

**Meaningful and Quality Inputs from National Education Coalitions (NECs)
in National Policy Forums and Compact Processes.**

Summary of Study Conducted by the Independent Learning Consultant:

Abrehet Gebredmedhin

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Example of a Local Education Group Meeting. Photo: GPE/ Carine Durand

1. Introduction to the study

In 2025, Education Out Loud commissioned a qualitative study to explore what meaningful and quality inputs look like from the perspective of National Education Coalitions (NECs) and key education stakeholders. The purpose was to better understand the nuances of how NECs contribute to national policy forums and Compact processes, and how these inputs are perceived by others involved in the policy space. The study was initially conducted for internal learning, and to support monitoring of NECs meaningful participation in policy spaces. However, the findings include insights that are valuable for a broader audience. The findings offer a richer understanding of what different actors consider meaningful participation, and they point to ways both NECs and policy partners can strengthen preparation, engagement, and collaboration in future policy influencing work.

The study was carried out by independent learning and evaluation consultant Abrehet Gebremedhin. Below is a brief summary of the main findings.

Data collection & approach

The study is based on a mixed method design combining a review of key documents with interviews and focus group discussions conducted in August–September 2025. In total, 49 respondents from seven countries¹ contributed to the study. These included NEC representatives as well as other key national education stakeholders such as ministry officials, development partners, and GPE/EOL representatives. Four criteria guided the selection of NECs to ensure diversity: *geography; engagement in local education groups; civic space and fragility; and NEC membership and age of the NEC.*

What this study adds

This study offers a dual perspective on what constitutes meaningful participation and quality inputs from NECs in high-level policy processes and dialogue platforms. By bringing together views from both NECs and other key national education stakeholders, it highlights where perspectives align, where they differ, and what can be learned from in planning and influencing processes. The findings help strengthen understanding on both sides of the policy table and can support more effective preparation for policy influencing work by NECs.

1. Findings from the report

How NECs Define Meaningful Participation and Quality of Inputs

Particularly four criteria are used by NECs to describe how they perceive quality inputs and meaningful participation; **Evidence based and data driven, Consensus-building, Solution-oriented and Credible.** Most NECs emphasised that meaningful participation requires **data-driven evidence** and the ability to represent diverse voices:

“The advocacy that we do is evidence-based advocacy [..]. ...If you don’t have this evidence, you won’t achieve anything, so the first thing to define quality participation is to ensure evidence through data collection at the local and national level” (KII with a NEC representative).

NEC described that a data-driven approach requires that they are **participatory** and **consult** the community groups they represent. As expressed by one respondent:

¹ 2 NECs from WCA, 2 NECs from HESA, 2 NECs from AP and 1 from LAC.

“This is not just one side's opinion. This is [the] voice of multiple communities, this is how we should be more accountable to the community, more transparent in our work, and credible through our work, through evidence based... civil society should be supported by evidence or best cases and first-hand voices of the community” (KII with a NEC representative).

Internal consultation with member organizations, ranging from small coalitions to networks with hundreds of members, **and consensus building**, is also viewed as important steps in securing quality inputs. Typical steps include sharing agendas in advance, requesting input from members and subnational structures, collating evidence, and harmonizing positions before LEG/compact discussions.

Several NECs described **solution-oriented and constructive engagement** as essential to maintaining influence and space for civil society, particularly in sensitive contexts. This was defined by coming to policy dialogue forums such as local education groups (LEGs) or partnership compact meetings with an **open mind**, proposing solutions and recommendations, and avoiding directly confronting or criticizing the respective ministry or government policies:

“We, as a coalition, try to make advocacy effective to the decision-makers, not just by confronting them but also by bringing solutions and tools that they can use...” (KII with a NEC representative).

NEC interviewees also underscored the importance of being perceived as credible actors. **Credibility** is understood as a composite of several characteristics: the consistent use of evidence, the ability to reflect legitimate grassroots concerns, a membership-centered approach, and the NECs' long-standing presence in the sector. It also depends on being viewed as **apolitical, impartial**, and solution-oriented, as well as on having the **technical expertise** to engage substantively (as experts) with government and other stakeholders. Finally, NECs stressed that a strong understanding of **GPE country processes and mechanisms** further strengthens their credibility and enhances their ability to provide quality inputs, particularly in GPE-supported forums such as the LEG or partnership compact processes.

How Key Stakeholders Define NEC Meaningful Participation and Quality of Inputs

Other stakeholders' perspectives on what constitutes quality input and meaningful participation generally align with the views expressed by NECs themselves. **Overall, they perceive NECs as important contributors to national policy dialogue, particularly when they demonstrate strong technical capacity, credible evidence-based inputs, and broad representation.**

Five factors were highlighted as shaping NEC meaningful participation and quality input: **technical and advocacy capacity, coalition representation, cooperative versus independent engagement styles, alignment with national priorities versus narrow advocacy agendas, and NECs' advisory versus accountability-oriented role** within the education ecosystem

In terms of *quality inputs*, many interviewees described **strong technical and advocacy capacity** as a fundamental precondition for NECs to participate meaningfully. This capacity enables NECs to engage effectively, contribute evidence-based perspectives, and follow policy processes with confidence. Stakeholders also noted significant variation in NEC capacity across countries, affecting the

consistency and quality of their contributions. Acting as a **coalitions, -representing** and consolidating diverse community perspectives, was viewed as essential for providing strong inputs.

