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Accountability Brief



Rethinking Reform: The Role of Teachers' Unions in Education Advocacy in Zimbabwe

Abrehet Gebremedhin
Clemence Tauya Nhliziyo



Key Insights

Despite the fundamental role of teachers in implementing educational reforms, teachers' unions are often kept out of policy discussions by both policymakers and international aid donors, or characterized as obstacles to change. This is the case in many developing countries, where reform and investment for quality public education are sorely needed. However, we simply do not know much about how teachers' unions and other non-donor-funded civil society organizations (CSOs) work in Africa.

This Accountability Brief, based on a scholarly work in progress, presents a case study of the work of broad-based membership organizations—specifically, teachers' unions in Zimbabwe—in navigating restricted civic spaces and building accountability by holding national government stakeholders to account for implementing promised education reforms.

The purpose of the brief is to better understand how teachers' unions survive and whether they coordinate with donor-funded CSOs. It also unpacks certain assumptions held by some policymakers and international aid donors about their potential as allies in advocacy and policy reform.

This Accountability Brief offers the following key insights:

- Teachers' unions vary significantly in their internal composition and therefore use differing tactics, despite largely similar goals.
- Teachers' unions face different government responses in restricted civic spaces, ranging from tacit support to severe repression, based on their relationship with the government.
- The advocacy agendas of teachers' unions often overlap with those of other CSOs in education policy spaces—specifically, advocating for increased access to quality, public education. In an example of an 'insider-outsider' approach, unions are able to join national education coalitions in order to advocate for shared advocacy agendas in policy spaces to which they would not typically be invited.
- Teachers' unions should not automatically be assumed to be resistant to all policy reform. Their relationship to reform is complex and variable, and depends on the proposed policy reform itself. More work needs to be done to learn about teachers' unions in places like Africa and Asia, and how they are choosing to—or not to—work with CSOs that are seeking to enact reform for improved access to quality, public education.

Introduction: Teachers' Unions in National Education Advocacy

There are few actors more important than the teacher in the implementation of education policy and reform. The teacher is the first and often only person that students and parents alike engage with at the school level. However, teachers' unions are often not present when national ministries of education, civil society organizations (CSOs), national education coalitions, and international aid donors come together to discuss reform of education policy. This is despite teachers' unions often being the "most powerful, well-organized, and representative civil society actor" present in the wider education ecosystem of a country.¹



Glenview No. 2 Primary School, Zimbabwe.

Credit: Carine Durand/Global Partnership for Education

¹ Mundy, K. 2010. "Education for all" and the global governors." In D. D. Avant, M. Finnemore, & S. K. Sell (Eds.), *Who Governs the Globe?* (pp. 333–355). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Earlier research at the Accountability Research Center (ARC) has found limited evidence on how some increasingly important civil society actors—such as teachers’ unions—shape national education policy, especially in restricted civic spaces.² In addition, there have been attempts, including from international aid actors, to build ‘pro-reform alliances’ against teachers’ unions, as they are often seen as an obstacle to reform.³ However, teachers’ unions may be one of the few actors that—despite repression, and without international aid funding—are able to hold governments accountable for their policy commitments for improved access to quality, public education.

This Accountability Brief presents insights from a study of teachers’ unions in Zimbabwe, which asked “What is the role of teachers’ unions in education advocacy in increasingly restricted civic spaces?” It was conducted in partnership with the Education Coalition of Zimbabwe (ECOZI).

We analyze how teachers’ unions in Zimbabwe interact with each other, other CSOs, and the government. Our reflections—drawn from both practitioner and scholar perspectives—are situated in broader discussions in the transparency, participation, and accountability field about the work of public servant labor unions and other broad-based membership organizations in building accountability. Specifically, we consider how trade unions coordinate with donor-funded CSOs. While teachers’ unions differ greatly and engage in varying tactics, we found a broader strategy shared among many of an insider-outsider approach to advocating for greater investment in quality, public education. Their overall purpose is to hold government ministries and policies accountable in increasingly restricted civic spaces.

