



The role of Civil Society Organisations in 2050 and beyond

Contribution from UNESCO's Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education 2030
to UNESCO's Futures of Education Initiative

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Introduction and background of this report

What is the role of education and knowledge in shaping the society we want, and what is the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in supporting this process?

Drawing on specific experiences from UNESCO's Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education 2030 (CCNGO), this independent report aims to provide inputs from civil society's perspective to UNESCO's Futures of Education Initiative, an initiative which strives to rethink education and shape the future.

The CCNGO is UNESCO's long-standing mechanism for **dialogue, reflection and partnership with NGOs** working in the field of education. **Founded in 1984, the CCNGO is a network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) committed to ensuring that the voice of the community is strengthened and considered in diverse decision-making arenas.** Its membership of some 300 local, national, regional and international organizations from all regions of the world provides a global overview and offers, through its Coordination Group (CG), a valuable contribution to the Futures' Initiative.

This report attempts an overall reflection on the world, education and its futures through a human rights, humanistic and transformative lens. It reviews **CSOs' critical and supportive functions to governments and partners** in education.

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Chapter 1 - Education as a human right and transformative concept

Education as a human right is recognised in many international treaties and in most legislation around the world. It is considered a fundamental right and an indispensable means to achieve other rights. Education is an enabling right as it seeks to build knowledge and skills that enable individuals and people to develop their full potential. Governments and the international community bear the main responsibility for its realisation. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has identified four main dimensions of the right to education. **Availability**, this implies the existence of educational institutions and programmes in sufficient quantity as well as related conditions and services. These include elements such as sanitary facilities for both sexes, clean water, qualified teachers with competitive salaries, teaching materials, libraries, computer services and information technology. **Accessibility**, referring to both material and economic terms, requires that educational institutions and programmes must be accessible to all without discrimination. **Acceptability** refers to the form and substance of education, including curricula, teaching and learning methods, which must be relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality. **Adaptability** implies that education must be flexible to adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and to respond to the needs of learners in a variety of cultural and social contexts.

These **four dimensions of the right to education are not limited to a specific population group or education sphere**. On the contrary, they are legally binding in all forms, levels and for all individuals and peoples. They involve exercising the right throughout life, which becomes possible when learning and life are integrated, including learning activities for people of all sexes and gender and of all ages covering early childhood, children, youth, adults and the elderly. The responsibilities related to the four dimensions furthermore refer to: all contexts of life covering inter alia family life, schooling, community and workplace and all living conditions; all groups such as migrants, refugees, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, girls, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or Questioning (LGBTIQ+) and the poorest strata of the population; various modalities (formal, non-formal and informal education); and respond to a wide range of needs and demands regarding learning and human dignity.

The purposes set out in international human rights law clearly express the **right to education as not limited to access, permanence or expansion of schools, learning centres and other institutions**. Improved access will **only be sustainable and pay off when accompanied by improved quality in teaching and learning**. Thus, the right to education encompasses the right to a specific quality of education, as well as a wide range of life experiences and learning processes that enable people individually and collectively to develop their personalities, talents and skills to live a decent life as an active member of society. To achieve these educational processes, societies must aim to transform the social order, so that equality, solidarity, justice and freedom become key purposes in the construction of knowledge and global citizenship. Humanity does not have the right to just any education, but to an emancipatory one.

Education in this broad definition, and in all its forms is the encounter of diversities, permanent intercultural dialogue, the enjoyment of knowledge, the experience of discovering the other. In this context, **the current models of education, often promoting excellence from a market perspective need fundamental reform**. The effects of the current models on our societies are multiple, increasing competition and pressure among students, teachers and even among educational institutions. A more

transformative education approach would move away from these narratives and realities. As aforementioned, this applies not only in terms of access to the human right of education, but also in terms of providing free educational learning environments that respect diversity, strengthen creativity, promote historical perspective and critical thinking.

