CHAPTER 4

Civil Society and Education Advocacy in Ecuador: Building a Social Contract for Education

INTRODUCTION

‘Only Education Can Change Ecuador’. This is the slogan used by the Contrato Social por la Educación (the Social Contract for Education in Ecuador, CSE), a participatory civil social movement in Ecuador. The CSE was founded with the intention of defending and exercising the human rights of the Ecuadorian population, and in particular their right to a good quality education (CSE 2002: 1). The CSE, in its 8 years of existence, has forced itself into a strong position in the national education field. They have been able to create broad awareness on a range of social issues related to the development of the country. The rising interest and commitment of the population at this moment to the goal of a good quality education, the members say, has been partly attributed to the work of the CSE (Participatory Workshop CSE, August 2009).

This chapter analyses whether and to what level the CSE has contributed to improve education access and quality in Ecuador. The arguments are based on research carried out by the author between March and May 2009. During that period I interviewed members of the coalition and other key informants, participated in the movement’s events and activities and analysed their core documents. Specifically, I interviewed around 20 coalition members, three policymakers, four journalists and other independent actors, all in order to make the research more comprehensive. These interviews were backed up by participant observation in the CSE headquarters and at their organized events and meetings. I also did various informal interviews with the coalition members, as well as with other actors in society. I spread my interviews over different regions in the country, visiting people in Ecuador’s three biggest cities, Quito, Guayaquil and Cuenca, as well as making fieldwork trips to the countryside. At the end of my research I sought to test my initial findings by organizing a participatory workshop for some of the members of the coalition. Around thirty members attended the workshop and through the focus groups organized in the context of the event I was able to build in feedback loops and check the validity of my assumptions with core informants. Through these different methods I sought to get an insight into the complex ways that the movement operates in order to get a sense of its own institutional memory.

In this chapter I seek to offer a broad insight into my findings of the goals, strategies, effects and successes of the CSE, as well as the lessons the movement
has learned in the years since its creation. In order to address these issues and to increase the understanding of this movement, it is first important to analyse the context in which this coalition was constructed and has evolved. The chapter is divided into six sections. The first section seeks to analyse the existing socio-economic and political situation of Ecuador in terms of the political opportunities for the development of a civil society movement committed to improve education in Ecuador. In the second section I will explain how the movement has developed over the years. Specifically, I will focus in on their goals and strategies, their membership and the power relations between the members. In the subsequent section I will then explore the external relations of the movement with the state, the media, and other sections of the Ecuadorian society. Finally I will explore the impact that the movement has had on the educational scene in Ecuador in terms of political, procedural and symbolic effects. The chapter will then end with a discussion and conclusion. Throughout the chapter I will emphasize the lessons the movement has learned over the years to enhance its strategic interventions in Ecuador.

The Ecuadorian Context

David Meyer’s article ‘Protest and Political Opportunities’ emphasizes the central role that societal context plays in the success of social movements. Meyer argues that social movements can ‘make history’ in a country. However, movements that try to make history do so not in situations of their own choosing, but rather in social and political circumstances peculiar to their given society. The national context determines the activities, mobilizing strategies, and the final effects of any social movement (Meyer 2004). The educational context in Ecuador, as in many other Latin American countries, is marked by a strong inequality between the white-mestizos and ‘black’-Indigenous groups. The discrepancies can be traced back to historical times in which education was used by the colonial power to subjugate the Indigenous inhabitants to their Hispanic and Christian values. In 1830, when Ecuador became independent from Spain, educational policies were adjusted in the constitution and aimed at using schools to promote homogenization and assimilation, in order to construct a proper nation state. Then, as of the 1960s, international actors came into play constructing new educational programs more focused on participation and experimentation (Oviedo and Wildemeersch 2008).

In the 1990s, neoliberal reforms in educational policies had the effect of increasing inequality in the country. Inequality rose as a consequence of the Structural Adjustment Programs initiated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) whereby the amount of public spending on education decreased. A further reason for rising inequality in Latin America has been a tendency of upper and middle classes to self-select out of public education and opt for private education as a reaction to the educational inclusion of groups previously excluded from the educational system. Consequently, as Bonal (2004) argues,