

National Civil Society Education Funds

A briefing paper

1 The origins of this concept

Since the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 there has been a dramatic rise in civil society advocacy 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. Coalitions have played a key role in securing major gains such as the abolition of user fees, leading to the enrolment of millions of children in school for the first time.

This briefing paper outlines a new proposal for how this important work can be effectively and sustainably funded – via a National Civil Society Education Fund.

The concept of a national Civil Society Education Fund (CSEF) arose from a major research and consultation process undertaken by the **Commonwealth Education Fund**. Since 2002 the Commonwealth Education Fund (which is run by ActionAid, Oxfam GB and Save the Children with a \$20 million grant from the Department for International Development), has been supporting education advocacy work in 16 countries across Africa and Asia.¹ In 2006, the Commonwealth Education Fund undertook a

consultation process to explore ways of sustaining the education advocacy work that it has been supporting, whilst recognising that the Commonwealth Education Fund itself will end in 2008. This “sustainability mapping” process involved 20 independent researchers interviewing over 500 people in 17 countries.² In this unprecedented work, the researchers spoke to members of education coalitions, national and international NGOs, donors, government officials and academics, they reviewed all relevant literature and they studied existing funding models in different sectors. The final report from this work, *Funding Change*,³ makes the case that, *there is a gap in the present aid architecture around education*, and that national CSEFs offer an effective way to fill this gap. It argues that this model is not only relevant in Commonwealth Education Fund countries but in *any* other country that is still working towards the achievement of EFA.

This briefing paper shares learning from the research about what works. While the concept of national CSEFs has emerged through the work of the Commonwealth Education Fund it is not an idea that is owned or controlled by it or by ActionAid, Save the Children or Oxfam. Rather, *anyone excited by the concept is encouraged to take forward the ideas in their own country and develop their own national CSEF.*

¹ For more details on Commonwealth Education Fund see: www.commonwealtheducationfund.org

² The researchers spoke to 90 members or staff of national education coalitions; 89 national CSOs, 92 international NGO staff, 90 donor representatives (49 bilateral, 16 multilateral and 25 Foundation or Fund staff), 42 private sector representatives, 37 UN staff, 32 government officials or members of parliament, 27 academics and 30 Commonwealth Education Fund staff.

³ Tomlinson, K. and Macpherson, I. (2007). *Funding Change: Sustaining Civil Society Advocacy in Education*. London: Commonwealth Education Fund.

The big idea

National Civil Society Education Funds will contribute to the achievement of Education For All (EFA) by supporting civil society organisations to participate in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of national education plans, as agreed in Dakar in 2000. They will provide strategic grants and capacity building to strengthen the education advocacy work of civil society organisations committed to EFA. National CSEFs will be run to the highest standards of transparency by inter-agency boards. They will be accountable, nationally owned, effective and efficient.

Funding for national CSEFs is not secured. International foundations, major NGOs and even the private sector will play an important role in helping to seed-fund national CSEFs in different countries. However, the research shows that the involvement of bilateral and multilateral donors is essential. One specific recommendation is that **every time bilateral or multilateral donors provide sector-wide support for a national government's education plan, an additional 3% should be triggered, to go straight into the national CSEF.**

The national CSEFs will focus on funding education advocacy work, as articulated in the Dakar framework for Action:

- enabling civil society to help “mobilise strong national political commitment to education, develop national action plans and enhance investment”.
- facilitating the “engagement and participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development”.

2 The concept

The research conducted by the Commonwealth Education Fund in 2006 made clear recommendations about the optimum structure and functioning of national Civil Society Education Funds.

2.1. The Board

The constitution of a national CSEF board is the key to ensuring accountability, transparency and ownership of the fund. The membership of the board should be from diverse agencies, involving perhaps 10 or 15 people who may come from the following constituencies:

- National NGOs, networks or coalitions
- International NGOs
- Teachers' unions
- Social movements
- Women's rights organisations
- Bilateral or multilateral donors⁴
- Academics/universities
- Prominent individuals
- Journalists
- Faith-based organisations
- Private sector representatives

⁴ Probably just one representative e.g. the lead agency or the chair of education donors' consortium.

