

**Formal and Informal Information Production and Dissemination
Networks**

Francisco Téllez

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Introduction

The volume of available information about educational research has grown enormously in recent decades due, in part, to the Internet information networks and portals. The Inter-American Network of Information and Documentation in Education (REDUC) was created in the 1970s for the purpose of disseminating educational research and other types of relevant documents among decision-makers in the region's countries. REDUC circulates this information in volumes containing analytical summaries that are published periodically and distributed to the network's various associated centers. The model originally used by REDUC to distribute its information is completely obsolete today. In this so-called information age, each independent institution or researcher can make the full text of its, his or her research, analyses, opinions, and so forth, immediately accessible to the "global village." Entering the virtual world of Internet is tantamount to entering, among other things, a huge digital library that contains numerous information resources and requires certain skills in order to be able to navigate through it without getting lost in the search.

This almost unlimited access to information via a personal computer connected to the Internet has not necessarily meant that more relevant information is used to construct education policies and programs. There are several studies that suggest that making the information more available to decision-makers does not contribute to resolving the difficult relationship between research and decision-making.

This purpose of this study is to explore the various information networks that exist in Latin America and the Caribbean and to evaluate just how useful they have been in education policy design. In particular, it is aimed at identifying the means that circulate the evidence that certain education policies and programs have produced positive results in countries in and outside the region. As a result, not only are information networks identified in this study, but also website portals of national and international institutions that offer information resources that could be useful to countries in the region.

The study is based on the following hypotheses:

1. Decision-makers are flooded with information and information seekers need the help of mediation.
2. Decision-makers in Latin America are much more aware of what is happening in the region than in the past, but they know little about programs and prospects in the world as a whole, in part because only a very small amount of the information is to be found in Spanish.
3. Seeking information about a particular subject means navigating through several websites.
4. Informal networks produce a stronger impact than formal ones, particularly for defining policy strategies.
5. Little information is available about meta-analyses of what works in education policies and programs.

6. Information sources about higher education may be the weakest point, except in the case of student loan models.

This study was prepared on the basis of data collected from the identified information portals and networks and interviews of decision-makers, information network coordinators and IDB officials who work in the educational sector in different countries of the region.

I. Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this section is to provide a conceptual framework in which to analyze the data collected for this study. The definitions of the terms given below establish the parameters for this investigation.

Information and Knowledge

The terms, information and knowledge, are generally used interchangeably. For purposes of this study, however, they must be differentiated.

According to Dunn (1994), data, information and knowledge are interdependent, yet different, elements within the hierarchy of a cognitive process. Information is data that has been interpreted and organized in such a way as to reach targets or achieve purposes associated with a change in policy-makers' ways of thinking and acting. A good example of this is the information disseminated by ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) or REDUC. Both of these information systems are designed to produce an impact on the way of thinking and acting of decision-makers by furnishing them with information about the various areas of the education system. Knowledge, on the other hand, is information that has been communicated to decision-makers, who transform it into reasonably certain beliefs that will make it possible to achieve aims under changing circumstances. By way of example, legislators may say that they know --as opposed to have been informed-- when they transform information that has been communicated by ERIC or another information source into reasonably certain beliefs about the effects of the size of a class on school achievement and act on the basis of these beliefs to support or reject the package of reforms on the matter. The idea of reasonableness rests on the recognition that it is rarely possible in real life to make declarations of the type that "doing x will lead to y," particularly if we are guided by evidence produced by the social sciences.

The nature of knowledge, its sources and the methodology for attaining it have varied throughout history. No researcher or scientist may boast that he or she possesses the absolute truth in a specific area of knowledge. The paradigms and theories on which we build our knowledge have a relative validity and are perfectly replaceable in the short or medium term (Eichelberger, 1989). For that reason, decision-makers must carefully assess the published results of research that could affect the contents of education policies and programs, for example, in order to determine whether they are legitimate, valid and pertinent to the problem to be resolved.

This is a task that decision-makers are hard put to perform, either because they do not possess the technical capacity that is needed or because they don't have the necessary time. It has also been shown that in doing their work, decision-makers in most cases dispense with the knowledge of experts. It has also been demonstrated that, as a result of their experiences and of other sources, they tend to develop a kind of informal knowledge that guides their decisions. For that reason, it is essential to understand the knowledge produced by decision-makers, in order to link it up with the knowledge that is produced

more formally, which, despite having a relative validity, can help to improve the quality of decisions that are made in the area of education.

Informal knowledge

There is evidence to suggest that decision-makers, to a greater or lesser extent, make decisions based on subjective knowledge developed informally from varied sources (Caplan, 1991). Authors have defined this subjectivity in different ways. Barabba and Zeltman (1991) talk about “frames of reference” that apparently consist of a series of general assumptions, decision-making rules and expectations. This information influencing our attitude toward problems, the way we conceptualize them and the types of solutions we favor for them. Kennedy (1983) uses the term “working knowledge” to refer to this informal knowledge. Working knowledge is the kind of knowledge that decision-makers in general, including policy-managers and -makers use spontaneously and regularly in their work. This type of knowledge is made up of beliefs, assumptions, interests and experiences that influence the behavior of individuals when they work. Cousins and Leithwood (1986) refer to the term “ordinary knowledge” as opposed to knowledge generated by the social sciences. These authors consider that this kind of knowledge, stemming from practical experience, is the basis for most decision-making and actions taken by organizations. Borghoff and Pareshi (1998), distinguish between “implicit” and “explicit” knowledge. Explicit knowledge is formal knowledge that can be packaged as information. It can be found in an organization’s documents: reports, articles, manuals, images, etc. Implicit knowledge, on the other hand, is personal knowledge that is rooted in individual experience and shared and exchanged through direct contact. This knowledge is of key importance for decision-making and action.¹

Transfer and dynamics of implicit knowledge

Sociological studies have shown that a large amount of the knowledge of high-level decision-makers and in communities of symbolic workers² is produced through the informal exchange of implicit knowledge among colleagues and companions at work --in other words, orally (Borghoff y Pareshi, 1998). Mintzberg (1990), for his part, explains that working meetings, telephone conversations and informal talks are the main sources of information used by senior officials to build knowledge and make work decisions. Implicit knowledge, in order to be developed, must be transmitted and flow between people. According to Borghoff and Pareshi, (1998), a simple observation borne out by empirical evidence from various case studies holds the key to the knowledge life cycle: knowledge that does not flow, does not grow, and eventually ages and becomes obsolete and useless. Knowledge that does flow, on the other hand, on being shared, acquired and exchanged, generates new knowledge that constitutes the basis for the learning process of organizations. Existing implicit knowledge can be expanded through its socialization in communities of interest and practice. For that reason, it can be communicated directly

¹ We will use the term “implicit knowledge” hereinafter to refer to informal knowledge..

² We understand this term as defined by Reich (1991).

and effectively. The acquisition of explicit knowledge, on the other hand, is indirect: it must be decodified and recodified within the mental models of each individual, who will then internalize it as implicit knowledge.