Education must not be about accumulating multidisciplinary approaches and content but rather about **turning curricula into transdisciplinary instruments**. It must support transformation in teaching and learning processes and lead to an education that is a driving force and catalyst for socio-economic, political and environmental sustainable and inclusive development, one that seeks to overcome persistent inequalities and asymmetries of power among individuals and social groups.

Challenges, trends and future horizons

In trying to imagine the future, the CCNGO Coordination Group (CCNGO CG) has reflected on current and future global trends and the role of education and CSOs within it.

Inequality and conflicts have escalated over the last few decades. In 2019 Human Development report, UNDP explored a new generation of inequalities, around education, technology and climate change. The report states that “these are two seismic shifts that, unchecked, could trigger a ‘new great divergence’ in society of the kind not seen since the Industrial Revolution.” The report details that 20 per cent of human development progress was lost through inequalities in 2018 through unequal distribution of education, health and living standards.ⁱ

Democratic systems are increasingly in crisis, replaced with more polarised and radical political systems favouring nationalism and protectionism over multilateralism, international aid and global solidarity. According to Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2021 report nearly 75 percent of the world’s population in 2020 lived in a country that suffered deterioration in political rights and civil liberties. This marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom.ⁱⁱ

In recent years this trend has also been accentuated with the **instrumentalization of social media** and analysis as well as manipulation of big data, where private and often foreign interests are purchasing and altering the outcomes of elections and political processes. According to Oxford Internet Institute 2020 report social media manipulation of public opinion is a growing threat to democracies around the world. It shows disinformation has become a common strategy, with more than 93% of the countries surveyed seeing disinformation deployed as part of political communication.ⁱⁱⁱ

Economic crises are deeper and more frequent, whilst the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis are still perceivable, the world seems set to face a recession of potentially unprecedented magnitude brought about by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, added to rising unemployment, **uncertain future work opportunities**, scarcity of traditional work, an **increased mismatch of skills between learners and workforce needs** can be expected, necessitating **massive re-skilling and imagining alternative functions and roles in society**. According to the OECD 14% of existing jobs could disappear, and another 32% are likely to change radically, as a result of automation in the next 15-20 years.^{iv}

The acceleration of technological development, artificial intelligence, big data and the development of a complex network of private and public interests around virtual spaces, combined with the blurring of

new frontiers between humans and machines, are forming new challenges on our future horizon in terms of **skills, human ethics and digital sovereignty**. UNESCO warns that Artificial Intelligence has a “winner takes it all” dynamic that needs to be regulated.^v

Added to this, globally the **main actors and the balance of power are shifting** as individuals and large companies’ net worth far outweigh that of many governments. In this context, **governments substantially increase their dependence on private companies especially big tech company expertise and services** including in education. Heeding the words of the Global ICT Regulatory Outlook 2020 report by the International Telecommunication Union, “ICT’s can dramatically transform education, health care, environmental management, agriculture, trade and entrepreneurship, the provision of government services – and so much more. For this to happen, enabling frameworks of policy and regulation, and the right networks and services need to be put in place.”^{vi}

In addition, decades of accelerated overconsumption and strengthened capitalism in a market driven society, have **accelerated climate change and environmental degradation, possibly beyond repair**, making a historically distant threat a horrifying reality. For the first time in history, humans may be witnessing first-hand the extent of the damages they can cause, and the limits of their own existence.

As briefly presented, many major global and mutually reinforcing challenges across numerous fields are emerging and expected to strengthen substantially in the future thus increasing inequalities.

Chapter 2 - CSOs as “critical friends and partners” to government and other actors in education

CSOs consider themselves as ‘**critical friends and partners**’ that can help governments, international organisations, and other stakeholders to deliver on their pledge to achieve a broad and transformative education in line with the vision set out in Agenda 2030 and its education goal. CSOs lobby for a **humanistic view of education** that shapes societies based on human rights, sustainability and diversity.

