How did a pilot programme evaluation influence El Salvador to scale up early childhood interventions nationwide?

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The panel commended this evaluation for strategically positioning the evaluation of pilots as an essential part of long-term UNICEF efforts to bring about sustainable change at scale for children. Among other things, the evaluation illustrates the importance of conceptualizing and implementing pilot projects with a clear intent to scale up nationally and regionally.

The Triple E evaluation was deemed highly influential. Evidence generated by the evaluation led to the formulation of a new ‘territorialization’ strategy for early childhood care in El Salvador.
Nearly two-thirds of the population of El Salvador is under 30 years of age, and school dropout rates are high. Yet less than 3 per cent of children under 4 years of age have access to comprehensive early childhood care services; in rural areas, this figure is even lower. Corruption, violence and insecurity have deterred investment and led to high levels of underemployment and inequality, imped ing social development. In the last decade, however, positive trends have been observed in life expectancy, schooling and health, and inequality is now among the lowest in Latin America.

The Triple E pilot programme – which takes its name from the Spanish initialism for education, empowerment and protective environment – ran from 2012 to 2015. Supported and coordinated by UNICEF, Triple E was implemented by the Salvadoran Ministry of Education (MoE) and partner organizations in four municipalities: Ciudad Delgado, Cuscatancingo, Ilopango and San Martín. Its aim was to strengthen and improve education and early childhood care practices in institutions, communities and families by promoting violence prevention and a culture of coexistence. Triple E was a key part of the UNICEF country programme to improve coverage of early childhood care services in El Salvador.

PURPOSE

This evaluation set out to measure the success of Triple E in terms of changes it had brought about in the knowledge, attitudes and practices of families as well as national and local institutions and community leaders. The evaluation focused on education empowerment and safe environment at the local level; assessed the relevance of programme results to local needs; and examined whether sufficient coordination and local capacity had been established to sustain interventions.

The findings are to be incorporated into future programmes aimed at children and young people, especially those focusing on early childhood care. To support greater coordination between actors, the evaluation report is directed towards the institutions that took part in the pilot and UNICEF country offices. Findings have also been successfully used to persuade the Government of El Salvador to scale up the pilot nationwide.

APPROACH

The evaluation examined two groups: a treatment group comprising all of the preschool children who participated in Triple E, and a control group of children who attended preschools involved in the programme but who did not themselves take part. The control group was selected from across the four municipalities using propensity score matching to ensure its representativeness in terms of age, gender and school grade.

The main indicators measured related to parenting practices, academic performance and cross-sectoral coordination, with data collected in four ways. Firstly, UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey questionnaires on parenting practices and early childhood development were administered to the families of the children in both groups. Secondly, integral development reports for every child were obtained from the participating preschools. Thirdly, focus group discussions were held with community leaders in each municipality and focused interviews conducted with representatives of the participating institutions. Finally, a literature review was carried out, including administrative documents from government bodies and statistical information from the General Directorate of Statistics and Censuses.
Data were analysed using statistical tools including the chi-squared test, Student’s t-distribution and the Mantel–Haenszel test. These tools were selected to fulfil two important needs: to establish differences between treatment and control groups, and to identify any associations between key variables.

**KEY FINDINGS**

**Changes in parenting practices**

Parents of children who had participated in the Triple E programme read aloud to their children more often and had more children’s books in their homes than parents of non-participants. Fathers of participants also engaged in play to a greater extent than fathers of non-participants.

**FIGURE 1**

Proportion of mothers who had read to their children in the last three days

The project has generated a strong impact on the equity of relationships between women and men. Men now have greater sensitivity and are more involved in the development of their children.

– Evaluation report

Discipline was also maintained differently in the families of children participating in the programme. Use of some forms of physical violence (e.g., beating the child, or striking with a belt) was found to be lower in the treatment group than in the control group. On the other hand, use of psychological violence and other forms of physical violence (e.g., spanking) were not improved by programme participation – in fact, some forms were more prevalent in the families of participants. Parents of participants were more likely, however, to use more positive techniques like withdrawing privileges and to tell their children what they had done wrong.

**Meeting child development needs**

Parents and teachers indicated that children who had participated in Triple E adapted better to the primary education system and were more capable of independent work. They also appeared to be more secure, sociable, motivated and extroverted. Qualitative and quantitative data support these observations. Examination of children’s integral development reports also revealed significant
benefits of participation, in the areas of personal and social development; expression, communication and representation; and relationship with surroundings. Additionally, children in the treatment group achieved better results when assessed at the start of preschool, and performed better throughout preschool.

**Good coordination across sectors**
The standard of coordination between the various participating institutions was found to be very high. The planning process was detailed and participative, involving institutions at both the national and local level. The pilot programme successfully created spaces for discussion, reflection and implementation, using a level of communication described as fluid and effective.

**Effective programme that eased transitions**
The evaluation found that Triple E had achieved its objectives and produced an effective and high-quality early childhood care programme, with suitable spaces, supplies and play equipment, which greatly benefited community-level work. Key training received by institutional personnel under the programme had improved the quality of their work. Children’s transition to formal education, which can often be traumatic, was significantly more successful thanks to the input participants had received through Triple E. The findings suggest, however, that benefits may decline following completion of the programme.

