May 2026
Number 21

Accountability Working Paper

Synergies or Trade-offs? Diverse Civil Society Advocacy in the Education Sector in Honduras

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Cite this work as follows: Hevia, Felipe J. and Prado Tuma, Diego. 2026. "Synergies or Trade-offs? Diverse Civil Society Advocacy in the Education Sector in Honduras". Accountability Research Center. *Accountability Working Paper* 21. http://doi.org/10.57912/32144239.

Cover photo: Children who have experienced urban violence being provided with an education funded by a project manged by the Norweigan Refugee Council.

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Contents

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the organizations and individuals who contributed to this research, particularly our colleagues at FEREMA, Foro Dakar Honduras, Diálogo Interamericano, and others for their time and willingness to help carry out this study. We would also like to thank the individuals who agreed to be interviewed and whom we are keeping anonymous. The insightful feedback from the ARC team—especially Abrehet Gebremedhin, Karen Brock, and Jonathan Fox—as always, helped us refine our arguments. We also appreciate the careful review and recommendations from Naomi Hossain, Mili Concha-Fernandez, and Diana Ayala, which greatly improved the clarity of the document. This research was generously funded by Education Out Loud (part of the Global Partnership for Education and managed by Oxfam Denmark), whom we thank for their ongoing support.

This English version of the Spanish original was machine translated using Deepl, and copyedited by Karen Brock. Lance Bellers did the layout. We used Claude (version 4.6), ChatGPT (version 5.2) and Language Tool to clarify certain ideas and to edit the document for style and syntax. Finally, we would like to note that any errors or omissions in this document are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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Summary

This Working Paper uses the case of Honduras to examine the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in education systems in contexts of limited state capacity. Given such a context in Honduras, we argue that creating a more equitable and high-quality education system requires a strategic alliance between two types of civil society actors that are typically separate.

On the one hand, there are what we call 'established' actors, which we define as organizations that defend the right to education, often through funding from international organizations. On the other hand are what we call the 'emerging' actors, which we define as organizations focused on improving the quality of education through the implementation of specific projects, and funded by private companies.

The paper argues that a strategic alliance between these two perspectives would allow for a more comprehensive articulation of demands for quality and equity in education, generating synergies around the strengthening of public education systems. It discusses a rare example of such coordination, the case of early childhood policy, and reflects on how organizations dedicated to policy advocacy can advocate for quality education, not just for access to school.

For this strategic alliance to exist, the paper argues that it necessary to recognize existing obstacles that include the lack of a common agenda; mistrust and political differences; and disputes over funding.

Key takeaways include:

- The right to education and the implementation of educational improvement projects are interdependent dimensions of a comprehensive systemic transformation of public education in Honduras.

- Individual projects yield positive results, but require a broader vision that includes the human rights agenda and the right to education to create pathways for scaling up.

- The evaluative framework of monitoring laws, funding, and institutional processes used by established actors lack the financial and technological power of projects to improve educational quality.

- Thinking collectively about promoting the right to education and the implementation of educational improvement projects is necessary to strengthen the public education system in Honduras.

1. Introduction

This Working Paper uses the case of Honduras to examine the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in education systems in contexts of limited state capacity. Given such a context in Honduras, we argue that creating a more equitable and high-quality education system requires a strategic alliance between two types of civil society actors that are typically separate. On the one hand, there are what we call 'established' actors, which we define as organizations that defend the right to education, often through funding from international organizations; these include Foro Dakar Honduras (FDH) and the Association for Social Justice in Honduras (ASJH). On the other hand, are what we call the 'emerging' actors, which we define as organizations focused on improving the quality of education through the implementation of specific projects and funded by private companies; these include Fundación Terra and Fundación Zamora Terán (FZT).

Below, we will discuss the two broad types of actor in depth, describing what they do in the education system. We will also explore how to interpret their various efforts. Through this discussion, we will define the actions and purposes of these actors to highlight their shared objectives and identify potential avenues for collaboration between them to develop more comprehensive public education policies at various levels of the education system.

At the same time, we will see that there are significant obstacles to the potential coordination of the right-to-education agenda and innovations in educational quality. In particular, we highlight three that are fundamental: the lack of an agenda with common goals, mutual mistrust, and competition for insufficient resources. For a strategic alliance between the two types of actor to exist, it is necessary to recognize these obstacles and identify collective demands that can foster collaborative work.

To present our arguments, this Working Paper consists of four sections. The first presents the context of Honduras, a country with fragile institutions and serious educational challenges. The second examines the roles of established and emerging actors within its education system. The third explores the challenges for coordination between the two types of actors and presents some promising solutions. Finally, we present the lessons learned from this case.

2. State Fragility and the Case of Honduras

From the perspective of some scholars of democracy, the state and CSOs can take joint action to create accountability mechanisms that encourage governments to respond to citizens' demands (O'Donnell 1998). From this perspective, strong states with professional bureaucracies are key factors in integrating civil society's capacity and together consolidating states that operate by the rule of law and provide public goods equitably. However, this relationship between states and CSOs depends on the particularities of the political and historical context in which it unfolds (Cohen & Arato 1999; Fox 1993; Hemchi 2022).

In this vein, the case of Honduras leads us to discuss how civil society, particularly the segment of it that is interested in defending the social cause of education, has managed to establish itself in a context of political fragility and weak state capacity. Indeed, following the civil war processes that Honduras experienced at the end of the 20th century, in the 21st century democracy is fragile, as evidenced by the region's first coup d'état of the new millennium (Aguilar 2009) and the formal charges of drug trafficking in the US against a former Honduran president in the U.S. (Moynihan & Schweber 2024). This political environment directly undermines the state's capacity to govern (*The Economist* 2024). Xiomara Castro's rise to power in 2021, while breaking with established bipartisanship, faces the immense challenge of implementing a progressive social agenda through a weakened state apparatus (Canizales Vijil 2022).

This state fragility translates directly into what Edwards et al. (2022) identify as the state's lack of capacity, competence, or will achieve collective goals. Other scholars have documented similar patterns of institutional weakness in Honduras and, more broadly, in Central America. Ruhl (2010) analyzes how Honduras collapsed institutionally during the 2009 crisis, while Pearce (2010) situates Honduras within broader patterns of limited statehood in Central America, where state institutions, rather than strengthening democratic order, systematically undermine it.

