



Presentation GEMR 2017/8

Who is accountable for the right to education in the South? Challenges and opportunities for Dutch civil society

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REPORT

International Day for the Rights of the Child, 20 November 2017, was the perfect occasion to present the second edition of the Global Education Monitoring Report, which maps out global progress towards the education targets of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Education is one of the key rights of children, but it is still too often neglected. The Report 2017/8 shows 264 million children are still not going to school, and many are not achieving minimum skills at school. It is clear education systems are off track to achieve these global goals.

The marginalised currently bear the largest burden of inadequate educational resources, but also stand to benefit the most if policy-makers pay sufficient attention to their needs. Faced with these challenges, along with tight budgets and increased emphasis on results-oriented use of funds, countries are searching for solutions. Increased accountability often tops their lists.

The 2017/8 edition of the GEM Report therefore highlights 'Accountability: meeting our commitments': who is responsible for good-quality education? Who can be held accountable, and how?

The event in Utrecht brought together a full house of people who, as chair of the day Rosanne Tromp remarked, "against all odds, cannot resist fighting for a better world and believe education is key in achieving this".

Civil society organisations need to collaborate in holding governments accountable

Trudy Kerperien welcomed all on behalf of the General Union for Education (AOb) and Mondiaal FNV, the Foundation of the Trade Union Confederation, both members of the Dutch GCE Chapter. Trade unions are often overlooked as partners in campaigns such as GCE, because of the assumption that education unions deal with working conditions and salaries only, whereas a very large part of the work of their work is on quality of education. "In fact, the two fields are narrowly related: teachers who are underpaid, hardly trained, working in difficult circumstances and who are never consulted themselves, are not in any position to deliver the quality education we dream of".

Trade unions support and implement projects for quality education directly, for instance through professional development of teachers, and for capacity building of unions, to make them stronger advocates for quality education in their own countries. Union delegates participate in (inter)national events to make a case for quality teachers and public education systems, such as at the Global Conference on the Sustained Eradication of Child Labour, from which Trudy just returned.

Civil society organisations have a role to play in holding governments accountable: “It not only means that we have strong opinions when governments fail, and that we advocate and lobby, it also means that we as CSOs take initiatives towards showing where gaps in the systems exist and how improvements can be made. And from our own experience I can tell you that especially the combination of strategies works”.

Trudy emphasized the need to unite, in order to be stronger in getting the message through. For instance with the Global Campaign for Education, the global network that represents civil society in all relevant fora for SDG4.

Accountability in education

Although ‘Accountability’ is a complex concept and in many languages not even translatable, GEM Report research officer Yuki Murakami elucidated the issue with a clear presentation. In short: “Accountability helps show who is responsible for what, and how problems can be fixed”.

Education is a shared responsibility. While governments have primary responsibility, all other actors - schools, teachers, parents, students, international organisations, private sector providers, civil society and the media - have a role in improving education systems: “We are all needed to improve education”. Good-quality education is a collective enterprise in which all actors make a concerted effort to meet their responsibilities. The full GEM Report addresses each of these actors in separate chapters.

But while responsibility is shared, accountability is not, warns Yuki. All actors can and should be held accountable for their own role. Individuals, however, should not be held accountable for outcomes that also depend on the actions of others. To illustrate: schools may be responsible for providing supportive learning environments, but to deliver this, they rely on governments providing resources, teachers respecting professional norms and students behaving appropriately.

Governments are not only responsible for good-quality education for their own citizens, but donor governments, having signed up to the SDG-agenda, are also responsible to further the education goals at the global level. In their aid programmes, the GEM Report states, they should allocate a minimum of 0.7% of their national income to aid and at least 10% of that to education. The Report also advises to be careful of results-based financing, as it doesn’t automatically achieve effectiveness and accountability.

The role of Dutch civil society in development

With both the GEM Report and the global GCE campaign this year highlighting the role of civil society in achieving the education goals, the recent official evaluation of Dutch support to Southern civil society tied in closely into the debate.

Piet de Lange, former senior evaluator with the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, first explained to the international audience present that like ‘accountability’, ‘civil society’ is not a straightforward concept either. To the Dutch, living in a country below sea level, the

concept stems from their everlasting struggle against the water. The strong realisation that all actors have to fight a battle together is at the heart of our 'polder model'.

In the IOB report 'Shifting Interests, Changing Relations, Support under Pressure' describes that 'civil society' usually refers to "the general associational life of people that exists between state bodies and the market on the one hand and the private sphere (individuals and families) on the other". For example: neighbourhood and youth organisations, parent-teachers associations and trade unions. In general thought "civil society has agency, the power to create change". But in practice, the IOB found, boundaries between government, civil society and private sector are blurred. There are gaps between expectations, ambitions and reality regarding the power to create change.

Since the 1960's about 20% of the national budget for development cooperation has been spent via Dutch NGOs. These, it was assumed, would help create better policies and provide countervailing powers to state and private interests. With the second Co-Financing Programme (MFS-II, 2011-2015), the government intended to support sustainable economic development, direct poverty alleviation and strengthening of the Southern civil society.