It would therefore appear to be essential to recognize the existence and the importance of the knowledge to which we have alluded above, irrespective of the name by which it is known, for carrying out efficient models for the transfer of information relevant to policy-making³. Its recognition is also apparently important for determining the type of information network that works most efficiently and functionally for these models.

Knowledge Management

The notion of “Knowledge Management” (KM) has appeared only recently. It has been developed mainly in literature about business management and has taken on growing importance as the volume of available information for business management and for decision-making in general increases exponentially. In many cases, it is not possible to discern what information or knowledge is relevant for a given decision-making process.

Almost all of the definitions of KM that have been found refer to the capacity of organizations to generate, share and use information and knowledge in order to reach their targets more efficiently. It is a matter of ensuring that individuals who play a productive function in organizations, both private and public, acquire the knowledge they need and in the place and at the moment they need it, in order to do their work efficiently. This relates to the capacity of organizations to adjust to new challenges or situations through effective management of the process of generating, sharing, and using relevant knowledge. An organization’s capacity for learning does not lie exclusively in its top- and middle-level management, but extends to all of its members. In this sense, learning and doing are more important to organizational success than the dissemination and imitation of knowledge. (Bambooweb Dictionary⁴)

Quality and Pertinence of Information

In order to be able to arrive at a definition of the quality and relevance of information for policy-making, several concepts are defined below.

Information for policies

Oh (1996) affirms that information, in the context of policy-making, is understood to be that which the policy-makers need to address a problem or a policy solution. The information for policy-making may come from systematic and/or scientific research into a policy problem, or from other sources (for example, the media, political talks, etc.) that may have very little empirical backing. In this case, it is understood that information changes or enhances the way policy-makers view policy problems and equips them with

³ It is pertinent to recognize that information, at the policy design level, is only one of the factors that influences or could influence the process. There are others, like the pressure exerted by stakeholders, restricted budgets, political interests, etc., that at times conspire to ensure that the information is not taken into account or is given very little consideration.

⁴ http://www.bambooweb.com/articles/k/n/Knowledge_management.html

criteria or conceptual maps for deciding how to confront those problems. By way of example, the preparatory activities for an educational reform frequently include strategies to produce relevant information for understanding the factors that affect the educational area where the alleged problems are to be found (quality and equity, for example) and for obtaining criteria or guidelines for efficient policy-making and implementation.

There are at least two moments in a policy development process where quite different information is needed. The first is the structuring of the problem to be addressed --in other words, information that will make it possible to determine the nature of the problem and its main causes. Information about policy problems is the most critical for developing an efficient policy, inasmuch as the way a problem is defined will determine our ability to seek and find appropriate solutions. Unsuitable or false information at this stage of the policy-making process could be fatal, for it could lead to the projection of solutions to attack non-existent or less crucial causes for the problem's existence (Dunn, 2003). For example, there could be several reasons for the poor teaching in schools in a given community. Lack of knowledge or a deficient diagnosis of these causes could lead authorities to invest a good part of their budget in minor causes and leave the main ones unresolved.

The second moment is the strategy design to resolve the policy problems that were structured. Here, the information that is needed has to do with an analysis of the possible alternative solutions that exist and an evaluation of which could most efficiently resolve a specific problem. In order to select a policy, information is needed about the policy's expected results. Information about what policy to choose also depends on the judgments made about the value or usefulness of the expected results (Dunn, 2003).

Factors that Influence the Use of Information in Policy-making

Literature on the subject identifies several factors that affect the use of information in policy-design. For purposes of this study, we will break these down into three categories that will help us understand the conditions that must be met in order to increase the possibility of using the relevant information for policy-making that is available in different types of information networks. These categories are:

- 1) Complexity of the policy decisions
- 2) Characteristics of the decision-makers
- 3) Characteristics of the information

Complexity of the policy decisions

Several authors (Dunn, 1994; Weiss, 1990; Anderson & Biddle, 1991; and Haddad, 1994; among others) have drawn attention to the complexity of the policy-making process, particularly in the education sector. That complexity, which is due mainly to technical and political elements, affects the probability that that information will influence the decision-making process.

Four elements are associated with the complexity of a policy decision, according to Dunn (1994): (1) Number of policy alternatives in a decision process; (2) degree of consensus on the value or usefulness of each alternative; (3) number of stakeholders and decision-makers involved in a policy decision; and (4) degree of certainty about the results of the policy alternatives. These four elements, in Dunn’s opinion, create four types of policy problems:

Well-structured problems, which are those involving one or a few decision-makers and a small number of policy alternatives. The benefits reflect a consensus on the goals that have been clearly arranged hierarchically in keeping with a decision-maker’s preferences. The results of each alternative are completely certain or have certain acceptable probable margins of error (risk).

Moderately structured problems. These are problems that involve one or more decision-makers and a relatively limited number of alternatives. The benefits also reflect the consensus reached on goals that are clearly organized hierarchically. The results of the alternatives, however, are neither certain nor can they be calculated within acceptable margins of error. This means that the probability of error cannot be estimated at all.

Ill-structured problems. The distinguishing feature of these problems is the involvement of several different decision-makers whose values are unknown or cannot be consistently organized hierarchically. As a result, the main characteristic of ill-structured problems is the conflict between competing goals. The policy alternatives and their consequences may also be unknown.

Table 1: Structural Differences among the Three Classes of Policy Problems

Element	Problem Structure		
	Well-structured	Moderately structured	Ill-structured
Decision-makers	One or a few	One or a few	Many
Alternatives	Limited	Limited	Unlimited
Benefits	Consensus	Consensus	Conflict
Results	Certainty	Uncertainty	Unknown
Probabilities	Calculable	Incalculable	Incalculable

All or almost all of the important public policy problems, particularly in the educational sector, are ill-structured. This means that they are defined by the presence of multiple stakeholders with conflicting positions and that the results of the policies that can be carried out are uncertain or risky.

Weiss (1990) reached the same conclusion when he pointed out that policy decisions are the result of a complicated conjunction of forces that can be noted in a democratic system, where several different groups armed with an array of ideologies, interests and information seek to influence public policy.

The complexity of policy decisions can affect the use of information about political and technical aspects. The use of rational procedures like policy analysis and strategic planning has characterized policy construction in recent decades (Reimers & McGinn, 1997; Stone, 1997). According to Stone (1997), this rationality simply means choosing the best means to reach a given target. And in order to evaluate those best means, it is necessary to use information. From the technical viewpoint, the more complex the policy problem, the more information will be needed to evaluate the policy alternatives and reduce uncertainty over the results of the policy.

This complexity can also influence the type of information that is used for policy-making. Complex policy issues are viewed differently by different stakeholders, creating differences over how to address those policies. In cases of conflict over or an absence of consensus on policy solutions, policy-makers tend to seek information or knowledge that supports their positions (Spaapen, 2001). As a result, from a policy viewpoint, the more complex a policy problem, the more likely it is that information and arguments will be used selectively and often distortedly to support a decision (Knorr, 1977).

