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# Education Out Loud: six insights on civil society effectiveness, legitimacy, sustainability, and grant management

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## About this paper

The Education Out Loud (EOL) programme funds civil society organisations and networks to engage in advocacy for inclusive and quality education. This short paper highlights evidence and insights from the INTRAC review of the programme which we think is relevant to the broader context for civil society support. The evidence base used in our review included a grantee survey, three in-depth country studies and interviews with global stakeholders with a stake in EOL and its objectives.

The paper comprises two parts. Part 1 summarises three insights into how the fund was set up and operates, to enable sustainable, effective and legitimate civil society. In Part 2, we consider how the funds were disbursed and the role of the grant agent. Through three further insights, we argue that a relationship-based approach, supported by effective systems and processes can enable a grant agent to manage the tension of 'bottom-up' vs 'top-down' grant management.

## Introducing GPE and EOL

EOL is an initiative of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). The GPE is a multi-stakeholder partnership which brings together government ministries of education, bilateral donors, development banks, civil society, private sector actors and foundations and a range of education stakeholders including teachers and youth leaders.

EOL is dedicated to civil society advocacy and social accountability. The fund supports civil society groups and networks in over 60 countries to be active and influential in shaping education policy to better meet the needs of diverse communities. EOL funds are disbursed to a range of civil society actors – including national, regional and global education coalitions; civil society organisations (CSOs) working locally on social accountability, and transnational organisations and networks working on policy issues relevant to education system strengthening globally and regionally.

In reviewing GPE's Education Out Loud programme, we found many attributes that suggested to us that those seeking to describe themselves as a progressive funder could learn a lot from EOL practices.

# Part 1: funding for effective, legitimate, and sustainable civil society



Our review of EOL took place over a nine-month period in 2024 and 2025, and was supported by a team of country-level consultants (based in Malawi, Ghana and the Philippines). Here, we share lessons from the review which we believe could be drawn on more broadly by grant-makers, as hallmarks for enabling sustainable, effective and legitimate civil society; especially in its role in inclusive policy-making. At the heart of this ambition is a recognition that good grant making is not only about the quality of the funding, but also the quality of the relationship that is established.

## What attributes did we find?

Beyond the quantity and flow of resources - important in itself – our review identified other ways in which EOL provided value to grantees, including:

- the added benefit of the relationship with the GPE multi-stakeholder partnership. Our review found that this association strengthened access to policy spaces and policymakers, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of their advocacy.
- the willingness to invest long-term in civil society infrastructure – namely the network of National Education Coalitions as members of the Global Campaign for Education, and to provide long-term, reliable support to the operational capacity of national networks.
- the subtle and respectful way in which the EOL Grant Agent (Oxfam Denmark) supported, modelled and encouraged certain behaviours and practices also enhanced the representation, inclusivity – and therefore the legitimacy - of the grantees.

We believe that these attributes are particularly relevant in today's environment, with a growing scarcity of resources for civil society advocacy. In this context, a focus on the quality of funding might be one way to help address challenges regarding the quantity of funding. In this part we look further into these findings and extract some possible learning for broader support to civil society in this complicated and shrinking funding context.

## Insight 1 - strengthening effectiveness: building credibility, investing in advocacy skills and capacity and enabling access

Beyond funding, the review found that EOL support to learning, networking and capacity building strengthened the effectiveness of its grantees in influencing policy. This included a range of support to grantees to strengthen their ability to identify opportunities, engage proactively and effectively in policy processes, develop effective positioning and build persuasive evidence-based arguments.

Furthermore, the association with GPE (owner of EOL) provided some grantees with greater credibility and relationships with policymakers and other education stakeholders, and access to policymaking structures and working groups – including the multistakeholder Local Education Groups. This expanded the opportunity for grantees to directly engage in policy development and policy change.

By situating civil society as a strategic partner and legitimate voice in education policymaking, EOL invested in both their capacity and their access – enabling civil society to have a voice, be clear about what they wanted to say, and have the evidence to support their claims.

## **Insight 2 - reinforcing legitimacy: collective power, legitimacy and grassroots connections**

When engaging in education policy it is not enough to engage with one CSO. Good policymaking in the context of finite resources will inevitably involve trade-offs, and not everything can be invested in or changed all at once.

A key principle in EOL was to encourage stronger relationships and collaboration between civil society groups with complementary skills and experiences, to share positioning and evidence, and develop unified positions and voice where appropriate. Attention was paid to supporting CSOs at the different levels where national education policy is made and influenced (subnational, national and transnational), to develop linkages between groups and processes within a country, as well as transversally between national, regional and global advocacy initiatives.

