of EDUCO that is largely unknown. Moreover, while EDUCO’s history has been discussed recently in other publications (Edwards, 2015; Edwards, Victoria, & Martin, 2015), its implications have not been considered specifically for CACs. This is an important gap that should be addressed because understanding EDUCO’s trajectory helps to shed light on issues that scholars, policymakers, and professionals should be aware of, especially if they are working in CACs. This paper thus attempts to contribute to the literature on education in CACs by revealing the hidden history of EDUCO and by highlighting lessons that can be drawn from this cautionary tale. In addressing EDUCO’s history, I will focus on the context of emergence, the institutional dynamics that constrained its trajectory, and the knowledge base that was produced on EDUCO and which has been key to its perceived relevance. In the final section, I reflect on the implications of EDUCO for CACs. First, however, I briefly comment on theory and method.
Theory: Critical International Political Economy

Theoretically, the findings presented in this paper have been informed by the approach of critical international political economy (Edwards, forthcoming-a). While this approach is extensively discussed in Edwards (forthcoming-a), it can be said here that this theoretical perspective directs attention to the political-economic structural conditions that constrain a country, as well as to the role of international organizations vis-à-vis country-level constraints and the mechanisms through which those organizations influence policymaking and policy diffusion at the national and international levels, respectively. Importantly, beyond the formal processes of policymaking, this theoretical approach directs attention to the larger factors that constrain and enable the government and encourages us to look at them in long-term perspective.

Methods: Longitudinal Case Study

The findings discussed in the sections below are the result of work completed over six years (2009-2015). During this time, I systematically investigated the origins and trajectory of the EDUCO policy, with this research entailing both archival work and 157 interviews with actors at the local, national, and international levels and from relevant governmental and international organizations. Methodologically, drawing on Jensen and Rogers (2001), this research can be understood as a longitudinal case, since the study centered on the evolution of a policy overtime and focused on the dynamics of change. The methods employed to understand the trajectory of this policy have been further discussed in Edwards (2012a).

Context of Emergence: Constraint and Possibility

Due to space constraints, only the essential characteristics of the political-economic context will be reviewed here. To that end, there are three features that need to be acknowledged. The first is the fact of civil war (1980-1992) and the effect this had on the country’s politics. Specifically, not only was the Salvadoran government caught in an on-going war with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—a coalition
of five rebel groups fighting for socialist reform of the land, economy and social services (LeoGrande, 1998)—but this conflict triggered the involvement of the United States, which was operating from a Cold War mindset. In all, during the civil war, the United States channeled $6 billion in military, economic and social aid to El Salvador (Robinson, 2003), with $533 million in military aid arriving in 1985 alone (Booth, Wade, & Walker, 2006). The United States thus held significant influence in Salvadoran politics, particularly as a result of the military and economic aid, without which it is doubtful the government would have been able to remain in power or to prevent the economy from collapsing (Montgomery, 1995).

Dovetailing with the first issue was the second: that is, the international promotion of neoliberal ideology and reform by the Reagan administration, notably through USAID (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007). This organization, as a major player in El Salvador during the 1980s, funded the establishment and rise of Salvadoran think tanks that supported the foreign policy preferences of the United States—a strategy, it should be noted, that has been employed elsewhere (Rappleye, 2011). These think tanks then lent credibility to neoliberal reform principles (e.g., market-deregulation, privatization of state agencies, austerity measures, shrinking of governmental agencies, elimination of state planning, etc.) by hosting famous economists (including the “Chicago Boys”) in addition to helping to elevate the profiles of Salvadoran economists and businessmen, who then promoted and employed the technocratic approaches to policy that resonated with USAID. In these ways, USAID was instrumental in transforming the national political context of El Salvador during the 1980s.

The third and final aspect of relevance here relates to the election in 1989 of the right-wing candidate for president, Alfredo Cristiani. Beyond having his campaign supported by USAID, he came from one of the think tanks that had been funded by this same organization. Moreover, when he transitioned to the presidency, he brought with him “at least 17 business leaders and persons linked with [the USAID-funded think tank]” (Segovia, 1996, p. 55). As the culminating political development of the 1980s, Cristiani’s election had serious implications for the subsequent period of governmental reform. In particular, under the label of modernization, his election signaled that all
governmental would have to accord with the market-based principles of accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. This state of affairs was a far cry from the agrarian reform and social welfare programs that had been pledged by José Napoleón Duarte, president during 1984-1989 who represented the Christian Democrat party (LeoGrande, 1998).

