Strengthening the Research Capacity of Relatively Small Countries in Latin America to Promote Better Informed Policymaking

Program Evaluation

Submitted to:

Global Development Network

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May 31st, 2019

FINAL VERSION

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an analysis and evaluation of GDN's Program titled Strengthening the Research Capacity of Relatively Small Countries in Latin America to Promote Better Informed Policymaking focused on the Program's relevance, effectiveness, impact, efficiency and sustainability.

A variety of methods were used for the evaluation, including desk review of program documents, survey questionnaires, interviews with stakeholders, participatory value-for-money assessment, and a limited version of the constructed matched comparison technique. Restrictions of time and resources implied limiting the scope and methods of the evaluation. As a result, the evaluation emphasized dimensions of relevance, effectiveness and impact over those of efficiency and sustainability. In addition, while the evaluation team was able to obtain inputs from all major stakeholders and Program archives, information from secondary stakeholders and sources external to the Program could not be incorporated into the analysis.

Overall, the evaluation results suggest the balance is positive for almost all of the evaluation dimensions. The Program has proved relevant to understand broad thematic priorities in the region, has addressed the capacity needs of independent research centers and helped build policy-relevant research agendas. In addition, the Program contributed to knowledge transfer and cross-learning between researchers and policy actors, and encouraged higher levels of policy engagement for the researchers involved. Finally, the Program enabled the production of quality, decision-making-oriented knowledge products focused on the education policy priorities of Ecuador and El Salvador. The evaluation also found important areas of opportunity in program implementation, effectiveness and impact.

Some recommendations based on the evaluation are:

- Redefine the Program's sequence to minimize potential negative effects from exogenous factors over implementation;
- Improve the Program's operation through a more streamlined approach to decision-making at key junctures;
- Invest in gaining more detailed knowledge about country contexts in order to better tailor inputs and activities to the needs of national research teams; and
- Consider transforming Phase 2 (capacity building phase on pilot design and M&E framework) into a program in itself for graduates of the Program under evaluation or for research teams with more experience in policy engagement.

I – PROGRAM PROFILE

1.1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.

International organizations and donors can play a major role in strengthening democracies and promoting social development around the world. In this context, the main objective of the Global Development Network (GDN), as expressed by its President Pierre Jacquet, is "to increase the quality of development policies, "so that the livelihood of millions of individuals and households can be improved". GDN is convinced that research plays a major role towards achieving this goal.

Connecting research with policy, however, is a complex process. One of the problems GDN has found is that most academic research does not look at the public policy process, and policy makers are not interested in abstract knowledge produced by academia. Another problem is that production and financial aid related to academic research is dominated by universities in developed countries. This knowledge, in turn, tends to stay in developed countries and, if exported, it is commonly perceived as foreign, cannot be locally adapted, or it is not implemented properly.

In lieu of these challenges, GDN works to bridge the gap between traditional research and public policy through mobilizing resources aimed at producing high quality knowledge at the local level, thus allowing local universities and think tanks to inform and address the policy challenges they face in their specific countries or regions. In addition, GDN provides local researchers with financial resources, global networking, research management support, access to information, training, peer review, and mentoring. To raise awareness about the relevance of evidence-based decision-making, GDN promotes networking and dissemination among key stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, civil society, research centers and think tanks.

To tackle such ambitious range of goals and activities, GDN creates partnerships and alliances with national and international organizations. The Program under evaluation is the result of one of those partnerships, specifically, with the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB). *Strengthening the Research Capacity of Relatively Small Countries in Latin America to Promote Better Informed Policymaking* is a Program that combines the interest of GDN in addressing the particular challenges these countries face to produce high quality, policy-oriented research, with the interest of IDB in increasing the technical and allocative efficiency of public spending in Latin American and the Caribbean.

1.2. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION.

The Program sought to promote a culture of evidence-based decision-making to improve the efficiency of public policy spending in the smallest and poorest countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. Targeting research teams working at independent institutions, the Program had the following specific objectives:

- Identify the thematic priorities, as well as the information and institutional gaps that negatively affect evidence-based decision-making;
- Strengthen the capacity of selected research centers to develop policy-relevant research in areas of public spending priority;
- Generate platforms for knowledge transfer and cross-learning between local and international researchers, and between the selected knowledge centers and education policy; and
- Bolster a network of policy-makers, researchers and organizations collaborating to improve efficiency in the allocation of fiscal resources.

The Program has the following major components:

- A Mapping and Diagnostic study exploring the research capacities, gaps, policymaking needs and thematic priorities in 17 Latin American and Caribbean countries.
- Competitive selection in two stages, the first one through a call for expressions of interest leading to a shortlist of ten teams invited to participate in a Policy Lab, and a final selection from proposals presented by those nine semifinalists.
- Capacity building on research conducted in close interaction with policymakers and under the mentoring and advice of experienced researchers.
- Policy engagement through frequent and direct interactions with local stakeholders, the drafting of policy recommendations and the development of a pilot project and M&E framework.

The Program has been implemented over a period of four years (starting in 2015 and ending in 2019) with funding from the IDB. Implementation of the Program has been sequential. Initially the focus was on developing the Mapping Study, a baseline diagnostic of research capacities, gaps and policy-making needs and priorities in 17 Latin American countries of interest to the IDB. Afterwards, and through an open call for expressions of interest in conducting education policy research, nine teams were competitively selected to participate in a Policy Lab in Lima. At the Lab, teams were given the opportunity to present and strengthen their proposals in preparation for a final competitive round from which five teams from four countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador and Nicaragua) were selected.

Difficulties getting clearance from the governments of Nicaragua and Bolivia to conduct research funded by the IDB reduced the number of grantees to two, one team in Ecuador (Universidad San Francisco de Quito, USFQ, and Grupo FARO) and another one in El Salvador (Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social, FUSADES). These teams received

financial assistance to conduct their research, mentoring and peer review from external sources, and support from government.

An amendment to the Program in the spring of 2018 redefined the scope and goals of the project in relation to the capacity building activities, distinguishing two phases. Phase 1, the capacity building phase on research, would aim at strengthening the research capacity of the independent research institutions selected to produce policy relevant research and recommendations. Phase 2, the capacity building phase on a program pilot design, would support these institutions to strengthen their capacities to engage with government agencies and local IDB offices in order to produce a demand-driven, evidence-based pilot project that builds on Phase 1 as well as on an M&E framework to evaluate the pilot (if/when such pilot is implemented). Phase 2 is focused on design exclusively. The decision to implement the pilot (or not) is left in the hands of the local ministry of education, yet the expectation was that, should the agency choose to move forward, the relationship developed during Phase 2 would make it more likely for the team to be invited to the process.

II – EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODS

2.1.   SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION.

The main purpose of this evaluation is to understand the extent to which the Program has achieved its specific objectives and thus contributed to the overall goals of improving public policy expenditure and promoting a culture of evidence-based decision-making in smaller Latin American countries characterized as low capacity.

The evaluation analyzes Program performance along dimensions of relevance, effectiveness, impact and efficiency, and examines, to the extent possible, the potential for sustainability of the capacity building and policy engagement components. The study characterizes GDN's role in the Program implementation and results as well.

The evaluation addresses both the Program's level of accomplishment and its implementation process in order to identify the specific mechanisms that facilitated or hindered progress towards established goals and make recommendations for future institutional capacity-building efforts where GDN acts as both partner and facilitator.

While the evaluation considers all of the Program's components, emphasis is made on capacity building and policy engagement.

2.2.   EVALUATION DIMENSIONS AND QUESTIONS.

The terms of reference agreed upon with GDN for this evaluation included a number of questions grouped into five dimensions: relevance, effectiveness, impact, efficiency and sustainability.

2.2.1. Questions of relevance:

Does the Program fill a gap in understanding the thematic priorities in line with public expenditures, especially in smaller countries with a less established culture of evidence-based decision-making?

Evaluation of this question focused on the Mapping Study given the purpose and implications of that product. To approach the question, we relied on the Mapping Study itself to understand key findings, as well as on the perceptions of GDN staff, IDB personnel, and two of the consultants working on the Study (including the lead consultant) regarding the final product's strengths and limitations to identify national policy priorities for both suppliers and demanders of research.

Did the Program help contribute and test best practices in the interaction between academia and policy actors and aligning the research agendas in their own country with policy priorities in the selected sector?

Given time and information constraints, we could only partially evaluate this question for the Policy Lab and the capacity building phases of the Program. To address the question, we reviewed the relevant available literature we could find on the intersection of research and policy-making in order to identify recommendations and best practices against which the program activities and accomplishments could be compared. The evaluation also took into consideration perceptions of what those best practices look like in the context of GDN's general work via interviews with GDN staff.

Are the capacity building activities relevant to the grantee's current capacities?

We used the general baseline identified in the Mapping Study as well as the researchers' and their advisors' perception on the Program's contribution to their capacities to conduct policy-relevant research broadly defined and demand-based, as well as to engage with policy actors.

Are the studies designed by the grantees relevant and in line with the objectives and goals of the Program?

Our evaluation of this question was limited to the capacity building phase on research. We evaluated the grantees' research questions against the general baseline established by the Mapping Study and the goals of the Program, as well as by gathering the perceptions of Program managers (GDN staff) and partners (IDB staff).

Are the questions asked by the grantees' studies relevant to the education priorities and policymaking in each of the two countries of implementation? Are they coherent with the grantees' own research agenda?

Like in the previous question, our evaluation here was limited to participants in the capacity building phase on research. To address this question, we reviewed Program documents and other written evidence to get a general sense of the education priorities in both Ecuador and El Salvador and gathered the perceptions of policymakers (ministries of education), education (IDB) experts and research advisors for the two teams. The evaluation of coherence with grantees' own research agenda relied on the research team members' opinions.

2.2.2. Questions of effectiveness:

Did the Program enable a better understanding of the mechanisms that can explain the impacts of various education policy initiatives?

Evaluation of this question was limited to the capacity building phase on research. We were only able to approach the question partially, as it was not possible to enquire about the impact

of the grantees' research products beyond the Program participants. Our evaluation relied on the perceptions of IDB experts, policymakers, research advisors and the grantees themselves.

How have the capacity building activities and GDN's support been instrumental in filling gaps to achieve the objectives of the Program and contributed to the quality of the outputs?

It was possible to evaluate this question of the Policy Lab and the capacity building phases of the Program. The associated activities were assessed for consistency against the key findings (i.e. gaps in evidence-based decision-making) of the Mapping Study. Additionally, the evaluation relied on perceptions of contribution and quality provided by research team members, mentors, IDB staff and GDN staff. We also gathered the perceptions of Policy Lab participants (that could not continue on to the research phase) on a limited basis (CIASES, in Nicaragua).

2.2.3. Questions of impact:

To what degree has each grantee achieved its stated goals?

Evaluation of this question was limited to the capacity building phases. To answer this question, we relied on Program documents pertaining to Phase 1 (research) and Phase 2 (pilot) as well as on the perceptions of grantees, mentors and GDN staff. We also looked at the grantees' accomplishments through the broader perspective of the Program goals.

Has the Program achieved its objectives?

To evaluate this question, we looked at the entire Program but emphasized the Policy Lab and capacity building phases. We used Program documents to compare Program results with stated goals and gathered the perceptions of GDN staff, researchers, IDB staff and mentors. Additionally, further evidence was provided by the team leader of one of Nicaragua's selected projects unable to continue in the Program.

Are there some unintended impacts such as spillover over effects in the institution of the grantees in terms of capacity building activities of the institution in the policy arena more broadly, beyond the education sector?

We were only able to address this question partially, as time constraints made it difficult to interview other research center personnel/authorities and policy actors in Ecuador and El Salvador. The question was explored through the perceptions of researchers and policy makers in the education sector.

2.2.4. Questions of efficiency:

To what extent is the current staffing at an appropriate level to effectively and efficiently implement the Program (in terms of quality and quantity), both at GDN and for grantees?

This question was evaluated for the Policy Lab and the capacity building phases. We relied on the perceptions of researchers, mentors, and IDB staff and GDN personnel regarding service delivery and overall performance to approximate an answer as it was not possible – given the time and information constraints – to compare with other similar programs or construct a counterfactual.

Were the Program results achieved with a value for money?

We focused our evaluation of this question on the Policy Lab and capacity building phases. To address the question, an adapted version of the participatory value-for-money assessment was embedded in the evaluation plan to account for efficiency considerations. The key inputs here are perceptions of value and investment (money, time and effort) based on the general framework of the Program as well as the actual cost (or resources budgeted) of Program components. For consistency, it was only possible to gather the inputs of researchers and GND staff for this assessment.

2.2.5. Questions of sustainability:

To what extent are the discussions engaged between different stakeholders in the two countries likely to be continued for further research?

To what extent will GDN's and IDB's support have a lasting impact (if any) on the grantees' capacity?

To what extent has this Program contributed to developing a culture of evidence-based policy making in El Salvador and Ecuador in the selected sector?

Given that, at the time of wrapping up this evaluation, Phase 2 of the Program was still ongoing in Ecuador and Phase 1 in El Salvador, and that in both countries there was a lot of uncertainty associated with the new government's priorities and disposition to engage with independent researchers, it was only possible to explore this question in terms of the expectations of both researchers and policymakers, pondered by each country's context.

2.3.   METHODOLOGY.

The evaluation's point of departure is the Program's theory of change and associated logic model, which typically define the causal mechanisms linking inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, and provide indications of how progress, acceptable delivery, completion and success might be measured. We followed an ex-post design that emphasized perceptions of change, pertinence, success, value and sustainability supported by other available evidence. The evaluation also reviewed the Program's delivery process in order to assess the extent to which the Program had been implemented as intended and identify the factors that enabled or hindered progress towards goals.