Characteristics of the Decision-Maker

The personal characteristics of decision-makers frequently determine up to a certain point what and how much information is taken into consideration in a policy-construction process. Patton et al. (1977), on the basis of research into the area of evaluation, identified the “personal factor” as a key variable for explaining the use of information in decision-making processes. They contend that when one or a group of decision-makers is personally interested in the evaluation and its conclusions, these studies are more likely to be used. On the other hand, when the personal factor is missing, these studies will have no impact. Patton et al. (1977) found in their study that the personal factor led decision-makers to undertake studies in order to satisfy information needs. In other words, the decision-makers’ personal interest in making informed decisions can lead to their personal involvement in producing information. These authors found this factor so important that they even suggest that the acute instability of federal program execution in the United States is one of the main reasons why evaluations are used so little. They distinguish between three types of instability:

- (1) high rotation rates among senior government officials, with the result that the person initially interested in making an evaluation could be in a completely different office before the study was finished;
- (2) reorganization of government offices, with the result that decision-making patterns are unstable, personnel are frequently reassigned, and the responsibilities are constantly changing; and
- (3) program mobility, so that as programs are transferred from one office to another there is a noticeable structural reorganization.

Ruskus and Alkin (1984), who reported heavy use of evaluation studies when the users themselves are involved in data design and collection, corroborate the importance of the personal factor to some extent. These authors believe that a possible explanation for this impact is that the users’ involvement in the evaluation process leads them to show a

preference as to which program they should use and how it should operate. In addition, Reimers and McGinn (1997) reported several cases where the direct involvement of policy-makers in research processes reinforced the use of information for policy construction. According to these authors, it is necessary to stop seeing researchers as producers and decision-makers as knowledge users. They propose an adjustment in perspective toward viewing policy-makers as choosers of the research products to be consumed and helpers of researchers in framing the problems to be resolved, so that the information that is produced by the investigation will be more useful for policy purposes. In this way, both researchers and decision-makers become builders of knowledge through dialogue. The experience these authors have recorded about their work in different countries as education policy consultants, seeking to build knowledge jointly with policy-makers, demonstrates to some extent that this approach may be useful (see Reimers y McGinn, 1997, pps. 127-176).

Characteristics of the Information

There are at least 3 aspects of the information that affect its use for decision-making: 1) the intelligibility of the information, 2) the information's adjustability to personal or organizational beliefs, and 3) kinds of investigation produced by the research.

1. Intelligibility of the information. Information that is easily understood by decision-makers is more likely to be used than more complex information. A document that is relevant for policy-making purposes must be concise, well-organized, simple as to the presentation of policy alternatives, and easy to read (combining written text with illustrations, graphs, figures, etc.) (Dunn, 1994). Cousins and Leithwood (1986) add, based on a systematic review of empirical studies on the use of evaluation studies, that the use of oral, non-technical language enhances the understanding and appreciation of the results, and increases their use.
2. The information's adjustability to personal or organizational beliefs. Information is more likely to be used when it supports and is not contrary to the interests of the organization or individuals who are carrying out the decision-making process (Oh, 1996). Cousins and Leithwood (1986) reached a similar conclusion, pointing out that when the results are in keeping with the expectations of the decision-makers, their acceptance and use increase. Caplan (1991), for his part, in a study about the use of knowledge in constructing public policies, found that many decision-makers who reject information that is relevant for policies, do so because they feel that it contradicts what they consider to be true. This author concludes that high-level officials are generally willing to accept the results of studies that are in line with their beliefs, but unwilling to accept results that are inconsistent with or that contradict those beliefs.
3. Kinds of information produced by the research. Reimers and McGinn (1997) distinguish between the information produced through policy research from that designed for understanding reality. The former is more pertinent for policy construction because it foresees the consequences of an action, while the latter generally only clarifies why reality is the way it is, without describing how it could be made different. Sector analysis, sector evaluation and evaluation studies

are examples of policy research. The results of studies of this kind can produce information that is relevant for the different stages of policy construction; the first two are useful for diagnosing a policy problem, while the last can be used to estimate the degree to which a policy has achieved its aims and what should be modified for future actions (Reimers, McGinn, & Wild, 1995). According to these same authors, most researchers are interested in conducting more basic studies that are not directly relevant for policy-making. This could be an explanation for the well-documented lack of connection between decision-making and research.

The conclusion to be reached from what has been stated thus far is that the quality and relevance of information has to do with several factors. In the first place, it must provide concrete answers to the two phases of policy development (structuring of the problem and design of the strategies for its solution). Here, it should be explained that, as regards the policy solutions phase, the development of a strategy can begin with information whose only purpose is to chart the course for the search for or discovery of more specific answers --in other words, information that offers major guidelines or criteria that enable the decision-maker to discover more specific search routes or strategies. For example, the knowledge of an in-service teacher training experience that is producing positive results in a given country could motivate a policy-maker to start a search for more specific information with which to analyze the possibility of carrying out that experience successfully in his or her country. It is information that opens up hitherto unforeseen possibilities for action.

Then comes all of the information that makes it possible to gauge or estimate the concrete consequences that a policy with given characteristics will produce. This information should include the strategy's political viability and its monetary costs.

In the second place, the information must be clear-cut and concise and strict and reliable studies or systematization processes must have been used in its production. Furthermore, insofar as possible, the decision-maker must have participated to some extent in the production of that information. In this sense, information that is produced by international, multilateral or foreign institutions, in which local decision-makers have no input whatsoever, could end up not being very relevant or fail to be considered in the policy construction processes, particularly if the decision-maker's profile is more political than technical.

Information network concept

Different definitions may be applied to the term "network." Some are more general, like the one proposed by Castells (1999), who defines a network as a series of interconnected nodes, nodes being construed to mean "the point at which a curve intersects itself" (p.506). On the other hand, we find more operational definitions for organizational work performed with interconnected computers. Along this same line, we have the definition proposed by Chisholm (1998), who defines network as a series of autonomous

organizations that join together to reach goals that none would have be able to achieve on its own. Other authors (Alter & Hage, 1993) use the term “systemic networks” to refer to groups of organizations that make decisions jointly and work together to produce a product or service.

In the case of information networks, their main purpose, especially from the viewpoint of people who need to make decisions in a given area, is clearly to enhance the efficiency of policy and program design or adjustment. The transfer of information about one country’s experiences to others, or between people, enables the country or user agents of that information to step-up and/or explain the kinds of policies and programs that are better-suited to resolving a policy problem. In this way, solutions that are developed to address a problem in one country may be extremely pertinent for another country facing similar problems, saving the latter country time and resources of different kinds that would have been needed to design its own solutions.

In this sense, the idea conveyed by the term “knowledge management,” of generating, sharing and using knowledge to comply with proposed objectives, is perfectly applicable to an information network.

