

IEFG

# SCENARIO SERIES

SCENARIO 2:

## GOVERNMENTS LEAD EDUCATION PROGRESS

Philanthropic and education leaders imagine a future in which funders support public leaders to deliver lasting progress

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## EDITORIAL SUMMARY

By Laura Savage  
Executive Director, IEFG



**Over the past year, we've often heard the same refrain in very different conversations. Whether discussing the future of aid, the growth of domestic philanthropy, systems change, locally led development or education reform, people increasingly arrive at a similar conclusion: philanthropy should work more closely with government.**

This phrase has become an answer before we have fully unpacked the question. Beneath it sit harder issues.

So this Scenario asks two simple questions. What does 'working with government' actually *mean*? And what would a future look like in which this was a reality?

It became clear as we commissioned this collection that discussion was not divided neatly into those who supported working with government and those who did not. Contributors arrived from very different places. Former ministers reflected on the realities of governing. Domestic philanthropy organisations described partnerships built over many years with local government. International foundations wrestled with questions of legitimacy, independence and accountability. Alongside these we include

a composite contribution, bringing together a set of perspectives we heard repeatedly, and that we felt belonged in the conversation, but that no single author was willing to articulate.

It reminds us that there are many funders who remain cautious about making government partnership philanthropy's default position. They question whether foundations should compensate for weak public systems, whether they risk losing the independence that allows them to innovate, or whether philanthropy's greatest contribution sometimes lies precisely in doing what governments cannot.

***“ If governments ultimately answer to their publics, then the role of philanthropy cannot be to direct public systems according to its own priorities, however well intentioned those priorities might be.”***

Looking across these essays, we found ourselves thinking less about the answers they offer than the questions they expose.

The first is a question of legitimacy. One of the strongest threads running through this Scenario is that governments derive their legitimacy from citizens, not funders. That sounds obvious, yet it has profound implications for philanthropy. If governments ultimately answer to their publics, then the role of philanthropy cannot be to direct public systems according to its own priorities, however well intentioned those priorities might be. Equally, recognising government leadership does not mean accepting every policy decision uncritically or abandoning philanthropy's own values and expertise.

The second is a question of independence. Education systems are public systems. Governments recruit teachers, finance schools, develop curricula and remain accountable to citizens long after any individual project or grant has come to an end. But scepticism about working with government deserves to be taken seriously. Philanthropy should not simply become an extension of the state, nor should it be expected to compensate for governments that are unable or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities. Many foundations were established precisely

because they can take risks, back unpopular ideas, respond quickly or support issues that governments struggle to prioritise.

Reading these contributions, we found ourselves becoming less comfortable with the phrase 'working with government'. It has come to mean almost anything. It can describe a genuinely shared endeavour built on trust, legitimacy and long-term relationships. It can also describe little more than obtaining permission to implement a project that has largely been designed elsewhere. Those are very different propositions, yet they are often discussed as though they were interchangeable.

Perhaps we have spent too long treating 'working with government' as an activity rather than as a way of thinking about the role of philanthropy in public systems. That distinction matters because the most interesting questions are rarely about partnership agreements or governance structures. They are about people, relationships and judgement. How do funders understand political leadership? What assumptions do they bring into their relationships with governments? How do they decide when to lead, when to convene, when to advocate, when to support and when simply to step back? Those questions do not lend themselves to a single model, and they cannot be answered through a checklist. They require philanthropy to become much more explicit about the role it believes it is playing within the education systems it seeks to strengthen.

Working with government is difficult. Governments are slow, bureaucratic and political, because they are public institutions accountable to citizens, operating within legal and financial

***“Governments are slow, bureaucratic and political [...] Those characteristics are not barriers to education reform. They are part of the environment in which education reform happens.”***

constraints, balancing competing interests that philanthropy rarely has to confront. They are made up of ministers, technical officials, district leaders, school leaders and many others, all working within different incentives and facing different pressures. Those characteristics are not barriers to education reform. They are part of the environment in which education reform happens.

The same diversity is true of philanthropy. Foundations differ in their governance, histories, motivations and appetite for risk. Some are deeply rooted in one country, others work globally. Some are shaped by business, others by family giving, faith or community philanthropy. Some are comfortable taking public positions but others prefer to work quietly behind the scenes. Those differences matter because they shape the partnerships that governments experience.

One of the privileges of working through IEFG is seeing that diversity up close. The education philanthropy community is often described as though it were a coherent group with a common worldview. It is not. But the strength of the community lies precisely in its diversity. The challenge is learning how to work collectively despite it.

Over the past two decades, international development has become much better at understanding the politics of reform. Political economy analysis has encouraged us to pay much closer attention to institutions, incentives, relationships and power within government. It has helped move the conversation beyond technical solutions towards a richer understanding of how change actually happens. We have been less willing to turn that same lens on ourselves. Foundations *also* have political economies. Boards shape priorities.

Founders shape culture. Reporting requirements influence behaviour. Institutional incentives affect decisions about risk, visibility and attribution. None of this is problematic in itself. Every organisation operates within its own institutional context. Yet these dynamics inevitably shape how governments experience philanthropy, just as politics within government shapes how philanthropy experiences the state.

***“Governments do not experience philanthropy one grant at a time. They experience it as an ecosystem.”***

Philanthropy's value rarely lies in trying to behave like government. Nor does it lie in standing outside public systems. Its contribution is often at its strongest when it understands both its influence and its limitations, and uses that position to strengthen the conditions in which governments, civil society and communities are able to lead change together.

Governments do not experience philanthropy one grant at a time. They experience it as an ecosystem. We spend considerable time asking how funders might collaborate with one another, but perhaps we should start by asking a different question: how can governments experience philanthropy as a more coherent, thoughtful and useful partner?

Coordination is not an end in itself. It matters because fragmented engagement places real demands on already stretched public systems, while better connected philanthropy creates more space for

governments to lead.

This is where we see the work of IEFG and JustSystems coming together.

One of IEFG's founding ideas is that philanthropy works better when funders know one another better. Our country Chapters were established on a simple premise: before organisations can collaborate effectively, they need to understand one another. Coordination is not something that can be imposed. It grows out of trust, familiarity and a willingness to see other funders as part of the same ecosystem rather than as parallel actors.

JustSystems approaches the challenge from a complementary direction. Its work highlights the importance of coalitions that bring together leadership across government and civil society. Philanthropy belongs in those coalitions too. There is no getting away from the fact that resources shape priorities and influence power. The question is therefore how consciously philanthropy chooses to play its role(s) within a system.

We are not proposing a single model for what this looks like. The contributors to this Scenario demonstrate that there are many legitimate ways for philanthropy to work with government, and different contexts will always demand different approaches.

Our hope is simpler; that this collection encourages funders to become more deliberate about the role they play within public systems, more curious about the assumptions they bring into those relationships and more willing to learn from one another as they do so.

International development is entering a

new phase. Education philanthropy has an opportunity not simply to respond to that transition but to help shape it.

