

From NGOs to CSOs: Social Citizenship, Civil Society and “Education for All” – An Agenda for Further Research

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A decade ago, when CICE published its first issue “Are NGOs Overrated?” both academic debates and development policy discussions were focused on the expanding role played by NGOs in the developing world. Today the language has changed – and so too, in some ways, has practice. In this article, I want to look at the new turn to “civil society” in development discourse. In particular, I want to answer the question: What does civil society have to do with the achievement of education for all – particularly in poor countries where universal access to basic education has not been achieved?

Below, I look first at how civil society engagement is being constructed in the official policy discourse of development aid organizations, raising questions about the narrowness and limitations of this conceptualization. I then argue for using a “social citizenship” lens when thinking about civil society and its role in the achievement of education for all. Throughout, I introduce examples from a recent study of civil society organizations (CSOs) and their interactions with internationally funded sector programs in education in four African countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, Kenya and Tanzania (Mundy et. al., 2007).

Education For All Governance Reforms: The Core Agenda

Over the past two decades, reforms to the way in which educational systems are managed and governed have been attempted across a large number of developing countries. These reforms typically draw upon an “ideal” governance agenda that includes decentralization, the creation of public-private partnerships, and a variety of efforts to enhance participation and local level oversight. The notion of engaging civil society is a central feature of this governance reform agenda.

The governance reforms that occupy the greatest space in officially sponsored educational development programs and policies revolve around the call for greater local accountability mechanisms and decentralization of governance. The common sense view that emerged in the 1990s is typified in the 1990 Jomtien declaration on Education for All:

Partnerships at the community level...should be encouraged: they can help harmonize activities, utilize resources more effectively, and mobilize additional financial and human resources where necessary (WCEFA secretariat, 1990, p. 58).

More recently, this agenda has been incorporated by the World Bank in its agenda for improving “short route accountability.” “Short route” forms of accountability emphasize the power of client-citizens as the main form for political agency in the education sector. As summarized in documents like the World Bank’s 2004 World Development Report Making Services Work for the Poor and the report of the Millennium Development Project’s Task Force on education, key short route accountability reforms include: decentralization of educational management and financing; the involvement of parents in school based management; the provision of better information on

school performance and student achievement to parents and communities; the introduction of school choice mechanisms (including demand-side mechanisms); and the expansion of NGO and public-private service provision to stimulate competition and efficiency among schools, as well as broader access.

To get a sense of the scale of support for such reforms, one only need look at the World Bank's own lending portfolio, where a large majority of current projects in primary education include two reform goals: financial decentralization to local government (80%) and the introduction of school level management mechanisms (90%) (WB/IEG, 2006, p. 43). Clearly it would be hard to find a single country receiving international support for EFA where experiments with these governance reforms are not now in progress.

In contrast to official donor interest in short-route accountability, long route accountability mechanisms – which we would recognize as comprising both the aggregation of interests at a national level and operation of formal democratic politics (elections, legislative oversight of policies) – are marginalized or viewed as relatively impotent to the achievement of EFA. In official donor documents, politics at the national level is widely viewed as negative or tainted: national level collective action and even government itself are viewed as marred by elite capture; the state, its bureaucracy, and other collective actors (as for example, teachers unions) are viewed as essentially undemocratic and unresponsive to equality issues. As a recent World Bank report concludes: “Public funding cultivates a large bureaucratic machinery and strong interest groups whose lobbying could result in inertia” (World Bank, 2006, p. 38).

Donor documents often, however, include a hortative call for greater engagement with “civil society.” Such calls are typically either quite vague, or carefully circumscribed. Thus reference to civil society often excludes or marginalizes teachers unions or presents them primarily as the “bad sort” of political agents, those involved in elite capture and blockage of educational reform (c.f. Corrales, 1999; Stein et al., 2006; Grindle, 2004). There is rarely much elaboration of the actors that belong to nationally organized civil society or any discussion of conflicts or tensions among them. As an example, the Fast Track initiative documents advise consultation with civil society, listing only “civic or indigenous groups, NGOs...” (EFA/FTI, 2005, p. 13).[1] Sometimes private providers and business leaders are included as part of civil society – though without elaboration of their specific interests or “stake” in EFA. Furthermore, the national role for civil society is rarely supported by research evidence.[2]