II. Identification of Information Networks and Internet Portals

This section sets out the results of the search for information networks and Internet portals that offer information resources that are relevant or pertinent for the design and adjustment of education policy and programs in the region.

To that end, two different types of information networks were identified: “formal networks” and “informal networks.” Formal information networks are those that are created for the explicit purpose of sharing information in a given area. The members of those networks, as either information producers or users, circulate data and information through means that are primarily digital. Informal networks, for their part, are those that operate in practice as networks, although there is no explicit purpose for doing so. In other words, they are potential nodes within a global network that only becomes effective when two or more of its members enter into contact and share information. This is the case of education experts or consultants who travel from country to country carrying with them information about experiences with policies and programs that other countries could be potentially interested in noting and analyzing. It is also the case of international meetings where decision-makers, as part of the meeting program or not, transfer information about their programs and policies to each other.

This study identified and analyzed only the formal information networks. The informal networks were covered only in the interviews of decision-makers.

Also included are portals containing national and international educational information that could be of interest to decision-makers or technical teams of public institutions in the region because of the information resources they offer with regard to programs and policies and empirical studies.

Networks identified

A sample of the education information networks and portals referring to Latin America and the Caribbean that were identified during the search process is presented below.⁵ It is not intended to be highly representative of the types of networks and portals that are available to the general public today. The search process to identify networks and then analyze them was relatively brief and it is quite likely that more than one network or portal was left out which, because of its importance, should have been included in this sample.

A short description of its objectives is given for each network or portal, followed by a description of the information resources it offers with respect to studies and programs that are potentially useful for education policy construction.

1. RELPE (Latin American Network of Educational Portals)

⁵ All of the identified networks and portals are included in an Annex to this document.

RELPE is a network of educational portals that was officially launched in 2004. In principle, it can be conceived as a constantly growing and renewed distributed regional system for the storage and circulation of educational contents, whose nodes are the national education portals designated by each country to comprise the Network.

A true community is expected to be formed for exchange and collaboration among both those responsible for education policy in the different countries and the portals' management and technical teams. The construction of process standards and methodologies is also foreseen in order to position the Network as a point of reference in the region and the world with regard to the collaborative management of educational contents.

The RELPE portal itself does not offer information about policies and programs. There are links from the portal to the national portals, each of which makes the contents it wishes to share available to the Network.

2. REDAL (School Networks in Latin America)

REDAL is a qualitative study about the operation of School Networks that have experience and influence in Latin America. Cases in point are Argentina's *Red TELAR*; Brazil and Paraguay's *Enlaces Mundiales*; Chile's *Enlaces*; Costa Rica's *Red Telemática Educativa*; Colombia's *Conexiones* and Mexico's *Red Escolar*.

REDAL's objectives are:

- a) Identify and understand through school networks the critical factors that contribute to the successful use of ICTs in education.
- b) Produce guidelines that could serve as orientation for education policy decision-making with regard to ICTs and the school networks in Latin America.

The research took 20 months --from August 2003 to April 2005-- and was financed by the International Development Research Centre of Canada.

3. APICE (Pan-American Association of Educational Credit Institutions)

APICE is a private, non-profit international organization comprised of public, private or mixed institutions whose basic objective is to promote, coordinate and manage academic programs of educational loans, scholarships and other financial aids for students in the American Republics. Its headquarters are in Colombia.

APICE has the following information resources:

Offers of **educational credit in Colombia** (there is a link to the offer of educational credit in Latin America).

Offers of **scholarships for study** in various institutions (Canada, Spain, Cuba, etc.)

Educational financing **statistics**

“Apice al día” **Bulletin**

(Latest edition available: September 15 to 30, 2005. The bulletin is circulated bimonthly.)

In addition to these resources, it has a link to publications in which only two investigations published in the past five years (2000 and 2003) appear. Both refer to the educational credit situation in Latin America and in other regions. Only the 2003 investigation is available on line. The site does not provide an up-to-date analysis of the educational credit situation in the region.

4. CERI (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation)

The OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation was inaugurated in 1968 for the purpose of providing educational research for education policy analysis and innovation. It specifically offers publications and documents about policies in several areas: Statistics, Country information, including Latin American and Caribbean countries, although information about education is not always included, and a directory of recent CERI publications (2003 - 2004).

5. PREAL (Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas)

“The Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL) is a hemispheric network of public and private organizations that are interested in helping to improve educational quality and equity by promoting informed debates on education policy and education reform issues and on the identification and dissemination of good practices and the evaluation and monitoring of educational progress. Institutions and persons belonging to the business world, civil society organizations, the government sector, international organizations, universities and actors in the political and social world in general participate in this network.”

The PREAL portal offers several information resources that could be relevant for education policies. The following types of documents are among the most important:

- **National Report Cards:** These are reports of PREAL’s monitoring of the educational situation in Latin America, the Central American countries and some selected countries of the region. They are designed to serve as an instrument for diagnosis and the formulation of recommendations.
- **PREAL Documents.** These are working papers on education policies.
- **Policy Series.** Series consisting of 3 annual issues containing policy recommendations.

- **Best Practices Series.** Documents that describe programs and experiences relating to educational development.
- **Executive Policy Summaries.** Two-page documents describing educational policy programs and trends.
- **Books.** These offer a description and analysis of different education programs and policies.

In addition, PREAL organizes 4 working groups in the following areas: Standards and Evaluation, Teachers' unions, Teaching professionalization, and School Decentralization and Autonomy. Pertinent information for policy-making can be accessed in each of these groups. The working group on Standards and Evaluation is presented below.

6. Working Group on Standards and Evaluation in Latin America (PREAL Group)

This is a “regional network of specialists and non-specialists that began to be formed at the end of 1998 in order to promote the educational evaluation of accomplishments in school learning and the introduction of standards in Latin America and that produced recommendations at the regional, national or local levels. Its end purpose is to help reinforce the improvement of educational quality, relevance, equity and efficiency in the region... It considers that the standards and evaluation are key policy instruments of a responsible policy when they effectively involve all of the social actors that should participate in education policy-making and execution.”

Information resources: **events** linked to the subject area (file of those held and information about scheduled events); links to **external training activities**; Latin American **press** news linked to the area of work (there is an exclusive section that presents experiences in publishing the results of tests and evaluation systems in Latin America called “clippings”);

Methodological resource: Teaching cards on educational evaluation; internal search engine.

Relational resource: forums for thematic discussions, moderated by specialists (Topics presented: "Myths, controversies and policies in educational evaluation in Latin America" and "Policies on the evaluation of learning achievements in Latin American educational systems"); and registration cards to record the information.

7. International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)

The IIEP is a UNESCO center with headquarters in Paris, whose mission is “to help the Member States improve the quality and effectiveness of their educational systems. It is specialized in educational planning and management. While the Institute’s main activities are training and research, it also provides services to interested Member States.