**If this Scenario encourages more thoughtful partnerships, stronger relationships across our own community and a greater focus on how governments experience philanthropy as a whole, then we believe it will have made a worthwhile contribution.**

## SCENARIO 2: IN THE FUTURE, GOVERNMENTS LEAD EDUCATION PROGRESS

### IMAGINE...

It is the year 2036, and over the last decade a coalition of education philanthropies has brought about a quiet but profound change in the global education philanthropy sector. They are seeing true progress, deepening institutional capability, de-risking investment, and creating the space for sustainable reform to happen.

This positive shift is founded on one core principal: that lasting progress in education depends on capable, confident governments.

### LOOKING BACK

These philanthropy actors of the future remember the early years of the 21st century, when across the globe the nation-state seemed to be losing its grip. Authority was fragmented, not only across a multipolar geopolitical order but also among powerful private actors, global corporations, financial markets, and a handful of wealthy individuals whose influence rivaled that of entire governments. States retained formal authority, but the perception of their primacy in shaping public outcomes, including in education, was eroding.

This drift was troubling. The historical record was clear: the expansion of mass education in Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa and beyond had always rested on the shoulders of governments. It was political commitment, a sense of national mission, and the leveraging of national infrastructure and resources that had enabled scale and sustained progress.

As philanthropic funding and global attention shifted away from the state (a long legacy of the 1980s and 1990s

neoliberal Washington Consensus, which so strongly shaped the next 30-year aid paradigm), **a crucial question emerged: could education systems survive, let alone thrive, without strong public leadership?**

Corporations could deliver tools; philanthropies could provide seed-funding; communities could mobilize. Yet without governments to integrate, regulate, and lead, inequality deepened, systems frayed, and education reform stalled.

There was plenty of evidence of what works to improve learning, but many country systems failed to translate that knowledge into practice. An industry of NGO education-delivery organisations that could manage donor-funded project design and reporting requirements flourished, in part because funders considered working with the state too messy and complicated.

## LOOKING FORWARD

In this scenario, our future coalition of philanthropies recognised that the model of working around government had reached its limits. Their adjusted approach came from a conviction that bypassing the state with fragmented private initiatives produced islands of innovation but little systemic change to sustain education outcomes for all children.

The closure of USAID and significant cuts in aid from other Western countries focused the debate. Several African leaders, while lamenting the overt racism and acknowledging the damage of the cuts, wondered aloud whether this was an opportunity for countries to escape humiliating aid dynamics and take charge of driving their own development. They noted that most country budgets were significantly higher than what aid brought, and with different political settlements and better strategic choices could make up for aid cuts without too much difficulty. This moment also renewed classic debates on how better use of domestic taxation and resources might strengthen the social compact, trust and accountability between people and their own governments.

So these philanthropies accepted a simple truth: lasting education progress depends on capable, confident governments and the role of philanthropy is to stand behind, not in front of, that leadership.

Rather than compensating for weakened public systems or funding NGOs to ‘pick up the slack’ of a weak state system, this coalition redirected its energy and resources toward strengthening the public institutions that hold societies together. Support flowed through national systems, not around them. Philanthropic funding became a bridge: helping governments

take on risk, build institutional capability, and create the space for reform that only public legitimacy can sustain.

This shift was grounded in a new understanding of what ‘government’ really is. Not a monolith, dismissed for weak capacity or corruption, but a network of people (teachers, planners, civil servants, local administrators, engaged community members) each with their own motivations, frustrations, and hopes for change. Supporting government meant supporting those people: helping connect across departments, learn, experiment, and strengthen the systems they inhabit.

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This shift also required a reckoning with power. Instead of defining success through their own metrics or brands, funders aligned with priorities and plans set by education ministries and local authorities. They stepped back from designing programmes or commanding the podium at global events. Instead, they helped create and resource spaces where public officials, educators, and communities could deliberate, make decisions, and lead.

Investments looked different: long-term partnerships to strengthen civil service systems, data and financial infrastructure, and the connective tissue of local government. Mutual accountability was built on transparency and shared purpose rather than conditionality. The focus moved from demonstrating impact to deepening capability.

Governments, now steering the agenda, welcomed the recalibration. They used it to navigate a multilateral order still mostly written elsewhere, but now shaped by their own priorities, voices, and ambitions.

This was not philanthropy saving the state; it was philanthropy finding its rightful place in service of public leadership.

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## DOES PHILANTHROPY GET THAT AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS CAN LEAD?



Author: Dr Matthew Opoku Prempeh,  
Former Minister of Education and  
Energy, Ghana

*“...my response is not theoretical, but an account of what happened when a government tried to lead, and asked philanthropy to take its rightful place.”*

### In public education, projects don't teach children. Systems do.

This scenario does not describe a distant fantasy. In Ghana, we are already living parts of it. So, my response is not theoretical, but an account of what happened when a government tried to lead, and asked philanthropy to take its rightful place. If philanthropy believes that governments should lead while support flows through national systems with power recalibrated, then it has to change how it behaves. Not in theory, but in budgets, boards, and daily decisions.

When I took office in 2017, Ghana's education sector was crowded with parallel programmes which were well-intentioned, photogenic and fragile. Donors and international non-profit organisations arrived with pre-designed projects, set up offices in the capital, secured formal permission, and then ran systems around the state. This familiar model inhibited ministerial oversight, generated conflicting priorities, channelled funds through separate mechanisms, and embedded technical expertise that never integrated into public institutions. We chaired the coordination groups and were 'consulted', but the message was clear:

comply or lose essential funding. Our system ran on external priorities, not ours. It ran on external agendas, fragmented reporting, and technical assistance that was never fully embedded in our institutions. Everyone talked about 'country ownership', but very few behaved as if they actually wanted it.

The scenario that philanthropy stands behind capable governments, not in front of them, is not a distant aspiration. It is what happens when a government decides to stop dancing to the old tune and writes its own. Under the President's 'Ghana Beyond Aid' agenda, we decided to act like a government, not an implementing partner.

We set our policy agenda and used experts on our terms. Our Education Sector Plan (ESP) was drafted, published and operationalised before the end of my first year in office. We expanded access to quality secondary education through the Free Senior High School Programme, reformed curriculum, professionalised teacher training, and aligned TVET and tertiary policy more closely with national priorities.

All of these reforms went through state

systems; civil servants, our agencies (which were cut from 20 to five), our budget processes, and a hard-won partnership with the Ministry of Finance to fund reforms from domestic and predictable resources.

Did we still take external money? Of course we did. But we stopped outsourcing leadership.

**If the education philanthropy community is serious about making this scenario a widespread reality, it must change five things:**

- Fund operating capacity, not just projects.
- Commit for a decade, not a grant cycle.
- Align with sector plans even when they are imperfect.
- Accept government metrics and mutual accountability.
- See 'government' as a network of people to back, not a bureaucracy to work around.

The real shift we made was political, not technical. We began to say no. We said no to funders whose projects did not align with our Education Sector Plan. We said no to implementers who treated Ghana's classrooms as test beds for their innovations. We said no to multiple competing success metrics designed to satisfy donor dashboards rather than national priorities. We said no to work happening in our schools without permission, coordination and accountability to the Ministry. This was a reckoning with power. For years, money had quietly set the terms of reform. We reversed that settlement: democratic

mandate first, money second.