Three students working in a classroom provided by the Solar.net Village project.

Credit: Zack Clark via Wikimedia Commons

In the field of education, this limited capacity manifests itself in chronic governance problems. First, limited state capacity is characterized by high turnover among education ministers (Finoli et al. 2023), which creates inconsistent leadership and hinders long-term planning (Edwards et al. 2023). Added to this is a lack of systemic funding and high structural dependence on international development cooperation funds. Furthermore, the sector is dominated by strong clientelism and patronage relationships, especially regarding access to and retention in the teaching profession (Altschuler 2013; Edwards et al. 2019; Morales-Ulloa & Magalhães 2013). Even formal decentralization reforms proved deficient, as they were implemented without the adequate transfer of funds and capacities, resulting in a system that was decentralized by default (di Gropello 2004).

The direct consequences of limited state capacity are reflected in educational outcomes. Average years of schooling stood at just 6.2 in 2018 (UNESCO-SITEAL 2024). Learning outcomes are minimal: in 2019, only 10.07% of primary-school-aged children met math standards and 14.56% met reading standards (UIS-UNESCO 2024). Azevedo et al. (2019) estimated that 75% of children were not proficient in reading on leaving primary school.

Like the rest of the region, an additional characteristic of Honduras's education system is its marked inequality. In 2019, the lower secondary school transition rate, for example, was 89% for the wealthiest quintile, but only 23% for the poorest quintile. Furthermore, upper secondary school completion rate is 76% for the wealthiest and only 17% among the poorest (UNESCO 2024).

Added to these problems are the damaging effects of hurricanes on educational infrastructure (Zapata 2025). There are also constant difficulties in adhering to the school calendar (Canal 6 Honduras 2025).

3. The Roles of Civil Society in Education

In this adverse scenario, what roles does civil society play? Education systems around the world recognize a wide range of non-state actors in education, including, among others, international organizations, development banks, private providers of educational services, business organizations, and CSOs (Cardini et al. 2021; Edwards et al. 2022; Menashy 2016; UNESCO 2021). In this sense, CSOs are just one more actor—albeit a highly significant one—in the governance of education systems (Cortina & Lafuente 2018; Gebremedhin et al. 2023).

The importance of civil society in the field of education has been recognized in major declarations on the needs of contemporary education systems since 1990, and CSOs have been acknowledged as key actors in ensuring the expansion of primary and secondary school enrollment that has been taking place since the 20th century (UNESCO 1990; 2000). Thus, for example, according to the Incheon Declaration (2015):

> *Civil society organizations, including representative and broad-based coalitions and networks, play essential roles. It is necessary to secure their commitment and collaboration at all stages, from planning to monitoring and evaluation, by institutionalizing and ensuring their participation. Civil society organizations can:*
>
> - *promote social mobilization and raise public awareness, ensuring that the voices of citizens (especially those who are victims of discrimination) are heard in policy-making;*
> - *develop innovative and complementary approaches that contribute to advancing the realization of the right to education, particularly for the most marginalized groups;*
> - *gather and share evidence drawn from practice, citizen assessments, and research to inform a structured policy dialogue, holding governments accountable for provision, monitoring progress, conducting evidence-based advocacy, controlling expenditures, and ensuring transparency in education governance and budgetary processes.*

While the value of civil society as a field is clearly established, its functions and actions generate multiple debates.

We identify two types of CSOs engaged in education: 'established' actors and 'emerging' actors. Those we call 'established' actors have focused on promoting and defending the right to education in various ways, including organizing national and international coalitions to improve universal access to school, monitoring education budgets, engaging in political dialogue for educational planning with diverse actors, and launching global awareness campaigns on the importance of the right to high quality education throughout life.

In recent decades, 'emerging' actors have demonstrated alternative forms of action and engagement with education policy, creating innovative and complementary approaches that contribute to advancing the right to education by improving its quality. These efforts focus on the design and implementation of educational improvement projects with one objective being to scale them up within the public system, seeking alternatives to resolve the global education crisis (Angrist et al. 2020; Evans & Popova 2016). Let us examine each of these types of actors and their roles in detail.

3.1 Implementation of educational improvement projects and 'new educational philanthropy'

Emerging actors, sometimes described as working within a 'new educational philanthropy,' are mostly nonprofit foundations linked to business groups that focus their efforts on implementing educational projects. In this way, they leverage private resources to improve public education systems through specific interventions—generally on a small scale and with the aim of directly addressing specific local educational challenges.

These actors are described as emerging not only because they have received relatively little attention, despite their growing relevance, but also because they are rethinking the relationship between philanthropy and education (Bishop & Green 2010; Frumkin 2008; Ridge 2019; Woodcraft et al. 2024) by not limiting themselves to the provision of school services (UNESCO 2021), and by participating in the development of public policies alongside the state and its collective interests. Their work and recognition have increased in recent decades due to changes in governance, where the state's growing interest in quality and in expanding its reach has led it to seek new allies. Thus, by offering valuable alternatives, these emerging actors are beginning to play a broader role.

In the case of Honduras, they include the Terra Foundation, part of the Terra Group which began in 1978 as a real estate company, and has become one of the most diversified private corporations with departments related to energy, oil and infrastructure; the FZT, driven in particular by Latin American Financial Services (LAFISE), which promotes the local financial and market; the Honduran Foundation for Corporate Social Responsibility (FUNDAHSRE), which brings together nearly 200 companies committed to improving education through corporate social responsibility initiatives; and the Honduran Commercial Financial Foundation SA, based in FICOHSA, the bank that founded it.

The home page of FZT's website, which says "We are where children need us to work for them with the help of companies, cooperation agencies and people who share our values."

Credit: © Fundación Zamora Terán, reproduced according to principles of fair use.

Part of the interest in these actors centers on the financial resources they can offer to public education systems, as well as their growing influence at the international and national levels in the field of education. These actors received attention in UNESCO's Education Monitoring Report dedicated to non-state actors (2021), which highlights the need for further research on them, seeking to determine "how they compete, complement, or collaborate with governments" (Matovich 2023: 23).

