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EXPLORING NGOS' PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR ROLE IN EDUCATION REFORM IN EGYPT

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Abstract

This exploratory study elicits NGO perceptions regarding Egypt's Ministry of Education and Technical Education's (MOETE) reform efforts, their interest in participating in education reform and policy advocacy, and their existing relationship with the ministry. Drawing on the findings from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 representatives of education NGOs based in Cairo and Giza, this thesis takes a qualitative approach toward answering the following research question: **How do NGOs targeting K-12 youth perceive their role in shaping education reform in Egypt?** Despite having to navigate a host of obstacles to accessing public schools and working with the MOETE, the NGOs represented in this study have demonstrated that they are trying to leverage various strategies to target public school beneficiaries and create impact, both showcasing their dedication to creating change in the education sector and the wide reach they have in the community. Ultimately, this thesis highlights the persistent system of centralization and restrictions under which many education NGOs continue to operate and the potential for the MOETE to look increasingly to the civil society sector for guidance on public opinion, feedback and monitoring support with regard to reform rollouts, and ideas and innovative models.

Keywords: education, public administration, public policy, advocacy, NGOs, public schools, MOETE, Education 2.0, education reform, Egypt

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List of Acronyms

NGO	Nongovernmental association
EFA	Education for All
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MOETE	Ministry of Education and Technical Education
NFE	Nonformal education
CSO	Civil society organization

Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Outline

Across the globe, and especially in the Global South, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have taken on greater roles in public service delivery, mitigating the gaps governments are unable to address through a variety of avenues, including collaborating directly with the state, advocating for policy change, and providing direct services to marginalized populations (El Baradei & El Baradei, 2004; Henderson, 2002; Molomo & Somolekae, 1999; Volmink & Van der Elst, 2017). In the education space, NGOs have surfaced as major players driving the expansion of access to quality learning in a number of countries across the Global South. Given the number of challenges associated with state-led education delivery in many countries in the Global South, the expansion of the number of players participating in education service delivery has also extended beyond NGOs to private actors, including private schools, tutors, or tutoring agencies, galvanizing the development of "shadow" systems of education (Byun et al., 2018; Hartmann, 2008) operating outside of formal education frameworks.

Egypt's pre-university system, the largest in the Middle East—with approximately 20 million students enrolled in public schools and 2 million in private (El Baradei, 2021)—has long dealt with significant challenges, including a lack of teacher training, poor treatment of students, oversaturated classrooms, limited access for marginalized populations, and an outdated focus on rote learning as opposed to critical thinking (Krafft, 2012; Sultana, 2008; UNESCO, 2014). Against this background, a number of both private entities and NGOs have been established, offering alternative and complementary approaches to education; according to a needs assessment conducted by El Baradei and El Baradei in 2004, more than 1,300 NGOs were working within the field of education at the time. While this number is sure to have varied over the years, these organizations have worked to address gaps that have gone unresolved by Egypt's

public education system thus far, complement the state curriculum, and expand access to education. Despite the positive impacts that the work of these organizations brings, Zaalouk (2017) notes, these interventions represent a parallel system of education and as such, "have added to the dangers of fragmentation in an increasingly fragile environment…making it harder to develop and/or rebuild coherent educational systems based on a comprehensive vision" (p. 290).

While the community school model offers evidence of collaboration between nonprofit organizations and the government in Egypt, researchers have directed less attention toward NGOs operating outside of this model in the education space. In recent years, language reflecting a desire for increased integration has become more evident in state education strategies. In 2014, the Egyptian government launched a strategic plan for reforming pre-university education by 2030 (UNESCO, 2014), and more recently, in 2018, Egypt's Minister of Education and Technical Education announced "Education 2.0," a plan to improve inclusiveness and innovation in education (Marey & Magd, 2022; Moustafa et al., 2022). Both strategies make note of an aim to increase the involvement of NGOs in the delivery of educational services. However, further research is required to better understand the Ministry's actual engagement of the civil society sector and NGOs' perception of their role in shaping education reform.

It is also important to note that the number of NGOs involved in the education sector increased dramatically post-1990 in response to a combination of both national and international influences, namely the long-term effects of Sadat's open-door policy toward "the West" which invited increased foreign aid into Egypt; the launch of the global Education for All (EFA) initiative and conference in 1990; the neoliberal push toward decentralization and privatization led by international organizations such as USAID and the World Bank; and the introduction of

the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Plan (ERSAP) sponsored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1991 (Allam, 2021; Ginsburg, 2010; Ginsburg et al., 2010; Ibrahim, 2010; Rutherford, 2013).

The literature presents a narrative of the substantial role these international actors have played in infusing Egyptian policy dialogue around education with their particular reform propositions, in part driven by underlying political and economic interests (Ginsburg, 2010; Ibrahim, 2010; Warschauer, 2004). Today, the World Bank and USAID, in addition to other international organizations such as Discovery Education and National Geographic (Moustafa et al., 2022), are still known to be supporting the Ministry of Education and Technical Education's (MOETE) most recent reform efforts—USAID in particular is working toward advocating for educational changes in Egypt both through direct work with the MOETE and through its funding of grassroots actors—through consultation on Education 2.0, exchanges of educational resources and materials, and funding contributions.

However, researchers have also highlighted that despite public discourse around some of the reform efforts introduced by these international organizations, the MOETE has historically held a tight, centralized hold over the public education system (Ginsburg et al., 2010). The involvement of these bilateral and multilateral organizations both reveals the type of impact that actors outside of the government can have at the policy level and also suggests that much of the dialogue around demand for education reform has historically been monopolized by a limited set of foreign influences. It remains unclear how engaged other NGOs have been in education strategy formulation, whether they consider national education reform among their goals as they work to support access to education at the community level, and whether they have found pathways toward voicing their demands for change at the national level.

To better understand existing demand for change, it is critical that researchers begin to more deeply explore the nature of current NGOs operating in the education space in Egypt, examine their relationship with the government and with international organizations, and identify potential pathways for increased collaboration toward positive change. Drawing on literature surrounding NGOs' impact on policy change, the proposed thesis seeks to examine education NGOs in Egypt and their perception of their role in shaping education reform in Egypt.

1.1 Context

In 2018, Egypt started working toward a 2030 goal of achieving its most recent strategic plan for education reform known as the National Education Project (UNDP, 2021) or "Education 2.0" (Marey & Magd, 2022; Moustafa et al., 2022). The plan has been positioned as a historical shift away from the public education system's deep-seated traditional focus on rote learning and high-stakes examinations in favor of more a skills-based, student-centered, and multidisciplinary approach aimed at stimulating critical thinking and deepening student learning according to international standards (Marey & Magd, 2022). As El Baradei notes, the plan is aimed at addressing three categories of challenges in the pre-university education system, namely the availability of educational services, the quality of education, and the management and structure of the educational system (El Baradei, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). In an effort to address these problems, the MOETE has framed its new reform plan around four strategic policies: "accommodating all children from age 5 to 18 in schools; adopting international curricula of high quality in math, science, language, and geography; instilling in students the value of continuous learning; and enabling students to effectively use technology to access knowledge" (El Baradei, 2021).

On the ground, this reform plan has thus far been rolled out in the form of changes to 85 curricula across the pre-university education system, changes to the format of the *Thanaweya Amma* exams such that it became multiple-choice and open-book, the distribution of tablets to public school students, the establishment of the Egyptian Knowledge Bank, "an electronic educational encyclopedia" (Zaki, 2018), and the merging of the science and mathematics branches of the *Thanaweya Amma* system (El Baradei & El Baradei, 2004; Wahish, 2022). According to news reports, former education minister Tarek Shawki was met with a wave of negative public criticism around the implementation of the reforms, with questions raised about the shortage of teachers in the pre-university public education system, the lack of an appropriate infrastructure to support the digital changes introduced, the lack of funding, and the persistence of overcrowded classrooms and poor student performance on exams (El-Din, 2022; Leila, 2021). The media has suggested that negative feedback and pressure from parents, due to concerns about the effective roll-out and progress of the reform plans, ultimately led to Shawki's removal from office (Wahish, 2022).

1.2 Research Problem

Egyptian NGOs have historically operated in a restrictive environment, with strict, top-down control of much of their activity imposed by the Egyptian government and little room for participation in supporting government-led educational change and reform efforts. The literature demonstrates that this experience has extended to the education sector, with little evidence or documentation of community participation in education reform plans (Ginsburg et al., 2010; Herrold, 2016; Ibrahim, 2010; Loveluck, 2012; Rizk, 2019). In this top-down system of education policy development and enforcement, NGOs have thus faced challenges targeting public school students in need of increased support and leveraging their know-how and models

of social change to better support the MOETE in addressing the host of challenges that continue to weigh on the pre-university public education system.

Given the limited amount of literature on NGO engagement in education policy discussions in Egypt, there is room to explore and better understand NGO perspectives on their level of engagement with the MOETE, whether they consider national education reform among their goals as they work to support access to education at the community level, and whether they have found pathways toward voicing their demands for change at the national level.

1.3 Research Questions

To this author's knowledge, the limited pool of English-language academic studies on education reform in Egypt to date has not considered questions of NGO engagement with the MOETE and their perspectives of education reform strategies in Egypt. Moving beyond studies on the community school model, which have mainly explored explicit, direct partnerships between the government and civil society sector, this thesis seeks to better understand the goals of education NGOs self-organizing to provide educational services to the public and the ways in which they might be working to shape education reform at the national level.

Toward this end, the proposed thesis explores the following research question: **How do NGOs targeting K-12 youth perceive their role in shaping education reform in Egypt?** The sub-questions that guide my research are as follows:

1. **To what extent are education NGOs currently involved in education reform, and to what extent are they interested in influencing Egypt's pre-university public education system?**
2. **What are the factors enabling certain NGOs to work with the MOETE, and what are the challenges NGOs face in attempting to work with the MOETE?**
3. **What strategies are NGOs using to access public school students and/or impact education policy?**
4. **How do NGOs perceive the MOETE's most recent reform project "Education 2.0"?**

5. **What are the opportunities for greater involvement of NGOs in education policy and reform strategy development?**

This thesis ultimately sheds light on both the existing and potential impact of education NGOs on national education reform through an exploration of the relationship between youth-focused NGOs and the MOETE, the specific pathways that NGOs leverage to influence the education system, and the ways in which the relationship between youth-focused NGOs and the MOETE could be enhanced to stimulate increased and more impactful collaboration.

1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 2 presents the conceptual framework, which defines the role of NGOs in the education sector and provides more information on the strategies these organizations can adopt to shape the public education system, according to literature on the ways NGOs influence policymaking. Chapter 3 then presents the findings of the literature review, providing an overview of previous research on the topic of NGO involvement in public service delivery, public education systems, and the larger reform and policy arenas, as well as existing studies on the education system in Egypt, including the challenges identified in the literature and any research on education reform efforts. Chapter 4 presents the methodology of this thesis, describing how data was collected and discussing the process used for analyzing the interview data in this study. Chapter 5 offers a detailed description of the results yielded from the in-depth interviews with NGO representatives in this study. Chapter 6 then builds on the results to present an analytical discussion of the larger findings and conclusions of this study in the context of the literature review and research questions presented at the start of this thesis. Finally, Chapter 7 presents the limitations of this thesis, and offers concluding remarks and policy recommendations for the education sector in Egypt based on the findings of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

This chapter focuses on defining some of the key terms relevant to this exploratory study, such as nonformal education, education reform, and policy advocacy, and identifies the main strategies NGOs use to influence policy according to the literature.

2.1 Defining Nonformal Education Actors

The majority of NGO initiatives in the education sector can be grouped under the umbrella term of "nonformal education," (NFE), referencing education frameworks operating outside of formal government-led education systems. In terms of the exact definition of NFE, the term encompasses a variety of services provided by civil society actors. In his comprehensive examination of the nonformal education sector, Hoppers classifies these services into the following categories: para-formal education, popular education, personal development, professional and vocational training literacy with skills development, supplementary NFE, and early childhood care and education (Hoppers, 2006).

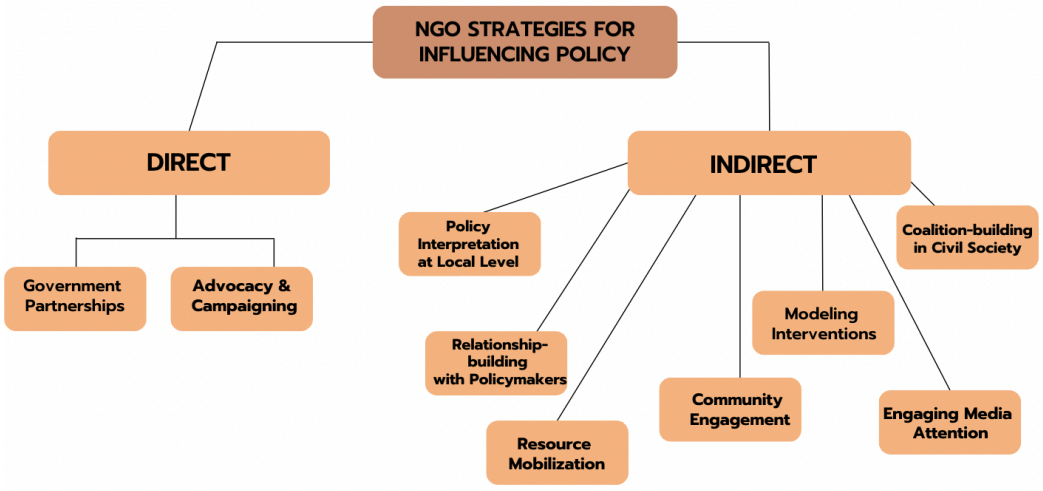
In brief, the category of para-formal education refers to programs that function the closest to formal education systems, often running either in collaboration with the state-run system or at least operating according to the governmental framework for education. Examples include community schools, evening classes, vocational and technical training programs, and official literacy support programs (Hoppers, 2006). The remaining classifications refer to education activities that operate outside of formal partnerships or recognition of government systems of education. These categories cover both those skills more traditionally thought to be a part of formal education systems, such as literacy skills, as well as skills or activities often considered to be more "leisure-time activities," such as fitness, personal development, or heritage exploration, or professional skills, such as entrepreneurship and vocational training (Hoppers, 2006).

