

Social Entrepreneurship and Systems Change Fundación Escuela Nueva

Teaching Case

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Introduction

Vicky Colbert and Clarita Arboleda spoke animatedly in the car as they returned to the headquarters of Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN) in the La Soledad neighbourhood of Bogotá, Colombia. They were driving back from Usme, a locality on the fringes of the greater metropolis, where they had visited two of the most recent additions to the network of FEN-assisted Escuela Nueva schools. The field visit had been encouraging. The principal, who had long advocated for the Escuela Nueva model in his schools, was enthusiastic and supportive, and the teachers had strongly embraced the new pedagogy and curriculum introduced by FEN earlier in the year. The students and their teachers appeared to be thriving as part of the Escuela Nueva network.

Both schools were considered multigrade primary schools, or schools where teachers were responsible for teaching more than one grade simultaneously. Multigrade schools were common in Colombia, particularly in geographies where low population density made it difficult to justify larger schools. Long considered the “poor relation” to single-grade schools, where students of the same grade and similar ages and abilities were grouped together in a single classroom, multigrade schools were a persistent reality in many regions of the world. However, with the introduction of the child-centred learning style promoted by Escuela Nueva, multigrade schools were able to turn their challenges into opportunities. Indeed, the rural schools in Colombia, particularly those affiliated with Escuela Nueva, often outperformed their urban counterparts.¹

The Escuela Nueva model spread throughout Colombia in the late 1970s and 1980s as a method to improve rural schools. The model promoted participatory learning, with the teacher in a facilitator role, allowing children to move at their own pace through self-directed learning guides. During this time, the Escuela Nueva model was implemented in over 20,000 schools, reaching nearly two-thirds of Colombia’s rural primary schools. However, the expansion of Escuela Nueva coincided with a decentralization effort by the Colombian national government in the late 1980s and 1990s, and this issue proved detrimental to the Escuela Nueva national rollout at a critical moment. In 1987, Colbert, along with several colleagues, established FEN as an independent, nonprofit organization, to ensure the quality and sustainability of the model’s implementation. Over 30 years, the team at FEN had worked on numerous fronts to influence the quality and rollout of the model throughout Colombia. With its growing reputation, FEN had also promoted Escuela Nueva internationally, influencing the education systems of over 20 countries in Latin America and worldwide.

Colbert checked her diary as Arboleda answered her mobile phone. A number of pressing appointments were on their agenda, and Arboleda was scheduling a meeting with the national Vice Minister of Education to visit some of the Escuela Nueva schools. Furthermore, FEN was organizing the III International Congress of Escuela Nueva for the following month, where over a thousand teachers, principals, researchers and educational specialists and planners from around Latin America would convene for two days in Bogotá. The Congress, which had been in the planning stages for over a year, would be a culmination of nearly four decades of growing the Escuela Nueva model.

Both Colbert and Arboleda believed that the situation in Colombia presented an important set of opportunities for FEN and the Escuela Nueva model. Just two weeks before, the Colombian government had signed a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC), the primary guerilla group involved in the 52 years of civil war. A week later, the country was stunned when the peace accord failed the referendum process with the Colombian public, who voted by a slim margin to reject the terms of the primary document of the peace process. While the rejection was heartbreaking, it reflected the continued divisions in a country where two generations had never known peace. Millions had suffered because of the half-century of war, resulting in a thriving illicit drug trade, 220,000 deaths and unmeasurable instability in Colombia.² Negotiating terms which would be acceptable to both sides required an enormous amount of compromise from both sides – and some Colombians were not yet sure that they had reached a deal that was acceptable given the enormity of the suffering. Despite this setback, the country was closer to peace than it had been in over half a century.

Colbert was convinced that transforming education for the rural, underserved areas of the country was essential to promoting a new peaceful reality for Colombia. The Escuela Nueva model had shown significant success in fostering peaceful, democratic behaviours in children compared to conventional schools.³ As she explained: “We have to reform rural education now because the peace process will fail if we do not.” Colbert believed that quality education was the “silent revolution” that would transform Colombia – and, in fact, the world.

1. Casassus et al. 2000.
2. Associated Press in Bogotá 2013.
3. Little 2006.

However, with this significant opportunity at hand, Colbert and Arboleda were struggling with important strategic decisions. What steps should they take to capitalize on the peace process to advocate for education reform in Colombia? How could they work closely in a decentralized environment to have greater influence over the Escuela Nueva model in the country? And finally, what type of role could a nonprofit organization like FEN assume in its relationship with governments and other organizations to ensure the quality and sustainability of the Escuela Nueva model?

Colombia's Education System

Colombia was the fifth-largest country in Latin America with a population of more than 48 million.⁴ The country was largely urbanized, with 76% of Colombians living in urban areas.⁵ Colombia was classified as an upper middle-income country, with strong GDP growth in recent years, primarily due to the global commodities boom. However, the official statistics were misleading: poverty and inequality were significant challenges for the country, with a GDP per capita of just USD 10,303 per annum and a GINI coefficient of 0.539, comparable to the most unequal countries in the world. Furthermore, recent economic slowdown, precipitated by the global downturn in commodities prices, had placed increasing pressure on financing for public services.⁶

Colombia's geography and half-century of civil war created unique challenges to delivering government services to the communities which were historically underserved. Nearly three quarters of municipalities had less than 20,000 inhabitants, and it was in these peri-urban and rural areas where the rebel groups operated most heavily. Due to the rebel activity, some of these areas were largely untouched by official government services. These areas were also the most affected by violence, with high homicide rates, as well as forced recruitment into war. Educational opportunities in these areas were sometimes non-existent.

