

Basic Education, Civil Society Participation and the New Aid Architecture: Lessons from Burkina Faso, Kenya, Mali and Tanzania

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Executive Summary

New efforts to revitalize and expand basic education systems have become central to the national development plans of many African countries over the past decade. These new efforts are different from the past on three counts. First, national efforts are supported by the international community on a larger scale than ever before, often through innovative sectoral approaches that fund national education sector plans rather than individual projects. Second, such changes are occurring in a context of political liberalization and democratic consolidation. Finally, new education sector plans now routinely recognize an important role for civil society in the realization of national basic educational goals. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are increasingly expected to be partners in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of national educational plans and policies. In this sense, sector programs have opened up greater political space for CSO participation and representation in the education sector policy arena.

In this study, we explore the current capacities and challenges facing civil society organizations as they attempt to engage effectively in these new governance roles, based on fieldwork in four countries: **Kenya, Mali, Tanzania and Burkina Faso**. We map the key non-governmental actors active in education and explore their experiences as policy actors in each country. We also ask how these actors are affected by a new architecture for aid to education and for educational governance: one in which bilateral and multilateral donor organizations, national governments and civil society actors are attempting to partner around a recently developed plan for achieving basic Education for All. However, the new aid architecture for education has created not only opportunities, but also significant challenges for civil society participation and engagement in the education sector.

Research Design

Drawing on a political mapping approach, 176 civil society informants were interviewed in total (30-50 organizations in each country); along with 60 interviews with international technical and donor organizations and government officials. Civil society organizations operating within the national educational policy arena included: national and subnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), faith-based organizations, national parent/teacher associations, teachers' unions, private provider groups, professional bodies, parliamentary organizations, business associations, community-based organizations (CBOs), research organizations, and networks or coalitions.

Emerging principles of aid effectiveness typically describe civil society as contributing to development:

- by enhancing educational services for citizens;
- by contributing to the fabric of formal democracy; and,
- by empowering citizens to make educational claims— especially those poor or marginalized (AGCSAE 2007a; AGCSAE 2007b).

If we accept the proposition that civil society participation contributes to all three of these areas, we should be asking not simply: Are civil society actors included in Education Sector programs, but also: Why some CSOs and not others, in some aspects of the program, and not others? More fundamentally, does the presence of CSOs lead to new capacity and effectiveness in citizen-led claims-making? Do they scale up at the national level in the sense of consolidation of formal democratic oversight of the education system?

The Structure and Capacity of Civil Society Actors in the Education Sector

Enormous variation exists across our case countries, suggesting that civil society support will need to be tailored to specific contexts and must not assume harmonized interests or abilities.

Intra-CSO relationships and National Coalitions are extremely varied in their capacities and effectiveness:

- Tanzania's TEN/MET appears to be the most effective in mobilizing a wide range of members around a common policy platform; it also is the most effective critic and watchdog over basic education commitments, at times resulting in tensions with government.
- Kenya's national Elimu Yetu Coalition is quite weak; since the declaration of universal free primary education it seems to have lost the capacity to mobilize its members around a common agenda.
- In Mali, education CSOs have only begun to develop an effective coordinating body or common platform on basic education. Although a number of coordinating groups have emerged in Mali over the last 10 years, CSOs tend to bargain individually rather than collectively.
- Burkina Faso, with the youngest of the national education CSO coalitions, is developing a somewhat more cohesive and effective coalition, the *Cadre de Concertation en Education de Base* (CCEB).

INGO/NGOs are among the most prominent actors in the education policy arena. While many work in project mode, there is an increasing work at a systems level and through rights-based approaches. Teachers' Unions are perhaps the most powerful, well-organized, and representative of civil society actors (especially in Mali and Kenya). However, they remain somewhat marginalized players within sector programs, despite their capacities for professional mobilization, and their broader contribution to democracy. Faith-based organizations bring considerable resources and capacities to the policy table. In Tanzania and Kenya, Christian and Muslim organizations are routinely consulted by government; in Mali and Burkina Faso, faith-based organizations are more marginalized in policy. Finally, there has been a rising number of Private Educational Providers in all four countries over the past decade. While governments tend to consult them, tensions sometimes emerge over their demands for increased government subsidies for private schools.

