

Orchestrating Education System Change

Insights from the Shikshagraha Movement

Harry Bregazzi | June 2026



ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT OUTCOMES LAB

The Government Outcomes Lab (GO Lab) is a global centre of expertise based at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. Our mission is to enable governments across the world to foster effective partnerships with the non-profit and private sectors for better outcomes.

We are an international team of multi-disciplinary researchers, data specialists & policy experts. We generate actionable knowledge, offering a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to the study of cross-sector partnerships through the three main strands of our work: research, data and engagement.

ABOUT SHIKSHALOKAM

ShikshaLokam is an NGO founded under the aegis of Shibulal Family Philanthropic Initiatives. As an education leadership catalyst, the organisation co-creates continuous learning and improvement programs and solutions for education leaders, along with government functionaries and civil society organisations.

ShikshaLokam orchestrates the coming together of diverse actors – government, civil society, market players, academia – towards public school improvement programs led by education leaders themselves. This accelerates collective action for education system transformation at scale, with speed and sustainably.

ShikshaLokam programs and solutions restore the agency of education leaders (teachers, school leaders, community members, administrators, education officers, etc. ensuring an enriching learning environment for children) in the K-12 public education ecosystem. By doing so, leaders’ ability to continuously improve is enhanced, they are able to solve the school improvement challenges on their own, and all our children get access to quality education as a fundamental right.

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Contents

4	Foreword – SD Shibulal	4
	Foreword – Professor Stefan Dercon	6
	Executive summary	
	Education system change The Shikshagraha movement	9
	Summary of findings	9
	Artificial intelligence (AI) statement	10
	Government-civil society partnership for education.	
	Why this? Why now?	11
	Shikshagraha The case research for this playbook	13
Our research	13	
15	Part 1	
	The Challenge: Complexity and scale in education system reform	15
19	Part 2	
	(Part of) the Solution:	
	Government-civil society collaboration	19
	Key consideration #1 What’s my role?	20
	Key consideration #2 Working with the system	26
	Key consideration #3 Routes towards trust	28
	Box 1: Questions and points for discussion	29
31	Part 3	
	Anticipated difficulties and how they might be avoided	31
	Risk #1 Overdependence	32
	Risk #2 Burdening schools	33
	Risk #3 Falling short of collective action	33
	Antidotes How might these risks be avoided?	34
	36	Conclusion
Orchestrating education system change		36
References		38

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The transformation of public education requires the combined and coordinated effort of many - government, civil society, communities, and philanthropy working in genuine partnership.

SD Shibulal



FOREWORD

SD Shibulal

Co-founder & Former CEO,
Infosys | Founder, ShikshaLokam

Over more than twenty-five years of philanthropic work, one insight has become increasingly clear: the transformation of public education requires the combined and coordinated effort of many - government, civil society, communities, and philanthropy working in genuine partnership. No single sector can do it alone.

This conviction has been tested and deepened through years of engagement with India's education system, and through encounters with educators, school leaders, district officials, and community members who work persistently to improve the learning experience of children in their care.

Shikshagraha is the expression of that conviction. It is premised on the belief that transformation begins when agency is restored to those closest to the child. When a head teacher speaks of her school as a place she is responsible for improving, something fundamental has shifted. When a district official and a civil society leader find a way to work together that neither could have managed alone, the system has moved. Shikshagraha exists to cultivate and sustain those moments, across contexts and at scale.

As the movement has grown, now active across fifteen Indian states, so too has the body of learning it has generated. About what enables cross-sector partnership to flourish. About the conditions that build trust between government and civil society. About the risks that can undermine even the most well-intentioned collaboration. This playbook is an attempt to make that learning available to others.

It is intended for practitioners and policymakers engaged in, or considering, government-civil society partnership for education reform. It does not offer prescriptive solutions, the diversity and complexity of education systems makes such prescriptions inappropriate. What it offers is a clear articulation of the considerations, conditions, and risks that shape whether these partnerships succeed, drawn from the lived experience of those within the Shikshagraha movement.

We hope those who read it are better equipped to decide who to work with, how to build trust, and how to navigate the inevitable difficulties of collaborative working. And that through better partnerships, more children gain access to the quality education that is their fundamental right.

Meaningful change in education is always built together. This playbook is offered in that spirit.

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The problems of education reform are too local, too contextual, and too dependent on trust to be solved from the centre.

Professor Stefan Dercon



FOREWORD

Professor Stefan Dercon

Professor of Economic Policy,
University of Oxford | Former Chief Economist,
UK Department for International Development

For much of the last three decades, the dominant approach to improving education in developing countries has focused on what governments should do differently: better curricula, stronger accountability frameworks, clearer targets.

These matter. But they have consistently underestimated something more fundamental: how to implement change. An essential ingredient for successful implementation is high quality relationships between government and the communities, civil society organisations, and local leaders who together determine whether any of it actually reaches a child.

That gap is what makes this playbook significant.

I have spent much of my career studying how governments deliver or fail to deliver in complex and resource-constrained environments. One lesson stands out above others. The state cannot do it alone. Not because governments lack commitment or capability, but because the problems of education reform are too local, too contextual, and too dependent on trust to be solved from the centre. The most effective systems are those where the government retains its legitimating and coordinating role while creating genuine space for civil society, communities, and local leaders to act with agency. That balance is extraordinarily difficult to strike. It requires patience, reciprocity, and a shared purpose that goes beyond compliance.

Over the last few years of advising ShikshaLokam, I have watched Shikshagraha attempt to build exactly that - and at a scale that few movements in education have seriously attempted. What has struck me is not the ambition, which is considerable, but the honesty about the difficulty. The questions this movement grapples with - how to work within government systems without being captured by them, how to build trust with district officials who are overworked and

under-supported, how to sustain a movement across fifteen states without losing what makes it work at the local level - are the real questions of education reform. They are also the questions that most policy research has found easiest to avoid.

This playbook does not avoid them. It is one of the most grounded accounts I have read of what government-civil society partnership in education actually involves in practice - the conditions that enable it, the dynamics that can undermine it, and the specific choices that practitioners face. It draws on the lived experience of those within the Shikshagraha movement, and it is more useful for that reason.

The lessons it carries extend well beyond India. Across low- and middle-income countries, the challenge of building productive, durable partnerships between government and civil society in education is near-universal. So is the tendency to underinvest in the trust, relationships, and shared infrastructure that make such partnerships possible. Policymakers who take this playbook seriously will find a clear argument for why that investment matters, and a practical guide for how to begin.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education system change

The Shikshagraha movement

Children around the world have greater access to education, but in many countries the quality of that education remains poor. Solving this learning crisis requires the combined efforts of multiple actors pursuing a shared goal.