Despite these significant challenges, in the last three decades, Colombia had made great strides in improving its public education system, increasing access and coverage across most populations. Since 1990, Colombia's education system had been compulsory for all children from ages five to 15.⁷ As a result, Colombia increased its average school life expectancy rate from 11.4 years in 2001 to 13.5 years in 2010. Basic education was nine years, with five years of primary education and four years of lower secondary education. Upper secondary education was non-compulsory and lasted two years. In 2014, there were approximately 8.6 million children enrolled in basic and secondary education in nearly 52,000 government schools in the country. In addition, there were nearly 10,000 private institutions serving approximately 1.5 million school-aged children.⁸

However, repetition and drop-out rates were still significant problems plaguing the system, primarily in lower income schools. The education system in Colombia reflected the large disparities that affect all types of government service provision in the country. As reported by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), school life expectancy for students from the poorest backgrounds was just six years, compared with 12 years for those from wealthier backgrounds.⁹ This disparity continued into tertiary institutions, with 9% university enrolment by poorer students compared to 53% enrolment for wealthier students.¹⁰ Overall, Colombian students performed well below the average in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a well-respected "barometer" of global school system performance.¹¹

Vicky Colbert

The disparity in education outcomes for the poor versus the wealthy was precisely the reason that Colbert had chosen to enter the field of education as a sociologist in the 1970s. Born into a family of passionate educators, it seemed almost inevitable that Colbert would choose education as her vocation. Colbert's godfather, Rafael Bernal Jimenez, a former Minister of Education of Colombia, had brought some of the initial concepts for child-centred education to Colombia in the 1940s. However, these concepts were almost exclusively taken up by elite schools for wealthy families. Colbert's mother, Paulina Reyes, was a passionate Colombian educator who had founded some of the most progressive teachers' colleges in Colombia. In the mid-1940s, Reyes traveled to Oregon State College to continue her studies. While studying, she met an American naval officer whom she married. Tragically, Colbert's father died just 12 days after Colbert's birth, and Reyes was widowed after a few years of marriage.

4. The World Bank 2015a.

5. The World Bank 2015b.

6. The World Bank 2013) and (Silva 2015.

7. Coward et al. 2005.

8. Colbert 2016.

9. OECD 2016.

10. OECD 2012.

11. OECD 2016.

Reyes returned to Colombia with Colbert to be close to their family. However, a few years later, intent on ensuring that her daughter would learn English fluently, she moved to Phoenix, Arizona so that Colbert could attend first grade in the United States. Reyes then married a NASA scientist and the family moved to Florida, where Colbert attended middle school. Tragedy struck twice, and Reyes' second husband was killed in a car accident. Colbert and her mother moved back to Colombia permanently.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances, Colbert's multicultural upbringing, fluency in English and ability to move seamlessly in international circles, would be essential to her later pursuits. And, despite her transcontinental upbringing, Colbert was firmly rooted in her Colombian heritage. As she described: "My family was full of love and affection and I never felt the absence of a father. I was able to study at quality schools and I was surrounded by my extended family. Later, I would realize my fortune with this upbringing, and I would realize the importance that every child be surrounded by love and opportunity."

Colbert finished high school at the Colegio Abraham Lincoln and went on to study sociology at Universidad Javeriana, a private university in central Bogotá. After a few years of teaching at university level, Colbert returned to the United States to complete a dual Masters in education and sociology at Stanford University. With these significant educational achievements, she decided to return to Colombia to work with the schools that posed the most pressing challenges to the country: rural, multigrade schools. At this time, Colombia was struggling to provide universal basic education and most of these rural schools were invisible to educational planners. In 1973, still in her early 20s, Colbert was appointed as the Colombian Ministry of Education's coordinator for rural schools.

From Escuela Unitaria to Escuela Nueva

When Colbert took up her post in the Ministry, she set out to see what was already working in Colombia's rural schools. Her exploration led her to study the different approaches that existed in the country. Collectively, these approaches were called "Escuela Unitaria" and the emphasis was on how one teacher could work simultaneously with all grades in the same classroom.

Escuela Unitaria, or the "Unitary School", was first conceived in 1961 during a UNESCO meeting of Ministries of Education in Geneva. It was designed and developed to meet the unique needs of low density rural populations, and was rooted in the active learning approach pioneered by educational theorists such as Maria Montessori, John Dewey and Jean-Ovide Decroly. The Unitary School model differed from traditional schools, which emphasized memorization, copying and repetition. Rather, the model promoted the idea that children should become active participants in their education rather than passive recipients. This model inverted the traditional method of teachers leading lecture-style sessions from the front of the room, and instead promoted personalized learning where teachers created the lesson plans and designed self-instructional cards for students, which students worked in pairs and small groups to independently complete in the classroom.

There were two outstanding examples of the Unitary School in the country: one under a UNESCO-funded project in a small, northern city called Pamplona, and the other at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city. The UNESCO-funded approach had a demonstration school called "La Unitaria" led by a teacher named Oscar Mogollón, who was widely revered by those who had seen his work. The second example at the University of Antioquia followed a more behaviorist perspective, an ideology which drew some criticism from other educators in the country.¹² Both approaches emphasized individualized learning, but there were certain features that had prevented these approaches from being replicated widely.

A few years earlier, an American Peace Corps volunteer named Beryl Levinger had also heard about the Unitary School model and had visited Mogollón at "La Unitaria". By this time, the Unitary School model was being implemented across 150 schools in the Norte de Santander department as part of the UNESCO-sponsored pilot project. When Levinger moved to Bogotá to work for United States Agency for International Development (USAID), she and Colbert met each other and shared their interest in the Unitary School model, as well as the work of Mogollón. They both also shared similar concerns about the replicability of the model.

