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Accountability Brief



The Role of Civil Society in National Education Policy in the Global South

Abrehet Gebremedhin
Naomi Hossain



Key Insights

Despite the prominence of civil society advocacy on education since the 1990s, there is limited consensus about the nature of its role in shaping national policies in the global South. Changes in civic space in the past decade are likely to have altered the terms of civil society engagement in education policy. This Accountability Brief, based on a [literature review](#), takes stock of the evidence about how past civic action has shaped education policy, to understand the possible impacts on policymaking should space for civil society advocacy on education be restricted in the future. The key takeaways are as follows:

1. The presence of diverse non-state actors in civil society advocacy for education has shaped national education policy in the global South. Beyond variation between the types and agendas of such groups, we know relatively little about how they interact with established, often donor-funded, national education coalitions.
 - a. Takeaway for international donors: There is little evidence on how some increasingly important civil society actors—particularly teachers’ unions, youth-led organizations, and rightwing and corporate-backed movements—shape national education policy.
 - b. Takeaway for national-level civil society activists: To continue prioritizing equitable access to quality education, and counter the growing influence of rightwing and corporate-backed movements, greater collaboration with progressive groups outside formal national education coalitions is needed.
2. Civil society organizations (CSOs) became influential actors in education policy at a specific historical moment: the post-Cold War expansion of civic space, democratization, and the neoliberal push for active non-state actors. Their initial focus was on promoting Education for All, aided by the transnational advocacy of donors and CSO networks. But restricted civic space, more emphasis on quality education, the ‘learning crisis’, and COVID-19, have altered the political context for national education advocates.
 - a. Takeaway for international donors: The effectiveness of education advocacy is dependent on political context and state–civil society dynamics. An enabling political context cannot be assumed.
 - b. Takeaway for national-level civil society activists: Advocacy for quality education for all hinges on navigating the relationship between civil society and the state. Tactics that worked when advocates were proposing politically popular reforms may not work to boost learning outcomes, or when governments and donors are less supportive.
3. The Education For All Dakar Framework and Millennium Development Goal 2 in 2000 created new opportunities for civil society engagement in education policy. Civil society played a vital role in forging a global norm around universal access to basic education. However, the lack of enforcement mechanisms, especially in financing commitments, raised questions about accountability. Actors such as Global Partnership for Education (GPE) emerged to support access to multilateral financing. GPE and sectoral approaches further legitimized civil society roles, though their impact varied.
 - a. Takeaway for international donors: Global education commitments opened space for civil society, yet the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms, particularly for finance, highlights the need for greater accountability.
 - b. Takeaway for national-level civil society activists: Global education commitments provided new avenues for civil society engagement, enabling a norm around basic education for all. Multi-level approaches by national civil society proved important for claiming accountability based on these global frameworks.

Introduction: Civil Society Advocacy on Education

This Accountability Brief shares insights from a [literature review](#) on the role of civil society in national education policy in the global South.¹ The review asked the following questions:

- Which **actors and institutions** have been involved in education civil society advocacy and activism in the global South?
- In which **political contexts** has education civil society flourished?
- Which **aid agendas** have created space for education civil society activism?
- In which **thematic areas** has education civil society has been most active?
- Which **strategies** have been used to influence national education policy and implementation?

Details of the search strategy and inclusion criteria are available in the full literature review. This Accountability Note situates our reflections on the literature on contemporary education policy and its intersection with civil society and civic space, highlighting unanswered questions that warrant further exploration.



A female student at Azimpur Government Primary School in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Girls' education has been an important theme for civil society action on education.

Credit: GPE/Chantal Rigaud

¹ The review was undertaken as part of the Education Out Loud civil society support program of the Global Partnership for Education, and comprises part of their Global Learning Partnership. An [annotated bibliography](#), accompanying the literature review, contains summaries of the most significant articles, reports, and book chapters.

Actors and Institutions

Development-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mainly funded by international aid, became the most visible civil society advocates and activists for education in the global South from the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the post-colonial and democratizing countries of the global South, NGOs entered contexts where faith-based organizations and teachers' unions had long been present,² and in which student and anticolonial movements had also influenced education policy at key moments in political history.

