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UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF MIDDLE-TIER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE FOR SCALING IMPACT IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

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Introduction

Attention to the middle tier of education systems (see box 2) has increased significantly over the last few years, with this system level now seen as a critical but underutilized lever for improving learning outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Asim et al. 2023, Childress et al. 2020, Chimier et al. 2023, Fullan 2015, Hargreaves 2023), Despite the current attention, however, the middle tier is not yet well understood. A better understanding of its nuances, strengths, gaps, and opportunities is needed to identify ways to strengthen and leverage it for improved education.

In 2024, the *Research on Scaling the Impact of Innovations in Education* (ROSIE) project at the Center for Universal Education at Brookings (part of the Global Partnership for Education's Knowledge and Innovation Exchange) approached this topic: looking specifically at the role of mid-level actors in decentralized systems with respect to identifying, contextualizing, and scaling education innovations. This is because scaling impact is a popular, promising approach for improving education systems. Previously, ROSIE investigated scaling-related education decision-making of central-level governments in LMICs (Olsen and Qargha 2022, Olsen 2023, Olsen et al. 2024). Building on that research, this companion study pursued two questions: What roles do mid-level actors and their professional cultures play in decision-making about adopting, adapting, and scaling education innovations? What are the contours and effects of their work related to scaling?

For those interested in improving education by scaling promising education innovations in LMICs, the middle tier represents a key opportunity. Central governments possess the resources and often the policymaking power. Schools are typically where innovations are operationalized into daily practice. But it is the middle tier—at least in theory—that serves as a bridge between the two by helping schools implement policies from the center, finding or fitting innovations to meet local needs, and communicating implementation ideas and challenges from schools up to the central government (Asim et al. 2023, Chimier et al. 2023, Kufaine and Mtapuri 2014). A strong middle tier can translate policies into manageable reforms; contextualize implementation for local uptake; and sustain impact through data collection, monitoring, teacher support, and securing commitment on the ground. As one of our research consultants said, "In reality, no education innovation can reach the classroom without the middle tier."

BOX 1.

What is scaling impact?

Scaling encompasses a range of approaches—from deliberate replication to targeted diffusion to integration within national systems—meant to expand and deepen impact leading to lasting improvements in people's lives. Our definition prioritizes scaling impact, or scaling the effects of an innovation, initiative, or idea in order to make it the new normal in a location, rather than simply growing or replicating the innovation itself (Brookings Institution 2025).

This report is written for central-level government officials interested in improving the ability of their middle level to contribute to education improvement, and for mid-level actors to contextualize understandings of their work and identify levers for improvement. It is also for non-state actors like non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and international funders seeking to maximize returns on their efforts and investments.

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BOX 2.

What is the middle tier?

This study defines the middle tier, or mid-level, of education systems as the level between the central and school levels—including regions, districts, subdistricts, and municipalities. It includes government actors such as subnational officials, district bureaucrats, pedagogical specialists, inspectors, and cluster leaders. Local and external NGOs, CSOs, funders, and other stakeholders often operate at this level and work closely with mid-level actors. The specifics of the middle tier differ from country to country, system to system, and even within systems throughout a country. This study therefore treats the mid-level not as a single governance level, but as a complex adaptive ecosystem (Marion 1999) in which the various functions, offices, and actors influence each other.

Barbara Tournier and her colleagues (Tournier et al. 2025) recently identified seven core functions of the middle tier: leading teaching and learning, managing financial and material resources, managing human resources, ensuring accountability and support, collecting and utilizing data, engaging the wider education community, and promoting equity and inclusion.

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Study methods and data

This study collected qualitative data in eight locations in four LMICs. For regional variety, we selected El Salvador, the Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, and Nepal. All four were country cases for our 2021-23 central-level study, and we intentionally chose countries whose education systems underwent some kind of decentralization. In each country, we conducted four rounds of 30- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews: two rounds in the capital city and two rounds in a purposefully chosen rural region. In each country, we interviewed government officials at the middle and central levels, as well as community or private-sector representatives, technical experts, and funder and NGO personnel. Respondents participated mostly in different rounds, but a few participated in both. We also conducted a handful of interviews with international researchers who study middle-tier education governance in LMICs. In total, we interviewed 90 individuals selected through a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling and distributed roughly equally among all eight locations (with fewer in El Salvador). All participants provided informed consent, and the study design went through independent ethical review.

In each country, we hired one or two education researchers with significant knowledge of the country's education governance system. These in-country consultants were authentic partners who collaborated with the ROSIE team throughout the research. They contributed to the work of identifying interviewees, refining interview protocols, and contextualizing and developing the analysis. They also conducted most of the interviews and joined in the work of reviewing global and country-specific literature.

Throughout this brief, we have included quotes from interview respondents. Quotes from transcripts were typically translated into English and were sometimes edited for clarity and flow. To encourage candidness, we assured respondents that quotes would be unattributed, and no names or specific positions would be included in this report.

The following graphics provide an overview of the four country cases and their respective education systems, highlighting the position of the middle tier in each context.

FIGURE 1

Country Cases At-a-Glance

	EL SALVADOR	KYRGYZ REPUBLIC	MALAWI	NEPAL
POPULATION	6.02M[1]	7.28M[8]	21.1M[15]	29.7M[22]
GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE ON EDUCATION (% OF TOTAL SPENDING)	10.6%[2]	23.5%[9]	16%[16]	10.9%[23]
COMPLETION RATE — PRIMARY SCHOOL	91.4%[3]	99.4%[10]	45%[17]	86.1%[24]
COMPLETION RATE — SECONDARY SCHOOL	61.4%[4]	86.2%[11]	23.3%[18]	35.9%[25]
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO — PRIMARY SCHOOL	27:1[5]	25:1[12]	62:1[19]	20:1[26]
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO — SECONDARY SCHOOL	28:1[6]	11:1[13]	34:1[20]	28:1[27]
LITERACY RATE	90%[7]	98.2%[14]	68%[21]	77.4%[28]

NOTE: All data is from the most recent available year. See "At-a-Glance" section in references for citations.

Education System Structure: El Salvador

El Salvador is a presidential republic with a unitary government and one tier of decentralization: the department level. Departments were established in 1995 as part of the Ten-Year Plan 1995-2005 (Elvir et al. 2017). They sit below the central Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MINED) and above the schools. Each department has a Directorate of Education that includes pedagogical managers; territorial pedagogical managers; and culture, arts, and sports managers.

Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MINED)

Middle-Tier

Departmental Directorates of Education

Schools
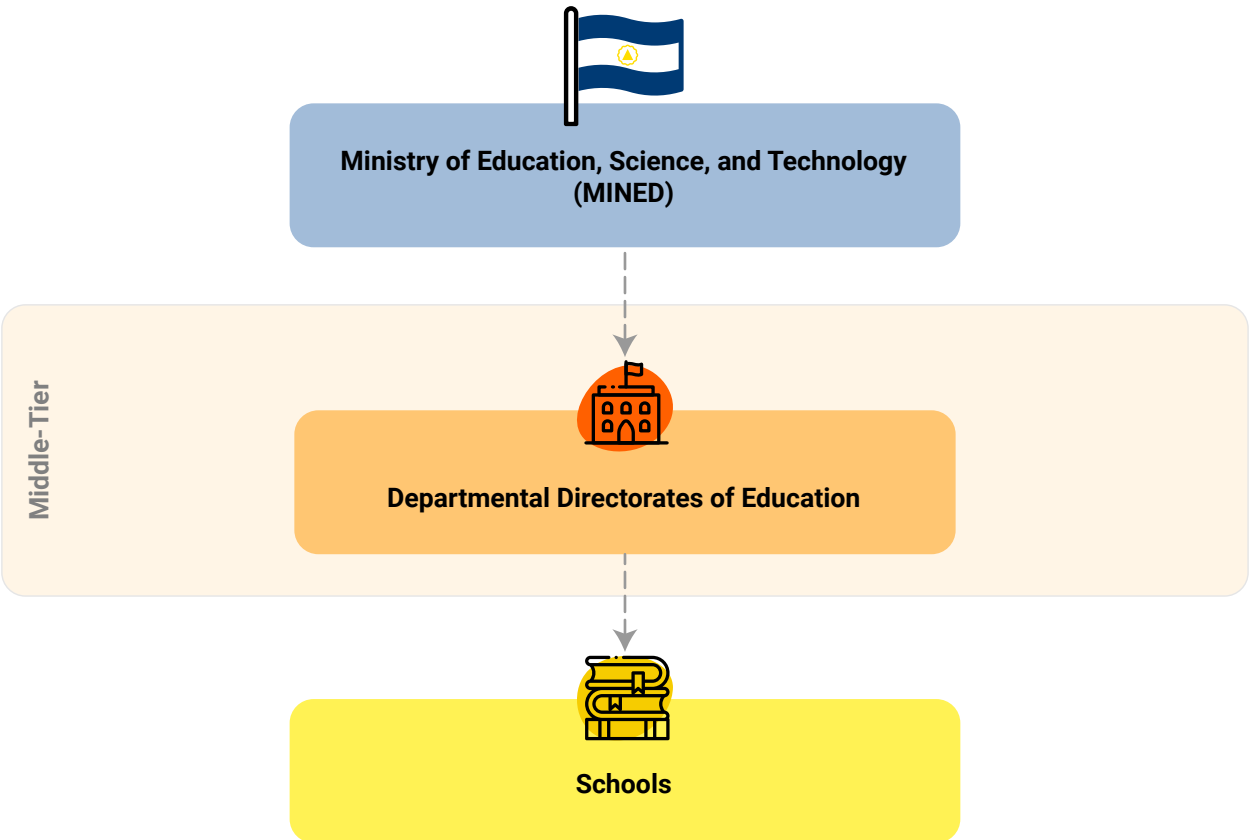
Education System Structure: Kyrgyz Republic

The Kyrgyz Republic is a presidential republic with a unitary government and three levels of local government: (1) regions and cities with special status, (2) districts, and (3) cities, local communities, and townships. Each district has a District Education Department (DED), which represents the Ministry of Education but is also subordinate to the district administration. Additionally, Bishkek has its own City Education Department (CED), which reports to both the Ministry of Education and the City Mayor's Office.