Emerging actors are also attracting increasing attention from academia. For example, in the case of the United Kingdom, research on the influence of these actors in education is a well-established field (Apple 2010; Ball 2012; Clarke 2012; Furlong 2013). Other countries, such as Spain, are also beginning to conduct more in-depth analysis on this topic (Saura 2016, 2017; Verger et al. 2015). One line of research examines their role in the process of consolidating and expanding the neoliberal model in education.

This tradition of examining civil society's functions in the implementation of neoliberal policies and privatization is also evident in Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly in the Southern Cone. One example is Nuria et al. (2022), which analyzes the role of foundations and corporate social responsibility initiatives in the process of education privatization under President Mauricio Macri's administration in Argentina. Also in that country, but from a perspective that does not focus on neoliberalism, Matovich (2023) analyzes the influence of international networks that are used by local non-state actors as intermediaries, thereby facilitating the circulation of their ideas, values, and agendas.

Other examples in the region are provided by Pedera (2019), who analyzes the role of private foundations in secondary education in Uruguay from an endogenous privatization perspective, distinguishing between the school and system levels. Similarly, Sousa and Araújo (2021) analyze the role of foundations and, in particular, their discourses in favor of the privatization of education in the case of Brazil. In Colombia, Munéyar (2020) analyzes the role of foundations linked to the hydrocarbons sector, where education emerges as one of the most recurring lines of action, accounting for nearly 70% of these foundations' activities.

In the case of Honduras, despite the differences between foundations, it is possible to identify a number of common elements in the activities that they carry out. First, they focus on the quality of learning, opening spaces for innovation to generate new alternatives to educational challenges. For example, the FZT has created spaces for innovation through its Conecta Aprende program, implemented in Nicaragua and Honduras since 2020, reaching more than 76,700 children nationwide. According to the FZT website, the program aims to improve literacy skills, focusing on fluency and reading comprehension in primary school students, through strong pedagogical strategies, integration of digital educational technology, and strengthening of professional teaching development (Fundación Zamora Terán 2025). FZT have a strong presence in public schools in Tegucigalpa and Comayagua where access to digital technology was previously nonexistent (Fundación Zamora Terán 2025). Similarly, the Terra Foundation has developed a peer tutoring program for basic education that identifies academically outstanding students in grades 7 through 12, who then help reinforce skills and competencies in students in the grade below them. This tutoring program has been implemented in approximately 439 public schools and has benefited nearly 180,000 students (Terra Foundation 2023).

A common element of the activities carried out by these foundations is that, generally, they do not depend on public resources for their implementation, nor on changes in education policies. Their scale is usually at the municipal level or lower, and being able to rely on funding from the foundations gives a good likelihood the projects are implemented in controlled environments within the public school system, and demand little from government. This generally allows for the development of collaborative, rather than confrontational, relationships with the government.

One example of this is the FICOHSA Foundation and the preschool programs it has successfully implemented, which have reached 176,000 children over 26 years. They have achieved this through private co-financing in areas where the state has a limited presence, via programs such as Educando Nuestro Futuro or Dar para Educar, which are not only focused on restoring school infrastructure but also operate thanks to voluntary donations from a supermarket's customers. These two programs have benefited more than 15,000 children in various regions of the country to date, according to official information from the foundation (FICOHSA Foundation 2025).

A third commonality is the communication capabilities of these organizations which, combined with the specificity of their actions, increases the chances of producing fast results and generating evidence of improvement, in contrast to the slow pace of government responses. Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, initiatives such as Educatrachos—a collaboration between the Terra Foundation, the FZT Foundation, and the Ministry of Education—showed rapid results by adapting their educational materials for distance learning through a digital platform serving rural communities, distributing printed guides, and establishing educational radio programs that reached more than 80,000 students (Educatrachos 2025).

Despite their benefits, the projects implemented by these actors face significant limitations, particularly regarding scale, lack of funding for replication, and scope of implementation. Many projects in this new generation of pilot interventions that emphasize innovations for educational quality may prove successful on a small scale, but are very difficult to implement at the national level, even when they yield positive results.

One example is the Entrepreneurial School program developed by the Terra Foundation. Although it yielded positive results in the schools where it was implemented, it remained on a very small scale relative to the education system, with activities in 50 schools involving 415 students (*El Mundo* 2025). The program operated for a period of time and generated valuable results, but as soon as funding was withdrawn, the initiatives were not sustained to bring about structural development of the education system.

The availability of resources is a widespread problem. The Honduran education system, with a budget of less than 5% of GDP (below the internationally recommended 6%), has limited capacity to sustain and scale innovations or improvements to educational quality. However, there are some notable exceptions, where innovation has been made possible by external funding. For example, the course "Inclusive Pedagogy on Gender Issues for Early Childhood Education at the Community Level" in Guatemala and Honduras, funded under the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange Program (KIX) of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE 2026), or the Remote Tutoring Program to accelerate learning, which was carried out in collaboration with Red Solidaria and funding from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (Puentes 2025).

A similar program, Maestro en Casa, implemented by Manos Unidas—a Spanish-origin NGO—with funding from the Catholic Church and the Honduran Institute of Radio Education (IHER) offered radio-based education and degrees to hundreds of people each year. The program consisted of training, primarily distance learning via radio, with a small portion of in-person instruction. Students were provided with textbooks and a curriculum, which consisted of a daily schedule supported by radio-broadcast tutorials and biweekly on-site support in the villages (Manos Unidas 2024). However, like previous programs, without financial stability, the program eventually ceased to exist.

These limitations are not unique to Honduras. Kaffenberger et al. (2021) argue that many education reforms fail to produce systemic change because they focus on institutional arrangements rather than learning. Even cases like Ceará in Brazil (Rivas & Scasso 2020), which have achieved strong monitoring and coordination, show that important learning gains do not necessarily translate into structural transformation. Overall, there is limited evidence that project-based innovations lead to deep system-wide change (Kaffenberger et al., 2021; Pritchett, 2013, 2018).

As we have seen, these actors are involved in a wide range of educational initiatives, but they focus on specific areas, such as the implementation of programs aimed at quality, new skills, and employability, which serve as attractive supplements to public schools. In particular, their strategy is to target specific regions and topics to focus on immediate impact, through partnerships with international donors and state education authorities. However, these organizations have a persistent weakness. Regardless of their intentions, they are associated with privatization due to the private profit-making companies that support them (Edwards et al. 2019), such as Grupo Terra funding Fundación Terra, and Grupo LAFISE, a regional financial platform that integrates various markets in the region, which funds FZT.