**FIGURE 2**
Triple E: Assessment of programme efficacy by specialists in the participating institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>% Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality activities</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of spaces</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuation of ‘family circles’ interventions</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of the programme</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional strengthening</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Limitations**
The pilot programme was found to have three main limitations. First, levels of violence in affected communities were so high that they restricted the rollout of some measures and, because of this danger, several personnel left. The second limitation was a lack of funding. This caused the pilot to start later than initially planned and led to changes in implementation timings. Finally, the pilot provided no baseline against which to compare the evaluation results.
INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

Cost-effectiveness and impact contributed to sustainability and scalability
The findings show that, in a context with limited resources, community programmes based on cross-sectoral coordination can be cost-effective. They can use community spaces, locally available resources and volunteers, and draw on the capacities of institutions in contact with the community.

This approach contributed to the high impact, sustainability and scalability achieved by the Triple E programme within the framework of a new ‘territorialization’ strategy for early childhood care. Under this, the MoE undertook a continuation of the interventions introduced by the pilot and extended them to other parts of the country. It is also incorporating the methodology developed through Triple E into its own institutional and community programmes.

Influencing national education and early childhood policy
By validating the benefits of Triple E, the evaluation influenced the formulation of the ‘territorialization’ strategy with a focus on social inclusion, which was coordinated by the MoE, National Institute for Children and Adolescents and UNICEF. Seeking to reduce inequalities across El Salvador, the strategy aimed for the equitable development of territories and revitalization of local development to make basic social services accessible to all. It prioritized cross-institutional coordination within each territory and strengthening the capacities of local stakeholders to implement family orientation programmes, increase parental involvement in family and childhood activities, and improve parenting practices.
UNICEF was recognized nationally for its leadership in positioning early childhood development across various platforms. For example, Ventanilla INJUVE facilitated communication between youth and local operators of the Triple E programme, as well as the establishment of committees on child rights. UNICEF was particularly influential in using the evaluation findings to promote a rights-based, gender-sensitive and inclusive approach, and to stress the need for interinstitutional coordination at the territorial level to conduct family orientation programmes in appropriate parenting practices.

Building a culture of evaluation and learning
Finally, the evaluation contributed to the building of a culture of evaluation and learning in El Salvador by introducing a methodology that emphasizes the sharing and use of evaluation results by local stakeholders, including national government.

BOX 1
SCALING UP SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE

The community-based, cross-sectoral nature of the Triple E pilot programme contributed to its success. The evaluation was highly influential. The evidence proceeding from the evaluation led to:

- the formulation of a nationwide territorialization strategy for early childhood care with a focus on social inclusion
- recognition of the leadership provided by UNICEF in positioning early childhood development in the national agenda – including the promotion of a rights-based, gender-sensitive and inclusive approach
- the building of a culture of evaluation and learning through a methodology focused on the sharing and use of results by stakeholders, including national government
- promotion of programmes and mechanisms for cross-institutional and cross-sectoral coordination to provide comprehensive cared and expanded early childhood development opportunities.

The evaluation calls for the creation of an information system to monitor the long-term results of interventions as they are implemented throughout the country.
LOOKING AHEAD

The evaluation report sets out various targeted recommendations for the scale-up of the Triple E pilot programme and for the future of early childhood interventions more broadly in El Salvador.

Cross-sectoral, inclusive interventions
The evaluation recommends that cross-sectoral interventions, such as those used in the Triple E pilot, should be incorporated into all early childhood policies, programmes and projects. Interventions should be designed from the bottom up with the involvement of local communities as well as local and national institutions.

Tracking long-term impacts
The evaluation calls for the creation of an information system to monitor the long-term results of interventions as they are implemented throughout the country. The MoE should use its existing organizational infrastructure and resources to track children through the education system to better understand the benefits of early childhood programmes.

Reviewing behavioural change
The limited effects of the pilot programme on parental disciplinary practices suggest a need to review the methods employed to elicit behavioural change in this area. Addressing cultural practices surrounding the use of certain forms of physical and psychological violence requires time and sensitivity. Any interventions to address these practices must include monitoring and reinforcement measures.

Including a baseline
Future programmes should overcome the limitations of the Triple E pilot resulting from its lack of a baseline. The evaluation recommends an experimental design that builds the evaluation method into the programme itself. This would not only provide a baseline, but also indicators that would enable effective measurement of the achievement of programme objectives.

Appropriate capacity
To ensure the quality of future programmes, an effective training system for new teaching and facilitating personnel must be set up to mitigate the effects of factors such as staff turnover. Similarly, the evaluation advises to designate the MoE, or other relevant stakeholders, to take over the facilitation role occupied primarily by UNICEF as the Triple E programme is scaled up.

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Although each institution was occupied with its own activities, it was always possible to meet to coordinate actions.
– Specialist at a municipal Principles and Values Unit