Some of our education partners took it better than others. Those who rose to the challenge listened to us, educated themselves on the reforms, and got in line behind us to support. The most useful funders understood that their leverage was bigger than their chequebook. They used their influence to amplify our teacher reforms on the global stage, giving our civil servants confidence and political cover. They aligned their initiatives with our structural changes so they could act as contracted service providers, paid for by, and accountable to, the government. They put philanthropic money into things donors rarely fund: serious technical advice in service of our priorities, transition planning, and the unglamorous work of implementation. They did not need their logo on every document. They needed our reforms to work.

Others struggled. Some threatened to take their money elsewhere, and did, when we refused to bend. Some had awkward conversations with their boards when they realised that money would no longer buy decision-making power. It is inconvenient when rhetoric about country ownership suddenly becomes real.

Here is the uncomfortable point: ***if your default model still treats government as a risk to be managed rather than a partner to be backed, you do not actually believe the scenario you have just read.***

You may say you want 'system transformation' but your practices betray something smaller. Three-year grants chase quick, attributable wins. Parallel data systems appear because you do not trust national ones. Pilots in government

schools never scale because the state never owned them. Capacity-building workshops build CVs for consultants, not institutional muscle for ministries and the education sector. That is not a transformation. It is a permanent supplementation. If the future of progress in education is government-led, then education philanthropy must do the hard, practical work of changing how it operates.

First, it must fund operating capacity, not just projects: the data and financial infrastructure, regulatory units, implementation teams, and planning cycles that keep a system moving. If you will not touch overheads, you are not serious about systems.

Second, you must commit for a decade, not a grant cycle. Systems change on political and bureaucratic time, not on three-year logframes. Stay through elections. Accept that some wins will belong to ministers who came before you.

Third, philanthropy must align with national plans even when they are imperfect. If your programme cannot be located inside a government's own sector plan and budget, ask why you are doing it, and help improve the plan instead of bypassing it.

Fourth, philanthropy must accept mutual accountability. Replace one-way conditionality with shared frameworks agreed with ministries. Allow governments to set the metrics. Sit in joint reviews where your own performance is on the table. Finally, you must see 'government' as people, not a monolith. Invest in networks of teachers, planners, district directors, and reform teams who already care about change. Create spaces where they can think, experiment, and

coordinate. None of this is as photogenic as a new app or pilot, but all of it is what transformation actually costs.

By the time I left office, Ghana's education reforms were far from perfect. But they were ours. They were debated in our Parliament, funded through our budget, implemented by our civil servants, and adjusted by our data. That matters because when politics shifts, only what is embedded in systems survives.

**Here is my challenge. If you read this scenario and feel inspired but do not change how your foundation allocates money, approves grants, measures success, and shows up in ministries, then this will remain fiction. But if you are prepared to move from owning projects to backing leadership, if you can live with less visibility and more patience, then this future is entirely possible.**

Philanthropy's role is not to stand in front of government holding the microphone, but behind government holding the line on resourcing, patience, and political courage. You can trust governments to run their education systems. We know how. The question is whether you are brave enough to act as if that is true.

***"... when politics shifts, only what is embedded in systems survives. "***

## IT'S NOT 'YOU' VERSUS 'US'



**Author: Sara Ruto**  
Echidna Giving and former  
Chief Administrative Secretary  
of Education, Kenya

*“A joyful classroom assessment is not something we often imagine. Yet there it was, happening before our eyes.”*

**January and February mark the start of the school year in East Africa. In Zanzibar, that meant a flurry of school-based assessments unfolding across schools and classrooms, which I recently had the privilege of seeing up close.**

In one Grade 3 classroom, a new assessment tool to measure critical thinking was being tested. Two teachers (male and female) - one the class teacher, the other from a neighbouring primary school - were administering the assessment. Officers from the government examination council stood nearby, observing. There was focus in the room, but also curiosity.

What set this process in motion was a Zanzibar-led NGO. Seeing an opportunity to strengthen the competency-based curriculum that the Government of Zanzibar has been rolling out since 2023, the team recognised the absence of a contextually-appropriate tool to assess children's critical thinking skills. The team took ownership of the problem, deepened their understanding, and sharpened their skills to contribute meaningfully to their country's reform journey.

Listening to them unpack the nuances of

creativity - as process or product, distinguishing creative thinking from critical thinking, and how they had developed a tool to measure the competence of critical thinking- was a masterclass in local expertise. They spoke not as outsiders importing ideas, but as practitioners shaping their own system.

The task itself was new, even slightly puzzling. Occasional giggles were heard from the students as they attempted to make sense of the questions. It felt, unexpectedly, joyful. A joyful classroom assessment is not something we often imagine. Yet there it was, happening before our eyes.

The Deputy Principal Secretary was not only well-versed in the details but also eager to see the tool rolled out to provide baseline data, now that the competency-based curriculum is in its fourth year. There was a palpable sense of shared purpose and camaraderie. This was not an externally driven pilot. It was owned by the Ministry of Education and its specialist institutions - and that ownership is the key ingredient to lasting reforms.

In the Grade 5 classroom, the scene felt more familiar. The class teacher was

assessing each child using a Grade 2/3-level test in Kiswahili, English, and Maths. He was a gentle and confident teacher who knew and followed all the assessment rules. When one girl began drawing sticks to solve the sum 82-48, his patience was not tested, yet we both knew this method would not yield the correct answer. The assessment was to identify such children who were lagging behind, so they could offer them catch-up classes.

I share these two moments because, over the decades, a salient shift has been taking place. There is growing confidence among system actors. Teachers are clearer on what needs to be done. Government officers understand their ministries' priorities – they navigate politics and power daily, and they know that meaningful progress requires unity of the technical arm and political arms.

In the philanthropic world, some actors are adapting and supporting this new reality. The language is changing. We hear “government-led” rather than “in partnership with government”. That is not semantics. It signals a deeper recognition of where legitimacy and sustainability sit.

And yet, not everyone has caught up. Despite the newly adopted language, some continue to fund parallel, duplicative initiatives that sit outside national priorities. They deploy ‘technical experts’ while overlooking the expertise already embedded in schools and governments. They design ‘capacity building’ programmes in a vacuum, inviting educators to yet another workshop that covers ground they have already walked many times before. **Duplication does not accelerate reform; it slows it down.**

This is not a dismissal of philanthropy. Many institutions are staffed by

thoughtful, experienced people who are talented, care deeply, and have developed valuable insights over many years of experience. From their vantage point, they can often see patterns across systems – strengths to build on, weaknesses to address. At their best, they back priorities that strengthen systems. At their worst, they exploit system gaps to run parallel programmes and systems that may look impressive but leave little behind. Just as governments must be accountable for every child – girl or boy – regardless of socio-economic background or region – philanthropy too, must be held accountable for the long-term effects of their investment decisions.

***“... some continue to fund parallel, duplicative initiatives that sit outside national priorities.”***

The future I imagine is one grounded in respect, inclusion, and genuine collaboration. A future that recognises and invests in resident resources and contextual solutions. One that moves away from automatically elevating the global over the local. A future that is attentive to language and power – where people are valued for their intellect and contribution, not for the prestige of their employment status or certification. Where the term ‘technical expert’ quietly fades, and is replaced by recognition of all types of resources, that equally invites the village carpenter’s workshop as a legitimate site of learning, as it invites the University Professor to share theory.