Board members should not gain financially from participation, though their costs could be covered. The key criteria for selection should be their personal commitment to EFA. A balance of men and women should be sought. Individuals who join should be acting in an individual, not institutional, capacity, bringing their personal knowledge and experience. If/when their own agency is ever considered for a grant they should leave the room during the deliberation and decision-making. Strong controls will be needed to ensure that organisations represented on the board do not benefit unfairly from the funds. Some form of relationship must be maintained with government, either through regular meetings, or an advisory committee – but there should not be a decision making role for government on the board.

2.2. The implementing agency

A national CSEF should have a small, independent implementing agency. This small team, perhaps five people, would be employed by the fund to carry out the following functions:

- Promoting the national CSEF
- Receiving and processing proposals
- Preparing papers for board decisions
- Communicating and implementing board decisions
- Ensuring sound financial management and reporting
- Compiling learning from – and evaluations of – the impact of work funded
- Identifying capacity building needs, especially of smaller CSOs
- Proactively linking with training providers to respond to training needs.

It is important to ensure that this small implementing agency remains focused on national CSEF management, respecting the political space of the national education coalition and its role in setting strategic directions. The agency should seek to use less than 10% of the funding available for its own costs (though a larger percentage may be needed initially).

2.3. The agenda/parameters

Education advocacy is hard to fund, yet it is essential for achieving EFA and for enabling civil society to play the role envisaged in Dakar (see box, p2). This fund is to be used only and explicitly for funding advocacy work. It is not intended to fund service delivery.

The exact framing of priorities for funding needs to be determined nationally in each country, but there is useful learning, for example from the Commonwealth Education Fund whose mandate was to:

- Strengthen broad-based and democratically run national education coalitions that have active membership across the country, and can effectively channel grassroots voices and experiences into influencing national-level policy and practice.
- Ensure that government financing for education is sufficient to make public schools work for all girls and boys, and that government budgets are effectively targeted and reach where they are most needed.
- Support evidence-based influencing of policy, rooted in innovative work that has succeeded in getting excluded children, particularly girls, into public schools.

2.4. Ensuring transparency

- The national CSEF's aims and objectives, and the names of the members of the board, should be published. There must be clarity from the start over what the national CSEF will or will not fund, and why.
- Staff and sub-contractors must be recruited through a competitive process in which the positions are advertised widely.
- The basis on which proposals are assessed should be available to all applicants.
- Grant-making should be competitive, in the sense that organisations must be assessed against common criteria.
- Any board member whose organisation submits a grant proposal must not be present when this proposal is discussed. Any conflict of interest must be declared.
- The results of each funding round should be published on the national CSEF's website and in paper copy elsewhere.

- Annual reports and accounts should be published, and accounts should be externally audited.
- Reporting requirements for both the fund and its beneficiaries should be established in advance of any grant-making.
- The national CSEF must be publicised widely, in national and local newspapers, on the internet (with links from other relevant sites) and through other creative means to ensure that organisations across the country understand how it works.
- The national CSEF should provide different sizes of grant to make it accessible to organisations of differing size, focus and capacity.
- The fund's staff should explore organisations that may be eligible for support and take risks with organisations that have a strong application but need support to build up their skills.

2.5. The funding

The most effective way to guarantee sustainable funding for national coalitions/advocacy would be for bilateral and multilateral donors to commit themselves to placing **an additional 3%** into a national CSEF every time they support an education sector plan of a national government. It is important that this happens automatically. Major donors giving support to basic education projects would also be encouraged to put an additional 3% into the national CSEF.⁵

It is essential that this is *additional* – as it would create tensions with any government if civil society was seen to be effectively taking donor money away from the government.

The premise of this approach is that national civil society should be in the driving seat for developing its own strategic work, and that civil society advocacy work on education should *not* be defined by donor priorities, or indeed any other external agenda, as this could distort direction.

