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Women in Policy: Using Data to Respond to the COVID Education Crisis in Peru, The Philippines, and Colombia

To mark the occasion of International Women's Day, IPA presents the second of three blog posts this week interviewing female policymakers we've worked with in different countries around the world. They told us about their experiences working in government and promoting a culture of evidence-based policymaking within their institutions, how the COVID-19 pandemic changed their work, and what long-term impacts they hope to achieve in the sectors in which they work. See the first blog post [here](#) and the second post [here](#).

Marief Bayangos, Division Chief- Planning Service, Policy Research and Development Division, Department of Education, The Philippines

Marief serves as Division Chief within the Department of Education's Policy Research and Development Division, which entails building up staff's capacity for identifying how research can be used to strengthen policy design and implementation. As part of her work, she also told us that she wants to assist other female colleagues to build their careers within the public sector to see how they can best contribute to making the Filipino education system more equitable.



When did you first realize that you wanted to work in education, and specifically within the government?

After university, I volunteered for two years as a secondary school teacher in a remote part of the Philippines. This experience allowed me to discover my interest in education, which evolved into a passion. However, I knew that teaching high school was not something I felt I could do in the long-term. Through that experience, though, I witnessed both the transformative role that education plays in social development and the systemic gaps that exist in the country for resource-poor communities. Working to promote education, I realized, not only depends on effective pedagogy but also on effective policy and governance. This

realization led me to the Department of Education, where I've held roles in numerous units over the years.

How has your work with the Department of Education evolved, and what has been the role of evidence in informing policies?

You could call me a “builder,” and I have tended to seek out challenges in my work that require me to start something new from scratch. I started with DepEd by developing programs for foreign assistance and, the next year, I was tapped to set up a consolidated international cooperation office. In the process of developing programs supported by foreign assistance, I attempted to map fifteen efforts to support basic education throughout the country in the form of aid and loans. This experience really made it clear for me how critical it is to have robust monitoring and evaluation systems and data-supported management decisions.

From there, I moved on to the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office, where my team and I supported the response to Typhoon Haiyan (2013) as well as the development of the recovery and rehabilitation plan to ensure learning continuity in the rebuilding phases after the typhoon. I had no guidelines or precedent to tackle my responsibility for designing the recovery plan, so much of this work depended on gaining a quick understanding of school and teachers' needs and working back from these needs to identify the data to support management questions.

This work, and engaging in the unit's operations more broadly, resulted in the establishment of the RADaR (Rapid Assessment of Damages Report) platform, a rapid damage assessment collection system, that works hand-in-hand with school principals by empowering them to report their needs (for example, to fix broken windows from the typhoon) to the Department directly through SMS messages. I am very proud that the system has now been fully incorporated into the Department's emergency response processes and the real-time data collection it facilitates allows various units within the Department to better coordinate their crisis policies (it was also rolled out as a mobile app in September 2020 to facilitate faster reporting).

How did these past experiences shape your work during the pandemic?

This experience in disaster response has proved to be a key asset during the COVID-19 pandemic in my role as Division Chief within the Policy Research and Development Division. Since I joined in 2016, I've been working with my colleagues to strengthen the mandate of PRD by establishing processes for drawing on monitoring data and empirical evidence to best support policy development across the entire Department of Education. One of my goals is to better incorporate feedback from learners, parents, and teachers, via surveys and focus groups, for example, into monitoring and data collection processes. At the onset of the pandemic, DepEd was tasked with building out a strategy to support educational continuity amidst the lockdowns and continued public health restrictions, and PRD has played a key role in promoting evidence-based strategies to do this.

Initially, we relied on existing studies to understand the situation, and we've slowly moved towards building evidence ourselves to get on-the-ground perspectives on the effect of the pandemic on basic education. For instance, we have developed the Learner Enrollment and Survey Form to aid in the opening of the school year, where we asked households about their capacities to support distance learning. Also, we've utilized IPA's [RECOVR survey](#) to understand the perceptions of parents on distance learning and to understand what modes learners were most receptive to for receiving lessons. With IPA, DepEd also launched a [Teacher Needs Assessment](#), and in turn, has incorporated all these survey findings into continued iterations of its distance education strategies. Of course, it is still a challenge to be implementing policies and tracking them in real-time, and we are trying to stay on top of a situation that is constantly changing. I'm thankful for DepEd's ongoing work with IPA on capacity building for Monitoring and Evaluation processes, and exchange opportunities like the "Research O'Clock" (2020's conference was, of course, virtual and focused on distance learning), which have established a strong foundation for PRD to equip DepEd to make data-driven decisions during the crisis.

Laura Ochoa, Technical Deputy Director for Early Childhood, Institute for Family Welfare, Colombia

Laura serves as Technical Deputy Director for Early Childhood Services at the Institute for Family Welfare in Colombia, where she oversees the agency's early childhood development portfolio. Upon assuming this role, one of Laura's main goals has been to standardize the use of data and evidence for ICBF's policy planning and implementation. To identify impactful programs and determine how to scale them, this work has involved institutionalizing knowledge management processes along with three key areas: innovation, evaluation, and research.



What inspired you to pursue public sector work?

My commitment to closing inequality gaps in Colombia was inspired by the time I spent working abroad in other countries where I could identify similarities in inequalities with my own context, prompting the decision to study to understand more about their causes and ways to approach solutions. This led to pursuing master's degrees in international development and public administration and to a professional trajectory in areas such as territorial development, peacebuilding, children and youth, and now Early Childhood Development, in Colombia and internationally.

Could you share an example of how an evaluation has informed ICBF's approach or projects in a particular area?