The democratic exercise of citizen participation for inclusive and sustainable societies

CSOs play a crucial role in defining the scope and quality of education that helps **shape and transform society**. In partnership with governments and other stakeholders, **CSOs also participate in developing policies, norms and legislation** implementing a common vision of education. In addition, **CSOs** through their proximity with communities and local groups and actors, **ensure that diverse perspectives and particularly those of the most marginalised groups**, who are often isolated and disconnected from decision making spaces and public policy arenas, inform the development of education policies, curriculum, legislation and financing that directly affect them.

The crucial democratic process of involving different civil society actors, and where possible, community representatives and citizens themselves in policy debate, decision making, monitoring and evaluation not only **increases accountability towards both government and the public but also enhances the content of policies**. The participation of civil society:

- Ensures that **policies are based on dialogue, and reflect the reality on the ground and the scope of expectations** of different stakeholders, including historically excluded ones;
- Helps **build consensus**, through transparent, broad-based consultation, reducing tensions during policy implementation;
- **Creates legitimacy for policies**, which are then owned and defended by citizens; and
- **Helps strengthen institutions of civil society**, with citizens empowered to engage effectively and grapple with the complexities of policy making.

All in all, the participation of CSOs and citizens in policy processes **favours good governance**, strengthens public institutions and the democratic values of a nation and other public entities concerned. To achieve this today and in the future, **governments and future governance entities and structures should be open to partnerships at all levels and to civil society’s critical approach in order to strive jointly for common and fundamental educational goals**.

Indeed, constructing and shaping education of the future should involve strong public dialogue, just as policies and legislation should be defined in dialogue with families, communities, territories, academia, artists, scientists and with CSOs. **Within these contexts and processes, civil society organizations need to sustain their efforts and advocacy for strong educational systems that offer free, inclusive and lifelong public learning and education under a model of participatory and democratic management, in which the voices and lives of all people are central**.

CSOs facing shrinking spaces

A particular **challenge for civil society organisations aiming to hold governments and other actors accountable** is the rise of authoritarian regimes and failed democracies. This challenge has resulted in increased repression and diversion from inclusive policy processes, a trend which seems set to last. In this context the very existence of CSOs has come under threat, as has their ability to effectively hold governments accountable, promote participatory processes, and give a voice to people most in need. CSOs must continually find new ways to lobby for **the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association, participation in government, governing spaces and public affairs**. These rights although **guaranteed in various international and regional human rights frameworks** must be implemented and enforced at local, national, regional levels.

CSOs' role in shaping, advocating for and regulating future education systems to develop a human centred egalitarian society, is and will be paramount. As inequality escalates and as competition for governance between public and private actors increases, CSOs' abilities to seek and retain access and inclusion in decision making spaces is and will be essential. **CSOs need to be ever more strategic and build strong partnerships to pool and maximize expertise and limited resources. In doing so, CSOs will have the reach, knowledge and know how to contribute to complex governance and regulation debates. In parallel, CSOs must continue to develop partnerships with current and new partners, using their resources and influence, in order to secure their place in new decision-making spaces.** CSOs will continue to be guided by a human rights framework, where public responsibility is essential in ensuring that education rights are enjoyed by all.

To operate well in the face of shrinking democratic and civil spaces, **CSOs need to optimise the opportunities and modalities the future has to offer. CSOs will need to maximize their capacity through efficient use of new technologies for information gathering and analysis as well as for effective use of new forms of communication.**

Research, data collection and analysis

The world is struggling to monitor progress in relation to education. CSOs at the national, regional and global levels work to **tackle the lack of data, improve quality and coverage of reporting, and build monitoring resources and research that inform evidence-based advocacy efforts and policy.**

CSOs bring essential and specific **value to the collection, development and refinement of disaggregated data** ensuring a community-led and bottom-up approach that considers cultural contexts, community needs and particularities. Such considerations are often lacking in large scale assessments carried out by governments and large international institutions.