Ministry of Education and Science (MoES)

Middle-Tier

Regional Resource Centers
(and other middle level structures supporting teachers at the republican and regional level)

City Education Departments (CED)
(reports to both the MoES and the City Mayor's Office)

District Education Departments (DED)

Schools
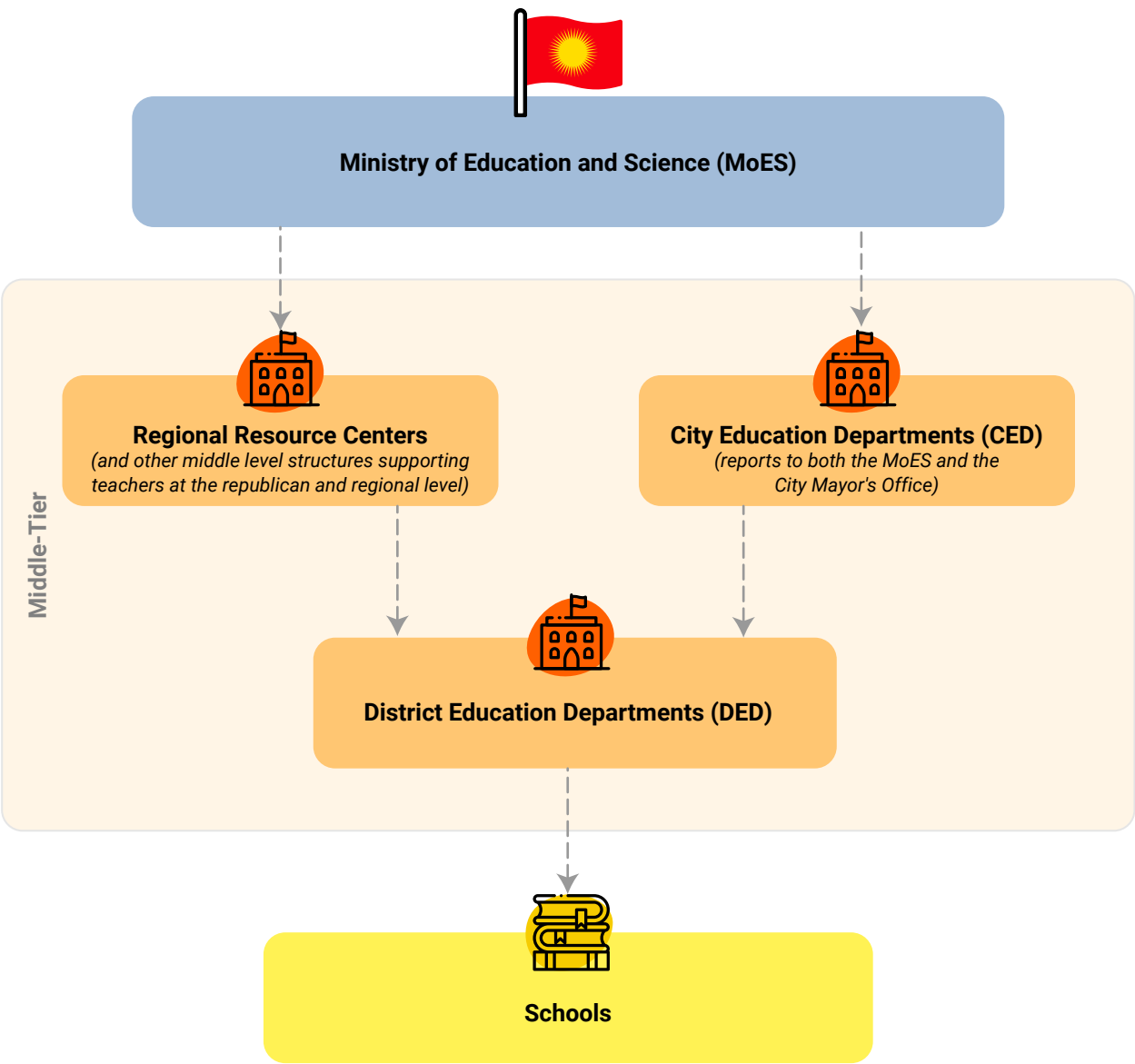
Education System Structure: Malawi

Malawi is a presidential republic with a unitary government and a single tier of decentralized governance. The Local Government Authority Act (LGA) introduced decentralization in 1998 (Local Government Act 2017). For primary and basic education, authority was devolved to District Councils, with a Director of Education, Youth, and Sports leading education work. In 2024, the revised national decentralization policy devolved authority to manage secondary education from the central level division office to education District Offices (Government of Malawi 2024).

Ministry of Local Government Central Office (MLGRD)

Ministry of Education Central Office (MoE)

Middle-Tier

District Council or City Council
(Director of Education, Youth, and Sports reports to both MoE and MLGRD)

Education Division Office
(reports directly to MoE)

Schools
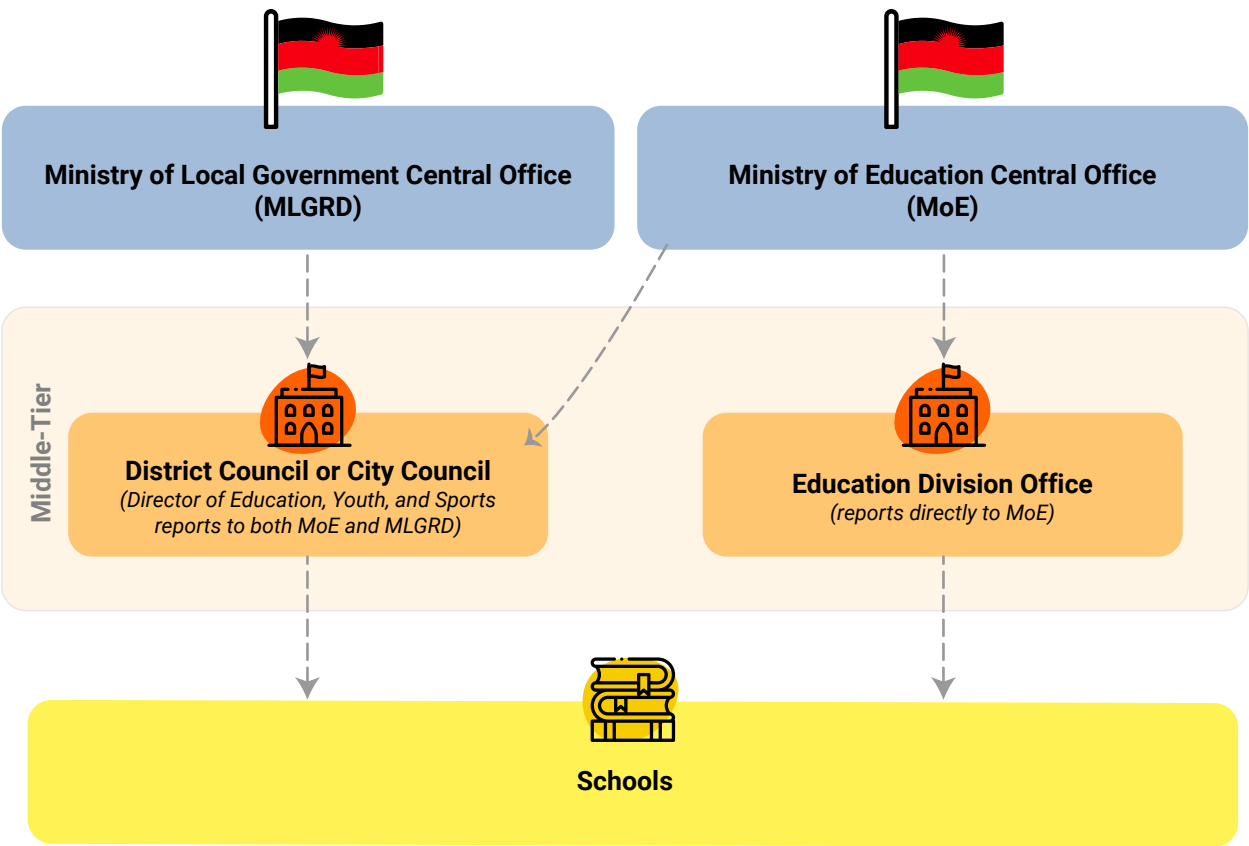
Education System Structure: Nepal

Nepal adopted a federal democratic republic structure in 2015 under its new constitution (Constitution of Nepal 2017) with three levels of government: federal, provincial, and local. Under the Constitution and the 2017 Local Governance Operations Act (Local Governance Act 2017), education was decentralized, with authority of basic and secondary education primarily devolved to the local level. Each municipality or rural municipality has an authority body that includes a municipal education department.

Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST)

Middle-Tier

Provincial Ministry of Education
(or Ministry of Social Development in certain provinces)

Education Development and Coordination Unit
(technical arm of MoEST at District Level)

**Municipal Authority Body**

Schools
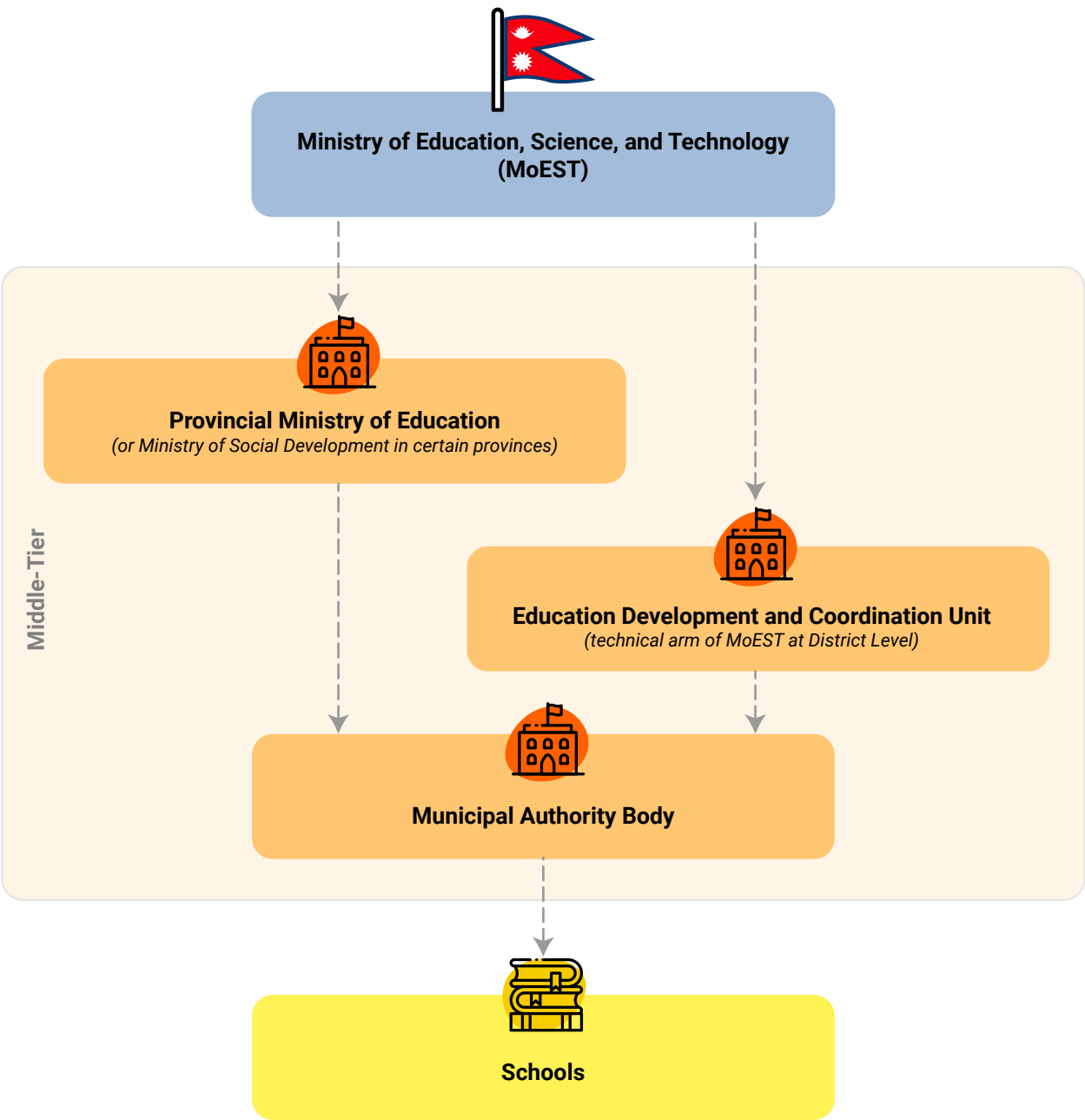
Cross-case findings, analysis, and recommendations

We found that mid-level offices and actors are mostly uninvolved in policymaking, developing innovations, contributing to central-level design or contextualization of innovations, or leading scaling or implementation work. While these are not the only, or even primary, roles of the middle tier, it is our belief that such a situation neglects the powerful contributions the middle tier can provide. Its knowledge of local needs and contextual details, its proximity to schools and teachers, its inherent commitment to its jurisdiction, and its 'in-between' positioning point to promising, untapped potential. **Our central takeaway from this study is that finding ways to restructure, strengthen, and make improved use of the middle tier's assets in service of scaling impact should yield exponential gains for countries wishing to transform their education systems for improved functionality and better learning/life outcomes.** To organize our analysis, we identified four broad dimensions whose contents intertwine to both influence and constitute the work of the mid-level in each country. Within these four dimensions, we discuss themes and offer recommendations.

FIGURE 2.

Dimensions that influence the work of the mid-level
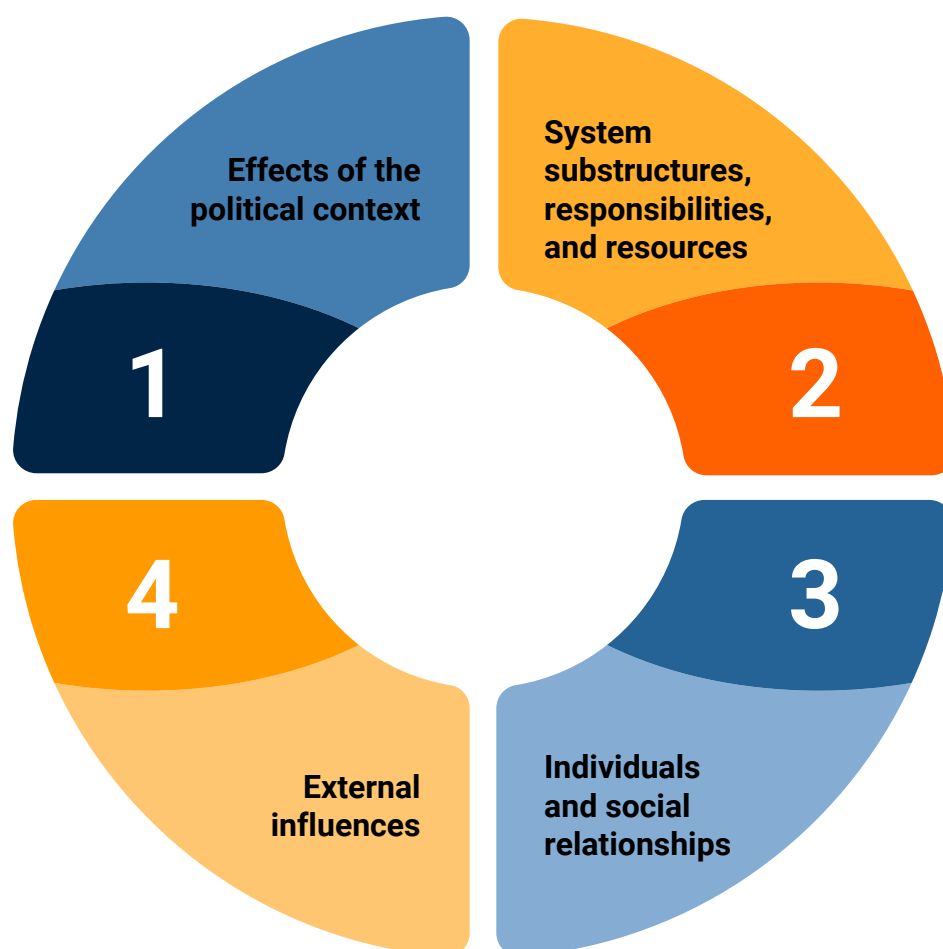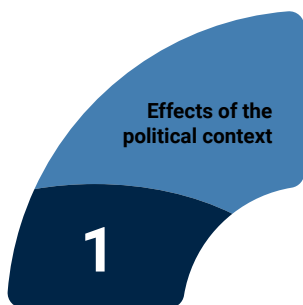
DIMENSION ONE: EFFECTS OF THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Improving education in a country always depends on its political landscape (Hickey and Hossain 2019). We begin by considering the middle level in relation to each country's history of decentralization. Decentralization is a formal way for countries to involve communities and subnational personnel in education, increase democratic participation, shift accountability closer to schools, and increase a system's local responsiveness. All four countries we studied decentralized their education governance systems at some point in the modern era but did so in different ways and for different reasons. El Salvador and the Kyrgyz Republic have since recentralized.

Incomplete decentralization affects the contributions of the middle tier

We found that decentralization was not fully occurring in practice in any of the four countries. Reasons for this include political desires to preserve centralized power, scarcity of resources, and central-level difficulty finding the requisite patience and trust needed to turn over increased autonomy to local regions.[1] In all countries, the central level retains three significant powers: allocating funding, hiring and firing teachers, and setting education policy. In the Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, and Nepal, there is currently legal and administrative freedom, or *de jure* autonomy, for the mid-level to consider, develop, and pilot its own education innovations, but this authority is usually not considered or leveraged. El Salvador does not have *de jure* mid-level autonomy. As a result, we saw little evidence of the middle level identifying, adopting, adapting, and scaling innovations on their own or contributing to the central level's work of designing or contextualizing innovations.[2]

Nepal devolved education control to all 753 municipalities/rural municipalities in 2015, but not fully, either on paper or in practice. There has yet to be a national education act (Republica 2025) and many at the federal level signal that they are unconvinced that decentralization is a good idea. As a result, decentralization—and the authority of the mid-level—is considered by many to be in limbo. Even for small-scale local initiatives or community-driven educational improvements, the local level often must go through complex federal approval processes that can delay projects and impose inappropriate standardization. Respondents highlighted that this excessive bureaucratic difficulty discourages the municipal level from undertaking innovation.

Further, as the move to decentralization is only a decade old, we found that municipal education administrators have not always developed the comfort, confidence, capacity, and belief in their own agency needed to enact the authority they have been given. For this, each side holds the other responsible. Municipal-level respondents reported the persistence of a pre-federalism mindset at the federal level and belief that the federal level still views the local level as a subordinate implementing body rather than as innovation partners. For their part, most national-level respondents (ministry officials as well as non-state technical experts and donor representatives) reported that municipal education officials were unwilling or unable to lead or think innovatively and diplomatically stated that the "decentralization experiment" was not working.