Finally, it is important to note that much recent donor discourse on EFA focuses on the idea of an international compact for achieving education for all. Such a compact requires southern governments to develop a “sound” and “nationally owned” EFA plan, while northern governments promise to provide long-term reliable finance (Sperling, 2005; Birdsall & Vaishnav, 2005; UN Millennium Task Force, 2005; Mundy, 2007). The notion of an international compact typically includes the idea that local level nongovernmental actors will “hold their own governments to account”. However, little consideration is given to how the local level accountability structures advocated by donors (PTAs, school committees) might translate into the engagement of citizens and organized civil society in the ownership and oversight of national EFA programmes. Furthermore, calls for a global EFA compact avoid the question of who and how international donors will be held accountable for their commitments.

In sum, the overall “theory of action” for civil society that is set out in key official donor documents on educational development still focuses on using civil society for accountability and

service delivery purposes at the local level. While interest in engagement with national level civil society actors is increasingly seen as important to new donor-supported EFA plans, there is little discussion of how local level citizen action either in the form of service provisions or through new accountability mechanisms like school councils, is linked to national and international civil society actors, capable of holding national governments and the international community to its EFA commitments.

Education, Governance and Social Citizenship

In his famous work, T. H. Marshall described the extension of free public education as part of a process through which democracies moved from the protection of civil and political rights towards the incorporation of social rights – creating a more extensive form of social democracy in which collective efforts were made to offset economic inequalities through redistributive measures (Marshall, 1964). Marshall used the term “social citizenship” to capture the new emphasis on social rights as distinct from civil and political rights. Few would dispute Marshall’s thesis that education became a fundamental (virtually taken-for-granted) entitlement and cornerstone of social citizenship in many industrialized democracies during the first half of the 20th century. Nor would they disagree with the thesis set forth in the work of Meyer, Ramirez, Boli and their students: that schooling itself developed normative cultural status at the level of the world polity or world system (in part through its promotion by international organizations) (Meyer & Boli, 1982). Schooling came to be seen as one among a core of institutions that links citizen to state, by integrating the individual into collective aspirations for economic progress and social justice.

Because schooling became a right of social citizenship, it also emerged as an important arena for citizen’s to make rights claims. At the same time, however, as schooling became “taken for granted” as an institution within modern social democracies, its status as a site for citizen claims-making may have eroded. More recently, processes of globalization seem to have changed the nature of citizen claims-making, through the erosion of the nation-state’s control over domestic policies, and the relocation of some forms of decision-making to the transnational sphere (Robertson, 2006, p.2).

Scholars who study world politics, however, have frequently argued the value of using a social citizenship lens to make sense of the potential for the democratization across local, national and transnational scales of governance (Held, 2005; Fraser, 2005; Scholte, 2005). In addition, the theories of action increasingly being mobilized by transnational civil society actors focus explicitly on the efficacy of linking up citizens’ demands for fundamental rights across national boundaries (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2005).

I would like to argue that it is against this standard -- of collective action in support of social citizenship -- that we should evaluate the work of civil society actors – NGOs, teachers unions, parents associations, faith-based organizations and others, as an important component (in Michael Edwards words) of a “commitment to equal citizenship and democratic self-government” (Edwards, 2004, p. 96).

Conceptualizing civil society in the EFA arena through a social citizenship lens forces us to think about the right to education as a right of citizenship, and to begin to imagine how the interface of local, national and global forms of citizen claims-making can move us towards the realization of educational and other human rights. It moves us beyond the official discourse for educational governance reform, which has been too heavily focused on the construction of a purely local-national accountability politics in education.

In what follows, I explore how a critical social citizenship lens, applied at three scales of governance, can help us to answer the question: are CSOs (including NGOs) overrated as agents in the achievement of Education for All?

I. A Social Citizenship Lens at the Community-School Interface

Most of us feel an instinctive affinity with the notion that local citizens and their voices ought to matter in the shaping of educational services. We also know that a wide range of “democratic decentralization” experiments is underway in developing country contexts. For example, in our recent field research in Africa we found the following: widespread use of direct user committees (primarily in the form of “school management committees”); devolution of system oversight to elected local authorities; a myriad of crosscutting experiments in citizen engagement in education through “social funds” or funds placed at the discretion of individual parliamentarians; and pilot projects focused on the creation of community “school report cards” (Mundy et. al., 2007).