3.2 Established actors and the objective of promoting and defending of the right to education

Since the end of the last century, 'established actors' have focused their efforts on promoting and defending the right to education through policy advocacy,[1] that is, by carrying out a diverse set of strategic and systematic actions aimed at resolving public issues of general interest. In education, the strategic objectives of established CSOs focus on three main lines of action: placing educational issues on the public agenda; influencing budget allocation and transparency; and/or changing or amending laws and regulations (Edwards et al. 2019, 2023; Finoli et al. 2023; Gebremedhin et al. 2023). In the field of education in Honduras, notable actors include: the FDH,[2] a civil society coalition that obtains its resources from international development cooperation agencies such as the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the Ricardo Ernesto Maduro Andreu Foundation for Education (FEREMA), which receives funding from international organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and formerly USAID as well as from private-sector companies and their corporate social responsibility initiatives; and ASJH, which is funded by individual Christian donors from the US and Canada, and international development organizations and global funds such as Education Out Loud.[3]

The primary strategic objective of these organizations is to place on the public agenda issues or challenges considered important for promoting and guaranteeing the right to education, but which, for various reasons, are not part of the public discourse. For example, adequate education funding, gender parity, non-discrimination, and inclusive education have become part of the public discourse largely because various organizations generate information, voice their opinions on these issues in the public sphere, and engage in political communication with authorities to seek responses to these demands.

ASJH's citizen-led platform "Transformemos Honduras" is an example of how CSOs seek to raise awareness of educational issues. ASJH uses the platform to promote social auditing as a tool for citizen participation, involving parents, teachers, and students in monitoring school attendance and conducting social oversight in educational and health facilities, as well as tracking the number of days children miss school, and the number of snacks they receive when they are there (ASJH 2022). Aggregated data has been added to the educational monitoring indicators that ASJH generates, which have been successfully used to mobilize media exposure for these issues (Rodriguez 2024).

A second strategic objective of established civil society actions is to influence public policy to achieve fairer and more transparent budgets. In Honduras, established civil society actors strive to secure specific budget allocations for issues that affect education, such as support for rural areas or indigenous communities. There is also pressure to ensure that governments fulfill their budgetary obligations; dozens of CSOs seek to make the discussion, allocation, and monitoring of the budget more transparent, aiming to improve the quality of public services and reduce corruption. Parliamentary observatories, budget transparency indices, and mechanisms for oversight, audit, or social accountability have been created to monitor and control government budgets.[4]

FDH provides a notable example of this type of work through its specialized pursuit of educational fiscal justice, which would allow the Ministry of Education to be provided with the necessary resources to ensure the right to education (FDH 2023). Their project *Raising the Voice of Free Public Education in Honduras* (2020–2026), launched with financial and technical support from the civil society in education fund Education Out Loud (part of the Global Partnership for Education and managed by Oxfam Denmark) aims to demand increased public funding for education, gender-responsive budgets, and greater transparency (Education Out Loud 2025).

Members of Foro Dakar Honduras at a working meeting on United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, that all girls and boys should be able to complete a free, equitable, and quality education.

Credit: Foro Dakar Honduras

To this end, the FDH has pursued three main lines of action: establishing or strengthening FDH chapters at the departmental level; generating data on education spending and gender-responsive budgeting; and forging strategic partnerships to influence public policy (Education Out Loud 2025). This involved developing a series of technical papers to estimate the resources that would be needed to fully implement the 2018–2030 Strategic Plan for the Education Sector (PESE). At the same time, FDH increased its engagement with legislative and executive branch authorities, establishing a series of policy dialogues to try and secure the education budget increases necessary for PESE implementation (FDH 2023, Education Out Loud 2025). FDH also actively participated in the discussion panels for the Plan for the Re-establishment of Public Education in Honduras, which was not approved before the end of President Xiomara Castro's administration, and has launched public campaigns aimed at engaging educational communities in demands for a larger budget.

Additionally, the FDH, together with CLADE, participates in the Global Action Week for Education (GAWE), an international mobilization aimed at pressuring the government to fulfill the commitments made under UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (CLADE 2024). With the same intention, in 2023 FDH participated as a national partner in "Consultation on Education for Peace, Democratic Coexistence, and Human Rights," an initiative coordinated by CLADE with support from UNESCO, the Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC), the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), and other agencies of the United Nations system (CLADE 2023).

Allocating a larger budget to education, along with transparency regarding spending and its link to educational outcomes, is also one of AJSH's main strategic objectives. Through the regular publication of reports on education spending, AJSH has sought to engage society in demanding clear and transparent budgets to address the issues of equity and quality plaguing the education system in Honduras (ASJH 2022, 2024). Similarly, through its Transformemos Honduras platform, it has been conducting social audits on the number of school days per year since 2014, using a sample of 18,547 participating teachers from 14 departments. From this data, comparative tables by gender, specialty, and test performance have been created, in addition to in-depth interviews with key actors in the education system. The study made it possible to establish objective transparency parameters and offer legal and administrative recommendations to correct the irregularities identified. Thus, over more than a decade, the work of ASJH and its Transformemos Honduras platform has established itself as a national benchmark in educational transparency, citizen participation, and social auditing (ASJH 2022). Its actions demonstrate that public oversight, multisectoral collaboration, and ethical commitment can sustainably transform the Honduran education system and contribute to the strengthening of democracy and social justice (ASJH & Instituto de la Justicia 2023).

In this same area, beginning in 2021, the FDH has, through hearings with the National Congress, issued formal recommendations to the Ministry of Education to draft laws promoting the inclusion of minority groups; in particular, it has advocated for the development of the "Law on Budget Increases for the Free Public Education Sector with a Focus on Gender Sensitivity, and Inclusion" (CLADE 2024). The law calls for consideration of the recommendations outlined to strengthen the public, free, high-quality, and inclusive education system with increased resources in order to reach historically excluded populations. Similar work is carried out by the Educational Observatory, which since 2017 has maintained agendas for holding the government accountable and demanding action, located at the Francisco Morazán National Pedagogical University (Educational Observatory 2017).