In both their own and in others assessments, civil society actors of all types in our case countries lack the organizational capacity and experience to engage consistently and effectively in policy dialogue, evidence-based advocacy and oversight activities in the education sector. CSOs recognize that playing these roles effectively will require collective, broadly-based action. They see a valuable role for international non-governmental actors in helping them to realize these new policy roles, both in finances and leveraging international moral authority. However, the value of nationally-led CSO action is also important to them.

Tensions and Contradictions in the Design of Sector Programs

The new education sector programs launched in our four case countries focus on the expansion and improvement of educational services, particularly at the basic education level; they introduce new forms of donor coordination and harmonization; and they establish a nationally-owned framework for educational reform. They also mandate increased engagement of civil society actors in the achievement of sector plans. However, this study has also suggested that the new education sector programs contain important "design contradictions" and tensions that raise real challenges for the roles and expectations of CSOs:

- Comparing the three emerging principles of aid effectiveness, the focus of sector programs is on enhancing the provision of services, with little clarity on the contributions that civil society actors make to the fabric of formal democracy or to the empowerment of the poor or marginalized.
- By design, the governance of sector programs centres around Ministry of Education-CSO engagement – a dangerous emphasis in contexts where sector funding is controlled by other Ministries, or where the power of the executive has historically limited citizen engagement in formal democratic processes.
- Sector programs do not establish a transparent procedural framework for civil society engagement at the national level, allowing governments to control who sits at the policy table.
- Sector programs tend to employ an imagery of “partnership” around the financing and provision of education, begging the question: do sector programs view private/CSO funding and provision of basic education as “unfortunately necessary” or “inherently desirable”?
- Sector programs assume harmonious, collaborative interaction with CSOs, ignoring the complex political reality of organizations.
- Sector programs not only reinforce longstanding tensions between the service delivery and advocacy roles CSOs play; they also foster administrative confusion about the relative responsibilities of the central state, subnational authorities and CSOs in guaranteeing access to quality basic education.
- Decentralized reform programs add another level of design contradictions (six identified within), including their use to “break” previous civil society leverage, and the little attention paid to the connections between accountability at the grassroots and democratic deliberation at the national level.
- There remains an overarching tension between two decades of promises around the importance of primary school and the absence of a strong international resource commitment to fill the funding gap.

These underlying problems create tensions for CSOs as they move towards “rights-based” approaches:

- Tension between advocacy for universal access to schooling, and other education/development goals.
- Tension between traditional service provider roles providers and advocacy for governmental provision.
- Tensions in CSO relationships with international funding organizations (on whom they are dependent), since CSOs must increasingly act as critics/campaigners within the international aid regime.

Changing Dynamics of CSOs Engagement in the Education Sector

Distinctive civil society experiences in the policy processes have unfolded around each of our four countries’ new education sector plans:

- In **Tanzania**, CSO engagement is relatively well-coordinated and includes impressive use of evidence-based policy advocacy. However, CSO efforts to play effective monitoring and watchdog roles have not been well-received by government, and there is also a perceived weakness in the capacity of the CSO coalition to reach rural and more marginalized CSOs and citizen groups.
- In **Burkina Faso**, civil society engagement is active and growing, especially in regional and decentralized fora. However, in contrast to Tanzania, civil society in Burkina Faso has embraced the gradualist approach to EFA that the government and donors have adopted in the sector plan.
- **Kenya** has seen a decrease in effective CSO engagement in the national education policy arena. In Kenya, this is partly due to the loss of a common CSO mobilizing frame after the declaration of free primary education; but it also reflects larger tensions between governments and autonomous CSO actors.
- Finally, in **Mali**, CSOs have not yet been able to develop a common platform for engaging government on educational issues – their efforts here are just emerging. In contrast to Burkina Faso, Mali has a number of well-endowed CSOs who have objected to key features of the sector program, posing challenges for a broad-based, collaborative CSO response to the sector program embracing a gradualist

approach to EFA. On the other hand, until recently there has been no movement in Mali to develop a coalition around the issue of governmentally provided free primary education (as in Tanzania).