Individual donors may wish to take the first step in supporting national CSEFs in particular countries.

Of course, depending on different contexts and also on performance of the national CSEFs, donors may wish to give a *higher or lower percentage* of support. The 3% is an indicative guideline and may vary to ensure appropriate sums are mobilised (either in countries with too little or too much donor support for education).

Where donors provide *general budget support* and funds are not allocated specifically to the education sector, the percentage of the government's budget allocated to education (likely to be around 20%) may be the basis for calculations (so where general budget support is given, an additional 0.6% might be triggered to go into the national CSEF).

Three other sources of funding for the national CSEFs may be important:

- Many large **foundations or trusts** may find national CSEFs an effective way to channel their resources into the education sector, drawing on national expertise rather than reinventing the wheel. Over the past year there has been a massive increase in interest in international education from major US foundations. Foundations may be particularly interested in seed-funding a national CSEF, particularly if this then attracts donor government funding.
- **International NGOs** may find national CSEFs an effective mechanism for improving coordination of their efforts to support national civil society's work on education. The close working relationships forged between ActionAid, Oxfam GB and Save the Children in the management of the Commonwealth Education Fund over the past five years has proved how effective this can be.
- Some **private sector** organisations may decide to support the call for better-quality public education; the national CSEF offers them a cost-effective way to have a major impact, as opposed to focusing on isolated projects.

⁵ Donors could give the 3% as a one-off payment when a new grant to the government is announced, or could pay it into the national CSEF on an annual basis.

3

Why education and why now? The changing aid architecture

There is widespread consensus that delivering on the EFA agenda is the fundamental responsibility of government. It is one area of state provision that extends from the centre to the most remote village – schools, as the last outpost of the state, offer unique opportunities for citizens to engage, more easily than they can with any other type of government provision. Therefore, the *education sector is in a unique position* that makes the creation of civil society funds specifically for education particularly important. The emergence of national coalitions on education has been unparalleled in any other sector. There is thus a distinct space for citizen monitoring of government commitments in education and a distinct need to ensure that this work is strategically funded, and funded outside of government.

In 2007 the world stands at the mid-point for meeting the Dakar EFA goals, set in 2000 for achievement in 2015. There has been progress since 2000 but it has been too little, with many countries urgently needing to accelerate progress – at least 70 countries are at present off-track. National CSEFs could add significant momentum towards achievement of the goals by further harmonising civil society work and building stronger domestic government accountability for delivering on the goals.

Since 2000 there has been a progressive move towards sector budget support, with donors harmonising their aid behind national government education plans. In the education sector, the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) has been a notable mechanism accelerating this harmonisation and promoting the idea of 'one country, one plan - and one report'. There are donor consortiums on education in many countries and there has been a significant move away from donor-led special projects. Indeed, donors are probably better harmonised on education than in any other sector.

However this emerging harmonisation carries risks. Donors working together are likely to be funding the core national education plan of the government – and governments risk becoming quite reliant on

these relationships and this funding to maintain the basic functioning of their education system. There is an associated risk that governments may feel compelled to be accountable to donors for delivering on the education plan – more than they feel accountable to their own parliaments or citizens.

The move to strategic sector support of government education plans has not been matched by a similar strategic engagement with civil society. This partly results from the lack of a co-ordinated and strategic approach by civil society itself – a situation fuelled by inadequate capacity, funding and information (eg about government plans, budgets and performance). This leaves donor responses projectised, fragmented or marginal.

Many donors recognise this, and want to support civil society work that is strategic. Yet as they do so, there is a danger of intruding too much on the independent space of civil society. National CSEFs offer an appropriate means to engage in a strategic and coordinated way, helping people to demand that national governments be accountable to their own citizens for delivering on education goals.



Ugandan school children gather to greet visitors

4

Steps to starting up a national CSEF

The process of setting up a national CSEF could be initiated by any credible individual or group from civil society. It may be the national education coalition, a national NGO or the national branch of an international NGO that sets processes in motion. From 2007 until its close in 2008, the Commonwealth Education Fund will be actively assisting the process in some countries, and it is hoped that many others will take the initiative in other countries.