Interestingly, Hoppers describes popular education programs as those that "explicitly set themselves apart from the formal system," embodying a "rejection of mass education" (Hoppers, 2006). This conception of activities organized outside of state-led systems suggests that through their services, these initiatives present to the public, and their government counterparts, a stance regarding their expectations of what should be included in an education system.

2.2 Strategies NGOs Use to Influence Education Reform

Drawing on the findings from the literature review, the chart below provides an overview of the various strategies NGOs may apply to influence the education system in Egypt (Figure 1). To answer sub-research questions 1 and 2, this thesis makes use of this chart in analyzing the interview transcripts to determine which strategies NGOs working with K-12 youth in Egypt may be leveraging to access public schools, build relationships within the MOETE, and influence the K-12 education system at large.

Figure 1



NGO Strategies for Influencing Policy

Source: Developed by researcher based on Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002; Delamaza & Palma Carvajal, 2022; Farid, 2019; Zhang, 2018; Rose, 2009; and Thomas, 1996.

2.3 Defining Policy Advocacy

Definitions of policy advocacy range from descriptions of deliberate, organized, and planned processes aimed specifically at influencing policymakers to more open-ended discussions of policy advocacy as expressions of reflections on policies and vocalization of public policy gaps (Aikman, 2010; Batley & Rose, 2010; Kumar, 2005; Mitlin, 2008).

In Aikman's (2010) discussion of education reform efforts in Tanzania, she draws on an Oxfam report's framework of policy advocacy that assigns varying types of advocacy to different levels, namely global, regional, national, district, and local. The types of advocacy discussed in the framework similarly range from more explicit attempts at influencing policymakers at the global and national levels, through direct lobbying efforts targeted at the UN or national government entities and regional alliance-building, to less deliberate efforts operating at the district and local levels, such as building stakeholder capacities, conducting program research, and documenting experiences and learning (Aikman, 2010). This framework presents advocacy as encompassing a range of focus areas, from global campaigns and commitments of resources to explicit discussion of legislation and participation in the review of policies and budgets to the delivery of education programming and management of schools at the district and local levels, including the work of NGOs (Aikman, 2010). As the literature review in the following chapter further details, the literature suggests that NGO attempts to practice policy advocacy, or to influence education policy, include a wide range of activities, both those that are more deliberate attempts to lobby for specific policy changes to service delivery and the vocalization of reflections around reform efforts.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 NGO-State Collaboration

Much of the literature exploring the role of NGOs vis-à-vis the state is divided along the question of the extent to which civil society operates as an independent sphere free of influence from the state. According to many authors who adopt a more liberal view, NGOs are thought to be well-meaning entities that function independently from the state in order to stimulate more bottom-up participation in public services and dialogues and promote democratic values such as equality and social freedom (Delamaza & Palma Carvajal, 2022; Shephard, 2014). Other authors take a more critical stance, considering NGOs as vessels for the promulgation of neoliberalism, and as such, functioning, at least in part, as an extension of government influence. Drawing on Gramsci's view of civil society as a "space where hegemony is disseminated," (Delamaza & Palma Carvajal, 2022; Shephard, 2014), these authors are more skeptical of the intentions of NGOs, critiquing the view that they can operate as forces outside of the control of the state, as well as other influential forces such as funding, and in doing so, questioning their ability to truly operate according to public demand and community needs.

Despite this division in perspectives, a number of authors have purported that NGO-state collaboration has the power to shape public service delivery (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Hjortskov et al., 2018; Mitlin, 2008), often positively, and the involvement of private actors in activities traditionally thought to be the responsibility of the state can also transform the politics surrounding these services (Bulkley & Burch, 2011). One study exploring the impact of human service organizations in the United States, for example, found that "cross-sector partnerships are designed to instigate reforms, injecting the system with innovation and harnessing proactivity as a joint tool to optimize and capitalize on existing potential in the public sphere" (Selden et al.,

2006, p. 1521), speaking to NGOs' ability to shape national policy discussions through their interventions.

Authors further argue that the participation of the public in service delivery also results in the transformation of the citizens or entities involved, widening avenues for citizens, either individually or through representative groups such as NGOs, to increase their political engagement and impact on policy decisions (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Hjortskov et al., 2018). For instance, the development of grassroots initiatives can strengthen relations and "collective practice" (Mitlin, 2008, p. 356) between community members, "resulting in significant demonstrations of popular support" (Mitlin, 2008, p. 353) and bolstering the capacities of civil society. In this case, civil society members may be empowered to advocate for more substantive political shifts. Through frameworks of coproduction, the public deepens its understanding of social services and government processes and states' perception of citizens shifts to an understanding of the public as more visible and proximal to the services in question (Hjortskov et al., 2018). These effects carve out increased spaces for citizens to voice their political opinions and, in turn, shape national reform decisions. As a consequence of their participation, however, the third sector may also find "itself incorporated into the institutionalized system of provision" (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006, p. 496), resulting in an integration of state-led and civil-society-led approaches.

Mitlin (2008) has introduced even further nuance to literature on NGO-government collaboration, noting that most researchers concentrate on coproduction as initiated by government entities and officials, failing to consider evidence of "self-organized co-production" (p. 351) by civil society. Drawing on studies on social movements in the Global South, she suggests that grassroots organizations leverage coproduction as an "explicit political strategy"

(2008, p. 339) to purposefully instigate longer-term structural change and re-shape the relationship between the state and civil society.

Mitlin also suggests that in Global South countries where the political terrain may differ from Global North state structures, though interventions launched by civil society may not appear to be driven by explicit political intentions, the mere effort to offer traditionally state-sponsored services reflects a form of political engagement in and of itself (2008). Mitlin's ideas are in line with Hoppers' description of popular education programs (2006), but suggests that even those organizations that may not be explicitly identifying as counter to the state system still stand as personifications of criticism of the state agenda via their mere existence. This interpretation of coproduction lends more meaning to the formation of alternative systems of education, suggesting that these stand as implicit political demands for the improvement of educational services and the increased engagement of the civil society sector in these efforts.

3.2 NGO and Government Collaboration in the Education Sector

In countries across the globe, NGOs have come to play a significant role in improving educational opportunities and transforming public systems. In particular, in the 1980s and 1990s, NGOs began to emerge as central actors in the education sector and became increasingly integrated into the global discourse on education provision (Hoppers, 2006; Rose, 2006; Shephard, 2014). This was in part a response to changes in the global economic and political arena, specifically the introduction of economic liberalization policies and efforts at political democratization around the world (Rose, 2006). Against this economic and political background, the launch of the World Education for All in 1990 and its later reaffirmation at the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 sparked increased global dialogue around the shift toward increased community participation and more decentralized approaches to education

delivery. This change in global policy discussions around education was compounded by the World Bank's publication of two reports in the 1990s, "Improving the Quality of Education in Developing Countries" and "Effective Schools in Developing Countries" (Ginsburg et al., 2010). In this period, the term "nonformal education" began to gain more traction, and increasing numbers of NGOs began to emerge offering a range of education services outside of the bounds of formal governmental education systems (Hoppers, 2006).

While initially conceived of as a separate, alternative pathway for education, over the years, NGO-led education initiatives, often NFE initiatives, have come to be viewed as offering "complementary" services (Rose, 2006). Despite increasing interest in the field of NFE, authors exploring the topic have noted that policymakers typically hold a more negative perception of NFE, often viewing it as secondary to the formal education system (Rose, 2006; Yasunaga, 2014). Yasunaga (2014) suggests that more priority and credit should be lent to the role of NFE given the extensive potential of NGO actors to enhance access to quality learning opportunities, particularly for children stemming from marginalized groups.

Other authors too have noted that NGOs can increase access to education for marginalized communities through nonformal frameworks of education service delivery (Batley & Rose, 2010; Gali and Schechter, 2021). Further advantages of NFE frameworks include their cost-effectiveness, ability to meet unmet student needs, flexibility in education delivery modes and approaches, (Yasunaga, 2014), and ability to reach students that are more challenging to reach (Rose, 2009).

Studies have also identified positive impacts on teachers and overall education quality through the collaborative involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) (Feinstein, 2013; Selden et al., 2006). Numerous studies have explored the impact of NGOs on education both at a

micro-level, with a focus on NGO engagement with schools (Selden et al., 2006; Sleegers, 2019), and a macro-level, with a concentration on public education through both formal and informal models of engagement in public service delivery (Bray, 2001; Volmink and Van der Elst, 2017). In a host of countries, NGOs are contributing to public education delivery, either through direct strategic partnerships or contractual arrangements with the government, or self-organized structures to offer a diversity of education services to the public, such as teacher training, infrastructure improvement, and supplementary or alternative educational programs (Bano, 2019; Volmink & Van der Elst, 2017).

For instance, Bray (2001) notes the existence of a parallel framework of education in Bangladesh led by a committee of institutions external to the government and its significant contributions to educational enhancement through service provision. This author also identifies examples of parallel systems of education that have emerged in countries such as Chad, Uganda, Mali, El Salvador, and Egypt (Bray, 2001). His example of the committee in Bangladesh also points to evidence of collaborative networks of NGOs working toward larger scale educational change. Volmink and Van der Elst (2017) also discuss the central role of NGOs in educational service delivery in South Africa, with attention to their position as champions for policy change in the public education system and acknowledgement of the barriers to more collaborative efforts among NGOs as a result of the long history of government mistrust of the sector.

The launch of EFA in 1990, an international initiative aimed at widening access to education to “every citizen in every society” (World Bank) across the globe, stimulated a shift in international organizations’ focus on offering services complimentary to those of the government to a focus on advocacy and campaigning for larger-scale policy change (Aikman, 2010; Batley & Rose, 2010). According to the literature, the ways in which NGOs can support larger education

reform varies. One study conducted on the education sector in Kazakhstan found that education reform efforts toward creating a more inclusive system were co-led by NGOs, which became involved in policy revision, monitoring and evaluation, and professional development and supported the government in instigating the cultural changes needed to uphold reforms (Rollan & Somerton, 2021). Gali and Schechter (2021) note that organizations can become involved in education through advocacy for policy change or through the direct provision of education services to those without access to the formal education system.

It should also be noted, however, that the literature does reveal some criticism of the NFE sector and its ability to provide learning opportunities to children. For example, it can be difficult to document the actual impact and cost-effectiveness of NFE services, and there is generally a lack of exploration into the flaws in NFE approaches (Rose, 2006). Ultimately, some authors suggest that NGOs offering NFE do not necessarily have the capacity to wholly address the gaps of public systems, but should rather be expected to "use their knowledge and position to hold the system accountable and bring systemic faults to light" (Lauritzen, 2020; Yasunaga, 2014).

3.3 NGO Strategies for Influencing Education Policy

In a study by Farid (2019), of 22 grassroots NGOs interviewed between 2009 and 2012, more than 90% "expressed an explicit concern with influencing government policy in their work despite the fact that they would generally be categorized as 'service delivery organizations'" (p. 540). While many NGOs may not make their interest in policy change explicit (Batley & Rose, 2010), existing literature highlights a number of ways in which they can exert their influence at the state level, both directly and indirectly. Among the more explicit strategies for policy influence, NGOs can form partnerships with governments (Batley & Rose, 2010; Gali & Schechter, 2021; Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002); through these collaborations, NGOs are able to

leverage their technical knowledge of the areas in which they work to expose the government to new approaches and strengthen their relationships with government officials responsible for crafting reform strategies. Beyond forming partnerships with the government to showcase their interventions and visions for change, organizations can also practice direct advocacy and campaigning, engaging in policy dialogue and pushing for specific changes in explicit policy arenas, such as through participation in taskforces, roundtable discussions, meetings with government officials, or through the submission of reports and proposals to the government (Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002).

There are also more indirect, discreet ways in which NGOs can attempt to exert their influence. These are strategies that may be observed more in contexts with increased centralization and limited formal access to policy discussions and government officials (Zhang, 2018). For instance, NGOs are known for their ability to shape the mindsets, attitudes, and expectations of the beneficiaries with which their work. Through their direct work with beneficiaries, these organizations are thus able to mobilize communities (Delamaza & Parma Carvajal, 2022; Thomas, 1996; Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002) and impact public demand for policy change, which can in turn lead to national-level responses. It should be noted that in the context of Egypt, where the policymaking process—particularly in the education sector—is highly centralized and top-down, without much room for community participation (Ginsburg et al., 2010; Ibrahim, 2010; Loveluck, 2012; Rizk, 2019), true community mobilization wherein societies are mobilized to engage in policy discussions or reform is largely impossible. For the context of this thesis, this author has thus chosen to use the term “community engagement” to describe NGO efforts at reaching communities and creating impact, however limited, through services directed to the community outside of the bounds of the formal government-led

education system. Outside of direct partnerships with the state, NGOs can also experiment with innovative approaches in the hopes that the government may observe their models and identify a need for change (Farid, 2019; Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002; Thomas, 1996). Additionally, NGOs can seek to shape policy discussions through coalition-building or mobilizing peer organizations in the civil society sector (Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002; Rose, 2009). This approach can take the form of networking with other NGOs, forming consortiums, and support groups or building partnerships for service-delivery to create a greater impact and direct more attention toward their work (Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002).