A third objective is to change laws and regulations, as well as, eventually, to have the ability to veto or mobilize to prevent a law from being enacted. In Latin America, cases such as the repeal of amnesty laws for human rights violators, or the more recent case of the decriminalization of abortion, are excellent examples of how civil society can exert pressure to change laws and regulations (Bergallo et al. 2019; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz 2006).

In Honduras, the latest educational reforms, which emphasize the importance of educational governance and the integration of non-state actors, have resulted in these organizations now participating as legitimate stakeholders in legislative matters. For example, the FDH was able to play a role in two of the most important legislative reforms: the Fundamental Law of Education (LFE) and the PESE (FDH 2023, 2024, 2026; Republic of Honduras 2012, 2019).

3.3 The strategies, tools, and actions of established actors

To achieve these objectives, organizations implement a series of actions and strategies that include ensuring their public presence through the use of social media and appearances in the media. For example, FEREMA organizes the presentation of its reports at public events, inviting various types of stakeholders, including the press (FEREMA & IAD 2018, La Tribuna 2024). The FDH has issued a series of statements on various current issues in education, which are shared with the press and political actors, allowing them to articulate their voice and demands on current issues (FDH, 2023).

These organizations base their work on the creation of international and national networks and alliances, which results in actions to gain the political presence and legitimacy needed to place their demands and viewpoints on the public agenda. For example, the FDH focuses its international efforts on participating in CLADE and the Global Campaign for Education (CLADE 2022). This involvement allows them to amplify their voice internationally, participating as representatives of the region in various forums, joining SAME, taking part in high-level regional meetings, and representing civil society in forums organized by UNESCO and other international agencies.

One of the most useful tools for achieving strategic advocacy objectives is the production and dissemination of research and monitoring reports. FEREMA has produced Educational Progress Reports that cover eight areas of analysis: coverage, retention, learning, equity, authority and accountability, standards and assessment systems, the teaching profession, and financing (FEREMA & IAD 2018). It also participated in the preparation of the report "Early Childhood Policies in Latin America: Progress Report on the Implementation of the Regional Agenda," covering the 2018–2020 period and addressing intersectorality and financing, quality of child development services, measurement of child development, and collaboration and partnerships (La Tribuna 2024). For its part, the FDH participated in the creation of the "Shadow Report: Analysis of the Situation of SDG 4 in Honduras for the 2015–2023 Period" on the state of the right to education in the country (FDH 2024).

CSOs seek to engage in dialogue with various policy actors, aiming to be recognized as legitimate interlocutors who represent the voice of a segment of society. This may be based on identity (women's organizations, indigenous organizations) or by representing social groups whose voices are not normally heard, or as technical experts. Direct dialogue with government actors is highly valued by CSOs, which seek opportunities to communicate with the highest-ranking education authorities at the national level (ministers or deputy ministers) and with political actors in the legislative branch, such as those responsible for education committees. Generally, political dialogue is a consequence of the successful use of other mobilization strategies. This dialogue is strategic to their work, as it helps pave the way for future policies that CSOs seek to defend or promote.

However, organizations dedicated to policy advocacy face a series of challenges, notably the difficulty of demonstrating "impacts" in the short and medium term, and the challenge of maintaining a stance that is critical of the government yet simultaneously collaborative and proactive—what might be termed a "constructive critical friendship." Moreover, unlike the local or regional level, the national level presents additional challenges, since advocacy must speak to the rights and needs of the entire citizenry and not only to specific local constituencies. This broader scope requires a rights-based approach and a careful distance from partisan agendas, in order to preserve both legitimacy and independence.

4. Promoting the Right to Education and Implementing Projects to Improve Educational Quality: Room for Synergy?

In the previous sections, we showed that there are two general types of CSOs and NGOs: established actors, dedicated to the right to education, and emerging actors who focus on activities centered on quality. They have distinct roles: defending the right to education and implementing educational improvement projects. The obvious question that follows concerns their relationship. To improve the equity and quality of education systems, do they work better separately, or could their coordination be beneficial? As a national education coalition in Honduras, FDH has been successful in bringing together traditional actors, but it has not achieved the same level of integration with emerging actors focused on educational quality. There are many obstacles to creating joint work between these organizations, but there are examples, such as the early childhood policy led by FEREMA, that demonstrate how the coordination between policy advocacy and the implementation of educational projects can allow for a comprehensive articulation of demands for quality and equity in education, generating synergies around common objectives, and implementing actions at various levels of the education system. We discuss how organizations dedicated to policy advocacy can advocate for quality education, not just for access to school.

4.1 Early childhood policy

The case of civil society engagement around early childhood policy, under FEREMA's leadership, is a good example of how the complementary functions can be effectively coordinated. As we saw above, one of the most effective strategies for promoting the right to education is the creation of broad civil society alliances, and having a representative and diverse range of organizations enhances legitimacy. The ultimate goal is to influence education policies—in terms of early childhood educational programs and teacher training—in such a way as to guarantee universal access to quality education.

Since the 1990s, FEREMA has established itself as a leading CSO in education (FEREMA 2023). In 2017, together with the international organization El Diálogo Interamericano, it presented its first educational progress report (FEREMA 2017) which identified early childhood and preschool education as a priority issue. While producing this and subsequent progress reports, FEREMA also worked on developing and implementing educational programs in public schools. These included "Juego y Aprendo" (Play and Learn), which developed a series of teacher training activities and educational materials to strengthen literacy in early grades, and "Crucemos el puente" (Let's Cross the Bridge), a widely-implemented learning support and reinforcement programs which began in 2004 with 53 public schools and by 2017 had expanded to 5,708 schools, certifying more than 440,000 children in pre-primary education across the country's 18 departments. The programs were designed for Community Centers for Pre-Basic Education (CCEPREB), public education centers operating in areas where conventional state-run services do not reach. They helped establish formal pre-primary education services for in these centers with the aim of improving the quality and effectiveness of student outcomes (FEREMA, 2017). The pedagogical approach of these programs was based on the national pre-primary education curriculum and enabled community leaders, parents, and other local stakeholders—even if those lacking formal teaching training—to obtain the necessary training to teach classes and help their students achieve certification.