2.3.1. Stakeholder assessment.

For the purposes of this evaluation, the following key stakeholders were identified: GDN staff members, IDB staff members, research team members, scientific and technical advisors (mentors), the research institution in which the researchers are located, the Ministry of Education in both El Salvador and Ecuador, and the Mapping Study consultants.

Table 2.3.1.1: Key stakeholder assessment

Stakeholder Name	Role in Program	Interest or Perspective	Role in the Evaluation
Head of Programs, GDN	Program management	Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability	Planning, final user, information source
Director of Strategic Partnerships, GDN	Program oversight	Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability	Planning, final user, information source
Senior Advisor (former Chief Economist), IDB	Program oversight Program financial management	Effectiveness, efficiency, impact	Final user, information source
Research teams	Program beneficiary	Relevance, effectiveness, impact	Information source
Scientific and Technical Advisors	Program resource	Relevance, effectiveness, impact	Information source
Local Education Specialists, IDB	Program resource	Relevance, impact	Information source
Ministries of Education	Program beneficiary	Relevance, effectiveness, impact	Information source
Research institutions	Program beneficiary (secondary)	Impact, sustainability	N/A
Mapping Study consultants	Program resource	Relevance, impact	Information source

Table 2.3.1.1 presents our stakeholder assessment for the evaluation. For each one of the stakeholders we identify their participation in the Program, their interest in or perspective on the evaluation, and the role they played in the evaluation.

The Program results from a partnership between GDN and IDB under a technical cooperation agreement in which the former acts as a consultant providing technical assistance and the latter supplies the financial resources to undertake the specified activities upon receipt and approval of agreed upon deliverables. Oversight of the Program is shared between GDN and IDB management, but the latter has the final word as far as approvals are concerned. Program management is mostly concentrated in GDN except for budgetary matters, which are totally under IDB's control. Both stakeholders have interest in all the Program attributes under evaluation, are important sources of information, and will be final users of the results. Additionally, GDN has had participation in the initial planning and approval of the evaluation plan.

Both research teams and policymakers at the local ministries of education benefit from the Program. Research teams are direct beneficiaries of the Program while policy makers benefit indirectly from it (at least in the form of evidence and knowledge). Given the nature of the
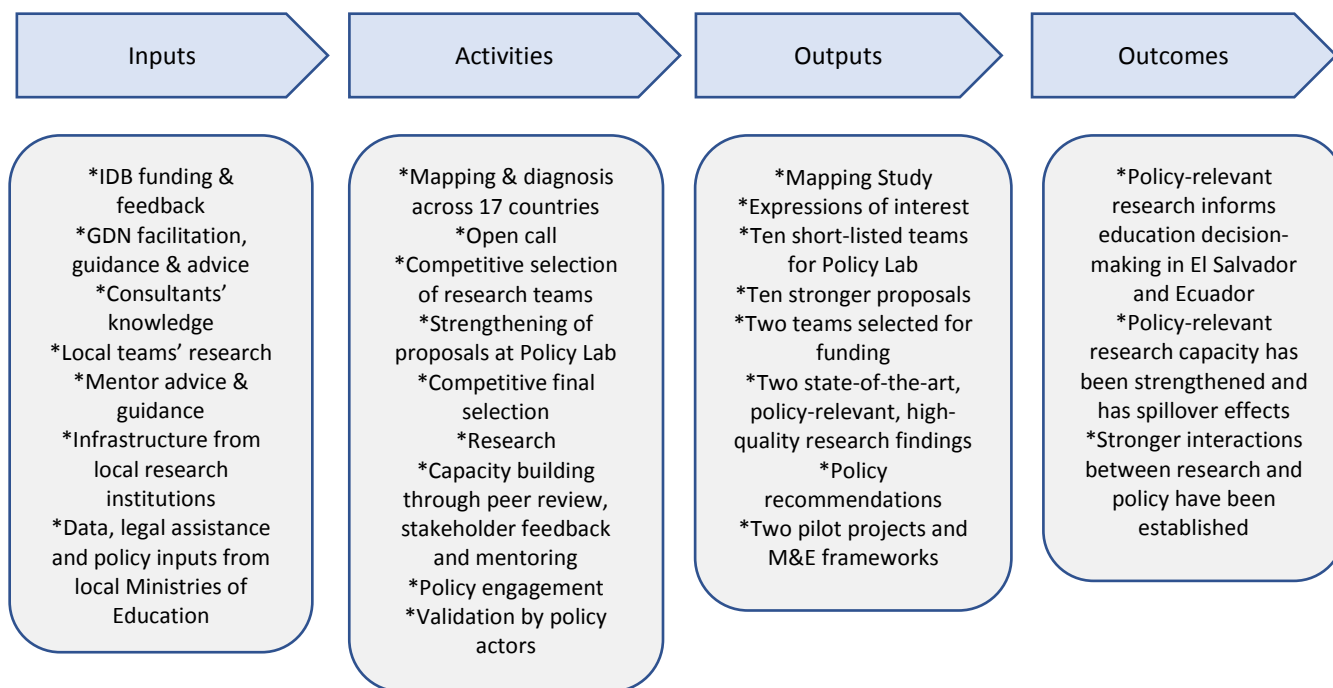
Program, these two groups are crucial sources of information and share an interest in the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the Program. Research institutions should, in principle, also benefit from the Program indirectly but they are a secondary player in the Program.

Finally, Mapping study consultants, advisors and local policy experts are important sources of knowledge, experience, contacts and expertise and, as a result, constitute key resources for the Program. In terms of the evaluation, advisors and policy experts are well positioned to provide relevant information and may share an interest in the relevance, impact and effectiveness of the Program. The Mapping Study consultants are additional sources of background information and general context for the evaluation.

Time and financial constraints prevented the evaluation team from fully engaging all stakeholders. With the exception of research institutions, however, all key players were surveyed and interviewed.

2.3.2. Logic Model of the Program.

Diagram 2.3.2.1: Logic Model of Program

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
*IDB funding & feedback *GDN facilitation, guidance & advice *Consultants' knowledge *Local teams' research *Mentor advice & guidance *Infrastructure from local research institutions *Data, legal assistance and policy inputs from local Ministries of Education	*Mapping & diagnosis across 17 countries *Open call *Competitive selection of research teams *Strengthening of proposals at Policy Lab *Competitive final selection *Research *Capacity building through peer review, stakeholder feedback and mentoring *Policy engagement *Validation by policy actors	*Mapping Study *Expressions of interest *Ten short-listed teams for Policy Lab *Ten stronger proposals *Two teams selected for funding *Two state-of-the-art, policy-relevant, high-quality research findings *Policy recommendations *Two pilot projects and M&E frameworks	*Policy-relevant research informs education decision-making in El Salvador and Ecuador *Policy-relevant research capacity has been strengthened and has spillover effects *Stronger interactions between research and policy have been established

In Diagram 2.3.2.1 we present our general understanding of the logic model guiding the Program. The diagram includes four segments: inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes. The inputs reflect the resources all stakeholders contribute to the Program and that make the specified activities possible. The activities, in turn, are meant to transform inputs into outputs, that is, the main products to be obtained from the Program. Finally, the outcomes represent

the actual goals, or what the Program is actually trying to achieve and to which the outputs will make a direct contribution.

2.3.3. Constructed matched comparison case.

In order to address effectiveness and impact more comprehensively, we complemented the evaluation methodology with an adapted version of the constructed matched comparison group technique common to quasi-experimental designs. The purpose has been to compare outcomes from the research grantees to two matching, non-financed proposals selected from the Policy Lab. Comparison cases were chosen from the group of three projects selected during the final round but that were not able to move on to the research phase.

We contacted the leaders of the research teams representing the Universidad Privada de Bolivia (UPB) and Centro de Investigación y Acción Educativa Social (CIASES) in Nicaragua, and only obtained a response from CIASES. As a result, the constructed matched comparison is limited to one case. Still, we believe this approach provides additional valuable information on the difference the Program can make to transform a research proposal into policy-relevant information that contributes to evidence-based decision-making.

2.3.4. Value-for-Money assessment.

There is a variety of ways to address value-for-money considerations. Depending on the nature of the intervention to be evaluated, there is a range of purely quantitative to mostly qualitative methodologies available. When a program's inputs, outputs and impacts are difficult to quantify or monetize, predominantly qualitative methodologies a more appropriate. In order to account for efficiency considerations, this evaluation used an adapted version of the participatory value-for-money assessment (PVfM).[1]

In this evaluation, the PVFM used the Program's original budget and underlying theory of change as starting points to identify major Program components and levels of financial investment. Yet the approach was fundamentally stakeholder driven because it relied on perceptions of value and effort based on the general framework of the intervention. Because the assessment considers all the major Program components under evaluation, participation was limited to GDN staff and research team members.

2.3.5. Questionnaires and interviews.

The evaluation team designed and used a variety of questionnaires to survey responses regarding the Program's relevance, effectiveness, impact, efficiency and sustainability. The questionnaires were distributed online or applied in person to research team members,

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[1]Participatory value-for-money assessment has been mostly developed as an evaluation tool by Chevalier and Buckles (2013) at Canada's SAS2 Dialogue.

mentors and GDN staff. The questionnaire templates and responses obtained can be found in Appendices A1 (for researchers), A2 (for mentors/advisors), and A3 (for GDN staff).

In addition, semi-structured or in-depth interviews were conducted with the following Program participants (a list of all the individuals interviewed is available in Appendix …):

- GDN management (Head of Programs and Director of Strategic Partnerships)
- IDB staff (Chief Economist and Education Specialists in El Salvador and Ecuador)
- Research team members in Ecuador and El Salvador (at FUSADES, USFQ and UDLA)
- Mentors/Advisors to the research teams (in Mexico and the United States)
- Government officials at the Ministry of Education in Ecuador and El Salvador

2.3.6. Desk review.

The evaluation team had access to many important documents generated during the lifespan of the Program. Review of these documents was fundamental to establish the Program's goals and direction, track Program implementation, substantiate Program performance and explore outputs and outcomes.

III – KEY FINDINGS

3.1. PERFORMANCE OVERVIEW.

This section focuses on discussing the Program implementation process and its consequences for Program outputs. The assessment of performance in reference to outcomes is left for subsequent sections, where effectiveness and impact are discussed in detail.

3.1.1. Implementation.

The original timeline for the Program spanned from May of 2015 to July of 2017. Implementation was to take place in a quasi-sequential fashion (certain overlaps were anticipated, especially at the beginning) with the last 12 months dedicated to the capacity building phase on research. The original version of the Program could not be implemented as planned due to delays during the grant-making phase. The Program was first extended to April of 2018 and then amended and extended once more to June of 2019. At the time of writing this evaluation report, the Program had been granted the maximum possible extension under a technical cooperation agreement with the IDB. Yet, the evidence suggest the Program will not be fully implemented as amended.

Implementation of the Program has been affected by delays resulting from the following key factors:

- IDB's internal protocols and procedures
- Political contexts adverse to independent research, especially in Nicaragua and Bolivia
- The proximity of elections, especially in Ecuador and El Salvador
- Organizational resource limitations tied to data collection and processing tasks in government agencies, especially in El Salvador

These factors have not necessarily operated in isolation, as the evolution of the Program illustrates. The Program proceeded according to timeline (or at least not obviously off-track) until the final selection phase.

As described previously, the Program started with the development of a Mapping Study. The research for this study took place between June and December of 2015. The first draft was presented in December of 2016 for IDB feedback and the final version was published in December of 2017. Information obtained during the regional research phase was used to inform de Call for Expressions of Interest, which was open during January and February of 2016. A selection of nine proposals was made in time for the planned Policy Lab, a two-day event that took place on the 14 and 15 of March of the same year. Policy Lab participants were given about a month to strengthen their proposals and submit them again for a final round of

selection on April of 2016. Five projects from four countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador and Nicaragua) were selected to move on to the research phase.

By April-May of 2016, the five selected research teams were just waiting for clearance from the IDB to begin the capacity building phase on research. IDB protocols establish that research projects funded with IDB resources must obtain a letter of no-objection from governments before any disbursement can be made. Securing such letters turned out to be a very complex process in countries where evaluation is relatively unknown and unwelcome, and where interaction between government and independent research centers is distant or even conflictive.

By December of 2016 there was already a six-month delay in implementation as only one project had received a green light from government (FUSADES in El Salvador) and one had been rejected (Universidad Privada de Bolivia, in Bolivia). In these circumstances, and anticipating complications due to political cycles in Nicaragua and Ecuador, the IDB decided to hold off on their go-ahead for FUSADES and agreed with GDN to extend the Program to April of 2018 under the expectation that, either by their own means or through the local IDB offices, the teams from Nicaragua and Ecuador could be in the clear early in 2017.

Further down the road it was discovered that the nature and timeline of the Ecuador project did not really warrant a letter of no objection from the government. Between January and April of 2017 the USFQ/FARO team had secured permission and a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Education. The two Nicaraguan teams, however, were facing increasingly adverse conditions for their projects and eventually decided to withdraw from the Program.

The team in Ecuador was able to begin the research phase in May of 2017 but the team at FUSADES had to re-engage with the local Ministry of Education in order to begin work on their project. Almost a year had passed since the FUSADES team had secured a letter of no objection and priorities had changed in the Ministry. So much so, that the project had to be reimagined and renegotiated. FUSADES received clearance from the Salvadoran government in December of 2017 but it was only until March of 2018 that internal procedures at the IDB permitted the go-ahead from the institution to the FUSADES project.