In that future, there is no ‘you’ and ‘us’. There are simply citizens – north and south – converging their energy to solve

shared education challenges. It goes without saying that programmes are government-led. Ministries are not forced into laborious proposal-writing exercises to justify their priorities; their sector plans already set the direction. What they need is aligned support for implementation.

Philanthropy has a choice. It can continue to orbit systems from the outside - circling, observing, funding new parallel initiatives - or it can help the system itself function better. It can invest in making ministries more efficient, more cost-effective, more coherent. It can back the resident experts who understand their own classrooms and communities, enabling them to make incremental but sustainable improvements that, over time, add up to real reform.

It can choose to strengthen the web of relationships that already exist – between parents, communities, schools, NGOs, and governments – so that they move together, not in competition. So that reform is not a project imposed from above or abroad, but a journey owned at home. A journey pursued because people see its value for their own children and for the future of their own country. Not because someone from elsewhere has swept in with resources and authority, unintentionally stripping away agency and power in the process.

**When philanthropy shifts from orbiting to anchoring, from directing to enabling, it becomes a catalyst for systems that improve from within. And that is how change endures.**

# SYSTEMS CHANGE MEANS LETTING GO OF CONTROL



Author: Abe Grindle  
Co-Impact

*“No one funder is enough to carry system reform alone. Yet we have behaved as if collaboration is optional and co-funding dilutes credit.”*

In the imagined future of this scenario, education funders are working better with government. There are fewer parallel units, fewer branded pilots, fewer donor-driven side strategies floating alongside national plans.

**The question I would ask is not *What did government finally get right?* but, *What did philanthropy finally stop doing?***

I believe the answer would be that they stopped working on their own area, and started thinking in systems. If we are honest about the past 30 years, the dominant approach has not been partnership but funder-led partial problem-solving dressed up as system reform.

My engineering training taught me that if you only solve part of a problem, you're solving a different problem altogether.

If the problem is to teach 100 children this week, I can give you 100 different solutions. If the problem is to teach 10,000 children for a week, the solution set narrows. To teach 10 million children, and then another 10 million who come after them, and so on indefinitely, that's an entirely different engineering problem.

We have been very good at teaching 100 children and publishing the RCT to prove it worked. We have been much less good at building systems that can teach 10 million children, year after year, under real fiscal and political constraints.

So in this imagined future where funders work well with government, philanthropy must have had to internalize the full constraint set. The goal is not a successful pilot that you later try to scale up. It is impact at scale that is durable: financially durable, politically durable, administratively durable.

Financially durable means the money to sustain the reform sits *within* the system, or tapers to something affordable within it. Politically durable means it survives a ministerial reshuffle. Administratively durable means the technical capacity sits inside the civil service, not in a permanent constellation of externally funded experts.

If that is the true end goal, then government ownership is not a 'nice to have'. It is a design requirement. That, in this future scenario, is where philanthropy has had to change.

For decades, even when aid was notionally on budget, we built parallel systems: program management units, technical assistance armies, consultant-heavy structures that could move faster than government. We treated working with government as a method, a channel, a 'how' rather than recognizing government as the leader, owner and driver of the work.

In this future scenario, philanthropy has stopped pretending that speed outside the system equals progress inside it.

It has accepted that government pace (yes: often frustrating, bureaucratic, political) is the pace of durability. If the end-state is that government truly *owns* the reform, then you have to design backward from that. That means no shadow systems. No permanent external crutches. No reform architecture that collapses the moment the grant cycle ends.

It also means, bluntly, no logo and low ego. One of the patterns you see in the positive examples - and there are positive examples! - is extremely low ego from external actors. No insistence on being seen as the architect.

Look at the education reforms in Ceará, Brazil. The Sobral Education Model did not succeed because a foreign donor imposed a blueprint. It succeeded because local political leadership made it their own and built it into the machinery of the state.

Or take TaRL Africa in Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire. In both contexts, foundational literacy rates in government systems have roughly doubled over a period of seven to 10 years (not two years, granted - but not 30 either!) from about a third of children finishing primary school with basic skills to something closer to two-thirds or more.

These are not boutique pilots. These are reforms embedded in national strategies, on the cusp of nationwide scale.

Those are not simple environments. Those gains did not come from bypassing government. They came from working inside it, at its pace, building coalitions that were politically and administratively viable.

*"... government ownership is not a 'nice to have'. It is a design requirement."*

What you also see in those examples is something deeply countercultural for philanthropy: blurred attribution. No single funder can claim sole credit. No single NGO can say 'this is our system'. The reform becomes indistinguishable from government policy. For a sector accustomed to innovation theatre and direct attribution, that is a hard pill to swallow. Yet it is often essential to creating motivation and a sense that we are in this together.

In a future where funders work well with government, philanthropy has had to let go of its obsession with sole attribution. The fixation on 'our model', 'our innovation', 'our measurable impact' has driven fragmentation for years. We have 1,000 laser-beams scattered across a landscape when what we need is braided rope: many strands, aligned, pulling in the same direction.

No one funder is enough to carry system reform alone. Yet we have behaved as if collaboration is optional and co-funding dilutes credit.

### A shift in power and political economy

I am always slightly uneasy when people reduce the challenge to 'lack of political will'. It's more complex than that. Governments face diffuse benefits and concentrated trade-offs. Education is one priority among many. The incentives are real.

***"Take one concrete step in that direction now: fund at least one major reform in a way that you are structurally incapable of taking credit for it."***

Also, philanthropy has its own political economy. Boards have time horizons. Donors want visible results. Staff build careers around identifiable innovations. In our future scenario, philanthropy has had to interrogate its own incentives. It has had to align funding horizons with the seven-to-10-year arcs that real system-change requires. It has had to tolerate uneven progress without prematurely pulling back. It has had to simplify reporting and align behind national priorities instead of creating bespoke donor architectures.

Philanthropy, in this future, has had to be honest about coalition-building. System reform does not emerge from giant, bureaucratic coordination platforms where every actor has equal voice and nothing moves. Nor does it emerge from unilateral donor control. It emerges from what I would call a focused pragmatic coalition: the handful of actors, in government and civil society, who together have the political authority, technical capacity, and legitimacy to get the job done.

Philanthropy's role in this imagined future is not to dominate that coalition but to underwrite it, to identify the local leaders and support them over time.

That requires deep listening to reformers who are operating within real constraints. It requires funders to admit that they are not the ones who will be there in 20 years. Government will be.

That is the final, sobering reality. When we all leave (when the grants end, when priorities shift, when leadership changes in New York or London) the ministry will still be there. The civil servants will still be there. The children will still be there.

So if we are serious about a future in which education funders work well with government, it cannot be a softer version of the old model. It cannot be donor-led reform with better optics. It has to be philanthropy redesigning itself around durability, humility and the full constraint set of the problem.

Take one concrete step in that direction now: fund at least one major reform in a way that you are structurally incapable of taking credit for it.