Since Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, the country’s politics have been dominated by the Zimbabwe African National Unit-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). This includes the use of violence and intimidation against its political opponents, including teachers’ unions.⁴ In restricted contexts such as Zimbabwe, entities like ECOZI, a national education coalition, play a unique role in providing a space for teachers’ unions and CSOs to converge and coordinate advocacy tactics for shared policy reform agendas. The case of Zimbabwe illustrates a historically strong yet strained education system,⁵ but also a diversity of engaged actors involved in seeking to expand access to quality, public education.

2 Gebremedhin, Abrehet, Felipe Hevia, and Naomi Hossain. October 2023. *Civil Society and National Education Policy: A Literature Review*. Washington DC: Accountability Research Center. https://accountabilityresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Literature_Review-_civil_society_education_Nov_2023.pdf.

3 Bruns, B. and Luque, J.A., 2015. *Great teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Washington DC: World Bank Publications. https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/LAC/Great_Teachers-How_to_Raise_Student_Learning-Barbara-Bruns-Advance%20Edition.pdf.

4 Lebas, Adrienne, and Lauren E. Young. “Repression and Dissent in Moments of Uncertainty: Panel Data Evidence from Zimbabwe.” *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 2 (2024): 584–601. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000230>. Kriger, Norma. 2005. “ZANU(PF) Strategies in General Elections, 1980–2000: Discourse and Coercion.” *African Affairs* 104 (414): 1–34.

5 Moyo, N., & Modiba, M. M. (2013). “Government and educational reform: policy networks in policy-making in Zimbabwe, 1980–2008.” *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(3), 371–385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2012.752868/>.

Diverse groups, diverse tactics

There is an assumption in much of the comparative education policy and scholarly literature that teachers' unions are 'political machines'⁶ or obstacles to education reform.⁷ However, there is a diversity of types of unions that, while sharing a willingness to work with others for education investment, differ in the tactics they use to try and influence government policy.

For instance, in the case of Zimbabwe, there are around 13 teachers' unions present in the national education space, though that number often changes. Some teachers' unions are long-standing and dominant in terms of history and the number of dues-paying teachers. Due to the relatively high number of teachers' unions present in Zimbabwe, there is significant variation in organizational type, tactics, and positions in relation to government. Some unions are likely to support government policy or at least be willing to engage with government directly, despite government resistance to teacher demands.

The Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA), for example, is the country's largest union with reportedly 45,000 members across Zimbabwe's 10 provinces. It evolved from the Southern Rhodesian African Teachers' Association founded in 1942, even before the expansion of access to education for Black Zimbabweans in 1980 or the presence of any international aid.⁸ However, over time, unions such as ZIMTA have preferred to work through bilateral engagement with government officials and policymakers. They often turn to evidence generation as an advocacy tactic—for example, documenting teacher welfare conditions across the provinces to support advocacy for salary increases—and they look to avoid any confrontation with government. They are viewed by many—members and non-members alike—as aligned with the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Unit-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

Another category of unions has emerged more recently, referred to by some stakeholders as “briefcase” or “sweetheart” unions. In instances where there is disagreement between the Zimbabwean government and teachers' unions—most importantly, a demand by progressive unions to restore monthly salaries to the pre-October 2018 salary of \$540 USD—these sweetheart teachers' unions may undermine attempts to build collective union movement power by accusing progressive unions of being “political.” In the past ten years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of such “sweetheart” teachers' unions, some with fewer than 300 members. When interviewed, one such “sweetheart” union emphasized their “apolitical” position:

We work with teachers' unions but there are times we disagree with other teachers' unions because of the motives behind [them]... We are apolitical and we don't force our members to vote for a specific party, we support the government of the day, only God can put and remove [government] leaders.

Leader of a teachers' union in Zimbabwe, April 2024

In contrast, some unions are broadly viewed by other CSOs and the government as “progressive” and sometimes in opposition to the government. While willing to engage directly and dialogue with the government, such unions are also open to industrial action. They are comfortable in using a broader array of tactics, despite heavy restrictions on civic space.

6 Ross Schneider, B. 2022. “Teacher Unions, Political Machines, and the Thorny Politics of Education Reform in Latin America.” *Politics & Society*, 50(1), 84-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323292211002788>.

