

New ways of working in partnership for education



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The Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF) is premised on the notion that civil society organisations working in partnership can help make public schools work for all children. From its inception, CEF has actively forged new ways of working through partnerships for education. CEF was founded on a novel and significant partnership between three leading UK charities and has continued to explore the boundaries of partnerships through its work in 16 low-income Commonwealth countries. The Fund utilises decentralised management and shared resources to support country-level civil society organisations that engage with local and national organisations to cultivate and support broad-based and democratically run coalitions for education advocacy. These coalitions bring together discrete voices to create a common platform, enabling governments to engage with civil society more easily and to open up previously closed-door policy formulation processes. These government/civil-society partnerships hold great promise for furthering international education goals and CEF is seeking allies to sustain these partnerships in the coming years.

The CEF concept

At a meeting on child poverty in February 2001, Gordon Brown, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced the creation of a Commonwealth Education Fund with a £10 million initial grant. Through the Department for International Development (DFID), details of how the fund would work were elaborated over the following year with ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children UK, who agreed to become joint partners and act as co-managing agencies of the CEF. This was the beginning of a unique partnership for education, marking an unprecedented collaboration between three prominent international development organisations, agreeing to work together in the areas of coordinated funds management and strategic capacity support to civil society organisations.

Beyond the initial £10 million grant, the British government also agreed to match additional funds raised through corporate or individual donations. A number of distinguished business leaders were asked to serve on the CEF Oversight Committee, chaired by Lord George (former Governor of The Bank of England) and vice chaired by Lord Leitch (former Chief Executive of Zurich Financial Services – UKISA/Asia Pacific).

Motivation for CEF

The CEF was framed around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education and gender – achieving gender equality in primary and secondary education by 2005 and universal completion of primary education by 2015. The main focus of CEF was agreed to be on civil society input into the Education for All process to raise the profile of international education goals at national level in low-income Commonwealth countries. The original completion date for CEF was to be 2005 (coinciding with the target year for the gender parity in education MDG). However, agreement was reached with the Treasury and DFID in 2005 to extend the country level operations of CEF to June 2008.

CEF was envisioned as an unconventional fund, not designed to support service delivery in education; not for building schools or running a few local projects. Instead of supporting individual projects in isolation, the funds would be used strategically to pull together disparate voices across society in order to encourage governments to place education higher up their agenda. In most countries the education and gender MDGs had little visibility and so governments did not feel accountable to deliver on them. The CEF was designed to help to change this, working to increase public debate around education goals within countries, promoting greater transparency and focusing on the needs of children currently outside the education system.

Structure, objectives and strategic planning

Mission

The CEF mission is to promote the right to education by ensuring that governments fulfil their commitments through good quality education policies, transparent and accountable financial procedures and quality education provision that reaches the most marginalised girls and boys. In order to succeed, CEF needed to promote strong partnerships across civil society in each country. This required building cohesive relationships among community-based organisations, national NGOs, teachers' unions, parents' associations, faith-based groups, the women's movement and the private sector, in order to help governments fulfil their education responsibilities.



Structure

Seventeen low-income Commonwealth countries¹ were identified as having significant educational challenges and the presence of at least one of the three CEF managing agencies. Each country developed interim plans to get work started by the autumn of 2002 whilst full strategic plans were drawn up and finalised by early 2003. The CEF programme in Zimbabwe was subsequently terminated due to unfavourable political and work conditions; thus CEF became a 16 country programme. One agency in each country was to take responsibility as 'lead agency', hosting the CEF Secretariat (Coordinator and Accountant). The lead agency provides legal, administrative and logistical support, along with line management and oversight, thereby keeping administrative costs very low. They join the other partner agencies and national education stakeholders to form a Management Committee and to ensure that CEF builds on existing capacity and experiences. This structure allowed for a high level of decentralisation, enabling CEF to recognise the immense diversity of the countries in which it operates, adapt its approach accordingly and provide the flexibility to situate responses to challenges within these different contexts.

Objectives

The lead agency was agreed by mutual consent in each country by early 2002. An initial consultation was then convened in Nairobi, with two representatives from each of the countries. Three core objectives of the CEF were decided. The CEF would:

1. Strengthen civil society participation in design and implementation of national and local education plans especially through support for broad-based national alliances and coalitions.
2. Enable local communities to monitor spending on education both at national and local levels (budget analysis/tracking).
3. Support innovative ways for communities to ensure that all children (especially girls and most vulnerable) are able to access quality education within a framework of national education plans - in a way that links to advocacy.