ICBF is working with IPA on several ongoing projects, and I'd like to highlight one in particular,

the *Pequeñas Aventureras* (Little Adventurers) project. *Pequeñas Aventureras* is a training program to strengthen community mothers in our Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services in Valle del Cauca on promoting scientific exploration in young children, particularly to address STEM gaps between boys and girls that research shows already manifest in early childhood. IPA conducted an evaluation (RCT) in 2019, with support from the IDB and Fundación Carvajal, and found that the program helped to narrow gender-based preferences with regards to STEM. Because of these positive results, ICBF will scale up the program this year to reach new regions. It's very gratifying to see the direct policy impacts of an evaluation that resulted in a program's scale-up.

What did ICBF do to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? How did this affect your work?

COVID-19 ushered immediate changes for ICBF: with ECCE centers and in-person activities closed, we had to rapidly design an operational and pedagogical strategy to promote early childhood development at home, mediated primarily by caregivers, spearheaded by our teachers. The program we developed, *Mis Manos Te Enseñan* ("My hands teach you"), is a series of phone-based modules that promote quality interactions between children and adults, and also includes prompts to check on children's health and nutritional status. Furthermore, thanks to the early adoption of a robust monitoring and evaluation system we were able to add new features to the program throughout the year, such as psychosocial support services, delivery of printed educational materials and pedagogical kits, and activities to elicit more participation from male caregivers and to strengthen children's identity and autonomy building. By the end of 2020, we logged 77 million calls under the program, delivered almost 15 million nutritional baskets and more than 5 million educational kits, which ultimately impacted 1.7 million pregnant women and children.

Overseeing a program like *Mis Manos te Enseñan* from inception and design, to implementation and evaluation, during an unprecedented crisis such as the COVID 19 pandemic, has been the most challenging yet rewarding experience of my professional life. Moreover, contributing to demonstrate how evidence-based policy-making has helped ICBF to answer critical management questions, iterate and learn to seek positive results in programming that trigger better outcomes in children.

What are ICBF's priorities for 2021 and beyond?

Our priorities for 2021 address challenges that emerged from the pandemic as well as long term policy objectives: a safe re-opening of in-person services; improving Early Childhood Education and Care quality through training and innovation in areas such as STEAM and socioemotional skills in early childhood; addressing specific needs for children in rural areas, children with disabilities and migrant children; and mainstreaming a gender focus across our services.

Annie Chumpitaz, Head of Monitoring and Evaluation, Ministry of Education, Peru

Since 2018, Annie has led the Ministry's Office of Monitoring and Strategic Evaluation, where she started as coordinator of the Evaluation team. In this role, she oversees the work of the Monitoring and Evaluation Department and the Statistics Department and also works to promote the development of data-driven programs and policy innovations within the Ministry.



What inspired you to work in the public sector?

I credit my father for this inspiration and guidance. He grew up near Lima with limited resources and worked his way through the education system, ultimately earning a PhD in the

United States; his example showed me the transformative role that education plays in social development, both at the individual and societal level. Because of his experiences, I committed myself to work to improve people's livelihoods. My first taste of government work came after completing my university studies when I joined the Ministry of Education. I worked for some years in private consulting, but ultimately rejoined the Ministry and I've never looked back.

How do you work to promote evidence-based decision-making within the Ministry? Could you share a few examples with us?

In my opinion, promoting evidence-based decision-making within the government comes down, in large part, to solid management. It's critical to co-create with partners to jointly identify policy-relevant questions that can be answered with data, and, where possible, tie program and budget decisions to evidence. It's also valuable to combine "quick wins" with medium and longer-term goals to help build momentum in promoting a culture of learning and evidence-informed decisions.

I've been lucky to work on many projects that have demonstrated the value of evidence-informed policy innovation. The Ministry's ongoing work with IPA since 2013, particularly with MineduLAB, has provided several opportunities to strengthen the policymaking process through insights from impact evaluations, administrative data reviews, and descriptive surveys. During the pandemic, many of the projects that were originally piloted, evaluated, and scaled through MineduLAB, such as information campaigns on school dropout, have been incorporated into the country's remote education offerings. Another important tool for us is the *Semáforo Escuela* (School Traffic Light), a school quality monitoring tool that has evolved from an in-person audit form to a digital platform that has also been expanded to include student and parent perceptions of education quality. The indicators in *Semáforo Escuela* assist the Ministry in prioritizing and targeting policy responses.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work? What lessons from the pandemic can be incorporated into the Ministry's ongoing policies?

The pandemic hit Peru right as the new school year was starting, and the Ministry had to support teachers, parents, and students in transitioning to the new normal essentially overnight. In early April 2020, we launched *Aprendo en Casa* ("I learn at home"), the country's distance learning strategy. We needed to understand how schools and students were responding to these modes, so rapidly generating data to inform program adjustments was key—however, doing so in a remote manner to comply with lockdowns and distancing was a huge challenge.

My team designed and implemented a phone survey from scratch to interview samples of teachers and parents on their satisfaction and challenges with distance learning, internet access issues, and a number of other areas. We continued to iterate on the surveys throughout the year, and they've proven to be a key asset to support data-driven decision-making within the Ministry and overall management for crisis response.

I've been reflecting on the role that remote education will continue to play even after the pandemic subsides, and growing demands on the education system in Peru. There are several pressing issues, including facilitating parental involvement for home-based learning, integrating digital tools that also promote socio-emotional learning, strategies to combat school dropout, and strategies for promoting healthy habits. While these are tall orders, I'm inspired by the opportunities for policy innovation that each of these will bring in the coming years.

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