Together, these cases highlight the fact that there are challenges to both more contentious and more collaborative forms of CSO engagement in sector programs. They also suggest just how fragile and hard-won effective civil society coordination can be. Civil society coordination depends crucially on the development of a common mobilizing frame or agenda. Perhaps because of the strong international support for rights-based approaches, the use of “universal free primary education” as a mobilizing frame has proven particularly powerful as a starting point for CSO coordination. However, such frames have to be negotiated and owned at the national level; and renegotiated (and re-owned) when specific goals are achieved.

Changing CSO-Government and CSO-Donor Relationships

Changes in CSO-government and CSO-donor relationships are a given feature of the new aid architecture. A central principle of aid effectiveness is the placement of funds directly under government leadership, to be used in agreed-upon sector plans. Across all our case countries, there has been a drop in direct funding from bilateral donors to NGOs, a heightened level of policy dialogue between donors and government, and a new (but relatively untested) framework calling for the engagement of CSOs.

CSO-Government Relationships

- CSOs are now accepted participants in education sector programs. However, governments still have the ultimate say over who gets invited to the policy table, and for which purposes.
- Winners and losers among CSOs: while most governments consult a variety of CSO actors, they tend to marginalize teachers’ unions and favour national ‘complementary’ organizations.
- Government-CSO relations are often fraught with tension and confusion about appropriate CSO roles and mandates, such as if CSOs are working complementarily within new sector programs.
- CSOs reject the idea of taking subcontracts from government for complementary service provision. However, support the opportunity to work collaboratively with the government to meet sector goals.
- Government-CSO relationships at decentralized levels are complex. Our limited exploration in this area suggests that lines of authority are often unclear and experience managing partnerships is weak.
- CSOs only weakly engage parliamentarians or the executive, instead focusing within the Ministry of Education. Rarely do they engage with the Ministry of Finance (which often controls education expenditure, and shapes the use of direct budgetary support).

Relations Between CSOs and Donors

- CSOs in all countries noted that a decline in opportunities to meet with international technical and financial partners characterized the period following the introduction of sector programs.
- Many described a drop in international funding for their activities – sometimes precipitously.
- CSOs are unsatisfied with donor support for their policy and advocacy efforts, and wary of donor initiatives that place CSOs in subcontracting roles.
- In some contexts, CSOs praised donors for helping them to leverage engagement in policy processes.
- CSOs believe they have a legitimate role in monitoring donors and their commitments to sector programs in education, although donors’ beliefs in this regard were unclear.

A significant finding across our case studies was the degree to which donor organizations lack a well-informed and coordinated strategy for supporting CSO involvement in the education sector. Except in Tanzania, donors have generally shown limited interest in providing core funding that might enable national CSOs to engage in sustained programs of research or advocacy. Many donors prefer to channel funds through their own national NGOs, and have only begun to try out directly funding Southern organizations. Nor do donors have transparent rules or processes to select which CSOs they interact with and support.

Implications and Key Policy Challenges

a) Why Is Civil Society is Important

Emerging principals of aid effectiveness typically describe civil society as contributing to development in three ways: by enhancing direct services to citizens; by contributing to the fabric of democracy; and by empowering citizens – especially those that are poor or marginalized (AGCSAE 2007a; AGCSAE 2007b). However, when we look at the way these rationales play out in the implementation of an aid effectiveness agenda within a specific sector, like education, we can begin to see much greater focus on the service-enhancing functions of civil society. While the democratic and pro-poor roles played by civil society actors in the education sector are routinely mentioned, there is considerably less clarity about these roles. There is also a tendency to assume that civil society actors act harmoniously and in a complimentary fashion under government leadership.