No branding requirements, no parallel delivery unit. Multi-year commitment aligned to government budget cycles. Shared measurement embedded in national systems. An explicit agreement that if it works, it will be indistinguishable from government policy.

If that feels uncomfortable, that's the point.

**Until philanthropy is willing to be invisible in success, it will keep mistaking projects for systems and pilots for progress.**

# WE NEED SYSTEM ABSORPTION AS A NEW READINESS DIAGNOSTIC



Author Devang Vussonji  
Elimu-Soko

*“...government-led reform does not fail because governments do not care, but because systems are rarely prepared to carry reform at scale.”*

**For decades education funders have considered their central challenge to be discovering what works.**

We invest heavily in pilots, innovations, technical assistance, and delivery partners. We build an impressive evidence base around structured pedagogy, teacher coaching, learning materials, and assessment. We learn how to demonstrate impact under controlled conditions.

Yet, even as the evidence accumulates, system-wide improvement stubbornly lags behind. In our imagined scenario, at some point in the future, funders stop asking whether governments are committed enough or capable enough and start asking a harder question: what if solutions are failing because we are failing to support local systems to absorb them?

## **From innovation to absorption**

As funders, we have been remarkably good at financing innovation. We have been far less disciplined about financing absorption: the ability of a public education system to take a proven approach, integrate it into everyday routines, and sustain it without permanent external support.

We often describe this gap as an implementation problem, but that framing lets us stay comfortably vague. Implementation sounds technical. Absorption is structural, behavioural, and political. It forces us to confront a truth we have long sidestepped: government-led reform does not fail because governments do not care, but because systems are rarely prepared to carry reform at scale.

As aid budgets contract and the long shadow of bilateral funding recedes, this reality has become unavoidable. Governments are no longer optional partners; they are the only actors with the legitimacy, reach, and durability to deliver education for all children. If government leadership is the destination, absorption is the road we must build.

## **What we have been doing instead**

It's not difficult to understand the reasoning behind many of our funding choices. Working around government is often faster, more visible, and easier to control. Parallel delivery reduces political risk. Pilots produce clean results. Attribution is straightforward.

But these choices also produce predictable consequences: fragmented systems, donor

choreography, and reforms that collapse when external support withdraws. We think about integration, but it remains theoretical as we rely on instinct, relationships, and experience.

*...this ministry seems ready....*

*...that district layer is the bottleneck...*

*...teachers are overwhelmed...*

*...the middle tier is weak...*

*...this won't survive leadership change...*

Such judgements may be accurate, but they are not systematic. Each funder makes them privately and so each portfolio relearns the same lessons.

We lack a common way of answering a basic question before funding scale: can this system realistically absorb this reform - across its people, routines, and institutions - at a quality and cost it can sustain? Without a shared answer, 'government-led' risks becoming rhetoric rather than practice.

Perhaps we should reframe System Absorption as a decision discipline that sits between evidence and scale, a readiness diagnostic that helps funders and governments understand:

- where a system is today,
- what would need to change for a reform to take root,
- and whether that change is feasible in the near term.

## What absorption looks like when taken seriously

In our future scenario, three levels of absorption would emerge.

### MICRO: Behaviour and real jobs

At the micro level, absorption becomes about whether people can actually do what reforms ask of them. We stop speaking vaguely about 'teacher capacity' and start asking concrete questions:

- *What exactly do teachers need to do differently on a normal school day?*
- *Do they understand those expectations clearly?*
- *Does the reform simplify their work, or add to an already impossible workload?*
- *Who do teachers listen to: peers, head teachers, inspectors, coaches?*
- *What motivates uptake: accountability, professional identity, time savings?*

Insights from behavioural science are useful here because they force us to diagnose barriers honestly. Many failures trace back to complexity, ambiguity, fatigue, or reforms designed without reference to real working conditions. Absorption demands simplicity and clarity, not more inputs.

### MESO: Routines and systems

At the meso level, absorption depends on whether systems have routines to make change repeatable. Training structures, coaching systems, supervision norms, data use. When systems adopt reforms this machinery is implemented.

We begin asking:

- *Is there a functioning middle tier that can support implementation?*
- *Are supervision and coaching aligned with the reform?*
- *Do data systems inform action or merely reporting?*
- *Are new practices reinforced or crowded out by existing priorities?*

Without this meso-level alignment, good ideas dissipate.

### MACRO: Policy, finance, political settlement

At the macro level, absorption determines whether reforms become institutionalised rather than donor dependent. Here, the questions are blunt:

- *Does this require curriculum or policy change? Is there a pathway for it?*
- Is there a credible financing plan once external support ends?*
- *What happens when political leadership changes?*
- *Are incentives aligned with reform or fundamentally opposed to it?*

Scale is institutionalisation, not replication.

### Why this matters for philanthropy now

For those of us already committed to government-led systems, absorption provides a practical way to align decisions. Rather than pooling funds around broad intent, we can coordinate around a shared diagnostic: when to invest, when to pause, and when to fund readiness rather than scale. For funders still focused on innovation, absorption offers an on-ramp

rather than a conversion demand.

Before declaring a pilot 'scalable', test whether the system can absorb it. If not, invest in readiness, or stop pretending scale will follow. Absorption must become a discipline, and a bridge between pilots and systems, between evidence and execution, between aspiration and accountability.

### How our funding behaviour is changing

As absorption becomes explicit, our funding choices are shifting. We are reducing funding to pilots that merely prove interventions can work and starting to fund pilots that prove systems can run them. We are investing less in parallel delivery and more in routines, middle tiers, and institutional capability. We are becoming more comfortable funding the unglamorous work of simplification, alignment, and political navigation; work that rarely produces quick wins but makes long-term change possible.

The change will be quiet. But it will be transformative.

### The challenge to our peers

The debate about whether governments should lead education reform is over. History has already answered it. The real question is whether we, as funders, are willing to finance the work that makes government leadership possible, even when that work is slower, less visible, and harder to attribute.

System Absorption is not an optional add-on; it is required for change to stick.

**If we want public systems to lead, we must invest not only in what works, but in what systems can carry. Once seen clearly, it cannot be unseen.**

## WHAT WE SAY IN PRIVATE



Author: Composite

*What follows is not attributable to any single foundation. It is a composite drawn from conversations many of us have had, often behind closed doors. It is the argument that surfaces in boardrooms and strategy sessions. It rarely appears in print because few funders will state it plainly. What this response says shapes our behaviour more than public rhetoric suggests.*

We agree, in principle, that government-led reform is the only credible route to durable, nationwide improvement in education. Yes: public systems, not projects, educate children at scale. Without political, fiscal and administrative embedding, gains will not last.

**What we dispute, quietly, is whether working primarily through government will deliver the impact we are expected to produce.**

Our scepticism is not only ideological. We've experienced it and, in some cases, proven it. We've seen rigorous evaluations demonstrating strong gains in literacy and numeracy from interventions delivered through non-governmental organisations under controlled conditions. Implementation fidelity is high. Monitoring is tight. Outcomes are measurable and attributable. We have also seen what happens when similar interventions are channelled through public systems. Training is diluted, supervision weakens. Data collection falters, political attention shifts. Effect sizes shrink. The research literature reflects this pattern: efficacy in pilots, attenuation at scale.