The evaluation found that MFS-II contributed effectively to the first two goals but not to the latter. Instead of strengthening Southern civil society as such and help them create systemic change, the programme rather strengthened the administrative capacity of individual Southern NGOs: to the service of the Dutch NGOs, as these needed to report on their programme management and results to the Ministry.

Capacity building is about long-term results and needs long-term investments and long-term relationships built on trust, dialogue, expertise and flexibility. Under MFS-II, support became short term and relationships between partners became fragmented, endangering collaboration between Dutch and Southern NGOs. Moreover, the decentralisation of Dutch NGOs, with many of them opening country offices in their partner countries, leads to a "scrambling for resources" instead of collaboration.

In short, Piet concludes, the IOB evaluation strongly calls for a paradigm shift on the role of Dutch civil society in development.

The role of Dutch civil society in the right to education in the South: blurring boundaries between state, civil society and private sector

Discussing the role of Dutch civil society in the right to education in the South was a challenge. With the wide array of approaches in accountability, the broad spectrum of civil society agents, and with a room filled with teachers, policy makers, union members, development workers and researchers - all with a different perspective, it is no surprise that lots of questions and issues were raised and that there are no easy answers.

To open the discussion, a panel of three was asked to reflect on the general conclusion of the Collective Consultation of Non-Governmental Organizations on Education for All (CCNGO/EFA) that met in May this year: "We note that civil society faces challenges in securing its significant role in implementing the agenda. Across all regions, civil society faces shrinking space, with the rise of authoritarian regimes, the weakening of democratic ones and a consequent restriction on the space for the voices of all people, especially the most marginalised. There are also fewer opportunities for broad-based dialogue on education and more limited involvement of civil society in government policy and planning processes".

Cornelius Hacking, senior policy adviser with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs referred to the successor of the MFS-II programme, 'Dialogue and Dissent', which invited civil society organisations to enter into a 'strategic partnership' on lobbying and advocacy for the 2016-2020 period. This programme "values development actors in their own rights, as transformers of society, not as mere implementers of national policies" and sets out to help build capacity for partners to lobby in any way and on any subject they wanted to. When applications for funding came in, the Ministry was disappointed to see that very few CSOs had chosen education.

From the audience it was raised that the guidelines for funding stated that the government was "keen to see CSOs play a substantial role in implementing the agenda for aid, trade and investment", and that content wise the strategic partnerships must be connected with this agenda. Moreover, when Minister Ploumen was asked which subjects would not be eligible for funding, she had said: Education". Cornelius remarked that this was an incorrect statement. He added that CSOs rather preferred to "follow the money", taking the priority sectors and countries of the Ministry as points of departure for their submissions.

This was confirmed by other voices from the audience, also marking that development NGOs indeed "followed the money" and deselected education, whereas it is widely accepted that education is key to development. Shouldn't they have based their choices on more intrinsic motivations? Have development NGOs voluntarily curtailed their role to being implementers of government policy? To what extent are they able and willing to monitor the government and vent criticism? And with the general public prioritising education in development aid: to what extent do development NGOs then represent their constituency? All these questions could not be answered in the time available for this session.

Panel member Ron Rijnbende, director of Edukans Foundation, a Dutch CSO that has focused exclusively on education since its foundation, brought forward that a too narrow focus on monitoring the quality of schools leads to individual scores, competition and a market orientation. In the Netherlands, this resulted in "accountability as the main task of school leaders". Development NGOs feel pressured to show results and therefore prefer to engage in activities that are more likely to produce quick and successful outcomes. "One of our biggest challenges," he says, "is that marginalised people are not the goal of many NGOs anymore".

When low fee private education was mentioned, Yuki explained how the success of Bridge International Academies (BIA) in attracting students is due to failing accountability mechanisms by all actors. Others from the audience added that the widespread protests from Southern civil society should be supported by Dutch civil society: although there may be occasional exceptions to the rule, in general low fee private education is detrimental to the goal of quality education for all. The Dutch government should cease its support to BIA as soon as possible. One interesting question remained unanswered: as long as national governments are unable to provide quality education to all, would Dutch development organisations be better able to fill the gap than private sector parties? Is that a feasible and even desirable solution?

It did bring the discussion to the topics of financial resources versus political will, of the driving forces engrained in our monetary system, and the need to integrate financial and economic education into the curriculum to better equip citizens to take on a monitoring role.

With regard to political will, Cornelius brought forward that the new Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Sigrid Kaag seems willing to reconsider the role of education in development policy, not only as part of humanitarian aid, social stability and/or the root causes of migration, but also

as a means to combat poverty; after all, few SDGs can be achieved without proper education. He calls on the CSOs present to help think about how we can best move forward together.

This meeting is organised by the Global Campaign for Education Netherlands (a coalition of Edukans, The General Union of Education AOb, Save the Children and Trade Union Confederation Mondiaal-FNV) and the GEM Report.