Organizations can also opt to galvanize change at the national level by leveraging their connections to funders or access to resources. As Miller-Grandvaux et al. highlight, both international and domestic funders are often drawn into policy conversations through their financial relationships with NGOs (2002). On the other hand, it is also the case that many NGOs working to impact policy in some way may be driven by their funders' larger advocacy interests. Whether through their donors or other sources, NGOs are often also able to leverage their access to resources and funds, and in turn their ability to reach wider audiences than the government, to dictate the types of interventions the government supports via their work with the civil society sector.

An additional strategy for indirectly influencing policy is through media engagement (Miller-Grandvaux et al., 2002; Thomas, 1996). This can take the form of more conspicuous advocacy campaigns or through the maintenance of a media presence, which directs more public attention to either the work of NGOs or their policy opinions. Furthermore, NGOs can stimulate changes in the way in which policies are interpreted and practiced through their decisions at the local level. Farid's (2019) study on grassroots NGOs in China found that organizations were able to

practice “street-level discretion and local initiative” (p. 536), leading to regional variations in the ways that national policies were viewed and implemented. While this may not be considered a clear form of policy change, Farid (2019) notes that this type of approach can “generate novel policy instruments and transform policy priorities over time” (p. 536). In another discreet approach to influencing policy, NGO representatives act as individuals able to leverage their own personal connections to build relationships with policymakers and become “insiders” who are able to impact policy discussions via more “unwritten informal processes” (Batley and Rose, 2010, p. 584). As Thomas (1996) notes, NGOs are likely to be practicing multiple strategies in conjunction with one another, rather than focusing on only one approach.

3.4 NGO-State Collaboration in Egypt: A General Overview and a Focus on Education

In Egypt, the relationship between government institutions and civil society actors has historically been a tense one. The literature describes policymaking aimed at restricting, dividing, and generally weakening the NGO sector by placing limitations on organizations’ ability to secure international funding, collaborate, and participate in certain activities (Herrold, 2016; Sayed, 2022). According to the literature, Egyptian NGOs explicitly advocating for policy changes have largely been perceived, and have often purposefully positioned themselves, in opposition to the government (Langohr, 2004).

Literature looking specifically at instances of collaboration between NGOs and the state in Egypt in the education space is scarce and often limited to examinations of community school frameworks. The community school model stems from a program launched by USAID in 1992 to improve retention rates and quality of education for girls in Upper Egypt and has since been scaled across different communities in Egypt (El-Sherif & Niyozov, 2015; Langsten, 2016; Langsten et al., 2022;). The majority of studies exploring this model have centered around

questions of the continued effectiveness and success of the program, raising questions about the sustained quality of education in these types of schools. Despite the initial success of the community school framework, authors point to a number of challenges that have barred the program from sustaining and growing its impact; these challenges include the need for more teachers, gaps in the quality of education teachers receive, lack of flexibility afforded to teachers in terms of their ability to change instructional methods and contextualize curricula due to MOETE restrictions, challenges with rates of retention, and persistent inequalities (El-Sherif & Niyozov, 2015; Langsten et al., 2022).

Outside of studies addressing the community school model, the literature on government-NGO collaboration in Egypt in the education sector is sparse. One recent study explored the perspectives of representatives of international organizations on the level of community participation in Egypt's pre-university education system (Rizk, 2019). In this study, Rizk found that NGOs were perceived to be facing numerous challenges in participating in the K-12 education sector, namely suspicion and a lack of trust from the government; difficulties overcoming the lack of culture of participation in the Egyptian government; lack of direction and advisement from government; bureaucratic challenges; funding difficulties; a culture of control and restriction; and differences in capacity levels across the civil society sector (Rizk, 2019). An older study by Herrera (2003) presented a case study on an NGO partnership with a public girls' school in Egypt, finding that the collaboration yielded a positive impact on the school environment, both by improving the school's infrastructure and achieving unintentional positive impacts on school community members' perspectives around education. These studies both point to the powerful potential of increased NGO involvement in the pre-university education system

and underline a significant gap in the literature with regard to NGOs' perspectives on their role and history of attempting to support education reform efforts.

3.5 Challenges in Egypt's K-12 Public Education System

Despite the Egyptian constitution's declaration of the state's responsibility for providing every citizen with the right to a free public pre-university education (Assaad & Kraft, 2015; El Baradei, 2021; Ginsburg & Megahed, 2011), the MOETE has long dealt with a plethora of challenges impacting children and adolescents' access to quality education. Among the more pressing challenges identified by the MOETE are "low ranking in international quality assessments, high class densities and high student/teacher rations, low literacy skills, and the parallel system of private tutoring at all grade levels" (El Baradei, 2021, p. 248). These challenges have been exacerbated by the effects of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting school closures and stresses on the pre-university school community. The difficulties marring the pre-university public education system have led to the growth of a diversity of alternative forms of education, offered through private tutoring, local NGO learning programs—including those led by both social enterprises and nonprofit organizations—public educator training programs, and perhaps most well-known, the community school model managed in partnership between the state, international organizations, and local NGOs.

This growth of an informal market of education has appeared to address the flaws of a deep-seated two-class private-public education system that has left many underprivileged families without access to quality education (Hartmann, 2008). While Hartmann's (2008) study focuses on the growth of the private tutoring system in Egypt, this logic can be extended to any non-state actor. As Paarlberg and Gen note, "the formation of nonprofits coproducing public services may be sparked by the demand from unmet needs and diverse preferences" (2009, p. 403).

The majority of studies on alternative education programs in Egypt have concentrated on the community school model, which was first introduced through the UNICEF-sponsored Community School Program (El-Sherif & Niyozov, 2015; Langsten, 2016; Mohareb, 2017). While this model is generally thought to be successful in widening access to quality education, a number of studies have identified challenges such as the reproduction of issues in the public system within the program, the convergence of the program with or incorporation into the public system leading to a decrease in its impact (El-Sherif & Niyozov, 2015), or the persistence of hierarchical power structures in education networks (Allam, 2021).

The endurance of many of the challenges of the public system within private interventions reveal a persistent co-optation of services by the state and a struggle to achieve coproduction that has a lasting effect on the public education system at large. While studies have concentrated on the successes and failures of programs such as the community school model in Egypt, noting the influence of challenges from the public system seeping into the model, questions remain as to the long-term impact programs such as these have on public education reform. Additionally, there has been a lack of attention to the continuously growing "shadow" system of alternative education programs operating independently, without state collaboration, and its impact on the public education system. The emergence of this system points to a public expression of educational needs and preferences that are not being addressed by the state system (Paarlberg & Gen, 2009). The question then is whether this expression of demands is being heard and integrated into the government's reform plans for the pre-university education system.

3.6 Education Reform in Egypt

Existing studies on Egypt's history with education development point to continuous efforts toward national education reform, with strategies often introduced in conjunction with

international loans or grants (Ibrahim, 2010). While these efforts have worked to slowly introduce improvements, such as enhanced enrollment numbers (Moustafa et al., 2022; UNDP, 2021), fundamental obstacles remain.

The bulk of existing literature on education reform in Egypt has concentrated on the period between the 1990s and 2010, a period defined by calls for global shifts in education discourse toward patterns of decentralization; Egypt's signing of the pledge for education development at the EFA Conference; and an international swing toward neoliberal reform ideas and economic liberalization, spurred in Egypt in part by IMF loan and its intertwined economic restructuring plans (Allam, 2021; Badran & Toprak, 2020; Dixon, 2010; Ginsburg & Megahed, 2011; Ibrahim, 2010). In particular, these studies have centered on Egypt's USAID-funded reform programs, such as the Integrated English Language Program (IELP) (Warschauer, 2004), which ran from 1997 to 2004, and the Educational Reform Program (ERP) (Badran & Toprak, 2020; Dixon, 2010; Ginsburg & Megahed, 2011; Ibrahim, 2010), which operated between 2004 and 2009.

Studies on education reform in Egypt have largely taken on a qualitative approach, most often relying on literature reviews, historical archives, and document analysis for data collection (Dixon, 2010; El Baradei & El Baradei, 2004; El Baradei & El Baradei, 2004; Ginsburg et al., 2010; Ibrahim, 2010; Johnson, 2018; Moustafa et al., 2022). A limited number of these studies have also sourced data from stakeholders such as pre-university teachers (Badran & Toprak, 2020; Zahran, 2023) and other stakeholders, including government officials, education experts, and representatives of international agencies (Allam, 2021). There is thus a gap in the literature in terms of NGO actors and their involvement in the MOETE's education reform efforts.

To date, literature on education reform in Egypt has concentrated on topics such as the MOETE's rhetoric on and progress toward increased decentralization; the influence of international development agencies such as USAID and the World Bank; and the impact of the MOETE's reform efforts on elements such as the quality of education in pre-university public schools in Egypt. More specifically, the literature points to a long history of reform efforts that have led to incremental improvements in elements such as enrollment and literacy but have struggled to deal with challenges like the need to improve education quality, drop-out rates, and student-teacher ratios (Dixon, 2010).

Authors have noted that a select number of international organizations, such as USAID and the World Bank, have played a major role in shaping national discourse around education reform given their ability to leverage significant amounts of funding (Allam, 2021; Ginsburg, 2010; Ginsburg et al., 2010; Ibrahim, 2010; Warschauer, 2004). Historically, these organizations have often operated independent of one another, further exacerbating the lack of cohesion and coherence in the government's efforts toward reform, and have also prioritized overarching economic and political goals in their intervention frameworks over giving attention to local realities and adopting more cost-effective strategies (Warschauer, 2004). Government reform strategies have not placed sufficient emphasis on curriculum development as a priority; lacked strategies for assessing the outcomes of reforms and further improving students' skills (Badran & Toprak, 2020; Moustafa et al., 2022); failed to align reform plans with Egypt's larger strategic goals (Moustafa et al., 2022, p. 55); struggled to create sustainable change in the quality of student learning (El Baradei, 2021); and fallen short in addressing one of the most significant obstacles to improvement, namely low teacher salaries (Johnson, 2018). Furthermore, despite increased political language around decentralization, the top-down nature of the public education

system persists, presenting significant challenges in accumulating the public support needed to create significant impact (Moustafa et al., 2022).

While “Education 2.0” signals a major cultural shift in the MOETE’s approach to education—described as a “full-scale transformation” by UNICEF (2021) and a systemic shift by the World Bank (2019)—gaps and challenges in the MOETE’s plans remain. For instance, Moustafa et al. note that “to date, there is no single published EDU 2.0 reform strategy document” (2022, p. 53). In Moustafa et al.’s interviews with stakeholders and review of literature, they also identified a lack of documents clearly outlining the strategy for implementing “Education 2.0” and a lack of evidence of the MOETE’s collection of “the perception of the reforms, engagement in the implementation and application of key features” (Moustafa et al., 2022, p. 61). More specifically, Moustafa et al.'s analysis reveals the following gaps in the MOETE’s existing strategy:

- A lack of a comprehensive communication plan to encourage citizens’ buy-in and stimulate the cultural shift needed for Education 2.0;
- Need for more attention to context-specific implementation of reform efforts, i.e., attention to local community needs and differences;
- Unclear political will to fully implement Education 2.0, indicated by increased inequity and budget interests;
- Continued top-down, centralized implementation of the new Education 2.0 curriculum and unrealistic deadlines that present difficulties for teachers;
- A need for an incentive structure and accountability mechanism for schools;
- And a lack of a comprehensive assessment process (Moustafa et al., 2022).

Zahran's (2023) study on the rollout of Education 2.0 in Sohag similarly identified challenges in the reforms' success resulting from the lack of buy-in from teachers and parents. Additionally, Zahran (2023) identified gaps in the MOETE's professional development efforts, finding that educators experienced challenges such as poor planning of teacher training sessions in terms of their timing; a lack of understanding of the reform curriculum developed by Discovery Education; and the need for further support specific to the actual implementation of reforms in the classroom. These gaps point to increased opportunities for civil society stakeholders to become more involved in the revision and implementation of Education 2.0. As Moustafa et al. highlight, "the EDU 2.0 reforms require the alignment of key stakeholders and the development of shared goals within a complex education system" (2022, p. 65). Given the largescale social transformation needed for Education 2.0 to succeed, NGOs have the potential to infuse the strategy with insights from their direct work with communities of students, teachers, and parents. Additionally, it is critical that we underline the scarcity of academic research exploring the specificities of the MOETE's reform plans with Education 2.0 and examining perceptions of its rollout thus far. In light of recent negative responses to the previous education minister Tarek Shawki's efforts toward education reform and his replacement, the gaps in the literature also call for more investigation into public reflections on the reform initiative in order to highlight areas for improvement and better understand how civil society actors might support the plan's continued implementation.

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter presents the research design and methodology guiding this thesis, describing the interviewee sample identified for the collection of data and the approach to data collection and analysis adopted for this study.