When we review our portfolios, we can't ignore that contrast. Our boards ask for

demonstrable results within defined timeframes. They compare cost-effectiveness and expect evidence that children have learned more because of our funding. The models that most reliably meet those expectations are often those we can control closely.

Governments operate under different constraints. Education competes with other sectors and electoral commitments. Within education, foundational learning competes with access, infrastructure, teacher remuneration. Politicians rotate. Reform champions are reassigned. Institutional continuity is fragile. This is reality; and it's frustrating.

There are additional risks we discuss cautiously: weak procurement systems, opaque financial management, allegations of corruption, cultures of *per diem* maximisation. This is reputational exposure for us. Trustees ask whether we should remain in a context where public controversy could compromise the foundation's standing. So we narrow our geographic footprint. The portfolio becomes safer, but also smaller.

When we say we 'work with government', we often mean that we have signed a Memorandum of Understanding,

establishing permission, formal cooperation and alignment. Ministries sign many such agreements and the existence of an MoU does not mean that our reform is politically prioritised, fiscally embedded or administratively owned. It means we are allowed to operate.

***“Children who lack foundational skills today cannot wait for institutional reform. If we possess resources now, and credible partners who can deliver improvements now, it feels responsible to act.”***

We are also wary of collective mechanisms. We organise ourselves around thematic priorities: early childhood development, foundational literacy, adolescent girls’ education, technology. Entering pooled funds or coalitions can feel like relinquishing clarity of purpose. Will our priority be diluted? Will our voice carry less weight? Maintaining direct bilateral relationship with a ministry appears to offer greater influence to advocate, negotiate and protect our focus.

What we less frequently acknowledge is that influence has limits. If a government does not genuinely prioritise the issue, our advocacy will not embed it. A reform may be piloted and praised, yet remain marginal in budgetary and administrative terms. Our advocacy may be experienced as “pushiness” and lead to resentment.

Faced with these realities, funding parallel NGO ecosystems appears defensible. Such organisations can reach children immediately, demonstrate measurable

gains, operate with clearer lines of accountability. Where state capacity is weak, they may fill urgent gaps.

There is moral force in that choice. Children who lack foundational skills today cannot wait for institutional reform. If we possess resources now, and credible partners who can deliver improvements now, it feels responsible to act.

We recognise the structural consequence. Persistent supplementation can entrench a dual system: one publicly funded and politically accountable, the other externally financed and performance-driven. The latter may produce evidence without strengthening the former. Over time, the capacity gap may widen rather than close.

Our position is this: until working through public systems can more reliably produce results we can measure, defend and report within our governance frameworks, we will continue to favour models we can control. This is not a rejection of systems change. It is a reflection of the environment in which we operate.

If the field seeks a genuine shift toward government-led transformation, it must address the gap between pilot efficacy and system effectiveness. It must develop accountability mechanisms that mitigate reputational risk without undermining public ownership. It must create coalition structures that preserve thematic focus while enabling collective action.

***Absent such shifts, our behaviour will continue to diverge from our rhetoric. We will endorse government leadership in principle, while financing projects in practice. That divergence is not born of bad faith. It is the predictable outcome of incentives left unexamined.***

# IN PROTRACTED CRISES, GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS MAY BE CONSTRAINED, BUT THAT IS NOT A LICENSE TO BYPASS THEM



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*“The architecture we have built was designed for emergencies that end. Most do not.”*

## The future of education in emergency settings will not be won by bypassing governments more efficiently.

It will be won by supporting them to lead, while backing the local actors and coalitions steering that leadership.

If we want the imagined scenario laid out above to become more than rhetoric, three systemic habits need to change now, not after the next emergency.

### Bypassing governments by default

We must resist the urge to route around public systems because it is faster. Speed is not the same as impact. Invest in state capability and accept that it requires time, iteration, and genuine political engagement.

### Building projects instead of coalitions

Durable change depends on alliances among governments, civil society, communities, and educators. Funders have convening power, and it must be used to align incentives and reduce the fragmentation that parallel delivery creates.

## Leaving durability design until too late

Every programme needs a credible pathway to government ownership and public financing, not as an exit plan bolted on at the end, but as the design logic from the start, even in humanitarian and emergency settings. Start not with ‘our programme’ but with how this can function as a government-led effort from the outset.

### We are responding to long-term emergencies with short-term fixes

Education in Emergencies (EiE) refers to the provision of quality learning opportunities and socio-emotional support in situations of conflict, protracted crisis, violence, forced displacement, disaster, and public health emergency. It is a wider concept than ‘emergency education response’, which is an essential component of it, but not the whole.

In crisis settings, education is often the first system disrupted and the hardest to restore. Today, 224 million children and young people in crisis require educational support. EiE programming exists to uphold their right to education. And yet the way

the sector responds remains fundamentally out of step with the realities on the ground. Two underlying failures shape this disconnect.

The first failure is structural. We are operating in a world defined by protracted crises but responding as if every context is a sudden-onset emergency. South Sudan, Lebanon, northern Nigeria, the Sahel, Somalia - these are not short-term shocks. They are long-term realities that have played out over years and decades. Yet the tools, funding cycles, and accountability frameworks applied to them continue to behave as if it were Week One of an acute response. The result is familiar: parallel systems that quietly become permanent, INGOs stepping into roles that should sit with ministries, students unable to transition back into public schools because the public system has been hollowed out by the very response meant to support it.

The second failure is conceptual. The global architecture - humanitarian here, development there, peace-building somewhere else - is out of step with how crises are actually lived. For children, teachers, and families, these are not sequential phases. They are overlapping realities. But the system continues to operate as if contexts move neatly from emergency to recovery to development. They do not.

## The forces holding us back

### Incentives and metrics

Short funding cycles and risk aversion prioritise visible delivery over long-term durability. Even where government engagement is genuinely possible, funders reward bypass because it is easier to measure, faster to report, and safer to defend to a board. Durability does not show up in a two-year logframe.

Government ownership does not produce a clean attribution story. So both are quietly deprioritised, and the sector calls it pragmatism. These failures are the predictable outcome of incentives that reward delivery now, whatever the cost to the system later.

### Public finance

Governments cannot take over what they cannot pay for. Where fiscal space is collapsing and teacher payrolls are already strained, handover is a public finance question, and the humanitarian system has been far too slow to engage with this seriously.

***Government is not one thing; it is made up of people: teachers showing up without pay, district officers coordinating with no resources, civil servants doing their best in impossible conditions.***

### Politics and legitimacy

In many crises, authority is genuinely fragmented. Ministries may be contested or decentralised, and education governance is far from a neutral technical space. Any serious pathway to government leadership has to reckon with that, not assume it away.

Too often, we hear (and have likely said ourselves) that governments in crisis contexts are too fragile, too contested, too slow. This is lazy thinking. Government is not one thing; it is made up of people: teachers showing up

without pay, district officers coordinating with no resources, civil servants doing their best in impossible conditions.