**Institutional Dynamics: Conflict and then Agreement**

In 1990, after 10 years of war, 37 percent of children ages 7-14 were out of school, and statistics were much worse in rural areas, where government-provided services were often unavailable (MINED, 1990). While responding to this situation was one of the first priorities of the Cristiani administration, it is important to note that there were multiple actors vying for influence at this point in time. Moreover, it is essential to highlight that the MINED did not have control of large portions of the country, particularly in the northern regions along the Honduran border, where the FMLN and affiliated rural communities were following an approach to education—known as “popular education”—that had its roots in liberation theology and which reflected the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire in that it taught students to identify and to mobilize against the political-economic structures that contributed to their oppression, such as capitalism, though also against smaller injustices as well (Hammond, 1998). Importantly, though, beyond the critical nature of this educational approach, the informal schools in these areas (and even beyond) were staffed by parents who worked in exchange for donations from the communities. These schools, thus, by default, were community-controlled, managed, staffed, and financed. Furthermore, in that they represented a challenge to the authority of the MINED, the new Minister of Education as of 1990 saw it as one of her goals to incorporate these communities into the official education system going forward.

With the above characteristics in mind, consider the following inter-institutional dynamics. First, after conducting a needs assessment mid-year 1990, a key consultant from UNESCO, who had previously worked on indigenous rights in Bolivia, recommended to the Minister of Education that the government build on the community-
based model she had observed while collecting data for her study. For the Minister of Education, however, this was initially seen as an untenable suggestion because it implied building on the educational model of the FMLN. Additionally, the idea that rural parents could manage schools was seen as unrealistic.

The World Bank was equally skeptical of this suggestion at first. This is important to note because the World Bank—which had recently, in 1989, begun to work in El Salvador again—was at the center of many of the reforms being considered once Cristiani entered office, both within and outside education. Indeed, the World Bank was in the midst of negotiating a structural adjustment loan at the same time that the Minister of Education was exploring options for funding education reform. The implication is that serious education reform could not be pursued without buy-in from the World Bank, since this institution would be the one to fund it. (Note that USAID was funding education reform, too, but their involvement was not focused on the reform of system governance.)

Although initially favoring a reform model based on the voucher system in Chile, the representatives of the World Bank working in El Salvador began to see the opportunity that community-management offered. This change of heart was prompted by two developments. First, the UNESCO consultant showed through the implementation of a pilot program in early 1991 that rural, uneducated parents could, in fact, be trained to hire and pay teachers.

Second, the World Bank staff in El Salvador recognized that a model of educational management based at the community level would represent an extreme form of decentralization. The second realization was crucial for them because, throughout the 1980s, decentralization was a key theme in international development (Conyers, 1983; Edwards, 2012b; Edwards & DeMatthews, 2014). Yet, to that point, the decentralization of state functions had only been envisioned at the state or district level (Winkler, 1989). One reason for decentralization’s popularity was because—as conceived in the dominant, neoliberal discourse—it was portrayed as being a way to make the management and provision of government services more efficient and responsive to the demands of citizens because those citizens would themselves be able to participate in and to influence
(if only by voting with their feet) the way local governments provided those services. Thus, by extending the idea of decentralization to the community-level—and here is a critical point—the World Bank would be able, if successful in El Salvador, to promote and sell a model where the community was thought to hold the teacher accountable, and in a way that was seen as novel since the community would be formally responsible for hiring and firing the teacher (who worked on a one-year contract renewable at the discretion of the school council, itself made up of five parents elected from the surrounding community). Ultimately, then, this idea took the principles of accountability, efficiency, effectiveness and extended them in a way that generated significant excitement on the part of the World Bank.

Once the World Bank saw the potential of the community-based model, it put significant financial and technical resources behind the program—initially $10.3 million and $69.3 million overall in conjunction with the Inter-American Development Bank (Edwards, 2015). The World Bank also began to promote the program in terms of neoliberal principles, sanitizing its critical origins. The Minister of Education, for her part, went with this idea because it met the conditions that constrained her: that is, (a) it expanded educational access, (b) it aligned with the neoliberal principles that were to guide all reform in El Salvador at that time, (c) it had the blessing of the World Bank, and (d) it incorporated and undermined the FLMN communities (because these communities, which suffered from insufficient resources, were not only required to join the EDUCO program if they wanted government funding, but they were also required to hire qualified teachers, which necessarily precluded them from hiring their own popular education teachers, who did not have the proper certifications).