A substantial body of mainly World Bank funded research supports such experiments, by offering convincing examples of cases in which local level citizen voice improves the quality of educational services. However, an equally large body of research argues against such policies – for many of the reasons noted in the section on democratic decentralization experiments above. Thus, for example, there is often tension or lack of clarity about how different decentralization experiments map onto one another, with the relationships between local elected authorities and school committees particularly unclear (Chapman et. al., 2002; Manor, 2004; Mundy et. al., 2007). Administrative challenges at the local level often lead to the creation of highly scripted forms of participation – as for example in our Africa study where school councils were told how many pencils and erasers to buy (Mukundan, 2003; Gershberg, 1999; Bray 2003; Cadell, 2005). Efforts to introduce private providers or to mobilize local level contributions to schools operate at cross purposes to the message of citizenship entitlement sent out by national promises of “free” education (Rose, 2006). Researchers also find that these reforms re-produce intra-community as well as inter-community inequality, limiting the redistributive scope of central government (Bray, 1999; Pryor, 2005; Dyer & Rose, 2005).

What seems to be missing, across all of these studies, is a sustained focus on the social citizenship effects of these experiments in democratic decentralization. We should be asking not only whether experiments in local level participation and accountability produce more effective services, but also, whether they lead to new capacity and effectiveness in citizen-led claims-making. Are these capacities equally distributed? Do they scale up at the national level in the sense of consolidation of formal democratic polities? In what ways can such capacities be better supported? As an example, in our African study, we found that reforms decentralizing school finance and administration do not seem to create contexts within which parents are more able to make claims for better or alternative educational service to their national governments. Furthermore, NGOs and other formally organized civil society actors active in the education sector rarely work with local communities to communicate their demands to formal parliamentary structures or the media.

II. A Social Citizenship Lens on the Interface Between “Civil Society” and the National Polity

In a wave of recent research, political scientists have shown convincingly that a movement towards free multiparty democracy reinforces promises of universal access to basic education, and to increased spending for this purpose, at least in Africa and Latin America (Stasavage, 2004, 2005; Brown, 1999, 2000; Brown & Hunter 2004; Nelson, 2006). To some degree, formal democracy

seems to lock governments into greater spending on the needs of the median voter, for whom entitlement to basic education remains an extremely important component of citizenship. Public satisfaction with basic social service contributes mightily to opinions about democracy itself (Bratton, 2007).

We also know that even across formal democracies, educational entitlements are surprisingly varied both in terms of extensiveness and structure. The literature on social citizenship tells us that the character of the relationship between civil society and the state, and the way in which popular voice has been institutionalized in forms of collective agency vis-à-vis the state, may be the defining factors in such variation. We thus need much more research, either single case or cross-national research, on the changing nature of state-civil society relationships and its implication for the achievement of social and procedural democracy within the education sector in the developing world.

While some studies of this type exist, they have largely focused on how governments can manage traditional interest groups, with a particular emphasis on teachers unions (Grindle, 2004; Nelson, 2006; Gershberg, 2004; Lowdan, 2004; Corrales, 1999). There has also been a recent wave of studies that map existing CSO actors and their relationships to donors and governments (Mundy et. al., 2007; Dofturi & Takala, 2005; Murphy, 2005; Mia, 2004; Lexow, 2003; Miller Grandvaux et. al., 2002; Commonwealth Education Fund, 2007).

What seems to be needed are more studies that focus explicitly on how to achieve greater direct voice for citizens in education, and how popular forms of collective agency can enhance reform processes at the national level in the manner suggested in the historical literature on social citizenship. A social citizenship lens would guide us to look more carefully at the limits and possibilities for national level collective action in education as well as across other social citizenship arenas, paying special attention to the opportunity for political alliances and institutional reforms that can amplify the voice of the median (poor) citizen at the national level. Ideally such research would be combined with research at the community-school interface, so that we can better understand how the political architecture for social citizenship at the national level conditions the effectiveness of democratic decentralization reforms in a variety of developing country contexts.

