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# **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN LATIN AMERICAN EDUCATION**

**CASE STUDIES AND PERSPECTIVES ON ADVOCACY**

Edited by

Regina Cortina and Constanza Lafuente



# Civil Society Organizations in Latin American Education

Examining the roles, impacts, and challenges of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Latin America, this volume provides a broad perspective on the range of strategies these organizations employ and the obstacles they face in advocating for and delivering educational reform. Building on previous research on international and comparative education, development studies, social movements, and non-governmental organizations, chapter authors provide new insights about the increasing presence of CSOs in education and offer case studies demonstrating how these organizations' missions have evolved over time in Latin America.

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#### **Civil Society Organizations in Latin American Education**

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# Civil Society Organizations in Latin American Education

Case Studies and Perspectives  
on Advocacy

Edited by Regina Cortina  
and Constanza Lafuente

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# Introduction

## The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Education

*Regina Cortina and Constanza Lafuente*

*Civil Society Organizations in Latin American Education: Case Studies and Perspectives on Advocacy* explores the ways that these organizations influence public education policy and individual and collective views about education. Presenting advocacy as a legitimate and effective strategy to influence policy, the six chapters in this volume, all written by experts in the field, highlight the significance of advocacy activities as civil society becomes more robust, experienced, and active in education. The case studies described demonstrate the diversity of the organizations and groups seeking to improve education: from political advocacy to encouragement of citizens' engagement in campaigns, to support for student movements implementing comprehensive strategies involving social protest or litigation, to cooperation with governments by mainstreaming and scaling-up education innovations to shape policy design and implementation.

### The State of Education in Latin America

#### *Recent History*

During the 1980s, many Latin American countries' economies nearly collapsed. To stem the economic crisis, the next decade brought the implementation of the Washington Consensus, a set of ten neoliberal market-oriented reforms that favored the retrenchment of welfare states. Since the subsequent sharp reduction of public expenditures for education, countries in Latin America have been challenged to allocate the necessary public resources to increase graduation rates, improve academic achievement, reduce the education opportunity gaps for Indigenous groups and rural populations, and provide quality education for all children in public schools.

#### *The Current Situation*

The majority of Latin American countries now provide access to free and compulsory primary schooling and have nearly eliminated the gender gap at that level. The Education for All (EFA) Regional Review (UNESCO 2014), a

component of UNESCO's global movement to improve the quality of education in developing nations, shows that access to pre-primary and secondary schooling has continued to expand. Half of Latin American countries have a gross enrollment ratio of at least 80 percent in pre-primary education. In 2010, approximately 53.5 percent of Latin American youth aged 20 to 24 had completed their secondary education, compared with the 44.8 percent of youth who completed this level of education in 2000 (UNESCO 2014).

But recent results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the global education survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), show that despite increased access to education, Latin American students lag behind in performance in comparison to other OECD countries. Half of the students from the ten Latin American countries that participated in PISA in 2015 did not reach the basic achievement level in science, and a high percentage of students demonstrated low performance in reading (46 percent) and math (63 percent) (Bos et al. 2016). Thus, providing the kind of quality of education that would allow students to take up their roles as full citizens in society remains a challenge.

Teachers are key actors in improving the quality of education, but several limitations undermine their effectiveness. For instance, lack of investment in teachers' professional development and the overall quality of their employment have led to low morale and have had a negative impact on Latin American education systems (UNESCO 2009). Further, for a variety of reasons, school systems do not attract the best candidates for teaching positions. Recruitment processes are not sufficiently selective, salaries are not attractive, and the low prestige of the teaching profession makes it unappealing for high achievers (Bruns and Luque 2015). Performance-based teacher evaluation is being developed in a few countries, including Mexico, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador, with mixed results. In many countries, teachers work in under-resourced public schools with inadequate access to basic services like running water and electricity. Further, numerous strikes and conflicts between teachers' unions and governments aimed at improving teacher salaries have resulted in high teacher absenteeism and a reduced number of school days for students (Fernandez 2015).