7 Bruns, B. and Luque, J.A., 2015.

8 Moyo, C.L., 1996. “The role of the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (ZIMTA) in the professional growth and development of teachers.” *Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education*, 4(4), pp.43-58.



Representatives from progressive education unions in 2022 pledging to work together to solve labour and educator welfare issues through social dialogue.

Credit: Education International CC 4.0

The most prominent such union is the Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), established in the early 2000s as an alternative to the ZIMTA and now with over 22,000 members. PTUZ has used diverse tactics to strategically promote its advocacy agendas. These include litigation, such as mounting petitions through the Zimbabwean courts, and the 'boomerang' strategy⁹ of appealing to international actors (such as the International Labour Organization and Education International—the global federation of teachers' trade unions) to pressure the Zimbabwean government to allow PTUZ to operate.

There is also variation within this camp of unions referred to as "progressive." One such example is the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ). ARTUZ has two aims: the enhancement of working conditions for rural teachers and the upholding of the right to education in Zimbabwe's rural communities. Since its founding in 2009 to support rural teachers in particular, ARTUZ has historically been considered by other teachers' unions as more focused on rural teachers, more willing to engage in tactics such as advocating for the right of collective bargaining, and calling for peaceful protests and strikes. However, as a result of its approach, ARTUZ has faced some of the harshest repression by the government, including the arrests and detainment of its members. In other words, the internal characteristics of teachers' unions and their overarching philosophy shape their presence and tactics in the wider national education sector.

⁹ Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. 1999. "Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics." *International Social Science Journal* 51 (159): 89– 101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2451.00179>.

These emerging findings, based on interviews with various unions, local CSOs, and national government officials, show that different types of teachers’ unions have varying advocacy tactics, relationships with the government, and responses from other actors. Teachers’ unions in Zimbabwe can therefore be categorized according to the typology in Table 1.

Table 1. Typology of teachers’ unions in Zimbabwe

Type	Relationship to government	Preferred tactics	Government response	Criticism by other actors
‘Established’ unions	Aligned	Bilateral engagement Evidence generation	Preferential treatment and support mechanisms	‘Coopted’ by government
‘Progressive’ unions	Not aligned	Litigation Industrial action Boomerang strategy	Heavy repression	‘Radical’, ‘Western-funded’ ‘Part of the opposition’
‘Briefcase’ unions	Encouraged	Participate in government councils Depoliticize demands	Create, support, and include in stage-managed consultations	‘Sweetheart unions’

Government responses to differing tactics

Governments also use different tactics to respond to the demands of teachers’ unions, based on how they perceive them and their relationship with them. In other words, governments in restricted civic spaces do not treat all civil society organizations alike. Similarly, it should not be assumed that all teachers’ unions act similarly or focus their advocacy solely on teaching conditions. All teachers’ unions in Zimbabwe, for instance, advocate for the expansion of quality, public education. Therefore, the historical power dynamics between the government and the union should always be understood and acknowledged.

For instance, a common tactic of the Zimbabwean government when negotiating with teachers’ unions is to generate questions—and therefore, confusion—about which of the two key actors is ultimately responsible for addressing labor conditions. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), which supervises and hires teachers through their Human Resources Directorate, and the national Public Service Commission (PSC) which is responsible for remuneration. MoPSE often points to the PSC, referred to by the teachers’ unions as ‘the employer’, when negotiating with teachers’ unions over improved conditions and salaries. However, the PSC does not make itself available for direct negotiations with teachers’ unions. Salary negotiations are done through the National Joint Negotiation Council. This Council includes government (namely, the Ministry of Labour and Social Services, PSC, Office of the President and Cabinet, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, and other government departments) and the APEX Council (an apex representation of government employees where teachers’ unions such as ZIMTA, PTUZ, and TUZ are represented). However, government sidelines teachers’ unions from wider civil servant salary negotiations. They do this by ensuring that those specific unions perceived as against the government are not represented in the NJNC.

The government has been perceived as creating or encouraging the creation of “briefcase” unions with few members just to create an atmosphere where consultations are stage-managed. We refer to this repressive tactic of increasing the presence and relative power of government-created or supported unions as “flooding the zone.” In other words, the briefcase unions flood the available advocacy space, undermining the demands of large and active unions.