Several issues seemed to stand in the way of taking the Unitary School model to national scale. First and most importantly, the self-preparation of the instructional cards was a significant hurdle for teachers who had little time to assume the task

12. Behaviorism is a learning theory that focuses on objectively observable behaviors acquired based on environmental conditions, which discounts any independent activities of the mind. Behaviorists believe that all human behavior is learned, thus all behavior can be unlearned and new behaviors learned in its place.

of preparing learning materials in addition to their teaching responsibilities. Second, the teachers were not given adequate training or supervision to implement the Unitary School model, which required a substantial departure from the way they themselves had been instructed. Third, the model did not address the issues in the community that affected children's learning, such as relevant content and flexibility to align with the schedules of agricultural families. Finally, there were political issues that were standing in the way of the Unitary School model. Teachers' unions opposed the model for two reasons: first, designing self-instructional cards demanded too much additional time for teachers; and, second, they felt that promoting multigrade schools could potentially decrease the number of teachers in the country.

Despite the drawbacks, Colbert saw significant promise in the model. To overcome the challenges that she and Levinger had identified, Colbert organized a national seminar to reach consensus on the different perspectives of the Unitary School model in the country. As a result of this seminar, a synthesis was developed, detailing the problems that had been identified, including the design of training materials, teacher training, the interaction between the schools and the community, and the way the approaches dealt with ideological theory.¹³

Through the process of building consensus, Colbert recognized a unique opportunity to build on what was already working in the country, yet design a more systemic model, rethinking the learning process and creating a model for rural, multigrade schools. With those problems identified, the challenge then became how to design a scalable, replicable and cost-effective programme that would guarantee complete primary education, quality improvement and impact at the policy level. To emphasize that they were embarking on a new approach for the country's rural schools, Colbert proposed a new name for the model: Escuela Nueva. Levinger and Mogollón both agreed, and the new name was adopted.

A Model for Scale

In 1975, Colbert obtained the political support of the Department of Planning at the Ministry of Education and the Secretary General, as well as financial backing from USAID, to develop the first training and learning materials, which provided the framework for the Escuela Nueva model. This project also included piloting the new model at 500 rural schools. Levinger joined from USAID to support as technical support for the initiative, while Mogollón was instrumental in ensuring change at the local level.

Importantly, the creation of the training materials provided the opportunity to reimagine the way that teachers would be trained to implement Escuela Nueva. The materials used the same methodology that teachers would use with their students, with teachers organized into groups and pairs in the same way that they would organize their classrooms when they returned to their schools. Beyond the training hours, they also envisioned "microcentres" where teachers from schools in close proximity to one another would be able to convene on a monthly basis to learn from a peer-to-peer style of supportive follow-up mechanism.

Several other important changes were incorporated into the Escuela Nueva model in order to facilitate scalability. First, the teacher-designed instructional cards were eliminated and replaced with a series of re-useable "learning guides" that were created and printed centrally (for economies of scale) but with local, open-ended adaptations that teachers could incorporate. These guides became the central focus of the curriculum, bringing a textbook, workbook and teaching guide together into one central document that could be used for several years. The guides were augmented by physical elements in the classroom, including appropriate furniture (modular desks and chairs that could be moved to form groups and pairs); learning corners (sections of the classroom dedicated to the activities of the learning guides) and classroom libraries (small, student-organized book corners where children could borrow books).

Second, Colbert, Levinger and Mogollón identified that it was critical to have the support of the parents and broader community in the model. Thus, the materials needed to be applicable to students' daily lives, and involve parents in the process of learning. The learning guides were therefore designed to include topics, stories and activities that were relevant to children in rural settings, with exercises that were taken outside of the classroom and performed in the home as well. One of the annual exercises, for example, was the creation of a community map which allowed the teacher to learn where every student lived and how far they had to travel to attend school. Other instruments were introduced to promote self-regulation, responsibility, and autonomy, including a journal of personal thoughts and a suggestion box, where children could provide personal input for schools.

13. Colbert 1987.

Building a Team & Early Scaling

In 1976, Colbert became the National Coordinator of Escuela Nueva at the Ministry with responsibility to lead the implementation of an initial pilot project to expand Escuela Nueva to 500 schools. (During this time, Levinger returned to the US.) In order to start the change process, Colbert knew that she needed to have a strong team in place in the Ministry. She believed that Escuela Nueva would not be served by hiring the “usual suspects” – career bureaucrats who had rarely, if ever, set foot in a classroom. Instead, Colbert decided to bring rural teachers into the Ministry, as practitioners and researchers to accompany and monitor and evaluate the process. This seemingly practical idea proved radical; even the mere act of identifying the appropriate pay scale for experienced teachers who lacked any university education proved enormously difficult. Colbert, however, was insistent: she believed that to implement a model across the rural areas required substantive input from rural teachers. Colbert’s tenacity paid off, and she managed to set up her team, bringing two outstanding teachers who had experience with the Unitary school project: Hernando Gelvez and Pedro Pablo Ramirez.

Colbert also believed it was critical to have Mogollón as part of her team. She sought support from the Ministry to have Mogollón appointed as the Head of the Teachers College in Pamplona. The arrangement proved a “win-win” for Escuela Nueva, since this way, Colbert could continue working with Mogollón from a national level and Mogollón could support the national implementation of the project in the Norte de Santander region. These appointments signified the importance that the Ministry had attached to the model, and the level of commitment that was forming at the highest levels of government.

With the USAID project grant, Colbert, the national team and Mogollón embarked on the first stage of scaling the model. In this phase, the emphasis was on ensuring a fit between the model and schools, as well as collecting baseline data and ongoing monitoring. With the team of rural teachers and researchers at the national level, Colbert ensured that the strategies they designed for the implementation of the project were viable technically, politically and financially. In this manner, through a very experiential, practice-focused approach, Colbert and her team started implementing a pilot project in 500 schools in three regions of Colombia, thereby, creating a network of schools that would demonstrate the effectiveness of the Escuela Nueva model.