In India, the Shikshagraha movement has emerged in response to poor learning outcomes in India's public schools. The movement champions local educational reform partnerships between government, civil society, community, donors, and more.

Using Shikshagraha as a case study, this playbook presents findings on how government and civil society work together in the pursuit of systemic education reform. It is based on research conducted by the Government Outcomes Lab (University of Oxford), consisting of 30 interviews plus focus groups and field observations in India.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Our research revealed a set of key considerations for enabling good state-society partnerships, as well as key partnership risks that should be anticipated and mitigated.

KEY CONSIDERATION #1 WHAT'S MY ROLE?

State-society partnerships leverage the complementary capacities of different sectors and actors. People involved in Shikshagraha consider the roles they are best placed to play, as well as what they perceive to be required from their partners in other sectors.

Government actors assume three main roles within state-society partnership: (1) cultivating a guiding vision and mindset for reform; (2) selecting partners; and (3) implementing policy at scale. All three reflect the fact that government actors represent the legitimate authority within a jurisdiction.

Meanwhile civil society actors provide: 1) connection to local context; (2) testing of new ideas and practice; and (3) providing support where government lacks capacity.

India has multi-tiered education governance, and it is important to note that roles, incentives, and partnership dynamics vary according to the level at which they operate.



Artificial intelligence (AI) statement

An AI transcription function on Microsoft Teams was used to generate transcripts of online research interviews. The accuracy of all quotations has been manually confirmed against original interview recordings.

AI was not used for any other aspect of the research, analysis, or writing of this playbook.

KEY CONSIDERATION #2 WORKING WITH THE SYSTEM

Governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) involved in Shikshagraha emphasized the necessity of ‘working with the system’. This means understanding the priorities and constraints of different actors, and positioning new initiatives such that the system enables them to progress, rather than becoming a barrier. Ideas that are not easy to integrate within existing processes will not be sustained. ‘Working with the system’ can be quite context-dependent, and so Shikshagraha’s emphasis on local knowledge becomes an important aspect of the pursuit of sustainable change.

KEY CONSIDERATION #3 | ROUTES TOWARDS TRUST

Trust is central to enabling good partnerships, and people in both government and civil society recognized they need to work to build trust. In Shikshagraha, trust between actors has been built on the basis of: credibility and values; demonstrating positive impact of partnership; and transparent communication, including the need to voice disagreements and acknowledge when things have gone wrong.

Risks of state-society partnership

The mutuality of partnership can in some cases become distorted or unbalanced, posing risks that may undermine the goal of quality education. Three main risks were indicated in our research findings:

1. government systems may become overdependent on external partners for the design and delivery of education initiatives. It is important that the capabilities of government institutions are strengthened through partnership, rather than simply outsourced.

2. Too many CSO-led initiatives, if not well coordinated, can become a burden to schools. This is inefficient at best, and at worst undermines the work of each CSO and of the schools.
3. Competition between organisations for funding, credit, and access can undermine collective action, as can a lack of flexibility required for collaborative working.

Actors from all sectors can help anticipate and avoid these risks.

Government-civil society partnership for education. Why this? Why now?



Government alone can never deliver... Education is a combined effort of the entire ecosystem

Government interviewee

Widespread lack of educational attainment among children in developing countries has long been a recognized problem. This ‘learning crisis’ persists despite increased enrolment and years of schooling.

Complex problems like the learning crisis cannot be solved by a single organisation, including a government. Too many factors are involved, and the causes are not sufficiently understood or controllable by any one actor. The nature of the problem therefore implies that: (1) solutions must involve multiple actors; and (2) solutions will vary according to context.

What would it look like for an education system to meet these two criteria – to inculcate collaborative problem solving and the flexibility necessary for local variation? This playbook examines the role that government-civil society partnerships could play in bringing about such characteristics. Specifically, we draw lessons from an education reform movement in India – Shikshagraha.

Shikshagraha leverages decentralization and cross-sector partnership to improve India’s public schools. The movement works across government, civil society organisations, community groups, and more (see further detail below). Although only a few years old, Shikshagraha is now established in

multiple Indian states, and is building a record of locally led education reforms. The movement’s activities range from direct work in classrooms, to community engagement, to education governance. Shikshagraha therefore exemplifies what Professor Alnoor Ebrahim calls an ecosystem strategy (Ebrahim, 2019). An ecosystem strategy is an approach to reform based on coordinating the efforts of multiple actors and organisations towards a common goal.

To redress the learning crisis requires such a strategy. Public education is and will remain a core responsibility of governments, but many other actors share the goal of quality education. Reform requires partnership between these actors, such that they bring about changes that no one of them could achieve alone. For those working to improve quality education, it is important to understand what partnership entails – its benefits, its challenges, and the factors that enable a good working relationship.

Using Shikshagraha as our case example, this playbook focuses on **how government and civil society can work together in pursuit of systemic education reform**. By government, we mean public sector actors and institutions – predominantly civil servants, but also elected politicians, headteachers, departmental staff, etc.

70%

of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are unable to understand a simple text. (World Bank, 2023)



It is worth understanding both the value and risks of state-society partnership. Doing so will help partners and potential partners make decisions about what to prioritize, who to work with, and how to approach collaborative working.

By civil society we mean both formally registered civil society organisations (CSOs), but also less-formal institutions, such as women's- and youth-groups, parents' associations, community leaders, and so on. In addition, donors also play a key role in Shikshagraha's state-society partnerships, due to the agency that comes with funding provision.

This report covers the roles of the different sectors, what factors enable a productive relationship between them, and what difficulties arise in working together. Part of the justification for a document like this is precisely that difficulties do arise. The Indian education system is large and complicated. It has multiple and sometimes parallel administrative authorities, and hundreds of CSOs involved to a greater or lesser extent. Government officials and civil society leaders can have divergent motivations, incentives, and values. There is plenty of scope for misunderstanding and frustration, which undermine the shared goal of quality education.

Yet if there is mutual misunderstanding, there is also mutual dependence. People we interviewed, from government, civil society, and philanthropy, valued each other's roles. Civil society organisations need governments if they are to shape sustained impact at scale. Strategic partnership with government can greatly enhance a CSO's projects.

Meanwhile, government agencies turn to CSOs for innovative practice, local knowledge, and community embeddedness. A government's capacity to implement policy can depend heavily on such factors – as when, in India, civil society was essential to the successful delivery of a polio vaccine programme (Solomon, 2019).