Research organized by CSOs with the direct support and involvement of community members, especially youth, is effective in better understanding potential barriers to learning. **CSOs thus provide evidence-based qualitative research for policy engagement with local authorities and policy makers.** Added to this, CSOs carry out advocacy research to **document good strategies undertaken by both governments and CSOs** to ensure access to quality learning for all and **can thus recommend these for replication and up-scaling.**

In the future, CSOs should be supported to further develop data collection, analysis and research, as well as empower people with the capabilities to do so, as a means to **strengthen the development of disaggregated data and research commons on education**. Furthermore, in a future of increased inequality, CSOs must increasingly and sustainably convince **policy makers of the value of information they gather and of the value of co-developed data** resulting in more effective policies, based on community needs.

Developing skills, deepening partnerships and pooling resources

CSOs will need to keep abreast of many new technological, biological and medical advances. They will **need skilled experts and expertise in order to participate, reflect and participate in the development of norms and regulations around new fields directly impacting education and society**. Such expertise will allow CSOs to question and develop frameworks providing ethical directions to the advances in fields where the traditional boundaries between humans, machines and technology are blurring and where innovations can reinforce exclusion and inequality if not regulated. The ability of CSOs to offer a critical, analytical lens from a human centred development framework in these areas, will be an essential safeguard against strong market driven incentives. Imagining a future fraught with such aforementioned challenges, illustrates an even greater need for a broad humanistic education, one that is life-wide, life-deep and lifelong. **Cultivating citizens who are informed, adaptable, respectful of diversity, towards the development of egalitarian knowledge societies, will be an essential and necessary step to shape a sustainable future**. CSOs will have an essential role in creating and supporting the development and provision of this broad education vision.

CSO will need to **mobilise partners at all levels especially at global level to build “commons”**, resources developed and open to all such as innovative teaching and learning methods, education content, publications, digital tools, data collection and analysis. This will be another important step in building a humanistic education and human centred society.

Chapter 3 - CSOs support citizen empowerment and learning environments at community level

Civil society organisations often operate with close links to local community groups and support learning and education activities for those most in need. By working hand in hand with members of the community, CSOs are not only **promoting and protecting the right to education, but also advancing the design and implementation of education policies and practices that address learning needs of the most disadvantaged and poorest members.**

The 2030 Agenda with its holistic, humanistic lens and life wide perspective, is a vision which is in line with CSOs long-standing support to human rights, and testifies to the important role played by CSOs in working with communities. The scope of CSOs' work in education is wide and varies greatly from country to country; this chapter focuses on two of these important functions:

- Supporting community members as active and empowered citizens; and
- Engaging with communities to strengthen learning environments and services at local level.

CSOs supporting community members as active and empowered citizens

CSOs are employing numerous strategies to **foster the development of free will and critical thinking as key elements for education and learning at community level.** It is increasingly important for citizen of all ages to have the ability to decipher ideas and messages presented to them in multiple formats in daily life, ranging from understanding new legislations to shifting through an infinite amount of information available on the internet. In today's connected world it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between reliable information, political or corporate positions and fake news, and to decipher if private and cooperate interests are favoured over collective and inclusive ones. As such, education approaches that favour critical pedagogy, play a key role in developing free will and critical thinking.

Many CSOs **mobilize and build capacity for critical thinking within their community** through workshops, round-table discussions and open debates. CSOs also dispose of a valuable set of approaches when it comes to **mobilising students and youth**, to rethink their vision of education for all age groups, **to claim their rights and to push education institutions and authorities to create spaces for the exchange of ideas and democratic dialogue.** They also lead **public campaigns** to inform on policies and **support citizens' understanding of their constitutional rights** and run specifically targeted programmes such as fellowships, trainings and pro-rights campaigns.

The **digital push** and distance learning, further accelerated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, is both **creating challenges and providing opportunities** to support community voices and empower citizens. On the one hand, digitalization comes with risks of exacerbating the digital gap and social exclusion. On the other hand, it allows communities and CSO members, who have access to new digital spaces, increased opportunities to participate in national and global policy forums and make their voices and opinions heard. **CSOs, in the future will increasingly need to continue fighting for the right to internet access and digital competences for all, as well as age sensitive and appropriate platforms, in order not**

to widen the digital gap, and to mitigate marginalisation of vulnerable groups as well as to expand space for community groups' voice and activism such as through the creation of online "third spaces".