The new entrants were international (mostly from the global North), national, and local organizations, with a shared progressive and human rights orientation. They organized themselves into coalitions—both national and international (the Global Campaign for Education)—alongside other civil society actors, which often included social movements, local community-based organizations, and teachers' unions.³

Coalition partners did not always agree on policy issues: tensions sometimes arose that highlighted different interests, such as when teachers' unions representing their members' interests opposed education reform initiatives supported by aid-funded NGOs.⁴ But these relationships enabled a degree of mutual empowerment: national and local actors gained credibility, platforms, resources, and a louder voice in transnational policy spaces, while international NGOs and coalitions gained authority from representing broad-based global South constituencies, bringing evidence and expertise to the table. This strategy of coordinated advocacy between and across multiple levels of the system is known as the “boomerang effect”⁵; global education civil society since 2000 is a clear example of this strategy at work.⁶

While teachers' unions are known to play a role in national education policy in the global South, the (English-language) literature is neither extensive nor conclusive about the nature or degree of their influence.⁷ Given that teacher support is necessary for successful education reform, it would be helpful to know more about the actual roles of teachers' unions in shaping national education policy, including within their education coalition partnerships.

The published literature on social movements includes studies of movements (youth and students; democratization; women's; peasant; and indigenous rights) that influenced education policy in key moments in Brazil, Chile, India, and South Africa, among other countries. Again, it would be useful to understand whether and how these movements were empowered by their relationships with NGOs and other actors, or access to transnational policy spaces—as well as to understand better their current orientations and priorities.

In contrast—and sometimes in direct opposition—to the progressive, typically secular, and pro-equality development NGOs that emerged most prominently in the early 2000s, rightwing and corporate-backed movements⁸ and CSOs are playing what appears to be a growing role in national education policies. These are often groups that seek to push market-oriented reforms into education systems, to bring education under parental or community control, or to resist progressive ideologies and initiatives to boost equity in education. Rightwing religious and private sector-supported civil society groups adopt the same strategies as progressive groups: framing issues; organizing citizens, often using online platforms; generating evidence for policy spaces; and media engagement.

2 Mundy, Karen. 2008. “From NGOs to CSOs: Social Citizenship, Civil Society and ‘Education for All’ – An Agenda for Further Research.” *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 10 (1/2): 32–40.

3 Mundy, Karen. 2012. “The Global Campaign for Education and the Realization of ‘Education For All.’” In *Campaigning for Education for All: Histories, Strategies and Outcomes of Transnational Advocacy Coalitions*, ed. edited by Mario Novelli and Antoni Verger, 16–30. Rotterdam; Boston; Taipei: Sense Publishers.

4 Novelli, Mario, and Antoni Verger, eds. 2012. *Campaigning for “Education for All”: Histories, Strategies and Outcomes of Transnational Advocacy Coalitions in Education*. Rotterdam; Boston; Taipei: Sense Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-879-7>.

5 Keck, Margaret, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

6 Mundy, Karen, and Lynn Murphy. 2001. “Transnational Advocacy, Global Civil Society? Emerging Evidence from the Field of Education,” *Comparative Education Review* 45 (1): 85–126, <https://doi.org/10.1086/447646>.

7 Moe, Terry M., and Susanne Wiborg. 2016. *The Comparative Politics of Education: Teachers Unions and Education Systems around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

8 Cortina, Regina, and Constanza Lafuente. 2018. “‘Only Quality Education Will Change Mexico’: The Case of Mexicanos Primero.” In *Civil Society Organizations in Latin American Education*, edited by Regina Cortina and Constanza Lafuente: 18–41. New York: Routledge.

Political Contexts

The emergence of NGOs and coalitions as prominent actors in education policy spaces occurred in specific political and aid policy contexts. The more mature groups originated in movements for democracy or democratization, at moments when civic space was rapidly opening and new civic groups of all kinds were emerging; that is, in political contexts which are the opposite of current political trends in much of the world.

As the literature on the relationship between education and democracy predicts, mass education proved to be politically popular, and politicians competed to expand schooling provision. Civil society played a crucial role in establishing the norm that education really was for all—regardless of gender, class, caste, race, geography, or ability—a norm that also gave them a rallying focus for initiatives to include children otherwise likely to be excluded from school. More recently, the education policy agenda has been dominated by concerns that the expansion of school systems has not been matched by gains in learning outcomes. The interruption to millions of children's schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated what was already seen as a “learning crisis.”⁹

In the period after the Cold War in which NGOs and education civil society coalitions emerged, aid donors placed increased emphasis on market-driven solutions to social policy concerns. Many NGOs in the global South became part of the broader system of non-state provision, including private for-profit schools. Some later shifted away from direct provision, recognizing that national education systems needed sustainability, and that would only come from citizens claiming their rights to education.¹⁰ However, in a growing number of conflict and emergency settings, NGOs continue to provide education services.