To be clear, the EDUCO program was theorized to function in the following way and to have the following impact. First, the education system would be more efficient if the central MINED transferred to the community level the responsibility for managing the hiring and firing of teachers, the latter of whom would work on one-year contracts that were renewable at the discretion of the school council (of five elected, volunteer parents from the community) that hired them. (Note that these tended to be small schools without principals, though one of the teachers would by default assume
some of the administrative duties typically associated with the principalship.) Not only was this community arrangement seen as inherently more efficient on a system-wide basis (perhaps unofficially because parents helped to build and maintain the school without compensation), but, in addition, this arrangement was seen as more efficient because the school councils would management the school’s budget and would, as such, be responsible for purchasing only the educational materials that the school needed, thereby eliminating waste in purchasing. Moreover, it was thought that this arrangement would promote effectiveness because it would lead to more consistent teacher attendance and improved student test scores, a consequence of the fact that teachers were under the scrutiny of community actors to perform well or else lose their job.\(^{2}\)

Clearly, then, the idea of teacher accountability was central. By turning the local community into an accountability lever, the MINED could generate improved outcomes. The community model of the FMLN—imbued as it was with notions of solidarity and critical consciousness—had thus been transformed into a neoliberal experiment inscribed with mechanistic notions of teacher monitoring and punishment.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that the implementation of this policy was not in doubt. All the dominant organizational and political actors agreed on this policy choice, and so it was only a matter of time and effort. Going forward from 1991, when the first education loan was approved, the World Bank provided close monitoring of the program as well as guidance at each step in the process. By 1994, thousands of communities had been integrated into the EDUCO program. Concretely, while the program began in 1991 with six communities, 3 years later it had 2,316 teachers and served 74,112 students (Cuéllar-Marchelli, 2003). Ten years later, in 2004, these figures had risen to 7,381 and 378,208, respectively.\(^{3}\) Approximately 55 % of rural public schools, which make up two-thirds of all schools in El Salvador, would operate under the EDUCO program (Gillies, Crouch, & Flórez, 2010).

**EDUCO’s Knowledge Basis: A Critical Perspective**

Since the program was implemented nation-wide, multiple studies have been
produced on EDUCO. These studies have been highly influential when it comes to the international popularity of this program, since it is on the basis of these studies that claims of effectiveness and impact have been made. Notably, however, these studies have tended not to be the subject of critical appraisal. Yet it is essential that we have a critical understanding of their findings, in order to learn from EDUCO’s example.

For the purpose of brevity, of the six impact evaluations produced by the World Bank, only one—the most-influential—is discussed here. Nevertheless, the critiques and conclusions presented here are relevant to the other studies, as well. A full discussion of all six studies can be found in Edwards and Loucel (2016).

Generally, it is important to recognize not only that the World Bank produced all of the six evaluations but also that there is an inherent conflict of interest. This is apparent in that the World Bank was evaluating the program which it had been financing and supporting since the early 1990s. However, beyond the obvious threat that this conflict poses to the credibility of the World Bank’s studies, there are other issues as well.

When it comes to the most influential EDUCO study—by Jimenez and Sawada (1999)—the main problem is that we cannot be sure that the conclusions offered by the authors are warranted. The authors employed advanced techniques to control for the inherent bias of the sample, which was a consequence of the fact that EDUCO communities were selected non-randomly and were targeted to the most disadvantaged communities and those affiliated with the FMLN. However, in the end, the quantitative (i.e., regression) results are not able to parse out the effect of the EDUCO program on such outcomes as student achievement, due to interference from other, related variables. Importantly, the authors acknowledge this limitation. They also concede that the significance of their results changes depending on which variables they include. Nevertheless, the authors choose to state in their conclusions that EDUCO did indeed have a positive effect on student language test scores, an effect that, they claim, was produced by enhanced community accountability of teachers.

These conclusions are powerful, particularly given the fact that they are offered by the World Bank and the fact that they were derived from methods that are widely seen
as rigorous and objective (Verger, Edwards, & Kosar-Altinyelken, 2014). To that end, the literature shows that other authors have repeated these conclusions, as did Barrera-Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos, and Santibañez (2009) and Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos (2011) in their reviews of the effectiveness of school-based management in developing countries.

