Final evaluation of the Civil Society Education Fund, 2016-2019

Executive Summary, Lessons Learned & Recommendations

September 2020

Final evaluation report

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Executive Summary

Purpose of the Evaluation

In September 2019, the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) commissioned the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) to undertake the Endline Evaluation of the Civil Society Education Fund, 2016-2019 (CSEF III).

The **purposes of the evaluation** are to:

- reflect on the intended and unintended outcomes achieved by CSEF
- examine the relevance of the CSEF objectives and Theory of Change (ToC)
- map the contribution of CSEF to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) objectives
- identify lessons to support the future of the GCE Movement
- map the contribution of CSEF to GCE goals
- assess transition to Education Out Loud (EOL)[1]

The evaluation addresses these purposes using two core **evaluation objectives and approaches**:

- To reflect on the **outcomes** achieved by the CSEF programme, both intended and unintended, through a quantitative and qualitative outcome harvesting (OH) approach
- To derive lessons learned for the GCE movement going forward through a qualitative **process and learning evaluation approach.**

Key Findings and Conclusions

How relevant to stakeholder needs was the CSEF III Programme?

CSEF was unique in combining the strengths of GCE, the largest, South-based[2], global civil society education campaign network with over 120 members and GPE, the largest global, multilateral education funding partnership involving most major donors and supporting governments in 70 developing countries.

The CSEF III objectives were strongly aligned with commitments to SDG4 and therefore were relevant to and strongly aligned with the changing priorities of key stakeholders such as the programme donor (GPE), programme implementer (GCE), and programme partners (NECs). The objectives of CSEF III placed greater emphasis on demonstrating policy-related targets than previous iterations of CSEF. The CSEF objectives were also sufficiently open to allow for NECs to adapt the objectives to suit their local

[1] The TOR refer to what was then the Advocacy for Social Accountability (ASA) fund and is now EOL.
[2] 'South-based' and 'North-based' are used here, as they were by those interviewed in this evaluation and in UN publications, largely to represent respectively donor and recipient countries in relation to development aid.

context; however, there are some priorities of GCE and NECs, such as work on Transformative Education, Education and Emergencies and the role of the private sector in education that remained outside of the direct scope of the CSEF and GPE.

The CSEF III ToC was largely found to be valid at the input-to-output level. The programme was able to offer inputs that NECs found relevant and helpful in their work to achieve programme outcomes and objectives. However, as coalition contexts change over time (and in particular, with regard to political contexts), not all of the assumptions concerning outputs to outcomes held. This is particularly true with regard to assumptions concerning government relationships with civil society, such as that government and other actors take CSO voices seriously and that national governments are open to inclusive CSO engagement. Assumptions were also less likely to hold true for NECs in decentralised or conflict-affected and post-conflict countries. However, even under these circumstances' coalitions have found ways to continue their advocacy work. The ToC was not used as a living document, or monitored and adapted to better fit the context of all National Education Coalitions (NECs). The CSEF III objectives remain relevant to EOL and the future of the Movement. The ToC is also relevant and valid for the future with amended assumptions and adjustment to the local contexts.

What did the programme achieve in terms of results?

CSEF achieved most of its objectives as set out in the results framework and demonstrated strong progress and improvement through the course of the programme. The programme was most successful in reaching Outcome 2.1 (coalitions have actively consulting with, engaged and mobilised the public), Outcome 3.1 (CSO views are represented in the GPE board by CSO representatives) and Outcome 3.2 (Key regional and global debates and events on SDG4 include strong links between national, regional, and global CSO voices). While the programme did not meet all targets, it was still able to demonstrate strong progress against Outcome 1.1 (inclusive coalitions actively engaged and represented diverse actors and the most marginalised), Outcome 1.2 (coalitions actively participated in LEGs and other key sector policy and review processes) and Outcome 2.2 (coalitions engaged citizens in and produced relevant research).