4.1 Sample

Interviewees were identified through a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling. First, this researcher contacted those NGOs with which she was familiar or those that are well known within the education sector in Egypt. During the interviews, participants were also asked to share suggestions of further education NGOs or specific contacts who might be interested in participating in this study. A purposive approach to this study was important given this thesis's aim in exploring a specific set of NGOs operating within the education ecosystem (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

A total of 13 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of nonformal education NGOs for this study. Each interviewee represented a different NGO, meaning that the results reflect the experiences of 13 different organizations. All of the organizations represented in this study are based out of the Cairo and Giza governorates, with the majority based in Cairo. This sample distribution was primarily for convenience purposes. While the researcher was open to speaking with NGO representatives from other governorates, those who were suggested to the reader throughout the interview process and who responded to requests for interview were ultimately based in the Cairo and Giza governorates. The majority of

participants work as higher-level organizational leaders; however, a number of interviewees also work as those implementing the organizations' services on the ground. Study participants were given the choice to either participate in their interviews in person or online via Zoom. With the exception of one participant who preferred to speak in person, all of the participants chose to schedule their interviews online via Zoom. Two of the interviews were held in part on the phone due to internet connectivity issues. The chart below presents an overview of the organizations represented in this study according to the number of full-time employees and type of organization (international NGO vs. local NGO). In total, nine of the interviewees reflected on their experiences with local NGOs, and four represent international NGOs.

Table 1

Interviewee	**Number of Full-time Employees**	**Type of NGO**	**Governorate**
1	2	Local NGO (*launched in partnership between Egyptian government entity and bilateral organization*)	Cairo
2	50	Local NGO	Cairo
3	130-150	International NGO	Cairo
4	10	Local NGO	Cairo
5	30	Local NGO	Cairo
6	20	Local NGO	Cairo
7	30	Local NGO	Cairo
8	101	International NGO	Cairo, projects reach across multiple governorates
9	100	International NGO	Cairo, projects reach across multiple governorates
10	15	Local NGO	Cairo
11	250	International NGO	Cairo
12	70	Local NGO	Cairo
13	3	Local NGO	Giza

Note. This table presents an overview of the interviewees who participated in this study, highlighting the type of organization they work with, the governorate in which they are based, and the size of their organization's team.

4.2 Data Analysis

With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to support the analysis of the interview data. The analysis that follows was conducted according to a combination of grounded theory and directed content analysis approaches, drawing on both the findings of the literature review and participants' insights to determine patterns in the perceptions of NGOs impact and vision for change in relation to national education reform (Berg & Lune, 2014; Neuman, 2014).

Through directed content analysis, researchers can examine qualitative data according to existing theoretical concepts. It is considered an appropriate approach in cases where existing literature offers relevant frameworks that can guide the process of analysis, providing themes that can direct the researcher in identifying patterns and making conclusions about collected data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This study applies existing literature on the strategies NGOs use to influence policy, as described in the conceptual framework of this thesis and identified in Figure 1, in the analysis of the interview responses to organize the findings and determine the extent to which the NGOs explored in this thesis are interested in and engaged in education policy discussions.

On the other hand, grounded theory is an inductive approach to data analysis through which a researcher builds theories based on the themes that emerge in the data itself (Berg & Lune, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Neuman, 2000). In addition to using a directed content

analysis approach, the researcher has also relied on a grounded theory approach, allowing for themes to emerge from patterns in the data throughout the process of analysis. This was a particularly useful approach given the exploratory nature of this study.

Using a combination of grounded theory and directed content analysis required that the researcher read through the interview transcripts and conduct several rounds of coding as new themes emerged in order to confirm findings and further explore perceived patterns.

Chapter 5: Results

This section presents the results of the interviews conducted with education NGO representatives and is divided according to the different categories of themes identified through the process of coding the interview transcripts. The subsections below present summaries of the interviewees' responses with regard to their organizations' goals, areas of work, and services offered; the target communities represented organizations aim to work with, and the level of access organizations have to the MOETE and public schools; organizations' relationships with the MOETE; the strategies organizations appear to be using to influence the education sector; the challenges and successes interviewees described in their experience working with or trying to work with the MOETE; and interviewees' reflections on the MOETE's recent reform efforts.

5.1 Organization Goals: Addressing Gaps in the Public Education System

A recurring theme across the interviews was the idea that NGOs were working to address gaps in the public education system or create systemic changes. In describing the missions and goals of their organizations, many interviewees made explicit mention of gaps in the education system. For instance, Interviewee 2, a representative of a well-established local NGO, described their organization's mission as follows:

> Our mission and what we do is basically to close the gap…that there is between the education system and the business world, meaning that a lot of students graduate with, you know, their education background. They know how to perform very well in an interview, but once they graduate… (Interviewee 2).

Interviewee 8, a representative of a large, international NGO, explained:

> You know, sometimes you find children in their maybe 6th grade or grade 9, and they still cannot read, although they go to schools on a daily basis and even they pass exams, but at the end, they don't know how to read. Right? So our program is

> not only focusing on ensuring continued enrollment, but focus on really becoming educated…we compensate the lack of skill programs in public schools.

Interviewee 6, a representative of a local NGO, added,

> We have a solid understanding of the challenges in the public education system. We know the gaps. We know that the only proper solution that will work is something that is contextualized to the Egyptian public schools and at the same time evidence-based.

These responses point to these organizations' recognition of failures on the part of Egypt's public education system to provide sufficient quality learning, resulting in significant gaps in the system that nonprofit organizations such as these have stepped up to address. Given their description of the organizations' missions and goals as directly tied to the gaps in the public education system, we might identify a political nature to their work and, in turn, even consider their efforts as a form of advocacy. While these organizations may not be explicitly lobbying the Egyptian government for change, the services they provide and the gaps they have observed in the public education system might be considered as manifestations of their expectations of what government schools should be providing.

In other cases, participants did not speak as explicitly about addressing gaps in the system, but rather alluded to their work complementing the public education system, describing their goal as being related to introducing students to skills or topics they have never been exposed to, achieving mindset shifts, breaking with societal norms and common practices, and enabling marginalized groups to experience quality education they might not otherwise be able to access. Interviewee 5's organization works to build connections between students of different background and cultures, and particularly to build more empathy and understanding for the experience of refugee youth in Egypt. While this is a small, local organization with a permanent team of only five individuals, it should be noted that the founder has extensive experience

supporting international and bilateral organizations operating in the education sector in Egypt. Further describing the organization's work, Interviewee 5 explained,

> Knowing that there's no safe space for positive contact and that contact in the streets is usually not always positive, it was about kind of filling that gap and creating a space that is safe for positive contact to take place. It could happen in some places, but it's just very unlikely.

While Interviewee 5 did not explicitly describe a failure in the public education system. Their reflections on the lack of space for intercultural connection-building lead to us to understand that public schools are not providing opportunities for socioemotional learning and helping to cultivate connections across lines of diversity. This interviewee later described the lack of safety in public schools, which suggests that the challenge of the lack of opportunities and spaces for positive contact between children of different backgrounds is both a general societal issue, as well as one specific to the public education system. Similar to Interviewee 5, Interviewee 7 comes from a smaller, local NGO that has not been able to scale their work far beyond the local community in which they were initially established. This interviewee has also faced challenges sustaining their operations in recent years given difficulties maintaining funding. Despite the smaller size of both Interviewee 5 and 7's organizations, both of these grassroots NGOs have received international recognition for their innovative and evidence-backed models of social impact. Discussing their observations of children that led to the establishment of their organization, Interviewee 7 said, "I realized that they don't get the chance to get exposed to any forms of arts in school or outside." This response similarly identifies a lack of attention to arts education in the public school system. While this participant may not have explicitly described their organization as aiming to address this gap, the mere fact that this organization exists to expose children to the arts in an attempt to strengthen their learning brings to light an area which

could be improved in the public education system and thus positions their work as an expression of demand for policy change.

In terms of the types of services these NGOs offer to address challenges in the public education system, the interviewees described the following:

- Providing alternative education opportunities directly to K-12 public school students themselves to complement the public-school system's formal curriculum, whether within public schools or through more informal outreach outside of the system itself
- Offering support to marginalized groups unable to access or fully benefit from the public education system in Egypt, such as refugee communities;
- Providing additional support to public school students struggling with their academic performance or at risk for dropping out of the public school system, whether through academic support or the provision of resources, both financial and other, to individual students and their families to empower them to continue pursuing K-12 education;
- Providing teachers access to training or resources to support their professional development and better enable them to support K-12 public school students;
- Building the capacities of other NGO to support the education sector;
- Providing support to parents to empower them to better advocate for their children and support students in their educational experience; and
- Offering schools support with access to resources and infrastructure renovation.

As for the alternative educational opportunities NGOs described to complement the educational experience of K-12 public school students in Egypt, the topics interview participants

described their programming covering include the following: social emotional learning skills such as problem solving, confidence, self-esteem support, and leadership topics.; other life skills, such as entrepreneurship skills, employability, digital skills, financial literacy, and experiential learning opportunities; environmental justice education; and arts education.

5.2 Target Communities and Access to Public School Students

Eight of the interviewees who participated in this study described their organizations as having worked directly with public school or the MOETE at some point in their organizations' history. However, only five of these organizations were described as having maintained an active working relationship with public schools to date, either through engagement with school leaders at the local level or through higher-level partnerships with the MOETE. The majority of the interviewees described their organizations' target communities as being marginalized communities in Egypt, such as refugees and asylum seekers who have either been barred from accessing the public school system or face challenges as students in the system, communities of orphaned students, or other communities of students attending public school but struggling with achieving quality learning. According to the interviewees, in most cases, these communities were targeted outside of a formal public-school setting, either through local community schools, social media outreach, local community engagement, or through partnerships with other organizations or learning centers. Some of the interviewees also described providing services for parents in these communities, and a limited number discussed offering training or professional development services to public school teachers.

Some of the interviewees described needing to direct their services toward private schools in order to be able to reach more students directly because of the challenges they either experienced or heard about secondhand with regard to engaging with the MOETE. For example,

when prompted to elaborate on the perceived barriers they described with regard to accessing public schools, Interviewee 1, a representative of a small local NGO of just two full-time employees, explained:

> From my personal experience, yes, like every time you would be in contact or in touch with someone who is ministry adjacent, they would make it very clear that if we want to go down this road, then good luck to us! And it was always a bit like, 'oh, do you have USAID with you?'…'which organizations are behind this?' And that's why I'm telling you like, it almost felt like it was a checklist…If you have these things, then you can ask if you can go in.

This participant further reflected on the negative consequences of feeling closed off from working with public schools:

> I don't think there's anything wrong with doing something for a [private] school, but you also have to ask yourself, when the money is coming to a project and under the guise of being there for Egyptian people and it's aid money and stuff like that…and then it goes to the most privileged people…so it's just a bit like, what are we trying to achieve here?

It is interesting to note that while this interviewee comes from a small, local nonprofit initiative, their work is backed by and housed under a large foreign embassy, and even operates in partnership with another Egyptian government entity. Even with these influential forces behind their work, the interviewee observed significant barriers to working with the MOETE. This interviewee's reflections suggest that the perceived barriers to collaboration with the MOETE have created an environment wherein organizations do not feel it is even worth approaching the Ministry, whether about the potential to support the education system or advocate for policy changes. As a result, it appears that resources with the potential to strengthen public school students' learning experience are being kept from communities in need and directed elsewhere, toward the private sector where schools appear more open to conversation and collaboration. This is particularly troublesome given the general understanding of the MOETE's lack of funds to support its reform plans. It is also interesting to consider this interviewee's reflections in

connection to some of the reflections shared by Interviewee 9, a representative of a large, well-established, international NGO with a long history of working directly with the MOETE. They described NGO organizations as often overstepping the bounds of their roles by directing students' attention away from the public education system and toward their services:

> The whole idea of an NGO helping the school is to bring those children into school, to help them pass their exams, and not create a parallel system that would actually attract children out of schools and out of formal schooling. That's not what an NGO should be doing. Maybe they should cover things that [public schools] don't have a budget for. Maybe do the trips they are unable to do because they don't have the time or the resources. (Interviewee 9)

In their response, Interviewee 9 seemed to place some of the burden of the generally negative relationship between CSOs and the MOETE on NGOs, suggesting that they need to reevaluate their approach to supporting public school students. In their opinion, NGOs could approach the MOETE with a more collaborative intention of identifying ways to support rather than simply offering the services they want to see offered in schools. Given this interviewee's background working with their organization, it should be noted that they have experienced a generally positive relationship and experience working with the Ministry. Considered in the context of Interviewee 1's response and other interviewees' reflections on the difficulties of accessing the MOETE, this response perhaps suggests that other organizations—perhaps smaller, grassroots initiatives with less of a government network—are responding to a perceived blockade on NGOs imposed by the government by taking a more confrontational approach and operating outside of the public system as a sort of "parallel system." This analysis might also strengthen our reading of NGOs' work as a form of political commentary on the public education system.

5.3 Relationships with the Ministry of Education and Technical Education

As described earlier, five of the interview participants described their organizations as currently having active relationships with the MOETE. According to the interviewees' descriptions, these relationships range from mere interactions around approvals at the local level for limited communication with public schools to more comprehensive memorandums of understanding (MOU) for deeper engagement with the MOETE and increased access to public school students and teachers. Two of these organizations are grassroots NGOs established in Egypt, and the other three are larger international NGOs.