Public schools are highly unequal in Latin America. There are sharp disparities in resource allocation, school infrastructure, and education. Decentralization reforms in the 1990s, the result of attempts to make education more cost effective and efficient, intensified inequality by increasing the education outcome gap between the poor and the rich. Socioeconomic and geographic inequality goes hand in hand. Low-income groups, and Indigenous peoples in the poorest quintiles who live in underdeveloped and rural regions, attend schools that offer a lower quality education, and they have the lowest achievement and education indicators according to *Education for All* (UNESCO, 2014). Overall, they have higher grade repetition and dropout rates and fewer years of school attainment than more affluent

and non-Indigenous students. For example, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC 2014) has reported worse education indicators for Indigenous students than for non-Indigenous students in Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru—three of the countries with the largest Indigenous populations in the region. Indigenous youth from ages 20–29 in those three countries had on average two fewer years of schooling than non-Indigenous youth (Cortina 2017).

## Civil Society Organizations Working for Education Change

### *The Increasing Prominence of CSOs*

Structural adjustment economic policies, implemented to ensure that countries can service their external debt, supported by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, along with market-oriented reforms, resulted in the retrenchment of the welfare state during the 1990s. Combined with high macroeconomic volatility, these policies affected low-income families disproportionately. Cut-backs in the state presence in education and health and social services led to the emergence of a parallel non-state institutional network to provide financial assistance and service delivery in support of schools and low-income students and their families (Pagano et al. 2007). A great diversity of CSOs, such as Catholic charities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and membership-based grassroots associations, are examples of the groups that emerged and continue today to support low-income students and schools through provision of infrastructure, school materials, scholarships, tutoring services, afterschool activities, or food distribution.

Moving beyond conventional models centered on service provision and financial assistance, a growing number of CSOs concerned about education are now transcending traditional roles to become active participants in policy debates, addressing the root causes of sustained education inequality. These innovative organizations seek to transform civil society's attitudes toward public education and restore the centrality of education in public debates; their goal is to generate national conversations about how to improve policies and institutions. In all countries, they coexist with the many foundations and other types of philanthropic and membership-based organizations that continue to play a role in service provision and assistance for public education.

The work of these CSOs, however, counters the traditional belief of individuals in many countries that the average citizen is not able to participate in public education or does not have a voice to influence education reform due to the unwillingness of public sector authorities and policy makers to incorporate their views into such policy debates. Thus, to illuminate the developing and productive relationship between individuals with needs yet to be met by their governments and the civil society organizations supporting

them, the chapter authors in this volume build on research in many related fields, such as comparative education, organizational studies, and international education development, to provide new insights into civil society participation in Latin America. Their underlying premise is that organizations in civil society have intensified their advocacy focus in education to take part in policy debates, influence policy development and implementation, and transform citizens' attitudes and opinions toward public education to guarantee the right to education for all and to extend educational opportunities to those who are yet to fully benefit from them.

### *Comparative Education Research on Civil Society Organizations*

The trajectory of international development organizations is vital for understanding the rising centrality and influence of civil society organizations in the field of education. International organizations propelled the growth of CSOs by selecting them as key stakeholders in their own reform efforts. The 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, which put forth six measurable education goals for meeting the learning needs of all children and which was adopted in the World Education Forum, highlighted the prominence of civil society in the achievement of the *Education for All* targets (UNESCO 2000). Further, an evaluation of national education coalitions' roles confirmed the importance of civil society in achieving EFA's targets by boosting citizen participation, holding governments accountable, and increasing the effectiveness of EFA aid (Global Partnership for Education 2012).

The rising presence of CSOs described in this volume has sparked widespread academic interest in understanding their roles, practices, and impact on education. Within the field of comparative education, research about these organizations emphasizes their service delivery roles (Rose 2009; Sutton and Arno 2004) or explores national and transnational advocacy networks that influence change in education policy (Archer 2010; Mundy 2008, 2012; Mundy and Murphy 2001; Stromquist 2008; Verger and Novelli 2012). The case studies described in this volume build upon this second line of research by focusing on the education advocacy of CSOs in Latin American countries.

### **The Themes of This Volume**

Below we define and discuss the themes and topics characterizing the six chapters that follow: civil society and civil society organizations, and advocacy, especially education advocacy.