For all concerned about the learning crisis and educational reform, it is worth understanding both the value and risks of state-society partnership. Doing so will help partners and potential partners **make decisions about what to prioritize, who to work with, and how to approach collaborative working.**

This playbook therefore aims to provide guidance for policymakers and practitioners, either already participating in a state-society partnership or considering pursuing one. Based on our research, the playbook summarizes: (1) the benefits state-society partnership might bring to educational reform; (2) the factors that can enable a productive partnership; (3) what difficulties can hinder the relationship, and (4) how such difficulties might be avoided.

While the intention is to provide practical guidance, there are no straightforward 'plug-and-play' recommendations presented here. Such recommendations are simply not appropriate for the complexity that characterizes education system reform

and multi-actor coordination. Notably, the specificities of local context mean that what is possible and applicable varies from place to place. We have tried to reflect such contextual sensitivity in the content of the report, and each reader will likewise have to consider how the themes discussed here manifest within their own working context.

What this playbook can provide, though, is a clarified set of key considerations and risks, reported to us in interviews and fieldwork with government and civil actors, as well as donors and community leaders. It synthesizes their experience of state-society partnership for education reform, and identifies what goes well and what is difficult. If this playbook can prove a useful reference for government officials and civil society leaders – helping inform their partnership design and practice, as well as anticipate and avoid difficulties – it will have fulfilled its purpose.

Shikshagraha

The case research for this playbook

Our case study for this playbook is *Shikshagraha* – a movement to reform India's public education system so that every child receives a good quality education.

Shikshagraha draws on the Societal Thinking framework, an approach to social change based on co-created solutions that are responsive to diverse needs (see societalthinking.org). Shikshagraha applies this framework to education, joining up the efforts of government, civil society, communities, teachers, donors, markets, and the media. They coordinate across these groups with a view to shifting norms in India's education system. Shikshagraha particularly aims to change: top-down implementation of policy; negative public perception of government schools; community disengagement from schools; and marginalisation of girls in education.

The movement has a strong decentralist ethic, based on the premise 'that transformation begins with restoring agency to those closest to the child – schools and communities' (Shikshagraha, n.d.). They therefore advocate 'hyperlocal partnerships' in which government, civil society, and communities design context-appropriate education initiatives that address local needs. Much of Shikshagraha's focus is at the district level, particularly targeting those districts whose schools currently have below average educational attainment.

At the same time, Shikshagraha forms a network of actors working for educational reform across India – currently in 15 states. They share information and ideas, develop collective narratives, collate data and feedback from the grassroots to present to higher levels of government, and advocate for education to become a national priority.

Shikshagraha's strategy therefore responds to India's extremes of both scale and diversity. Local co-created initiatives are adapted to the unique needs of different places, while common goals for the wider system are pursued through data collection, logistical and technical support, and engagement with state- and national-level government.

Crucial to the movement's success is effective collaboration between the partners involved. Shikshagraha exemplifies the kind of 'ecosystem strategy' outlined above – orchestrating the actions of multiple organisations and sectors to achieve more than the sum of their parts. Studying Shikshagraha offers a chance to better understand the relationships between actors within an ecosystem strategy, and so gain insight into the relational factors that might aid the reform of public schools in India (and possibly elsewhere).

OUR RESEARCH

The research underlying this playbook was conducted by the Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford. Our study of Shikshagraha consisted of 30 interviews, including: government officials at the district, state and national levels; education focussed civil society organisation staff; community leaders; and philanthropic donors. The interviewees were distributed across five Indian states¹, as well as some who work nationally. We also conducted fieldwork in India – in New Delhi, Bihar, and Karnataka. We held focus groups with different actors working in state-society partnership, as well as observations in schools, government offices, and community education initiatives.

¹ Bihar, Karnataka, Nagaland, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana.



PART 1

The Challenge:

Complexity and scale in
education system reform

01

PART 1

The Challenge: Complexity and scale in education system reform

Like many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), India has achieved increased access to education in the past two decades. The central Government of India prioritized ‘education for all’, and accompanied school building initiatives with teacher recruitment and student enrolment drives. The independent Annual Status of Education Report now states that ‘access to schools is complete’ (ASER, 2025: 16).

Nevertheless, universal access to education in India has not been matched by universal quality. Indicators of competency in literacy and numeracy suggest there is widespread lack of attainment in government schools, particularly among children in rural areas. In several Indian states, fewer than 10% of rural government school children in grade 3 can read a grade 2 text (ASER, 2025). Even by grade 5, on average more than half of students are still unable to read at grade 2 level (ibid.). The economist Lant Pritchett observed similar discrepancies between school access and education quality across multiple developing countries. He states the matter bluntly: schooling ain’t learning (Pritchett, 2013a).

The reasons why school access and attendance do not translate into improved learning are numerous. Even in our relatively small case study, participants cited a diverse range of barriers to quality education. They included: linguistic diversity within the student-body; political instability; teacher shortage; unmanageable teacher workload; incompatible textbooks; geographic isolation; cultural norms about the value of education; and lack of safety in school, especially for girls.

Some of the problems in this list are directly within the purview of the public education system (teacher workload, textbooks, etc.), while others, such as political instability, are characteristics of a broader socio-political system. Readers may recognize some of these issues in their own contexts, and will be able to add yet others from their experience.

How must the reform of an education system proceed when the factors shaping (lack of) educational attainment are so diverse? Rather than analyse any single problem identified, we can characterize the collective, overarching problem: **the tension between complexity and scale in education system reform**. The tension consists of the fact that system reform must redress a plethora of contextually specific causal factors (complexity), while pursuing universal and equitable standards of quality education for all schools (scale).

India’s immense diversity – of language, culture, ethnicity, religion, and geography – means educational needs vary considerably across regions, and even between districts. “India is 28 different countries within one country”, interviewees told us, a “nation of multiple nations”. Uniform mandates from central government are often not well suited to this diversity.

<10%

of rural government school children in Grade 3 can read a Grade 2 text in several Indian states. (ASER, 2025)

Here, then, is the justification for a decentralized approach to education. The requirements for reform in any context vary according to a wide range of factors (complexity). What is needed in Bihar is not the same as what is needed in Nagaland. Even where different places share similar problems – upper secondary school drop-out rates are high in both Bihar and Nagaland, for example – the underlying causes might vary, and so the actions required to redress the same problem would still be different. In other words, the solution to the learning crisis is not to prescribe any solution, but to ‘let solutions evolve locally’ (Pritchett, 2013b: 3). Hence Shikshagraha’s emphasis on local agency and empowerment. The movement’s theory of change is founded in the conviction that one size does not fit all in education.

But what about scale? India has more than one million government schools (UDISE+, 2025). Administering an education system this large requires a certain level of coordination and regulation. Teacher training and technical support needs to be distributed fairly, for example, not to mention funding. Without coordination, multiple niche interventions operating in isolation can mean duplication of effort, limited sharing of information, and a general lack of coherence.