In those circumstances, with only two teams in the clear and USD 100,000 in unallocated research grants, GDN and IDB agreed to take advantage of the close relationships the teams had developed with their governments to redefine the scope and timeline of the Program. As a result, the deadline was extended to June of 2019 and the remaining funds were reallocated to a "Phase 2" of the Program, through which FUSADES and USFQ/FARO would produce recommendations for a program pilot that built on the research findings, and design an M&E framework to evaluate the pilot. A final decision on these changes was conditional on obtaining the ministries' cooperation. By December of 2017, the teams were in the process of seeking approval letters from their ministries for an extension and expansion of their collaboration.

In early spring of 2018, all deliverables pertaining to Phase 1 in Ecuador were sent to IDB for approval so that Phase 2 could begin. It took several months to review the papers, incorporate feedback and actually attain a common understanding across IDB departments and local office regarding the purpose of these research products in the context of the Program. As a result, the Ecuador team could only begin Phase 2 after January of 2019. At the time of writing this evaluation the pilot design and M&E framework had received feedback from a specially appointed advisor and their expected delivery date is May 31st, 2019. In the case of El Salvador, although the plan was to roll out both Phases within a single period of 13 months, delays in accessing and processing data from the Ministry of Education pushed back completion of Phase 1 and made it practically impossible to launch Phase 2.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Program has encountered major implementation problems, some of them difficult to foresee but tied to the risk of working in adverse environments, while others highlight issues with program design. As a result, one of the teams (FUSADES) will not be able to complete the entire implementation cycle (as planned) within the time frame allocated.

3.1.2. Outputs.

The Program's original logic and sequence suggest a total of seven key outputs to be obtained from the inputs and activities (see Logic Model diagram). As mentioned in the previous section, important changes to the Program resulted in modifications to the outputs as well. Table 3.1.1.1. compares originally expected and actually obtained outputs for the Program over the entire implementation period (2015-2019).

The Program was able to first produce a diagnostic of the region that identified information requirements, as well as knowledge and institutional gaps interfering with evidence-based decision-making. Aside from its value as a source of knowledge, the immediate purpose of the study was to inform further Program development by getting a sense of the policy areas to focus on and of the local research centers to contact.

The Mapping Study was used to develop a restricted Call for Expressions of Interest that attracted 25 different teams from the identified centers in the region and beyond. The expectation was that 10 teams would be selected to participate in a two-day Policy Lab to take place in March of 2016. In the end, 9 teams were invited to the exercise and had the opportunity to interact with experts and policy actors, receive feedback on their proposals and make contacts with other regional researchers working on similar topics. Later sections will substantiate that the Policy Lab was an output of tremendous success.

The Lab was followed by a period during which teams had the chance to strengthen their proposals before presenting them for a final selection in April of 2016. The second competitive round resulted in five research projects selected to continue to the capacity building phase on research funded through IDB grants. Minor changes are always expected and do not necessarily suggest performance problems. In this case, the number of projects finally selected was smaller

than what was originally planned but, if anything, the assessments of the GDN/IDB/Expert panel suggest this is the result of a push for higher levels of quality.

The implementation problems described in the previous section are clearly reflected in the outputs associated with the research and policy engagement components of the Program, as Table 3.1.2.1 describes.

Table 3.1.2.1: Original, modified and final outputs 2015-2019

Original (May 2015-July 2017)	First Modification (May 2015-April 2018)	Second Modification (May 2015-June 2019)	Final (May 31st, 2019)
Baseline/diagnostic study	Mapping Study	Mapping Study	Mapping Study
Undetermined number of expressions of interest to participate in the Policy Lab in Lima, Peru	25 expressions of interest to participate in the Policy Lab in Lima, Peru	25 expressions of interest to participate in the Policy Lab in Lima, Peru	25 expressions of interest to participate in the Policy Lab in Lima, Peru
10 short-listed teams participating in the Lima Policy Lab	9 short-listed teams participating in the Lima Policy lab	9 short-listed teams participating in the Lima Policy lab	9 short-listed teams participating in the Lima Policy lab
Six selected teams for 12-month research grants	Five selected teams for 12-month research grants	Two teams left for 12-month research grants	Two teams for 12-month research grants
Six state-of-the art, policy-relevant, high-quality research products	Five state-of-the art, policy-relevant, high-quality research products	Two state-of-the art, policy-relevant, high-quality research products	Two state-of-the art, policy-relevant, quality research products
		Two pilot interventions designed on the basis of research products with their corresponding M&E frameworks	One pilot intervention designed on the basis of research products with its corresponding M&E framework

As a result of the Program amendment and second extension (to June of 2019), the outputs changed from five to two policy-relevant research products and two program pilot designs with their corresponding M&E frameworks. At the time of writing this evaluation report, one of the research products (USFQ/FARO) has been delivered and the other one (FUSADES) is wrapping up with an expected completion date set for May 31st, 2019. As will be discussed below in greater detail, both products have successfully met expectations of quality and relevance.

In regard to the pilot project and M&E framework, only the Ecuadorian team will be able to deliver this product on time (May 31st, 2019); it was impossible for the Salvadoran team to finish Phase 1 and complete Phase 2 within the time frame they were left with.

3.2.   RELEVANCE.

3.2.1.   Understanding thematic priorities in line with public expenditures.

The Mapping Study, the first key output of the Program, contributes to fill a gap in understanding thematic (policy) priorities in the smallest countries of Latin America and the Caribbean but the picture it presents is partial and requires further research.

As described by Program designers and managers, the Mapping Study was conceived as a first step in addressing public spending priorities in the region through the mapping out of regional trends and issues affecting the demand and supply of policy-relevant research in the countries the IDB had identified as priority for the Program.[2]

The study was able to identify policy priority areas in the broadest sense. Both researchers and policy actors have education and health as common first priorities across the region, while public expenditure analysis is only a second priority for researchers. Policy actors, it turns out, are more interested in impact evaluation and climate change.[3] The study finds other policy and analytical areas of interest for both researchers and policy makers but none of these areas is evaluated against their public spending priority (i.e. priority areas for research are not necessarily priority areas for spending).

The final report is the product of three sub-regional studies based on online surveys, desk review and interviews conducted in only three countries. The sample size is small and data availability was a significant problem, especially in the case of Caribbean countries. The budget allocated to this project made it very difficult to have a substantial presence in the region – a condition necessary to deeply explore the intricacies of policy and research in the countries covered.[4] As a result, the general findings did not bring any major surprises to the consultants in charge, all of whom had significant prior experience working at the intersection of policy and research in different countries.[5]

Stakeholders interviewed on the Mapping Study admit a lot more would need to be done to turn it into an actual diagnostic of research supply and demand in the region (or a knowledge product in itself).[6] Yet the Study has been very useful to inform further Program development. On the one hand, the IDB had an ex-ante interest in promoting public expenditure effectiveness and efficiency in health and education, as is clearly indicated in the Consultant Terms of Reference for the Mapping Study. In that sense, the Study provided support for moving forward in the region on at least one of those two areas. On the other, it identified general issues related to research capacity and the use of research for policymaking, as well as promising independent research centers that could benefit from investment in capacity building. This

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[2]The 17 priority countries are: Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.
[3]Further detail available in GDN (2018), pp. 65-72.
[4]According to the itemized budget GDN shared with the evaluation team, the total amount allocated to this phase was USD 41,000.
[5]As expressed by Joseph Hoffman, lead consultant for the Study, in interview with the evaluation team.
[6]Opinion shared by Joseph Hoffman, Andrea Ordóñez, Francesco Obino and Alejandro Izquierdo in interviews with the evaluation team.

information proved crucial to the design of the Call for Expressions of Interest leading to the Policy Lab in Lima, Perú, and to the selection of research proposals for funding.

3.2.2. Best practices in academia-policy interaction and alignment of research agendas to policy priorities.

The team conducted a limited literature review to identify best practices in the interaction between academia and policy actors. Research on this topic is relatively recent and, as a result, not a lot is known about best practices leading to evidence-based decision-making, especially in developing countries. GDN's own research[7] has found that most of the work looking at the link between research and policy has focused on developed countries out of concern for accountability in the context of public expenditures in international aid. Specialists working on this topic suggest that effective knowledge transfer (research to practice) works better through processes that encourage discussion, problem solving and joint development.[8] The OECD has also pointed to the value of knowledge brokers to translate research into useful evidence, and of international cooperation for capacity building in the use of that evidence.[9]

As Francesco Obino, Head of Programs at GDN, informed the evaluation team, this Program was not designed with a particular conception of what the interaction between research and policy should be: "the stand of GDN on this is that the interaction between research and policy cannot be defined a priori. We are highly dependent on the context, we are highly dependent on the history and on the people as well, so the approach we took was rather agnostic, in terms of how is it that ideally a research institution should interact with policy actors".[10] It should be mentioned as well that a program like this demanded some degree of flexibility given its experimental character in the region and the fact that the knowledge obtained from the Mapping Study was mostly of a general nature.

Considering what the relevant literature is hinting at, as well as GDN's approach to the nature of the research-policy interaction, our conclusion is that the Program has made a contribution to the knowledge about general conditions for evidence-based decision-making in the smallest and poorest countries of Latin America, to encourage and facilitate interaction between researchers and policy actors around the resolution of relevant policy problems and, to a more limited extent, to bring together the supply and demand for research in a co-creation process. In this sense, the Program is not only aligned with some of the best practices already identified for developed countries but has also started a meaningful learning process on the link between research and policy in developing countries.

3.2.3. Relevance of capacity building activities to grantees' capacities.

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[7]See GDN (2002).
[8]For example, Ozga (2004).
[9]OECD (2017).
[10]Excerpts from interview with Francesco Obino.

In general, the capacity building activities included in the Program are considered to be relevant to the grantees' capacity to conduct policy-relevant research (broadly defined and demand-based) and to engage with policy actors.

In general, the teams have a positive perspective on the Program's contribution to their research capacities. This outlook is stronger in the Salvadoran case, where all researchers (even the team leader) considered the Program absolutely helpful to improve their research capacities.

The survey results from research team members suggest that the capacity building activities included in the Program were, on average, moderately relevant to their capacity to engage with policy actors.[11] It is important, however, to contrast this result with the emphasis researchers made during the interviews on the significant contribution their participation in the Program had made to their individual capacities.

Andrea Yáñez, team member from Ecuador, reported during an interview that for her participation in the Program opened an opportunity to improve her methodological capacities (especially for qualitative, yet policy-relevant research). Even though she had interacted with policy actors in the past, she believes the Program gave her the chance to expand her policy networks and improve her skills to interact with government officials.[12] Helga Cuéllar, team leader from El Salvador, felt challenged by the requirements of conducting demand-based research for policymakers and reports to have developed "great negotiating skills, because I had to negotiate everything with the Ministry in order to keep this project going".[13] For Gabriela Góchez, team member from El Salvador, interaction with policymakers during the research phase has been very important to her understanding of the policy process and to improve her capacity to communicate with policymakers.[14]

Another way to assess relevance in this case is through the contribution of the Program to clarify research goals, approach, methodology and data sources. On average, grantees believe their participation in the Program was very significant in this regard, especially the team leaders, who carry this perception since the Policy Lab.

3.2.4. Relevance of research studies and alignment with Program goals and objectives.

Answer to this question must center around the general goal of improving public policy expenditure and the specific objective of strengthening research capacities to undertake public expenditure analysis.

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[11]The majority of researchers was moderately in agreement with the statement "participation in the Program significantly improved your interaction with policymakers and other policy actors". See Appendix A1 for further details.
[12]From interview with Andrea Yáñez.
[13]Excerpts from interview with Helga Cuéllar.
[14]From interview with Gabriela Góchez.

The research team in Ecuador focused their work on the impact of government investments in early childhood education on student performance. More specifically, the team set out to study the effects that initial education has on child development and educational attainments as reflected on results from standardized tests on math and language taken by 3rd and 6th grade students. In addition, the researchers conducted a perception study with a (non-random) sample of teachers, directors and parents to identify expectations around the effects of initial education as well as obstacles to the success of early childhood policies.

The findings from this study are not conclusive, but the results may contribute to national discussions on the effectiveness of investing public resources in initial education from the standpoint of evaluation and the conditions (socio-economic and infrastructural, for instance) under which such investment could have a greater impact.

The Salvadoran team is conducting an evaluation on the potential of standardized testing as a resource for improving teaching quality in El Salvador. This team, however, was selected on an entirely different proposal, one focused on assessing the cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness of a new government approach to the professional development of teachers. By the time the team was ready to begin, the priorities of the Ministry had changed and it was necessary to formulate an alternative project in order to move the engagement forward.

The relevance of both works to public spending in education is indirect, more so in the case of El Salvador. In this sense, their relevance to the Program goals and objectives is partial. However, both studies are highly relevant to education policy, one of the areas the Mapping Study identified as priority for the entire region. Moreover, as will be discussed later, both studies have been very aligned with the education policy priorities in their respective countries, although, it must be said, such priorities tend to change regularly.

3.2.5. Relevance of research questions to national education priorities in Ecuador and El Salvador, and coherence to grantees' research agenda.

The studies conducted by the grantees have been relevant to the education priorities and policymaking in their countries, especially in El Salvador, but these priorities change.

In Ecuador, the Mapping Study identified a general consensus amongst researchers and policy actors around education as one of five top policy priority areas. Researchers also proved interested in the analysis and evaluation of public expenditure.[15] The team in Ecuador explored the impact of initial education policies, a thematic area in line with the research agenda at the Ministry of Education (at the time the research project was approved) and pertinent to the work the local IDB office had been conducting on education policy in general, and early stages of education in particular.[16]

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[15]See GDN (2018), pp. 69-70.
[16]From interviews with Andrea Cardona and Sofie Westh.