### *Civil Society and the Nature and Role of CSOs*

We understand CSOs as the organizational component of the infrastructure of civil society (Lewis 2007). Cohen and Arato (1992) define this component

as the sphere of social interaction between the market and the state, composed of families, associations, social movements, and all forms of public debate. It includes organizations with diverse characteristics and degrees of formalization and access to political and economic resources. Examples of CSOs—grassroots organizations, cooperatives, NGOs, unions, philanthropic foundations, mutual aid associations, religious organizations, community-based organizations, transnational advocacy networks, and student organizations—suggest their diverse structures, ideologies, and resources. In Latin America, the patterns of social participation and social inequality are also mirrored in the accessibility of resources for the different types of organizations.

Improvement of public education is the goal of all the CSOs—located in the Global South with headquarters in Latin America—profiled in this volume. Embodying the operational definition of CSOs in general, they are private, self-governing, nonprofit, and voluntary (Salamon 1994). All of them are formally constituted at least to some extent. They are private since they are distinct from the public sector, self-governing since they control their own activities, nonprofit since they do not distribute profits to their directors, and voluntary because they depend to some degree on voluntary participation.

In some cases, CSOs work alongside student and social movements in pursuit of a common agenda. Social movements are networks of individuals and groups that are defined as the social processes through which various actors with a shared identity allocate resources to engage in collective action through social protest against a distinctive opponent (Diani and Bison 2004). Organizations and movements might collaborate to realize shared purposes to transform the social order or wide-reaching policies, such as the case of CSOs that provided legal counsel to the student movements focused on Chilean education, as described in Chapter 3.

Civil society organizations are by definition autonomous from state entities. Yet, in Latin America, the distinction between these two spheres is often unclear. States and civil society are never inexorably separate because they “are always mutually constitutive” (Dagnino 2010, 26). State institutional mechanisms guarantee the framework for civil society to operate, and civil societies hold governments accountable and encourage citizen participation (Oxhorn 2006).

Since the 1980s, Latin American CSOs have been persistently assuming and then augmenting diverse roles, including those of service provider, agenda setter, innovator, monitor of public policy, and technical expert. Their rising centrality is related to the transition to democracy from military dictatorships in the southern cone in the 1980s and 1990s, and the democratization processes that followed in other countries in the region and the consequent increased freedom of association for civil societies. Closely connected is the diffusion of communications and technology, and the growing number of educated professionals who support the creation of new organizations in areas such as human rights, rural development, education, and

health (Salamon 1994). Most importantly, the growth in outsourcing of education and social delivery services by international donor agencies, as well as increased funding by governments to implement such services, explain CSOs' expanding presence. Second-generation reforms implemented in the region, which aimed to decrease public sector intervention in the economy, also encouraged contracting out to CSOs in order to obtain improved transparency of public finances.

### *Education Advocacy*

Our definition of advocacy is consistent with Jenkins' (2006) broad conception: Advocacy comprises actions that seek to influence change in public decision makers, private organizations, and citizens on behalf of the public interest. Such advocacy tends to represent the interests of individuals that political systems or economic structures exclude. Thus, it claims to "represent the collective interests of the general public and underrepresented groups as opposed to the interests of the well-organized powerful groups especially business, mainstream social institutions and the elite professions" (307). The advocacy strategies of these organizations are seen through their activities, such as campaigning to raise awareness about human rights, fostering citizen participation in education, protesting, seeking to influence national or international policy through lobbying public authorities, monitoring education policies or EFA achievement, and initiating and litigating class action suits for education rights. All of these activities are examples of CSOs engaging in advocacy in the field of education.

We conceptualize three main strategy orientations in the education field, locating them along a continuum that goes from conformity to protest (see model included in Table I.1).

This table identifies the basic categories of education strategies, and related actions, that CSOs employ: provision of education services; political, social, and legal advocacy; and social protest. The classifications are supported by theoretical work on advocacy groups in the United States by Minkoff, Aisenbrey and Agnone (2008), Minkoff (1999), and Jenkins (2006). While each action appears as a separate item on the table, it is likely that CSOs combine actions and engage in several at the same time.

The left-hand column of the continuum presents the strategies of organizations that *conform to education models* and do not seek to change policies or institutions since they sanction existing education policies. This is the case of the organizations that deliver education services, distribute goods, or provide assistance.

