“Accountability in Education: The Role of Citizens in Accelerating Learning for All” Roundtable | March 6, 2018

The Roundtable sought to answer two questions: How can citizen engagement and collaborative social accountability contribute to addressing the learning crisis? What role can partnerships play to accelerate learning for all – including the World Bank, GPE, GPSA, BEC and civil society organizations?

The last 50 years have seen a great expansion of schooling in many developing countries, but education outcomes are lagging behind. As countries have committed, through Sustainable Development Goal #4, to ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and to promoting lifelong learning, the World Development Report 2018 (WDR 2018) ‘LEARNING to Realize Education’s Promise’ warns of the “learning crisis” that the world continues to face. Worldwide, the majority of children are not acquiring even the basic skills and competencies. This leaves many countries stuck with underdeveloped human capital, which seriously hampers potential for growth.

The report, the first ever entirely centred on education, provides a deep and comprehensive analysis of the drivers, factors and policy solutions for the learning crisis. It provides evidence-based arguments for the importance of investments in children’s literacy, numeracy and life skills towards eliminating poverty and getting countries on a sustainable path towards growth. Its release coincides with a pivotal year of renewal of major international donor commitments to education worldwide, such as the replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education with over $2.3 billion for the period 2018-2020, and the US Government’s READ Act of September 2017, which prioritizes basic education in US foreign assistance.
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At this juncture, several stakeholders considered it timely to assess the role of civil society and citizens in accelerating learning for all in an open Roundtable discussion. The event was organized by the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA), the World Bank’s Governance and Education Global Practices, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), and the Basic Education Coalition (BEC).

The discussion benefited from insights from a wide range of participants including members of the GPSA Steering Committee, donors, governments, World Bank staff and civil society organizations working in the education sector.

The GPSA works with over 50 governments and more than 300 civil society and private sector partners towards solving governance-related development challenges around the world. Over a third of projects in the GPSA’s portfolio are promising examples of projects working to improve education by engaging civil society, governments and other stakeholders in collaborative social accountability mechanisms.
Across the world, education is generally considered a government responsibility, with private initiatives filling the gaps. The power of community management and social accountability has long been recognized by education sector stakeholders, as underscored by Dan Stoner, co-chair of the Basic Education Coalition’s Board of Directors and Vice President of Education and Child Protection at Save the Children, in his keynote address.

Helping parents and community members to engage in children’s learning, work effectively with school stakeholders and hold government officials accountable has been shown to pay dividends in addressing learning needs.

Social accountability in education can take a variety of innovative approaches that collectively contribute to addressing the various dimensions of the learning crisis identified by the WDR18: measurement of learning, (school) inputs for learning, and systems conducive to learning.
Parents and community members have an important role to play in generating data (information) to measure children’s learning levels that can help education systems function better, whether at the school, local, district or national level. For instance, household-based literacy and numeracy tests, rather than school-based assessments, yield crucial information on key outcome indicators that can be measured across the population, not just pertaining to children who are attending school.

‘Citizen information lets us get a true picture of the state of learning in a country,’ said Dan Stoner. Whether held in people’s homes or at the school, citizen-led assessments have brought about increased awareness of children’s lagging skills and understanding of the learning problem, even among parents who are illiterate themselves. At local levels, the information gathered by parents, children and teachers themselves often helps school stakeholders to solve school and community problems. national education policy. By providing evidence for
better decision-making, citizen-driven information sometimes also provides incentives for improved prioritization of learning in national education policy.

Important data challenges remain, however. First, citizen-driven data must be well-managed, actionable and accessible to the citizens (parents and students) who are affected. Here the private sector could be transformative in advancing the collection and use of data into governments’ well-functioning, open data systems. Citizen data on learning must also be complemented by countries’ participation in international assessments such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). Second, the capacity of household assessments and of any kind of citizen-driven data to lead to government action, often depends on the capacity of bureaucracies to design, manage and implement good policies, from ministries down to school management.

Finally, to close the feedback loop and ensure follow-up action, having dedicated civil society partners acting as intermediaries and collaborating with government to surface solutions that address citizens’ concerns is crucial. An example is the Expert Grup project supported by the GPSA in Moldova, which is coordinating school-level participatory budgeting processes with national-level policy dialogue. As a result of the project, the government has made participatory report cards mandatory across all Moldovan school districts.
Citizens can help to monitor issues in education inputs, such as the assignment of teachers across schools, their (lack of) training and attendance, as well as the provision of learning materials corresponding to defined curricula. Citizens can also help monitor safety of schools and uncover corruption such as teachers demanding side payments from students. Important tools of citizen involvement and social accountability at the school level include parent teacher associations, community school governance boards and community report cards. Also within early childhood education, which traditionally has not been a government responsibility but the provision of which has been shown to have tremendous impact on learning outcomes, citizens can monitor health, nutrition and learning.