Those organizations with positive working relationships and full-fledged partnerships with the MOETE described utilizing a number of different strategies to build that relationship and gain approval to access to the public school system, including investing time in building relationships with ministry officials; focusing on forming connections at the local level, i.e., governorates or schools, to achieve impact; mobilizing resources to gain leverage and gain initial access to schools or conversations with the MOETE; modeling evidence-based interventions to earn the trust and approval of the MOETE; publishing research to engage in policy-level discussions; and participating in civil society coalitions aimed at engaging in policy discussions.

Participants whose organizations have been unable to build partnerships with or achieve the necessary approvals from the MOETE to engage in policy discussions or enter public schools also described using a number of strategies to shape the education system by reaching public school students in different ways, such as partnering with organizations with direct access to public schools or communities of public school students and mobilizing communities by advocating for mindset change in informal spaces outside of the public school setting. These strategies are described in more depth in the following section.

5.4 Strategies for Impacting Education System

5.4.1 Government Partnerships

As discussed above, five of the interview participants described their organizations as having approvals or MOUs to work with the MOETE or access public school students. Two of these organizations described having only limited approvals, in one case simply to communicate with public schools and in another to offer services in public schools. While the other three organizations described having MOUs with the MOETE and generally positive relationships, the description of their partnerships still appeared to be limited to approvals to provide their services in public school settings, with little evidence of active coproduction or cocreation with the MOETE. None of these relationships were described as including any partnership or collaborative efforts around larger policy questions or strategies.

5.4.2 Advocacy and Campaigning

When asked about their involvement in policy discussions around the K-12 public education system, the majority of interviewees answered that their organizations were not interested in or explicitly involved in any policy advocacy. Many of the interviewees were quick to clarify that their organizations were more focused on other areas, such as program implementation, and that they had not identified policy advocacy as their focus area. There was a general sense that interviewees perceived their work to exist outside of the policy arena. For example, one representative of a local NGO with a generally positive relationship with the MOETE said, “We’re mainly an extracurricular activity…because we’re not giving subjects. It’s not like we’re giving something that the students are going to get grades on and have exams at the end” (Interviewee 2). Similarly, Interviewee 11, a representative of a large, well-established international NGO with an extensive history of working with the MOETE, explained, “Unfortunately, I think we don’t have in our project or intervention that is targeting changing

policy or advocacy or so on. So all the time we are working in the lower circles of influence, not policy changing." None of the interview participants had been invited to any policy discussions instigated by the MOETE or invited to participate in any strategic planning efforts in relation to education reform. Only one interviewee noted that their organization is beginning to plan how they might focus more on advocacy by collaborating with research institutions to make more contributions to the education sector and influence discourse on education reform. In particular, this organization is beginning to explore how they can focus more on engaging the media and disseminating impact evaluations to share more evidence-based practices and solutions with others, including the MOETE, and take a more proactive approach in communicating the value of education.

As mentioned earlier, while the majority of interviewees described their organizations as not being actively engaged in policy discussions, a select few did describe participating in discussions through third parties, such as UN Agencies. For example, Interviewee 3, a representative of a large international NGO, explained that they were advocating for more support for refugee students among UN Agencies and others around the access of other nationalities to the public education system. Interviewee 10, a representative of a smaller local NGO with ties to a larger international network and a described sharing reflections on education policy in their individual media engagements as a public figure, but not explicitly through lobbying efforts as a representative of the organizations they work with.

Additionally, interviewees made mention of the recent establishment of a national coalition of CSOs working on education, referred to as the National Education Forum by Interviewee 8 and described as an education working group by several other interviewees. According to interviewees, this coalition includes a group of local NGOs who are "jointly

[working] on policy dialogue, advocacy, and harmonizing their efforts in the field of education" (Interviewee 8). According to another participant, this group is currently working on a strategy for including more refugee students in the public school system that will ultimately be presented to the MOETE, suggesting that this coalition may serve as a useful platform for NGOs to direct their policy suggestions to the MOETE and advocate for changes they see as necessary for the improvement of the education system at large.

It should be noted, however, that this group appears to be a relatively exclusive group to which not all NGOs working in the education space have had access. One participant made a point to note, "I would say to take care that not all NGOs are included in this educational working group. They might not be aware. Some of the NGOs you interview might not even be aware that there is an educational working group" (Interviewee 9). Interviewee 8 also added that there is a separate, smaller forum of international NGOs that has also recently formed to advocate for policy recommendations across different fields, including education. Both of these organizations work for large, well-known international NGOs with established connections among other international NGOs, the government, and other bilateral agencies, perhaps further highlighting Interviewee 9's description of the exclusivity of these for a.

5.4.3 Relationship-building with Ministry Officials

A number of interviewees described a process of courting the MOETE, dedicating a significant amount of time to building personal connections with MOETE representatives in order to work toward more favorable and trustful relationships. For example, Interviewee 2 explained that while they have been told that in the past their organization faced more challenges in targeting public schools, their organization's leaders placed great importance on earning the ministry's trust. Their organization is a local NGO with a positive history of working directly

with the MOETE and directing their services toward public school students. This interviewee further explained how their organization reached this point in their work with the Ministry:

> We're able to work with the ministry because the co-founders, 20 years ago, spent time and effort to gain the ministry's trust, to give them access to schools and to be able to delivery our programs. And of course, each year until today, the ministry reviews all the programs before we delivery to make sure everything is in their consent…Since then, we've had a good rapport and good relationship with them. They know us and they trust us. (Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 4 similarly described the time it takes to cultivate a strong relationship with the MOETE, reflecting on their previous experience working with closely with the MOETE when their organization had the backing of a large embassy and a great deal of international funding. This respondent explained, "To be through the ministry, you cannot, you know, just like knock on the door and go and tell them who you are…and expect that they would welcome you" (Interviewee 4). These responses demonstrate the extensive amount of time, effort, and dedicated strategy necessary for an organization to develop a working relationship with the MOETE.

Interviewees also emphasized the significance of the specific individuals with which NGO representatives cultivated relationships. According to the interviewees, it is critical that NGOs dedicate time to building individual connections at various levels to avoid challenges with high turnover rates within the MOETE and ensure the organization has someone who can advocate for them even beyond the stage of gaining approvals in order to actually implement their programming. For example, Interviewee 6, a representative of a local NGO with a long history of working in Egypt and positive ties to the MOETE, explained:

> Part of our government relationship management is that we wanted to, and it was important and crucial for us to engage all levels of MOETE throughout the past years, through different ways, because even if you have the MOE and even if you have access to schools, sometimes you can have a lot of struggles and challenges inside the school or in creating impact you want, so it's actually important to have the right support...So throughout the past years, we managed to have very good relations with MOETE representatives in each governorate. (Interviewee 6)

Participants described organizations working toward building these relationships by continually setting meetings to share updates and impact, inviting MOETE representatives to events and recognizing their efforts and successes, and leveraging employees' personal connections within the government to gain access to MEOTE representatives. In particular, interviewees also alluded to the importance of being strategic in efforts toward building relationships with the MOETE by centering interactions or partnership proposals around the priorities of the ministry.

5.4.4 Relationship-building at the Local Level

Some interviewees also described focusing their efforts on local officials, such as governors or even school principals, in order to have achieve limited access to schools or students. For example, Interviewee 8 described their large, international organization as having obtained local approvals at the governorate level to be able to work with schools in identifying the public-school students that would need their organization's support and monitoring the intervention's impact on the students:

> Basically, we are cooperating with the schools to provide us with the list of girls who are or maybe who are the best eligible candidates for the program in terms of the family conditions, any performance…We continue to coordinate with them regarding the progress of the goals after enrollment of the in the program. So our collaboration with the program is with the schools at the local level and to make sure the proper selection of girls and the monitoring and evaluation. (Interviewee 8)

This participant's response suggests that the levels of access to the MOETE also vary among NGOs, even those that are larger and with access to significant international funds—with it being slightly easier to achieve the approvals necessary to work with schools in a limited nature, but perhaps much more difficult to develop a relationship which grants an organization direct access to school communities.

This interviewee also made a point to explain that despite their focus on local approvals, their organization still prioritizes making strategic efforts at engaging with higher-level officials at the MOETE in order to maintain a generally positive relationship. Specifically, they intentionally co-organized a number of national events centered on education with the MOETE in order to both form connections with both ministry officials and engage with other civil society actors working in the field of education. Though targeted at relationship-building, the interviewee also explained how their organization was able to leverage these events to engage in informal policy advocacy with officials in attendance.

One study participant also recalled a more informal experience of having been able to access public school students and achieve a small impact through the establishment of positive relationships with local school principals. Outside of their experience working with a formal nonprofit organization, this interviewee described having previously worked on an education initiative as a younger student. The student group primarily focused on investing in school infrastructure and supporting school renovations, but through this work was able to achieve positive relationships with school officials that enabled them to direct other capacity-building support to students covering topics such as critical thinking and other social-emotional skills:

> We would tell principles, if you are interested and if the teachers wouldn't mind, we also have a few things like games and activities that we can do with the children…and it worked in a few schools. I think in some schools, the principals were a bit like, 'let's keep it under wraps,' and then other schools, it's a bit, it's just casual. So I think it was also really a matter of who you're engaging with made a difference. (Interviewee 1).

This response points to the potential success of an approach in which an NGO strategically and gradually builds toward increased access to students by first investing time and resources in support that directly aligns with what the MOETE's wants. While this organization might not explicitly categorize their work as rooted in policy advocacy,

this interviewee's response suggests that organizations working with the MOETE are actively, however subtly, working toward promoting their own agendas, first cultivating a relationship rooted in synergies with the MOETE and then building on this relationship to address further areas of improvement in the public education system. This interviewee's description of the perceived attempts by schools to conceal their work with the NGO or maintain their relationship on an informal level also points to a potential fear of the MOETE restricting these activities should they have been made known to higher-level officials.

5.4.5 Coalition-building within Civil Society Sector

As mentioned earlier, a number of interviewees referenced the recent formation of an education working group made up of NGOs aimed at sourcing ideas and reflections for education reform from the civil society sector. While interviewees described this as being made up of local NGOs working in the education space, the group appears to have been established and is being guided by UNICEF.

Some of the interviewees also alluded to a process of informal coalition-building in order to access public school students and influence the system. While these organizations were unable to access public schools through formal partnerships or with the explicit approval of the MOETE, they described partnering with other organizations with established partnerships with the MOETE in order to direct their impact toward public school students and the education system. Participants also described being part of policy discussions through invitations to workshops and other events hosted by international organizations such as UNICEF. Interviewee 3, a representative of a large, well-known, international NGO explained that any discussions around policy in which they were involved were not instigated by the MOETE: "There were

some workshops where we have attended with the ministry and UNICEF, but the invitation as more coming from the UNCIEF side" (Interviewee 3). In these spaces, the interviewee explained, NGOs were able to share their reflections on education reform efforts. While this response points to the promise of deeper NGO involvement in policy discussion around public education, the interviewee's mention of the invitations stemming from UNICEF raises questions as to the MOETE's level of commitment to engaging with NGOs. While it appears the Ministry has been involved in the discussions described, this interviewee's reflections suggest that the MOETE could take more initiative in instigating these types of fora.

5.4.6 Resource Mobilization

A number of organizations described having been able to either build more formal relationships with the MOETE or achieve policy advocacy by focusing on mobilizing resources toward the public education system. This can include financial resources through the indirect provision of funding for the education system. All of the interviewees that described having collaborated with the MOETE identified that the programming they partnered to offer was funded through the resources of the NGO, without any financial support stemming from the side of the MOETE. A number of the interviewees also described having supported the MOETE with infrastructure support, such as building public schools or renovating existing schools, as one of the main determinants of a positive relationship with the MOETE. Reflecting on their organization's history of building public school schools, Interviewee 9 explained, "So yes, [Name of large, international organization] has done something and we are loved by the Minister of Education. It goes back years…so when it comes to dealing with the Ministry of Education, we don't have a problem. When we had the funds to help them with the schools, we did that willingly and gave them the schools to run later." One interviewee explained how their

partnership with the MOETE was primarily centered around the provision of equipment and materials to help schools prepare for the transition to the use of smart classrooms (Interviewee 3). Another interviewee also described directing small amounts of funding toward the public school system by supporting students with resources for their research projects during the pandemic (Interviewee 10).

Some of the interviewees also mentioned the importance of being backed by funding, an international development agency, or another government entity in order to achieve a partnership with the MOETE. Interviewee 4 described their organization's relationship with the MOETE as generally positive when they had the backing of another government entity: "So the program was, you know, blooming, and the cooperation with the ministry was very good, but again we were only a project. And the good thing at the time was that we were, they felt as if we are an extension of the…embassy" (Interviewee 4). During this period of the organization's relationship with the MOETE, the interviewee also remembered the ministry often asking for funding or resources that were not originally outlined as part of the programming they were collaborating on; according to this interviewee, during the partnership, these expenses were expected to be covered by the NGO.

5.4.7 Community Engagement

Many of the interviewees described elements of their work that could be categorized as forms of community engagement. For instance, in some cases, interviewees described seeing their impact disseminated throughout the K-12 education system through their target beneficiaries, most often, teachers. One participant from a local NGO with extensive experience working with public school students described observing the ripple effect of seeing teachers their organization

had worked with shift into positions at new schools and bring their newly developed values and skills with them:

> So teachers go to another school or a teacher becomes a principal for another school. So this has also been one of the successful things that has been done because they go with what all the learnings that the they've learned in the school and they create change in another school so. These are the three levels we're successfully working on that from the ministry side. (Interviewee 6)

In this case, while the organization may not be directly advocating for change with the MOETE, they appear to be working to shape the public education system through their impact on teachers and their understanding of the influence teachers have on how the public school system operates.