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1   It may also be that governments, especially in small or disorganized countries, correctly believe that centralization is the most efficient governance system. We do not wish to discount that possibility.
2   Given that we only collected data in two or three regions of each country, we were not able to capture much regional variation or pockets of local resilience. Our findings should therefore not be taken to characterize every location in each of the four countries.

Malawi decentralized governance of basic/primary education in 1998 (Malawi Decentralization Policy 1998), but secondary education was not decentralized until 2024 (Government of Malawi 2024). Although on paper local districts and divisions govern education, in practice the education system remains top-down with strict reporting lines. In terms of education priorities, policymaking, and allocating resources, there appears to be little decision-making at the middle level aside from selecting schools and areas for infrastructural support or a new externally initiated program. Because governance for secondary education was decentralized so recently, it is too soon to determine if local education divisions are engaged in autonomous education governance or decision-making for new innovations.

Many respondents reported that the slow pace of the central level in responding to local requests and concerns complicates the middle level's ability to carry out its work. For example, one mid-level official shared how this undercuts their responsibility to support and motivate teachers:

> Data is collected monthly, termly—and we report it to the central authorities. But some challenges are not taken [up] in a timely manner. [For example,] if it is an issue of teacher discipline, and other teachers or community members see the teacher still employed at the school with no penalty, still enjoying all benefits. This demotivates others and makes us look like we are not enforcing teacher discipline.

In interviews, decentralization was described as fully functioning for the basic/primary level and expected to function well at the secondary level. However, this framing of decentralized decision-making was limited to small, bounded decisions (such as which school receives infrastructure improvements), rather than policymaking or initiating new comprehensive programs. This seems to explain why some respondents, when discussing autonomy for smaller decisions, reported that decentralization works, while others, talking about larger, more systematic changes to schools, reported dissatisfaction with the current state of decentralization. Decisions about innovations or piloting are generally not seen as a priority for mid-level actors in the face of pressing challenges like teacher shortages, too few schools and classrooms, effects of climate disasters, and uneven student attendance. Other than modest, low-cost organizational changes (which carry promise, as we discuss later), it seems that Malawi's challenge-heavy reality pushes mid-level thinking about new education programs or innovative practices to the margins in favor of status-quo education maintenance and infrastructural needs.

The Kyrgyz Republic gained independence in 1991 and slowly but consistently decentralized its public sectors, including education, over 15 years. But starting around 2013, a process of recentralization began, and after COVID-19 pandemic challenges and a change of presidential power in 2020, a new constitution enshrined the Kyrgyz Republic as a super presidential system (Kyrgyz Republic 2021). Education and other sectors are now returning to rigid vertical governance. This has severely limited the autonomy and motivation for mid-level education specialists to use their expertise and local knowledge to improve education.

Most education innovations come from the Ministry of Education, typically in partnership with external donors and frequently with the public support of the president. We were told that innovative thinking is discouraged at the middle level in favor of monitoring, reporting, and respecting the hierarchy. As one respondent told us, "Taking initiative is punishable." Another said the following of middle-level education personnel:

> [They] have absolutely no opportunity or time for creativity [or innovative thinking]. They are subordinate to the management of the District Education Department which, in turn, is subordinate to the regional or provincial structures. Those, in turn, are subordinate to the level above. The [whole structure] is step-by-step subordination.

As a result, there now exists a cycle of de-professionalization in which, as the existing expertise of middle-level specialists is neglected, the incentive for them to think and act like agentive experts (as well as for incoming personnel to have education expertise) decreases. This reinforces the perception that middle-level expertise cannot be counted on which, in turn, strengthens the argument for decreasing autonomy of the middle-tier. We found a similar vicious circle with mid-level capacity and agency in Nepal. On the whole, mid-level respondents in the Kyrgyz Republic (many of whom had been in their roles for decades) appreciated the decentralization of the previous decades and regretted that current recentralization neglects their experience, expertise, and local knowledge.

El Salvador's decentralized education governance began in the 1980s when regional and subregional offices were created, and advanced in 1991 at the end of the Civil War with the beginning of the *Educación con Participación de la Comunidad* (EDUCO) program. EDUCO turned school management over to localities in the form of 263 parent associations that received funds directly from the ministry to hire teachers and purchase materials (Edwards 2020). The program grew rapidly over the next decade, eventually involving more than 2,000 associations, 7,000 teachers, and 362,000 students (Meza, Guzmán, and De Varela 2004). Rather than replacing centralized education governance with decentralization, however, the country adopted parallel systems: the community-based system for EDUCO schools (often in rural areas) alongside the existing centralization for the remaining schools. The middle-tier acquired its current structure in 1996, when the Ministry of Education created departmental offices to decentralize administration of school facilities. However, major curriculum and policy decisions remained centralized, with the middle tier acting as implementing agent only. EDUCO ended in 2003, and local decentralization ended with it. Recently, the president consolidated power into a highly centralized education system with a hierarchical structure (Bärlocher and Ueberhall 2019). Mid-level respondents reported that they do not expect to engage in decision-making around choosing or designing education innovations or scaling strategies, as that is not what their the work entails.

In all four countries, despite the promises of decentralization past or present, the central level views the middle level as more of an implementing body and reporting arm than as decision-makers or consultants for identifying, contextualizing, and scaling innovations.

Some respondents stated that the top-down structure is effective, while others reported that it may be satisfactory, but its communication lines are not always clear or responsive. One central-level official shared that the top-down structure misses the opportunity for each system level to offer its own unique contributions to new initiatives as would occur with a more collaborative process:

> We've been working to overcome this phase in which the central level designs [a program] and the departmental directorate operationalizes [it]. Because in management models each level always has its own strategic role to provide. We [want] to go even further—to consider ways to meet with representatives who will be involved in the eventual use of the policy that will be designed, or in the [implementation] strategy. The [middle level is] the first level of the educational work. [What's needed is a] consultative process that includes contributions enriched by knowledge of the actual contexts where the policies, projects, or programs will be implemented.

In all four countries, despite the promises of decentralization past or present (Asim et al. 2025), the central level views the middle level as more of an implementing body and reporting arm than as decision-makers or consultants for identifying, contextualizing, and scaling innovations. Although the smaller sizes of El Salvador and the Kyrgyz Republic (6 million and 7 million people, respectively) might in part justify a centralized education system, we believe that the constraining mid-level structures and expectations of centralized systems may preclude the kind of cooperative partnership for which many middle-tier researchers advocate (e.g., Stern et al. 2021).

There were also exceptions to this finding. Inexpensive innovations, such as creating new organizational structures for parents or teachers and implementing academic competitions, were not uncommon in the Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, and Nepal. In Nepal, for example, some rural municipalities developed and classified local-language curricula as an academic subject (MyRepublica/Nagarik 2023). In the Kyrgyz Republic, a central-level "Government Accelerator" program enabled Bishkek City to expand preschool access by training and certifying individuals to open small, home-based kindergartens (Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic 2024). And in Malawi, mid-level actors in Lilongwe organized groups of mothers to visit schools and talk to girls about staying in school and avoiding teen pregnancy (UNFPA Malawi 2016). These offer an important potential starting point for use in building out the middle tier's autonomy and capacity to contextualize and scale innovations for local needs. They also remind us that large, expensive programs aren't the only promising education innovations; well-implemented simple curricular adjustments or organizational changes can also make a difference.

Thinking larger, however, the traditional tripartite (central, middle, local) and vertical structure of education systems might be considered an outdated, stratified bureaucratic paradigm (Sager and Rosser 2021) that should be replaced by overlapping social networks (Daly and Finnigan 2016), pluralist third spaces (Fuller 2022), or education leadership clusters (Global Education Cluster 2024). Because the traditional education governance structure originated over a century ago, was designed to differentiate and preserve power, and is a colonialist imposition on LMICs, true transformation may require governments to reimagine and restructure their education systems to foster national consultation systems and increase mid-level decision-making authority (Olsen et al. 2024, Spindelman and Crouch 2025).

Recommendations

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Help external education innovators understand the government's policy agenda related to education and align their innovations with existing policy priorities.

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS:

- Include middle-level officials in nation-level deliberations about prospective programs and innovations. This not only makes use of their knowledge and perspectives but also strengthens middle-tier capacity for and commitment to innovation. For example, experiment with a one-year pilot program engaging mid-level representatives from two regions or districts in ministry-working groups focused on innovation and reform.
- Improve transparency around central-level decision-making and education policy development so the middle level better understands how policymaking operates.
- Decrease bureaucratic approval barriers to piloting promising education innovations to encourage innovation at the middle level.

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTI-LATERAL ORGANIZATIONS:

- Support CSOs, international development partners, activists, national associations, and others tasked with assisting government to refine and improve decentralization in education, such as through the provision of technical assistance, convening platforms, and advocacy support.
- Invest in research and diagnostic studies on how decentralization is working in practice and to identify systemic, institutional, financial, political, and cultural barriers to mid-level engagement in innovation and scaling.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Conduct thorough landscape analysis and stakeholder mapping to understand how decision-making authority is exercised in practice to inform strategic stakeholder engagement efforts vis-à-vis innovation scaling decisions.

DIMENSION TWO: SYSTEM SUB-STRUCTURES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND RESOURCES

The structures, responsibilities, and available resources of the middle tier have considerable influence over what work is enabled or precluded, encouraged or discouraged (de Kock et al. 2025). This does not mean actors cannot interpret their roles differently or push against structures with which they disagree. Respondents sometimes denounced aspects of their work, called for increased autonomy (especially in the Kyrgyz Republic and Nepal), and articulated things they wished they could do but did not believe they could. But we saw no evidence of them not carrying out their work. The following three sub-sections detail how system structures, responsibilities, and resources shape the middle tier's ability to engage in innovation and scaling.

FIGURE 3.