“I find them [NECs] really helpful in organizing civil society around particular issues and giving them a stronger voice in policy discussions with government. They are strongest when they have solid representation at decentralized level, so the voices from the grassroots filter up and policymakers can see their strengths” (KII with a stakeholder)

Other stakeholders further elaborated on the expected role of coalitions in bringing together community perspectives and holding government and partners accountable

“So CSO coalitions... expected role is to see what the government and partners do and if they match the aspirations of all country people. Especially because education is of high interest to people, so CSO coalitions individually point out something, but if they consolidate their voices and collectively raise their voices against wrongdoing or low performing activities, then it works”.
(KII with a non-NEC stakeholder).

Diverging views on meaningful participation amongst other stakeholders

While there was broad agreement on the elements of quality input, stakeholders were less aligned on how NECs should engage meaningfully with government counterparts.

Some valued a **solution-oriented, cooperative engagement style**, consistent with how many NECs described their own approach, and appreciated NECs that adopted a measured tone, avoided confrontation, and framed their contributions as constructive. Others stressed the importance of **independence and constructive challenge**, noting that balancing collaboration and accountability is essential but not always consistently achieved. Concerns were raised that **overly friendly or non-confrontational** approaches risks co-optation, whereas overly confrontational tactics may undermine influence.

“Their approach of engaging government is friendly and non-confrontational and critical to your friend, but if you don’t have the right tactics, you are more likely to be neutralized and sucked into the system...” (KII with a non-NEC stakeholder).

Stakeholders also differed on whether advocacy should **align with broad national priorities** or focus on marginalized groups. Some felt that NECs occasionally concentrated **too narrowly on specific agendas**, such as marginalization, gender, or disability, rather than aligning their contributions with wider national priorities and reform processes.

“In most cases [..] these CSOs are narrowly focused on their own target audiences [..]. they are more focused on their competitive advantage rather than national-level reforms or transformation” (KII with a non-NEC stakeholder)

A smaller subset preferred NECs to provide advice rather than recommendations or accountability-oriented inputs, reflecting a narrower interpretation of the NEC role, -essentially viewing NECs as contributors of technical insights rather than actors pushing for policy change.

Finally, some stakeholders were critical of NECs and NEC members, whom they perceived as **too aggressive** or overly **confrontational**, arguing that such tactics did not contribute meaningfully to policy dialogue. Others, however, noted that NECs provide a structured channel through which more

confrontational actors are able to engage in sector dialogue in a more strategic and constructive manner.

How NECs prepare for and contribute to policy change – and in which forums

Interviews also explored how NECs prepare for and contribute to policy dialogue, as well as the types of forums where they are able to exert the greatest influence.

*In terms of preparation, **capacity-building activities**, including those offered through EOL and other partners such as the Global Campaign for Education and UNICEF, constitute a central component of how NECs equip themselves for meaningful participation in policy discussion forums. This was consistently emphasized by both NEC representatives and other stakeholders interviewed. Respondents noted that these opportunities strengthen both the technical and organizational capacities of NECs, which they viewed as necessary for engaging effectively in sector dialogue. NECs also highlighted that **capacity levels vary** across members, especially newer ones, which can affect how extensively, and how quickly, members can be consulted when timelines are tight.*

Another aspect of NEC's preparation relates to the more routine processes required to build **internal consensus**. These include **consulting members**, gathering **evidence from grassroots structures**, and developing **collective, data-informed positions** ahead of policy forums. As one NEC representative explained:

“In regard to the national level, how do we prepare? We have other organizations we work with in different domains. We have teacher unions, student-parent unions, researchers, and also media, so what do we do beforehand? We have instituted consultation meetings, so before we have a meeting, we figure out the policy brief that is organized... We call all the members in different categories like teachers, and we have a consultation meeting, first of all, to do an analysis of the educational context. Secondly, to receive information when it comes to an agenda that has already been published, to have the opinions of everyone... We try to harmonize the views to have the same voice during meetings”
(KII with a NEC representative).

However, consultation practices vary depending on the time available, as NECs are occasionally required to **adopt fast-track** and lighter consultation methods using the internet, SMS and WhatsApp to reach out and consult members in occasions where they either only recently became aware of the meeting or received the agenda at a short notice.