For those organizations working outside of public schools, without any direct connection to the MOETE, community engagement often seemed to be at the core of their efforts to engage public school students. Without direct access to students through public schools, these organizations have had to think creatively and leverage other tools and channels, such as social media, through local community volunteer networks, peer-to-peer engagement, and family engagement, to find public school students interested in participating in their programing and receiving more support. Some of the interviewees from these organizations described seeing their beneficiaries bring the learnings they gleaned from participating in their programming into their peer groups and public-school community, thus further diffusing the impact of the NGOs' work. For instance, one interview participant remembered students inviting their school peers to attend one of their organization's sessions in order to see their colleagues' presentations of community service projects. This interviewee also shared the following story:

> I believe that they are keen on transferring this knowledge to their school peers, and actually, I can tell you a very cute story. [Our partner] had an open day recently for high schoolers to learn more about the programs and scholarships…and our students joined this event and have invited their school peers to attend with them too, so they traveled all together. (Interviewee 6)

Another interviewee similarly recounted a memory of a student in one of their programs bringing a project they had made into their public-school classroom, ultimately leading to the school to reach out to the NGO to explore partnership. According to the interviewee, this never materialized into a formal partnership because of threats from the MOETE directed at the school. In light of the results of this study, it appears that the MOETE may have wanted to maintain centralized control over the content being shared with students. Unlike other interviewees' reflections, however, this response points to overt efforts on the MOETE's part to block an NGO from influencing schools, rather than what most interviewees have described as more inconspicuous preventative measures that make approvals challenging. It is also, however, worth noting how the NGO was able to begin infusing some of its values into the public-school environment through one of its beneficiaries.

5.4.8 Modeling Interventions

Some of the interview participants described being able to scale their impact by creating tools and resources either in collaboration with the MOETE or with accreditation or approval from the ministry.

For example, Interviewee 3 described their international organization's experience creating a curriculum for capacity-building targeted at public school teachers and successfully having this accredited by the ministry. They described this project as having proceeded positively because of the program's alignment with the MOETE's goals: "This process was not hard or challenging, but it was cooperative. I think this whole project was appealing to the ministry during the time because it kind of speaks to their priorities" (Interviewee 3). One interviewee even described having observed the MOETE support their organization in mainstreaming and

helping scale the impact of a number of their programs. This interviewee similarly works for a large, international NGO. They explained:

> Usually our projects get a lot of positive feedback from the Ministry of Education, and they ask us to mainstream these interventions. For example, we were piloting a literacy interevention… in the summer, like summer camps, and the Ministry of Education asked [us] to include more public schools and include more children and this happens a lot with many of the interventions because mainly [we are] focusing on evidence-based interventions. (Interviewee 11)

5.5 Barriers to Working with the Ministry

According to interviewees, there is a general, often unspoken or implied, understanding in the education sector of the difficulties involved in building a partnership with the MOETE and working directly through public schools. Interviewee 1, for example, explained their experience coming from a smaller, local NGO without any experience working with the MOETE: "You need to go through an excruciating process of filtering, of you know, checking if these, if this is the agenda they want to have with the kids, you know? So, it is extremely difficult." Interviewees whose organizations are not working with the MOETE, either because they have not been able to secure approvals to work with public schools or because they have simply never approached or been approached by the MOETE, described a number of barriers preventing the development of a relationship. These barriers include bureaucratic challenges because of the dense, often unclear approval process; lack of sufficient resources; lack of backing by international actors; a perception of a lack of trust or confidence in the civil society sector on the part of the MOETE; high turnover rates within the MOETE; and misalignment in interests and priorities in terms of development of the public school system.

In terms of resources, all of the interviewees who have worked with the MOETE made it clear that the projects they partnered on were supported entirely by funds raised by their organizations, with no or limited resources coming from the side of the MOETE. As for those

organizations who do not have an active relationship with the MOETE, a number of interviewees postulated the reason for this being their smaller size or lack of resources. Interviewee 7, for example, the leader of a small, local NGO, explained that they had never approached the MOETE for partnership because they "didn't have the resources to approach the ministry." This participant later described their recent need to downsize their work, speaking further to their struggle to maintain the funds to continue their work, let alone direct resources toward a partnership with the MOETE.

Interviewee 4, a representative of another small, local NGO, described the lack of resources on both sides, civil society and the MOETE, as a reason for decreased collaboration between NGOs and the ministry: "But I mean the education sector, I mean I don't even know how it would have been possible given what I understand is a lack of funding in the education sector, how they would have been able to afford such programming." Similarly, Interviewee 10 explained a general sense of apathy among MOETE teachers and employees and attributed this, at least in part, to their low pay. This reflection also speaks to the issue of a lack of resources underpinning a lack of drive to work toward change in collaboration with other organizations.

Interviewees with experience working with the Ministry either directly described or alluded to the importance of having the backing of a larger, international organization when approaching the MOETE for potential collaboration. For example, Interviewee 4 reflected on how their program was first launched as part of a bilateral agency initiative, but later broke ties with the international agency and established itself as a local NGO. According to the interviewee, this transition introduced a number of new challenges for the organization with regard to its relationship with the MOETE. Despite the organization already having had deep-rooted connections with the MOETE, in its new form as a local NGO without the backing of an

international agency, the interviewee felt a new sense of distrust and lack of interest in collaboration on the part of the MOETE.

In some cases, interviewees also described the lack of alignment between donor interests and the areas that require funding in the education sector. For example, Interviewee 9, an NGO representative from a large, international organization, explained:

> It comes down to the lack of resources. NGOs are usually restrained by the restricted funds they receive from donors that actually have a certain goal or results that they expect, that they cannot spend money elsewhere, while the schools have different needs. And the appetite for funding schools has gone down, has decreased a lot recently by donors…NGOs do have a lot of funds, but it's not being directed towards that.

According to another participant from a local NGO with significant ties to the international NGO community and an outspoken political voice, the kind of changes that need to happen in the K-12 public education system are ones that will require a great deal of time, commitment, and longer-term funding; these types of investments do not appear to appeal to donors that are more interested in shorter-term projects that produce quick results, but do not necessarily support systemic change. Similarly, Interviewee 2 explained that their organization would need to have approval from their larger, international umbrella organization in order to become engaged in higher level policy discussions in the education sector, implying that up until now, this had not been a priority for spending.

In some instances, interviewees felt that there was no interest on the part of the MOETE in working with their organization, either because of a perception that the MOETE was more focused on other priorities or a sense that the MOETE did not value or understand the importance of their area of work. For example, Interviewee 5, a representative of a small, local NGO without any history of working with the MOETE but recognition among international organizations for their innovative approach to social change, explained, "First, it has to be

prioritized…There has to be a willingness from the government to prioritize, and I feel like that's the reason [organization name] or other organizations stay quiet and don't partner because there's a sense that, 'ok, maybe we're not wanted, or maybe you know, it will put us at risk or we'll put our work at risk" (Interviewee 5). In this case, this interviewee also alluded to a concern for calling attention to themselves and risking their work being shut down or scrutinized by the MOETE.

On a similar note, Interviewee 4 described feeling as though the MOETE is hesitant to acknowledge certain issues and thus collaborate toward achieving certain changes in education in fear of admitting to challenges on their end. They explained, "Also, some of those programs actually highlight what the ministry themselves or the government is not doing. So by just accepting this, it's as if showing failure, showing their own failure" (Interviewee 4).

Many of the interviewees described a general sense of distrust in the civil society sector stemming from the MOETE. Two interviewees mentioned the challenge of countering conspiracy theories within the MOETE about NGO involvement in public education. For example, Interviewee 4 explained, "They are always suspicious of our intentions in general and that there is money behind what is moving us…they think there is a political agenda or, you know, the conspiracy theory thing that the international, or the 'West', wants to come into and interfere with the curriculum." Interviewee 5 similarly attributed the slow growth in their relationship with the MOETE to the lack of trust in them as an NGOs and further explained that more efforts on the part of the ministry to build relationships within civil society could increase NGOs' interest in collaborating toward strategic change: "I think any actions that would be taken as more participatory and strengthen that trust would be a good thing for sure."

In some cases, interviewees also seemed to be explicitly positioning themselves, as well as their organizations' work and missions, as outside of the bounds of the MOETE. For example, Interviewee 13, an NGO representative from a small organization based in their own local community, explained, "To be clear, the Ministry of Education never contacted us. We never thought about contacting them. We truly think of them as our contrast. We think of them as, like, 'We do not want to be you, and we do not think your way is the way." For this interviewee, it appears that the lack of alignment stems from both their end and that of the MOETE.

It is important to note that not all interviewees perceived their lack of a current working relationship with the MOETE negatively, but rather commented on their sense of empathy for the ministry's current focus on reform efforts and the intensive work the ministry needs to do in combing through potential civil society partnerships to maintain a sense of order in the public education system. For example, one interviewee noted that they did not perceive the MOETE as an adversary but rather understood the need for a system of scrutiny and approvals. This interviewee is from a large, international NGO with well-established connections within the MOETE; they are the same interviewee who reflected on the way NGOs could improve their approach to the MOETE. They explained:

> [Working with the MOETE] requires screening, security checks, approvals that they might not be able to give us, not because…they're not against us, but they are entitled to do that. Anything that happens inside the Ministry of Education schools run by the government has to come through them, not through NGOs anymore. (Interviewee 9)

This interviewee further explained that it used to be easier to work with the MOETE, but that this period of time created "some sort of chaos because not all NGOs coming in have a clear agenda of what they're trying to teach the children" (Interviewee 9). For this participant, it makes sense for access to public schools to be restricted to certain organizations that are properly vetted.

Other interviewees similarly commented on the importance of organizations coming to the table with strong, evidence-backed interventions, rather than simply any organization being given access to public schools. However, these participants also alluded to the value of the MOETE creating more opportunities for partnership and involvement. For example, Interviewee 2, a representative of a small NGO with extensive experience working directly with public schools, explained:

> I mean, if there's room or space for NGOs to be involved in the current educational system and the subjects of course, I think it would take the country to the next step, if we were involved in more than just extracurriculars, yeah I think, but it depends on the NGOs right? You need to have very well, structured, strong NGOs that really are able to change the education system. But of course, I think if there is room and space for NGOs who do this, I think it would make a huge impact in all on the whole education system.

Interviewees whose organizations have worked with the MOETE were also asked to reflect on the challenges they might have experienced. The challenges most often cited by interviewees were bureaucratic challenges, the lack of coordination and, as mentioned earlier, the issue of changing employees within the ministry, which makes it difficult to maintain long-term relationships within the MOETE and impacts the sustainability of projects. For example, Interviewee 3 described having a generally positive experience working with the Ministry, but made a point to note the challenge of dealing with high turnover rates: "Of course, like people, it changes frequently in the ministry, which also make it hard to follow up on anything. So the high turnover of the people you're working with is is also sometimes is not helping and the ties break after the project."

In terms of the lack of coordination, interviewees described their perception of a lack of organization within the ministry and general sense that there was no clear strategy in the MOETE's approach to engaging with CSOs. Many interviewees described having to interact with numerous individuals from different units within the MOETE in the process of gaining

approvals to work with public schools and in their ongoing experience of continued work with ministry. For example, Interviewee 11 explained, “Whenever you reach out to the ministry to do a project, you’re not reaching out to the same person every time. It depends on where or under which department your project falls, but it’s not under like one strategy for the ministry that they need this and that support…so I think it needs to be structured and organized and coordinated.” Similarly, Interviewee 10 described the difficulty of creating a sense of buy-in within the ministry in order to proceed efficiently and effectively with a project. They shared, “We would have all the agreement from the ministers, but then it’s all about the middle management and lower management. And so if you’re lucky you find the guy, you know a champion. So if we found the champion, we can work. If we don’t, you know.”

Furthermore, participants described a lack of understanding of the processes involved for gaining approvals to work with public schools. Interviewee 6 even described there being “so much ambiguity and no clear steps” for those organizations with established MOUs with the MOETE. They described a recent sudden change in approval processes that now requires professional development programs within public schools to have the minister’s official approval, even if these programs are already operating under the umbrella of an established memorandum or partnership with the ministry.

Interviewee 3 shared their reflections on the lack of coordination by drawing a comparison to other countries’ approaches to collaborating with civil society on matters of public education:

> The one thing that I think it’s missing in Egypt …is that like whatever impact you’re achieving, your achieving it on a certain district or a school, but it’s not a national, not nationwide…because to my point related to how the support is not coordinated across the different ministry departments…In other countries, it’s the whole ministry working with you, it’s not a specific department. And…it’s all the civil society community working with the ministry. I’m taking this part. You’re taking that part, and at the end of the day,

> we have this goal to achieve, but I think this is what's missing here. And maybe if this done, we could achieve more impact on a scale. (Interviewee 3)

This interviewee similarly described how projects that do unfold in collaboration with the ministry are often instigated by civil society actors and centered around specific, smaller-scale projects. There was a similar sense among other interviewees of a lack of structure in the way the MOETE works with NGOs and a lack of effort by the ministry to actively engage NGOs toward achieving longer-term change within the education sector.