To evaluate the pilot, two institutions, Nemequene Scientific Association of Colombia and Instituto Ser de Investigaciones, led studies of the new model. Their evaluations, issued in 1978, 1982 and 1988, demonstrated that quantitative and qualitative improvements could be made in the most disadvantaged schools. This was evidenced in better academic scores, a reduction of drop-out and repetition rates, improvement of self-esteem and increased participation of girls when compared with conventional schools.¹⁴

From Pilot to Regional Scale

Once the pilot stage had evidenced positive results, Colbert realized that the next step would be to prove that the model could be scaled significantly, and to make the case for national rollout. With the support of departmental governments and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Colbert and her team assembled the funding needed to expand to 3,000 schools. The National Federation of Coffee Growers and Fundación para la Educación Superior (FES) also became interested in supporting regional expansions to some of the coffee regions, the department of Valle and to the Pacific West Coast of Colombia, one of the poorest regions in the country. These funding alliances were critical to gaining support within government, since budgetary support for rural schools was limited.

At this time, Colbert also worked to build the leadership to make the case for national rollout of the model. To do this, the national team and Colbert coordinated a series of visits to demonstration schools by high-level policymakers in the Ministry. Mogollón, meanwhile, was also working at the departmental level to prevent obstacles for Escuela Nueva for a national rollout. An initial obstacle was the teachers’ unions, that had opposed the former Escuela Unitaria model and the multigrade concept under the premise that a single-teacher model would justify under-staffing as a matter of policy. Colbert worked to bring the unions and leaders together in support for Escuela Nueva, emphasizing the progressive tenets of the model, with the focus on child-centered, participatory learning. By communicating the goals and benefits of the model, Colbert was able to earn the support of teachers, who in turn were strong influencers to the unions and departments.

As Colbert built her team and corralled resources, she began to meet significant resistance from within the Ministry as well. Many of the career civil servants within the Ministry were intimidated by the youthful exuberance of Colbert and her team members, who were outside of the traditional political hierarchies. By identifying and securing sources of funding and gaining allies outside of the Ministry, Colbert was seen as “punching above her weight”, and many of these career civil servants did not appreciate her self-drive and the support she was receiving from the Ministry.

14. Asociación Científica Nemequene de Colombia 1978a); (Asociación Científica Nemequene de Colombia 1978b); (Rojas & Philips 1982); (Rojas & Castillo 1988).

Colbert's memories of this time are bittersweet:

I wanted to make things happen and I learned that each obstacle became an opportunity. In this way, I was going beyond the innovation per se and putting in place the strategies and activities to make things happen. I guess this is what a social entrepreneur looks for. I remember that I had a little red Volkswagen at the time – certainly not the car of a government minister. One day I came outside to find that somebody had written “car of a rural teacher” on the back of my car – they were rejecting the idea that I had assembled a team of rural teachers in the Ministry.

Despite these challenges, by 1979, the Escuela Nueva team was going strong. However, Colbert's personal life was at the same time experiencing upheaval. Her husband, Jairo Arboleda, a highly-regarded development expert, was appointed as the Head of Latin America and the Caribbean for Save the Children International, headquartered in Westport, Connecticut. With a baby daughter on the way, Colbert made the difficult decision to leave Colombia for a two-year appointment in the US.

To protect the viability of Escuela Nueva, Colbert ensured that Mogollón was appointed into the Ministry as Coordinator of the project. Mogollón, whose hands-on experience developing Escuela Nueva had made him nearly synonymous with the model, was named as head of the Escuela Nueva programme for the Ministry. Although she found it very difficult to leave during this exciting time, Colbert felt that the programme was in good hands.

National Rollout

Under Mogollón's leadership, the expansion of Escuela Nueva continued apace, expanding beyond 3,000 schools. However, further rollout of the model was hindered by one critical component: financing. Specifically, scaling up Escuela Nueva required investment to train teachers, print and distribute learning guides, purchase furniture suitable for the classroom and create ongoing learning and support for the teachers in the network.

Colbert returned to Colombia in 1981, taking up a position as Head of Distance Education at the University of Javeriana, a role which allowed her to connect with the rural areas by creating access to tertiary institutions for less-mobile professionals, most notably for primary school teachers. However, her heart was still with Escuela Nueva. From her post at Javeriana, she continued to promote the model by gathering support from academia and networking extensively on behalf of the model. Her efforts were apparent to all those who cared about education in Colombia, and Colbert's big opportunity was still to come. When Belisario Betancur was elected President of Colombia, Colbert was appointed as Vice Minister of Education.

In 1983, back within government, Colbert recognized the issue of financing as a serious hindrance to a national rollout of Escuela Nueva. At the same time, Colbert felt that to have maximum impact, Escuela Nueva needed to be an explicit part of the national government policy for rural schools. As Vice Minister, she worked with the National Planning Department and the World Bank on a Development Plan for Rural Areas on an assessment of the weaknesses of rural education. Based on this study, and with the input of Colbert and her team, the Colombian government recognized the significant need to develop a solution for improving educational outcomes for rural children.

As Vice Minister, Colbert also promoted Mogollón to be the Head of the Regional Teacher Training Centers in the Ministry (*Centros Experimentales*), where he had the national leadership to influence the regions. She also ensured that Gelvez and Ramirez, the rural teachers whom she had recruited to the national team, assumed the national coordination and teacher training roles of Escuela Nueva in the Ministry respectively. In this manner, Colbert worked to protect the model and its technical continuity to avoid disruptive changes from new administrations that did not understand the essence of the model.

In 1985, the team's advocacy efforts were strongly rewarded. With a forceful push to universalize primary education, the Colombian government made the landmark decision to adopt the Escuela Nueva model as a national policy for the entire country. As a sign of support, the World Bank provided a USD 100 million loan to fund Colombia's rollout of universal primary rural education, including Escuela Nueva. In anticipation of the decision, the team had already ramped up its activities and, with the policy in place, they worked even more feverishly to expand Escuela Nueva. By the end of 1985, the model had scaled to approximately 10,000 schools.