Leadership is often distributed across regional authorities, municipalities, school networks, and community structures. A 'Beyond Aid' pathway must be designed for that layered reality, not a simplified model of centralised control that rarely exists even in stable contexts.

### What it will actually take to change

There are signs of change. Local and national organisations are increasingly operating as system actors, not just implementers, providing the continuity and community accountability that anchors durability when international attention shifts.

Crisis-affected ministries and sub-national authorities are asserting stronger leadership through crisis-sensitive sector planning, alignment of partners to national priorities, and clearer coordination expectations. And there is growing recognition, including among funders, that education's handover problem is fundamentally a public finance problem, prompting more serious conversations about fiscal space, domestic resourcing, and the constraints created by debt and economic shocks.

These shifts are not yet dominant, but they are real signals. They suggest our imagined scenario can happen, but only if we stop treating durability as a 'later' issue and start designing for it from the very beginning of a response.

The current incentive structure is not neutral; it actively rewards parallel delivery and punishes the slower, messier work of building public systems. Changing that means changing what we fund, how

we measure, and being genuinely honest about which of our habits are holding the system back. That conversation needs to happen in public, not just in private.

Real change means accepting that building public systems is slow, iterative, and unglamorous. Somalia is the proof. Rebuilding public financial systems took sustained, iterative work over more than two decades. In the early stages, most donors avoided government systems entirely, and many civil servants were more familiar with INGO compliance templates than with their own government's financial rules, because parallel delivery had become the default way of working.

Repeated incremental shifts eventually strengthened the muscle of public systems, aligning education spending with the national budget, building the practical capability to move funds to schools through government channels, anchoring accountability in Ministry of Finance systems rather than donor reporting. The system is still not perfect, and there is a long way to go. But it is more government-led because some partners, including the Global Partnership for Education, stayed the course and enabled country leadership rather than bypassing it.

In a world of protracted crises, speed cannot continue to justify bypass. The architecture we have built was designed for emergencies that end. Most do not.

**If we are serious about durability, humanitarian actors need to resist that pull, and start supporting systems that last.**

# WE CAN CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP CAPACITY AND COLLABORATION



Author: Agustin Porres  
Varkey Foundation

*“This is what government-led reform actually looks like in practice. It is slower, less visible, and less attributable to any single organisation. It is more likely to last.”*

**Transforming education systems requires recognizing a central truth: systemic change is driven by governments.**

Public policy, shaped by political leadership, is what enables reforms to reach scale and sustainability. Rather than viewing governments and NGOs as separate spheres, the challenge lies in building effective and complementary relationships between them.

One approach pressures government from the *outside*. This way relies on public advocacy, scorecards, reports, global comparisons, sometimes naming and shaming. It can shift narratives and generate urgency. It often reinforces distance and distrust. Government becomes something to correct or compensate for.

The other approach works with governments from the *inside*. In this way, we still push for change but through relationships, trust, leadership formation, and capacity strengthening. Here, we must assume that reform only sticks when governments feel ownership over it. This way is less visible. It is slower and sometimes more intangible but it builds political and institutional muscle.

In Latin America, this distinction is particularly important because education reform has always been political. Ministries of Education operate within complex political environments shaped by unions, fiscal constraints, decentralisation, electoral cycles, and deep debates about inequality and the role of the state. Many reforms that looked technically sound failed not because the policy design was wrong but because the reform was politically unsustainable or institutionally weak.

The idea that governments should lead education reform should not be controversial! Yet, as this scenario implies, in many international education discussions it still is. For years, a large part of the global education conversation assumed that innovation would come from *outside* government: from NGOs, foundations, social entrepreneurs, or pilot projects designed to demonstrate new models. Governments were often seen as slow, bureaucratic, or resistant to change, while innovation was expected to come from elsewhere.

Education systems are, by definition, public systems. They depend on public financing, public regulation, teacher career

structures, curriculum frameworks, and national assessment systems. No NGO, foundation, or private actor can reform a national education system without government. At best, they can influence it. At worst, they can fragment it.

For many years, philanthropy and civil society organisations tried to influence systems through pilots and innovation programmes. The idea was (still is!) that successful pilots would scale. Let us remember this: scaling is not a technical process; it is a political and fiscal one.

Scaling requires budget allocation, teacher training systems, curriculum reform, negotiations with unions, legislative frameworks, and administrative capacity. Only governments can do those things! So the problem was never just finding good ideas; it was building political ownership and institutional capacity.

Over time, many of us working closely with ministries have come to understand that systemic reform is less about innovation and more about *alignment*: alignment between political leadership, technical teams, financing, teacher policy, curriculum, and assessment. That alignment *cannot be built from outside a system*. It has to be built from within government.

***“...we create the conditions for leadership capacity and collaboration to emerge so that reforms come from within governments themselves.”***

### **Comunidad Araucaria: creating the conditions for effective leadership**

A practical example of this approach is Comunidad Araucaria, a network of Education Ministers and Secretaries from across Latin America that we launched in 2022 from the Varkey Foundation together with other allies. More than 80 top education decision-makers have participated. We convene regularly, creating space for peer exchange, exposure to new ideas, and collective reflection. We do not design policy for them, nor do we announce reforms on their behalf. Instead, we create the conditions for leadership capacity and collaboration to emerge so that reforms come from within governments themselves. These conditions come from the community between ministers: they find role models, motivation, ideas and technical experience.

This is a very different model from the traditional project-based approach. Instead of funding programmes and implementing them, the work focuses on people, leadership teams, and ministries as institutions. Ministers do not lack reports, consultants, or pilot projects. What they often lack is political space to think, trusted peers to learn from, and strong technical teams that can turn ideas into policy.

### **An example of turning idea into policy**

Through the network, ministers were exposed to the concept of Character Education in some of Comunidad Araucaria's annual meetings, when experts such as Professor James Arthur and Professor Tom Harrison participated in practical sessions funded by philanthropy. Ministers then debated the idea, visited systems implementing it, and engaged with evidence. And for some reason, it resonated with them. They

returned home and began exploring how it could fit within their state and national priorities. In some cases, that led to the development of formal initiatives.

At that point, the role of external actors changed. Instead of promoting the idea from the outside, we supported ministries that were already interested by offering structured training to their technical teams and helping build capacity inside ministries. Over time, some of those ministries designed their own policy initiatives informed by the discussions within the network.

The idea ceased to be externally introduced and became part of their own political agenda.

This is what government-led reform actually looks like in practice. It is slower, less visible, and less attributable to any single organisation. It is more likely to last.

However, this model creates tensions. Philanthropy operates under incentives that make this approach difficult. Funders want measurable results, and they want to showcase them. They often work within short time horizons. Building capacity inside government does not produce quick wins and rarely produces clean attribution. Success might look like a stronger technical team, better coordination across departments, or improved internal processes. These are transformative in the long term but hard to capture in a typical three-year grant cycle.

On the government side, incentives are also complex. Political turnover is frequent, electoral cycles shorten planning horizons, and budget constraints limit ambition. Ministries sometimes prefer project-based funding because it is flexible and easier to manage than systemic

reform. In some cases, governments are used to external actors funding parallel programmes rather than strengthening the system itself. So the current funding model often reinforces fragmentation rather than systemic reform.