A source of teachers’ unions’ power in negotiations is collective action. Fragmentation reduces that power.¹⁰ The Zimbabwean government has therefore sought to fragment unions’ collective power through the promotion of these “sweetheart” unions with very few members. For example, it appoints them to key leadership positions in government-established councils and provides them media airtime to speak as the voice of teachers’ unions. Often, when government officials announce that reforms have been reviewed and approved by teachers’ unions, they refer to these unions, and have not directly engaged with those unions with much larger constituencies. One such group is the Teachers for Economic Development (Teachers4ED). The Teachers4ED and its push for “economic development” is considered by many as a decoy or sweetheart group created by the government. It represents teachers who are inclined to the existing government leaders. However, even though it is referred to as such, it is not a registered union but is a collective of teachers who align themselves with the President and the ruling party.¹¹

The government has also come up with tactics aimed at undermining the power of unions that are more critical of the government and bolster those unions considered as aligned with the government. One such tactic in Zimbabwe is the manipulation of dues and currency to weaken the organizational power of certain unions. According to stakeholders interviewed, some unions can receive dues from their members in US dollars while others are only allowed to receive dues in local currency, which has struggled with inflation and instability. One union leader described how the government has sought to weaken progressive unions, which are forced to collect dues in a weakened local currency, as opposed to those unions aligned with the government, which are allowed to collect dues in US dollars:

They have come forward with this strategy to make sure those who talk a lot have no access to US dollars.

Leader of a teacher union in Zimbabwe, April 2024

In some alarming instances, the government has gone a step further and taken overtly repressive actions. This is visible against those unions that ministry officials refer to as “mischievous” and “militant.” This includes arresting and charging union leaders for murder, harassing and abducting union leaders and their families, widespread firings, ransacking of union offices, and beating of protesting teachers. Such repressive tactics against teachers’ unions in restricted civic spaces have not been sufficiently acknowledged by the comparative education literature nor by the international aid sector. In fact, some international aid policymakers have advocated for the building of ‘pro-reform alliances’ – between business leaders, civil society, and government – against teachers’ unions for the adoption of reforms.¹² Such policy recommendations by international aid actors should be problematized and reflected upon in contexts with restricted civic space, where teachers’ unions may be one of the few actors able to hold governments accountable despite such heavy repression.

10 Murillo, M. V. 2001. *Labor Unions, Partisan Coalitions, and Market Reforms in Latin America*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

11 There are other, similar organizations that have inclined themselves with the Zimbabwean President’s name for patronage purposes. For example, Men for ED, Women for ED, Mahwindi for ED, Doctors for ED and so forth.

12 Bruns and Luque, 324.

An insider-outsider approach based on shared agendas

The Education Coalition of Zimbabwe (ECOZI), jointly founded by unions and implementing CSOs, is a national coalition including a diverse group of active teachers' unions including ZIMTA, PTUZ, ARTUZ, TUZ, and EUZ. Despite the diversity of types of teachers' unions, advocacy tactics, and the repressive tactics they face from the government, all teachers' unions in Zimbabwe share a key advocacy agenda: the promotion and expansion of quality, public education. This was immediately visible across all unions' organizational missions and reiterated in interviews with teachers' unions and other CSOs alike.



The Board Chair of ECOZI (right) hosts officials of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education at an event marking Global Education Week in Mutoko in 2023.

Credit: ECOZI

National coalitions like ECOZI can come to play a helpful insider role through advising government. ECOZI has brought together otherwise antagonist unions under the shared advocacy agenda to support progressive education policies. It has created a platform from which shared advocacy agendas can be delivered to the government which otherwise would be resistant to union demands. This is especially visible in a restricted civic space like Zimbabwe. ECOZI can directly liaise with the government on behalf of all CSOs. It is viewed with less suspicion due to the 'technocratic' or 'policy advisory' approach it has taken when dealing with the government. This is despite the membership of active unions. This contrasts with government-controlled councils such as the APEX Council or NJNC, which sideline these unions.