At the same time, Colbert and her team collaborated with researchers to undertake further evaluations of the new model, to provide evidence that educational outcomes could be improved with the application of Escuela Nueva. The results were definitive. Students enrolled in Escuela Nueva schools had considerably higher achievement on tests given for mathematics for third grade, Spanish language for third and fifth grades, as well as socio-civic behaviour and self-esteem, than students in traditional schools.¹⁵

15. Colbert et al. 1990.

Decentralization and Decline

Meanwhile, other government initiatives were creating challenges for the Escuela Nueva rollout. Colombia had maintained a policy of decentralization of government starting since the 1960s, however this process did not start in earnest until the mid 1980s. As a result, decision-making, spending and management devolved to departments (*departamentos*) and municipalities. The Ministry of Education, pressured by powerful teachers' unions, was one of the government ministries with the greatest incentive to decentralize. As a result, municipalities with less than 100,000 inhabitants depended on departmental budgets, while those municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants were decentralized even further and given autonomy over their own budgets.

Although decentralization was enacted for good reasons, it created significant confusion for the rollout of a central policy, such as Escuela Nueva, that was in its process of expansion. Rather than deal with a single Ministerial directive, the Escuela Nueva team now had to influence 32 departments and 1,048 municipalities. Communication to municipalities about the model was lacking, disrupting teacher training and support. Many teachers who had been trained in the Escuela Nueva model were moved to other departments and municipalities, interrupting the integration of the model at the schools where progress had been made. As Colombia had no formal curriculum, but rather guidelines, the decentralization gave a large degree of autonomy to municipalities and schools as to what type of pedagogy and curriculum were used. The result was a fragmentation of the curricula delivered across schools and regions, as well as poor coordination between teacher training and the delivery of materials.

At the end of 1985, with a new government administration taking over, Colbert's appointment as Vice Minister ended. Under the terms of the World Bank loan, the Escuela Nueva team continued the rollout effort in Colbert's absence, growing to 20,000 schools by 1992. However, the decentralization effort interrupted the further rollout to the remaining 14,000 schools. As the World Bank loan funding came to an end, further training of teachers and development of learning guides was halted and municipalities were given full control over curriculum rollout and teacher training.

Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN)

Colbert's experience in the Ministry left a lasting impression. Her experience highlighted to her that public sector innovations are highly vulnerable to political and administrative changes. She believed that government institutions were important vehicles to achieve scale, but that they had an inherent short-term view that proved difficult when sustaining an innovation with quality. She had also reached the conclusion that while working with governments was crucial to achieve coverage and impact, public-private partnerships and civil society were critical for quality and sustainability.

As she described:

The main reason for the weakness of public institutions to sustain innovations is that they are not learning organizations. This means, among other reasons, that they do not accumulate knowledge about lessons and good practices; they do not use scientific knowledge and evaluation results as the basis for policy and action; there is a permanent turnover of government officials and staff rotation; there are changing priorities according to political preferences. Those reasons become a threat to the innovation unless conditions exist for the promoters of the innovation to protect it, or the intervention of non-governmental actors with sufficient clout before governmental officials to continue promoting it.¹⁶

Colbert decided that there needed to be an institution that would help to support and preserve the Escuela Nueva model, independently of government. In 1987, with the support of several of the members of her team and some Ministers she had worked with in the Ministry, Colbert decided to set up a nonprofit foundation with the aim of preserving the Escuela Nueva model. Colbert believed that by creating a nonprofit organization that held the integrity of the Escuela Nueva model, they would be better able to maintain and enhance its impact and continue the process of learning and improving the model. In a sense, FEN was established to hold the public trust of the Escuela Nueva model, which government institutions were not designed to do.

During this time, Colbert accepted a regional position at UNICEF as Regional Education Adviser for Latin America and the Caribbean, a role which seemed the perfect opportunity to build on the experience of taking the Escuela Nueva model beyond Colombia. Before taking her position, Colbert set up FEN as a Colombian non-governmental organization (NGO) with an initial project to initiate an adaptation of the model for urban areas.

16. Colbert 2013.

Growing FEN

When Colbert founded FEN, she had envisioned a small nonprofit that would sustain the Escuela Nueva model in partnership with the Colombian government. FEN's first project, funded by the Inter-American Foundation, was to work on a model adaptation for urban contexts (called Escuela Activa Urbana) which gave the nonprofit an initial source of funding. However, within a few years, it was clear that the interest in Escuela Nueva from partners and countries beyond Colombia was high. As demand for materials' adaptation and implementation support grew, so did FEN. In 1996, Colbert decided to leave her position at UNICEF to focus on growing FEN full-time.

Colbert described the transition from working in government and multilateral bureaucracies to a small nonprofit organization as significant, but refreshing: "I've had to learn to work through a small NGO to influence political will and national decision making. You need three elements to influence public policy: a scalable model, demonstration sites and empirical evidence and feasibility. At FEN, we have worked on all of these elements to strengthen them for the success of Escuela Nueva." Most of all, the work at FEN gave Colbert the position from which to hold on to the integrity of the Escuela Nueva model, a role which she prized.

FEN sustained itself through a "fee for service" model, acting as a service provider to governments and partners who sought to implement Escuela Nueva in their schools and education systems. In the decentralized Colombian context, FEN also acted as a service provider to departments and municipalities that sought to revitalize, enhance or improve the Escuela Nueva model in their schools. For other countries, FEN conducted "study missions", where government delegations would visit Colombia to learn from the Escuela Nueva model, which sometimes led to longer-term projects where FEN would assist countries in implementing the Escuela Nueva model in their education systems.