Considering rising global trends such as concentration of power, increased inequality and digitalisation, in the future CSOs fundamental role of supporting community members as empowered and active citizens will be increasingly important and relevant.

Engaging with communities to strengthen learning environments and services at local level

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly strengthened community and family members' long-term engagement and participation in education to facilitate continued learning. There is great scope for enhancing learning sustainably by furthering good relationships between learning institutions and local communities. Local CSOs are **powerful in creating bridges between communities and state-supported education systems. They are strategically placed to facilitate a whole community approach to education both now and in the future**, building on the rich knowledge of communities and ensuring sustainable solutions for reinforced teaching and learning.

Many recent international policy discourses and governmental agreements emphasize life-wide, life-deep and lifelong learning as a paradigm for future education systems. In this context, many CSOs have long **aided communities to create alternative spaces for learning and support**. CSOs set up, aid or run community learning centres (CLCs), or similar structures, to provide education and training for children, youths and adults. CLCs are multifunctional and often innovative, they do **not only provide education and training, but also cover community information, counselling opportunities for learners, and act as social and cultural meeting places**.

Community learning centres with strong links to community support systems provide learning opportunities ranging from basic education, literacy, foreign languages to personal development and health, income generating activities, vocational training and the provision of life skills among others. These centres provide essential support, development and care complementing and **reinforcing the learning opportunities and support provided by formal education systems**.

Community learning centres are essential spaces for access and participation of learners of all ages aiming to leave no-one behind. CLCs engage with key education concepts fundamental for a sustainable society such as Education for Sustainable Development, Global Citizenship Education and Development, health and sexual education. CLCs contribute to improved health and well-being, gender equality, reducing inequality, resilience against crisis, conflict prevention and promotion of peace. Moreover, CLCs provide services that **offer skills, alternative services and innovative learning solutions** for youths, adults, vulnerable and marginalised groups to create a sustainable livelihood in ways which are often overlooked in formal learning and training settings. Such services of training and follow-up support may assist in counteracting challenges such as the rural-urban drift. CLC's integrated learning approaches that simultaneously strive for diverse skills and learning objectives are particularly promising; providing for example a practical rationale for learning by combining literacy with skills training.

Given the emerging and increasing global trends such as rising structural inequalities and multiple crises of sustainability there is a significant increased risk for vulnerable people to be left behind. In this

context the wide range of activities and support, cross-sectoral benefits and alternative learning pathways provided by CLCs will make their contributions ever more important in the future.

Furthermore, their flexibility and capacity to innovate will become increasingly indispensable assets. In particular **CLCs support social transformation towards the establishment of a learning society, where knowledge and capacity to adapt are nurtured as fundamental tools to coping with future challenges.** Envisioning future trends, CLCs are likely to become important physical spaces with strong community ownership that cater for the provision of digital competencies and other key competencies very much needed to promote sustainable development and active citizenship.

Since community learning centres mostly operate in non-formal environments, they are flexible, can quickly respond to changing needs and new demands of individuals and society as well as integrate innovative teaching and learning methods. This flexibility is an essential asset in an era of increasingly rapid change caused by global shifts such as globalization, digitalization, migration, demographic changes, technological development and global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

To maximise effectiveness in the future CLCs will **wherever possible, need to set up strong partnerships, ensure sustainable resources from CSOs, local governments, and other future actors** at sub-national, national, regional and global levels in particular, through exchange and cooperation, professionalization and funding. Noting that **financial support should be adequate, predictable and sustainable – without jeopardizing CLC's independence and autonomy in terms of governance and content priorities.**

Conclusion and recommendations

As demonstrated throughout this report, **CSOs play an essential role in shaping education and society today and they will continue to do so in the future.** Their proven **flexibility and adaptability will become increasingly valuable and necessary in facing new challenges.**

CSOs' **main functions** of providing support to the most marginalized groups and carrying their voices into decision making spaces **will, in essence, remain the same. However, the modalities, tools and means of expression will evolve** as new partners emerge, technology advances and society changes.