Based on its direct work in schools and its advocacy for education policy, in 2022 FEREMA established a cross-sectoral alliance—including government, the private sector, and nonprofit CSOs—as well as a vast number of stakeholders who expand the avenues for collaboration in the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies (Finoli et al.,

2023). The work of this alliance included initiatives to promote the right to education, such as the production of a second educational progress report, this time focused on early childhood. Its launch was attended by the Minister of Education and covered by various media outlets that highlighted the problem of low preschool enrollment in the country (La Tribuna 2024).

What is novel about this trajectory of activities is that, in addition to the established actions of placing an issue on the public agenda, FEREMA developed a series of specific educational improvement projects to directly address some of the challenges of early childhood education.

The methodological framework that FEREMA applies in its projects is structured around four areas of focus:

- Continuing education programs, including a nine-month university certificate program offered by the Central American Technological University (UNITEC) in partnership with FEREMA.
- Provision of resources for educators and, in some cases, furniture and infrastructure such as sanitation and water.
- Quality, which focuses on teacher training and the creation of up-to-date educational courses that are also monitored and evaluated.
- Social-emotional learning as part of teacher training and student education.

These areas are exemplified in the work of Crucemos el Puente, which aims to strengthen educational quality in early childhood and pre-primary education communities through workshops and ongoing training processes, academic support sessions, and the development of innovative methodologies. This led to the development of a comprehensive system of educational competencies in the Community Centers for Pre-Basic Education, which has been integrated into the continuing education system of various municipal and departmental educational authorities, with contributions from the Swiss Foundation Vivamos and in collaboration with UNITEC.

A example of the work of this initiative is the recent campaign to train 30 teachers from 20 Community Centers for Pre-Basic Education from four municipalities to achieve their Certificate in Comprehensive Development of Educational Competencies for the Pre-Primary Level. The aim was to strengthening the capacities of volunteer educators (FEREMA 2025). Since the program's inception, more than 300 educators from all departments of the country have been certified.

4.2 Quality and equity in the educational debate

We can see how, by linking the promotion of the right to education with the implementation of projects, we can combine complementary actions (such as developing national reports and designing teacher training programs in specific schools) and strengthen the necessary coordination between educational equity and quality. Therefore, we recommend that NGOs and CSOs interested in promoting education in Latin American countries with fragile states seek synergies between established CSOs working for the right to education and emerging actors who, with their financial strength and technology, focus on implementing educational projects.

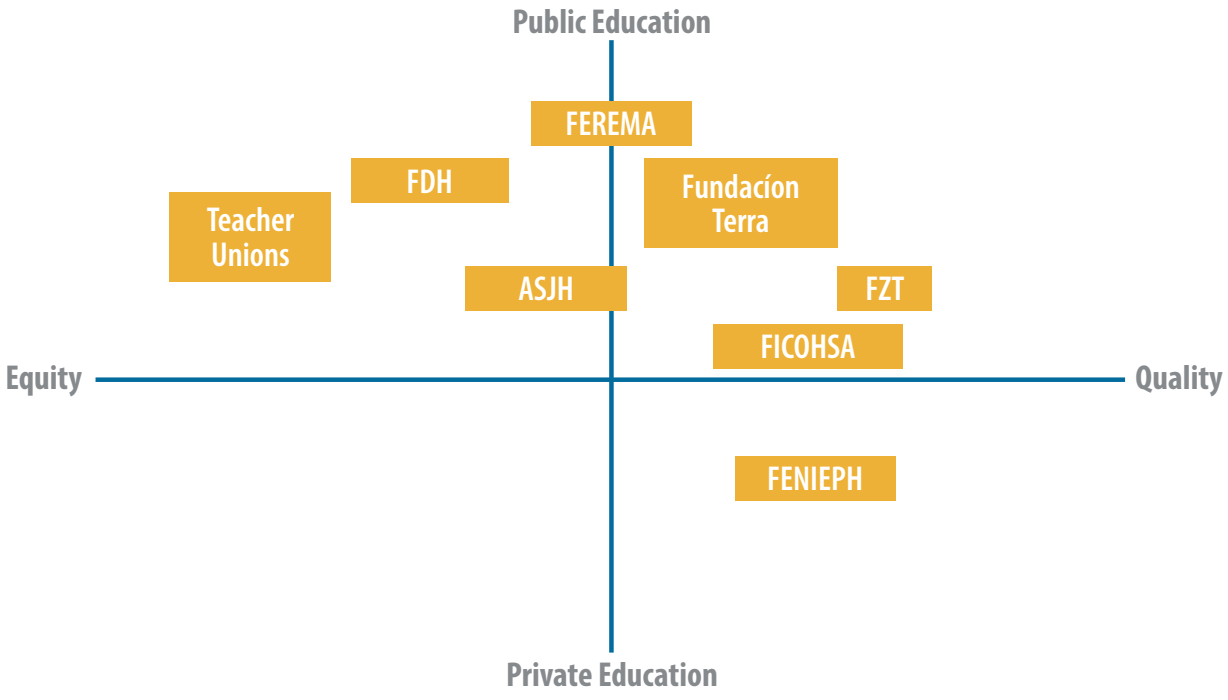
One reason this synergy is uncommon is because the dominant narrative conceives these two types of actors as opposites. In recent decades, discussions of education in the international arena have centered on two major debates that can be depicted on a Cartesian graph. The first debate is represented by the x-axis, which has equity at one end and quality at the other. The second debate is represented by the y-axis, which has the public sector at one end and the private sector at the other (Hevia & Jamil 2023).

To summarize the discussion, on the equity-quality axis, the debate centers in particular on "what" questions: What does the right to education mean? What do we expect from education systems? What are their main problems and objectives? In the 20th century, the answers to these questions focused on the ideal of equity, and seeking to provide free public education to the entire population. Although the state is the primary funder and administrator of the education system responsible for fulfilling that promise, as we have seen in recent decades, non-governmental actors have played an increasingly significant role in pursuing educational equity (Gebremedhin et al. 2023; Srivastava 2020; UNESCO 2021; Verger et al. 2018). At the beginning of the 21st century, the focus shifted to quality. Here, the discussion developed around the need to prepare students for the information age. Thus, in recent years, educational reforms have focused on how to improve the quality of education through curricular changes, teacher policies, and the expansion of educational provision models (Colella & Díaz-Salazar 2015; Wulff 2020).