Strategy

The CEF structure utilised a high level of decentralisation from the outset, seeking to take strategic decisions where they would be best made. The initial £10 million fund was allocated according to the population size and level of educational challenge in each country, enabling a strategic plan to be developed by each country with the allocated amount. The UK management committee was thus able to focus on strategic planning, ensuring that each country was clearly complying with the core CEF objectives, rather than judging the minutiae of each proposal. That was left to national management committees who were in a much better position to judge the relevance of the strategy and the appropriateness and competence of each partner. Each country developed interim plans to get work started by the autumn of 2002 whilst full strategic plans were drawn up and finalised by early 2003.

Collaborative management – a new way of working

Collaboration

CEF involves an unprecedented degree of collaboration between Oxfam, Save the Children UK and ActionAid. There is almost daily communication on CEF between the three agencies in the UK and monthly UK management committee meetings bring together representatives from each agency to provide vital strategic guidance to the operations of the CEF. CEF's association with these internationally respected agencies creates a platform from which to communicate with influential figures and organisations at a local, national and international level. The benefits of this associated credibility are clear, not least in terms of advocacy and the opportunity to attend high-level meetings.

The collaboration around CEF has also led to wider collaboration on education issues between the lead agencies. ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children form the core of the UK branch of the Global Campaign for Education – officially formed in 2004 – which now includes almost all UK agencies with an interest in international education as well as the main teacher unions. But the depth and breadth of CEF partnerships goes beyond the three managing agencies in the UK.

Composition

The level of CEF partnership and collaboration has grown, as evidenced by the diverse composition of the Management Committees who work with CEF programmes in each of the 16 countries. These Management Committees have extended beyond the three managing agencies to include other international NGOs, national NGOs, UN agencies, DFID, teacher unions, government representatives, media, academia and the private sector. The CEF Management Committees have become a learning ground and a space for building shared understanding. Simply getting these groups together under the shared vision of CEF to agree how to strategically fund work across the country is a remarkable achievement.

The CEF represents a new way of working – a new mode of international NGOs working constructively and collaboratively with governments, civil society and the private sector in the North and South. Although CEF itself will be ending its work in 2008, it is hoped that the learning from this collaborative model will endure and reach beyond the 16 CEF countries. This collaborative model between NGOs and other stakeholders becomes very relevant in light of current interest in exploring workable ways for supporting civil society especially as the global aid architecture is changing towards 'budget support' for governments in the developing world.

Strengthening civil society participation, budget monitoring and innovation

Success

Stepping away from the management structures to look at the operational side of CEF country level work, it is evident that CEF partnerships with local and national civil society organisations are

making a difference. Through CEF support, new umbrella education coalitions are being created and existing coalitions significantly strengthened. CEF coalition partners are engaging with policy processes to ensure that free quality basic education is a right for all children and they are building domestic pressure on their governments to prioritise education on the political agenda.

CEF's 2005 mid-term review recorded 97 examples of changes to education policy and practice in which CEF support has played a significant part. Key changes include the abolition of 'user fees' by many developing country governments at the primary and basic education levels. CEF-supported education coalitions are growing in confidence and CEF is continuing to work with them to build capacity for advocacy and to foster thinking on sustainability. A few CEF countries are also exploring opportunities to engage the private sector in contributing to addressing strategic long-term education needs. For example, the Cadbury Schweppes Foundation has been contributing support for national education coalition work in Ghana as well as education advocacy projects in several communities within a cocoa-producing district.

Empowerment

CEF is also working to empower people to participate effectively in the monitoring of education finances and budgets, leading to demands for increased public resourcing of the education sector and to greater transparency in the use of funds. Many CEF partners have trained people at national and local levels to track education spending. This helps demystify national education budgets and allows more people to engage with financial information that was previously closed off to them. This may lead to changes as simple as having individual school budgets publicly displayed. Community members can then check that those resources are being delivered and are not misused. CEF's work, among others, is demonstrating that this is an area where civil society engagement can make a massive difference.

CEF also helps identify innovative approaches that have helped excluded children² to access and succeed in school. These have been documented and shared in different ways within countries and CEF is supporting ongoing efforts to use this information for better education policymaking. CEF has supported over 130 partners working with disadvantaged children to raise issues with governments, resulting in policy changes. In CEF's experience, changes in policy and practice are most likely where substantial and unified thematic coalitions have developed around a specific issue of exclusion or when these issues are taken up by national coalitions.