EOL also had a strong learning focus, which we found to strengthen the reflective practice of individual grantees, as well as the shared learning and support between grantees with common interests through the creation of thematic regional learning collectives.

Our review found that this collective power and connective tissue enhanced the legitimacy, relevance and effectiveness of engagement in national policy change as well as social accountability and monitoring of policy implementation.

## **Insight 3 - funding for sustainability: long-term flexible funding for civil society as a public good**

A unique feature of EOL is indeed the investment in the core funding of civil society coalitions as an end in itself. Many of the grantees of EOL, specifically the National Education Coalitions, and the Global Campaign for Education, have received EOL (and predecessor CSEF) funding for many years, often more than ten. This flexible long-term approach enabled grantees to plan and invest long-term, recruit expert staff, and buffer shifts in donor priorities and interests. It also enabled them to advocate for policy change, and longer-term implementation. Fundamentally, this long-term approach contributed to organisational stability of the grantees, which was further consolidated by EOL support for organisational strengthening.

Many funders limit the amount of time they will support a CSO, using arguments of dependency and financial sustainability. We found that, although some coalitions were able to generate additional resources, the predictable and sustained funding provided by EOL remained critical to their ability to plan, determine and deliver their own agenda, and learn from their work.

Given that CSOs need resources to operate, we ask whether a focus on financial sustainability among many funders is misplaced? Instead, we suggest that EOL shows us how a focus on organisational stability, representation and impact is preferable, where grant-makers treat ongoing investment in civil society as a public good that supports inclusive quality policymaking.

## Part 2: effectiveness in grant management



Movements need funding but can you add value beyond providing funds? And if so, how do you do this in a way that doesn't undermine the very nature of a movement?

In Part 1, we discussed the design features which enable EOL to contribute to a sustainable, effective, legitimate civil society, with a strong role in inclusive policymaking. In Part 2, we unpack the role of the Grant Agent in EOL, and describe how Oxfam Denmark delivered their role, navigating common challenges that arise when managing a global fund focused on supporting locally-led 'development'.

### The role of Grant Agent

EOL was designed by GPE, including the role of Grant Agent to administer the fund – manage the grant-making process and report on results to the GPE – to ensure efficiency and effective grant-making. Oxfam Denmark took over this role, establishing Global and Regional Management Units to manage the programme and relationships with grantees.

While this role was described in quite technical and neutral terms in our early interactions for the review, we found that it is considerably more complex than a channel for money and reporting, and added value of its own to the programme and grantee experience. In fact, we found that beyond efficiency, the approach of Oxfam Denmark to the role of Grant Agent was key to programme results.

### Grant-maker or tightrope walker?

International development initiatives are often characterised as either top-down or bottom-up, and the tensions between these approaches are well documented, with important trade-offs in practice. In this case, Oxfam Denmark had the challenge of funding a civil society movement of national education coalitions - which necessarily needs to be flexible, emergent and driven by its members; while channelling funds which require accountability to GPE for a results-framework and education policy targets. We found that Oxfam Denmark managed to use available grant-making tools to gradually push the dial and strengthen practice in certain areas, including gender and social inclusion, without imposing external value systems or approaches, with respect and support for local ownership, and context-informed and flexible management.

There will always be challenges for funder to know when and how to hold or let go of control, but we were impressed with how the EOL grant agent played its role, negotiated its authority, and developed coherence from a diverse and localized programme without imposition. Their approach provides insights and ideas from which other grant makers could learn.

## Insight 1 - bringing your skills and assets to grant-making

First, it is important to understand that the role of grant maker does not need to be limited to getting money out of the door; instead they can and should draw on the broader resources at their disposal. Part 1 highlighted the added value of GPE's relationships with policymakers, bringing opportunities to strengthen credibility and access for grantees. As the Grant Agent, Oxfam Denmark could draw on its history of practice and reflection, deepening understanding and approaches for feminist analysis, localized partnership dynamics and learning approaches. As part of a confederation with a mix of different types of entities and actors, they understand complexity and were able to identify areas where coherence is necessary. This organisational experience informed how they approached their grant-making role.

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## Insight 2 - recognising and mitigating your limitations, and letting go where you don't know

While good grant management means uses all available resources, not just financial ones, it is equally important to be clear what you don't have, and therefore where to stand back. In this case, the individuals involved had extensive experience in various aspects of programme management but were not present in many of the countries where EOL grantees were working. The grant makers did not have the context expertise or the cultural capital for a nuanced understanding of how policy is made in a given country; the relationships to enable engagement with the long-term process of policy implementation; or the rootedness in a particular locality which brings the long-term commitment to the changes you're advocating for.