In retrospect, the same studies which have supposedly shown the benefits of the EDUCO program—and which have been picked up and used to spread this idea—can be interpreted differently to offer alternative conclusions. These alternative conclusions clearly cast doubt on the advisability of EDUCO as a public policy and on the supposed benefits of the teacher accountability mechanism at the heart of the EDUCO model. Furthermore, by placing the above critique in the political-economic context of the 1990s, it is suggested that a more appropriate interpretation of the EDUCO program would be that it: (a) was a program which didn’t improve key indicators of quality, (b) imposed costs on the rural parents (who volunteered their time on the ACEs and who helped to build and repair the schools in their communities), (c) sought to weaken the teachers unions (by instituting one-year contracts for EDUCO teachers and precluding teachers from belonging to the unions if they worked in an EDUCO school), and (d) was directed at undermining and incorporating FMLN communities into the official education system (by replacing their popular education teachers and schools with the EDUCO program and with teachers from outside their communities). Of course, this alternative interpretation highlights the political motivations behind EDUCO. But it needs to be remembered that EDUCO was always a political decision, and that it has continued to have political consequences for the global education agenda in that it influenced the priorities of international organizations and other countries when it came to policy options.

**Implications of EDUCO for Conflict-Affected Contexts**

There are at least four implications for CACs that can be highlighted from the experience of EDUCO. First, scholars and practitioners need to look at shifts to larger context and shifts that happen in the political and economic realms. That is, we need to
look at the spaces and forces beyond the official processes of policymaking. This is particularly the case in CACs, since they are often “fragile” or suffer from a lack of capacity. As a consequence, they are susceptible to geopolitical influence from other countries, and that geopolitical influence can shape the overall priorities or approach to reform that a country takes, both during and after the conflict.

Second, we need to be attentive to inter-institutional dynamics and the ways that these dynamics align with constraints at multiple levels. In the case of EDUCO, although the World Bank was a very influential entity, it still had to engage with the Salvadoran government, which in turn had to respond to its particular political context. This is an important point because CACs are often severely impacted by local-level politics, politics which likely contribute to the emergence of conflict in the first place—just as was the case in El Salvador with the war with the FMLN. Thus, when researching or interpreting a policy reform in a CAC, one must look beyond the surface level engagement of international institutions in order to see the other factors that shape education projects and educational reform more generally.

Third, the EDUCO case shows us that we must be careful when it comes to evidence—in terms of its production (since there could be a conflict of interest), its interpretation (since there could be misrepresentation), and its subsequent invocation by organizations and policy entrepreneurs (since it may not show what they claim it to show). Here, the case of EDUCO is especially relevant for SBM in CACs, since EDUCO is often cited as an example for these contexts, and since it was shown above that there are fundamental flaws with the underlying studies, flaws which call into question the claims of effectiveness along such dimensions as student achievement and student retention.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, we need to remember that EDUCO is a model that has was premised on a number of features that are problematic, both generally and in CACs specifically. These features include a narrow and punitive conception of accountability for teachers (which contributes to shifting the focus from community context to teacher responsibility for educational outcomes), the use of one-year contracts for teachers (as opposed to longer term contracts and/or membership in unions, the latter
of which EDUCO teachers were prohibited from participating in), a reliance on volunteer parents (who assume key management functions without compensation, a fact which appeals to policymakers and may contribute to lack of investment in system-wide management capacity), and contributions in cash and in kind from the community to help build and maintain schools (a practice which is practical in the short run but which places extra burden on those who are already marginalized, especially when EDUCO models are implemented in rural areas). All of these aspects place additional strain on communities affected by conflict and may even contribute to conflict since they are largely extractive and can increase tensions and instability. Although some of these strategies—such as relying on community contributions for building educational spaces—may be the best option in the short term for providing education in CACs, policymakers should be sure that punitive and extractive aspects of EDUCO are not incorporated into long-term reform strategies. These comments are not meant to advise against community participation. The International Network on Education in Emergencies (2003), for example, rightly points out the valuable role of community participation in CACs when it comes to developing local-level capacity and providing life-saving educational programs. The point here is that community participation—a la EDUCO—should not be used as a justification for SBM models that undercut capacity, that weaken community empowerment, or that substitute for broader approaches to building vibrant and robust communities.

(Notes)

(1) This and the next section have been adapted from Edwards (2016).

(2) For more on the experience of teachers, parents, and students in EDUCO communities and schools, see Edwards (forthcoming-b), Lindo (1998), SIMEDUCO (2011), and Srygley (2013).

(3) While the EDUCO program was initially only intended as a strategy to provide education at the preschool level and in grades 1–3, it was subsequently expanded in 1994 to cover through grade 6 and then again in 1997 to cover through grade 9 (Meza, Guzmán, & de Varela, 2004). After 2005, even some high schools became EDUCO schools (Gillies, Crouch, & Flórez, 2010).
(4) Note that all impact evaluations of EDUCO were produced by the World Bank and its consultants.

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The Global Education Policy of School-Based Management in Conflict-Affected Contexts


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