### What needs to change

If governments are truly going to lead education reform, while external actors support that process, both sides will need to rethink their incentives. External funding will need to focus more on institutional capacity, leadership, and systems, not just projects. Governments will need to integrate external support into national strategies rather than treating it as parallel funding.

The real shift, then, is not that governments will lead education reform in the future. Governments have always led education systems. **The real shift is whether the rest of the education ecosystem (philanthropy, NGOs, multilaterals, and civil society) organise themselves in ways that strengthen governments' ability to lead reform, rather than working around them.**

# PHILANTHROPY AND GOVERNMENT MUST HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



Author: Sol Marie Gonzalvo  
Ramon Aboitiz Foundation

*“If we leave a community, will the work continue? If there is a change in government leadership, will the programmes continue? Or when we stop, does everything stop?”*

When we started out, many years ago, our work in education was very direct. We built classrooms, we trained teachers, we supported school leaders. We worked directly with schools and communities. It was hands-on, direct to beneficiaries, and we could see results immediately.

After many years of doing that, we started to realise something. The problems were still there. The shortages were still there. The learning gaps were still there. We saw that if we continued this way, we would just keep doing the same things forever.

So we had to ask ourselves a difficult question about sustainability. Not financial sustainability, but system sustainability. If we leave a community, will the work continue? If there is a change in government leadership, will the programmes continue?

Or when we stop, does everything stop?

That was when we started to shift our thinking from doing projects ourselves to working more at the ecosystem level, asking who actually has the mandate to do this work and how we can help them do their job better.

## Leadership first, before anything else

One of the biggest lessons for us was that leadership and governance have to come first. Before programmes, before infrastructure, before training.

So when we work with local governments now, the first thing we ask is not what project they want. The first things we ask are:

- What is your aspiration for education?
- What is the problem in your city or municipality?
- What does the data say?
- What do you want to do about it?

We show them the data, but we give the problem back to them. We tell them, this is your education system, this is your problem, so what is your plan? If the mayor does not understand the education problem and does not prioritise education, then no programme will be sustainable.

## Use the systems that already exist

In the Philippines, education is centralised, so many local government leaders say education is not their job. They say it is the

Department of Education's responsibility. When we looked closely, we realised that local governments have very important roles in education. There are local school boards, which have the mechanism for broader participation. There is the Special Education Fund that comes from property tax. By law, that fund can only be used for education. The mayor chairs the local school board. The structure is already there.

Yet for the longest time, many of these boards were not active, or the funds were used for things like sports meets, events, or activities that were visible but did not really address learning.

So part of our work became very simple, but also very difficult: we use the mechanisms that are already there, and creatively work within boundaries and nudge these to do work they may not have considered, with a broader network of stakeholders. We tell mayors, you need to activate your local school board. You need to meet regularly. You need to have a strategic plan. You need to decide how you will spend your education fund to address your education gaps.

Only after those things are in place do we fund programmes or infrastructure. So our funding is aligned with leadership and systems, not the other way around.

### **Sometimes philanthropy needs to ask the difficult questions**

One thing we realised is that not many organisations can tell a mayor that they need to fix their education system. Smaller NGOs usually cannot do that because they depend on local government. But a long-standing domestic philanthropic organisation sometimes can because we have relationships, credibility, and we are part of the community.

*If everyone just comes in and runs their own programme, you end up with many good projects but no system.*

*When there is no system, the impact is fragmented and not sustainable."*

So sometimes our role is not just to fund projects but also to present the data. Sometimes our role is to say, nicely but clearly, "Mayor, we are in the midst of a learning crisis, how can we support you in activating your school board. We need to have a plan. You can be more intentional about how the special education fund can be spent and we can co-design these with you." Once that happens, then other organisations can come in. NGOs can run programmes, other funders can support projects. Now they are working within a system instead of everyone doing separate things.

If everyone just comes in and runs their own programme, you end up with many good projects but no system. When there is no system, the impact is fragmented and not sustainable.

### **We must speak the language of politicians**

Working with government also means understanding politics. Mayors are elected. They think about votes, visibility, and legacy. So if you want education to become a priority, you have to show them that improving education is something they can be known for. You have to show them the data in a way that matters to them.

Some people do not like talking about politics in education reform, but education reform is political. Budgets are political. Priorities are political. Leadership is political. So you have to work with that reality, not pretend it does not exist.

At the end of the day, if literacy improves in a city, people will remember that mayor. And if that motivates them to prioritise education, that is okay. What matters is that education improves.

### **Domestic philanthropy can sit between local and national**

One of the things we have also found useful is being able to sit between local work and national policy discussions. We work with local governments, so we see what is actually happening on the ground. Then when we are in national discussions with policymakers, we can bring that local experience and say, this policy might look good, but this is what it looks like in a fourth-class municipality with very little budget.

So the local work informs the national conversation, and the national conversation sometimes opens doors for us to help more local governments. That connection between local implementation and national policy is very important.

I often think about this work like the balcony and the dance floor. Sometimes you are on the balcony, looking at the whole system, the policies, the strategies, the funding landscape. But sometimes you have to go down to the dance floor and see what is really happening with mayors, school boards, budgets, and plans. If you only stay on the balcony, everything becomes theory. If you only stay on the dance floor, you cannot change the bigger system. So the work is really about moving between these two: local and national,

strategy and implementation.

Maybe this is what education reform will look like. If I look forward, I think education reform will not just be about ministries, donors, and NGOs running programmes. **I think more and more change will come from local leadership: mayors who prioritise education, local school boards that actually function, local education funds that are used strategically, and organisations that help government work better instead of working around government.**

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## FRAMING THE IIEFG SCENARIO SERIES

The **International Education Funders Group (IEFG)** provides space and curates knowledge that enables philanthropy to see the wider context in which it operates. Global education does not exist in isolation: it is shaped by political, economic, social, and environmental forces that are shifting rapidly. By stepping back to view these dynamics, philanthropy can make more strategic use of the full range of tools at its disposal: resources, influence, networks, expertise, and convening power.

**JustSystems** strengthens the support infrastructure for leaders in government and civil society and influences philanthropy to make public systems work better for people in the Global South. Their partners help make public systems better at delivering meaningful outcomes, be more inclusive in terms of who benefits and who decides, and be more dignity affirming in how citizens experience government. Their approach emphasizes impact at the scale of the need, political economy analysis and winning coalitions.

The **IEFG Scenario Series** is one way we aim to support a broader perspective. Each Scenario highlights a theme emerging from global debates on development, aid, and education, and considers what this could mean for education philanthropy.

Scenarios are structured thought experiments, not forecasts: hypothetical, positive futures that help test assumptions, expose tensions, spark imagination, and prompt reflection and discussion. What might this trajectory mean for education systems, and how should philanthropy respond?

Each Scenario will include:

- a narrative vignette bringing the future into view;
- responses from a range of perspectives (governments, civil society, business, educators, and philanthropy);
- a synthesis of themes and implications for education philanthropy practice.

This Scenario is the second in the series, co-produced by JustSystems and IIEFG.

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# **SCENARIO SERIES**