Responding to the demands of both complexity and scale therefore implies a particular balance within the education system. There must be sufficient overall control for coordinated action and equal coverage, but also enough autonomy for local actors to be able to respond to the variations in requirements for different contexts.

It is with reference to this need for a balanced response to complexity and scale that the case for state-society partnership is so compelling. If optimized, state-society partnerships could enable a collective joining up of efforts to assist efficiency and sharing of information, whilst maintaining adaptability to circumstances in different places. This kind of networked but locally operated structure is arguably better suited to navigate the tensions of complexity and scale than the centrally-managed approaches that are traditional in education governance (Pritchett, 2013b).

For a strategy featuring multiple coordinated actors to be successful, the relationship between the different sectors and actors is of utmost practical importance. To state the potential benefits of such a model in abstract does not yet reveal the practical collaborative work of such multi-actor cross-sector relationships. Our interviews and focus groups on Shikshagraha reveal some of what that

work involves – the roles played by different actors, the conditions for good relationships, the opportunities or challenges presented by different contextual circumstances. And while participants certainly did talk about the mutual benefits of collective cross-sector working, they also spoke of the perseverance needed to sit through months of meetings without much progress; of the setbacks caused by changes in personnel; and of the challenges of compromise and negotiation that inevitably accompany collective working.

Parts 2 and 3 of this playbook present our research findings on government-civil society collaboration, to derive guidance about how actors might best work together to drive systemic change in education.



PART 2

(Part of) the Solution: Government-civil society collaboration

02

KEY CONSIDERATION #1

What's my role?

State-society partnerships seek to capitalize on the different but complementary capacities of various actors. Perhaps the first question for organisations to consider as they enter partnership regards the respective roles of the partners. What can and should be the role of each? What does each side seek from the other?

All the ideas presented here derive from our research on Shikshagraha. The people we interviewed expressed a range of views on both their own and their partner's role, including how their understanding of their role had changed during collaborative work.

GOVERNMENT ACTORS

Our research identified three roles that government actors are best-placed to assume within state-society partnership. They are: (1) cultivating a guiding vision and mindset for reform; (2) selecting suitable partners; and (3) implementing policy at scale. All three reflect the fact that government actors represent the legitimate authority within a jurisdiction.

The government plays a key role in **defining a vision** for educational reform – to set priorities and provide an overarching strategy towards a long-term goal. The worldview and mindset of leaders within a system – although intangible in themselves – can be one of the most potent drivers of system change (see Meadows, 2008). People in government are well-placed to promote a vision for education in their region, and to select partners who can gather around that vision.

Guiding vision was observed to be a 'missing ingredient' in some state-society partnerships. Multiple partnerships may be underway, with carefully selected CSOs, but one interviewee felt that their state still

lacked a "transformation framework which should guide their efforts". Others indicated that a lack of guiding vision can be exacerbated by changes in government, or even just by individual officials moving to new positions. If a vision for transformation is driven by one or two key personnel, rather than becoming shared by a wider collective, it may weaken and fade if those personnel move on.

Government actors must also assume the foundational role of **selecting partners** with whom to work. There are numerous CSOs, working on all aspects of education in India, who want to help improve public schools. Government interviewees reported that they are constantly approached by CSOs with proposals for new initiatives. Government actors must therefore consider what area to partner on, at what time, and to what extent. Careful and strategic choices are needed to avoid risks of duplication (signing up multiple CSOs on the same priority) or developing overdependence on external organisations (see part 3, below). Some officials are therefore cautious about who they choose to work with. Others observed a more open approach, though bringing in lots of CSO partners can be counter-productive if it is done without consideration of what the government needs for their education system.

Regardless of whether they have few or many partnerships, governments are the only partner with capacity to **drive reform at scale**. This is a major factor in



If you don't involve the government or the local authorities you will only make change at the margin... Without [government support] it's not possible to achieve transformation at scale

Donor interviewee

CSO's and philanthropist's motivation to work with government. They recognize that CSOs can test innovations and introduce new ideas in a sample number of schools – but that government's role is to assess what is effective and then embed it into the larger system.

A NOTE ON LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

India's federal government system includes three main levels: centre, state, and district. Education is a 'concurrent list' subject, meaning that both central and state government are responsible for policy and funding. There are also administrative units below the district level. For education, below the District Education Office there is typically a Block Resource Person and a Cluster Resource Person (responsible for 10-20 schools)².

Although the focus of this playbook is on the relationship between government and CSOs, the relationship between the different levels of government is equally important in shaping reform efforts.

Our interviewees noted the top-down nature of the government hierarchy, with one describing it as a "command and control system". Both government and civil society actors recalled difficulties encountered with the hierarchy. Delays in the delivery of resources, lack of coordination between the levels, and

² The exact administrative structure varies between states.



limited mechanisms for bottom-up feedback were all mentioned. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the schools themselves, expected to implement the sometimes-contradictory orders filtering down to them from centre, state, and district. One government interviewee noted that this can leave little space for the schools to act on their own initiative in response to diverse challenges.

These findings indicate the core tension between scale and complexity described in part 1, and the need for balance between control and autonomy. One interviewee characterized the ideal relationship across levels of government as "common vision with diversified approach":

"Our approach should be diversified since my school's priorities may be different from your school's priorities and challenges. So our approach will be diversified, but vision should be common"
Government interviewee

Common vision across levels of government is not inevitable, however, and can be undermined by political divisions. An ecosystem strategy for education reform must inevitably grapple with the realities of hierarchy and multi-level governance. Hence the Shikshagraha movement operates across levels, combining decentralist empowerment of local actors with larger-scale strategic partnership and advocacy. When considering the question 'what's my role?', it is worth noting that organizations' roles can vary depending on the level at which they are acting.

KEY CONSIDERATION #1

What's my role?

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

Our research identified three main roles for civil society organisations within state-society partnerships. Just as the government roles reflect government's unique position as an authority, CSO's roles reflect the unique strengths of civil and community-based groups. They are: (1) connecting to the local context; (2) testing new ideas and practice; and (3) providing support where government lacks capacity.

One of the most valuable aspects of civil society organisations is that many are embedded in and emerge from particular places and communities. Such CSOs have a **strong understanding of local context**, culture, and language, as well as a trusting relationship with members of the community.