There was some flexibility to redefine measurement definitions and calculations in response to programme learning about NEC work, but ultimately, targets were not updated. In these cases, the outcome indicators were not always effective measures of the achievement of objectives, particularly in contexts where ToC assumptions did not hold. However, the outcome indicators used in the CSEF Results Framework still provided a useful guide to stakeholders to track progress towards achieving the programme's objectives. In many cases, there are reports of the ways in which RS and GS were able to use data to provide tailored attention and advice to NECs to address areas of slower progress. Therefore, the complex indicators allowed for programme stakeholders to understand incremental progress towards outcomes and objectives, even if this progress was not always fully reflected in the ultimate outcome indicators.

Objective 1: To support effective civil society representation and engagement in education sector policy dialogue

The programme made notable improvements against Outcome 1.1, although targets were only partially met, which may in part be explained by changes to the indicator measures which led to an initial decrease in progress against targets. Scores achieved against this indicator were driven by an

improvement in membership numbers rather than membership engagement, but there were important ways the representation of marginalised groups has increased across CSEF NECs and there was increased representation in all seven targets groups. The programme did not meet all its targets against Outcome 1.2, which in some cases demonstrate that some of the programme's assumptions do not hold. Despite this, NECs have found ways to strengthen their engagement through informal channels.

Objective 2: To support active public outreach and citizen engagement in the generation/ use of research and evidence on quality, equity, financing and education system reform

CSEF mainly reached its Outcome 2.1 targets, with global reporting indicating that the programme met or exceeded targets until the final year of the programme. CSEF's improvements in public engagement was largely driven by the increase in the frequency of citizens meetings organised by NECs, however the Global Action Week for Education (GAWE) was still a main calendar driver for public outreach. Results against Outcome 2.2 are mixed, coalitions have succeeded in engaging citizens as part of research, but the definitions applied for OI2.2.1 have meant that progress against the production of research is difficult to track. The failure to achieve these targets, despite progress, appears to lie in the ways in which research has been defined and in the mismatch between target timelines and those which drive the need for research, including yearly planning and external events.

Objective 3: To ensure global and regional processes relating to GPE and SDG4 are better informed by national and local civil society

CSEF III met all targets for Outcome 3.1, ensuring that civil society is actively supported to engage in GPE fora. CSEF's performance against this indicator is strong, and targets were met across all reporting periods. Engagement in GPE processes brought capacity building and national-level engagement opportunities for coalitions, however, while there is strong evidence that CSEF supported higher levels of participation with civil society perspectives in GPE processes, there is less documentation on the extent to which civil society inclusion has had an impact on GPE processes. CSEF III performed strongly against Outcome 3.2, which examines the participation of and linkages with civil society and SDG4 processes, taking advantage of the timeliness of opportunities to contribute to discussions on global education goals.

What are the changes, intended and unintended, at the global, regional and national levels brought about by CSEF III?

The intended and unintended changes generated by across the programme at national, regional and global levels demonstrate not only that the programme has hugely progressed against its objectives, but also has highlighted some of the unintended but crucial mechanisms used by the programme to achieve its aims. Through our OH, we identified a total of 17 types of outcomes that emerged across the breadth of the CSEF programme and at multiple levels. These encapsulated changes focused at the national level, as well as those that applied to the global and regional levels. Outcomes targeted changes three main levels: outcomes within individual coalitions and their membership, as well as the Movement more broadly; outcomes targeted at the general public, which included marginalised groups within society; and outcomes oriented towards decision makers, whether policy makers at the

national level, key influencers of policy making or implementing processes, representatives of donor groups and those involved in the setting of international goals.

While the bulk of the outcomes focus on the achievements of NECs, the GS and RSs made significant contributions in their own right. In addition to supporting NECs to contribute to global and regional dialogue, the GS and RSs conducted their own set of activities towards these by themselves acting as civil society representatives on behalf of the NECs and the Movement. Their efforts to strengthen the diversity and inclusivity of underrepresented civil society voices in global and regional fora was augmented by their efforts to create alignment and cohesion across the Movement as well as amongst civil society more broadly.