The “Fundamentals of education planning” collection consisting of several titles that present the state-of-the-art in different subject areas and that are written mainly by external authors are among the IIPE’s publications. The collection points up the recent advances in education policy and planning and discusses their implications.

The Institute’s main activities are the following:

In research and observation:

- Observation
 - Trend monitoring
 - Emergency situations
 - Ethics and corruption
 - HIV/AIDS coordination
 - Recent activities

- Basic education
 - Access to education
 - Secondary education
 - Decentralization
 - Impact of HIV/AIDS
 - Recent activities

- Higher education
 - Building up universities
 - Restructuring
 - A world market
 - Role of industry
 - Virtual universities
 - Professional education
 - Recent activities

- Educational quality
 - Computerized research
 - Informed policies
 - Creation of consortiums

- Financial management
 - Education costs
 - Financing schools
 - Preparing the budget
 - Auditing
 - Recent activities

8. BUENOS AIRES IPE

The Buenos Aires IPE is the IPE's first regional headquarters. It was created in response to Latin America's specific situation and particularly to the interest aroused by the educational transformation under way in most of the region's countries.

The Buenos Aires IPE has three links in its portal to information sources that may be useful for education policies in Latin America; these are:

1. The on-line Bibliographical section that makes it possible to consult over seventy articles and publications on education management and policy.
2. IPE documents. A "series of unpublished documents presented by the professionals on the IPE staff in the course different academic activities" are to be found here.
3. Publications: These are documents whose purpose is to disseminate the results of the Buenos Aires IPE – UNESCO training, research and technical assistance activities.

9. CIPPEC (Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth)

CIPPEC is an organization that works in several public policy spheres. In the case of education, CIPPEC set itself the mission of "strengthening the relationship of the national State and of the provincial states with civil society and of the institutional capacity of those States to implement education policies that will improve the equity and quality of education in order to make it a basic means of social transformation."

CIPPEC's web page offers a series of investigations and studies of education policies in Argentina. These publications include:

1. Books
2. Series of Studies about the State, Power and Education in Argentina.
3. Series of Provincial Reports prepared under the Project "The Educational Provinces"
4. Working papers.
5. Public Policy papers.
6. Education policies newspaper: Educational States.

The books are the only ones on the foregoing list that are not on line.

10. INEP (Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research)

The INEP defines itself as "a self-sufficient federal body connected to the Ministry of Education, whose mission is to **promote studies, research and evaluations of the**

Brazilian education system for the purpose of **subsidizing public policy formulation and implementation** for the educational area within parameters of **quality and equity** and of **producing clear and reliable information** for managers, researchers, educators and the general public.”

It offers information resources relating to, among other things, statistical data on the Brazilian education system, the evaluation of courses and institutions and the preparation of examinations. It also has a catalogue of publications that are available in both a physical and a virtual library.

11. ENLACES (LINKS) NETWORK

The Enlaces Network is a policy initiative that seeks “to introduce information and communication technologies in Chile. Its focus has been on fostering equitable access to the new technologies by linking up networks and computers in the country’s educational establishments. Enlaces also committed itself to the preparation of human resources as a key element of this technological incorporation process and to that end continues to train teachers in large numbers.”

Among its information resources, it offers publications, papers and documents that contribute to the understanding of the many dimensions involved in the integration of informatics into the education system. Included are reflections and studies about the impact of ICTs on the management, organizational culture and different areas of learning, among other possible spheres of action.

12. ETIS (Education, Work, Social Insertion) Network

The Etis Network seeks to contribute to debates on education and work by offering a space for the production of knowledge, its systematic organization and its dissemination throughout the region. It also serves as a bridge between several actors: researchers, officials, directors of educational and training institutions, and NGOs, etc. Its general purpose is to provide inputs for the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies and education, training and social insertion programs by coordinating with different regional networks.”

Its main areas of interest are: the Labor market, Labor segmentation, Labor and social insertion of youth, and the Education-work relationship.

Its information resources are: the dissemination of events and socialization of projects and experiences.

13. GRADE (Group for the analysis of development)

Grade's mission is "to conduct applied research in order to encourage and enhance public policy debate, design and implementation. Ever since its founding in Lima, Peru in 1980, GRADE has devoted its efforts to the study of economic, educational, environmental and social issues in important areas for the development of Peru and of other Latin American countries. The institution seeks to disseminate its finding among policy-makers and the general public."

A series of unclassified publications are presented in the specific area of education, although a search engine does exist by author and date. There are also links to the network's most important investigations and the projects that are under way are presented.

14. Portals of the Region's Ministries of Education

The Ministry portals generally reflect the countries' current production and reflection.⁶ Some of them offer a variety of policies, programs and projects they are conducting to cope with problems of poor educational quality and equity. Others, however, have portals with little content and few links to sites that frequently do not offer any substantive information about they projects they are executing.

15. Latin American Regional Consultative Group

The Consultative Group for Latin America is one of the seven regional centers created by the Consultative Group on Early Childhood and Development for the exchange of knowledge between the network of networks and institutions that work on Child Care and Development in Latin America.

Its main objective is to improve and disseminate policies and programs that will help to better the quality of life of boys and girls in the region through participatory strategies aimed at democratizing information and knowledge in the hemisphere.

The priority topics for the network are: guidelines for upbringing, work with parents, training of human talent, early childhood indicators, significant experiences (dissemination of good practices or relevant experiences), coordination processes (between educational levels or grades) and emerging issues (Aids, abuse and mistreatment, and indigenous children).

The site offers diagnostic aspects (realities and contexts, where some UNICEF reports are presented); service policies (in Colombia, specifically; then a series of links that lead to international declarations on behalf of children).

⁶ See the description of various Ministry portals in the Annex.

16. OLPED (Latin American Observatory of Education Policy)

The OLPED is a multidisciplinary space for research, analysis, dissemination and documentation about education policies in Latin America.

It includes ample information about bulletins and similar social networks and has an on-line document bank with a search engine by key word, title, country or author. It also offers a space for the educational research conducted by the Public Policy Laboratory of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro State. Lastly, the area for documents presents reports on the education policies of some Latin American countries (Brazil, Argentina and Ecuador) during some of their past administrations.

17. REDUC (Latin Network of Information and Documentation in Education)

REDUC is a network of public and private institutions of almost all of the Latin American countries. Ever since its creation in the 1970s, it has had the following objectives:

- Interconnect knowledge in education with decision-making action and processes in order to improve the quality and efficiency of education in the region's countries.
- Collect studies, research and information about education in Latin America.
- Process that research in the form of Analytical Summaries of Education (RAEs).
- Disseminate that processed information among the varied group of REDUC users.
- Encourage informed conversations about education in the region, oriented toward producing new knowledge in order to confront each country's educational problems.

The database of RAEs consists of about 20,000 Analytical Summaries of investigations and studies of Education in Latin America. The network also offers a database containing 1,116 full-text documents (in Adobe-Acrobat format), selected from the database of RAEs.

