

## Coordinated action to transform education

Education outcomes are a shared responsibility and achieving results in education can rarely be linked to individual actors and organizations. Rather, they are outcomes of complex interactions between governments and diverse stakeholders working within countries. Sustainable, catalytic results rely on these coordinated actions, the fulfillment of agreed responsibilities and inclusive, efficient and effective partnerships.

Sector coordination works best when there is **jointly agreed and clear priorities for education, strong political will and government leadership** (at both local and national levels), **clear roles and responsibilities** with an **inclusive governance structure** (typically outlined in the form of a Terms of Reference for the local education group), strong **capacity** of different organizations as well as the government to engage and **accountability mechanisms** that are adhered to (such as joint sector reviews and other shared monitoring practices).

Good sector coordination can strengthen alignment of education delivery actors, including at decentralized levels or from other sectors; technical co-ordination of efforts and approaches; and better alignment of external finance.

### Why sector coordination matters

Coordinated action aims to make better use of partner countries' institutions, human resources, procedures and tools as the mainstays for improving education outcomes so as to ensure programming, resources and expertise are aligned with country policy directives, reform efforts and priorities, and are also used efficiently.

Different partners have different incentives for participating in sector dialogue, as well as different, unique contributions they bring to the table. **Understanding and recognizing the different reasons why stakeholders engage in dialogue and coordinated action** allows governments to tailor their communication strategies and engagement approaches accordingly. When stakeholders perceive that their interests and perspectives are understood and valued, they in turn are more likely to participate actively in coordination. Mobilizing different system actors can further offer a space for identifying individual assets that can be leveraged to achieve a common goal, collective strengths – meaning what can be achieved through collaboration that could not be accomplished by stakeholders working in silos – as well as addressing system bottleneck and points of resistance. In **Cabo Verde**, the participation of civil society organizations in sector coordination mechanisms has been central to pushing the policy environment toward more rights-based policy design and service delivery.

Another measure of sector coordination is the **alignment of external financing with national systems**. Alignment of external aid means aligning aid not only with national sector policies, strategies and plans, but also with government institutions and systems. Because of their structural proximity with national systems, aligned modalities can provide unique opportunities to support the capacity strengthening and transformation of those systems in partner countries.

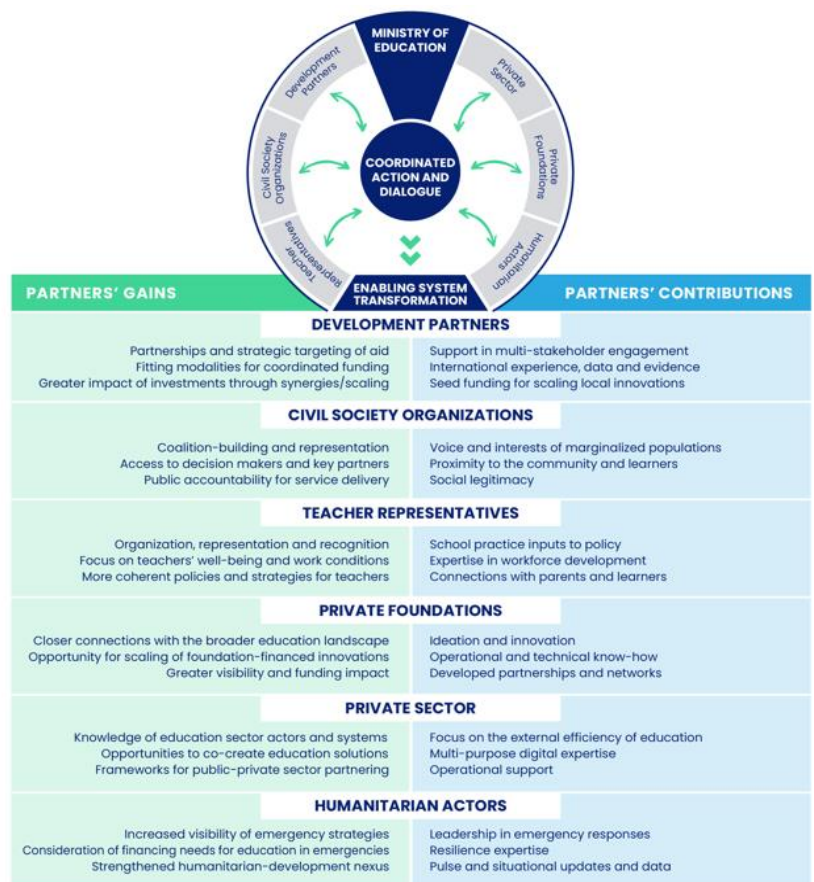
They can improve transparency and accountability around the national budget and systems, enhance the relevance and quality of joint sector dialogue, provide increased absorption of

external financing contributing to impact at scale and leverage cross-cutting reforms that have a critical impact on education. In **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, dialogue between development partners within the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG), has benefited from a shift from project-based dialogue to a greater focus on policies, budgets and priority reforms, enabling partners to better understand and address specific issues such as teacher budget allocations and deployment at the subnational level.

In crisis-affected or prone contexts, coordination of humanitarian and development efforts has been key in ensuring that the education needs of vulnerable populations are met. In **Uganda**, the government-led Education in Emergencies Working Group coordinates implementation of a comprehensive Education Response Plan offering linkages across humanitarian and development partners in refugee settlements. The Response Plan is fully integrated into the broader Education Sector Plan and builds on active engagement and strong coordination with local actors in delivering education. In contexts with no legitimate or recognized government, coordination in the education sector needs to happen without government leadership. In **Myanmar**, the development partner-led *Joint Response Framework* has provided partners with medium-term priorities to align sector funding, including that of ECW and GPE.