There are some key steps that may be followed, though these will need to be adapted to each context:

- **Read the full research paper(s)**
 - *Funding Change: Sustaining Civil Society Advocacy in Education* (London, Commonwealth Education Fund, 2007)
 - *Driving the Bus: The Journey of national Education Coalitions* (London, Commonwealth Education Fund, 2007)
- **Raise interest in the concept:**
 - Share this briefing paper or publish an adapted version of it for wide distribution across national civil society.
 - Hold a national seminar or workshop, bringing together the relevant stakeholders.
 - Discuss the concept with in-country representatives of bilateral or multilateral donors (e.g. DFID, EU, SIDA, NORAD, USAID, UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, etc).
- **Form an interim board**
 - Identify a core group of credible individuals who will be willing to form an interim board⁶ to take the idea forward and have more formal discussions with all the stakeholders. There should be close coordination with any existing national education coalition to ensure that this is seen constructively and not as a threat.
- Hold discussions with, and research, existing civil society fund in the country (even if working on another sector) to ensure learning is shared and duplication avoided.
- Secure a small start-up grant from the donor/s or foundation/s that are most interested in supporting the process of setting up the fund and get commitments in principle from others.
- **Seek legal registration⁷**
 - Research the different options for legal registration, and get advice from a lawyer.
 - Decide which form of legal registration will be most appropriate for a national CSEF.
 - Prepare the legal papers to set up the fund and register.
- **Final steps**
 - Formalise the board – ensuring that it is broad-based, widely credible and representative of different constituencies.
 - Find office space.
 - Recruit a manager/coordinator and other core staff for the implementing agency.
 - Publish guidelines for how the fund will work and what it will support – and distribute this widely (including in national media).
 - Secure grants from interested donors.
 - Start the real work!

⁶ In countries where the Commonwealth Education Fund has operated, the Commonwealth Education Fund Coordinator may play an active role in galvanising an interim board, and the Fund Management Committee might be a starting point. This should be rapidly expanded to bring in new voices and ensure that the creation of a national CSEF is not seen just as the perpetuation of the Fund.

⁷ The legal framework under which this fund would operate will differ from country to country. It is recommended that whoever intends to establish a national civil society education fund decides on the most appropriate structure, and then takes legal advice on how to register and institute such an organisation. It is recognised that this may be complicated and will take considerable time.

5

Questions and answers

Why not give the funds to national education coalitions to manage?

In recent years national education coalitions or campaigns have emerged in dozens of countries, linking NGOs, parents' groups, teachers' unions, child-labour activists and diverse social movements. They play a key role in extending public debate on education, pulling together learning from across society and providing a strong public platform. A lot has been learnt about how to develop an effective coalition that can act as a strong political voice; how to involve members, build their capacity to engage in policy dialogue and ensure internal democracy.⁸ These coalitions need some funding to function but they are not designed to manage large-scale funding. If they directly managed a national CSEF their essential nature would rapidly be distorted. Members would join in order to access funds and members would be disgruntled or leave if they did not secure funds. The delicate balance of an effective coalition could quickly be destroyed. It seems preferable to have a separate fund that can support the coalition and support the members of the coalition – but which is managed professionally and at arm's length from the secretariat or board of the coalition. In turn it is important for the national CSEF not to intrude on the territory of the coalition – it should not set strategic directions or seek any voice for itself.

Do all donors need to agree before a fund can start up?

No. A CSEF could start up with the active support of just one significant donor, but as early as possible it should seek the support of more than one donor so that rival structures do not emerge. The fund should not be a mechanism for distributing funds from just one donor. However, a possible route to starting up a fund might be to develop a consortium bid to one donor. As national CSEFs are set up in more and more countries, and as the concept is promoted internationally, it should be easier to attract a range of donors in each country.

Who holds the fund to account?

