



5. Conclusions



The evaluation's main finding is that systems strengthening is a story about the contribution of agents, relationships, and relational infrastructures who are at the core of systems dynamics (Figure 9). Education systems strengthening is not about interventions and the faithful replication of their tools. These bricklayers include a small number of loosely networked, closely connected, actors in civil society, donors, experts, and reformers in government, many of whom changed their positions in the system during the period covered by the evaluation. Collectively, bricklayers have staying power and embark on a process that they know will take others and time to complete—but that illustrates how social accountability projects can be a vehicle to strengthen a democratic system that achieves its main objectives.

1. Bricklayers are Backbone Actors. This Work is a Strategic Investment

Bricklayers are not the main protagonists of social accountability relationships in APMAEs, nor in ensuring that an individual child gets a quality education. Even so, their “**real work**” as secondary actors has strengthened the school communities and/or the education system in which those primary relationships are embedded. The nature and extent of their contribution becomes a strategic investment only when it is considered in interaction with others who strive to co-produce quality education over time.

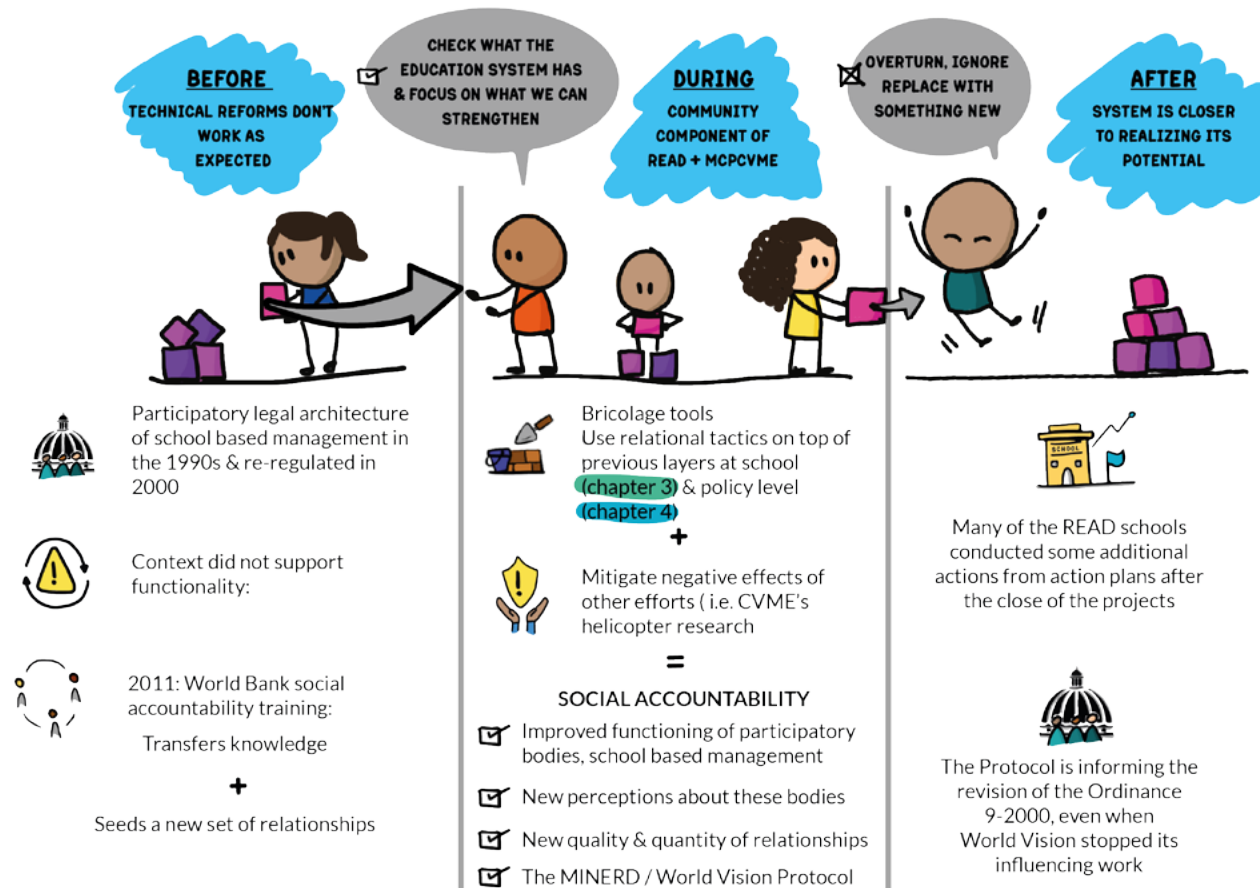
2. Layering Enables Cumulative Results

For them, layering seems to have emerged as a promising strategy to walk along the resonance pathway in ways that advance change amid discontinuities in the local education system. As **elsewhere in Latin America**, collectively they figured out the details of policies and regulation, implemented reforms in the General Education Law, learned by doing with others how to fine-tune reforms, and fed back their collective insights to the policy process. In so doing they, bolstered much-needed continuity and ongoing improvement of reforms to strengthen the quality of education.

Figure 9: The Findings

BRICKLAYERS (WV STAFF + PARTNERS) LAYERING

DIRECTION & FUNCTION TO SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT REGULATION



SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY INTERVENTIONS CONTRIBUTED TO EDUCATION SYSTEM STRENGTHENING VIA A RELATIONAL AND INTERTEMPORAL PROCESS

FOR EVALUATORS ASSESSING
1+1 = 3? *over time!*

- Consider theory-based methods for casual evaluation of systems strengthening
- Refocus from interventions as tools & methods to interventions as people & relationships that bricolage and use those tools & methods
- Grapple with contexts where change, continuity, predictability, uncertainty & ambiguity coexist
- Cathedral thinking might help: a collective movie with moving targets and changing leading actors, rather than a single win attributed to a single actor
- Zoom in & out of casual hotspots to look at the loose connective tissue between micro and macro levels (chapter 2)

3. Making Progress with Pre-existing Rules and Interventions can be an Effective Approach