Roundtable participants agreed that, notwithstanding recent increases and commitments, much more money for education is going to be needed to tackle the challenges globally. Civil society organizations

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have an important role to play in securing commitment for capital investments not only from ministries of education, but also ministries of finance, legislative bodies, prime ministers and presidents. However, “whether or not a country is spending commensurate to what they can afford, it’s not a matter of just spending, but of spending on the right things,” asserted Omar Arias, Manager for Global Engagement and Knowledge at the World Bank’s Education Global Practice, and several participants concurred that citizen engagement and social accountability can help to reach this goal.

“At the national, regional and local levels citizens can play a crucial role in influencing decision-making on education budgets, watching that quality investments are indeed being made and reporting on them”, said Alice Albright, CEO of the GPE. Effective social accountability approaches across the budget cycle include citizens’ involvement in budget analysis, allocation, implementation and auditing, and capacity building of governments in citizen-friendly budgeting and budgeting literacy.

In Ghana, where education is guaranteed by the constitution and over 40% of discretionary spending is spent on education, mostly teacher salaries, reports are still indicating low learning outcomes and high teacher absenteeism. As Eva Mends, Head of Budget Reform at the Ministry of Finance of Ghana highlighted, “the GPSA project on education finance monitoring and tracking distribution of learning materials led by SEND Ghana has been a useful collaboration because they are ensuring that every dollar that we spend provides the outcomes of good quality education and learning. Moreover, citizen monitoring has led us to the expansion of free education in Ghana, supported by a 20% increase in spending.”

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Role of Social Accountability in Systems for Learning

Finally, as the WDR 2018 explains, beyond citizen engagement in measurement of learning and monitoring learning inputs, important challenges remain in creating and maintaining systems that are responsive to citizens’ learning needs. The paradox is everywhere, suggested Debbie Wetzel, Senior Director of the World Bank’s Governance Global Practice who chaired the event. “As the WDR points out, for most individuals, there is nothing more important to them than their kids, but collectively, the political economy of decision-making and our ability to invest in education and learning just doesn’t work in our favour. We must think forward about these issues, and identify how social accountability can help us with that.”

At the school level, learning requires systems with empowered teachers who employ effective teaching strategies, students who are prepared for learning, and schools that are safe and conducive to learning. Oppositional advocacy, pitting parents against teachers and school leaders, often does not work. Collaborative social accountability efforts on the
other hand, can help to achieve solutions for these system-wide, incremental behavioural changes needed by fostering all education actors (parents, students, school administrators and governments) to work in partnership towards empowering students and teachers equally. “Anywhere in the world, successful schools have parents and communities who insist on wanting to see their children succeed,” suggested Dan Stoner.

At the national level, the WDR argues for stronger coalitions for learning, as well. Civil society organizations should put pressure on governments to better measure learning and set measureable targets for education improvements. This, in turn, will help convince those who consider that education results take too long to achieve to be meaningful. Also, at all levels, stakeholder fragmentation is a big issue in education. Often, there are competing governmental, donor and civil society partners who each make a piecemeal contribution to, for example, provide schools with learning supplies.

Through well-designed, strategic social accountability mechanisms, civil society can help to coordinate actors and align their inputs into education systems. The GPE’s processes for joint education reviews – consultations involving governments and civil society – are already providing such system-level coordination mechanisms.
Conclusion

Citizens and civil society organizations have important roles in contributing to better learning outcomes: from being agents of accountability and providing education and learning inputs directly, to supporting public institutions for education and advocating funding for education. Civil society will need strengthening all around to play these roles. Combating the learning crisis is also an enormously challenging task because “while we are educating learners for the world that we live in today, the world we are going to be living in will be radically different,” said Al-eem Walji, CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation USA.

“We have to equip children with cognitive skills for adaptability and civic responsibility, which will help them in a rapidly changing world,” observed Debbie Wetzel. Finally, new horizons further expand opportunities while creating new challenges. And as Dan Stoner concluded, the sector is behind on incorporating technology. “There is a whole world of information out there and you can hold it in the palm of your hand. How can we get technology into the most remote places so that people there have access to learn and explore the world beyond their means?”