The current project in El Salvador addresses teacher quality, a universal concern in education policy. Ariel Fiszbein, the team's advisor, in his assessment of the team's last progress report commented: "The goal of this research is to explore the usefulness of diagnostic tests of mathematics and language learning to inform and help teachers and teaching in public schools in El Salvador. Without a doubt this is a question of critical importance and the research can have a very positive influence in El Salvador as well as in other countries facing similar challenges pursuing an improvement in quality of education".[17]

In an interview with the evaluation team, IDB expert in education Pablo Zoido, who has deep knowledge of El Salvador, referred to this research as "fundamental for El Salvador…[…]…evaluation and learning are top priorities in our agenda for the country and something we have worked a lot on with the Ministry. Helga's topic [the team leader] moves in the right direction: we cannot stop at appropriate measurements, we need to make sure teachers are using those results".[18]

Government officials from the Ministry of Education in El Salvador confirmed the relevance of this research to education policy in their country in general, and the work of the Ministry in particular. Team El Salvador's assessment carries a great deal of interest not only because both student tests and teaching quality are top priorities in the education research agenda the Ministry established, but also because the study focuses on student evaluation instruments designed and developed in-house and under tight scrutiny. José Carlos Márquez, Research and Innovation Manager at the Ministry of Education, told the evaluation team the research is "very useful to us as we try to build our own [testing] model… [but also]…to socialize the evidence obtained with decision-makers".[19]

Research team members in both countries reported the research conducted during the Program is completely relevant to their own research agendas. In El Salvador, Helga Cuéllar is a senior researcher and one her country's top specialists in education policy, an area she has been working on for several years at FUSADES. Gabriela Góchez and Ana Marcela López are younger researchers at FUSADES dedicated full-time to the research project funded by this Program.

Before joining the USFQ faculty in the Economics Department, Iván Borja worked for five years at Grupo FARO in areas such as education, poverty and health, and social policy in general. He was involved in a major evaluation study on Ecuador's Ten-Year Education Plan with funding from the European Union. At USFQ he continues to address questions related to education and social policy. Sebastián Oleas is Professor of Economics at USFQ where he conducts research on education, health and social security. Before joining Universidad de las Américas' Economics Department, Andrea Yáñez collaborated with Grupo FARO as a research associate working on issues of public spending in education.

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[17]Excerpts from assessment letter to Francesco Obino on progress report delivered by FUSADES.
[18]Excerpts from interview with Pablo Zoido.
[19]Form interview with José Carlos Márquez.

3.3.   EFFECTIVENESS.

3.3.1. Understanding the impacts of various education policy initiatives.

The two research projects funded through this Program address questions related to the impact of education policies and, to that extent, contribute to a general discussion on the subject. The Ecuador project looks at the impact of initial education policies on student performance and other variables of interest. The Salvadoran project focuses on the impact of novel student testing on teacher quality. The fact that the two projects financed under this Program revolve around impact evaluation is remarkable in contexts where evaluation is not only uncommon but may also be unwelcomed. Yet, the extent to which the actual research products contribute to a broader debate on the impact of education policies is hard to determine with the evidence available.

In the case of Ecuador, it should be mentioned that the qualitative paper delivered as part of the research product, which gathered perceptions of parents, teachers and school authorities on initial education policies over the last 10 years, highlighted issues of teacher quality, poor administration and lack of infrastructure as potential obstacles to policy success. The general perception is that, despite methodological limitations, this paper constitutes a valuable piece of information in the context of Ecuador, where apparently qualitative studies of this kind are not common.[20]

In the Salvadoran case, the results from the evaluation will only be ready at the end of May, therefore, it is not possible for any stakeholder to advance an opinion at this point. As discussed earlier, however, perceptions on the relevance and potential contribution of this effort are very encouraging.

The evaluation team asked researchers directly how much participation in the Program had helped them understand the impact of different policies on the quality of education in their countries. Average responses are quite remarkable because, even though they are specialists in education policy, team members are highly (Ecuador) to completely (Salvador) in agreement with that statement.

3.3.2. Contribution of capacity building activities and GDN's support to the objectives of the Program and the quality of outputs.

3.3.2.1.   <u>Strengthen the capacity of research centers to undertake public expenditure analysis</u>.

The Program's capacity building activities have made a contribution to the goal of strengthening the capacity of research centers to undertake quality, policy-relevant research,

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[20]Based on interviews with Iván Borja (Ecuador team leader) conducted on April 22nd, 2019, Sebastián Oleas (team member) conducted on April 24th, 2019, and Andrea Yáñez (Ecuador team member) on April 25th, 2019.

though not necessarily on public expenditure analysis. Below we provide details on how this contribution was achieved based on the evidence collected.

The Policy Lab.

According to participating researchers, the activities at the Policy Lab played an important role helping them clarify their research plans and improve their communication skills. Iván Borja, team leader in Ecuador, Helga Cuéllar, team leader in El Salvador, and Melba Castillo, team leader in Nicaragua rated the Policy Lab very highly in these categories.[21]

It was possible to corroborate this perception during interviews with the team leaders. Iván Borja indicated that, during the Policy Lab, "there were two important moments, during the first one we had a vis-à-vis [sic] with education experts and that helped us clarify and strengthen the methodological aspects of the research. Secondly, there was a plenary session where we all presented our proposals, and our peers and other colleagues gave us feedback, which significantly strengthened the methodology and the connection to decision-making of our proposal".[22] For Helga Cuéllar the Policy Lab was "an incomparable experience, having been there with other colleagues, policy experts and former government officials…I was very happy with the contributions they made to strengthen my proposal, as well as with how much I learned about communicating research to policy actors".[23]

GDN´s Francesco Obino believes participants especially benefited from face-to-face sessions with experts and reported observing moderate to major improvements in the methodological approach, the policy relevance, as well as in the clarity, feasibility and overall quality of the research proposals.[24]

Capacity building phase on research.

The Program was meant to provide a space where teams could develop policy-relevant investigations with the guidance of subject-matter experts and more experienced researchers as well as GDN's feedback and assistance, and in proximity to actual decision-makers. For team members, the capacity building phase on research was a hard-to-find opportunity to dedicate precious time to research projects of interest to them but difficult to develop due to lack of necessary data and/or financial resources. It allowed them to grow as researchers, exposing their work to international standards and rigorous peer review and feedback.

Iván Borja, team leader from Ecuador, told the evaluation team that "…compared to what we had two years ago, having been able to do something in initial education, even if it is small, will have important repercussions for the capacities of this team".[25] Sebastián Oleas, team member

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[21]Based on survey responses and interviews. For details on the survey responses, please consult Appendix A1.
[22]Excerpts from interview with Iván Borja.
[23]Excerpts from interview with Helga Cuéllar.
[24]For further details on these survey responses, please refer to Appendix A3.
[25]Excerpts from interview with Iván Borja.

from Ecuador, commented to the evaluation team that the research conducted under the Program had been an opportunity to "do applied research, work with data, see the problem from a policy perspective, and try to make recommendations. To me, this work added important value because it gave me access to data, I was able to build, run and polish the model, and then write an evaluation document".[26] Helga Cuéllar, team leader from El Salvador, mentioned that "I had done research before but not demand-based research… [interaction with] the politics [sic] had always been the purview of the president [of FUSADES], but this time I had to do it, and that was part of the learning process".[27]

The capacity building activities on research included access to a mentor/advisor for each team, a person with significant experience not only in the specific field of the research but also on translating research findings into effective policy inputs.

Based on the role the Program envisaged for mentors/advisors, the evaluation team surveyed researchers to get a general impression of the mentor's contribution to various dimensions of their work: research quality, policy relevance of research, drafting of policy recommendations, and communicate findings to policy actors. On average, team members pointed to research quality and policy relevance of research as the two dimensions where their advisors had the greatest impact. The team in Ecuador believes their advisor, Héctor Villarreal, was important for the quality of their research and somewhat important to its policy relevance. Researchers in El Salvador, in contrast, believe their advisor has been crucial for research quality and policy relevance.

In order to get a more complete picture, the evaluation team asked research mentors/advisors how much guidance and assistance their mentees had needed in various areas related to their work under the Program: improving research quality, increasing the policy relevance of their research, and translating research into information useful to policymakers. Héctor Villarreal, team Ecuador's advisor, believes researchers needed the most help with quality issues but was highly satisfied with the end result in terms of quality and relevance.[28] Villarreal's impression is also evident in the final review he wrote to GDN on the research results: "This is a serious effort with good results. […] While some shortcomings are present, they are of second order nature, and the overall work is an excellent starting point for a fine policy-relevant research agenda".[29]

Ariel Fiszbein, advisor to the Salvadoran team, believes they only needed moderate guidance and assistance improving research quality and no assistance at all from him for other matters. The final research product from El Salvador will only be ready by May 31st, 2019, however,

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[26]Excerpts from interview with Sebastián Oleas.
[27]Excerpts from interview with Helga Cuéllar.
[28] Apart from help improving research quality, Villarreal mentioned the team in Ecuador needed very little assistance translating research into useful information for policymakers and no help at all with other matters. See Appendix A2 for details on his responses.
[29]Advisor report on final drafts of "Calidad y equidad en educación: Lecciones de la política de ampliación y mejora de los servicios de Desarrollo Infantil, Educación Inicial y Educación General Básica en Ecuador", dated March 30, 2018.

based on what he had seen at the time of the interview, Fiszbein mentioned being satisfied with the quality of the research and highly satisfied with its policy relevance.[30]

Clearly, the assessment of both beneficiaries and resource persons depends on the type of relationship they manage to develop and the particular needs of the research project as it unfolds. In the case of Ecuador, Iván Borja, the team leader, described his interaction with Villarreal as "very strong at the beginning, we had a lot of communication with him; Héctor has a lot of experience in econometrics and part of our investigation was quantitatively oriented so his recommendations on the mathematical modeling were very good".[31] Borja indicates that between May of 2016 and December of 2017, the team was in close contact with Villarreal but then lost touch with him between January and March of 2018, when the team was wrapping up Phase 1. Borja believes the final stages of the research could have benefited significantly from Villarreal's expertise in education, quantitative methods and public policy. Villarreal, for his part, suggested to the evaluation team he expected to be more involved in the development of the econometric model.[32]

For members of the Salvadoran team, the advisor was very important – not only to improve research quality, but also in providing insights to drive policy relevance and effective communication with policymakers. Interestingly, Ariel Fiszbein, advisor to team El Salvador, believes his role was less of a mentor and more of a sounding board, and indicates his contribution was moderate and mostly limited to quality assurance.[33] With respect to their advisor, Helga Cuéllar mentioned that "the only thing I regret is not being able to take full advantage of his expertise; he was always available and had worked with us a lot in the methodological section of our first proposal but in the end that did not fly…for the second one, I sent it to him and he commented, but it was not what we had built the first time".[34]

3.3.2.2.   Create platforms for knowledge transfer and cross-learning.

On average, research team members had very little contact with other researchers and experts in the region working on similar topics. As a matter of fact, Joseph Hoffman, lead consultant for the Mapping Study and longtime collaborator of GDN, told the evaluation team that "…there are not many organizations that provide opportunities for southern researchers to talk to each other outside of their countries…[..]…it would really be a shame if something like that is lost".[35]

The Policy Lab provided a valuable opportunity for researchers to interact with other scholars, experts and policy actors at the regional level. Due to resource constraints however, this

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[30]It is important to note that Fiszbein told the evaluation team he would never give the highest rating to anything (i.e. he would never be completely satisfied with any research product). See Appendix A2 for details on his responses.
[31]Excerpts from interview with Iván Borja.
[32]From interview with Héctor Villarreal.
[33]From interview with Ariel Fiszbein; also, see Appendix A2.
[34]From interview with Helga Cuéllar.
[35]Excerpts from an interview with Ariel Fiszbein.

opportunity was limited to the team leaders (at least in the case of the two grantees). Participants report the Lab was absolutely useful to expand their research networks, give international exposure to their work and engage with policy experts.[36] Yet, interviews revealed that interactions with other researchers during the Policy Lab have not transformed into promising work connections due to the duration and nature of the exercise.[37] Two days was considered not enough time, especially as no follow-up workshops or group activities have been planned.[38]

The Program, on the other hand, made it possible for the research teams to build a relationship with the local IDB offices, something that has been particularly useful for the Ecuadorian researchers to improve the quality and relevance of their final product, as well as to develop a pilot program on evaluation of teacher quality during Phase 2. In the case of El Salvador, the research phase, with all the delays and difficulties, provided an opportunity to develop a space for cross-fertilization uncommon even for FUSADES standards.

All things considered, the evaluation team´s assessment is that the Program´s capacity building activities have been quite effective at creating platforms for knowledge transfer and cross-learning, even if the nature of such platforms is different in the two countries.

3.3.2.3.   Strengthen the relationships/links among policymakers, research centers, think tanks, and researchers to share and build on specific models that foster efficiency in public expenditure.

The capacity building activities of the Program have made a contribution to strengthening the relationships between researchers and policy actors through the emphasis on policy engagement during Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Policy engagement has intersected most Program components beginning with the Policy Lab. At the Lab, participants had the opportunity to listen to and interact with a number of policy actors from civil society and think tanks (some of whom had extensive experience working with and for government) in order to strengthen the policy relevance of their research proposals. Later, during the capacity building phase on research, grantees were expected to develop their project in close contact with policymakers at the Ministry of Education. Finally, during Phase 2 (the capacity building phase on pilot project), researchers were to design a demand-based pilot program (built on the research findings from Phase 1), as well as an M&E framework to evaluate the pilot, in close consultation with government officials and local IDB experts.
In El Salvador, policy engagement started at the highest possible level (with a contact between Helga Cuéllar, the team leader, and the Education Minister) but trickled down to managerial levels without difficulty and under a very flexible arrangement (no formal agreement was

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[36]For additional details on the survey responses, please refer to Appendix A1.