On the y-axis lies the debate between the public and private sectors, focusing particularly on "how" questions: How can we provide universal, high-quality education? How can we ensure that educational services improve over time? How can we hold schools more accountable for their results? During the 20th century, the state was primarily responsible for ensuring access to education, while the discussion on private education was limited to freedom of choice and the participation of established actors such as the church. With the emphasis on quality, education began to be viewed as a service that could be improved through market mechanisms and the participation of companies. This led to the implementation of policies such as education vouchers, the creation of quasi-markets, and the deregulation of teacher labor policies, with the aim of supply and demand driving educational quality (Ball 2012).

What is novel about the proposed framework is that the educational quality initiatives put forward by emerging actors are situated within the quality-public spectrum; they are oriented toward improving public schools, not necessarily toward their de facto privatization. From the perspective of private foundations, the idea is to improve educational quality within public systems, not so much through privatization, but rather through the adoption of methodologies and actions aimed at improving learning (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of civil society actors in the education sector in Honduras by orientation.



Source: Author's own work.

To ensure this potential does not amount to disguised privatization (Edwards et al. 2023), it is necessary to include the dimensions of equity, access, and rights in the discussion. Educational improvements must aim to be universal, not merely reach those schools favored by a foundation's decision based on its commercial strategies. And this is where the coordination between functions promoting the right to education makes sense. If there is no explicit discussion of how these actions can ensure universal and free access through the public system, these agendas do not promote educational equity.

On the other hand, CSOs advocating for the right to education have historically assumed that educational equity will lead to quality. However, we have long known that school and learning are not the same thing; access to school does not guarantee that children will learn, not even the basics (Pritchett 2013). For this reason, educational quality is also a necessary requirement for ensuring the right to education. Coming together to work toward securing greater resources for education systems is necessary, but not sufficient if we do not address the issue of educational quality and the need for schools to adapt to children and new learning systems—rather than the other way around.

There are very few examples of partnerships that seek to complement the role of civil society in education in Honduras, or even in the Global South. The actions undertaken by the PAL Network and its organizations (Alcott et al. 2018; Hevia et al. 2024) or the dissemination of the "Teaching at the Right Level" methodology in Africa, are some of the few examples where this complementary action between defending the right to education and implementing improvement projects can be observed.

The scarcity of examples is no accident; as we will see in the following section, in the case of Honduras, we identified at least three significant constraints that hinder this complementarity.

5. Key Considerations for Developing a Complementary Agenda

There are three perspectives that allow us to identify the main challenges to be addressed and the ways to address them.

5.1 Lack of a common agenda: the tension between equity and quality

The first challenge for coordination is establishing a common agenda. Established actors, such as teachers' unions and human rights organizations, tend to prioritize equity, universal access, and the defense of public education as a fundamental right, without addressing the quality of learning beyond the struggle for resources and access to school. For their part, corporate foundations and emerging organizations tend to focus on the educational quality of schools as they define it and the development of employability skills.

This conceptual divergence is not merely semantic; it often reflects different visions regarding the priorities of education policy. For example, when the Terra Foundation promotes entrepreneurship and digital skills programs in nearly 90 public secondary schools across various districts of the country, it prioritizes quality from the perspective of preparing students for the labor market. Meanwhile, organizations such as the FDH focus their efforts on ensuring that education reaches the most marginalized communities, prioritizing equity in the allocation of state resources, without knowing clearly whether they have succeeded.

The tension between these approaches hinders the formation of effective coalitions and unified messages directed at decision-makers. Without a shared vision of the fundamental goals of educational transformation, joint advocacy initiatives tend to get lost in fragmented and, at times, contradictory agendas.

5.2 Mistrust and political differences: the specter of privatization

A second obstacle to effective coordination is the persistent mistrust of established actors toward emerging ones, particularly those from the business sector. In Honduras, where social inequalities run deep and history is marked by intense political conflicts, CSOs rooted in social movements often view educational initiatives promoted by business foundations with suspicion, suspecting hidden agendas of privatization, even when no such stance has been made explicit. This mistrust manifests itself, for example, in dialogue forums where representatives of organizations such as the Commission for Alternative and Non-Formal Education question the intentions of foundations like FICOHSA or FEREMA, even though their programs may be generating positive results in hundreds of pre-primary public schools. The fear of a progressive commodification of education hinders the building of strategic alliances, even when shared objectives exist.

Political and ideological differences also play an important role. While some organizations maintain a critical stance toward educational models influenced by neoliberal visions, others consider efficiency and innovation to be priorities, regardless of their ideological origin. These differences, rooted in distinct conceptions of the role of the state and civil society in education, complicate constructive dialogue and coordinated action.

5.3 Disputes over funding: limited resources and divergent priorities

The third significant obstacle relates to access to financial resources and the competitive dynamics this generates. Corporate foundations generally have their own stable sources of funding, derived from their parent companies or corporate donors. This allows them to implement social impact programs with relative autonomy and continuity. In contrast, established advocacy organizations typically rely on international development cooperation finance, public funds, or small donations—resources that are more limited and unstable.

This asymmetry in access to funding creates a dynamic where international donors and aid agencies tend to prioritize projects with tangible, measurable results in the short term. It is easier to document the impact of a literacy program benefiting 1,000 children in specific communities than to demonstrate the results of a policy advocacy campaign to increase the national education budget. Consequently, organizations are pressured to orient their strategies toward direct interventions that can show quick successes directly linked to learning, regardless of whether they address the structural problems of the education system.

It is interesting to note how these two requirements are exemplified in FEREMA's work and the variety of projects it undertakes. FEREMA has developed its own methodology that incorporates training and support projects for teachers and students, as well as small-scale pilot projects. Thus, we see that, although it is an established actor, it has successfully carried out activities at both the policy advocacy and project implementation levels.

For example, the CCEPREB schools are the result of a collaboration between FEREMA and the Honduran government spanning more than a decade, offering pre-primary education opportunities to a previously excluded segment of the population. This is a project that, while it received grants from USAID, has also successfully collaborated with foundations. On the other hand, FEREMA also generates small-scale projects, such as the training modules for teachers at various CCEPREBs mentioned above. However, we cannot overlook the importance of addressing the core concerns of FDH and ASJH, which, through incisive research into the education system, advocate for greater transparency in Honduras's school system, the elimination of corruption, and the protection of the rights of excluded groups.