Although some authoritarian governments have built education systems with strong learning outcomes, no literature emerged from our searches on whether or how civil society—or non-state actors—influenced those policies.

A key lesson about political contexts for national education coalitions is what would be predicted by civil society and social movements theories: that the role of civil society is closely shaped by its relationship with the state. The state can make—and restrict—space for civic action, and enable—or prevent—civil society growth and strengthening. The evolution of national education coalitions in Ghana, India, and the Philippines all illustrate the importance of the relationship with the state for civil society to be effective, a relationship which may be at times cooperative and consultative, and at others, contentious or even conflictual.

Aid Policy Education Agendas

New space for civil society was carved out by a pair of global commitments in 2000 that together framed the aid agenda in basic education: the Education For All (EFA) Dakar Framework for Action, and Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2), Achieving Universal Primary Education. These commitments emerged at a time when progress on education had stalled, human development had become a central aim of the development process, and the end of the Cold War had brought optimism, including about a role for civil society.

There were always tensions between the expansive vision of education and broader human rights encoded in the EFA movement with its ambitions for country ownership of the agenda, and the narrower MDG goal of “achieving universal primary education” according to a technocratic process. The MDG target for education was narrower than

⁹ World Bank. 2017. “World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise.” Washington DC: World Bank. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>.

¹⁰ Novelli and Verger, *op. cit.*

the EFA goals, and focused on raising enrollment rates in primary education rather than on a broader transformation of the education system, obscuring problems of inequality, and reducing ‘the right to education’ to ‘access to primary education’.

Despite these tensions and contradictions between the two processes, the aid agenda framed by EFA and the MDGs created new space for coordinated civil society action by groups such as the Global Campaign for Education, including monitoring at multiple levels of the system. Civil society contributed directly to monitoring via the EFA and MDG global forums, helping forge an international consensus around the norm that everyone should be able to access (at least) primary schooling. However, the rising importance of international NGOs in education policy spaces has raised questions about whether they have occupied space more appropriately occupied by domestic groups, and how aid dependence may have shaped agendas.

Yet while EFA and the MDGs created unprecedented global coordination around basic education, this was not matched by coordinated enforcement mechanisms that bound aid agencies or governments to their commitments, or sanctioned them for their failures to deliver. This is particularly notable with respect to financing. Observers note the chronic shortfall in financing for basic education in the global South, as well as its uneven distribution.¹¹ The Fast-Track Initiative (later the Global Partnership for Education) was set up in 2002 in part with the aim of ensuring that countries whose governments were committed to education for all could access necessary finance. One mechanism by which GPE seeks to enable education for all is supporting the further consolidated and institutionalized new roles for non-state actors in education financing and policy processes.¹²

The sector-wide and sectoral approaches introduced as part of the aid effectiveness agenda in the 2000s also granted more space and legitimacy to civil society. Sectoral approaches to education policy enabled ‘partnership’ and ‘participation’ in policy dialogue, but research in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Mali, and Tanzania found that in practice this meant more of a role for civil society in service provision and local-level accountability work than national policy advocacy or monitoring. In Nepal, by contrast, sector programs made it possible for NGOs to ‘move up’ the policy chain, and to connect with policymakers at multiple levels.

Thematic Areas of Civil Society Focus

The literature review examined three broad thematic areas that education civil society in the global South has focused on: efforts to address exclusion and inequality, and the framing of a norm around education for all; governance and accountability; and learning outcomes.

The signature achievement of the education civil society community has been its contribution to the framing of a global consensus on universal basic education—with the implication that governments are ultimately accountable for ensuring education provision. This has encouraged governments—at least in theory—to conform to and comply with an international norm. The normative consensus, not found to the same degree in other sectors, created space for CSOs and NGOs to advocate for the inclusion of groups currently or potentially excluded from education.

¹¹ Aaron Benavot et al. 2016. “Education for All 2000–2015: The Influence of Global Interventions and Aid on EFA Achievements.” In *Handbook of Global Education Policy*, edited by Karen Mundy, Andy Green, Bob Lingard, and Antoni Verger: 241–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118468005.ch13>.

¹² Including funding the Education Out Loud initiative for support to civil society, which also funded the research of which this paper is one output.