Though far from comprehensive, our Africa study may suggest a starting point for his type of research. In it, we suggested just how important collective action by civil society organizations is to the popular struggle for educational rights--and how often CSOs fail to coordinate their work, have limited ability to engage in policy dialogue, and are sidelined or co-opted by governments and donors (Mundy et. al. 2007). While civil society actors have gained an important seat at the national policy table in the countries we studied, from a social citizenship perspective we can see that CSOs often have no formal strategy for engaging directly with citizens or with elected officials in a sustained or cumulative manner; nor is it clear how they link to broader social movement politics in their given countries and whether they authentically represent popular voices in the policy process.

III. The Transnational EFA Interface from a Social Citizenship Perspective

It is especially difficult to translate existing research on the formation of social citizenship regimes at the national scale into a workable agenda for studying governance at the global scale. The interface among international actors (both state and non-state) and between these actors and national level actors is difficult to conceptualize using a social citizenship lens, precisely because there is neither a global state nor any real movement towards the construction of a state-like

authority system at the world level. Instead, globalization has created a hybrid system in which sovereign states (and the myriad of international organizations they have created) compete with a range of non-state agents to influence what are still primarily domestic guarantees of citizenship (Robertson, 2006; Scholte, 2005). Claims-making for social rights in this context is understandably diffuse, often simultaneously operating across many levels.

A number of analytic studies have tried to capture the process through which citizen-led claims-making for EFA operate at the transnational level. One 2005 case study suggests that global level civil society EFA efforts have been “captured” by key international organizations, like the World Bank; and that national level CSO efforts are often led and shaped by international CSOs (Murphy, L., 2005; Murphy, J., 2005). Clearly, these are trends that do not fit “normatively” within the social citizenship agenda. On the other hand, a number of studies have praised international level civil society actors for gaining a seat at the international EFA policy table (as for example, through seats at world assemblies and the Fast Track Initiative). In this instance, transnational civil society actors have helped to generate a new mode of citizen claims-making which links Northern citizens (holding their governments accountable) to the claims-making efforts of Southern citizens, both to their own governments and the international community (Mundy, 2007, Mundy & Murphy, 2001).

The achievement of a universal right to education is, at least in aspirational terms, likely to remain a key issue in any effort to build a form of global social citizenship. It makes sense to question global-level EFA efforts in the same way we might interrogate a national regime for social citizenship: in normative terms, to see how far EFA efforts presently or potentially support procedural and social equality necessary to the construction of a global democratic polity (Held, 2005); and in analytical terms, to throw a spotlight on the character of collective action and the potential for alliances that support the expression of popular claims-making at a global scale.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that, rather than asking whether NGOs are overrated, scholars in comparative education should switch their attention to a different question: what does civil society have to do with the achievement of education for all-- particularly in poor countries where universal access to basic education has not been achieved?

Most official donor discourse on civil society continues to support civil society participation for reasons of instrumental efficiency: as a way of enhancing educational service delivery or ensuring accountability for funding at the local level. Recently donors have also welcomed civil society participation in national policy level dialogue, but this invitation is quite limited and de-linked from the mechanisms for local level civil society participation being supported by donors.

As a corrective, I have suggested that a “social citizenship lens” can help us to evaluate and interrogate the contributions made by civil society to “education for all”. A social citizenship lens prompts us to ask how far civil society engagement in EFA activities supports the procedural engagement of citizens (“voice”) and their social equality (conceptualized as a right of citizenship). Furthermore, I have argued that we need to conceptualize social citizenship rights and citizen-led claims-making as processes that increasingly play out across local, national and international levels. By studying how opportunities for social citizenship claims at local, national and global levels are facilitated by organized civil society, we can move beyond the official donor discourses to better assess both the character and potential for collective action and popular claims-making at a global scale.

Notes

- [1]. Another Fast Track Document, however, does note: "Annual sector reviews are conducted by the recipient country and its donor partners in a spirit of peer reviewing and learning; it is good practice also to bring teachers associations, private providers, parents associations and other civil society organizations into the review process." (p. 11)
- [2]. Thus, for example, the Millennium Task Force's civil society recommendation supports its Recommendation 2, "improve accountability through local control" with the citation of no fewer than 14 donor funded empirical studies.

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