Funding for projects generally came from governments seeking to adapt and implement the Escuela Nueva model, and from partners (international organizations, private sector) supporting the adaptation and rollout of the model to different contexts. Unrestricted funding was used to provide matching funds for projects that required investment from FEN, as well as R&D long-term initiatives, such as building the community connections around the Escuela Nueva model. Accordingly, FEN ramped its staff, both permanent and contract, up and down over the years based on the demand for their services. Some of the staff members had been part of the original Ministry team that Colbert had assembled during her tenure in government, and a few others were from the network of rural teachers that had been involved in the initial Escuela Nueva rollout.

As the organization expanded, Colbert recognized the need to professionalize the organization and build a sustainable strategy for their operations. In 2005, Colbert recruited her strategic and business-minded daughter, Arboleda, into the organization. As a business graduate with a Masters in International Education from New York University, as well as experience working within the Colombian government, Arboleda was an ideal match for Colbert's passion and entrepreneurial spirit.

FEN Activities

FEN worked in a number of different ways to promote, preserve and adapt the Escuela Nueva model for the Colombian context and beyond. Over the years, their activities grew to include the following:

- **Technical Assistance:** FEN's primary role was to provide technical assistance and support to governments and partners wishing to implement the Escuela Nueva model. Importantly, technical assistance was promoted as a "package", including the distribution of learning guides, provision of teacher training, and ongoing evaluation and support.
- **Community Connections:** FEN also worked to build a "learning network and community" around the partners who were implementing the Escuela Nueva model, so that they could continue to learn from one another and support the continued roll-out and adaptation of the model. Teachers were a vital component of this network, and it was interesting to note that teachers who had been trained with Escuela Nueva decades before still remembered the model with great affection. FEN's flagship community-building event was a series of global Congresses (2003, 2006, 2016) that brought together practitioners and policymakers from around the world to learn and promote the model.
- **Research and Evaluation.** FEN also promoted the evaluation of the Escuela Nueva model through partnerships with academic and research institutions. More recently, they had undertaken a process of developing standardized assessments and metrics to achieve a global understanding of how the Escuela Nueva model was being used and what impact it was having.

New Developments

FEN realized early on that adapting the model was necessary for its survival. Escuela Nueva had long been associated with rural, multigrade schools, and this was detrimental for expanding its impact to education systems as a whole. Colombia – indeed, the world – was urbanizing rapidly, and Escuela Nueva was, in essence, a model whose principles could be applied in various settings. FEN's first project, funded by the Inter-American Foundation in 1987, supported the adaptation of the Escuela Nueva model for urban settings, developing a new model called *Escuela Activa Urbana*. This model had been implemented in more than six cities in Colombia.

FEN also expanded upon its focus on community and civic behavior, deciding to make civic and democratic values a central part of the learning because of the intimate relationship between pedagogy and citizenship building. While the Escuela Nueva model had always emphasized student governments to elect student leaders who had authority and responsibility for activities in the school, FEN placed greater emphasis upon these activities. These student leaders became role models in the school, heading committees where all students actively participated in directing school activities. This focus was an important development for the model and its impact, and a study in coordination with the University of London in 2006 found that “Escuela Nueva demonstrated significant results in the development of democratic behaviors and peaceful social interaction of children, in comparison with conventional schools.”¹⁷

Also, in 2001, USAID provided funding for FEN to adapt the model for out-of-school, displaced children, creating a community-style of schooling for children that acted as a bridge for children to enter the formal school system. This new model was called Escuela Nueva Learning Circles. With funding from the Colombian Ministry of Education and USAID, this model was successfully piloted and expanded as a national program in 2003.

International Influence

Colbert and her team at FEN played an active role in promoting the Escuela Nueva model around the world. Ironically, the restructuring at the Colombian Ministry of Education had the unintended benefit of beginning a wave of international expansion for the model. Colbert deployed former staff and colleagues from the Ministry to several Latin American countries and posts of international NGOs, who were searching for consultants to implement the Escuela Nueva model in other countries. When she was offered the position to lead Escuela Nueva by the Academy for Educational Development (AED, now FHI 360) to pursue the design and implementation of the Escuela Nueva model in Guatemala, Colbert instead recommended that Mogollón lead the rollout of Escuela Nueva in Guatemala. His work then expanded to include Nicaragua, Peru and Equatorial Guinea. Just as she advocated for Mogollón to work in Guatemala, she also recommended other Colombian rural teachers to work for international NGOs in other countries, such as Brazil, Paraguay, Honduras, Panama, among others. Through these appointments, FEN inspired many educational projects based on the principles of Escuela Nueva in countries in Latin America and beyond.

As an independent nonprofit, FEN sought out ways to promote the model, encouraging study missions by other country Ministries of Education to see the model in action. FEN also sought out relationships with academic institutions to further evaluate the model and to publish the results. Finally, Colbert herself became the recipient of numerous awards and accolades¹⁸ and these awards, with the press coverage that came with them, were instrumental in highlighting the Escuela Nueva model for the rest of the world.

As the story of Escuela Nueva grew, so did the number of requests from countries who were interested in adapting and developing the Escuela Nueva model for their educational systems. By 2016, FEN had worked closely with nine countries to adapt and implement the Escuela Nueva model, including the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Panama, El Salvador, Honduras, Paraguay, East Timor, Zambia and Vietnam. FEN had also led study missions for government representatives from Iraq, India, Peru, Egypt, Belize and Papua Guinea, among others.

A Precarious Peace

Colbert and Arboleda arrived back at the office and sat down over cups of coffee to discuss the future of FEN. They both continued to believe that the role of FEN was to sustain and grow the quality and reach of the Escuela Nueva model. Through adapting the model and providing support to governments and partners, FEN had, by one estimate, impacted five million children globally. Colbert was confident that Escuela Nueva had an even bigger role to play in the future. She strongly believed that the world needed a “paradigm shift” in education – with new ways of educating children that were suited to creating peace and prosperity globally. However, the endeavour presented numerous challenges.