How effectively did stakeholders support the CSEF III objectives?

The Global Secretariat (GS) put in place effective mechanisms to steer programme operations, track progress and accountability, and maintain strategic alignment. Many of these mechanisms were developed in response to recommendations provided by independent evaluations and reviews with the aim of strengthening GCE's capacity to act as Grant Agent, most notably the addition of internal audit and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) capacities. The implementation of global processes was coordinated through regional partners, who ensured compliance and accountability, but also helped NECs to adapt tools and processes to national contexts where possible. The GOC and RFCs provided independent decision making and oversight, which mitigated against any risks of conflict of interest. RFCs were valued for their advisory support which provided RSs with a 'fresh pair of eyes'.

Regional Secretariats (RSs) built strong relationships of trust with individual NECs, and provided a wealth of long term support for continual improvement over the course of CSEF III, building on previous phases of the programme. The RFMA role maintained robust financial and grant management processes, while also building the NEC financial management capacities through training, tools, and support, which was valued by NECs and in some cases helped them to improve proposals and demonstrate implementation capacities to a wider set of donors.

Both GS and RS directly supported the achievement of CSEF III objectives. The GS was most valued for its provision of tools, guidance, information on GPE processes and SDG4 implementation, and in creating spaces for CSO participation in global decision-making platforms. RSs worked directly with NECs to improve their ability to contribute to both global and regional debates and platforms, while also strengthening national advocacy. RSs had the experience and expertise to support NECs working in complex and diverse contexts, and to provide tailored and long term support based on individual NEC needs.

There were challenges related to overseeing and coordinating a highly diverse and complex programme, in particular the heavy workload assigned to RSs who were balancing multiple responsibilities, and reporting and annual proposal processes which served an important function, but were time consuming and at times risked diverting RSs efforts from important advocacy work.

How effectively did the CSEF III structure support the CSEF III objectives?

Overall, the structure of the programme provided NECs with a holistic set of support from global and regional levels, which increased their visibility and credibility, and in turn supported the achievement

of CSEF III objectives and strengthened the wider GCE movement. In this way, the tri-level structure was mutually beneficial across all levels, and is possible due to the existing spirit of solidarity built through the cohesive GCE movement.

Programme management and grant management functions were strengthened based on previous independent evaluations and reviews, and were broadly effective and helped to maintain strategic alignment and monitor progress and accountability. However, the CSEF III structure created bottlenecks due to the multiple layers of review and approval, which risked delays in funding and implementation, and added to stretched workloads.

The MEL strategy was strengthened in CSEF III, following recommendations from the external evaluation of CSEF II, and although there were reported challenges in the roll out of the system, which took longer than planned to operationalise to its full extent, the MEL system was a worthwhile investment which improved on the previous paper-based system. There may be further scope to improve the usability and utilisation of the MEL system for NECs beyond regular progress reporting.

How efficient was CSEF III in the use of resources?

As the Grant Agent, GCE took steps to improve grant management functions in line with independent recommendations, including improved auditing functions, which although slow to implement initially, was operational by the close of the programme. RFMAs continue to provide valuable financial accountability and reporting at regional levels, which ensures there is close monitoring and support for individual NECs. While the RFMA role added an additional layer, which added to costs and at times created bottlenecks due to the added layer of review, absorbing this role into either the GS or RS is unlikely to have been effective.

The introduction of new systems meant continued challenges in coordinating necessary annual proposals and reporting, which were onerous and time consuming and could cause delays in coalition contracting and fund disbursement. In part, the structure of CSEF exacerbated this due to the various levels of review and approval, however the benefit of the structure was strong accountability and transparency mechanisms at global and regional levels.

The tri-level structure which operated within the wider GCE movement added value to the programme through the cohesive and collaborative network of global, regional and national experts working towards the same goals. This allowed both CSEF and non-CSEF organisations to mutually benefit each other by sharing resources and platforms, and created opportunities for collective advocacy in order to strengthen civil society voices.