Middle tier roles across cases

	El Salvador	Kyrgyz Republic	Malawi	Nepal
Policy	Departments oversee program and project implementation (determined by MINED).	District and City Education Departments (DEDs and CEDs) receive directives and implementation responsibilities for national initiatives from the MoES.	Local Government Authority (LGA) is responsible for implementing national policies, programs, and regulations determined by MoE.	Municipal level has authority to formulate, implement, monitor, evaluate, and regulate policies and plans, but constitution states these cannot contradict federal laws and policies.
Finances	MoF disburses funds to department offices, who manage payroll for school personnel, pedagogical managers, and small disbursements for schools.	MoES funds teacher salaries and educational expenses. Funds are disbursed through MoES, DEDs, and CEDs.	MoF disburses funds to District Councils and Division Offices, who allocate it to various sectors (including education) according to annual budgets.	MoEST allocates funds to municipalities and offers conditional grants. Municipalities can raise additional funds, but these are usually small amounts.
Admin	Departments oversee school administration and pedagogy, visit/inspect schools, and address individual school issues that principals cannot.	DEDs and CEDs manage education processes, inspect and monitor schools, and administrate Olympiads.	District Councils oversee primary school operations and visit/inspect schools. Education Division Offices do the same for secondary schools.	Municipalities and rural municipalities are responsible for daily implementation of education, monitoring and reporting on performance, and managing school infrastructure needs.

	El Salvador	Kyrgyz Republic	Malawi	Nepal
Teachers	Central office Teaching Career Tribunal hires teachers. Departments provide teacher training and instructional support to schools, including coaching and mentorship.	Schools hire teachers. DEDs and CEDs hire principals and deputy principals and provide teacher training and instructional support.	MoE retains power to hire, fire, and transfer teachers, though LGA recommends teacher transfers to the central level. LGA supports teacher quality and communicates performance issues to central level.	MoEST retains power to hire, fire, and transfer teachers throughout all provinces. Municipalities and rural municipalities provide teacher training on new programs and adjudicate school complaints about teachers.
Data	Departments collect, compile, and submit school quality and progress reports to central level.	DEDs and CEDs collect, compile, and submit information to MoES regularly and upon request.	LGA collects, compiles, and inputs data at district and zonal levels via District and Zonal Education Management Information Systems .	Municipalities and rural municipalities collect data from schools through EMIS and send to federal level. Some municipalities also collect own education data.

Process demands often overtake education innovation concerns

Although intricacies of each country's middle level differ, common roles and responsibilities appeared across all four. When it comes to scaling, for example, the middle tier typically oversees or implements initiatives handed down from the central level, monitors progress, and leads or supports program-specific teacher training. **One thing that stands out across roles and countries is that, intentionally or not, process issues and administrative tasks dominate, leaving little time, capacity, or scope to focus on identifying, adapting, contextualizing, or scaling innovations.** This is confirmed by the broader literature, which points to overwork, understaffing, and an emphasis on accountability and hierarchy over autonomy at the middle tier (Fullan 2015; Tournier et al. 2025).

In **Nepal**, municipalities and rural municipalities are primarily responsible for daily school operations, reporting, exam oversight, and infrastructure management. Especially in the two rural locations where we collected data, responsibilities for education innovation or teacher development take a backseat to building schools and roads. The municipal authority technically has decision-making power and a mandate to innovate, but it appears disinclined to develop or find promising innovations to improve education or provide instructional support. Instead, in municipalities with little local revenue, respondents reported a tendency to spend available money on building schools, classrooms, and roads, and adjudicating teacher complaints in schools.

In the **Kyrgyz Republic**, mid-level respondents reported that the central level overloads them with administrative and compliance-oriented duties (e.g., frequent requests for information) that leave little space or time for innovative thinking, pedagogical support, and quality assurance work. Other than standardized test scores and Olympiads, there is little focus at the middle level on what is being taught and learned in classrooms. Instead, mid-level personnel mostly process central requests, document their work, coordinate new policy or program implementation, and visit schools to support teachers when they can.

In **Malawi**, the mid-level mostly responds to community and school-level concerns, oversees education infrastructure work such as building new classroom blocks or repairing damaged schools, inspects schools and submits data upward, and provides coordination and support for donors and NGOs who arrive to implement their own programs (as discussed later). Decisions at this level seem to center on allocating funds for infrastructure projects, personnel for teacher training, and relocating students and families during climate emergencies.

In **El Salvador**, the middle tier is focused on departmental administration and education management. Departmental Directors conduct broad oversight, oversee administration, and approve expenditures, while Departmental Managers monitor and support schools and follow up with teachers on program implementation. A primary challenge reported was overwork, particularly due, we were told, to a 2025 restructuring which retired or dismissed about 20% of the regional managers (see La Prensa Gráfica 2025). Those who remain have increased responsibilities and larger territories, so despite a pedagogical mandate, administrative tasks take precedence over supporting teachers. Developing, contextualizing, or consulting on education innovations is not currently among their responsibilities.

While not unimportant, the emphasis on vertical reporting, compliance assurance, and overseeing program delivery across all cases precludes the middle tier from focusing on innovation or pedagogical aspects of instruction, like robust teacher development or helping teachers make use of student learning data. Additionally, although instructional leadership at the middle tier is currently a popular topic in global literature (Chimier et al. 2023, Sharma 2024), we found no evidence for middle-tier officials receiving training in instructional leadership or teacher development. This reveals some untapped potential for the middle tier to engage more fully in instructional leadership and spend a greater portion of their time on pedagogical support within and across schools. If a country wishes to better utilize its middle tier for pedagogical improvement in classrooms (as many advocates propose), it would be advantageous to build autonomy-oriented, learning outcome-focused pedagogical leadership goals into the middle-tier structure.

One thing that stands out across roles and countries is that, intentionally or not, process issues and administrative tasks dominate, leaving little time, capacity, or scope to focus on identifying, adapting, contextualizing, or scaling innovations.

Recommendations

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Build trust with central levels by way of transparent reporting, collaboration, and sharing local education challenges and assets whenever possible.

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS:

- Expand and emphasize the role of mid-level actors as innovation interlocutors; supporting teachers and school heads to implement new policies and innovations; and regularly sharing back their challenges, feedback, and successes to inform adaptations. This can include revising job descriptions and evaluation frameworks to prioritize these roles.
- Offer professional development for mid-level officials to undertake more instructional leadership, especially in relation to implementation of pedagogical innovations. For example, the mid-level seems well-positioned to work with teachers to collect and use learning outcome and equity data in ways that can help teachers be less biased, more outcome-focused, and more cognizant of student inequalities.

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTI-LATERAL ORGANIZATIONS:

- Work with the central government and local NGOs to develop and offer tailored initial training and ongoing professional development to mid-level actors focused on innovation and scaling them for sustained impact.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Engage mid-level officials in innovation contextualization as co-owners of the implementation process—including through consultation processes, collaborative workshops, and multi-stakeholder discussions, and as co-creators of scaling goals and strategies. Bringing the middle tier into the process will take time and effort but can increase the odds of scaling success and sustained commitment.

Resource scarcity constrains experimentation

Across cases, we heard that resource constraints make it difficult for mid-level actors to carry out their core responsibilities, and that what resources are available are largely controlled by the central level. Consistent with prior research (Asim et al. 2023, Anand et al. 2023), we found that mid-level personnel—from directors to managers to inspectors—lamented the effects of insufficient resources for education in general and for their own offices, especially in Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the world (World Bank 2025). Across all countries, several respondents shared that low salaries, overwork and, in Nepal and Malawi, sometimes a relocation requirement disincentivize new people from seeking mid-level employment and decrease job satisfaction and motivation for current employees. Old vehicles and difficulties obtaining fuel in El Salvador and Malawi limit school visits and make inspections more challenging. Some respondents in El Salvador shared that regional and local offices need printers and updated technology, and that the digital tablets provided are insufficient for writing, submitting, and uploading the required reports. **Insufficient resources for the mid-level often mean that only "essential" duties are prioritized—relegating innovation, scaling, and instructional**

reform to the margins. Additionally, insufficient or inflexible funds discourage mid-level specialists from innovating because they know there is little money available to experiment with new approaches.

In **Nepal**, the federal government allocates funds to municipalities for paying teachers and offers conditional grants that specify where to spend money and in what amount. These federal conditional grants make up the vast majority of local education budgets but cannot be used flexibly, which means local governments can only experiment with innovations out of their own funds. Local governments can raise revenue, but most struggle to do so.

In **Malawi**, the central government disburses funds to divisions and districts, who then allocate funds to their various sectors, including education. We heard that these central disbursements often arrive late, if at all. As in Nepal, investments often centered on infrastructure projects. This reflects not only the scarcity of funds, but also the fact that building roads, schools, and classrooms offers immediate visible evidence of development. This makes for good retail politics, and reducing school overcrowding and travel time are often community demand-driven reforms. This points to a potential contribution of the mid-level in scaling: drawing on local knowledge and community needs to identify, develop, and pilot the right innovations.

In the **Kyrgyz Republic**, funding for teacher salaries and school-related expenses comes from the Ministry and District Education Departments, while facility maintenance and utility costs are the responsibility of cities, rural districts, and municipalities. The middle tier has no real financial autonomy or discretionary budget of its own and has no money available for developing or piloting innovations.

In **El Salvador**, interviewees reported that funds for mid-level and school staff, teacher salaries, and petty cash are allocated by the central level's Ministry of Finance and channeled through mid-level offices. The middle tier, we were told, has no financial autonomy other than auditing the use of funds by schools.

In all four countries, these rigid spending requirements and lack of local revenue carry implications for scaling. Middle-tier engagement in scaling education innovation seemed to be (1) de-prioritized in favor of core responsibilities and infrastructure investments, (2) focused on initiating low- or no-cost innovations only, or (3) limited to supporting externally funded innovations. In both Malawi and Nepal, we learned about low- or no-cost innovations being initiated at the middle-level, including structural and organizational changes, (e.g., quiz competitions or encouraging teachers at the cluster level to plan together). This is a reminder that innovation does not always require high cost.

