



# African Civil Society Education Groups: In Search for A Place in Implementing the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA)

Research Report  
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## *Executive Summary*

The African Union (AU) launched its Continental Education Strategy (CESA) in 2016, as the education component of the Africa We Want vision, stressing that CESA's twelve strategic objectives constitute a domestication of the global SDG4 agenda while articulating additional African priorities, which respond to the continent's long-term development needs.

CESA's launch envisioned implementation processes which would see the African regional bodies (such as ECOWAS and SADC) play an important role in driving the adoption and further elaboration of CESA strategies at the regional and national levels. The CESA strategy document recognized the role of civil society (and other non-state actors) in developing and implementing CESA. It mentioned two pan-African civil society networks by name, ANCEFA and FAWE. It also assumed that regional economic communities (RECs) and national governments would see to it that civil society is part of the CESA governance and implementation structures. CESA itself called for the establishment of an alliance of *all* stakeholders in its twelfth strategic objective.

The operationalization of CESA since 2016 has not matched the high-level of political support that governments and civil society alike express towards it as the articulation of a genuinely African vision for the continent's educational needs. CESA remains largely unknown at the national level, without a visible presence in national education sector plans. Regional Economic Communities (RECs) appear to be disconnected from many CESA processes and their policy efforts in the education sphere make very few references to CESA. With few exceptions, civil society education groups across Africa are unaware of CESA and cannot identify meaningful ways of engaging with it at the national level. In contrast, governments and civil society monitor the implementation of SDG4 goals and consider reporting on progress in the realization of the SDG4 goals a priority. Politically valued but operationally neglected, CESA's diffusion into the regional and national education policy realms remains very weak overall.

CESA's most visible operational components are the twelve CESA clusters, thematic working groups which seek to maximize the engagement and contributions of different education stakeholders



in promoting and implementing CESA's objectives. The clusters cover themes such as teacher development, TVET, curriculum, peace education, school feeding, and ICT in education. The twelve clusters are at various stages of their development and are not all equally inclusive or active. There does not seem to be a deliberate effort to reach out to civil society for their participation in the clusters. Expanding the membership of each cluster is largely left to the chair(s) and coordinator(s) of the clusters who do not all share an understanding of civil society as an essential education stakeholder representing citizen voices and -as the case is in Africa- as an important actor in the national education landscape, as evidenced by their participation and leadership roles in the local education groups, the national education sector coordination and dialogue platforms. As a consequence of the low levels of civil society participation in CESA clusters, important potential connections between the continental and national levels are missed, as well as potential gains from the knowledge and expertise that civil society groups can contribute to CESA processes and policies. Deficits in information, awareness, participation, and governance, can clearly be seen in the CESA clusters, and are expressive of the same deficits that characterize CESA as a whole.

Some recent developments give cause to optimism regarding overcoming those deficits in CESA. The AU and UNESCO, as the two agencies responsible for CESA and SDG4, have worked together to agree on joint benchmarks and common indicators for both frameworks. The first *Continental Report*, which was published by the AU and UNESCO in February 2023, is the first time that reporting on CESA's implementation has systematically been done. The agreed indicators for both frameworks allow seeing CESA and SDG4 as complementary and not separate and relieves governments of the burdens of separate reporting on each. This convergence was not a result of SDG4 negating CESA, or vice versa, but of expanding the SDG4 indicators so that they cover CESA objectives which the SDG4 lacks or does not include as strongly.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the pandemic and its damaging effects on education in Africa, there is a collective will, expressed by African leaders at the Transforming Education Summit in 2022, to strengthen the continent's education systems and to improve their inclusiveness and resilience. The African Union's declaration of education as the thematic priority for the continent in 2024 will

include taking stock of CESA and evaluating its architecture, implementation, and governance. This presents a significant opportunity to revitalize CESA, elevate its visibility, and underscore its importance in advancing national education goals. Subjecting the actual governance and architecture of CESA to critical review is a crucial part of the next phase of its development. For civil society, more inclusive and representative governance structures are needed for CESA to truly become the educational articulation of the Africa We Want vision. The report identifies the absence of “the alliance of *all* education stakeholders”, which the CESA strategy document called for, as the major governance deficit that needs to be urgently addressed.

African civil society education groups are eager to engage with CESA, to shape its development, and to help in giving it increasingly more substantive presence at the regional and national levels. The research report is an expression of this interest and seeks to identify concrete and practical measures by the AU, RECs, national governments, civil society, and supportive funders, which would lead to expanding the meaningful participation of civil society in the governance of CESA and in its processes at all levels, from the continental down to the national.

The report’s recommendations to enable meaningful civil society participation in CESA are the following:

**1. Address the issue of shrinking civic space:**

- Inclusive participation at the regional and continental levels requires addressing shrinking civic space at the national level
- The AU, RECs and national governments should provide adequate legal, political, and social spaces for CSOs to operate freely. Enabling national legal and administrative frameworks are necessary.
- Evidence from different parts of the world and from different institutional settings show that the legal obligation to consult CSOs is conducive for civil society’s ability to influence policy.

**2. Establish CESA’s Governance Structure:**

- The Governance Structure of CESA, the *Alliance of All Stakeholders*, should finally be established
- AU should work collaboratively with the RECs so that they buy into the same principles and reflect on existing engagement modalities between their education arms and civil society.
- AU should open participation in CESA clusters to interested and qualified civil society organizations.
- Open joint CESA-SDG coordination and knowledge production mechanisms, such as the *Continental Report*, for civil society participation.

**3. Increase coordination between civil society groups, pooling of resources and collective demands for participation:**

- Civil Society Groups, including INGOs working in Africa, should increase their coordination, pooling of knowledge resources, and collective demands for more and meaningful participation.
- Regional umbrella organizations with official status (EACSO, SADC-CNGO, and WACSO) should work with education groups in their regions to establish civil society education clusters.
- Umbrella organisations should facilitate and support the engagement of national and thematic CSOs, not crowd them out of those spaces.
- Funders should include the support of coordination platforms between education groups in their priorities.

#### 4. *Facilitate civil society's full participation in the 2024 Year of Education in Africa:*

- Civil society and teacher organizations should be part of the regional and national task forces to shape and support country-level action plans for the Year of Education.
- Remove barriers to civil society participation in AU- and REC- high-level Summits and meetings.
- Provide role and space for civil society, as panelists and speakers in the planned conferences, as contributors to studies, and as participants.
- AU should consider setting up a special Civil Society Fund to support civil society participation and engagement. Funders should also play their part in enabling civil society participation in the Year of Education.

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