The transparency of the workings of the national CSEF board and implementing agency are key. Reports and accounts should be published and shared widely. Minutes of all meetings should also be kept and made available, though some confidentiality in the deliberations and decision-making on specific grants will be necessary. If the national CSEF fails to act in a credible or transparent manner, it is likely to lose the support of the donor community.

Why not a new Commonwealth Education Fund? Is there a role for international oversight?

The Commonwealth Education Fund research emphasised the importance of nationally registered funds with national credibility. An international management committee would be too far away from the action to make the best decisions. In the Commonwealth Education Fund's case, decentralising decision making to in-country management committees helped resolve this issue. National CSEFs should be accepted as credible mechanisms for channelling support to civil society advocacy work on education. However, situations may later arise whereby a national CSEF loses credibility. International intervention may be required in such instances. It is possible that the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) and regional bodies (like the African Network Campaign on Education For All – ANCEFA, the Asia and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education – ASPBAE and the Latin American Education Campaign) might be willing to maintain a register of national CSEFs within their membership. In addition to other interactions they will have with the national CSEFs, these global and regional bodies might also be willing to serve in a formal capacity as needed, to receive and investigate any serious concerns about the management of a particular national CSEF, and to make recommendations to donors/others about whether the fund remains a credible mechanism.

⁸ See Tomlinson, K. and Macpherson, I. (2007). *Driving the Bus: the Journey of National Education Coalitions*. London: Commonwealth Education Fund.

Why not a fund for service delivery by civil society?

Service delivery projects are relatively easy to fund. The public in donor countries are often keen to support service delivery, and donors (whether bilateral or multilateral agencies, foundations and trusts) have many other existing funding mechanisms to support such work. It is much harder to secure funding for civil society 'advocacy work' and yet this work may be more strategic and have a more substantial impact. For example, NGOs have run Non-Formal Education programmes in Tanzania for many years, but the numbers they have reached are small compared to the million children who were able to access school following the abolition of user fees (which followed research and advocacy work by organisations such as Maarifa / TENMET).

Is there a capacity-building role for national CSEFs?

The Commonwealth Education Fund research concluded that national CSEFs have an important role to play in capacity building for civil society – and that just giving out grants alone will often not be enough. However, the central role may be to do an assessment of capacity needs – particularly for smaller organisations that may need skills in project development, finance management, policy-orientated research, budget work or designing campaigns. The national CSEF should **not** however, seek to fill these capacity gaps itself. Rather it can play a role in identifying agencies / individuals who can help with capacity building of coalitions and their members. It is essentially a match-making role in the area of capacity development and it would be important to play this role in close consultation with the national education coalition.

What about donor orphans and countries where donors are reducing funding?

There is a danger that national CSEFs will thrive in countries where donors are already putting lots of funding into government education plans – but will struggle in countries with few donors. One possible solution to this that needs exploring is to work with the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) Expanded Catalytic Fund – designed to support governments that have credible education sector plans but few in-country donors. The automatic trigger of 3% additional funding could apply to all grants made from the FTI Expanded Catalytic Fund.

A national CSEF may also have an important role in some middle-income countries where there are few donors and the FTI is not engaged – in which case other sources of funding may be explored (for example through international foundations).

Should governments be involved?

It will be very important for the board and implementing agency of the national CSEF to maintain good communication with the national government – particularly with the ministry of education. This should be an integral part of being a transparently run fund. However, it would be inappropriate for the government to have a direct seat on the board of a fund which is designed for civil society – and any attempt at influencing specific decisions should be resisted.

Will national CSEFs work in all countries?

This model of a national CSEF could work in any country, though it may need to be adapted. For example in some contexts, like India, there are many CSOs who are reluctant to use any foreign donations. It is likely that this reluctance may extend to donations channelled through a national CSEF. It may be possible in such contexts to resource the national CSEF through other means such as national foundations or the private sector.

For further information on the ideas in this paper please contact:

Chike Anyanwu: canyanwu@commonwealtheducationfund.org

Sheila Aikman: saikman@oxfam.org.uk

Katy Webley: k.webley@savethechildren.org.uk

David Archer: david.archer@actionaid.org

Designed by JF Design