Insufficient resources for the mid-level often mean that only "essential" duties are prioritized—relegating innovation, scaling, and instructional reform to the margins.

For educational improvement to be prioritized at the mid-level and piloting/scaling of promising new innovations to be undertaken, there must be an openness to experimentation, which is difficult without the resources to support it. Spending funds, personnel, or time on an innovation developed or identified by the middle level is essentially disincentivized because if it does not succeed, that money has been wasted. **There is, therefore, a link between innovation, appetite for risk, and the funds a location has.** Nepal offers a clear example.

BOX 3. APPETITE FOR RISK IN NEPAL

Despite their constitutional mandate, local governments in Nepal remain reliant on federal grants. This means that most local governments can experiment with innovations only through their limited internal revenue. The fewer the resources, the less a municipality can pilot innovations. One respondent told us that "local governments with few resources cannot afford mistakes."

In contrast, internal revenue for a populous urban municipality like Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) is high, which affords more opportunity to take risks with innovations. As a result, KMC is currently an education innovation leader in the country. One example is KMC's recent Book Free Friday initiative, which engages students in a wide range of hands-on activities, projects, and practical exercises like agriculture, carpentry, cosmetology, dance, sculpture, and debate (Ojha 2023). Discussing the experience implementing Book Free Friday, one education advisor explained that they "recognized it was a risk, and many people were initially scared of this approach." Despite facing criticism, the initiative was implemented at the behest of the popular KMC mayor, who guaranteed his staff support and political cover regardless of the outcomes.

Locations with more resources also can access more expertise, which is reportedly scarce in many municipalities in Nepal. In KMC, when the mayor decided to take a risk with Book Free Friday, he also hired additional staff, increasing the department's ability to implement this reform (and likely others eventually).

Resources were not the only factor in the success of introducing Book Free Friday. Also important was the role of a proactive, charismatic leader committed to education and willing to take risks. The current mayor of Kathmandu, Balendra Shah, is a 35-year-old poet, engineer, and celebrity rap musician whose campaign platform included education reform. He was the first independent candidate to be elected mayor of Kathmandu and is responsible for introducing Book Free Friday. Interviewees stressed his desire for change, responsiveness to the needs of families, focus on educational outcomes, and willingness to leave the logistical details to his education experts. The combination of KMC having revenue to spend on education experimentation and an innovation-minded mayor committed to education created the conditions for the middle level to initiate a culture of scaling innovation.

In two other locations in Nepal, we also found proactive leaders willing to take risks, in these cases despite low financial resources: the chairperson of Hupsekot and the mayor of Jaimini. All three leaders seem to believe that education innovations are not a risk, but a smart move which will yield long-term impact. These leaders' proactive nature, clear vision, and ability to mobilize limited resources enabled bold reforms despite structural constraints. This kind of political actor can act as a scaling champion and provide support and cover for piloting and scaling innovations.

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Prioritize low- or no-cost innovations, as they are often more easily launched and sustained after initial funding ends, and because the right ones can leverage significant systems impact.

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT:

- Targeted resource fixes like upgrading vehicles, streamlining fuel procurement, and offering newer technologies with related training and upkeep, though not cheap, will improve the mid-level's ability to conduct its work.
- Experiment with innovation funds and competitive grant programs targeted at mid-level actors to encourage initiative and ownership of innovation. For example, modest amounts of flexible funding could be made available for mid-level teams to locally pilot and test innovative education approaches.

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTILATERAL ORGANIZATIONS:

- Seek opportunities to provide flexible support to mid-level actors to identify, adapt, and adopt innovations that suit their location's context and priorities (e.g., small grants for regional or district-led innovation).
- Prioritize funding for innovations beyond the pilot phase, to support a transition to mid-level ownership and sustainability.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Prioritize low- or no-cost innovations as well as innovations that lighten rather than increase already demanding workloads for school- and mid-level actors.
- Given the power of visible results, work with mid-level officials to build short-term, promotable milestones into scaling workplans and regularly share successes.

Data use for decision-making at the mid-level is rare and not in demand

Despite the current popularity of data use for decision-making among international education development organizations and donors, in these four countries **data use at the mid-level was characterized by gaps, system incoherence, and unrealized potential.** We heard that mid-level officials' relationship to data is primarily about collecting information (or ensuring that educators input it), formatting it, and sending it up to the central level—not interacting with data themselves. This is not to say that data are never used at the mid-level, but they are not used by mid-level actors very often and are typically de-prioritized in decision-making in favor of experience, talking with constituents, or visiting or contacting schools directly. As a school principal in the Kyrgyz Republic told us, "I do not need any data because I [already] know everything about my school."

BOX 4. WHAT IS MEANT BY DATA?

In all four countries, "data" was understood to include quantitative data only: numbers and in a few cases descriptive statistics or inferential analysis. Systematic use of qualitative data was never mentioned. Cost data were never mentioned. Data referenced were typically numbers of schools, teachers, desks, or books; student enrollment, attendance, and dropout information; school rankings or student test scores aggregated by school or location; and, in some cases, personal information about students and families. As we have written elsewhere, there is value in broadening how "data" are defined (Olsen 2025).

Each country has an Education Management Information System (EMIS), into which mid-level officials enter data (except in El Salvador, where school heads input). These data systems were neither considered valuable by the mid-level nor used much in their work.

Some of this may be by design, since EMIS were initially developed by and for centralized governments for national policymaking, planning, and resource allocation. However, other reasons were raised as well. First, the data collected were considered unhelpful due to inaccuracies, missingness, and lack of useful disaggregation. Second, participants reported little capacity for and training in use of EMIS data. Third, it was reported that the central level took too long (often a year or two) to receive, process, and return the analyzed data for it to be useful. Fourth, data collection was largely seen by the middle tier not as a substantive activity to inform anyone's decision-making, but as a bureaucratic reporting function or performative act of central control. Fifth, in the Kyrgyz Republic we were told that institutional overlaps and data center gaps at times confused mid-level officials. And finally, mid-level actors told us that they did not possess the authority or autonomy to make the kinds of education decisions for which these data would be useful, like proposing new innovations, adapting an innovation for specific teacher needs, or moving implementation to a higher-priority school or site.

We found that, at least in the eyes of the mid-level respondents interviewed, the primary uses of data and EMIS in their countries are record-keeping, ensuring system compliance, and demonstrating that the central government is paying attention. Even outside of EMIS use, our interviews revealed limited data use by middle-tier officials. When they did use data for decision-making, mid-level officials shared that it was rarely from the EMIS. Instead, some reported keeping their own data in Excel, Google Sheets, or on paper, and phoning schools when they needed more information. Others reported that they did not need systematic data to conduct their work because their first-hand knowledge was sufficient.

Many mid-level actors do collect, use, and maintain important information about the schools in their jurisdiction, just not always the way external data-use groups conceive of data and data use.

Paradoxically, many respondents told us both that the data they have are insufficient, *and* that there are no other data they would like to have. For us, this paradox can likely be solved by pointing to the history of not using data (in the systematic, modern sense) for decision-making in these countries. In other words, if educationalists do not have a culture of data use in their daily work, they are unlikely to desire additional or different data. Interviewees in all four countries shared that they do not perceive a cultural history in their location of using data for decision-making or using data dashboards, so there are low capacity and motivation for engaging in the data work that formal systems theoretically make possible.

We did, however, talk with various NGO representatives conducting education work at the middle levels who reported using the EMIS or their own collected data regularly. One of the NGOs interviewed even works with the central government to strengthen its EMIS system. Given this divided perception around EMIS usefulness, we hope that NGOs who work on data systems are aware of the on-the-ground gaps in data accuracy, timeliness, and the low data demand among mid-level actors. This appears to be an area of opportunity for greater engagement of mid-level actors; perhaps NGOs can incorporate the mid-level actors' own expertise, first-hand knowledge of locations, and specific data needs into accessible data systems for use.

Despite the frequent international refrain to increase data collection and use in LMICs, our findings suggest that the middle tier should not be overburdened with data collection and compiling responsibilities unless a clear, valuable need exists and the available data help inform their work (e.g., for instructional support, evaluating student learning, tracking equity, and monitoring scaling progress). Further, we learned **many mid-level actors do collect, use, and maintain important information about the schools in their jurisdiction, just not always the way external data-use groups conceive of data and data use.** There are lessons from this, including the global community expanding what constitutes useful data, and incorporating into data-use systems the context-specific, accumulated practitioner knowledge already possessed by mid-level actors.

Recommendations

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Be amenable to supportive, respectful efforts to increase data-use capacity and integrate systemic data into regular decision-making.

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS:

- Simplify data collection requirements for mid-level actors and prioritize the use of timely and disaggregated data collection on learning outcomes and equity issues.
- Leverage the mid-level's first-hand knowledge and expertise to gather actionable feedback on the EMIS's reliability and utility and identify areas for improvement.
- Streamline and increase overall coherence and coordination among a country's many data centers, sources, and uses at all system levels.
- Include cognitive measurements of student learning outcomes that are simple, easily usable, and psychometrically valid—and bring these data to local levels (for example, see RTI International 2023).

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS:

- Invest in training and strengthening data-use capacity for decision-making at all education system levels, and support local efforts to foster a strong data culture.
- Expand the understanding of what data are useful for education decision-making, including qualitative, participatory, and innovative research designs that value stories, participant perspectives, and indigenous ways of knowing.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Consider what knowledge mid-level actors may have about local schools that are not captured in the EMIS and how it could support existing efforts—and then build strong, data-culture relationships with those actors.
- Support mid-level actors' data practices by way of respectfully deployed innovations and experiments around data use, knowledge, and behaviors. Integrating new data use into preexisting decision-making processes (rather than abrupt replacement) is likely the best approach.