What is the likely sustainability of the programme benefits?

The main perceived legacy of CSEF III is the creation of a collaborative network of strong, credible NECs sharing a common agenda and able to advocate effectively for SDG4. This includes the creation, sustaining and strengthening of NECs and the establishment of a network with a common agenda, which built on the existing GCE movement of education coalitions.

CSEF III was perceived to demonstrate the need for and value of a civil society voice at global, regional and national levels in the establishment and promotion of SDG4, and helped to translate the global strategy and 2030 Agenda to local contexts. It added value by ensuring that CSOs had a voice in donor coordination mechanisms and that they were invited into national policy processes.

However, there are some perceived risks and concerns related to the sustainability of the CSEF achievements as the programme comes to an end. CSEF partners valued the long-term, contextualised approach which recognised that building advocacy capacities and advocacy work itself is a process, rather than a single event or project; a change to a short-term project approach to funding and activities may put this at risk. There were questions raised about the long-term sustainability of some of the tools and systems built by GCE during CSEF III, including in particular the online MEL platform. Finally, the future of funding, with a shrinking donor landscape and the threat of Covid-19, has brought further concern for the future of NECs, in particular nascent coalitions and those who are ineligible for EOL funding.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

In moving forward, our evaluation's findings offer several lessons learned and recommendations, which are presented below.

Multi-donor fund support for advocacy through a global-regional-national civil society network is an effective way of achieving a range of positive outcomes and impact towards the achievement of SDG4

CSEF III, combining the strengths of GCE, GPE and regional networks in support of NECs, has been highly successful in achieving intended outcomes at national level. It has also been highly successful in creating a collaborative network of strong, credible NECs able to advocate effectively for SDG4. It has demonstrated the need for and value of a civil society voice at global, regional and national levels in the establishment and promotion of SDG4.

- **Recommendation 1:** GCE and GPE should seek to build on the strengths of their global and regional partnerships under CSEF, especially through the operation of the EOL fund. GCE should also look for other funding partnerships to support the GCE Movement in sustaining and benefitting from the CSEF achievements.

Advocacy and mobilising resources take time and requires a sustained approach

Support to strengthening advocacy[3] requires a long-term process to be effective. For instance, mobilisation and the development of human and other resources takes time. This raises problems for donors who need to justify to their home constituency the achievement of short-term results and an exit strategy. The need to demonstrate short-term, concrete achievements was seen by those interviewed as a move to a project approach, requiring an emphasis on activities as opposed to the building of sustainable systems and long-term processes.

- **Recommendation 2:** Future initiatives to strengthen and support civil society advocacy in relation to SDG4 should take a longer-term, sustained approach to build capacity, systems and processes and with less emphasis on short-term activities. Adequate time should be allowed for mobilising and

[3] Advocacy is used here to contrast with service delivery, and encompasses all CSEF objectives.

fostering human and other resources and to allow for systems developed by the initiative to become fully embedded and sustainable in order to gain their full benefit.

The need to modify approaches according to context rather than employ a global approach

CSEF III employed a global ToC and Results Framework and a global approach to project resourcing and support, while also encouraging adaptation of programme design and implementation which was flexible to national needs and context. Whilst this local adaptation of a global approach was in many ways successful, the heavy requirement for global and regional planning and reporting was often resource intensive which some NECs found challenging. The global ToC and assumptions were not fully applicable to NECs in all countries.

The Results Framework contained indicators and targets which were at times too narrowly defined to allow the programme to capture the full achievements of coalitions, particularly in contexts where certain assumptions did not hold true. Furthermore, targets did not take account of changes in indicator definition and measurement, which distorted the progress against targets in some instances.