[37]From interviews with Iván Borja and Helga Cuéllar.

[38]Interviewees may not be aware that a session to present their work is being planned for the next Global Development Conference.

signed between the Ministry and FUSADES, for instance). An official from the Ministry interviewed for the evaluation confirmed he had established a trust relationship with Helga Cuéllar, the team leader, and that collaboration with the entire research team had been very helpful, even in terms of assisting them with data cleanup and processing, something he had never seen before.[39] At the Ministry, the focus was less on overseeing the production of a good research paper and more on understanding how the team's work contributed to their own activities and to education policy decision-making. The research team, for its part, took policy engagement very seriously, and was clearly willing and capable of keeping that level of engagement, through the several difficulties encountered, by anticipating and adapting to changing priorities. As Ariel Fiszbein mentioned to the evaluation team, "if the goal is not only to write papers, but to have influence on managers, that is a necessary condition".[40]

The USFQ/FARO team did not work as closely or at such high level with the Ministry of Education in the country. They developed a working relationship with the Ministry's Research Department, the area in charge of approving all research in education that involves access to government data and schools, as well as the area responsible for validating and socializing research results. Iván Borja, the team leader, reports meeting with Ruthy Intriago, then Director of Research, and her team in a workshop format two or three times before and during the course of the study, as well as exchanging a number of emails with them to share information about the research and deliver reports. Access to information and schools was formalized through a memorandum of understanding between Borja and the Ministry.[41]

Official documents shared by the Research Department with the evaluation team, as well as information obtained during an interview with a research official designated to assist us with our enquiry, suggest that the relationship with USFQ followed the standard operating procedures the Ministry has established for external research projects.[42] According to the process, the Ministry's involvement with the research ends at the time the proposal is approved, however, the Ministry expects to get final results from the researchers and, upon request, may socialize the results to other appropriate departments within the Ministry.[43] Once the final research product has been received, it is sent to a repository.[44]

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[39]From interview with José Carlos Márquez Hernández. In their two progress reports, the FUSADES team also mentions their assistance to the Ministry with database cleanup and processing.

[40]Excerpts from interview with Ariel Fiszbein.

[41]At the time the evaluation was conducted Ruthy Intriago no longer worked at the Ministry of Education and the team was unable to find updated contact information.

[42]Andrea Cardona was the official designated by Jorge Benalcázar, Research Manager, to speak with us regarding the USFQ investigation. She was not familiar with the research but explained to us the internal processes for "external research projects" at the Ministry. On May 10, 2019, Cardona also shared with us via email the document titled "Gestión del proceso de la investigación 'Calidad y equidad en educación: Lecciones de la política de ampliación y mejora de los servicios de Desarrollo Infantil, Educación inicial y Educación General Básica en Ecuador". This document describes the management process for the USFQ Project at the Ministry.

[43]At the time of the interview (April 25th, 2019) Cardona told us the Ministry had not received the final research product from USFQ so, for them, the project had not concluded and, therefore, could not be socialized to other areas of the Ministry with potential interest in the results.

The USFQ team did not interact with other policy actors until late in Phase 1, when local IDB experts reviewed the research product and provided substantial feedback to the team. Engagement with the local IDB office has continued into Phase 2, which will conclude next May 31st. For this Phase, the team is developing a pilot program to evaluate teacher quality in Ecuador, a topic of interest for INEVAL (the country's evaluation authority), in consultation with the IDB local office.

3.3.2.4.   The role of GDN.

GDN is crucial to achieve Program objectives due to the many roles the organization plays in the Program, including facilitator, guide, broker, negotiator, advisor, peer reviewer, coordinator and organizer. These roles constitute an essential input to sustain and bring to successful conclusion all Program activities.

The evaluation team surveyed researchers and advisors to get their general view of how instrumental GDN had been to their work in the Program, and dedicated some interview time to explore the issue in greater detail with all Program participants and the funding partner. To researchers, the survey asked how helpful GDN had been for selected activities such as networking with other researchers, improving research quality, timely completion of research, engaging with advisor, communicating research to policy audiences, engaging with policy actors, and preparing policy briefs. We also asked whether communication with GDN had been fluid and constructive.

Overall, researchers believed GDN had been the most helpful at improving research quality and engaging with advisor, followed by networking with other researchers and timely completion of research. There are differences between the teams, with El Salvador consistently giving higher marks to GDN than Ecuador (for greater detail on the responses, please see Appendix A1). It is interesting to contrast these results with the perspective of Francesco Obino, Head of Programs at GDN, who considered that, along almost all the activities considered, the team from Ecuador needed significantly more help than the Salvadoran team (see Appendix A3 for more details). Researchers and GDN staff alike significantly to completely agree communication between them had been fluid and constructive.

These results are limited to certain aspects of the Program that, though highly important, do tell the whole story. It is thus necessary to put them in context and to gain a better understanding of the researchers' individual experiences with GDN and the Program.

Iván Borja, for instance, actually believes one of the Program's strengths has been GDN management: "…GDN had total clarity on the objectives it was trying to achieve, and that was very helpful for us…[…]…also, working with organizations like GDN is always easier because there is less bureaucracy, and there is a lot of transparency and honesty in the relationship…[…]…having GDN in charge of the Program was a great help. Under different

circumstances, given all the delays and the indifference of the government, the project could have fallen through the cracks and not concluded successfully".[45]

Helga Cuéllar pointed out that "…GDN is not here [in El Salvador], but being able to tell the Ministry that I had the support of the Global Development Network generated more credibility and trust in the project. FUSADES has credibility, so if on top of that you add an external organization that carries IDB support, there was more confidence [in the project]". She added "GDN was always on top of things, especially during the most difficult moment for us when we had to change the original proposal. Francesco especially, has been very valuable, crucial. I was able to speak with him in DC when I was there… […]… [GDN's] availability and optimism, that is what helped us move forward".[46]

The perspectives both team leaders shared with the evaluation team suggest that, while GDN may have played an important role supporting specific activities or outputs, the organization was really instrumental to hold together the entire process for these teams: the organization exercised good leadership and project management to make sure everybody stayed focused in the middle of difficulties.

3.4. IMPACT.

3.4.1. Goal achievement for grantees.

Addressing this issue is complex because researchers have individual goals and agendas that mix with the goals of the Program and the agendas of donors and managers. The evaluation team approached it at a very general level, surveying the team members about the extent to which they had clear and specific goals themselves for their participation in the Program, and secondly, about how successful the Program had been at helping them achieve those goals. These questions are directly tied to the goals of the research projects and the completion of Phase 1 (for El Salvador), and Phases 1 and 2 (for Ecuador). During individual interviews the evaluation team asked researchers to compare the expectations they had about the Program with what had been accomplished.

Team members strongly agree they started the capacity building phase on research with clear and specific goals for their team's participation, something research advisors and GDN staff members agree with.[47] On average, researchers indicate the Program has been moderately to highly successful to help them achieve their goals, something that GDN staff and research advisors agree with as well. The opinion is more positive in the case of Ecuador, where team members on average think the Program was very helpful.

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[45]From interview with Iván Borja.
[46]Excerpts from interview with Helga Cuéllar.
[47]For details on survey responses, please refer to Appendices A1 (for researchers), A2 (for advisors) and A3 (for GDN staff).

In general, team Ecuador's research proceeded according to plan in terms of methodology and data sources. Changes introduced to the structure of the research product (that turned it into two papers instead of one) did not modify the goals and scope established at the outset. Even though there was a significant delay in starting Phase 2, the team is certain they will complete the pilot design and M&E framework on May 31st, 2019. Researchers in Ecuador, however, are less enthusiastic about how their expectations regarding policy incidence were met: "…it was possible to create a space for dialogue but that did not reach a level of maturity…[…]…the [research] topic is not present (sic) with the new Director of Research [at the Ministry of Education]…what kind of continuity can this relationship have?"[48]

In terms of the original goals set out for the research in El Salvador, the project currently being completed is different from the proposal this team was selected on. The goals, scope and methods of the original project had to adapt to changes in the priorities at the Ministry of Education. The Program is partly responsible for this because the team had to wait a significant amount of time to begin their research (after the initial government approval came in) in the midst of IDB's uncertainty about continuing with the Program or not. This delay, combined with other technical and political circumstances beyond the control of Program participants, will also prevent the Salvadoran team from participating in Phase 2 of the Program. In this sense, achievement of stated goals has to be considered incomplete. For this team the expectation coming into the Program was to develop a rigorous, applied research project to inform policymaking, "but in public policy, decisions need to be taken quickly and [traditional] research timelines are no match…[…]…it was challenging, I did not expect it, but it was challenging…[…]…it made me understand the work cannot be as rigorous".[49]

3.4.2. Goal achievement for Program.

The Program has two general and four specific goals, all of them quite ambitious for an initiative of this size and length. The lack of clear achievement benchmarks or parameters, as well as the complexity of the outcomes, complicates the task of addressing success in a straightforward fashion. The evaluation team decided to approach questions of goal achievement by identifying steps in the right direction and meaningful changes as perceived by those directly involved in the Program, taking into consideration the context in which those steps/changes took place.

3.4.2.1. <u>General goals</u>.

The Program has two general goals: improve public expenditure and foster a culture of evidence-based decision-making. We surveyed stakeholder perceptions on the Program's success at achieving these goals and obtained further information through individual interviews.

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[48]Excerpts from interview with Iván Borja.
[49]Excerpts from interview with Helga Cuéllar.

On improving public expenditure, researchers tend to believe the Program had very little success.[50] Team members see their research projects as small, potential contributions to decision-making but recognize that final decisions on resource allocation at the national level depend on multiple factors beyond the scope of their work.[51] The perceptions of mentors, GDN and IDB are slightly more enthusiastic but tend to agree that the contribution of the Program to this goal is small to moderate.[52]

It is important to mention that one of IDB's main concerns leading up to this Program has been to increase the efficiency of public spending in areas such as education.[53] A key finding in this regard has been that the efficiency frontier in education can be significantly improved through increasing teacher quality. For Alejandro Izquierdo, teacher evaluation is, in consequence, a strategic tool in the process of improving quality in education.[54] From this standpoint, that both grantees had been able to focus their work on this area are important steps in the right direction.

As for a culture of evidence use, the general perception is that the Program has been moderately successful, but there are interesting variations across stakeholder groups that should be noted. On average, researchers are the least enthusiastic about the Program's contribution to this goal, yet team leaders have a significantly better opinion than the rest – perhaps because they were better positioned to engage with policy actors more frequently and intensively during the Program. Such experience may, in turn, induce more favorable perceptions around the potential for evidence use in the future.[55] Perceptions of research advisors tend to coincide with those of team leaders.[56]

The evaluation team acknowledges the Program is relatively small and short for the magnitude of the tasks it intends to tackle, especially as there are no mechanisms in place to sustain the results achieved. However, considering the context in which the Program has operated, especially in relation to the difficulties of conducting independent research on sensitive topics

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[50]For details please consult Appendix A1.

[51]From interviews with Iván Borja, Sebastián Oleas, Helga Cuéllar, Gabriela Góchez, and Ana Marcela López.

[52]Héctor Villarreal, advisor to the Ecuadorian team, shared a very positive view on the Program success in this regard given a context in which research on evaluation and public spending are still lacking. Ariel Fiszbein, on the other hand, saw no straightforward connection between improving public spending and the Program outputs he is familiar with. From interviews with Héctor Villarreal and Ariel Fiszbein. See Appendix A2 for survey responses.

[53]IDB's flagship report on spending in Latin America, highlights issues of technical and allocative efficiency as well as equity as pressing problems to solve in the region in order to improve the capacity of governments to address pressing policy problems such as insufficient infrastructure, lack of quality in education, crime, and access to health services. For further detail see IDB (2018).

[54]From interview with Alejandro Izquierdo.

[55]Both Iván Borja and Helga Cuéllar rated the Program as highly successful at fostering a culture of evidence-based decision-making (see Appendix A1). In interviews, Cuéllar pointed to the "potential" of activities such as those included in the Program to increase evidence use, while Borja recognized the importance of initiating "meaningful discussions" with policy actors around evidence produced by independent institutions.

[56]Héctor Villarreal believes the Program has been completely successful at fostering a culture of evidence-based decision-making (see Appendix A2), while Ariel Fiszbein shared with the evaluation team that, in this regard, the Program "yields a high return on investment".

and in the region, our conclusion is that the Program has enabled progress in the right direction. By enabling the production and use of evaluation to inform policymaking in Ecuador and El Salvador, countries where this type of research is still scarce, the Program has contributed a building block towards improving the discussion on public spending as well as the use of evidence in decision-making.

3.4.2.2. <u>Strengthen the capacity of research centers to undertake public expenditure analysis</u>.

Survey results and information from interviews suggest researchers do not necessarily see a connection between the research capacities the Program helped strengthen and public expenditure analysis. In essence, they think their work is only, in the best-case scenario, indirectly relevant to public spending in education. The evidence, however, points to other important indicators of success for the Program in reference to research capacities.

