

# THE ROLES OF CSOS IN FTI COUNTRY-LEVEL PROCESSES

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At the World Education Forum in Dakar civil society organisations were recognised as playing an important role in respect of the “*formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development*”. Indeed, a wider role was also acknowledged in helping “*mobilise strong national political commitment to education, develop national action plans and enhance investment*”.

Since the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 there has been a dramatic rise in the coordination of civil society work on education across Africa, Asia and Latin America. National education coalitions have emerged in dozens of countries, linking NGOs, teacher unions, parent groups, students, faith based groups, activists and social movements. The coalitions act as national platforms, bringing together diverse voices from across society, to hold their governments to account for delivering on Education For All (EFA). Dramatic progress has been seen in demystifying education budgets, monitoring the implementation of policies, promoting gender equality in education and stimulating public debate, including in the media and with parliamentarians.

Within FTI there has been a growing recognition of the key role of CSOs with an increasing recognition that the key to effective country level processes is a “*Local Education Group*” made up government, donors and CSOs. In the latest proposal from the task team on strengthening country level processes there is a key role for CSOs in helping to analyse the status of existing education sector plans, supporting revision / adapting of the plans and helping in the review of the plans presented for FTI endorsement. The Capacity Development guidelines recognise that “*country ownership is much broader than government ownership*” and should include civil society.

In practice CSOs have had mixed experiences of being involved in FTI processes. In some cases there is space for CSO contributions - but CSOs are not well organized to use the space. Sometimes, the space for contribution is very limited for example reduced to a one off consultation event - where CSO views can be heard and then ignored. If CSOs are to fulfill the roles now expected of them by FTI it is important to invest both in:

- Creating a sustained spaced for engagement by civil society;
- Building civil society capacity and coordination so that it can use that space effectively.

**Creating space** should not be a problem as there is an apparent consensus that CSOs have a key role - but this does vary from country to country. Some governments feel threatened by independent CSO voices and try to control who is invited to the table if they have to invite CSOs. Sometimes, donors unintentionally exclude CSOs. There is

little doubt that the spread of national donor consortiums on education has meant that Ministries of Education are sometimes single minded in their dialogue with donors — ignoring inputs from their own citizens or oversight from their own parliaments in the pursuit of coordinated donor funding. The effect can be that Ministries feel more accountable to donors than to their own citizens. Clearly this is wrong and we need to invest actively to ensure improved domestic accountability.

The **capacity of civil society** to play a constructive role is a more complex area. There are now many national education coalitions (65 are members of the Global Campaign for Education). However, the capacity of these coalitions to fully represent the range of voices in civil society depends on having predictable funding for such work. As it is, most bilateral and multilateral donors continue to work in a projectised way with civil society, supporting CSOs for service delivery but not for more strategic work. Indeed, in respect of work with CSOs donors show little or none of the coordination, harmonization or sector-wide perspective now used in dealing with government. This needs to change and FTI can play a key role.

One specific proposal is for the creation of **National Civil Society Education Funds**. This concept emerged from research across 20 countries in 2006/7 involving 500 detailed interviews. The idea is simple. To have a national fund in each country managed by civil society for civil society, funded in a coordinated way from multiple donors.

National Civil Society Education Funds will contribute to the achievement of FTI goals by supporting civil society organisations to participate in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of national education sector plans. They will provide strategic grants and capacity building to strengthen the work of civil society organisations committed to EFA, particularly building their capacity to hold governments accountable. National CSEFs will be run to the highest standards of transparency by inter-agency boards.

CEF, a project set up by the UK government and run by ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children has shown what such an approach can deliver. Over the past five years it has

- created or strengthened broad-based national education coalitions in 16 countries, involving over 2,100 organisations
- contributed to at least 92 significant changes of policy
- trained over 430,000 people in budget monitoring, and distributed information about education budgets to over 6 million people
- supported 56 partner organisations to document innovative ways of ending gender discrimination provided strategic funding for the Global Campaign for Education's annual action week, mobilising over 6 million people in 120 countries

A proposal is now being developed and refined to support national Civil Society Education Funds in **82 countries**, seed funding these through regional secretariats over the next three years. We appeal for progressive donors to show their support for this approach and to work together to get this bold initiative off the ground. FTI could play a pivotal role in filling this evident gap in the aid architecture by supporting such an initiative, for example through EPDF.