NECs further described preparing **“alternative”, “shadow” or complementary reports** as part of their preparation in formal meetings, drawing on data collected through their subnational networks and grassroots members. These reports are used to inform verbal contributions or submitted in advance to policy forums and were viewed by NECs as a way to strengthen the evidence base behind their inputs. As one NEC representative explained:

“Our analysis is fed by alternative reports that we prepare; these reports emanate from data collection that we do with local coalitions and the other organizations we work with, which gives us information for our report” (KII with a NEC Respondent)

In terms of key NEC contributions to policy forums, feedback from the sampled NECs aligns closely with their definition of meaningful participation and quality inputs. NECs see their primary contributions as:

- Raising grassroots voices
- Identifying community concerns
- Mobilizing their members for joint advocacy

According to both NEC and non-NEC stakeholders, a significant contribution of NECs is their prioritization and highlighting of **marginalized groups, including girls and women, learners with disabilities, and out-of-school children**. As one NEC representative explained:

“In the LEG, our focus is on the marginalized groups and on social inclusion in general [..]. We have produced position papers to improve education for marginalized communities in rural communities, to work on this with girls and people with disabilities ... We lift the voices who need more attention
(KII with a NEC representative).

In terms of which forums to influence, the study indicates that the GPE-supported forums remain the spaces where NECs are most able to participate visibly and vocally in policy dialogue- at least among the sampled NECs. This pattern is also reflected in findings from previous EOL reviews.

In addition to GPE-supported forums, some NECs also take part in an influence policymakers across a broader set of sector dialogue spaces. For example, some NECs regularly liaise with parliamentarians or executive education councils beyond the LEGs, allowing them to influence discussions at multiple levels of the policy cycle.

Has NEC's Participation and quality inputs in policy forums changed over time?

While both NECs and other stakeholders **reported no major changes in NECs' formal access to, or presence in, national policy forums over time, they nonetheless observed clear improvements in the quality of NEC contributions to national policy discussions**.

Although monitoring data from Education Out Loud points to increased NEC participation in LEG forums over time, respondents did not report noticeable changes in their own participation. Participation was generally perceived as **stable**, though increasingly shaped by shrinking civic space and contextual fragility. Some NEC respondents reported greater confidence in policy engagement, while other stakeholders emphasised that reduced political support for the SDG4 agenda has made meaningful civil society participation more challenging, particularly in conflict-affected context

Concerning *the quality of inputs*, NEC respondents attributed improvements over time to strengthened technical and analytical capacity, more diverse membership, greater use of evidence, and the development of more nuanced and well-substantiated policy positions. Several NECs also noted that deeper consultation with communities had enhanced the legitimacy of the inputs they brought to policy dialogue.

“The most important thing to [define] quality participation is whether the target group is being consulted thoroughly, from their own perspective[.] them being included in decision-making is very important.” (FGD with a NEC member)

Improvements were seen as particularly visible in NECs' ability to articulate **more nuanced policy positions** and produce increasingly **sophisticated analytical reporting**, with evidence generation and use described as “crucial” to the perceived quality of their contributions. Other stakeholders similarly

noted a gradual professionalisation of NEC inputs over time, including **stronger engagement on technical** issues such as education financing.

Enabling and hindering Factors for Meaningful Participation

Across the interviews, respondents highlighted a range of conditions shaping how, and to what extent, NECs are able to participate meaningfully in national policy dialogue.

A key enabling factor identified by NECs was the GPE country model. Processes such as local education groups (LEGs), joint sector reviews, and partnership compacts were described as structured spaces that explicitly encourage civil-society inclusion. NECs noted that this recognition creates a legitimate entry point for their participation, and that being supported through EOL and associated GPE funding arrangements further strengthens their standing. As one NEC representative explained:

“Our participation was after GPE financed [the country], and GPE met with ministers and told them our work is unique... This influences a lot [...] and it provides accountability that this organization also receives GPE funding and international funding” KII with a NEC representative)

This perception aligns with the study’s findings that, among the sampled NECs, **GPE-supported forums remain the spaces where they are most able to participate visibly and vocally in policy dialogue**, although the extent of their influence varies by national context and over time.

Respondents also pointed to several additional enabling conditions, including **the presence of functioning and predictable policy dialogue structures**; an open civic space where civil society can contribute freely; constructive communication channels with government and development partners; and strong technical and organizational capacity within NECs. A good understanding of policy cycles and GPE processes also enabled NECs to time and tailor their inputs more effectively.

At the same time, interviewees identified **factors that hinder meaningful participation** even when formal access exists. In some contexts, shrinking civic space and political or administrative constraints limit NEC’s ability to speak openly or influence discussion. NECs also noted challenges such as selective or tokenistic inclusion, limited access to policy documents and data, risks of co-optation, and capacity gaps or turnover within coalitions. Together, these factors can constrain the quality, independence, and consistency of NEC contributions.

Overall, these findings illustrate how NECs’ ability to engage substantively in national education policy dialogue is shaped not only by institutional design, but also by the broader political and civic environment in which participation takes place.