6. Conclusions

The findings from the Honduran case can be organized into four main conclusions.

Interdependence of access and learning in the right to education. The Honduran case shows that the right to schooling and the implementation of educational improvement projects are not separate agendas but interdependent dimensions of a broader systemic transformation of public education. Guaranteeing the right to education means not only ensuring universal and free access but also creating the conditions for all children to learn. In this sense, reforms aimed at improving quality only acquire their full meaning when framed within a rights-based perspective.

Limits of stand-alone projects. Individual projects, driven mainly by emerging actors, can yield positive results in specific contexts; however, their reach remains limited if they are not connected to a broader vision that incorporates human rights and the right-to-education agenda. Without such alignment, innovations tend to remain focalized experiences, lacking the normative, political, and financial foundations needed to open pathways for scaling up and generating structural change in the system.

Strengths and weaknesses of established actors. The advocacy repertoire used by established actors—centered on monitoring laws, financing, and institutional processes—is crucial for defending public education, but it lacks the financial, technological, and operational power that educational improvement projects bring to bear on learning quality. This asymmetry illustrates that legal oversight and policy advocacy, on their own, are not sufficient to transform pedagogical practices or respond to the learning crisis.

The need for complementary collective action. Therefore, it is necessary to think and act collectively to promote the right to education and implement educational improvement projects, seeking complementarity rather than confrontation between these agendas. Only a strategic articulation between the advocacy capacities of established actors and the technical and innovative potential of emerging actors can sustainably strengthen Honduras' public education system. In the context of severe institutional fragility and inequality, such as in Honduras, this complementarity is not only desirable but essential. Without it, interventions will remain fragmented—on one side, 'islands of excellence' without systemic impact, and on the other, a legitimate defense of public education that does not always translate into concrete improvements in classrooms. By contrast, there is scope to build more comprehensive demands for a public education system that is both robust in rights-based terms and effective in guaranteeing learning for all.

7. Recommendations

Based on these findings, we propose a set of actor-specific recommendations.

Established right-to-education advocacy organizations can strengthen their contributions by explicitly incorporating the learning dimension into their agendas, complementing the monitoring of laws, financing, and access with systematic attention to educational outcomes. This requires either developing internal technical capacities or forging alliances with organizations specialized in quality, as well as exploring joint projects with emerging actors that link political pressure for increased and better-targeted funding to the implementation of pedagogical innovations in public schools. Simultaneously, it is important to build a public narrative that presents equity and quality as interdependent dimensions of the right to education, rather than as competing objectives. Legal frameworks and advocacy discourses already refer to educational quality; extending this concern to concrete learning outcomes is the most direct route to achieving such articulation.

Emerging actors can maximize their impact by aligning their interventions with an explicit commitment to strengthening public education and upholding the right to an education. This entails designing projects that avoid creating "islands of excellence" and incorporate territorial and social equity criteria, alongside strategies for scalability and sustainability from the outset—including transferring capacities to public actors and seeking the institutionalization of effective methodologies. It is equally strategic to build collaborative relationships with advocacy organizations and share data and evidence to inform public policy agendas and bolster the legitimacy of innovations.

Coalitions and networks can serve as neutral spaces to build trust and a shared language between established and emerging actors by facilitating regular encounters where priorities, results, and concerns are openly discussed. From these spaces, it is possible to develop conceptual frameworks that integrate efficiency, equity, and cultural relevance as core components of educational quality and use them to guide position papers, proposals, and joint strategies. Making "small wins" achieved through specific collaborations visible helps demonstrate the value of complementarity and creates the political and symbolic conditions needed to move towards larger joint initiatives.

Coordinated work between established and emerging actors on specific projects, as illustrated by FEREMA's experience in early childhood, can greatly enhance feedback and accountability mechanisms within the education system. While organizations with social advocacy capacities monitor compliance with legal frameworks and budget allocations at the national level, technically oriented organizations can document the actual implementation of policies in schools and identify gaps, obstacles, and opportunities for improvement. The experience during the COVID-19 pandemic in Honduras shows how such coordination made it possible not only to argue for more equitable national education policies, but also to implement immediate solutions, such as community learning centers in vulnerable areas, creating a virtuous cycle in which field evidence informs advocacy, and advocacy in turn generates the enabling conditions to expand the impact of local interventions.

State and educational authorities can play a key role as coordinators of the non-state actor ecosystem by systematically mapping organizations and projects, defining clear frameworks for engagement, and establishing institutional coordination mechanisms. Mixed committees or working groups that bring together rights-based organizations and technical actors can validate, adapt, and scale pedagogical innovations according to the shared criteria of equity, cultural relevance, and sustainability. Simultaneously, strengthening information and evaluation systems is essential to monitor the impact of these initiatives on different groups of students and territories and to ensure that their expansion follows a system-wide logic rather than being driven by short-term opportunities.

Finally, **donors and cooperation agencies** can foster complementarities between established and emerging actors by prioritizing funding for projects that combine policy advocacy with improvements in school-level quality rather than isolated initiatives. The creation of pooled funds with shared governance could reduce competition for resources and promote collaborative projects aligned with strengthening public education. It is also crucial to support rigorous evaluations of interventions and promote open access to the resulting evidence for ministries, civil society organizations, and communities so that it can inform decisions about policy and scaling.

Notes

1 As discussed in the literature, the established role of civil society is typically defined as actions aimed at resolving a public problem or influencing policy decisions by holding the government accountable for fulfilling its functions and obligations (Acuña & Vacchieri, 2007; Juárez et al., 2016; Tapia et al., 2010).

2 Foro Dakar Honduras, founded in 2004 following the signing of the Framework for Action of the Declaration on Education for All (signed in 2000 in Dakar), is a civil society coalition dedicated to monitoring and advocating for public education policies in Honduras. It has focused on the human right to education, particularly the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal number four (SDG4), which centers on ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education (FDH, 2026). Specifically, the FDH's objectives focus on achieving educational fiscal justice that provides the Ministry with the necessary resources to ensure the right to education (FDH, 2026).

3 In addition, there are other important CSOs, such as the Center for Research and Promotion of Human Rights (CIPRODEH), which works specifically in the field of education, promoting a culture of peace.

4 ARC has one of the world's largest repositories on this subject; see https://accountabilityresearch.org/publications/.

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