ODK took a sensitive approach to promoting or offering approaches and technical expertise, combining relationship building, listening and offering, and being careful not to oblige grantees to adopt approaches that didn't work for them. Through its global and regional management units, Oxfam Denmark was able to establish the relationships that allowed it to let go of control of how the money was spent while also adding value to how the work was done in practice. In this way, it became more possible for EOL to provide relevant, context-appropriate support to grantees in dozens of countries and contribute positively to grantees' approaches and capacity.

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## Example in practice: supporting grantees to strengthen gender equity approaches

As an example of this approach, ODK was able to deepen a focus on gender equality through a combination of 'hardwiring' gender into grant management mechanisms (from planning to results reporting), supporting learning, and modelling good practice. Through working in this way they could move the needle on a sensitive and cross-cutting issue; prompting and supporting grantees to strengthen gender equality objectives in their work and working practices.

They did this by using the tools that exist within a grant management process (for example identifying gender in the proposal requirements and assessment criteria, and within the reporting process) as well as directly supporting grantees to integrate gender equality issues into their analysis and planning, and their learning plans, and facilitating support visits and learning activities. Alongside this they also embedded a commitment to gender equality in their own practices – drawing from the Oxfam Denmark feminist principles, and integrating this in their policy frameworks, their training and safeguarding mechanisms, and through a gender equality and social inclusion working group. Finally, they also introduced earmarked funding for gender equality (and social inclusion) related activities, which was additional to the core grants, but design to fund integrated activities that would strengthen the core grant. This work was further reviewed and adapted based on feedback – through systematic and rapid reviews.

Through integrating a gender focus at every level, Oxfam Denmark was able to support and strengthen attention and commitment to gender – through grantee activities, analysis and in areas such as representation within the national networks. But at the same time, the way that a focus on gender was translated in practice was driven nationally and locally – dependent on the realities of the context and local analysis of what could be prioritised in order to contribute to policy making for quality inclusive education.

### Insight 3 - balancing grantee autonomy with programmatic coherence and accountability

The role of the Grant Agent is not neutral; daily choices are made, relationships are formed, policies are designed and implemented - all of which can enable or constrain the work of grantees, and add value to, or undermine their practice. This is an art not a science. These are complex roles and require tensions to be navigated and priorities to be balanced. This includes an honest appraisal of the tensions and clearly articulating the benefits when there is an intervention, negotiating with grantees are being clear how the approach will add value. To do this there is a need to commit organisationally to shifting power, and to recognise that enabling a diverse, localised, responsive, adaptive programme requires different mindsets, behaviours and processes from the grant manager.

Oxfam Denmark took a decentralised funding approach that enabled grantees to set and report against their own results framework, while the grant agent translated and built coherence across contexts. They also invested heavily in learning, from building skills in reflective practice of grantees; convening learning collectives at national and regional level to encourage peer exchange; and working with learning partners to capture, synthesise and incorporate programme learning into the EOL design and approaches. These practices are the final piece in the jigsaw that enabled local to global connections and coherence while ensuring that grantees were able to determine their own agendas and priorities locally.

## Conclusion

Local and global are sometimes posed as dichotomies, with development practitioners expected to stake where they sit in their development practices. However, both are important in enabling the wider changes that are necessary for all to access their human rights. Valuing this and working to hold the tension effectively is core to contributing to acknowledging that the grant-maker role is not neutral, must add value and to deliver progressive grant-making practice.

## About the authors

Kate Newman has been the Chief Executive of INTRAC since 2022 and has worked in the international development sector for over 25 years. Prior to joining INTRAC Kate worked with ActionAid, on participatory approaches and the right to education and later with Christian Aid, where she held a number of senior leadership roles. She holds a PhD in community development and has extensive experience as a consultant, working on strategy, partnership, evaluations and learning reviews as well as the development of resource materials.



Hannah Beardon has over 25 years of experience supporting international development actors in learning, reflecting on their work, and improving their communication, evaluation, and learning mechanisms. She has a diverse skill set as a researcher, evaluator, writer, and facilitator, specialising in participatory practices within the realm of international development. Organisations she has worked with include UNICEF, FAO, and various NGOs.



Helen Collinson has worked in international development for 30 years, specialising in advocacy, policy research, and public campaigning. In her capacity as an independent consultant, she undertakes advocacy training, evaluations of advocacy programmes, scoping studies and applied policy research. Helen has worked with INTRAC since 2008, training civil society in advocacy skills in diverse national contexts and online.