For instance, one of the central campaigns of ZIMTA, the largest and most established teachers' union in Zimbabwe, is the promotion of early childhood development (ECD) education. This includes advocating directly to the government for further investment and working with ECOZI to develop specific ECD policies. The role of teachers' unions in advocating, through various tactics, for greater expansion of and investment in public education has even been acknowledged by government stakeholders. One key national stakeholder in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education noted that:

The teachers' unions, they want what is ideal for a student. They also advocate for issues like for the provision of inclusive education, all our schools to have access for those disabled pupils such as ramps... [it is] not always only advocating for better remuneration.

National government official, April 2024

In other words, national education coalitions may be well suited to facilitate the presence of teachers' unions and channel their common advocacy agendas in a more palatable or 'apolitical' manner in restricted civic spaces.

Broad-based membership organizations such as teachers' unions, as a complementary partner working on the outside, act as a legitimization to capital-city-based national education coalitions who are liaising on the inside with government ministries. These two types of CSOs therefore work in tandem through a complementary insider-outsider approach that, according to Fox (2016) can spur a "dynamic process of change in which outsider pressure strengthens insiders, while insider willingness and capacity delivers tangible reform progress, [driving] a 'virtuous circle' of mutual empowerment."¹³



In 2019 the General Secretaries of PTUZ and ZIMTA came together for the first time, signing a joint statement deploring lack of possibility to engage with government. There is still much to learn about if and how different kinds of unions can work together in restricted civic space.

Credit: Education International CC 4.0

¹³ Fox, Jonathan. 2016. "Scaling Accountability through Vertically Integrated Civil Society Policy Monitoring and Advocacy." Institute of Development Studies. *Making All Voices Count Working Paper*. <https://accountabilityresearch.org/publication/scaling-accountability-through-vertically-integrated-civil-society-policy-monitoring-and-advocacy>.

For instance, ECOZI has worked closely in tandem with government and unions to help facilitate dialogue on certain policy reforms. These include the Teaching Profession Council Bill, which seeks to professionalize teaching by setting standards and establishing a regulatory board.

Conclusions

Unions of public service workers—education, health services, etc.—are often seen or dismissed, particularly by international aid donors, as resistant to policy reform. Often, teachers’ unions are already engaged in influencing government policy and well-practiced in holding government to account to either put greater investment into services or follow through with promised or agreed-upon investments. This is a desired outcome of many international donors and civil society organizations. Therefore, ignoring—intentionally or not—the ‘most powerful, well-organized, and representative civil society actor’ in the national education policy sector may be unwittingly hindering intended advocacy outcomes.

Though we know quite a lot about how teachers’ unions have worked in places like Europe, the US, and Latin America,¹⁴ we still do not know much about how teachers’ unions operate and survive in a restricted civic space such as Zimbabwe. Many African countries receive significant international aid to support both government programs and civil society organizations (such as the Global Partnership for Education’s [Education Out Loud](#)) to influence policy design and reform. However, little support—such as financial aid or conditionalities from donors for their inclusion in policy dialogue, like national education coalitions—is given to broad-based organizations such as teachers’ unions already engaged in grassroots advocacy on the continent. Therefore, we still have much to learn about different types of groups and if—and how—they can work together toward shared advocacy agendas. More systematic and comparative research is needed to learn from those already engaged in the work on the ground, to better understand the varying tactics of teachers’ unions and how they survive and interact with other civil society organizations in restricted civic space.

¹⁴ Grindle, M. S. 2004. *Despite the odds: The contentious politics of education reform*. Princeton University Press.

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About the Authors

Abrehet Gebremedhin is a researcher at the Accountability Research Center and a PhD candidate at the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C. Her academic research centers on monitoring and evaluation, civil society engagement in education and health, transnational aid for education, and youth mobilization.

Clemence Tauya Nhliziyo is a policy advocacy expert with over fifteen years' experience in shaping organizational responses to emerging policy trends in education; land and agriculture; disability inclusion and general developmental programming. He is currently a Policy and Advocacy Manager for CAMFED Zimbabwe responsible for managing the GPE Girls Education Accelerator Programme in Zimbabwe.

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American University
School of International Service
4400 Massachusetts Ave NW
Washington, DC 20016
www.accountabilityresearch.org