The middle column identifies approaches of organizations that *seek to reform education through established channels*. Their type of advocacy can be classified as political, social, or legal. Political advocacy targets public decision makers during the different stages of the policy process—for example, agenda setting, implementation, and/or monitoring—and might also

Table I.1 The Strategies of Education of Civil Society Organizations

<i>Provision of Education Services</i>	<i>Political, Social, and Legal Advocacy</i>	<i>Social Protest</i>
<i>Conforms to Education Models</i>	<i>Seeks to Reform Education Through Established Channels</i>	<i>Seeks Transformation Through Unconventional Channels</i>
Sponsorship of schooling by covering direct costs through scholarships	<b><i>Social Advocacy</i></b> Campaigns that raise awareness of the right to education	Protest Boycotts
Education provision (with or without government funding)	Campaigns that encourage citizens' participation in education	
Social assistance	Efforts to improve the practices of other CSOs	
Tutoring services	<b><i>Political Advocacy</i></b> Lobbying legislators	
Infrastructure provision	Technical assistance for policy design and implementation	
	Policy monitoring	
	Monitoring achievement of EFA targets	
	<b><i>Legal Strategy</i></b> Strategic litigation Class action suits	

include legal tactics that target the judiciary such as strategic litigation and class actions. Social advocacy is instead directed toward private actors such as organizations, citizens, and businesses, and it aims to modify their viewpoints about education policies and practices.

The right-hand column of the continuum refers to advocacy strategies that operate outside of conventional institutional channels and *seek to transform through unconventional channels*. Such strategies aim to replace or radically transform political, economic, and institutional mechanisms that generate education inequities. Such an approach based on social protest is characteristic of social movements.

## The Contents of This Volume

### *Chapter 1: Developing and Refining an Impact Strategy*

Here, through a qualitative study, Regina Cortina and Constanza Lafuente explore the political, social, and legal advocacy of *Mexicanos Primero*.



*Mexicanos Primero* is one of the first civil society organizations in Mexico to demand accountability from federal and state authorities for governmental expenditure of public resources targeted to public education. The authors investigate how *Mexicanos Primero*'s strategy combines different approaches to fulfill its organizational mission to increase educational equity and improve education outcomes. The authors develop three arguments based on their investigation. The first contends that *Mexicanos Primero* is part of a broader context in which Mexican civil society has continued to grow and diversify. The second argument asserts that research on corporate involvement in education has great explanatory value for understanding this organization, since *Mexicanos Primero* is an organization that receives a new type of support: funding from corporate sector leaders for education that, contrary to traditional patterns of philanthropy, seeks to actively encourage policy change in education. The third argument contends that a strong organizational capacity, financial resources, and access to decision makers strengthen the effectiveness of *Mexicanos Primero*'s strategic advocacy framework.

Such a strategic advocacy framework includes the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing combination of five components: a carefully designed impact policy agenda that details the changes in education policy that will ensure achievement of a fairer education system; applied research to provide solutions to education problems and to support its claims; multimedia campaigns to raise awareness in citizens to generate support for the organization's petitions; professional awards and capacity-building initiatives for teachers and school communities; and a legal approach to put pressure on the public authorities to invest in school infrastructure, and to stop abuses of power from the government and teachers' unions.

## *Chapter 2: Including Parents, Teachers, and Students*

This chapter, also written by Constanza Lafuente and Regina Cortina, explores the accountability challenges of *Mexicanos Primero*, highlighting the tensions in the accountability practices that sustain its advocacy strategies. The authors critically examine how the CSO is accountable primarily to parents and teachers, two of the main groups affected by the problems of education in Mexico and, therefore, targets of its campaigns; and how *Mexicanos Primero* has designed and implemented accountability mechanisms to meet the needs of a broad range of stakeholders.

As advocacy organizations have become notable actors petitioning for education reform and teacher evaluations, their practices supporting advocacy have also become major topics of study, as have their external and internal dimensions of accountability. While the former includes reporting to multiple actors in their ecosystems, the latter dimension refers to CSOs' adherence to their values and mission. In discussing both dimensions of accountability as they apply to *Mexicanos Primero*, the authors provide