Deep knowledge of different contexts is difficult for government actors to achieve, especially if personnel move frequently between posts. A state-level government official told us that their motivation to collaborate with CSOs was to help them accommodate the diversity within their state's population. They noted that the government must work "horizontally" across the whole population, while CSOs can work "vertically", responding to the specificities of different places. Isolated communities, or those that are marginalized from mainstream society, can be especially difficult for government to access. One CSO leader, from Nagaland, noted that the



indigenous worldview in Nagaland can be very distinct from the Indian 'mainstream'. They saw part of their role as being "ambassadors of our culture" in interactions with partners from larger cities or from outside the state. A community-based organization, prepared to work as a bridge between community and government, can be invaluable in such a scenario.

CSOs can also be a **source of new ideas and practices** within education. A government interviewee appreciated the "scientific approach" of CSOs – i.e. experimentally testing new interventions for their effect on educational outcomes. Civil society leaders also saw this as an explicit part of their role. Several advocated a model whereby

CSOs pilot new interventions in a small number of schools, gather evidence on effectiveness, with the intent that government then adopt successful programmes at scale. An example of this 'pilot to scale' model from within Shikshagraha is the introduction of a school 'house system'. The idea came from a CSO, who initially conceived of it to help counter caste-based violence in schools. They built a case study of initial findings from one district, and an experimental trial to test the effect. This subsequently convinced the state government to adopt a house system for all schools across the state.

Finally, CSOs can **provide support and expertise** in areas where government lacks capacity. A frequently repeated



NGOs are very uniquely suited to carry with them the actual voice of the community, and design interventions which are best suited for that community

Donor interviewee

sentiment about the benefits for government of working with CSOs was that CSOs can help 'fill gaps'. Examples reported included: technical assistance with programme design; monitoring and verification; database management; additional finance or resources; local community arranging volunteer teachers due to teacher shortage.

There is some risk associated with this latter role. A critical interpretation might say that 'filling gaps' means civil society covering for government failures, or that CSOs are taking responsibilities that are not their legitimate domain. Normative debates about the role of different actors remain important. It is also important to recognize the realities of resource-constrained contexts. It is not within the power of a single district education officer and their civil society partners to transform the funding and organisation of the national education system. But they can work together to address the educational needs of their district, and CSOs 'filling gaps' may be crucial to the success of that endeavour. (See part 3 below for more discussion of the risks of partnership).

A NOTE ON CSO TYPOLOGY

Just as the role of government actors varies across centre, state, and district, so the role that a CSO plays may vary depending on the level at which it seeks to operate. Reviewing the findings presented above, it is apparent that not

all CSOs can play all of these roles. Not all CSOs are based in a specific locale, for example. A larger organisation, working across districts or across states, may not be deeply embedded in a local community. Their role may be more about collation of data from different places, or to act as a strategic partner to higher levels of government.

Our research on Shikshagraha included leaders from a range of CSOs. Some were embedded in a local context, working with teachers and community in a specific district. Others operated at a larger scale, and included engagement in multiple states and with the central Indian government. Their focuses varied widely – from textbook design, to digital infrastructure, to caste-based violence.

In the spirit of an ecosystem strategy, all of these different approaches and focuses have a role to play in the pursuit of quality education. Knowing that not every CSO can play every role suggests that there could be benefits to different CSOs working together. One of our focus groups with CSO leaders noted the value of multi-CSO 'collectives'. Benefits mentioned included sharing new ideas, de-siloing efforts, building organisational capacity, and building solidarity. Though the focus of this playbook is government-CSO relationships, CSO-CSO partnership is also an important part of orchestrating system change.

OTHER ESSENTIAL NON-GOVERNMENT ACTORS

This section has so far focused on government actors and civil society organisations. But they are not the only groups involved in Shikshagraha's state-society partnerships. In particular, there are two other groups with an important role to play in education reform.

First there is **community** – parents, women's and youth groups, and more generally the members of a community who can shape education in their places. Interviewees expressed the value of local knowledge, and discussed the need to facilitate flow of information from community members into decision-making processes.

One interviewee gave an example in which community actors were key to accessing out-of-school children who lacked formal identity documentation. Women in the village knew the families who lacked documentation, and with support from a local CSO and local government they were able to create the necessary documentation, and enrol nearly 50 new students in school. This anecdote exemplifies the potential benefits of collaboration between government, civil society, and community. The role of women leaders was essential – their local knowledge and trusted position enabled them to bridge the gap between undocumented families and the government school system.

KEY CONSIDERATION #1

What’s my role?

The Shikshagraha movement champions community involvement, and includes community in its ecosystem strategy through an initiative of ‘Shiksha Chaupals’. Shiksha Chaupals are village meetings that promote participation in education and address barriers to quality education at the local level.

Over 30 thousand Chaupals have been organized. We observed two during our field research, in Bihar and in Karnataka. Problems raised in the meetings we observed ranged from poor sanitation in schools to caste discrimination. The meeting leaders encouraged community members to act collectively in response to these problems, and to engage directly with the schools. Shiksha Chaupals thus **cultivate a ‘demand-side’ lever for education reform**, raising communities’ awareness of what they can contribute to, and expect from, their government schools.

Shikshagraha are gathering insights from multiple Shiksha Chaupals into a qualitative database of ‘voices from the ground’, to gain a larger scale view of education barriers, and community-led solutions, from across India³.

The second key non-government group are **donors**. Much of the funding of civil society organisations comes from philanthropists and foundations who want to support educational improvement. Although they are not in the classrooms or directly designing interventions,

³ See the public dashboard here: <https://dashboard.shikshagraha.org/voices-from-the-ground>



donors shape the priorities and actions of the organisations they fund, as well as the potential to build connections between different organisations.

The donors we spoke with all perceived their role as being about more than money. They also provide mentorship, access to networks (including additional potential donors), and act as a strategic

partner. Although donors inevitably have a control and accountability function, they recognized the need to stand by CSOs over the long-term, and allow them the flexibility to adapt and change. For some, this means committing long-term, unrestricted funds rather than funding fixed-term projects or designating specific activities.

INTERLUDE

Finding the right people

To speak of government and civil society as general categories can overlook an important point: partners are not categories, they are individual people.

While a partnership is formally an agreement between organisations, it is lived relationally through individuals within respective organizations and groups. A civil society leader seeking a Memorandum of Understanding does not speak with ‘government’ in the abstract, but rather speaks with *this* official, *this* office manager, and so on. The willingness, motivation, personality, and ambitions of specific individuals significantly shape what a partnership can achieve or not.

This point was repeatedly highlighted during our research. Interviewees spoke of the importance of finding ‘like-minded individuals’, and of how much can be achieved when key people believe in an initiative. Putting thought and effort into finding the right people, at all levels, can pay dividends.