3

DIMENSION THREE: INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

A system is never just a collection of interdependent substructures. It is a dynamic space in which humans—sometimes irrational, rife with competing interests, affected by ideology and social interactions—think and act. The professional histories, motivations, capacities, and collegial relationships of the individuals inhabiting mid-level positions influence their ability and motivation to engage with education innovations.

Insufficient training and professional development constrain mid-level actors' relationship to innovation

A common concern regarding the mid-level is the lack of targeted training programs, professional development, or mentoring, which contributes to decreased and disparate capacity among mid-level actors. Respondents in all four countries reported that there is no (or no recent) training for how to succeed in mid-level positions, and no regular professional development or peer exchange opportunities to grow in their roles.

Our collected data confirm that focused training for the different types of individuals who inhabit mid-level roles is a pressing need. In many cases, mid-level roles were filled by former teachers who received little or no training in the middle tier's unique work or the programs whose implementation they are responsible for supporting. We know that education governance and practice are not the same, so former teachers or school administrators would benefit from specialized training for their new roles. A panelist in a recent International Institute of Educational Planning webinar shared an illuminating insight from Pakistan: "One challenge with the middle level is that in our system mid-level roles are often filled by experienced educators, often with no training, and this creates two problems: schools lose a good teacher and the systems get a bad middle-manager" (UNESCO IIEP 2025).

In other cases, especially in Malawi and Nepal, we learned that many mid-level officials enter their roles from non-education work in sectors like agriculture or public health. The lack of specialized training can be problematic in these situations, since governance of other sectors differs from education governance in myriad ways. Even respondents who had been in their mid-level education positions for some time reported that professional development for the current era is long overdue, especially in the use of digital technologies and data analysis.

Mid-level actors need both a deep understanding of education in their locations and knowledge of education governance in order to introduce, contextualize, support, and scale innovations that address needs and opportunities in their jurisdictions.

This lack of training has implications for all aspects of mid-level work, including potential engagement with scaling. **Mid-level actors need both a deep understanding of education in their locations and knowledge of education governance in order to introduce, contextualize, support, and scale innovations that address needs and opportunities in their jurisdictions.** Without requisite experience or training, their effectiveness is dramatically reduced. Furthermore, locations interested in leveraging the middle tier for instructional leadership, as the global literature advocates, would benefit from targeted training on teacher development and new instructional innovations. Finally, the managerial function that has historically been stressed in many of these mid-level roles might impede innovative thinking, especially for long-serving officials. As one of our research consultants remarked, "These are people who've been in the system for years and it might be difficult for them to stand up and say, 'Let's come up with new innovations.'" As a result, professional development for officials around fostering experimentation, agency, and innovative thinking could be an important avenue for helping the middle tier take on innovation and school improvement work.

Recommendations

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Actively engage in opportunities to strengthen capacity and receive specialized training.
- Be willing to let go of some pre-existing professional beliefs in service of new learning

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS:

- Develop and provide robust initial training and ongoing professional development for mid-level education actors that take professional history and experience into account.
- Provide specific training and capacity strengthening opportunities for mid-level staff on the new programs for which they must support implementation.
- Develop competency frameworks for mid-level roles to help strengthen capacity and further professionalize them.
- Hire and retain only qualified and committed education officials.

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS:

- Support the piloting and establishment of university fields of study and targeted training programs in areas such as education governance, instructional leadership, and scaling education innovations for impact.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Look for opportunities to provide technical expertise to mid-level actors to support innovation and draw alternative perspectives and cutting-edge skillsets. Consider embedding or seconding a staff member in mid-level education agencies when scaling a particular innovation to provide technical expertise and deepen understanding of how to integrate the innovation into the system.

In-country peer-exchange is rare, which limits innovation-sharing and collaborative learning

Learning and systems transformation are social activities that cannot succeed in isolation (Knapp 2008). Education governance is no exception: **if the goal is to expand the impact of effective practices and innovations in a system, then mid-level personnel must have authentic opportunities to learn from each other.** However, respondents reported that little to no peer learning takes place among mid-level actors, especially those working in different geographies within a country. It is an area in which we believe strategic offerings will yield sizable returns.

Respondents in **Nepal** reported little knowledge-sharing across municipalities, except for incidental visits with colleagues in other localities. Although a regional governance structure exists, it does not engage or coordinate any knowledge-sharing across municipalities. Instead, innovations developed at the middle level are implemented in silos. Respondents believe this is largely due to the historical absence of a sharing culture in the country, noting this was persistent long before decentralization. For example, both Hupsekot and Jaimini are rural municipalities in the Gandaki province with proactive education leaders, but our interviews revealed that neither leadership team knew what innovations recently occurred in the other location. To promote a culture of sharing and publicize its Book Free Friday, Kathmandu Municipal City (KMC) posted the curriculum on its website, though this seems to be an exception to common practice.

We found other factors, too, that contribute to the lack of peer exchange at the middle level in Nepal. First was a reported sense of rivalry that discourages collaboration. Some mayors, we were told, refuse to adopt successful models from neighboring municipalities simply because they were pioneered by political opponents or leaders of other local units. One interviewee said that some elected representatives do not want to appear to be "copying initiatives" from other municipalities. Second, there are no funds for knowledge-sharing visits or peer-exchange meetings. Although the 2015 Constitution promotes cooperative federalism and collaboration among levels of government, and the Local Government Operation Act encourages coordination among municipalities (Democracy Resource Center Nepal 2020), we were told that an absence of funding precludes this from occurring.

In **Malawi**, we likewise heard very little about regional or cross-district knowledge-sharing, although the Malawi Secondary School Headteachers' Association (MASSHA), a recently developed network of secondary school principals, could prove promising if supported and used well. And we learned of technical working groups that include members from village, district, and national levels, but interviewees appeared not to use them or even know about them. We were consistently told that there are insufficient funds for education officials to tour other locations, and the country's move to devolve education to local governments means there is no provincial level to coordinate peer-exchange across districts and divisions. Some officials, however, told us that they do visit other districts on their own time to learn. For example, one official learned that another district has its own education offices and told us he wants to attempt that in his own location.

In both the **Kyrgyz Republic** and **El Salvador**, we were told that there is no history of knowledge-sharing across locations, and that current centralization discourages both this kind of distributed knowledge culture as well as the mid-level's ability to initiate any innovations they might learn about. However, in El Salvador, we learned of a valuable inter-generationality to the corps of department managers, in which some experienced pedagogical managers informally mentor newer ones. Although not an official structure, this illuminates an opportunity for peer learning that could be formalized. This mentoring could even be reciprocal, with newer education officers mentoring more veteran ones in new approaches, digital technologies, and the promise of innovative thinking.

We know that an innovation that works in one location does not necessarily work in another, even within the same country. And there are valid concerns about education transfer as a contemporary global practice (Steiner-Khamsi 2004). At the same time, there is little doubt that collectively learning about and discussing success stories and promising innovations improves education and brings attention to collegial support cultures as a priority. There is likely significant value in investing resources into establishing peer-exchange networks, even though it may require difficult cultural work in locations with no history of sharing.

Recommendations

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Identify or advocate for opportunities for formal or informal peer learning, knowledge exchange, and intergenerational mentoring both about the work of the mid-level in general and about promising innovations.
- Set up communities of practice around specific reforms under consideration to enable peer learning and support contextualization of the reform.

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS:

- Formalize and support intergenerational mentoring systems and peer-exchange networks among mid-level actors (e.g., annual forums, regular focused meetings, a standing agenda item for existing meetings, dedicated WhatsApp channels). Where possible, build on existing mechanisms for coordinating these networks.
- Task existing regional or provincial education offices, if they exist, to map and actively share innovations being piloted or scaled throughout the country.

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS:

- Support peer learning structures and opportunities among mid-level actors within countries, especially actors working to contextualize and implement similar innovations elsewhere.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Formally devote time and resources to connect with mid-level offices throughout a country in order to solicit their input, share collective experiences across geographies, and strengthen mid-level capacity along the way.

4

External
influences

DIMENSION FOUR: EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Countries are not hermetically sealed. They participate in scores of overlapping international and regional architectures, partnerships, discourses, and cultural exchanges. Although the impact of global influences is typically more observable at the central level in countries, we found influences on—and possibilities for—the middle tier to engage with international actors and neighboring countries on innovation and scaling.

Global donors and NGOs coordinate with mid-level actors but rarely solicit mid-level expertise for scaling innovations

The role of donors and NGOs is significant in all locations, but if and how they work with the mid-level varies by context. Interviewees in all four countries reported that mid-level actors were not part of decision-making around which external innovations to bring to a location or how to pilot or scale them. Instead, the mid-level is primarily responsible for coordinating implementation of external innovations in local communities and schools—and in the case of Malawi, choosing where the work will be implemented. Prioritizing scaling partnerships between funders/NGOs and mid-level actors should increase the ability to fit the right innovations to a location's contours, ensure location-sensitive piloting and implementation, strengthen local ownership for sustainable impact, and model for a country how to involve its middle tier.

In **Nepal**, the federal level has worked with international donors on education since the 1970s, but development support has lately decreased to about 10% of the country's education budget (Global Partnership for Education 2022). Beginning in 2019, Nepal's International Development Cooperation Policy (Ministry of Finance, Nepal 2019) has required that development partners work through the federal government (particularly the Ministry of Finance's foreign aid division) when working with local governments. This means that development partners cannot have a direct financing arrangement or memorandum of understanding with local governments or middle-tier offices. For local and international NGOs working in Nepal, we found some but not significant evidence of outreach or engagement with the middle level. This was reportedly due to (a) the lack of education prioritization in many municipalities in favor of infrastructure work and (b) the perception that working with NGOs remains the province of the central government. A development representative working in Nepal told us:

> Right now, who's doing what with regard to innovations is mainly mapped and gathered by the central government and development partners, which isn't ideal. Development partners come and go, and the central government isn't a neutral player. Local governments have to prove their independence—show that they can fulfill their mandates. So they can't always be open and vulnerable to the central government. Doing so risks them appearing incapable and losing autonomy.