Interviewee 11 further commented a lack of coordination among civil society actors in their work toward creating impact in the public education system:

> I still see that coordination with agencies is not enough. Sometimes…you feel that they do not want to share enough information…So I think that we need more coordination, especially in this strategic plan. So if the organizations did not really coordinate their activities and their budgets and their interventions, this strategy would not be a successful one. They will not succeed.

Additionally, Interview 3 noted that the lack of coordination and clarity made monitoring and evaluation of their project with the MOETE difficult. In their experience, once the project was completed, it was difficult for their organization to follow up on the sustainability of the program and whether any further support was needed because no mechanisms for follow-up and longer-term evaluation were put in place.

5.6 Successes in NGO-MOETE Relationships

Interview participants who had engaged with the MOETE in some way were also asked to reflect on any of successes they experienced in their interactions with the Ministry. In general, many of the participants, regardless of their relationship with the MOETE, described leaders within the ministry as being visionary in their plans and rhetoric around progress within the education system. This is in line with the media's coverage of the systemic shift and visionary

element of Education 2.0 as led by former Minister Tarek Shawki (Marey & Magd, 2022). It is worth questioning whether these interviewees would have described the MOETE as visionary prior to Shawki's period of leadership. As discussed earlier in the Results chapter, there were five interviewees that described their organizations as having established relationships with the MOETE. While these participants also shared many thoughts about the challenges they may have experienced in first building a relationship and the gaps they have observed in the K-12 public education system, they generally described their relationships with the MOETE in positive terms. Most of these participants did not delve into a great deal of detail about the successes of their relationship with the MOETE, but rather shared more generally about their ease in working with public school students and ability to spread their impact through their connections with the MOETE. A common thread in these participants' descriptions was their dedicated efforts toward strategically aligning their programs with the priority areas of the MOETE.

As described earlier, two of the interview participants described being able to scale their programming to other public schools and governorates as a result of their work with the MOETE (Interviewee 11 and 12). One of these interviewees (11) is from a larger, international NGO, while the other represents a local NGO that is quite well established in the education sector with a positive reputation among government entities and CSOs. Interviewee 11 further explained that they have successfully developed a number of training resources for educators that ended up being accredited by the MOETE to be made more available to other educators in the pre-university system. Both of these organizations described their programming as being evidence-based, and that being a driving factor in their ability to replicate their work more easily with the support of the MOETE.

5.7 Reflections on the Egyptian Public Education System and MOETE Reform Efforts

5.7.1 Main Challenges in Public Education System

Interviewees reflected both generally on the challenges they observed as being the most prevalent in the K-12 public education system and more specifically on the flaws they see in the MOETE's efforts toward reform. In terms of the challenges in the education system and gaps they perceived in the MOETE's reform efforts, interviewees highlighted the following problems:

- **A lack of safety/child safeguarding mechanisms**: Interviewees commented on the issue of bullying in public schools, particularly against marginalized groups such as refugee students. In general, however, a number of interviewees described the need to introduce safeguarding mechanism and build teachers' capacities to respond to safety issues within schools. Interviewee 5, for example, explained, "I think the biggest issue is that a lot of children don't feel safe, I would say."
- **The persistence of private tutoring:** One interviewee noted that the prevalence of private lessons also acts as a barrier to creating more impact in the community, making it difficult for NGOs to reach public school students.
- **Large classroom sizes and teacher-to-student ratios**
- **Lack of support for refugee students' integration into the public school system:** This includes a need to better orient refugee students in public school settings, provide more language learning support, tackle discrimination and bullying in schools, and offer more community-building support.
- **Disconnect between curriculum and skills required in the job market/real world:** A number of interviews commented on the disconnect between the focus areas of the current K-12 curriculum and the skills students will eventually need to be successful in the 21st century job market. For instance, Interviewee 7 said, "I find schools to be, the

children have to de-learn them. The school tends to block them. They put them into a sort of herd mentality and everything in this day and age needs someone who is completely without the herd mentality. I don't see that the education system is preparing them." Along these lines, a number of interviewees described the public education system as revolving around a traditional approach to learning centered around grades and memorization, with less attention to individual development, soft skills, and true learning.

- **Need to improve the teacher experience:** Many of the interviewees reflected on the numerous challenges K-12 public school teachers are facing, from a need for further professional development and low pay to the negative public perception of teachers and general lack of value of education. One interview participant, for example explained:

> We can have a good caliber. It's just …It's the payment. It's how society looks, you know, little them right now unfortunately, how the media is belittling them as well, how they are not getting adequate training or or even education. The program that we have… which are having students who are in college, who are about to be teachers, and it's…I'm shocked really. The training for, you know, 10 days or 12 days, is the real effect in their lives, like they have been studying for four years, but…it's very academic, very rigid, very old materials. (Interviewee 4)

- **Misalignment with context and practicality:** All of the participants who commented on the visionary nature of the MOETE's reform plans made this observation with the caveat that the ministry's efforts are still lacking in terms of their practicality. A number of interviewees noted that the ministry's discussion of reform plans seems to reflect a misunderstanding of the current context of K-12 public education in Egypt, with little attention to the skills, tools, and community support needed to achieve such significant changes. For example, interviewees commented on the positive efforts at digitizing the education space and introducing more digital tools, but noted that the MOETE transition toward the use of these tools was mishandled, with little attention to the backgrounds of

both students and teachers and the need to create a better understanding of the tools before their introduction. This has, in turn, led to a waste of resources and slowed progress toward reform goals. Interviewee 2, for instance, shared:

> In each public school, there' s a computer lab that has not tons, but 20 computers that are very good. But we also, we always go to the schools to check on them, and every time they're closed, and no one has allowed them because if something breaks, the school is in trouble, so it ends up with the students don't even use them…they're not even introduced.

In particular, the majority of the study participants identified a significant gap in the MOETE's reform efforts as being the lack of attention to the need for teacher training to support changes. For example, Interviewee 4 reflected on the need to cultivate creativity and problem-solving skills in public school teachers:

> Teachers need to be trained on how to be creative in a classroom. That has 40 and above students ecause you cannot expect a teacher, you know, to go directly into teaching strategies, while they don't know how to organize the classroom in the first place, how to do classroom management, how to deal with special needs, how to deal with trauma…There's just so many things that our teachers are missing, and whenever they develop a program, they go, you know, as if they extract the teacher from their environment and give them things that are not… yeah, the teacher is not able to relate to it. They get the training done, and they expect the teacher to go back and, you know, perform perfectly, like really? How so? (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees also noted that while the MOETE seems to attribute the gaps in teacher development or capacity-building to a lack of resources, there is a general sense that the ministry and the public at large needs to place more value on the role of teachers. Interviewee 6 explained, "I feel it's more like they don't have hope in teachers or their ability of creating change, and this is contrary to our belief."

Interviewees also spoke about a perceived disconnect between the funds available to achieve the reform plans being promoted by the MOETE. For instance, Interviewee 9

said, “I mean…they have diagnosed [the problem] very well, but do we have the means or the funds to actually fund all that?”

- **Lack of attention to cultivating community buy-in (students, parents, and teachers):** According to interviewees, one of the largest issues with the MOETE’s recent reform efforts is the hastiness with which changes were introduced. Interview participants reflected on the MOETE’s lack of attention to building buy-in within the K-12 educational community, namely students, parents, and teachers, before introducing changes. Many of the interviewees felt that much of the negative response from the community could have been avoided had the ministry dedicated more time and efforts to helping community members understand the reforms and discussing the values of the changes. Interviewees described observing a general sense of frustration among public school students and their families because of the shifts toward more critical thinking and analysis, signaling a lack of understanding of the reason behind these changes and the value this shift can bring.

  Many of the interviewees described a complete ignorance within the MOETE of the role of parents in supporting education reform and a need to direct more attention toward garnering their input and backing. Interviewee 3 shared:

  > I think some work needs to be done with parents and teachers around some awareness about the importance of this because it’s really sometimes disappointing to see that the pushback is coming from them, that they are not looking at the overall picture and how this would make the students who are graduating from the Egyptian system as competent and as competitive as others.

  Interviewee 6 further explained that parents “don’t care about learning, they care about the certificate, the government certificate,” underlining the need for the MOETE to dedicate time to changing the public’s mindset in support of their reforms or promoting

the ways in which the reforms align with the priorities and values of the community. For Interviewee 4, the negative response to the reforms pointed to the disconnect between the MOETE and the larger K-12 educational community: “You know, for me, it reflected how the top are completely unaware with what is really happening in the field…as if they don’t know the people or they don’t know what do the people need…or how they would react to those kind of major changes.”

- **Lack of strategic communication around the goals of reform efforts:** Interviewees described not having a sense of clarity around the MOETE’s ultimate goals with the reform efforts. One interviewee explicitly confirmed the lack of a physical document describing the MOETE’s reform plans: “I remember asking colleagues, like, can I see this? And they were like, no, we don’t even know. Like, we haven’t accessed it…No one really knew what it was specifically. So I guess, from the outside, it looks really great, but I have yet to actually see, and the government hasn’t really been open about what it actually involves or means” (Interviewee 5). Similarly, Interviewee 13 noted, “I think [Tarek Shawky] fell short in these two areas. What is it that you are leading us to? And is your team on board?”

5.7.2 Opportunities in MOETE Reform Efforts

As for interviewees’ reflections on the MOETE’s efforts at reforming the K-12 public education system, the following themes emerged from the researcher’s discussions with participants:

Opportunities

- **Strong, ground-breaking vision in current education strategy:** Most of the interview participants acknowledged the visionary quality of the MOETE’s current approach to

education reform, describing the introduction of Education 2.0 as a significant break from Egypt's traditional approach to education and a systemic shift toward a greater focus on learning and critical thinking. Interviewee 6 described how significant the changes envisioned are: "When the education reform happened, we were super excited because we thought that this is the only opportunity for the education system to be reformed. Like if we don't do it now, it's never going to happen because, of course, changing the curriculum…In Egypt, this is something I think has happened only twice in history."

- **Potential shift in approach to working with NGOs:** A few of the interviewees noted that they perceived the MOETE as beginning to perceive and engage with civil society more positively. For instance, one participants shared, "Recently, the government started to speak about civil society in a different way, and there was the year of civil society, and there have been different discussions. The dialogue was civil society organizations, and this maybe changes the perception around civil society" (Interviewee 3).
- **Positive NGO perceptions of curriculum changes introduced to date:** Generally, interview participants had positive things to say about the curriculum changes that have been introduced thus far, such as shifts in the content of student textbooks: "I really hope that they continue after the change in the Minister with this reform of the curriculum because I think whatever have been done so far is really great. I think the textbooks are more child friendly. They like the colors, the photos, the illustrations used" (Interviewee 3).

Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings

This section considers the results presented in the previous chapter in the context of the findings of the literature review, drawing conclusions to further guide the development of recommendations for the MOETE's future with the NGO sector. The discussion of this study's overall findings below are organized around the research questions outlined at the start of this thesis.

6.1 To what extent are education NGOs interested in influencing Egypt's pre-university public education system?

The majority of interviewees did not express an explicit interest in participating in policy conversations, and most participants appeared to be hesitant to describe themselves as engaged in any type of advocacy work. The only participant that described their organization actively taking steps to engage in advocacy described their plans as centered around producing research, but not necessarily directly engaging in lobbying efforts with the government. A number of the interviewees painted a negative picture of their relationship with the MOETE, either describing the relationship as nonexistent, with no effort on the part of the ministry to activate any communications, or as more tumultuous, with clear signals of distrust coming from the government. These initial results paint the picture of a lack of interest in or a hesitancy around participating in education reform and policy advocacy. It is also worth considering whether participants were shying away from defining their work as a form of policy advocacy because of a perception of policy advocacy as being limited to a more structured approach to influencing policymakers through overt efforts such as budget review and lobbying (Aikman, 2010). However, as the literature review has shown us, we can consider a wide range of activities under the umbrella of participation in education reform and policy advocacy, including education service delivery functioning as an attempt to improve policy implementation at the local level.

Other results also offer a different reading of interviewees' interest in policy advocacy. Interviewees described the recent establishment of two fora, one exclusively for international organizations, aimed at creating spaces for more policy discussions with the civil society sector. While information surrounding these groups appears to be limited to word-of-mouth, with no references in news articles or literature, the interview responses suggest that there are steps being taken among civil society actors and the MOETE to engage in more efforts at collaboration around education reform. It is also worth noting that interview participants were vocal about the challenges they perceive in the public education system and, as discussed in the results section, often cited gaps in the public education system in their descriptions of the goals and visions of their organizations. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that the resources and services being provided by the NGOs represented in this thesis align with a number of the challenges interviewees perceive in the pre-university education system.

Despite the lack of a formalized relationship between most of the NGOs and the MOETE, these findings underline the ways in which NGOs are finding ways to either align themselves with the priorities of the ministry in order to gain access to the public school system or address areas that are not being actively tackled by the MOETE, thus complimenting their work and bringing to light elements which require further reform attention. Additionally, despite the many barriers to working with the MOETE and public schools that interviewees shared, the participants also highlighted the various other strategies they use to reach public school students, families, and teachers and to create cultural and mindset shifts within the pre-university community, speaking to NGOs' interest in influencing the education system on a larger scale than service delivery. If we frame these findings in the context of Mitlin's perspective on self-organized coproduction (2008) and Hoppers' definition of popular education, we can consider

these results as evidence of these NGOs' interest and engagement in the politics of education reform, regardless of whether or not they are actively engaged in advocacy or lobbying efforts with the MOETE.

6.2 What are the factors enabling certain NGOs to work with the MOETE, and what are the challenges NGOs face in attempting to work with the MOETE?