Civil society organizations and social movements have been at the forefront of efforts to recognize and realize the right to education. The rights-based approach treats education as not merely a need or service, but a fundamental human right, which implies universality and state responsibility to act. CSOs and social movements have also helped establish norms of gender parity in education policy. Historical gender disparities in access to basic education have narrowed markedly in many countries in the global South in the past generation. Often in coalition or partnership with multilateral agencies and governments, CSOs adopted a range of approaches to address gender inequality in education, including: advocacy campaigns to shift gendered norms that restrict girls' schooling; pilot programs, including in non-formal education and material support for girls' schooling; and curricular and pedagogical reforms to support and sustain girls' participation. For instance, NGOs were notably successful at helping reach gender parity in basic education in Bangladesh, in a context where they had space and resources.¹³

The norm that girls should receive education as much as boys is now more widely accepted than before the decades of the EFA, MDGs, and civil society activism, and this alone is a major achievement. However, from the outset women's rights activists and scholars were critical of the reduction of the MDG gender equality goals to the school enrollment of girls: gender parity, even where it was achieved, is not the same as gender equality.



In Honduras, a girl sits on outside porch steps reading a book.

Credit: GPE/Paul Martinez

13 Chowdhury, A. Mushtaque R., Samir R. Nath, and Rasheda K. Choudhury. 2003. "Equity Gains in Bangladesh Primary Education," *International Review of Education* 49 (6): 601–19. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:REVI.0000006929.59667.16>.

While the establishment of the norm of access to basic education for all did not resolve issues of inequality in or beyond education systems, it provided a rallying point and source of legitimation for civil society efforts to include children who would otherwise have lacked access to schooling. Children from marginalized backgrounds, who face stigma and other barriers to school, comprise a large proportion of children excluded from basic education. Striking advances have been made with respect to including children with disabilities, in which civil society activism has played a role. Civil society activism around inclusive education (for children with disabilities and special education needs) offers a lens onto civil society activism in education in the global South more generally: these actors vary by their origins; whether they are membership organizations; and by whether they provide services or advocate for public services on behalf of their constituencies (or beneficiaries).

Civil society has focused on improving governance and accountability in national education policy through two main entry points. 'Social accountability' approaches promote participatory monitoring of education inputs and school performance from below, and 'open government' approaches aim to improve transparency and the scope for citizen oversight and participation through opening up from above. Both are used to strengthen accountability and responsiveness in education systems.¹⁴ Earlier optimism about social accountability tools (community 'score cards' or school 'report cards') has given way to recognition that empowering citizens to monitor and improve education service delivery requires attention to context and power relations, and monitoring at multiple levels of the system:¹⁵ people cannot successfully demand services unless the state has the capacity to respond.

Budget tracking and budget monitoring have also been important strategies in civil society's advocacy toolbox, as activists seek to hold governments accountable for financing education. Budget tracking and monitoring aims to improve allocations and expenditures on education, raise public awareness about budgetary and expenditure processes, and increase the political costs of failures to ensure appropriate finance that is well-spent. A key concern across this area of work has been that efforts to strengthen 'accountability' in education systems have often meant focusing on teachers in ways that are punitive and/or that fail to activate the broader relations of accountability within which education systems operate.

Innovative activism and research to improve learning outcomes have been increasingly prominent. The literature on interventions to improve learning outcomes is large, but reviews and syntheses have arrived at divergent conclusions about the state of knowledge. Well-known cases of civil society innovations to raise education quality that have scaled up and are understood to have influenced education policy and practice in governments and multilateral agencies include the Indian NGO Pratham's community-based student assessment exercise the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), which has developed to enable citizens to arrive at their own diagnoses of the learning crisis and the needed education reforms, and which aims to create pressure on the education system to raise educational standards. The assessment-based approach has been adopted and adapted in countries across the global South, notably in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania under Uwezo, a regional civil society initiative.

14 Hevia, Felipe. 2021. "Gobierno Abierto y educación en América Latina y el Caribe." *Estudios Sociológicos de El Colegio de México* 40 (118): 85–122, <https://doi.org/10.24201/es.2022v40n118.2112>; Huss, Oksana and Keudel, Oleksandra. 2020. *Open Government in Education: Clarifying Concepts and Mapping Initiatives*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

15 Gebremedhin, Abrehet. 2023. "Moving on Up: Multilevel Monitoring and Advocacy for Health Rights." Accountability Research Center. Accountability Working Paper 12. <https://accountabilityresearch.org/publication/moving-on-up-multilevel-monitoring-and-advocacy-for-health-rights/>



In Nepal, this school has a suggestion box to learn what exactly the students and teachers need, especially the girls and female teachers. These boxes are in the schools, and someone has a duty to open them twice a week. If there are any suggestions, the school will figure out how to address them.