One CSO interviewee said they try to establish good relationships with junior officials, who may be more accessible, and possibly more open to new ideas. Similarly, another felt that there was more scope for flexibility when partnering with district-level personnel rather than state-level. On the other hand, to work beyond a single district, relationships with higher-level officials and politicians may become part of the strategy. As noted above, navigating hierarchy is an inevitable part of partnership, particularly in a multi-tiered system like India’s. Our CSO interviewees thought tactically about where relationship-building efforts were best focused - which personnel, and at which level.

Building rapport, trust, and understanding with people in different institutions is therefore a skill well-worth developing. Some individuals can be particularly well-placed to play that role: *cultural brokers*, whose experience, network, and political judgement allows them to navigate smoothly the different worlds of government, civil society, teachers, and community, helping to build shared understanding and vision (see Greenhalgh et al., 2011: 555). For both government and civil society actors, there could be value in developing the skills of a cultural broker themselves, or intentionally employing or partnering with people who have those skills.



Individuals matter... You need to find your friendships, need to build those networks wherever it is possible

Civil Society interviewee

KEY CONSIDERATION #2

Working with the system

Having discussed the respective roles of government and civil society partners, the next two key considerations draw attention to factors and practices that can enable state-society partnerships to flourish rather than stall. Again, all of the ideas presented here are based in our research on Shikshagraha.

The second key consideration is thinking about how to work with the system. If state-society partnerships are to constitute part of an ecosystem strategy – coordination of multiple organisations within a system towards a common goal – they must be informed by an understanding of that system. Both government and CSOs interviewees emphasized this point in our research.

TAKE A SYSTEMS VIEW

A civil society leader working in Bihar summarized the sentiment of several interviewees when he said his organisation tries to take a ‘whole system view’, encompassing state government down to individual schools. They take the time to learn the needs and priorities of different actors at different levels of government, and the constraints and limitations in which they work. Crucially, this approach means that the CSO is concerned with more than just getting government to accept their ideas. For example, you may have an idea for a new teaching method that you want to see adopted in government schools. But looking at the wider system reveals many more issues, from delayed textbook delivery, to school washroom cleanliness, to budget utilisation. The focus of the partnership may best be directed at some of these other aspects, at least at first.

That entails flexibility and responsiveness to multiple factors. One CSO leader acknowledged that they have sometimes “let go of what we wanted to do”, because priorities of their government partner differed. But such flexibility needn’t necessarily mean giving up on an original idea. Rather it is about situating the ideas within a broader set of interdependencies, and recognising what else needs to happen alongside the proposed solutions. Indeed, interviewees suggested that a programme is only likely to happen and be successful if the other factors are addressed too.

Practically, taking a systems view involves a lot of listening, and an openness to learning from multiple perspectives. This is akin to what Peter Senge and colleagues, in an essay on systems leadership, have called the ‘ability to see the larger system’ (Senge et al., 2015). It also naturally lends itself to working collaboratively, because understanding the many factors affecting education quality also reveals the inability of any single organisation to address them all. One former government official advocated for CSOs to form collectives, and, based on an assessment of the educational needs at different levels, work with the government to distribute tasks and support roles among themselves.



The first value of a CSO to my mind would be just to listen a lot. To everyone... If you listen and evolve with the area, people, community that you’re working with, you might do very different things than what you started out with

Civil Society interviewee

WORK WITH THE SYSTEM FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Having gained a wider systems view, the next step is to use that understanding to inform proposed activities. Interviewees spoke about working *with* the system – such that its characteristics and contextual attributes could enable rather than constrain the progress of a partnership and the sustainability of a solution.

For example, a funder noted how they positioned their intervention as contributing to ‘bagless days’ – an initiative prescribed in India’s National Education Policy 2020. They felt that aligning an idea for a new intervention with the existing policy framework would facilitate its acceptance by government officials.

But working with the system needn’t just mean alignment to existing policy. Another example involved aligning with a cultural structure – peer groups in Nagaland. These are cohorts of young people that stay in touch over years, often volunteering together and contributing to their community. The interviewee saw peer groups as a wonderful resource for supporting education, and so asked them to come and volunteer in their schools. They remarked: “it’s an existing system... an existing cultural thing... my whole philosophy said, don’t supersede that, take advantage of that”.



Perhaps of most importance, though, is that any solution will not be sustainable unless it is relatively easy to integrate within the existing system. One clear aspect of being ‘easy to adopt’ means not adding resource requirements in a context that is often already resource constrained, nor otherwise being a burden to actors in the education system. For example, one CSO leader told us they make sure to know the classroom schedules for the schools in their district, to ensure that any initiative that they proposed was not going to detract from the schools’ ability to complete their syllabus.

Another CSO leader similarly advocated a ‘low-interference approach’, by which they meant their work with government should not imply producing new textbooks or new teacher training requirements. Instead, they learned whatever the government system was already doing, and worked with them to try and improve it. They saw this approach as necessary to the long-term sustainability of any improvement – the CSO could step away, and things would continue in the new improved manner.

KEY CONSIDERATION #3

Routes towards trust

When we asked interviewees, ‘what enables a good relationship between government and civil society?’, one of the most common answers was trust.

Trust has to be built between partners, it cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, it may be that the baseline perspective is one of mistrust. For some in government, ‘civil society’ is equated with ‘activist NGOs that are not accountable to anybody’ (Solomon, 2019: 19). Meanwhile, CSOs can fear that working with government will result in co-optation and watering-down of their mission. Several routes for developing trust emerged from our research findings.

CREDIBILITY AND VALUES

Government actors and funders saw the credibility and ethical values of CSOs as a key basis of a trusting relationship. One funder said that they could accept a CSO missing its targets, but that “there is no compromise” with what they judge to be poor ethics.

How might a CSO demonstrate their credibility and values? A compelling personal narrative on the part of civil society leaders can help in this regard. One interviewee felt their personal story was a key part of building credibility with government officials. They had left India and had a successful career overseas, but came back to their home state to work on education. This sense that they had ‘sacrificed’ their success to help schools was seen as demonstrating commitment.

When it came to building trust with politicians, interviews noted the importance of showing no motives other than quality education, and avoiding any blatant political associations or biases.

DEMONSTRATING IMPACT

Another way to build trust between partners is to appreciate positive impact – to find ways of allowing partners to observe where good progress is being made.

A CSO actor described how they organized a ‘showcase’ in some of the

schools they worked in, and invited their government partners to come and see the students’ work. One benefit was that government could assess the progress of the programme beyond simply looking at quantitative learning outcomes. Indeed, the interviewee observed that the learning outcomes in their first year of operating were actually “not great”. But because of the showcases, government officials saw that there was some positive change happening in the schools, even if it had not yet translated into exam results.