Cross-sector coordination is essential to respond effectively to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic required coordination across the education and health sectors. Climate change is underlining the need for education stakeholders to coordinate with those working on climate change, disaster risk reduction and management, and environmental protection, both to prepare education systems for increasing disasters and to harness the role of education in climate action and environmental sustainability. In the **Kyrgyz Republic**, a country highly vulnerable to climate risks, the Coordination Commission of Climate Change Problems ensures multisector coordination, including mainstreaming of climate change considerations in all national, social, economic and environmental policies.

Successful coordination mechanisms offer value to stakeholders, meeting potential motivations and incentives for specific actors in working more closely together; and are based on an appreciation of what they bring to the table. The graphic provides an overview of what partners can gain and contribute through strengthened sector coordination.



## Challenges in sector coordination

Unprioritized sector policies and plans; the dependency on external aid<sup>1</sup>, diversion or overlap of resources and the evolving political economy are some of the forces at play at country level that can lead to inefficiencies in sector coordination.

**The lack of alignment and harmonization of donors** are important barriers to sector coordination – increasing the amount of aid (by volume of financing, by number of projects) that is both fragmented, dispersed and operating on the margins of the national budget and country systems. Such misalignment generates heavy coordination and transaction costs, with limited catalytic effects on resource allocation and spending. The recent partnership compact of **Niger** [finalized a short time before the coup] noted that in 2023 there were 34 development partners supporting 120 different types of projects and funding modalities in the education sector, each drawing on the already stretched national capacities. This was despite the existence of an aligned pooled fund, operating successfully. In **Kenya**, coordinating and aligning donor funding to national systems remain a challenge as poor financial management from previous grants impact donors' trust to increase the provision of funding through national systems. While understanding the perceived risks, GPE has noted that there are funding modalities and approaches through which external financing can be significantly aligned with country public financial systems, while still adequately managing risks [including use of aid-on-Budget or *ringfenced budget support* mechanisms]. There are good examples of this throughout the Partnership, including aligned aid-on-Budget pooled funds in several GPE partner countries.

**Overlapping, sometimes competing mandates as well as political will** among government agencies and the weak engagement of multiple key stakeholders in local education groups (including religious, parent and minority or marginalized communities) hinder effective sector coordination. In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, there is weak engagement of provincial governments in sector plan implementation and limited participation of key groups, such as religious organizations, in the monitoring and implementation of the plan. In other cases, governments grapple with 1. the capacity to bring diverse sets of donors around the table to coordinate and align behind national priorities; or 2. the often-unequal power balance in the donor-to-recipient relationship.

In situations of **crisis**, such as those including conflict, forced displacement, or disasters driven by natural hazards and climate change, coordination is integral to the continuity of learning for school-aged children, but it is also challenging due to the disconnects between education coordination systems (Education Clusters, Refugee Education Working Groups, and local education groups). In fragile or conflicted affected countries, stakeholders may not be willing to engage directly with the government, further highlighting the necessity of close coordination among education stakeholders to align sector support with humanitarian resource flows. There is frequently a lack of clarity around the roles, leadership functions, and responsibilities of each during a crisis. In the early Rohingya response in **Bangladesh**, there were considerable tensions between humanitarian and development partners, stemming from this lack of clarity, which led to delays and inefficiencies in the response; progress has since been made with a context-specific coordination model which includes well-defined responsibilities.

## Recommendations to strengthen sector coordination

As stated by the Education Commission, education sector coordination is a key component of effective education systems. It ensures that resources are allocated equitably and efficiently, policies are coherent and consistent, and all actors are working together to achieve common objectives. The Global Education Forum could thus consider supporting the following recommendations on a way forward:

**ACTIVELY SUPPORT COORDINATION:** Encourage both bilateral and multilateral agencies to make funding and capacity available to support country-level coordination efforts. This could involve open funding support to organizations who take on specific coordinating agency roles, but it could also include encouraging or providing specific incentives for agency staff at country level to actively engage in coordination activities. It could additionally include encouraging donors to align a greater portion of their investments in financing modalities that are aligned to government systems, including pooled funding mechanisms. This could also include supporting partner country governments to build capacity within their own systems for moving toward such mechanisms, i.e. through learning exchanges.

**ADVOCATE FOR COORDINATION:** The Global Education Forum includes deeply respected voices from the global education and development stage. Country-level coordination does not typically benefit from enthusiastic advocacy efforts and is thus often not a top priority for donors – bilaterals and multilaterals alike. The Global Education Forum and its members could make a tangible difference by taking up the issue of coordination as an advocacy priority. This includes encouraging leaders and senior officials to support and engage in revitalizing sector coordination mechanisms and building on existing partnership landscapes to maximize aid effectiveness, as well as aligning their efforts around country-owned priorities for education reform. Special focus can be given to designated capacities for improved communication, closer collaboration and clear leadership roles between humanitarian-response mechanisms (i.e., Education Clusters and Refugee Education Working Groups) and development governance structures (such as local education groups or similar), when advocating for coordination in crisis-affected contexts.

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<sup>i</sup> Domestic financing under national budgets is the main source of funding for education. However, external aid represents a significant proportion of additional, discretionary financing, particularly in low-income. To meet their education ambitions, countries seek a variety of sources of funding – from traditional bilateral or multilateral funds (in grant, credit or concessional), discreet grant project funding from non-profit and philanthropic organizations (international or local), and increasingly more often through innovative financing mechanisms. These can include loan buy-downs or leveraging mechanisms like the GPE Multiplier; less often instruments that involve debt forgiveness/swaps or outcomes payments/funds are utilized.