18. RIACES (Iberoamerican Network for Quality Accreditation in Higher Education)

RIACES is an "association of agencies and institutions that evaluate and accredit the quality of higher education. It is independent from any State and its members must have competence in the subject that is recognized by their respective governments or States. The purposes of the Network are to promote cooperation and the exchange of material on quality evaluation and accreditation of higher education among the Iberoamerican countries and to contribute in that way to guaranteeing the quality of higher education in those countries."

The site has a database on the various procedures used in each country to regulate the accreditation of higher education. It only possesses a publications bank and provides a link to the organizations responsible for those publications.

19. SITEAL (System of Information and Trends in Education in Latin America)

SITEAL's mission is to analyze trends that reveal problems of inequity in access to education, delve more deeply into the study of the relationship between education and society, investigate the impact on the educational system of the different economic and social scenarios in the region, and indicate the effects of education on family quality of life and social dynamics.

It is a program that is conducted jointly by the International Institute for Educational Planning – Buenos Aires (IIEP – UNESCO, Buenos Aires Regional Headquarters) and the Organization of Iberoamerican States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI).

It has a database that is divided into two sections:

1. Available indicators organized into four dimensions:
 - Access to education,
 - Internal Efficiency and Continuance (in the educational system),
 - Relationship between Study and Work among Adolescents and Youth, and
 - Educational achievements.

2. Indicators on work

20. THE UNESCO REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The general purpose of this international organization is to sow peace in the minds of men through education, culture, science and communication.

The site is organized into the following spaces (in addition to the institutional presentation and the general orientation):

(1) Regional Forums and Networks

- Scientific educational network:
- Regional Education for All Forum
- UNESCO Associated Schools Network
- Permanent Forum on Secondary Education
- Educational Innovations Network, INNOVEMOS
- KIPPUS. Teaching Network for Latin America
- School Leadership Network
- LLECE (Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of Quality in Education)

- SIRI (Regional Information System)

(2) PREALC (Regional Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean)

(3) Virtual library

- Bibliographical base:
- Digital documents

(4) Education for All

UNESCO/OREALC offers a wide range of information resources that correspond to different educational problems and themes in Latin America and the Caribbean. Some of those themes, for which studies and analyses are provided, are the following:

- Literacy and education of youth and adults
- Cultural diversity
- Teachers: Conflicts in educational systems
- Teachers and ICTs
- Teachers: Professional training and development of teachers
- Scientific and technological education for all
- Education and Sustainable Development
- Early childhood and family education
- Literacy and education of youth and adults
- Inclusive education
- Intercultural bilingual education
- Early childhood and family education
- Secondary education
- Technical and professional education
- Education and gender
- Statistics and indicators: Development of indicators
- Statistics and indicators: Building up national capacities (for the production, analysis and use of statistics)
- Educational assessments: International studies
- Educational assessments: Investigation of associated factors
- Educational assessments: Educational standards
- Educational assessments: Strengthening of National Systems
- Educational assessments: Other Areas of Assessment
- Educational financing
- Innovations in education
- Leadership in education
- Prevention of HIV/AIDS
- Educational situation: Regional analysis

21. INNOVEMOS. Educational Innovations Network for Latin America and the Caribbean UNESCO

The INNOVEMOS Regional Educational Innovations Network is conceived as an interactive space and permanent forum for reflection on and the production, exchange and dissemination of knowledge and practices concerning innovations and educational change, in order to help better the quality and equity of education in its various modes and programs. INNOVEMOS is a regional network of national networks that include institutions of different kinds with differing spheres of competence (schools and non-formal educational programs, centers for educational research and promotion, ministries of education, and universities, etc.), different territorial levels (regional, national and local) and different thematic areas (institutional development, teaching and learning processes, professional development, education and work, diversity and equity; and education and culture).

The network revolves around six subject areas or “circuits”:

- Teaching and learning
- Professional development
- Institutional development
- Diversity and equity
- Education and culture
- Education and work

Each subject area has the following sections endowed with information resources: Innovations bank. Innovative educational experiences are presented here, together with those responsible for them. In some cases, documents are proposed to lay the groundwork for the actions. A free and open space in which to express opinions is available for each experience that is presented.

The “To know more” section has an on-line documents registry with references to publishers.

This is followed by the “share your experience” section, where the educator or person responsible for the educational projects is asked to present his/her experience, which is then published on a list.

22. ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean)

ECLAC was founded “to contribute to Latin America’s economic development, coordinate actions for its promotion and reinforce the countries’ economic relations with each other and with the rest of the world. Its activities were

subsequently extended to the Caribbean countries and the objective of promoting social development was incorporated.”

The information resources connected with education are organized in the following way:

Analyses and research

- (a) Teaching staff and student population. This is broken down into: abandonment of studies, students and teaching staff.
- (b) Education planning and policy. This is broken down into 15 thematic categories. For purposes of this study, it is interesting to emphasize:
 - Education statistics
 - Education policy
 - Education programs
 - Education reform
- (c) Teaching systems. This is broken down into 15 subsections.

ECLAC magazine

- (a) Teaching staff and student population
- (b) Education planning and policy
- (c) Teaching systems

23. IDB – Inter-American Development Bank

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), before undertaking lending and financing activities, conducts research and disseminates knowledge about development issues, tasks that lay the groundwork for the discussion of the policies to be implemented. These products include studies, monographs, notes, books, reports, publications, information bulletins, training programs, conferences and seminars to support the organization’s mission and objectives. The Bank’s departments that are most heavily engaged in this activity are the Research Department (RES), the Sustainable Development Department (SDS), and the Integration and Regional Programs Department (INT), but the Bank’s operations and other departments also engage in research and the dissemination of knowledge.

These products are broken down into three functional groups:

- Strategy and policy. They contribute to both regional and institutional programming and help to define the operational strategies, policies, and directives. The products include macroeconomic instruments, policy and strategy documents and reports for corporate planning.
- Analysis and assessment. The assessment activities enable the Bank to review and analyze the projects it finances, development objectives, strategies, policies,

- corporate programs, budget returns on its annual operating plans and objectives. This information is extremely useful for keeping shareholders up-to-date on the Bank's returns and for reporting, with the management, on the lessons learned.
- Creation and dissemination of knowledge. This category includes the products that inform and advise authorities in Latin America and the Caribbean, provide data that will serve as a basis for analyses in future reports, determine what resources will be made available to borrowers in the future, administer training to the officials of the executing agencies in the social area, and disseminate technical knowledge.

It is the Bank's **Sustainable Development Department** that collects information about education.

The information is classified into two major groups:

- (1) By educational level or subject
- (2) By type of resource

The following information is provided by Levels:

- Preschool: No information is given
- Higher education: There are publications classified into three categories: strategies and policies, technical reports and annals, and books and magazines;
- Primary and secondary education: Publications display titles for the following categories: Technical reports and annals, and Working Papers.