Spreading the word

A build-up of resources and applied pressure through advocacy takes time and networking. There is also a need to record and share innovation in ways that are relevant and accessible to policymakers and education practitioners. The most popular channels are: workshops for practitioners; newspaper articles; posters, photos and exhibitions; seminars for policymakers; TV; radio; published reports. Some CEF-supported programmes have also engaged in child-to-child information transfer, role-play, performance and have engaged both community leaders and tribal elders in delivering messages.

K E N Y A

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology



Our vision is to have a globally competitive quality education, training and research for Kenya's sustainable development.

The provision of education and training is fundamental to the protection of human rights and poverty reduction.

Education aims at enabling Kenyans to preserve and utilise the environment for sustainable development. In addition, the development of quality human resources is central to the attainment of national goals and industrial development.

Kenya is pursuing MDG and EFA goals and is striving to ensure adequate access to education and training to all Kenyans including vulnerable groups such as nomads, orphans, street families and those living in informal urban settlements, girls and persons with special needs.

The Government is fully committed to an education system that guarantees the right of every learner to quality and relevant education. It is

within this context that the Government introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) from 2003, which brought on board 1.5 million who had been locked out due to poverty. This created many challenges and to address them the Ministry provided capitation grants for instructional materials to all children to ensure that the poor and marginalised groups are mainstreamed. A number of reforms were undertaken to provide for stakeholders' participation and to improve governance and accountability.

The Government has also reviewed the entire education sector through a sector-wide approach to planning with a view to developing strategies for prioritised investments.

As the Ministry responsible for education, we recognise the need to anchor our operations on specific principles and values. The implementation of programmes is guided by our vision, mission and values.



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Sustainability of civil society advocacy

Future needs

The need to resource civil society education work and advocacy will continue beyond CEF's completion date in 2008. Although some of the more established coalitions have been able to attract funding from other sources, most still depend substantially on CEF for core funding. CEF hopes that by sharing its partnership experience internationally and demonstrating the return on investment in coalitions it will encourage wider and systematic collaborative support of civil society coalitions and advocacy generally and on education in particular. To this end, CEF is undertaking a comprehensive research project in 2006 into the CEF model of collaborative support for civil society and national coalitions working on advocacy, campaigning and strategic monitoring in education and the sustainability of such an approach.

Research

The research is being conducted in all 16 countries to identify appropriate national solutions for civil society organisations and coalitions to continue to work and grow and to sustain existing achievements. The research will be grounded in an understanding of the history and nature of education civil society and coalitions as well as the wider context in each country, while making use of learning from other country contexts. It will also seek out donor and other stakeholder views on the potential for more strategic support to civil society and coalitions and information about the technical requirements for establishing such a mechanism, in the emerging aid architecture. Additionally, the research will document the experience of the CEF and its partners in the process of coalition building, to provide guidance through case studies for anyone setting up or supporting coalitions.³

Conclusion

It is felt that there is tremendous value to the partnership that underpins the concept and actual experience of the CEF. Achievements of CEF coalition partners have been cultivated in no small part by the strong managing agency collaboration that was created at the inception of CEF and shaped its operation. This foundation of partnership, courageously entered into by

organisations that had not previously engaged in such close a collaborative funding management relationship, created the basis for similarly innovative partnerships across 16 countries.

Partnerships involve sharing resources, sharing risks, addressing challenges and embracing a diverse range of approaches to the further the core objectives of the project. The result for CEF has been an ever-widening network of organisations working in coalition, and engaging together with governments, to promote free quality education for all children.

Endnotes

1. Bangladesh, Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The CEF programme in Zimbabwe was subsequently terminated due to unfavourable political and work conditions.
2. Some excluded groups of children that CEF partners focus on include: girls, street children, children with disabilities, indigenous children, HIV orphans and vulnerable children, linguistic minorities, pastoralists, conflict-affected/displaced children, low caste/Dalit children, children in very remote/rural communities, and migrant workers.
3. CEF research reports, briefing papers and practitioners guide will all be made available through its website www.commonwealtheducationfund.org

Biographical notes

Jill Hart has worked with the Commonwealth Education Fund since 2004 and currently acts as Communications and Knowledge Management Coordinator in the UK Secretariat. She previously worked as Programme Coordinator for World Literacy of Canada. Jill holds an MA in International Affairs (Development) from the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, at Carleton University (Canada).

Chike Anyanwu has been the International Coordinator of the Commonwealth Education Fund since 2003. He previously worked as Education Advisor for ActionAid Nigeria and was instrumental in the establishment of the Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All (CSACEFA). Chike holds an MSc in Social Policy and Planning from the London School of Economics (UK).