17. Little 2006.

18. Colbert was named as a Schwab Social Entrepreneur of the Year in 2004 and an Ashoka Social Entrepreneur in 2004. She also received the Clinton Global Citizenship Award in 2008, the World Technology Award in Social Entrepreneurship in 2005, the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship in 2007, a Kravis Leadership Award in 2011 and was recognized with the Wise award for pluralism in 2009 and then as the WISE Prize for Education Laureate in 2013.

Within Colombia, many departments and schools claimed to be using the Escuela Nueva model, but were in fact implementing it partially at best. The Colombian government had also at times promoted the use of “light versions” of the Escuela Nueva model, or even alternatives, as part of its menu of options for departments and municipalities. Even in those regions or countries where Escuela Nueva was being used in a quality fashion, it was difficult to measure the impact of the model. In situations where FEN had provided technical assistance to adapt and implement Escuela Nueva, there was little funding available for long-term monitoring and evaluation – typically, projects included a simple baseline and short-term assessment. Therefore, although they were working to develop a more robust, standardized monitoring and evaluation system, FEN was not able to fully measure its impact or attribute their impact to educational improvements.

These challenges aside, the Colombian peace process – with negotiations continuing despite the referendum result – would likely result in increased support and funding for rural education. Colbert and Arboleda strongly hoped that the peace process would give them an opportunity to revitalize and reposition the model in the country. Beyond Colombia, this process – given its scale and scope – provided an opportunity to consider new ways of working with governments, providing evidence that could be used by other countries seeking to implement the Escuela Nueva model.

Colbert and Arboleda thought carefully about the opportunity provided by the political environment and what it would mean for FEN and the Escuela Nueva model. Together, they agreed that the peace process provided a chance for FEN to reinvigorate the Escuela Nueva “brand”, while showcasing how the model could be used to promote peace and livelihoods in the marginalized areas of Colombia. They also believed that the growing emphasis on rural areas could greatly expand their influence in the departments and municipalities that were the primary decision-makers for rural schools.

However, Colbert and Arboleda needed to address the broader strategic questions that were pressing for FEN:

- What type of role and tactics should a nonprofit organization like FEN use in its relationship with governments and other organizations to ensure the quality and sustainability of the Escuela Nueva model?
- How could they work closely with the Colombian educational authorities to have greater and long-term influence over the quality of the Escuela Nueva model in the country? What steps should they take to capitalize on the peace process to advocate for education reform in Colombia?
- What should FEN's role be internationally, in its relationship with partners (other nonprofits, international organizations, governments)?

These questions were not easy, and they knew that finding answers may require important changes to how the organization operated. However, a rural education system that failed the children of Colombia was simply not an option. With the peace process in limbo, Colbert and Arboleda felt their call to action was clear. Now, more than ever, children in the rural areas needed to be engaged in an education system that gave them skills and hope for the future.

Assignment questions:

- What were the key characteristics of the Escuela Nueva model that allowed for government adoption and national rollout? What role did evaluation play in national rollout?
- Do you believe that governments are capable of “innovation”? What characteristics of government prevented the wholesale rollout of the Escuela Nueva model?
- What role can nonprofit organizations play in sustaining innovation with government scale?
- What should be the strategies to be able to maintain the nonprofit organization?
- What strategies and mechanisms would you suggest to Colbert and Arboleda to strengthen and grow the model and the organization?

Appendices

Appendix 1: Student Enrolment in Colombia, 2014

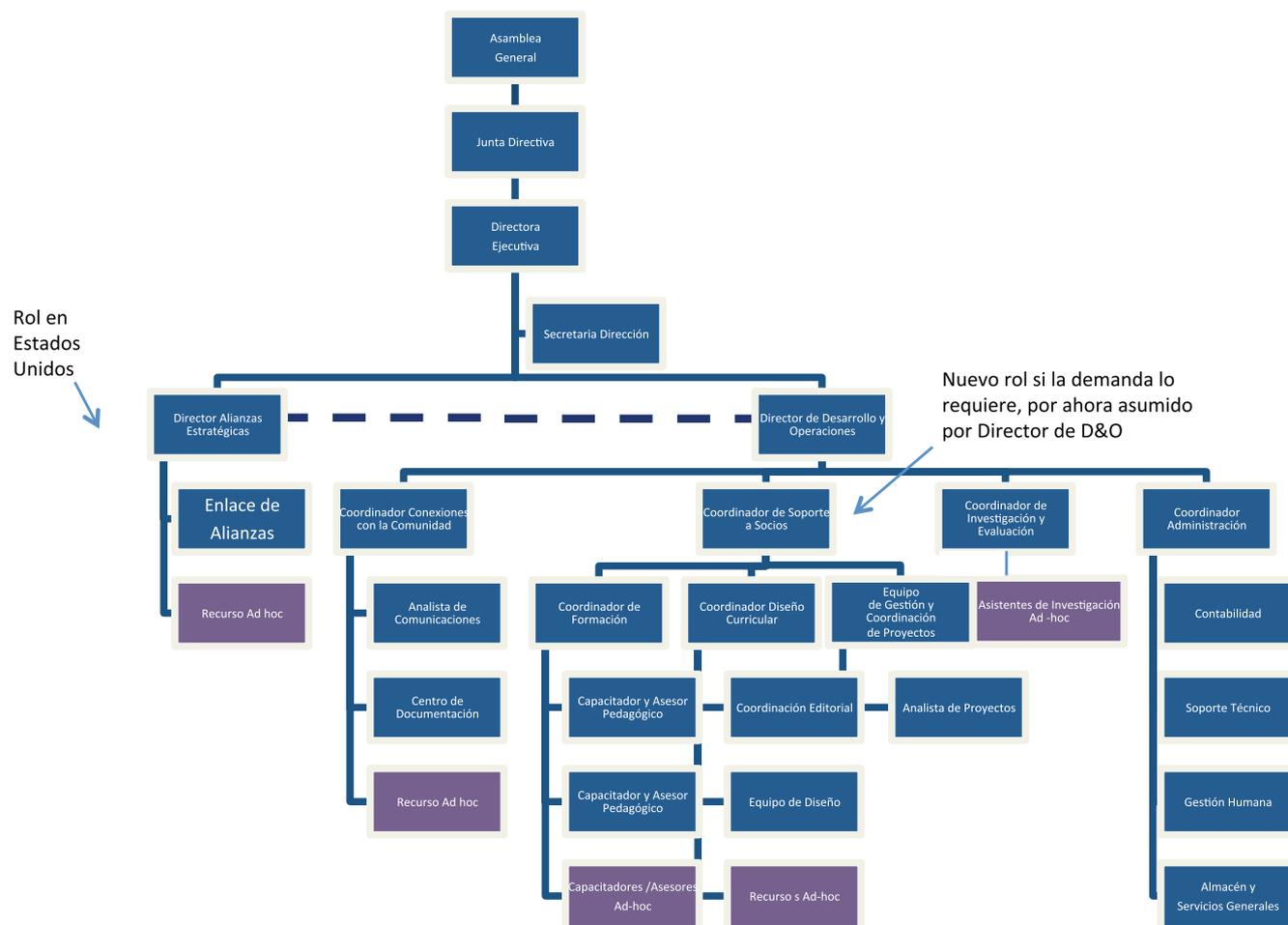
	All Schools	Urban	Rural	Escuela Nueva
Basic Primary				
Private	643 358	609 569	33 789	3 391
Public	3 899 002	2 578 708	1 320 294	607 448
Basic Secondary				
Private	479 655	454 032	25 623	0
Public	3 013 690	2 325 769	687 921	44
High School				
Private	256 033	243 295	12 738	0
Public	1 092 959	890 275	202 684	19