Layering, the core strategy of World Vision staff and its allies in the READ project's community component, first, and MCPECVME, later, was to amend, revise and add to the formal and informal rules of the education system, especially Ordinance (*Ordenanza*) 9-2000. Effectiveness was about influencing the course of a reform that had been adopted years before the projects were approved. To paraphrase one participant, World Vision staff in the Dominican Republic saw their role as strengthening APAMAEs and the rights and opportunities embedded in law that are not fully functional. It was never the intention to instigate a new reform, overturn, or ignore institutional arrangements in the Dominican education system and create something anew.

The community component of READ and the MCPECVME did not introduce direct changes to the existing rules of the education system. Rather, it focused on using and iterating social accountability processes to catalyze and/or change the quality of relationships in school-level management and participatory bodies. The result was of activating relationships of a different quality (or soft governance) in practice.

To do so, they built on and adapted insights from social accountability system-level capacity-building efforts seeded by the World Bank, which strengthen individuals' knowledge, but critically their relationships within schools and across the local education system. These insights were meshed with those of actors across the education sector through READ and systematized in a first iteration of a Protocol. Those insights, along with World Vision's CVA package, further informed the pre- and post-COVID iterations of the social accountability intervention through MCPECVME. The emergent revised systematization of these experiences with a broad new set of stakeholders across the education system informed, in turn, the process of co-creation of a Joint Protocol with MINERD. In schools where READ and MCPECVME were active, and some additional schools, these insights are unevenly but continuously implemented. Each school has embraced parts that make sense for its context.

4. Using Social Accountability to Strengthen School-based Management and the Social Contracts that Make them Function

At the micro level, the evaluation identified and traced how *READ* and *MCPCVME* were layered on top of each other and the education system, which enabled them to contribute to the functioning of school-based management in the short term. The collaborative social accountability intervention was an operational means to support more responsiveness as well as to rework agreements between parents, school staff, and others on their mutual roles and responsibilities (i.e., their democratic social contracts, one school at a time). Mitigating negative interactions with *CVME* was also important. The projects further equipped some local actors to become agents of sustainability of the intervention, although the effectiveness of these local actors is uneven across schools.

5. Invest in and Capitalize on Relationships for Ongoing Policy-making

At the macro level the *World Vision/MINERD Protocol* is the result of leaders who opted to carve out the space and focus to invest patiently in building relationships and encourage teams and colleagues who could take on the baton to do the same. Relationships, networks, and trust are a critical resource for using implementation over time as a resource to build insights from implementation happening across the system into policy-improvement routines that long outlive the original projects.