The role of CSOs in **advocating for a humanistic vision of education in the reflection and development of policy, legislation and financing, with a lifelong learning perspective,** is important today and will become significantly more valuable in the future due to emerging socio-political, economic and environmental trends, and their ensuing challenges. **CSOs will need to maximise resources, expertise and develop strategic partnerships to secure their place in future governance and decision-making arenas.** They will also need to seek more formalised ways to cooperate, synergize and co-construct innovative, sustainable and coherent solutions alongside **joint advocacy initiatives at sub-national, national, regional and international levels to be most effective in bringing change.**

CSOs will continue to support communities and sustain close **links to local groups, creating bridges between communities and state-supported education systems, and supporting learning and education activities for those most in need.**

Through CLCs and similar institutions, CSOs will continue to foster critical thinking and inform people of their rights and opportunities, whilst in parallel they will continue to lobby governments and other future actors to provide and support **enabling environments and institutionalised spaces for democratic participation to exercise their rights.**

CSOs will also increasingly seek out prospective support for engaging in the **development of digital 'third places', new important and permanent collective social spaces for dialogue and exchanges beyond work and home.**

The development of these different spaces of community led democratic participation and creation will **enable the co-construction** of innovative teaching and learning methods, educational content, publications, digital tools, data collection, research and analysis, as well as support the production of **licensed creative and digital commons.**

The process of reflection carried out in the elaboration of this report clearly establishes CSOs' increasingly valuable and essential roles. In a world of rising inequality fuelling tensions, increased alienation from automation and uncertainty caused by multiple crises, not least climate change, CSOs bring the vital human touch and human hand necessary for the co-construction of **inclusive education, knowledge and policy frameworks.** The CCNGO CG has elaborated **nine recommendations** to guide and support CSOs and their partners towards shaping a sustainable future:

- CSOs, as the **voice for diversity, inclusion and collective thinking,** should strengthen the crucial and increasingly important role they play in **shaping education and society;**
- CSOs must strive to be fully included in **decision making spaces** within national, regional and global governance institutions;

- CSOs should increasingly push to be actively involved in reflection and policy spaces for the **construction of inclusive normative standards** in education and other vital inter-sectoral related fields;
- CSOs must increasingly **nurture professionals** and experts with a **humanistic lens** in order to provide a critical analytical reflection **and human centred development framework in fields of innovation**, that have a lasting impact in the future of society and education;
- CSOs should **strengthen cooperation, partnerships, joint advocacy and accountability as well as pool limited resources** between NGOs and other future public and private actors at national, regional and international levels;
- CSOs should contribute to **create and populate commons in education** and related fields;
- CSOs should reinforce their **engagement and capacity in data collection, monitoring and research** both to inform decision-making and to contribute to developing education commons;
- CSOs should continue to **support the development of free will, critical thinking education and learning at community level to foster active and empowered citizens equipped with relevant skills for the future**; and
- **UNESCO and other public and private actors** in education and related fields should **partner with and support CSOs** by providing access to decision-making spaces and essential resources.

ⁱ United Nations Development Programme. 2019. *Human Development Report 2019 - Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in human development in the 21st century*. New York, UNDP. p. 35.

ⁱⁱ Freedom House. 2021. *Freedom In the World 2021 – Democracy under Siege*. USA, Freedom House. p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bradshaw, S., Bailey H. and Howard P.N. Oxford Internet Institute. 2021. *Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*. Working Paper 2021.1. Oxford, Oxford University.

^{iv} OECD. 2019. *The Future of Work – OECD employment outlook 2019 - Highlights*. Paris. OECD p. 7.

^v UNESCO. 2021. *Elaboration of a Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence*. <https://en.unesco.org/artificial-intelligence/ethics> (Accessed 28 February 2021.)

^{vi} International Telecommunication Union. 2020. *Global ICT Regulatory Outlook 2020 – Pointing the way forward to collaborative regulation*. Geneva, ITU. p. 2.