On average, researchers highly to completely agree the Program has helped them gain a deeper understanding of how research can inform education policy in their countries. Additionally, the Program seems to have had a positive effect on the ability of researchers to communicate with policy audiences about their research and its relevance for decision-making, especially in the case of team leaders.[57] The majority of team members believe participation in the Program significantly helped them understand the information policy-makers need to more efficiently allocate public resources for quality improvement in education. Most importantly, perhaps, researchers report the Program has had a major positive impact on their research capacities for policy-relevant research.[58]

The general perception outside the research teams is that the Program has been very successful at strengthening the research capacities of the members, as evidenced by significant improvements in the quality, feasibility and policy relevance of the research projects throughout the Program. For instance, IDB's Alejandro Izquierdo believes the formative aspects of the Program were successful to the extent that it was possible for GDN and the IDB local offices to guide and assist both USFQ and FUSADES in the process with good results, at least in the case of Ecuador.[59]

After reviewing the available evidence, the evaluation team concludes that the Program has made a significant contribution to strengthening research capacities at the individual level but its impact at the institutional level appears rather small, at least for now. That said, a fair assessment should take into consideration that the Program is still ongoing at the time of writing this evaluation and that, in consequence, it is perhaps too soon to observe the Program's demonstration effects in both USFQ and FUSADES.

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[57]For details on survey responses please see Appendix A1.
[58]Please refer to Appendix A1 for details.
[59]Based on information disclosed during interview. At the time of interview, Izquierdo had not seen the final research product from El Salvador.

3.4.2.3. <u>Create platforms for knowledge transfer and cross-learning</u>.

Evaluators addressed this issue from the standpoint of interactions amongst researchers at the regional level, and between researchers and policy actors, specifically government officials and IDB country specialists working at the local level. Survey responses from the researchers group are not very encouraging. In general, they believe the Program had little success at creating platforms for knowledge transfer and cross-learning.[60] Interviews, however, revealed a more nuanced perspective on this issue.

Both Iván Borja and Helga Cuéllar believe the Program fell short at promoting the development of networks and spaces for knowledge exchange between researchers at the regional level as well as policy experts. In their view, the Policy Lab was a promising starting point that, unfortunately, could not materialize.

GDN acknowledges that having additional events such as workshops or a regional conference at with all the researchers, experts and policy actors at the end of the Program – as was originally planned – would have given more impulse to the creation of platforms. As the Program moved forward, however, and considering all the implementation difficulties, the strategy had to change: "the IDB took the opposite approach…[…]…the IDB was worried that these governments were not necessarily committed to evaluation, therefore, the IDB was ready to make the documents confidential, if that could facilitate the interaction between the government and the teams".[61] At the end of the day, organizing additional workshops or a regional conference did not make sense as the number of teams in the Program changed from five to two, and their timelines were clearly divergent.

Borja and Cuéllar agree, however, that the Program did a good job at enabling and facilitating cross-fertilization and knowledge transfer with government officials (especially in El Salvador) and local IDB specialists (especially in Ecuador), an opinion shared by mentors, GDN staff and IDB personnel interviewed. Ariel Fiszbein, for example, writes "…I had the privilege of observing first hand (through my interactions with the FUSADES team and their counterparts in the Ministry of Education) the capacity building effects it is having by providing a practical platform around which some of the best education researchers in the country can collaborate with government officials. […] With all its back-and-forth, the project appears to have served its capacity building role by establishing a solid working relationship between FUSADES and the Ministry".[62]

Available evidence thus suggests that the Program was successful at generating opportunities for knowledge transfer and cross-learning especially between researchers and policy actors. The evaluation team's perspective is that the Policy Lab was moderately successful in that

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[60]For details on the survey responses, please refer to Appendix A1.
[61]Excerpts from interview with Francesco Obino.
[62]Excerpts from advisor assessment of the second progress report submitted by FUSADES, as sent to Francesco Obino on April 18th, 2019.

regard as well. While a follow up to the Policy Lab in Lima could have helped to strengthen networks and alliances, the Lab itself – and the possibility they had afterwards to interact more informally during the GDN global conference – allowed them to get acquainted with the work their Latin American peers were doing and opened opportunities to start a conversation at the regional level that did not exist before.

3.4.2.4. <u>Strengthen the relationships/links among policymakers, research centers, think tanks, and researchers to share and build on specific models that foster efficiency in public expenditure</u>.

Survey responses indicate that, on average, researchers believe the Program had little to moderate success in achieving this goal. The Salvadoran team has, in general, a better opinion than their Ecuadorian counterparts in this regard. GDN considers the Program to be highly successful at achieving this goal, however, this perception appears mostly driven by the experience of the Salvadoran team: while there is strong agreement on the role of the Program to strengthen interactions between local researchers and policymakers in El Salvador, GDN is less convinced about the results in Ecuador.[63]

From the beginning, GDN was not certain how well-connected the Ecuador team was with policy actors, which is why the Program paired them with Grupo FARO, a well-known think tank in Ecuador.[64] The consortium would have created opportunities for cross-fertilization and capacity building in both research and policy engagement. Unfortunately, the plan did not work out as expected due to unforeseen circumstances.[65] As a result, policy engagement was left in the hands of USFQ. While Iván Borja, the team leader, believes the Program contributed to create conditions favorable for engagement with the Ministry of Education, and that indeed the relationship strengthened but only on a temporary basis, that is, as long as their point of contact was the Director of Research.[66] In the case of Ecuador it is important to highlight that a working relationship with local IDB education specialists not only strengthened the final research product of the team but also added important insights to the development of Phase 2.

In the context of FUSADES, where interactions with policy actors are fundamental to the center's mission and one of its major strengths, researchers did not see significant changes at the institutional level but recognize major impacts at the individual level in terms of the contacts made and the learning opportunities that such close interaction with the Ministry's day-to-day needs and institutional decision-making made possible.[67]

Survey responses reveal that, on average, the policy engagement component of the Program was considered valuable to enhance the policy relevance of the research, however, there is a

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[63]For details on survey responses, please consult Appendix A1 for researchers and Appendix A3 for GDN staff.
[64]From interviews with Iván Borja and Francesco Obino.
[65]Interviews with Iván Borja and Andrea Yáñez suggest that Andrea's exit from FARO and management changes at the organization are the main reasons behind the collapse of the consortium.
[66]Form interview with Iván Borja.
[67]From interviews with Helga Cuéllar, Gabriela Góchez and Ana Marcela López.

difference between the two teams in this regard: while the El Salvador team found this policy engagement absolutely important, the Ecuadorian team saw it as moderately important.[68] This is not surprising given the differences observed in the teams' interaction with policy actors (especially government officials).

3.4.2.5. Constructed matched comparison case.

As part of the evaluation, and specifically to tackle questions of impact, the evaluation team wanted to get a sense of what had happened to those research proposals that, though selected during the grant making phase of the Program, had not been able to secure IDB funding due to difficulties obtaining the required "letter of no-objection" from their governments. The evaluation team reached out to the Bolivian team, led by Christian Ricardo Nogales from Universidad Privada de Bolivia, and to Melba Castillo, head of the Nicaraguan team located at Centro de Investigación y Acción Educativa Social (CIASES). We only obtained a response from Ms. Castillo, and arranged to have a conversation with her on May 6th.

Ms. Castillo explained to us that, as a private research center in Nicaragua, they do not have access to many resources for research and therefore saw participating in the GDN call for proposals as a good opportunity to produce quality, policy-relevant research in early childhood education. After what she described as a "fantastic experience" in the Policy Lab, her team put together one of the five research proposals finally selected by a GDN-coordinated international panel to receive IDB research funding under the Program.

This project started out in significantly adverse conditions. The authoritarian government in Nicaragua had been gradually closing access to information and spaces for collaboration with civil society and academia, especially independent research centers. Ms. Castillo relates that access to the Ministry of Education's databases had been cut since 2009 and that the only information publicly available on policy interventions was related to expenditures. She also commented that conducting field research in Nicaraguan public schools is very difficult and, when it has happened, it has been under the strict supervision of Ministry of Education officials. Ms. Castillo described her project as pioneer in nature because it was going to be the first exploration of early childhood policy in Nicaragua, shedding some light on how budget for this area was being spent and with what results.

Despite the less than favorable conditions, the team felt somewhat hopeful because the national government had launched an early childhood policy in 2011 that had actually received funds from the IDB to establish early childhood centers all over the country. Additionally, CIASES had done some work related to the performance of those centers and had shared the results with both the local IDB and the Ministry of Family Affairs, the agency in charge of early childhood policy, during the second part of 2015.

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[68]Complete survey results for researchers can be found in Appendix A1.

Yet, according to IDB sources interviewed for this evaluation, the local office in Nicaragua at the time had contacted local authorities informally, but it did not receive a positive feedback.[69] Upon informing of the situation, GDN also recommended Ms. Castillo tried to obtain the letter directly through her acquaintances at the Ministry.[70] With elections approaching however, Ms. Castillo and her team considered any attempt to engage with government would be unfruitful and, in turn, decided to withdraw from the Program.[71]

When asked about the fate of the research proposal jointly approved for GDN/IDB funding under the Program since her withdrawal in 2016, Ms. Castillo pointed out CIASES was unable to go through with it due to lack of funding. CIASES depends on income derived from consulting and their early childhood center to cover operational expenses. As a result, she commented, very few resources can be allocated to research or capacity building. Research-wise, Ms. Castillo told the evaluation team that since 2014 they have only been able to work on one, five-year project financed by USAID on early reading and writing. That project, coming to a close in 2019, has relied mostly on information obtained from private schools given that, as communication with government was cut for all independent research centers over the last two years, it is not possible to have access to data from public schools or get permission to interview teachers or school authorities at the local level.

Clearly, had the CIASES team been able to continue in the Program, they would have produced a piece of policy-relevant research on a topic yet to be fully analyzed in Nicaragua, a country that, like others in the region, lacks a culture of evidence-based decision-making. Moreover, the Program would have made an important contribution to the capacities of an independent research center to conduct public expenditure analysis, something probably very necessary in the Nicaraguan context.

Unfortunately, this case also illustrates that some basic conditions need to be met before the Program begins to make a difference. The kind of research that purportedly seeks relevance to policy-decision making may be uncommon and perhaps unwelcome in the smaller Latin American countries, but the experience implementing this Program shows that even then there is variation across governments in the extent to which they are open to and tolerant of independent thinking – variations future editions of the Program need to take into consideration.

3.4.2. Unintended effects.

Considering the limitations of assessing unintended effects in the context of this evaluation, we focused on surveying Program stakeholders for their general impression on the likelihood of institutional or policy-related spillover effects.

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[69]As revealed in an interview with Alejandro Izquierdo, from IDB.

[70]From letter sent by Francesco Obino, Head of Programs at GDN, to Melba Castillo of CIASES on October 18, 2016.

[71]In an email from Melba Castillo to Francesco Obino, Head of Programs at GDN, dated October 25, 2016, Castillo suggests no minister would be willing to commit to any research project with elections in sight. She also asks Francesco to let her know if he thinks it might be possible to obtain funds for the research from another source.

Half of the researchers interviewed believe their centers will develop policy-relevant research in areas different from education because they acknowledge a general interest in policy incidence on the part of fellow economists and their institutions, not necessarily as a result of the Program.[72] Particularly clear in this regard is the case of FUSADES, an independent institution with a long tradition of policy engagement in a variety of areas. This, however, does not necessarily mean institutions like FUSADES are willing to invest in capacity building activities. On the one hand, the demonstration effects of the Program are yet to be observed but, given its size, they are likely to be small. On the other, interviews revealed that the selected centers may lack the resources to do so and/or have not identified potential sources of funds directed to that purpose.[73]

In terms of prestige and credibility, FUSADES was already in high regard in El Salvador before the Program and will very likely continue to be afterwards. Universidad San Francisco de Quito is also quite prestigious (it is actually considered the best university in Ecuador) but such reputation comes mostly from its teaching and academic activities. The University is a relatively new player in the policy arena and, though participation in the Program is a step in the right direction, that position is not likely to change much as a result – at least not in the short run and without further, university-wide investment in capacity-building for policy-relevant research.

In sum, the evaluation team could not find more substantial evidence of spillover effects. That said, this Program may have contributed to create more spaces for collaboration between government and society, especially in the case of Ecuador. This might not be an unintended consequence necessarily but is worth mentioning here because its value needs to be understood in a broader context. President Rafael Correa's rule in Ecuador has been described as a period during which interaction between government and civil society, if not eliminated, was significantly reduced. Think tanks like Grupo FARO came to be seen as adversaries and, though academic institutions enjoyed a better relationship with the administration, they tended to withdraw to themselves. It is thus important to highlight that this project started at a time when creating trust between government and private, independent institutions was considered difficult in the country.[74]

3.5. EFFICIENCY.

3.5.1. Value for money assessment.

The PVfM approach engages stakeholders in the assessment of observed changes and the level of investment in an intervention (money and effort). Following the Program's logic model, the

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[72]For more details on survey responses, please consult Appendix A1.
[73]From interviews with Iván Borja and Helga Cuéllar.
[74]For instance, Sebastián Oleas shared with evaluators that "San Francisco [USFQ] was vetted for a long time; the main institutions [collaborating with government] were FLACSO and Universidad Católica, for affinity reasons".

assessment focused on the following core components: Policy Lab, capacity building on research and policy engagement during Phase 1 and Phase 2 (in the case of Ecuador). Because mentoring and advice was a key feature of the capacity building phase on research under this Program, the team included it as a separate item in the assessment.