Similarly, stories of individual student growth can reinforce the work of a partnership and demonstrate impact. In one example, a girl who had taken a leadership role in her school’s new house system had grown in confidence, and expressed an aspiration to be a Collector in the future⁴. Like the showcases, this example of positive impact is not based on test results or quantitative outcomes. They indicate that stories can be at least as, if not more, effective as numbers for demonstrating impact.

Another CSO interviewee acknowledged the need government has for trustworthy partners, and also saw that, as a new organisation, there was no basis for that trust; they were simply one of the many CSOs that approach government:

⁴ A ‘Collector’ is a civil servant who oversees district-level administration. The District Collector is the highest-ranking civil role in the district government.



The core thing that we look at is the ethical fabric of the organisation... the value systems and things like that... If there are failures, we don’t have a problem. They don’t achieve their targets, we don’t have a problem. But if there is something that questions their ethics, then we immediately exit.

Philanthropic funder interviewee, on the importance of CSO ethical values.

Initially I think when we started the organisation though, we were taking an effort to partner with the government. We realized that there is no space for them to trust us... For them we are just strangers coming in, and they would have so many visitors coming in and asking to try out so many things. So how do we create that exceptional image of us?
CSO interviewee

This organisation ultimately built that ‘exceptional image’ by prototyping their programmes in private schools. On that basis they could generate some evidence, and then come to government with a concrete proposition: here’s what we’ve tried, here’s what we’ve found was effective, let’s see if this can work in public schools too. They felt that their permission to work in the government schools was based on this evidence generation from private schools. This represents one way in which a new organisation could build a track record of good performance that can be necessary to establish government partnerships.

TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION

Finally, transparent communication was seen as crucial to partners building trust and credibility in each other’s eyes.

For CSOs, honest communication can mean pushing back against ideas or decisions of their government partners. There is risk associated with this, due to the power dynamic between government as the legitimate authority and CSOs as

‘hired’ partners. But, as outlined above, providing honest feedback to the government can be one of the key benefits of working with CSOs. One CSO interviewee reported that, in their experience, senior bureaucrats appreciated the pushback – that senior officers are so used to hearing “yes Sir, yes Ma’am”, they found it refreshing to hear a contradictory opinion. Such feedback can be a source of credibility and trust, because it demonstrates values other than self-interest and shows a genuine care for the education system and the children it

serves, such that the CSO will risk their partnership with government to state what they think is right.

Ultimately, a CSO that can build the trust of government pays dividends. More than one interviewee observed that, while at first they were approaching government, after several years of successful partnership, government started approaching them – including government actors from other states and districts from those in which they work.

Box 1: Questions and points for discussion

Government actors

- Are you carefully selecting partners in response to the identified needs of your system? Have you sought partners who are embedded in and trusted by the local community?
- How is the knowledge and feedback of CSO partners incorporated into your decision-making?
- Are you creating a culture of open dialogue in which partners are able to give honest feedback or pushback?
- How might you create a shared vision for the future, around which multiple organisations and community can gather?

Civil society actors

- Are you cultivating local knowledge and trust within the place you serve?
- How can you develop a ‘whole system view’, understanding the needs and limits of the education system in your state/district?
- Have you planned for government adoption of your ideas from the outset, including mitigating any resource implications or burden?
- Are you coordinating with other CSOs for a collective action approach?



PART 3

Anticipated difficulties and how they might be avoided

03

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RISK #1 | OVERDEPENDENCE

Mutual dependence is inherent in state-society partnership, with actors in each sector gaining things from partnership that they are unable to achieve themselves. Indeed, as the previous sections have described, this mutuality provides the underlying logic of a collective ecosystem strategy. It is a key reason why the people we interviewed are motivated to work in partnership. But our research findings also indicated that the mutuality of partnership can in some cases become distorted or unbalanced.

Government interviewees expressed concern that working with external organizations on all aspects of public education could lead to overdependence on non-governmental actors. By 'overdependence' they meant that the government's own capacities would not develop, or could even weaken over time, if responsibility for designing, administering, and implementing education policy was delegated to CSOs. One interviewee observed that government institutions are even disincentivized from hiring staff for their own positions, because CSO personnel can cover for the shortage. If government's motivation to partner with CSOs is because it saves resources, it distorts their role to select partners according to the educational needs of the constituency, and as part of a coordinated strategy.



A particular risk with such overdependence is that education will suffer should the CSOs ever stop working with government. That is, once the CSO exits, or their funding stops, government is left without the skills or staff to manage the transition. As an interviewee observed, government institutions should be *strengthened* through partnership, not left incapable of functioning without external organisations.



We also need to eventually evolve. We need to capacitate our own institutions... If we have too much dependence on the external agency, eventually we will not grow.

Government interviewee



I went to a school where a teacher said, 'you know, I do a foundational learning and numeracy programme of one organisation in the mornings, another organisation in the afternoon, and of a third one on Saturdays. Which one do I do?'

CSO leader, on the problem of overburdening schools.

RISK #2 | BURDENING SCHOOLS

An additional risk stems from the potential for *too many* state-society partnerships. Our research indicated that, if multiple government-CSO initiatives are not coordinated, they can become a burden to schools. Teachers get trained on several activities, and the schools are expected to accommodate them all. Sometimes there is even duplication – where the government has signed up two or three CSOs to do the same thing in the same schools. This is inefficient at best, and at worst undermines the work of each CSO and of the schools.

Schools have made complaints in such cases, saying that they cannot complete their core curriculum due to the additional expectations being placed on them by CSO-led initiatives. One state in India has recently stopped allowing CSOs to work directly in schools, due to negative perception about disruption caused. The benefits of working in partnership have been overbalanced by the risks.

RISK #3 | FALLING SHORT OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Ideally, state-society partnerships would amount to a form of collective action: multiple actors working together on the shared goal of quality education. Interviewees highlighted two difficulties that can undermine the ideals of a collective approach.

The first is competition between CSOs – over funding, over access to government, and over who gets credit for success. For some, collaboration can also be perceived as diluting an organisation's identity and mission. All of these can be barriers to collective action, prompting reluctance to work together rather than embracing a collective model.

The second disrupter of collective action is having too narrow or rigid a focus – a propensity for CSOs to be focused on implementing their one idea at the expense of flexibility, responsiveness to system requirements, and co-creation of solutions. This was observed as a difficulty by government interviewees, but also by CSO interviewees. Interestingly, one person noted that CSO rigidity can sometimes be due to commitment to a donor's agenda – a useful reminder that donors and philanthropists, from whom many CSOs receive their funding, have considerable agency to set the activities of civil society actors.

PART 3

Anticipated difficulties and how they might be avoided

ANTIDOTES | HOW MIGHT THESE RISKS BE AVOIDED?