24. IBE-UNESCO (International Bureau of Education)

“The IBE's main mission is to operate as UNESCO's specialized center for the development of educational contents, methods, and infrastructures. The Organization builds networks that make it possible to share experiences and competencies in curriculum development in all of the world regions, promotes innovations in curriculum conception and implementation, and helps to strengthen practical competencies and regional and international cooperation.”

Publications

The Educational INNOVATION and Information magazine offers short articles on current educational research, activities conducted within the IBE, and news items about the field of comparative education.

The Educational Practices Series is published jointly with the International Academy of Education. These booklets describe in simple language ten or twelve universally applicable principles identified through research and by the academic world.

The INNODATA Monographs launched in 1998 were originally designed as a series of case studies about educational innovations selected from the IBE's INNODATA data bank.

Studies in Comparative Education. A series of 14 documents about different areas of education policy that were published in 1994 and 2004. They are not available on line.

Prospects. Quarterly review of comparative education. A magazine available on line that offers articles about a variety of subjects relating to education policy throughout the world.

25. Fronesis Institute. Teaching, communication and society

The creators of this portal, Rosa María Torres and José Luis Coraggio, adopted the objective of collecting, displaying and following-up on the principal international educational initiatives signed by governments and international agencies over the past thirty years.

“In addition to presential and on-site activities, **Fronesis**' e-services include the moderating of several electronic networks - Comunidad E-ducativa, Ed-Community (in English), PronunArgentina, Debatededucacion and Ecuador-Lee-Escribe- together with **Fronesis**' virtual forums space. All of the portal's sections are continuously fueled by the users themselves and by the members of the associated networks.”

Some of the information resources this portal delivers are:

International Educational Initiatives

These include:

- United Nations summits and conferences
- UNESCO Regional Office programs
- Education for All
- Education for girls, UNICEF
- Sustainable development
- Iberoamerican Plan for Reading
- Iberoamerican summits and conferences
- Hemispheric education plan
- Millennium Development Goals
- World Bank Fast-track initiative

Documentation bank: consultations, agreements and laws

Classification by countries.

Observatories

There is a directory of observatories classified by region. First the sub continental observatories (Latin America and the Caribbean) are presented; this is followed by some national cases (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico,

Paraguay and Peru); and lastly, the register of regional observatories (Andean region, international, Iberoamerican and European).

Indexes and indicators

A survey is presented of indexes and indicators constructed by other institutions that are associated in some way with education.

26. Information, Analysis and Discussion of Education and Education Policies. José Joaquín Brunner's Personal Blog

This site presents the author's academic production, which is quite plentiful. The materials offered in this blog are classified in accordance with the author's varied publications in specialized magazines, written press, books and digital publications. The author also offers publications of other authors that he considers relevant for the analysis of policies in Chile and in developing countries. A case in point is the document "Reform of European higher education: the process of Bologna and its many lessons," that according to Brunner "is a kind of tool box of the policies to transform higher education and for technical-vocational training under way in Europe and on the many lessons to be drawn from that process for public policy in Chile and in the developing countries." The author has specialized in policies on higher education, a fact that is reflected in the information provided in his blog.

27. Specialized Distribution Lists on Education

There are distribution lists in Latin America that are administered by individuals and institutions for the purpose of communicating the results of studies, opinions, press articles, essays and other kinds of documents, to the persons who are on the list. Some lists are closed and it is first necessary to sign up in order to access the information. Others, however, generally those belonging to institutions, send periodically published information bulletins to those who are on their distribution list. These bulletins are also available at the institution's website.

For purposes of this study, 4 distribution lists administered by individuals and that are apparently closed, were identified. One is administered by Gregory Elacqua from Chile. Elacqua circulates among the approximately 1,500 e-mail addresses on the list, mainly articles taken from the most important newspapers and magazines in the United States, plus reports of studies and analyses on educational topics sent to him by the participants on the list themselves.

The three other remaining lists, unlike the preceding one, are known for mainly circulating the studies and personal opinions about education policy of the persons who manage those lists. These people are Rosa María Torres, in Ecuador; León Trahtemberg, in Peru; and Simon Schwartzman, in Brazil. It proved impossible to find out how many e-mail addresses these people have on their lists.

III. Analysis of the Identified Portals and Networks

Because of the limited time allotted for this study, it proved impossible to make an in-depth analysis of the pertinence and quality of the information offered by the portals and networks that were identified and explored. Even so, some general conclusions may be ventured.

Excess Information

The educational networks and portals in Latin America offer a great deal of information about a wide variety of topics relating to education policies and programs. Although in many cases that information is organized according to some classification criterion, it is still hard for decision-makers to dedicate part of the little time they have available to information searches.

In addition to the information that is available in Spanish about education programs and policies, many sites offer information only in English about educational research in other regions of the world, such as that of the IBE-UNESCO. It has not been possible within the confines of this study to determine up to what point the language limitation hampers decision-makers' access to information. However, assuming that high-level decision-makers rarely consult publications on the Internet and that their informal information networks are made up of consultants and advisors who probably read English, the language barrier would not exist if those informal networks effectively give thought to accessing and sharing the information obtained from English-language publications.

Information by System Levels

A more thorough analysis would be needed to determine whether the information networks and portals examined here offer enough empirical information for all levels of the system. One of the hypotheses of this study was that there could be a shortage of information about higher education. The fact is, however, that several portals, including those of the IDB, RIACES and Brunner's blog, offer just as many studies and analyses about the different areas of higher education. Information about preschool education policies, on the other hand, appears to be lacking. More information can be found about early childhood programs than about the development of policies for this educational level.

There is little information about Meta-Analysis

Even without having made a thorough analysis of the information resources that each portal or network offers, it is still possible to affirm that most of the websites discussed here, while in many cases aimed at producing an impact on education policy, do not indicate clearly and concisely which are the policies and programs that, under certain circumstances, have produced good results in the educational areas for which they were intended. The publications offered by PREAL, however, are an exception. The

Executive Summaries, for example, give a two-page analysis of precise educational problems in the region's countries and recommend specific policies for their solution.

What are most plentiful are study and research reports that, because of their length or failure to target policy recommendations, are not an effective means of communication for contributing to the policy-construction processes.

Variety versus Specificity

Some networks and portals have the advantage of offering information resources of different kinds that refer to different areas of education policy and practices at the same site. International organizations like UNESCO/OREALC and the OECD have that advantage, which reflects the complex nature of these organizations in terms of their spheres of work and influence. Other portals like the Etis Network or APICE, that specialize in subjects connected with education and work and with educational credit, respectively, target certain areas. Regardless of the quality and relevance of the material offered by the latter type of networks and portals, it can be ventured that, based on the interviews conducted for this study, a decision-maker responsible for policy design in various areas of education, like a Vice-Minister and his or her advisory team, will be more likely, at least at the beginning of an information search, to consult sites that are more in line with the complex structure of a Ministry and that organize their information by types of policies and programs in accordance with the system's different levels, than those that are more specialized and do not provide an overall view of the education policies a country needs to implement. This study, however, does not have sufficient evidence to affirm that the large portals produce a stronger impact than those that are more specialized in education policies and programs.