Financial investment in each component was approximated through the Program budget approved by IDB, adjusted to reflect the programmatic amendment that resulted in the reassignment of USD 100,000 in unallocated research grants to Phase 2 (the capacity building phase on pilot design and M&E framework). For Phase 2, a total of USD 40,000 were allocated to each research team.[75]

Table 3.5.2.1: Program budget by selected component

Program components	Item #[1]	Cost	% of Budget[2]
Core Components (A)			
Mapping Studies	**(1, 1.1)**	**$41,000**	**12%**
Policy Lab	**(1, 1.2)**	**$44,000.00**	**13%**
Research	**(2)**	**$59,420.00**	**17%**
Agenda preparation	(2.1)	$6,000.00	
Review process	(2.2, 2.2.1)	$880	
Two country case studies[3]	(2.2, 2.2.2)	$52,540.00	
Mentoring[4]		**$6,000.00**	**2%**
Policy Engagement (Products)		**$48,240.00**	**14%**
Policy Briefs	(3.1)	$8,240	
Phase 2 in Ecuador[5]	Amendment	$40,000	
Total A:		***$198,660.00***	***45%***
Approved (but not realized) for Core Activities (B)			
Research + Phase 2 in El Salvador	(2) + amendment	$77,080.00	22%
Dissemination	(3.2)	$17,920.00	5%
Total B:		***$95,000.00***	***27%***
Total A + B:		***$293,660.00***	***84%***
Other Items (C)			
Contingency	(4)	$5,000.00	1%
Monitoring and evaluation	(5)	$5,970.00	2%
Overheads	(6)	$45,690.00	13%
Total C:		***$56,660.00***	***16%***
Grand Total (A+B+C):		***$350,320.00***	***100%***

(1) From original budget Excel spreadsheet delivered by GDN. (2) Refers to original total budget approved by IDB for the Program. (3) Excludes items 2.2.2.5 (honoraria for resource persons/mentors) and 2.2.2.6 (honoraria for global advisor). (4) Based on contracts signed between GDN and advisors Héctor Villarreal ($2,500) and Ariel Fiszbein ($3,500). (5) As specified in the Request for Amendment and Extension of Contract (IDB Contract No. C0109-15) submitted on March 29, 2018.

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[75]According to information in pages 4 and 5 of the Request for Amendment (March 29, 2018), this amount included up to USD 7,500 per team for a policy advisor, up to USD 5,000 per team for the pilot design, up to USD 10,000 per team for the M&E framework on the pilot, up to USD 5,000 per team for meetings and consultations, and up to USD 12,500 for additional GDN staff support per team.

Table 3.5.2.1 above presents the Program budget originally approved and disaggregated by component. The level of financial investment in each selected Program component was rated as high, moderate and low depending on the proportion of the Program's core budget (USD 198,660) it represented.[76] The team used the following criteria for this rating process:

- Proportion ≥ 30% of core Program investment: High
- Proportion ≥ 20% and < 30% of core Program investment: Moderate
- Proportion < 20% of core Program investment: Low

Table 3.5.2.2 below describes the level of financial investment for each Program component based on their share of the total core budget.

Table 3.5.2.2: Financial investment rating for selected Program components

Selected Core Components	Cost (Budget)	% of Core Budget (CB: $198,660.00)	Level of Financial Investment
Policy Lab	$44,000.00	22%	Moderate
Research	$59,420.00	30%	High
Mentoring	$6,000.00	3%	Low
Policy Engagement	$48,240.00	24%	Moderate

The team asked program stakeholders familiar with all the selected core components (GDN staff and research team members) to rate their investment (time and effort) in each component. Table 3.5.2.3 presents the results of this exercise.

Table 3.5.2.3: Rating of total investment levels per program component

Selected Core Components	Level of Financial Investment	Level of Researcher Investment	Level of GDN staff investment	Average level of investment
Policy Lab	Moderate	High	High	High
Research	High	High	High	High
Mentoring	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate
Policy Engagement	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate

Despite the relatively moderate cost of the Policy Lab, the time and effort it required from both researchers and GND staff members was high. Researchers indicated that the work was very intense and somewhat stressful considering the upcoming grant competition.[77] Participation of GDN staff in the Policy Lab took place at all levels. Both the Head of Programs and the Director

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[76]We decided to use the core budget approved instead of the total budget approved for two main reasons. First, rating the cost of core activities against the total budget approved would be misleading given that there is a sizable proportion of it that would not be disbursed as a consequence of delays in the Program implementation. Second, allocation of administrative costs (Other Items in Table 3.5.2.1) to each of the core components is not straightforward and, therefore, any distribution incurs the risk of over or underestimating the cost (approximated via approved budget) of each component.

[77]Based on interviews with Policy Lab participants Iván Borja, Helga Cuéllar and Melba Castillo.

of Strategic Partnerships at GDN described the Lab as an effort the entire organization contributed to, from temporary staff members to GDN's top management (including the Chairman of the Board and the President).

The capacity building phase on research, the most substantial part of the Program, clearly demands high levels of investment across categories, from financial resources to the time and concentration it demands from every person involved. For most team members, it implied a near-to-full-time commitment that had to accommodate previously acquired commitments – especially in the case of the Ecuadorian team who had to simultaneously attend to the teaching and academic responsibilities typical of a university position.[78] Considering the supporting role GDN plays in research development, as well as the implementation difficulties and delays this Program has faced (associated with the challenges of working with independent research centers to develop policy-relevant products in the region, and with the varying policy engagement capacities the teams came to the Program with), GDN staff members had to invest significant amounts of time and effort in coordination, management and facilitation activities with researchers, advisors and the IDB.

Mentoring was certainly part of the capacity building phase on research, but it is evaluated separately given that it is one of the unique features of this Program and, theoretically, one of the most important contributing factors to overall research quality and relevance. The financial resources budgeted for mentoring represent a significantly low level of investment in this regard but researchers, on average, found that engagement with their advisor required moderate amounts of time and effort. To some extent this is not surprising given that advisors provide feedback and recommendations for researchers to digest and incorporate into their work. The level of time and effort invested by GDN staff, however, is rated as high. The Head of Programs at GDN offered two reasons for this.[79] On the one hand, identifying the right mentors for their technical expertise and knowledge of the local policy context is an intensive and sometimes challenging activity for the organization. On the other, GDN had, in some occasions, to engage with a mentor face-to-face on behalf of research teams.

In this Program, policy engagement has certainly cut across all major components. We believe, however, that the nature of such engagement during the Policy Lab was fundamentally different from the interaction that had to take place with government officials during the research phase and, for Ecuador, also during the pilot project phase. In consequence, we asked participants to rate their level of investment in policy engagement only in connection to these two phases. To approximate the level of financial investment in policy engagement we used the budget allocated to production of the Policy Briefs as well as the grant money reallocated to the pilot project phase (see Table 3.5.2.1).[80] From the financial standpoint, the level of investment

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[78]This was especially the case of Sebastián Oleas who did not enjoy a reduced work load at the USFQ to work on the project. Information obtained during interview with Dr. Oleas (see Appendix XX for details).

[79]From value-for-money exercise with Francesco Obino, Head of Programs at GDN.

[80]The evaluation team understands this is a somewhat arbitrary decision, but it was not possible to disaggregate which parts of the research budget were dedicated to policy engagement activities and which to pure research. Since the Policy Briefs are the most concrete product of such policy engagement during the research phase, we

in policy engagement is moderate. For research team members, however, policy engagement demanded a high investment in time and effort.

In the case of Ecuador, this perception has to be pondered in the context of changes in the team – that affected the level of engagement with government officials – and the interaction with policy actors at the IDB – with whom several valuable but time consuming exchanges took place before the research product was given a green light.[81] For the team in El Salvador, policy engagement was demanding because they were working very closely with the Ministry of Education not only to obtain information and shape the research, but even to make up for the lack of organizational capacity at the agency.[82]

The fifth column in Table 3.5.2.3 presents the average level of investment (money + time + effort) in each one of the Program's core components. The Policy Lab and the Research components commanded relatively high levels of investment, while moderate levels characterize both the Mentoring and Policy Engagement components.

The value generated by each Program component was estimated by asking participants to rate as low, moderate or high the impact they believed each component had on the goals of the Program. The ratings in Table 3.5.2.4 represent the relative value participants assign to each component in the context of the Program as a whole.

Table 3.5.2.4: Value rating by Program Component

Selected Core Components	Value for Researchers	Value for GDN Staff	Average value
Policy Lab	High	High	**High**
Research	High	High	**High**
Mentoring	High	High	**High**
Policy Engagement	Moderate	Moderate	**Moderate**

With the exception of Policy Engagement, stakeholders perceive a high value to all Program components. In the case of Policy Engagement, average values do not reflect important differences in the experience and expectations the two teams had around this component.

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decided to use them as a partial proxy. The pilot project phase is mostly about bridging from policy recommendations to policy formulation, and thus the level of engagement with decision-makers is assumed to be fundamental. In consequence, the team decided to count the funds budgeted for Phase 2 as a partial proxy for policy engagement as well.

[81]The research team in Ecuador was originally a consortium between USFQ and Grupo FARO, a widely known and highly capable think tank in Ecuador. In this project. USFQ will take care of the research and FARO was supposed to focus on policy engagement (though it would benefit from capacity building as well given that Andrea was significantly involved in researching the qualitative paper). Changes at Grupo FARO and Andrea's exit from the organization left all policy engagement responsibilities in the hands of USFQ and Iván Borja, specifically.

[82]As Helga Cuéllar, Gabriela Góchez and Ana Marcela López explained to the evaluation team, Ministry of Education officials are overflowed with tasks and responsibilities for which not enough personnel is available. Efthdfghrg78

Researchers in El Salvador assigned a high value rating to Policy Engagement most likely because of the close interaction the three of them had with ministry officials and the positive feedback and assistance they received from the local IDB office. For the Ecuadorian team, policy engagement was frequently a time-consuming, frustrating activity not necessarily leading to meaningful, long-lasting connections and less to policy incidence.[83]

Graph 3.5.2.1: Participatory Value for Money Assessment results
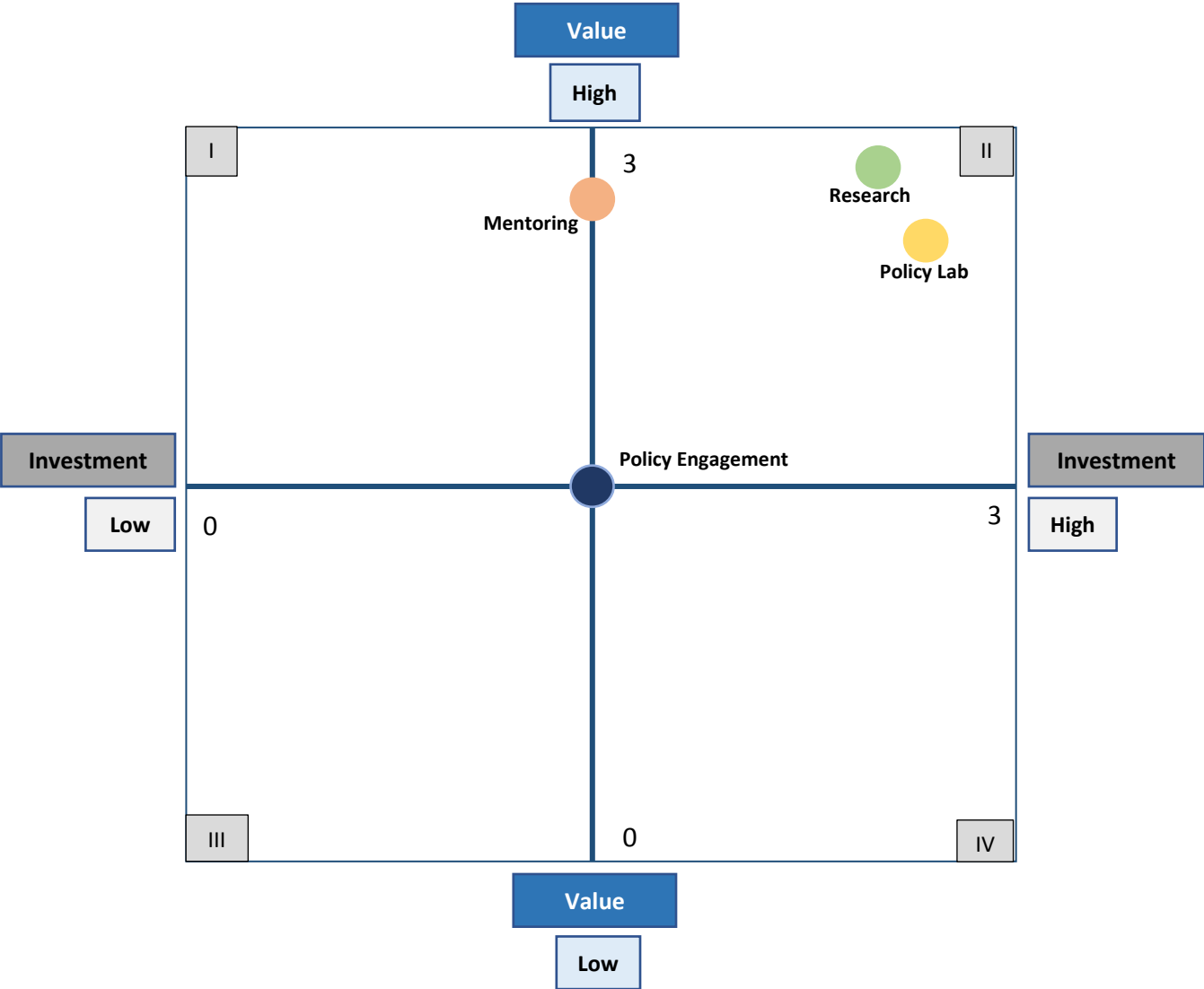
Combining the previous ratings of value and investment, Graph 3.5.2.1 presents the results of the PVfM. The Graph has four quadrants (I, II, III and IV) that represent different combinations of value and investment:

- Quadrant I: High value, low investment (most efficient outcome)

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[83]Based on interviews with Iván Borja, Andrea Yáñez and Sebastián Oleas.