Even as *World Vision* stopped working on policy-influencing processes, actors within *MINERD* have continued to use the inputs to inform a process to update *Ordenanza 9-2000* and have expressed interest in taking the process further. For these actors, the Protocol is the beginning of a process rather than its end. In other words, as individuals and their networks enabled the loose continuity of the effort to strengthen *APMAEs* wherever and however possible, they provided direction to strengthening that the system on its own would not have had. **“Each new element may be a small change in itself, yet these small changes can accumulate, leading to a big change over the long run”**—in this case, a 20-year-long process anchored in implementation.

While the *World Vision* team had to confront spots of resistance, their strategy—which combined layering with other benefits for stakeholders across the system—preempted potential large-scale confrontation or resistance from beneficiaries of the status quo. Generally, powerful opponents may be able to protect rules that are critical to enable them to reap benefits from the system, but are unable to stop the

addition of piecemeal changes to the operation of APMAES, which the World Vision team and others hope will eventually tip the balance. In producing a Protocol that brings together the insights of *READ* and *MCPCVME*, along with insights from key stakeholders in all levels of the education system, which is now informing a revision of *Ordenanza 9-2000*, reformers seem to be closer to realizing this potential. The new co-created insights would alter important aspects of APMAEs, which have been instrumental in reproducing the status quo. **Among these changes, MINERD is now pushing to change *Ordenanza 09-2000* to increase the length of time APMAEs' members can serve from one to two or three years.** In Danilo Ginebra, the *Junta de Centro* is already considering doing this for the same reason. They are proposing to change things so that they do not have to have a new APMAE every year, but every three years like the *Junta de Centro*.

6 Layering can be Useful for Education Systems with Similar Political Economy Dynamics—but there are Many Other Paths to Rome

Readers of World Vision's social accountability evaluation in Bangladesh or our work on resonance pathways to scale might be surprised that this evaluation does not center on trickle-up or other roads to scale up over time. Theoretically and in some isolated cases outside the evaluation's sample there were sideways scale-up and trickling up. For example, select district and regional officials went to schools, picked up lessons, and took them to other schools in their district or regions. But these cases were exceptional, and do not seem to be the most promising pathway to change in a system like that of the Dominican Republic. This is a hierarchical education system, where change from the bottom or the middle upward, without signaling from the top, is unlikely. Whether organically or by design, those who sought to advance change generally took an alternative political path. This incipient comparison suggests that while more research is needed to identify types of education systems structures where some pathways might be more promising than others, identifying them could enable more meaningful cross-learning across local education systems where findings are transferable.

7 Time Matters to Meaningfully Evaluate Systems Practice

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the evaluation's analytical innovations and findings provide important insights for intertemporal causal evaluation of systems strengthening by putting people and relationships front and

center. This theory-based evaluation sought to grapple with a local system (and its components, causal pathway, strategies, and outcomes) where change and continuity, predictability, uncertainty, and ambiguity co-exist. The evaluation refocused attention from interventions as tools or methodologies to interventions as people and their relationships as the force driving the bricolage, adaptation, implementation, and contribution of those tools and methodologies.

The evaluation also made a bet and showed the value of identifying key causal hotspots and zooming in and out of these over time. It explored the development and loose connective tissue between micro- and macro-level change-making efforts and their effects over a long period of time. In so doing, the evaluators were able to observe patterns and outcomes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Collectively, the interaction of the micro and macro and of interventions over time tells a story of the system that is stronger than any narrower account—whether focused at a level or at a specific point—might produce. This new systematic insight affected evaluative judgements about the accomplishments and limits of two seemingly siloed projects as well as preceding and emergent reforms and project cycles.

In short, the evaluation’s approach and findings are consistent with and complement [USAID’s draft Local Systems Policy Paper](#), which was issued for comments as the evaluation was finalized. The evaluation illustrates some of the paper’s key points about evidencing systems practice and the contributions that matter most over time, without ignoring the critical role of agents (or bricklayers) and relationships:

Recognizing that change can be slow does not mean there is nothing to be done in the meantime; rather it is an opportunity to reframe and focus short-term efforts in ways that are most likely to generate the longer-term, sustainable outcomes that local communities desire the “how” matters just as much, if not more, than the “what.” Remember: the process is the product (USAID, 2024).