Alongside the above risks and difficulties, our findings point towards some potential antidotes that could help avoid them. The following are suggestions, based on our research, for how actors might take steps to avoid the risks of suboptimal partnership. Many of these reflect the content already discussed in part 2, about the ideal roles of each sector.



GOVERNMENT ACTORS

Government can help avoid some of the difficulties listed above by **being intentional and selective in their choice of partners**. Being intentional about the number of CSOs involved, where they work, and their agreed activities, could help mitigate the risks of developing dependence, and of overburdening schools. Although often working in resource-constrained contexts, government actors should avoid partnering with lots of CSOs solely because they are a source of ‘free’ capacity.

Government could also help avoid creating overdependence by **integrating CSOs within the government’s own processes**, rather than having them operate in parallel or at arms-length. This could facilitate sharing of knowledge and skills between CSO and government personnel. Both sides could benefit from this approach. With regards to the risk of overdependence specifically, it could help knowledge and skills become embedded within government, such that they do not simply depart with the CSO staff once a partnership finishes.

The latter point raises the matter of **exit-strategy**. When entering partnership, government could consider how long they anticipate their need for the partnership, what will happen afterwards, and how any progress made will be sustained after the partnership finishes.

Finally, government could develop a **guiding vision** for educational reform, to potentially foster a collective ethos among CSO partners. This could be strengthened by emphasising a high-level, measurable outcome for which all actors can strive. Selecting an outcome that no single organization can achieve alone may help re-calibrate competition between CSOs, motivating a focus on the mutual gains of collaboration rather than a zero-sum game for individual credit and funding (Ebrahim, 2019).

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

To mitigate overdependence, civil society leaders also need to think about **exit strategy** and the term of their partnership. When and how will they leave? The ‘low interference approach’ mentioned in part 2 might be one way in which a CSO can build government capacity, not dependency, and so move on from the partnership without negative consequences for education.

The risks of overburdening schools and falling short of collective action could both be countered with **CSO-CSO coordination**. Convening several CSOs and mapping endeavours, even before approaching the government, could help avoid duplication of effort. One interviewee recounted how they coordinated with a small group of CSOs, such that in their approach to government they could “speak with one voice”. This involved “resolv[ing] all our thinking and conflict internally before we go to the government”, and required each organization to work for collective effort more than for their own esteem - “identities did not matter to us”. While there may always be grounds for competition between CSOs, this latter example suggests that the perversions of competition can be mitigated. It requires principled leadership from figures who are willing to prioritize the interdependent goal of quality education ahead of personal credit.

Finally, a more collective ethos could be strengthened with a willingness to



co-develop ideas - with government, with other CSOs, with teachers, with community. As one interviewee bluntly put it, some CSOs are “solutions in search of problems”. Such narrow focus or rigid commitment to one idea can undermine collective action. As discussed elsewhere, the antidote is a case of the power of mindset shift. Considering how your idea can serve the system, rather than how the system can serve your idea, is one way of orienting efforts towards a more responsive, collective approach.

DONORS

Donors also have a role in mitigating risks for the partnerships they fund. They can **allow CSOs flexibility** to respond to government priorities and other changing circumstances on the ground. Such flexibility will help CSOs to

‘take a systems view’, and to co-develop ideas with government and community. **Long-term unrestricted funding** (as opposed to single-project fixed-term funding) could similarly facilitate system strengthening, particularly if investment is made in people, overheads, and other capabilities that support long-term change. Finally, in addition to encouraging CSO-CSO coordination, donors could consider **multi-donor coordination** – either in formal joint funding agreements, or as lighter-touch forms of cooperation. Multi-donor coordination could de-silo reform efforts, and help multiple initiatives add up to more than the sum of their parts.

CONCLUSION

Orchestrating education system change

We opened this playbook with a quotation from a senior government official in the Indian education system: “Government alone can never deliver... Education is a combined effort of the entire ecosystem”.



Above all, it is apparent that orchestrating education system change is ultimately about transforming relationships.

WHY ECOSYSTEM APPROACHES MATTER

The subsequent sections of the playbook go some way to explaining *why* a combined ecosystem effort is necessary for reform. It begins with the complex interplay of factors that shape educational outcomes, and a recognition that no single actor or organization has sufficient agency to address them all. Hence the need for an ecosystem strategy - coordinated action in pursuit of shared goals (Ebrahim, 2019).

In India, the Shikshagraha movement is striving to strengthen relationships, aggregate the efforts of multiple sectors, and foster local control over education. The experiences of different people involved in Shikshagraha, summarized in this playbook, provide a set of key considerations and potential tactics that can guide further efforts for education system reform – in India, and possibly in other countries too. The key considerations that emerged from our research were:

1. seeking clarity about the role that different actors can play in partnerships. Each sector has different strengths and attributes that can be fostered within a partnership.
2. taking a systems-informed approach to collaboration – that is, understanding the nature of the system in which you work, then using that knowledge to shape practice such that progress is facilitated rather than hindered.

3. building trust between partners, and realising that there are several routes towards trust that partners can actively cultivate.

Those making decisions about collaborative working should also be aware of the risks of partnership. Our findings highlighted three in particular:

1. Overdependence of government on external organisations, weakening the government’s own capabilities.
2. Burdening schools with too many new initiatives, such that partnerships paradoxically undermine quality education.
3. Falling short of collective action, due to the distorting effects of competition, or pursuing a fixed idea at the expense of flexibility and responsiveness to system need.

All partners have a responsibility to understand and mitigate such risks, and we suggested a few remedies at the end of part 3.

NAVIGATING THE TENSIONS OF PARTNERSHIP

Taking these findings together, the people working in the Shikshagraha movement demonstrate a constructively critical approach to the means and ends of partnership. They continuously negotiate a balancing act to optimize the benefits of partnership and avoids the risks. For example, they pursue strong

partnerships embedded in government, but without substituting for government. They seek to work with existing systems, while also challenging and re-shaping those same systems. And they must avoid the traps of competition and fragmentation, transcending self-interest in the pursuit of collective action. The reflective attitude demonstrated by people we interviewed is therefore itself a key finding of this playbook. They show the kind of vision, flexibility, and willingness to learn that it takes to lead education reform at multiple levels.

TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS, TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS

Above all, it is apparent that **orchestrating education system change is ultimately about transforming relationships**. The quality of a child’s education is dependent on the interactions between numerous individuals and organisations, across sectors and at different scales. Focusing on those relationships– how they function, their benefits and challenges – is one route to understanding how co-created solutions to the learning crisis might be unlocked. This playbook cannot prescribe what those solutions should be. Indeed, we explicitly acknowledge that the solutions will vary according to context. But by examining state-society partnerships, we hope to have shed light on the conditions that could enable such solutions to emerge.

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