- Quadrant II: High value, high investment
- Quadrant III: Low value, low investment
- Quadrant IV: Low value, high investment (least efficient outcome)

Strictly speaking, efficiency is this context is about maximizing value for a given level of investment. The results suggest that all Program components had a positive contribution to the Program goals, but not all of them generated value as efficiently. From the efficiency standpoint, mentoring turned out to be the best value. The Policy Lab and Research Phase have a high yield, but their cost in terms of money, time and effort is equally high. Finally, the value of Policy Engagement is proportional to the investment made: moderate.

In the case of high value-high investment components, the question that arises from this exercise is whether the same outcomes could have been obtained more productively (i.e. with less investment) given the context. On the financial side, the answer is probably negative. The Policy Lab was a huge endeavor, all activities were deemed very useful and relevant, and still budget constraints made it impossible to bring all team members. In addition, the size of the research grants could be considered sufficient to relatively small.[84] On the side of time and effort, it might be possible to use the resources more efficiently, especially in the case of GDN. The Policy Lab was a first for the organization in the context of an important and promising Program, so bringing in so many staff resources seems understandable but not strictly necessary (especially for future editions).[85] As for the research component, it seems unlikely that team members could have invested less given the nature of research and the financial resources available. The implementation problems discussed in previous sections probably had an effect on the time and effort GDN staff had to put into the research component, which suggests that at least some productivity gains could be obtained through program redesign.

3.5.2. Efficiency and Program delivery.

Inefficiencies in program delivery may be related to inadequacies in the amount or functioning of the necessary inputs. One of the evaluation questions specifically asked whether current staffing levels were appropriate to implement the Program. The evaluation team addressed the question in two ways. On the one hand, we asked researchers, advisors and Program partners to evaluate GDN's performance along dimensions that could be tied to insufficient staff levels given the many roles the organization played in the Program: guide, facilitator, broker, manager, coordinator and feedback source.

On average, the teams moderately agree that GDN staff provided timely and adequate guidance and facilitation during the Program implementation. There is a difference, however, between the perception of team leaders and that of the team members in both cases (team leaders appear much more satisfied with GDN's performance). This probably results from the

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[84]Based on perceptions gathered from researchers and their advisors through various interviews.
[85]GDN was also undergoing a transition, with a new Head of Programs coming in and having to take charge of the process very quickly, which probably required extra time and effort.

fact that team leaders had much more contact with GDN staff than team members, and perhaps a higher level of understanding about GDN's role. Research advisors, who also had significant interaction with GDN staff, had a high opinion of the organization's ability to deliver. In addition (and despite significant delays in the case of Ecuador), researchers strongly agree their financial support was delivered in a timely fashion.[86]

The evaluation team also explicitly asked GND staff members to indicate how important common obstacles had been to the efficiency of the Program, including staff levels. Available responses indicate that, from this perspective, factors such as bureaucratic procedures and lack of cooperation from stakeholders were extremely important (see Appendix A3). Information obtained during interviews and through process tracing suggest the efficiency losses came mostly through the time invested in obtaining letters of no objection from governments and, to some extent, getting prompt feedback on the quality of the reports to move forward with the Program.[87]

3.6. SUSTAINABILITY.

The fact that this evaluation and the Program itself are simultaneously coming to an end makes it very difficult to assess sustainability in a meaningful way. The evaluation team, however, was able to explore the expectations of Program stakeholders around future interactions between research and policy based on their experience in the Program. They were also surveyed on their perceptions around a culture of evidence-based decision-making.

3.6.1. Continued engagement.

We surveyed Program stakeholders on the probability of working with policymakers and other policy actors in the future, as well as on the likelihood of continuity in the development of policy-relevant research agendas.[88] At the time interviews for this evaluation were conducted, both research teams continued to have some form of engagement with their Ministry of Education.[89]

On average, team members are very likely to continue production of policy-relevant research, and are optimistic about their future chances of working with policy actors. The Salvadoran team reported stronger probabilities than Ecuador, a result not entirely surprising given the nature of FUSADE's activities, its standing in El Salvador, and the role it plays in the policy process. Ariel Fiszbein, their research advisor, coincides with this perception and also believes it is highly likely that engagement between the research team and policy actors at the Ministry of

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[86]For greater details on the survey responses, please consult Appendices A1, A2 and A3.

[87]The contractual relationship between GDN and the IDB for this Program has GDN playing the role of a consultant under a technical cooperation agreement. This means GDN has no control over Program funds and timeline as resources are only disbursed upon receipt and approval of specified deliverables.

[88]For details on the survey responses, please consult Appendix A1.

[89]Such engagement was stronger in El Salvador because the team there was still working on Phase 1. In Ecuador, the team had finished the research and seemed to have no regular contact with the Ministry of Education.

Education continues. However, there is significant uncertainty regarding how this is going to happen in the context of a political transition taking place on June 1st.[90] Helga Cuéllar, the team leader, believes their research product is very innovative in the context of El Salvador, and trusts they will be able to present it to the new government. Though she is yet uncertain about the kind of reception the paper will get, she is confident in her continued engagement with Ministry officials.[91]

Further engagement is less obvious in the case of Ecuador, despite the fact that the Pilot project is currently ongoing. It has been difficult to independently corroborate the support such pilot currently has from the Ministry of Education or INEVAL (the government evaluation agency for which the pilot and M&E framework are being developed). IDB personnel in Ecuador, however, indicated that INEVAL's new Executive Director (appointed last March) has plans to restructure the agency and, as a result, evaluation projects like the pilot are not a priority anymore.[92]

Researchers in Ecuador have a strong interest in policy incidence but find that sustaining engagement is a challenging process in a context of changing government priorities and precarious interaction between government and civil society. It should be mentioned that certain regulations at the Ministry of Education actually prevent the type of collaboration that would be essential to, for instance, set up a demand-driven research agenda.[93] The Ministry is trying to change those regulations to allow for more flexibility in collaboration arrangements with external researchers and improve their use of the research products approved. Nonetheless, the details of this new regulation and the date it will be available are not yet known.[94]

Confidence of Ecuadorian researchers regarding sustainability is also affected by the difficulty of combining such a time-consuming activity with the teaching and academic responsibilities of a university position.[95] The probabilities of maintaining a certain level of policy engagement are higher when researchers have the necessary institutional support. While FUSADES is a policy-oriented think tank with a focus on incidence, USFQ is an academic institution centered on research and teaching. Moreover, as Andrea Ordóñez pointed out to the evaluation team, there are not many spaces for collaboration between think tanks and universities in Ecuador.[96]

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[90]From interview with Ariel Fiszbein.
[91]From interview with Helga Cuéllar.
[92]Frpm an interview with Sophie Westh, IDB specialist in charge of the education portfolio in Ecuador. She mentioned the new plans for INEVAL are affecting all sorts of projects big and small, including PISA 2021.
[93]Until now, joint research projects require a special agreement that needs to be formalized between the Ministry and the research institution, and typically involves public financing, therefore, these agreements are more the exception than the norm. From interview with Andrea Cardona.
[94]From interview with Andrea Cardona.
[95]As revealed in interviews with Iván Borja, Sebastián Oleas and Andrea Yáñez.
[96]From interview with Andrea Ordóñez. The opportunity for cross-fertilization between USFQ and Grupo FARO, unfortunately, collapsed due to changes at Grupo FARO.

3.6.2. A culture of evidence-based decision-making.

While the majority of stakeholders believe the Program has made a contribution to a culture of evidence-based decision-making, it is difficult at this point to assess the extent of such contribution with the evidence available.

Researchers and government officials alike in Ecuador and El Salvador clearly understand the importance of producing policy-relevant research and of using evidence from research to make decisions on government programs and policies. Yet they believe the road is long before a culture of evidence-based decision-making takes root in their countries for multiple reasons, political consideration being one – if not the most important – of them.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main purpose of this evaluation has been to understand the extent to which the Program has achieved the specific objectives set out by GDN and IDB and if, in turn, it has contributed to the overall goals of improving public policy expenditure and promoting a culture of evidence-based decision-making in smaller Latin American countries.

Overall, the evaluation results suggest the balance is positive. The Program has proved relevant to understand broad thematic priorities in the region, has addressed the capacity needs of independent research centers and helped build policy-relevant research agendas. In addition, the Program contributed to knowledge transfer and cross-learning between researchers and policy actors and encouraged higher levels of policy engagement for the researchers involved. Finally, the Program enabled the production of quality, decision-making-oriented knowledge products focused on the education policy priorities of Ecuador and El Salvador.

That said, there is certainly room for improvement. The analysis of implementation revealed a number of factors external and internal to the Program with negative effects on its effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and ultimately, on its potential for sustainability. While certainly the external factors are beyond the Program's control, attending to the internal factors may improve the chances of minimizing the consequences of exogenous issues. In particular, if the current arrangement between GDN and the IDB is to be maintained, the evaluation team believes Program authorities and managers should consider introducing the following changes to the Program sequence:

- Instead of starting with a call for expressions of interest around a particular topic, initiate the Program cycle with a selection of countries to work with on that topic; and
- Before calling for expressions of interest, secure letters of no-objection from the governments of the countries selected.

The Program under evaluation developed its cycle from the supply side mostly, inviting researchers to present proposals of potential interest to government. While that approach is natural considering GDN's traditional point of entry in the countries where it works, it overlooks the fact that those projects required government clearance to take place, and that such clearance may depend on a variety of contextual factors unknown to Program managers and authorities. Our recommendation is, therefore, to avoid potential problems by first choosing a thematic focus (e.g. health, climate change, impact evaluation), and then follow with a selection of countries where collaboration between researchers and governments on a particular project is reasonably feasible. Once this subset has been identified, the next step involves securing the letter of no-objection.

The selection of thematic focus and countries requires better knowledge about national contexts and priorities than is currently available. In this regard, our recommendation is not only to increase the regional relevance of the Program (something we will discuss later on) but also to rely more on sources of information available at the territorial level – such as local IDB offices and experts – to inform decisions on what types of research projects are more likely to be of interest for governments as well. Doing this will add to the policy relevance of the proposals (because the call for expressions of interest will be designed accordingly) and to the likelihood of a more productive policy engagement during the research phase. Once no-objection letters have been secured, then the competitive process to select expressions of interest, strengthen proposals and make a final selection can start.

This rearrangement may lead to a less organic – and perhaps a bit more restrictive – process for researchers in exchange for greater input from the demand side and, in consequence, a greater chance for smooth implementation and success achieving outputs and outcomes. It does not, however, eliminate the potential for disruption and volatility associated with government's short-term perspective, especially in countries where power is highly concentrated or during electoral cycles. Being able to react promptly and adequately to these situations requires a level of flexibility large bureaucracies typically lack. Therefore, in addition to rearranging the Program sequence, we believe the current operational rules (especially those that apply at key moments to move the program forward) must be examined and, if possible, replaced with a more streamlined approach - one that aligns better to the Program timeline agreed upon by the partners, and that increases efficiency in Program delivery.

The evaluation team also found additional areas of opportunity related to the evaluation attributes under examination. First, the Program is already relevant to the broad priorities and general needs of smaller Latin American countries, however, the experiences with Nicaragua and Bolivia suggest not all countries will be receptive to the GDN model at any given point. If work is to continue in the region – especially in the smaller countries – GDN needs a better understanding of both their knowledge transfer systems and overall research environment, as well a greater access to local expertise. That means thinking about giving continuity to the Mapping Study with a more in-depth analysis of research organization, research capacities and policy priorities in selected countries of region, with participation of local partners.

Second, although differences in the results observed in Ecuador and El Salvador are expected, we found the greatest divergence in the nature of the policy engagement that took place, especially with government officials, something that feeds into de ability of the Program to create platforms for knowledge transfer and strengthen the links between researchers and policy actors. The Ecuador team had a more difficult time engaging with the Ministry of Education than their counterparts in El Salvador, and while a partial explanation to this may lie in national idiosyncrasies or the nature of the research centers where the team members are located, there are also important differences across team leaders in terms of seniority and policy networks.

In order to increase the effectiveness and impact of the Program under a variety of circumstances, we believe it is important to tailor certain inputs to the needs of a particular team to the extent possible. For instance, the Ecuador team could have benefited greatly from having more and earlier guidance navigating the local policy scene. That means either pairing the team with a policy advisor earlier in the process (in addition to the research advisor) or choosing an advisor with the subject matter expertise and regional policy knowledge necessary to provide both types of mentoring. This suggests, however, that the Program might need to dedicate more resources to work with a less experienced team than are otherwise considered at this point.

Third, we would like to stress the importance of regional dissemination, exchange and networking to potentiate the impact of capacity building and policy engagement at the end of the Program. Understandably, these activities had to be cancelled and their resources redirected as a result of changing circumstances for the Program this first time around. Yet, if a new edition of the Program reaches a critical mass, an event such as a regional conference or workshop would be an appropriate follow up to the Policy Lab once all the projects come to a conclusion. In addition, a digital platform for all participants – a space where they can interact and learn from each other's experiences, showcase their work and even develop joint projects for the future during and after their participation in the Program – could be an interesting and useful addition GDN is already familiar with.

A final note concerns the Program redesign that took place during 2018, and that made the most out of a difficult situation by introducing Phase 2, an additional capacity building component focused on policy formulation. While this change made sense under the circumstances, the evaluation team did not find enough evidence to support keeping it as part of this Program. In the context of what GDN wants to accomplish in developing countries, however, Phase 2 could be a separate program designed as a next step for graduates of this Program (if implemented as originally intended), or as a more suitable program for research centers with more seniority and/or visibility in the policy arena. A final decision in this regard would depend, of course, on how GDN and IDB want to shape, target and fund future endeavors aimed at strengthening the research capacities of research centers in the region.

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