- **Recommendation 3:** Future initiatives of this nature should continue to emphasise adaptation to the local context and an approach that is responsive to the varied and changing needs of different coalitions.
- **Recommendation 4:** ToCs should be treated as living documents, designed to the meet the differing needs of the stakeholders in different contexts. Formatively reflecting on these helps to equip the programme with a better understanding of whether the designed approach is working, for whom it is working, and in which contexts in order to allow necessary adaptation.
- **Recommendation 5**: As with ToCs, Results Frameworks should also be used as living documents in which targets can be adapted or amended in light of changing external factors affecting the potential for target achievement, or to provide more meaningful measures of programme achievement. The use of proximal indicators such as output indicators may allow for more flexible targets and a more granular picture of what is working, where, and for whom, which supports a fuller picture of programme progress, a more nuanced approach to course correction and supports a better understanding of the programme ToC.

The value of regional support and expertise supporting a contextually-relevant, responsive approach

RSs played a key role in supporting NECs. NECs strongly endorsed the importance of RSs in the achievement of CSEF III objectives. This was in the light of the RSs' deep understanding of the NEC context and greater ability to provide capacity development, technical support and 'South-South' lesson-learning than would have been possible with a purely global-national programme.

- **Recommendation 6:** Global funds should take into account the value of working closely with or through regional networks that are able to provide continuity of support through capacity development, technical support and 'South-South' lesson-learning. The potential trade-offs of this approach may include increased inefficiencies due to increased levels of governance, which should be mitigated against through strong processes and clear communication channels.

The importance of building a spirit of global solidarity and trust

CSEF III was a fund that supported NECs through a complex and well-designed interlocking global-regional-national structure. However, more than this, the programme has built on the previous work of GCE to further the spirit of global solidarity and trust.

An important outcome of the programme was the cohesion of civil society and across the different levels of the programme, which had a multiplier effect for the achievement of other outcomes such as credibility in the eyes of decision makers and the public. GCE was able to add value to CSEF III through its pre-existing movement of coalitions, which included both CSEF and non-CSEF members, and drew upon the wider expertise and external relationships within the Movement to meet common objectives. There are some concerns about the risk of maintaining the spirit of global solidarity and trust, in EOL.

- **Recommendation 7:** Programmes involving global funds should take into account, not just measures to strengthen administrative effectiveness and efficiency, but also motivational and community-building aspects, in particular the establishment of a spirit of solidarity and trust between stakeholders.

The need for effective communications, lesson learning and information sharing on a 'South-South' basis

Communications, lesson-learning and information sharing – especially on a South-South basis – supported NECs to achieve the CSEF objectives. This was enabled through the structure of CSEF, which utilised roles and relationships across different levels for effective horizontal and vertical communications, as well as the use of the MEL platform as a global repository of information that could be quickly shared. There are some concerns about the ability to continue to benefit from lesson learning and especially South-South information sharing to the same extent in future as the programme shifts to EOL.

- **Recommendation 8:** Future programmes, particularly those focused on supporting diversity and inclusion, should consider measures to ensure strong communications flows between global and national levels through the use of regional levels structures which provide long-term support and build strong relationships with the national level.
- **Recommendation 9:** Future programmes should ensure strong MEL systems, such as the one used in CSEF III, as a means to not only monitor progress across a number of short-term output indicators and longer-term, composite outcome indicators but also as a platform to strengthen communications and provide South-South lesson sharing.

Need for strong human resources within and supporting NECs

Future funders should take into account that capacity building and advocacy activities require sufficient levels of human resources and person time, and not simply activity costs. The enhanced capacity of NECs to undertake advocacy work in line with the CSEF III objectives was strongly assisted by the ability of NECs to secure appropriate staff through the CSEF fund. The long-term funding of core staff time and resources allowed coalitions to remain active and therefore visible, adapt and take advantage of unexpected opportunities, helped to reduce high staff turnover and loss of capacity.

- **Recommendation 10:** Providers and potential providers of funds for capacity building networks and national-level advocacy coalitions should pay particular attention not just to funds needed to support activities, but to support the core costs of human resources needed to build capacities for, efficiently undertake or to augment these activities.