When speaking about externally developed innovations, respondents in Nepal told us that the innovations brought by donors or NGOs do not always fit the context of their municipalities. Additionally, respondents reported that the mid-level has not been asked to co-implement projects, other than to provide some coordination and occasional teacher training. Finally, some respondents reported that the lack of mid-level participation in project implementation and the

inadequate attention given to handover/local ownership result in efforts not being sustained past their initial phase. **These perspectives suggest that the mid-level has an important, untapped role to play in infusing local knowledge and expertise into the work of contextualizing an externally developed innovation for piloting and scaling in a location.**

Another respondent suggested that one value development partners bring is for system strengthening at the local level:

> Our local governments are only in their second tenure. They are not always strong enough to come up with comprehensive innovations on their own. If you look at Kathmandu, which is an exception: the reason they have innovations is because they have experts and consultants guiding them. [In our rural areas,] we do not have anything of that sort. So, the first thing I believe development partners need to do is strengthen the local government system when it comes to new education initiatives.

In the **Kyrgyz Republic**, the education system has received significant support from international funders for decades (Ekonomist.kg 2021). Decisions about which external innovations to adopt and implement are made at the central level. For these initiatives, consultants associated with the funder or NGO are routinely brought in to assemble working groups of Kyrgyz educationalists (typically not from the mid-level), who contextualize the innovation for rollout across the country and develop implementation plans to be coordinated and carried out by in-country mid-level officials and civil society expert teams working together. The district education department receives an order for implementation that it must follow. We were told that—except in the cases of minor municipal initiatives—mid-level local knowledge, education expertise, or decision-making is not solicited during implementation. Similar to in Nepal, interview respondents talked about externally developed reforms not always fitting the needs of the country. And similar to all four countries, these efforts were often described as short-term projects not sustainable beyond their funding and centered more on donors' own agendas than on improving education in the country.

In **Malawi**, education is also heavily reliant on foreign donors and NGOs who bring external innovations for implementation (Walls 2025). Although there was some evidence that an external innovation often begins in a single location or set of schools before being expanded— in other words, some kind of piloting before scaling—the mid-level education personnel we interviewed report that they are not invited to contribute to any part of the scaling process (e.g., contextualizing, piloting, or refining the innovation or implementation plans).

Unlike in Nepal—and somewhat like in the Kyrgyz Republic—implementation efforts by external actors do involve coordination with the middle level for primary education. Donors and NGOs typically propose innovations to the central level, but once approved, they transfer funds directly to districts and local officials who coordinate implementation and monitoring. District-level personnel provide NGOs with support and determine which schools or villages will receive programs or infrastructure work. We learned of cases where NGO representatives were invited to join the District Education Management committee when education needs and plans are being discussed. As such, while they do not select external innovations, mid-level actors for primary education do play a role in coordinating implementation. This offers one example of how the

mid-level can be further engaged in the process of scaling innovation. For secondary education, however, we were told that mid-level officials used to engage directly with NGOs in their jurisdictions, but that role has been taken over by the central level's Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGOMA). As a result, this work is now controlled at the central level. As one division manager told us, "Now it's like we're just visitors to the process."

Some mid-level officers reported that they believe one of their responsibilities is to ensure NGOs and donors are satisfied and their work is well supported. This is both because the officers want NGOs and donors to continue working in their locations and because they want the efforts to succeed. This reminds us of the delicate balance required of mid-level officers to both be candid with external partners about the work's potential for sustainable impact and to ensure that these external groups will continue to work in the location, especially given the reality of resource constraints.

In **El Salvador**, innovations are selected at the central level and are often the result of partnerships between the central level and international donor organizations. Unlike the Kyrgyz Republic and Malawi, implementation plans for these innovations are also developed at the central level, often in partnership with external project developers and without mid-level input. If consultation or fact-finding with local communities is to be conducted, the central level undertakes this. The middle level's responsibility is to receive and learn the reform and support teachers in its implementation—and no one we interviewed had concerns about this division of responsibilities or wished for it to be otherwise. We were told that there was previously considerable local-level collaboration with NGOs around education innovations, but that ended in 2019.

For countries wishing to better leverage the middle tier, more fully including mid-level personnel in decision-making, scaling, and evaluation of education partnership projects can increase local ownership and commitment to the reform and give the implementation and scaling process the benefit of mid-level knowledge and support. Specifically, mid-level actors might be given more active roles in implementing, contextualizing, and determining the optimal scale of external innovations. Furthermore, as the contemporary funding community regroups and plans new directions in response to recent tectonic shifts in global education funding (including but not limited to the early-2025 Trump administration's decision to cease US government international development funding), it could prioritize the middle tier as a cost-efficient, high-promise improvement lever.

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Learn about the international NGOs and other external education groups working locally and become familiar with scaling impact as a field (For example, see Curtiss Wyss et al. 2023).
- Look for ways to reach out to or to receive external teams who wish to contribute to education in the area. Where possible, establish formal systems for working on their innovations.

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS:

- Empower mid-level actors to take a more active role in managing implementation of externally initiated innovations, including selecting locations, informing contextualization, monitoring progress, and determining optimal scale.

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS:

- Prioritize working with those external actors (NGOs, scaling teams, etc.) who have strong existing relationships with central and mid-level government actors and build into the grants support for the time-consuming work of maintaining these relationships.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Solicit the knowledge and local expertise of mid-level staff who can (a) inform the contextualization of external innovations to fit the local context, (b) align implementation to school calendars and contours, and (c) provide detailed information on previous reforms and innovations on which to build.

International learning and knowledge-sharing are underutilized

When asked whether they knew about promising education practices or innovations outside their own country, the majority of mid-level respondents said that they do not know what neighboring countries are doing apart from informal learning opportunities such as "I have a friend there" or "I studied in Bangladesh." In most cases, the reasons put forward for this were that there is no system or culture for cross-country sharing and—given how few opportunities the mid-level has to initiate innovations—no motivation to learn.

In **Malawi** and **Nepal**, we were told there is very little international or regional knowledge-sharing either in-person or through online networks. One interviewee in Malawi said, "we're only concerned with our own problems." In the **Kyrgyz Republic** and **El Salvador**, there is a practice of government education officials visiting and being visited by neighboring countries, but this is limited to central-level personnel. In the Kyrgyz Republic, we heard about occasional social-sector innovation forums for the central level to learn about reforms in neighboring countries. In neither country, however, did we find mid-level officials formally traveling outside the country or engaging in international peer-learning.

Bringing mid-level actors into global conversations and networks for education transformation offers significant value for both them and the broader global education community. At the same time, there is a cardinal need to respect and advocate for maintaining the uniqueness of countries and regions, and it is not the case that education transfer or homogeneity always constitutes the best approach. A balanced approach seems wisest.

Recommendations

FOR MID-LEVEL ACTORS:

- Actively advocate for and participate in available regional and international knowledge-sharing networks and activities whenever possible. Initiate conversations with peers and external NGOs about current education trends and innovations in neighboring countries.
- Find and read existing documents and reports that seek to empower and strengthen mid-tier actors as global education experts.

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS:

- Provide access to improved information and communications technology so mid-level actors can regularly communicate with peers in neighboring countries.
- Consider including mid-level officials in international knowledge-sharing events or neighboring country visits.

FOR DONORS, PHILANTHROPY, AND MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS:

- Offer funded opportunities for cross-national learning tours and conference attendance for mid-level actors and identify ways to encourage mid-level participation in existing international scaling workshops and online global education networks.

FOR NGOs AND CSOs:

- Prioritize the inclusion of mid-level actors inside and outside government in relevant networks, conversations, and knowledge dissemination systems.

Conclusion: Harnessing the power of mid-level agency

To reap the benefits of the middle-tier's knowledge, expertise, and proximity to schools, central governments would be well-served to more fully include mid-level officials in the work of identifying, adopting, piloting, contextualizing, and scaling innovations. This might be called "harnessing the power of mid-level agency."

For countries committed to decentralization, the benefits of local accountability, sustained participation, and community ownership will not be realized until the mid-level possesses sufficient capacity, autonomy, authority, and support to contribute to innovations and take responsibility for education in their jurisdictions. This cannot occur unless governments acknowledge the negative education implications of preserving excessive central power in a decentralized context. And for all countries, decentralized or not, supporting the mid-level to contribute meaningfully to policy and innovation work and communicate their knowledge and expertise upward should be a high priority.

We do not wish to underemphasize the role of forward-thinking, committed central levels of education. And we do not want the middle tier to be the next system level to blame. But, as we have presented in this report, there are myriad contributions to education transformation the middle local level can provide. For LMICs who wish to leverage the middle tier, each side must be willing to commit: the mid-level to accept increased autonomy through strengthened capacity and hard work, and the central level to turn over additional authority to mid-level offices and trust the process.

To achieve these goals, we hope that central governments will consider sharing their power and re-structuring their governance systems to transfer more innovation and education improvement responsibility to the middle tier. We hope that middle tier actors will rise to the occasion and assume (or push for) increased responsibility for innovation work in education. We hope that NGOs and funders who work with or at the middle level will prioritize a program of supporting and unlocking the potential of the middle tier in ways recommended in this brief. And we hope that scaling organizations continue to learn both how the mid-level *currently* operates and how it *can potentially* operate differently so that they can productively engage this system level. In these manners, we look forward to locations around the world working collaboratively to unlock the potential of the middle level and leverage its inherent ability to improve education systems for communities, children, and whole locations.

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