If we accept the proposition that civil society participation should enhance democracy and empowers the disempowered (and not only the quality of services themselves), we need to look again at sector programs and the aid effectiveness principals they engender. This time, we should be asking not simply: is civil society included in the sector program, but also: why some CSOs and not others, in some aspects of the program, and not others? Are there design contradictions in the sector program, as for example between decentralized mandates for CSOs and national policy input, or around the question of who should fund and provide educational services? More fundamentally, does the presence of CSOs lead to new capacity and effectiveness in citizen-led claims-making? Are these capacities equally distributed? Do they scale up at the national level in the sense of consolidation of formal democratic oversight of the educational system?

b) Understanding Civil Society Capacity in Specific Contexts

The dynamics of civil society engagement vary considerably across countries, despite the formal similarities of their roles as envisaged in national sector plans. We might begin our discussions on where to focus our efforts by evaluating what appear to be five key thresholds for civil society effectiveness:

- Are the formal terms for CSOs engagement in national policy processes conducive to autonomous policy, oversight and advocacy roles?
- Have individual CSOs attained a degree of autonomy and voice in the national policy process? [including the capacity to act in watchdog or oversight roles that are critical?]
- Have CSOs developed mechanisms for coordination and collaboration around a common platform?
- Is this platform deeply rooted in, and owned by, a wide range of national civil society actors?
- Are CSOs able to link enhanced citizen voice at a local level to their emerging roles in national policy processes; and do they do this both in their dealings with the Ministry of Education and through parliamentary and legislative processes?

These thresholds look quite different in Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Mali, or Kenya, and may be even more varied across other national contexts. Investing in better understanding of CSO-sector program dynamics is an important starting point for better and more effective external initiatives. However, across all our case studies, the one area that seems in most urgent need of further research an analysis is the interface between new forms of local governance in education, and the development of greater citizen voice and public deliberation within national level policy process.

c) Providing Better External Support for Civil Society Engagement

External actors face a delicate task when supporting the more “political” of the roles played by civil society actors. They must do so while continuing to support government leadership and ownership of sector programs; in ways that do not imply partisanship; and that do not carry the threat of sanction or hegemony. Nonetheless, our case studies suggest that external actors can assist in seven important ways, such as:

- Dialogue with governments about the establishment of legal frameworks, formal processes and better government receptivity to CSO policy, oversight and public deliberation roles.
- Argue for more transparent, regularized and democratic processes for the inclusion of civil society representation in the formal processes engendered by national education sector plans.
- Provide reliable core support for coalitions/networks in a way that ensures autonomy.
- Support neglected civil society actors or interests – such as teachers’ unions and smaller subnational or thematic groups – to develop productive forms of engagement in national policy deliberation.
- Support international linkages between Northern and Southern citizens and their organizations, especially where governments inhibit CSO engagement, or where civil society capacity is weak.
- Support civil society organizations’ capacities for coordination and policy voice.
- Assist CSOs that link decentralized forms of citizen input to national policy processes.

Because of the dynamic and varied histories of civil society engagement in the education sector, there is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all plan for its support by external actors. In such a context, donors need to develop and explore a diverse portfolio of mechanisms for enhancing civil society engagement, keeping in mind that different mechanisms are likely to suite different objectives and can pose different risks. Above all else, external actors need to develop a regular process for reviewing the implications for democracy, public deliberation, citizen engagement, and pro-poor representation when they engage in efforts to support civil society actors within sector programs. One way of doing this might be to engage civil society organizations in the same kinds of dialogue and public deliberation over donor policies that are increasingly expected in national policy processes.