Credit: GPE / Kelley Lynch

Pratham has also developed the pedagogically innovative Teaching at the Right Level approach that assesses the level of a child's learning and orients teaching to it, rather than to grade level. Recent research into the community assessment approach has found that it challenges assumptions about the levers of accountability in relation to learning outcomes. Among other things, building citizens' engagement with school systems over time is part of the 'long route to accountability' through political pressure from below; this is opposed to assumptions that people can effectively demand better services directly from providers if given relevant information about those services.

Civil Society Strategies

The literature review identified four civil society strategies for shaping national education policy:

1. Movement-building, including building civil society capacity, coordination, networking, and constituency mobilization around policy issues, as well as the ‘cultural work’ of framing or norm-setting.
2. Policy engagement, featuring insider strategies and ‘constructive engagement’, exercised through seats at the policy table.
3. Pilots and ‘proof of concept’ initiatives using research and data to trigger and inform reforms and create pressure on state actors.
4. Contention or mobilizing countervailing power (e.g. student or labor movements).

Most CSOs and coalitions about whom published studies were found combine these strategies to different degrees. However, most tend to deploy one as their leading strategy. The literature uncovered few examples of contentious repertoires to mobilize or demonstrate countervailing power other than those by teachers’ and other labor unions, and student movements. Choice of strategy is determined by the issues discussed in previous sections of this literature review:

- the character of the civil society actors and institutions themselves, including their constituencies and capacities to engage;
- the political and aid contexts, including the space created by the state and by international aid frameworks; and
- the policy issues on which they seek to engage, in turn reflective of both the priorities, and civil society capacities to engage on those issues.

National education policies in the global South can be profoundly influenced by global actors, including transnational civil society and aid donors. A crucial dimension of civil society capacity to advocate for change was found to lie in its capacity to coordinate, but building broader supportive constituencies beyond formal CSOs was a weak spot. Civil society engagement in non-formal education policy dialogue indicates space for innovation and learning about what works on the ground to percolate upward and influence policy. However, there is a risk that participation masks instances in which power has not shifted and there is no real policy change. Many NGO strategies try to avoid serious conflict with government, and to combine supportive service provision with advocacy, building enduring relationships over time.

The line between cooperation and cooptation can be a fine one for education advocates. Evidence-based strategies are used by all kinds of civil society actors with the capacity to do so, but they appear to be a favored approach for corporate- and foundation-backed think tanks and related civic groups. While major reforms were triggered by contentious forms of civic action, the Chilean student movement of the 2000s being particularly notable, the literature on the more contentious side of civil society strategies is an area for further development.

Conclusions and Implications

This Accountability Brief has summarized key findings from a review of the literature on the role played by civil society in shaping national education policies in the global South. It focused on synthesizing what is not yet well-known in the literature, such as the emergence and increasing influence of non-traditional non-state actors in education policy, the timely presence of civil society actors in a previous era of expanded civic space, as well as the crucial role that national-level civil society and non-governmental organizations have played in promoting an international norm of basic education access for all. It also reflects on the influence of civil society on national education policies in the context of increasing restrictions on civil society organizations and social movements.

The existing literature reflects an earlier era when civil society and social movements could freely advocate for education access for all, and civic space was less restricted. However, further examination is needed to understand how much has changed as civic spaces evolve and emerging actors shape education advocacy. For instance, in meetings to share and reflect on the literature review, civil society actors supported by Education Out Loud highlighted concerns around competing with private sector actors for access to government, limited capacity and resources, and limited responsiveness from government. Such concerns, along with other research agendas that emerged from the literature review—such as the role of teachers’ unions in coalitions and the use of budget information for advocacy—present new questions ripe for inquiry.

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Cover photo: Leaders and youth advocates gathered for a workshop in Dakar, Senegal supported by Plan International in 2018. GPE/Victoria Egbetayo

About the Authors

Abrehet Gebremedhin is a researcher at the Accountability Research Center and a PhD candidate at the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C. Her academic research centers on monitoring and evaluation, civil society engagement in education and health, transnational aid for education, and youth mobilization.

Naomi Hossain is a political sociologist and Professor at SOAS University of London. Her research focuses on the politics of inclusive development, or how people get the public services they need. In international collaborations, she has researched food and fuel riots, the politics of public service delivery, closing civic space, and the politics of Bangladesh's development success. Some of her work can be seen [here](#).

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American University
School of International Service
4400 Massachusetts Ave NW
Washington, DC 20016
www.accountabilityresearch.org