Portals of the Ministries of Education

It can be gathered from the descriptions of the portals of Ministries of Education presented in the Annex, that the amount of information they provide about the countries' policies and programs varies from portal to portal. Some offer very few information resources; others provide only a list and description of the programs under way, in addition to institutional information; and still others include assessments of projects and studies based on the results of tests to measure learning. In many cases, the portals of the Ministries of Education probably reflect the private sector's production and reflection in the country. This may have to do with the maturity or doubtfulness of the discussion under way in the countries about education policy. The information resources offered by the former tend to be more conducive to the development of education policy in other countries than those of the latter.

Portals in the Caribbean

It was surprising not to find networks and portals with targeted educational information in the Caribbean countries. No networks other than the portals of the Ministries of Education and of the studies conducted by multilateral organizations like the IDB could be identified that revealed the unique features of those countries' most pressing policy

problems and solutions. If that is truly the case, it would be advisable for this subregion to reveal to the world its experience in the area of education policy.

IV. Results of the Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to determine the usefulness of both the formal and informal information networks for the design of education policies and programs. An effort was also made to find out what kind of network is most useful and for what policy design phase.

The persons interviewed who are or have been in decision-making positions are: Margarita Poggi (Argentina), Irene Kit (Argentina), Cristián Cox (Chile), and Amalia Anaya (Bolivia). It should be added here that all of these people come from the world of research and that their performance as decision-makers was or is highly technical.

Other people who are managers or coordinators of information networks were also interviewed, as follows: Marcela Gajardo (PREAL), Gregory Elacqua, and Celia Alvariño (RELPE). And to conclude, two IDB officials, Gustavo Cuadra and Jaime Vargas, who are responsible for negotiating, designing and supervising education programs in the Central American and Caribbean countries, were also interviewed. These two specialists were consulted about the kind of evidence their counterparts use to design a program.

Results of the Interviews

According to the decision-makers, the informal networks in which information about successful policies or programs is circulated orally for the most part, have an impact basically on the discernment criteria for determining what kind of policy could be most effective for resolving a problem. The people who were interviewed, whose profiles may be atypical among the decision-makers because of their research experience, are very clear about the fact that every policy or program that has been successful in another country must undergo a process of assessment to determine its viability in the target country, where conditions may be very different from those prevailing in the country where the program has been successful. In this sense, the informal networks serve as a starting point for exploring policy solutions to a given problem.

Three of the four decision-makers who were interviewed pointed out that they always tend to go to the same sources for information. They know where to find the information that they consider to be the most useful for their work and are little given to exploring others, because of a lack of time more than anything else. In other words, as one of the decision-makers who were interviewed stated, they organize the information sources hierarchically and look only into those they consider most valuable. These sources generally belong to international organizations, which are those that offer the most comparative policy studies that include countries from other regions of the world. The existence of important information networks in Latin America, such as those of UNESCO/OREALC, PREAL, IPE, and SITEAL, which offer varied and valuable information resources, was also recognized.

Some decision-makers acknowledge the need for a mediation effort between the information and the decision-maker, on two levels: one, to centralize in a single place (website) the relevant information produced in given areas of education policy and practices; and the other, more specialized level, where one or more individuals, hopefully familiarized with the production of knowledge in and outside the region, basically assume the role of competent intermediary between the information produced by others and the decision-makers. The experience of one of the people interviewed is that generally speaking “the documental information that is circulated is produced and read by technicians and rarely focuses on the interests of decision-makers or bears in mind their analytical logic (preparation time, prior conditions, budget costs, visibility and acceptance by the educational and social community).” This would tend to accentuate the need for mediations to facilitate the technical and political interpretation of the evidence of successful policies that circulates throughout the region.

In their interview, the IDB officials clearly indicated that some countries do not have the installed capacity to reflect scientifically on education policy. These countries apparently have no universities or research centers that produce relevant information for education policy and that prompt a technical discussion in this area at the local level. The existence of a large number of academic scholars pondering on educational issues would help to spur a dialogue or debate on public policies that would lead authorities to search more actively for evidence before embarking on a specific course of action.

The experiences of the two IDB officials bears out the diagnosis made above. Some small countries depend heavily on international cooperation or on research projects financed and led by foreign institutions to make the sector analyses and design strategies for solving problems. In contexts of this kind, informal information networks are of key importance for transmitting evidence produced in other countries. There is a heavy dependence on foreign consultants.

Interviews of Information Network Coordinators

The most obvious conclusion to emerge from the interviews of these informants is that in order to produce an impact on policy and programs, it is not enough to merely make the information available to decision-makers. The information user must not be a passive subject who only consumes information without reacting to it. In this connection, the end purpose of the spheres for interaction offered by the networks and discussion forums is to ensure that the information truly flows among the different nodes of a network. This idea is clearly related to that of knowledge management defined at the beginning of this document. Information and knowledge have to circulate and be used in order for new knowledge to be generated. It is not a matter of having decision-makers participate in a formal information network where their ideas are confronted with those of others and they receive and circulate information that is relevant for policy. Rather, it is the attitude of maintaining a dialogue with others so that the information produces a true impact on being internalized, interpreted and reshared, so that it will continue to fuel discussions.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

The information networks and portals that exist today in the region and outside it put a large volume of information into circulation. Most of that information is not useful to the countries at a given moment. In order for the information resources available to a decision-maker to be well-managed, it is necessary, ideally, for that decision-maker or the work team to which he or she belongs to know how to discern the kind of information that must be used to structure problems and define effective strategies that will resolve those problems, and also to know how to recognize the reliability of the different information sources that are available.

As pointed out earlier, decision-makers rarely have the necessary time to navigate through the virtual world of technical information that is available about education. This study has clearly revealed the existence of a need, rarely satisfied by the information networks, for a mediation effort between the information and the decision-makers. This mediation work needs to be accomplished both orally and in writing. In this connection, in addition to the need for networks that provide written information, decision-makers should create their own personal information networks, in which actors whose technical and analytical capacity in the policy issues to be resolved they recognize, also participate formally or informally. These mediators should be capable of transforming the information offered by different information sources into precise diagnosis and concrete policy proposals.

In many countries, international experts have been, are, and will continue to be a key element for the development of education. Even so, an all-out effort should be made to generate local analytical capacity in the decision-making centers of the region's countries. Each Ministry of Education should have a studies department with sufficient skill to accomplish the indicated work of intermediation. These departments should be experts on the information resources available in the national and international information portals and be capable of recognizing the information that is most relevant and pertinent to policy needs at a given moment. In addition, this team of mediators should concern itself with maintaining conversation networks within the ministries, in order to share the information they generate with all of the actors who need to be informed, from Ministers to low-level officials.

In this way, knowledge management within public institutions could truly bring about a positive change in the impact of information on the decision-making process.