Source: <http://bi.mineducacion.gov.co:8380/eportal/web/planeacion-basica/sector>

Appendix 2: Escuela Nueva Model



Appendix 3: Fundación Escuela Nueva Organogram



Appendix 4: FEN Historical Financials

	2016(*)(**)	2015(*)	2014
		USD	
Income from sale of Learning Materials (Program/operation revenue)	1,130,196	774,112	726,380
Cost of sale of learning materials	507,281	250,408	216,462
Income from Technical Assistance (Program/operation revenue)	626,074	683,718	615,534
Income for distribution of learning materials	-	28,661	635
Cost of technical assistance	771,601	729,913	375,384
Income from Donations	59,777	51,649	16,505
Gross surplus	537,165	557,819	767,208
	-		
Administrative Expenses	511,140	432,462	642,817
Total Administrative Expenses	511,140	432,462	642,817
	-		
Operational surplus	26,025	125,357	124,391
	-		
Non-operational income	111,119	157,774	72,522
Non-operational expenses	29,149	103,201	44,691
	-		
Surplus before income taxes	107,995	179,930	152,222
	-		
Income taxes	6,331	18,622	6,800
	-		
Annual Net Surplus	101,664	161,308	145,422

*2016 and 2015 figures are classified and distributed in compliance with IFRS, applicable to Colombian nonprofits as of 2015

**Will be audited March 31st, 2017

Appendix 5: Summary of Research and Evaluation on the Escuela Nueva Model

Evaluation Title	Year	Findings
National University of Colombia. Assessment of FEN's urban adaptation, Escuela Nueva Activa.	1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Incremental improvement in language skills of 40.36% and math 69%. – Participating schools performed better than the city's average schools, although situated in the city's lower socio-economic areas.
UNESCO. First Comparative International Study on Quality of Education.	1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – "Rural education in Colombia has better quality than urban education." [except in big cities of Latin America.] – "In mathematics, only Cuba's scores are above Colombia's." [In rural education]
Universidad del Rosario & FEN. Published in Education for All and Multigrade Teaching: Challenges and Opportunities. University of London.	2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – "Escuela Nueva demonstrated significant results in the development of democratic behaviors and peaceful social interaction of children, in comparison with conventional schools." – "Escuela Nueva students gain awareness and understanding of the power of situations and groups to influence individual behavior." – "They develop skills to step up and act and become mindful change agents." – "They learn and practice the ability to overcome challenging situations (social, emotional and academic)."
UNESCO. Assessment of Escuela Nueva Learning Circles.	2004/ 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – "In only 6 months of operation, the Escuela Nueva Learning Circles™ Program for migrant, internally displaced children, has numerous achievements: a 100% enrollment, an 18.5% increase in children's self-esteem, and the highest level of improvement in both language and math, placing children of the learning circles 13.9 and 17.3 points, respectively, above the national average."
USAID. Girls Education Monitoring System (GEMS), Effects of Active Learning Programs on Girls Persistence and Completion of Primary School in Developing Countries.	2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Escuela Nueva pedagogy and methodology enhances girls' participation because of its active, child-centred learning nature. – Cooperative learning, which is central to Escuela Nueva, contributes to eliminate prejudices, stereotypes, and gender biases. – It also provides opportunities for them to participate more, excel, be more outgoing, take initiative and lead groups.

Appendix 6: Photos

Photo 1: Traditional Teacher-Centred Instruction



Photo 4: Teacher as Facilitator



Photo 2: Escuela Nueva Classroom



Photo 5: Teacher Training with Similar Methodology



Photo 3: Learning Guides Used in Peer Pairs



Photo 6: Learning Corners



Photo 7: Emphasis on Democratic Values



Photo 8: Classroom Community Map



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