In terms of the factors enabling NGOs to work with MOETE, the results suggest that organizations with funding and resources and a history or personal connections with the MOETE enable the development of more successful collaboration with the ministry. The barriers or challenges NGOs face in attempting to work with public schools and the MOETE, according to the interviews, include bureaucratic issues, high turnover rates making it difficult to maintain approvals and relationships, a lack of trust or suspicion from the MOETE toward CSOs, lack of alignment in terms of priorities, lack of resources on both sides, unclear strategy and coordination with regard to MOETE's engagement of NGOs, ambiguous processes for approval and partnership development, and lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

These results are in line with the findings of the literature review on the deep-seated relationship of distrust and tension between the government and the civil society sector in Egypt, bureaucratic challenges in the government, the lack of direction and coordination within the MOETE, and the need for improved systems for monitoring and evaluation (Badran & Toprak, 2020; Herrold, 2016; Moustafa et al., 2022; Rizk, 2019; Sayed, 2022;). As the literature review has underlined, there is a long history of government efforts at co-opting and restricting CSOs, either through overt policies, the implementation of bureaucratic obstacles, or ambiguous legal or political rhetoric (Herrold, 2016; Rizk, 2019; Sayed, 2022). Despite the MOETE's proclamations of interest in working more closely with NGOs and creating a more decentralized structure

across the education system, the results from the interviews conducted for this study suggest that a restrictive environment for NGOs in the education sector persists.

The results of this thesis suggest that NGOs have a difficult terrain to navigate in terms of accessing public school students and spreading their impact. The findings also shed light on some of the potential negative ramifications of barricading NGOs from gaining increased access to public schools. Many of the interviewees discussed having to find creative ways to engage public school students and their families in their programming because of the barriers they had experienced or heard of with regard to securing the necessary approvals to work directly in public schools. In some cases, organizations discussed targeting private schools because of the difficulties associated with attempting to work with public schools. These results point to the obstacles NGOs without approvals face in providing services to marginalized communities and perhaps the misuse of resources when services are directed toward private school communities simply because of ease of access.

While some of the interviewees commented on the importance of the MOETE maintaining control over which NGOs are able to access public school students to maintain the effective use of resources and ensure only quality, evidence-based, and well-organized interventions reach the pre-university education community, we might further consider these interviewees' reflections in light of other participants' observations of the ambiguity in approval processes and limited coordination or direction provided by the MOETE. These findings highlight the need for clearer policies around NGO involvement in the education sector and perhaps more direction and support for NGOs interested in offering resources or services to public school students. This would create more clarity among the civil society sector with regard

to the filtration process used by the MOETE and perhaps encourage NGOs to enhance their interventions to better suit the needs of the public school system.

6.3 What strategies are NGOs using to access public school students and/or impact education policy?

Only a handful of the organizations discussed in the interviews were involved in government partnerships and direct advocacy and campaigning. Furthermore, those organizations with approvals from the MOETE or MOUs appeared to have partnerships that are limited to providing the NGOs with access to service provision in public schools, with little evidence of more comprehensive or policy-oriented partnerships. According to the results, the main strategies NGOs appear to be using to engage in education impact are relationship-building, coalition-building, and community engagement. The results suggest that the majority of organizations are going about creating educational impact outside of formal avenues of partnership with the MOETE. It also appears that international organizations are taking the lead in bringing NGOs further into the fold of education reform discussions, by inviting them to participate in workshops and events and leveraging their approvals to work with public school students to direct more NGO resources and services to the pre-university public school system.

These findings provide insight into the nature of the relationship between the MOETE and civil society actors, demonstrating that NGO-MOETE relations are largely NGO-led, with international agencies engaging NGOs in policy-level conversations and education NGOs taking the initiative to build connections with MOETE officials and cultivate connections both in the civil society sector and within the larger community to gain more access to public school students, teachers, and students' families.

6.4 How do NGOs perceive the MOETE's most recent reform project "Education 2.0"?

Participants had overall positive things to say about the general direction of the MOETE's reform efforts and the start of a shift toward more student-centered, critical-thinking-oriented learning. In summary, participants shared that they perceived Education 2.0 as being led by a strong, ground-breaking vision for systemic change in the pre-university education system. They also perceived changes in the MOETE's rhetoric around working with NGOs, with observations of potential openings for increased collaboration in the near future. Lastly, participants felt generally positive about the curriculum changes introduced to date. On the other hand, participants remain critical of the government's priority areas and the reform strategy's actual implementation. Interview participants were outspoken about the numerous challenges they perceive as continuing to plague the public education system, such as the lack of child safeguarding mechanisms, the persistence of the private tutoring system, large classroom sizes and teacher-to-student ratios, the lack of support for refugee communities, the need to provide increased support to teachers, and the misalignment between the job market and the pre-university public school curriculum. In terms of participants' reflections on the strategy's implementation, interviewees shared that more attention needs to be directed toward aligning the strategy with different communities' local contexts and considering the practicality of certain changes, more efforts need to be dedicated toward garnering community buy-in, and communication around the goals of the reform efforts need to be enhanced and clarified.

These results are in line with previous literature on education reform in Egypt that have identified challenge such as the lack of coherence and coordination in reform efforts (Warschauer, 2004), the lack of attention to local contexts (Moustafa et al., 2022; Warschauer, 2004); the need for an overarching communication plan to help build more community buy-in (Moustafa et al., 2022; Zahran, 2023); the need for dedicating further attention and resources at

monitoring and evaluation (Moustafa et al., 2022) and gaps in the MOETE's provision of support to teachers (Moustafa et al., 2022; Zahran, 2023).

Interview participants' responses on the MOETE's reform efforts also point to a bubbling interest among NGO representatives to share their reflections with regard to reform strategies. In their answers, interviewees drew on both their experiences working with vulnerable communities, their knowledge of international educational trends, and their personal perspectives as members of the Egyptian public and parents themselves. This is telling of the powerful insights NGOs have the potential to source given their strong roots in local communities and connections with multiple stakeholder groups, such as students, teachers, and, perhaps most importantly, parents.

6.5 What are the opportunities for education NGOs' greater involvement in education policy and reform strategy development?

Despite having to navigate a host of obstacles to accessing public schools and working with the MOETE, their families, and teachers, the NGOs represented in this study have demonstrated that they are able to leverage various strategies to target public school beneficiaries and create impact, both showcasing their dedication to creating change in the education sector and the wide reach they have in the community.

As some of the interviewees noted, the responsibility of addressing challenges in the public education does ultimately fall on the shoulders of the government. While NGOs may not have the resources or capacity to address all of the gaps in the system through their service delivery, there is potential for the MOETE to look increasingly to the civil society sector for guidance with regard to public opinion about public challenges and reform efforts, feedback and monitoring support with regard to reform rollouts, and ideas and innovative models with regard to educational methodologies and curriculum topics (Lauritzen, 2020; Yasunaga, 2014). The

results of this thesis point to the larger roles education NGOs can play outside of service delivery to support and enhance the MOETE's education strategy, underlining opportunities for expanding the relationship between the MOETE and civil society actors beyond one centered only around approvals for school access. In particular, the findings of this thesis also demonstrate the ways in which the MOETE can take on more initiative in building relationships with the NGO sector, dedicating efforts to identifying and connecting with NGOs, drawing from their learnings and reflections on the education system, and inviting them to participate in building better strategies for reform rollouts.

To begin, perhaps the most powerful impact that NGOs can have is to encourage more buy-in among community members with regard to the MOETE's reform plans, easing public acceptance of changes and helping to pave the way for larger cultural shifts around what the education system should look like (Herrera, 2003; Mitlin, 2008; Rollan & Somerton, 2021). With enhanced coordination of its relationship with NGOs and efforts at harnessing the collective power of civil society actors, the MOETE has the potential to build a clearer line of communication with the public around education changes and work toward better understanding of the meaning and value of these changes.

Furthermore, there are abundant sources of support for the local contextualization of education reforms, particularly curriculum changes, and for better alignment of curriculum topics with today's labor market needs among education NGOs in Egypt. As the results demonstrate, NGOs are working to infuse the Egyptian community with a diversity of skills and have the potential to apply their expertise, resources, and educational approaches to help the MOETE consider the needs of specific communities and support teachers in better understanding student needs. By enhancing efforts toward collaboration and creating a more welcoming atmosphere for

NGOs to become involved in public schools, the MOETE has the potential to deeply enrich the existing curriculum and student experience, exposing students—and teachers—to a wide range of activities, skillsets, networks, perspectives, and learning styles. The example of two interview participants (Interviewees 11 and 12) experience seeing their organizations scale their programs to a larger number of students and schools showcases a model for engaging NGOs that the MOETE could more readily apply to other organizations.

In addition, in light of the challenges and the types of services participants described in their interview responses, the findings of this thesis suggest that there are significant opportunities for education NGOs to become more involved in reform as relates to the following specific areas: refugee integration and systems for safeguarding, professional development support and context-specific training for public schools teachers, the integration of more diverse topics and skills into existing public school curricula, such as arts education, SEL, entrepreneurship and leadership skills, and environmental justice.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This thesis has presented an exploratory study into the perspectives of education NGOs on their role in shaping pre-university public education reform and their relationship with the MOETE in Egypt. The findings have highlighted a great deal of variability in the level of access NGOs have to the MOETE and to public schools, but have revealed shared concerns about the challenges associated with reaching public school communities and working with the MOETE. While many NGOs appear to be hesitant to become more involved for fear of being dismissed or repudiated, the results do also point to the positive steps forward in the engagement of NGOs in the public education system. Some interviewees noted positive shifts in political rhetoric around NGO involvement, and the findings also show that there are NGO working groups wherein policy conversations with NGOs around the education sector and the government's reform efforts have started to take place. Furthermore, some of the participants discussed successful experiences seeing their programming approved for intervention in public schools and even scaled up across the education system. These findings thus demonstrate that while NGOs have long faced, and continue to deal with, significant obstacles to working with the MOETE and participating in larger policy discussions, there is evidence of positive change and models which could be expanded on for better collaboration in the future.

In light of evidence of the positive impacts of collaboration between NGOs and the state in the education sector in the literature, the findings of this study suggest that there is an opportunity to create more space for NGO engagement and involvement in policy discussions and create more transparency and ease with regard to NGOs' ability to participate in pre-university education. Based on the findings of this thesis, below is a list of actionable recommendations for MOETE policymakers to improve the ministry's relationship with

education NGOs and engage them more intentionally around education reform discussions and strategy development.

- **Create more transparency around NGO working groups**

  The MOETE should publish clear information regarding the existence, role, and intended outcomes of the education working group to strengthen public knowledge of the ministry's reform efforts, signal opportunities for more NGOs to become involved in policy discussions, and better guide the involvement of NGOs in policy discussions. With a clear description of the group's goals and intended outcomes, the public and NGO sector can also better hold the MOETE accountable for considering the insights and feedback of civil society actors in the formulation of reform strategies and changes to the pre-university public education system. Furthermore, all NGOs in the education sector should be made aware of the working group and should be invited to participate in some capacity. This can help to create more coherence and coordination in the education sector, creating more space for NGOs to connect with one another around their services; expanding smaller NGOs' networks to build up their capacities and expertise in service of better educational programming; and widening the MOETE's reach in the NGO sector to better source feedback and support for reform efforts.

- **Co-create a strategy for building community awareness and public interest in Education 2.0**

  The MOETE can leverage NGOs, their networks, and expertise to build a strong communication strategy around Education 2.0 and help the larger community enhance its understanding of the ministry's work toward reform. This strategy will also encourage the MOETE to hold itself accountable for changes it introduces in the public education

system and demonstrate the ministry's commitment to garnering public support for its reform efforts and listening to community members' on-ground experience of reform rollouts.

- **Publish clear guidelines for NGO engagement in public schools**

The results have shown that many NGOs feel blocked from becoming involved with the MOETE and providing interventions within public schools. There is a great deal of ambiguity around the MOETE's process of approvals for NGOs interested in working with public schools. To create better lines of communication with the NGO sector and better guide their efforts, the MOETE can publish clear guidelines outlining the steps NGOs need to take to gain approvals to work with the MOETE and public schools and describing the existing needs of the public education system. This can also help to create a cultural shift in the way the MOETE operates with regard to building relationships with NGOs, encouraging the MOETE to give fair consideration to every opportunity to collaborate with an NGO in the education sector, rather than focusing only on those organizations with stronger personal connections within the ministry. These guidelines would be better supported with the development and publication of a clear strategy for the MOETE's approach to working with NGOs and the areas in which NGOs may be able to apply their expertise, resources, and existing programming to bolster the government's reform efforts.

It is also important that this author acknowledge the limitations of this thesis and offer recommendations for future research on the topic of NGO engagement in education reform in Egypt. First, given my background as an expatriate in Egypt and the fact that the interviews were conducted in English, the reach of this study with regard to the interviewees included in this

study was limited. There was, for example, one instance where an NGO representative initially agreed to participate in an interview but later commented that they would not be able to participate in English. In the future, if other researchers choose to conduct similar research and conduct interviews in Arabic, they may have more success in widening the scope of their research to include more grassroots NGOs working in the education sector in Egypt, particularly organizations working outside of the Cairo governorate. This would strengthen the reliability of future research results and allow for more extrapolation beyond the limits of a particular study.

Second, the scope of this thesis was limited to education NGO representatives and their perspective of their relationships with the MOETE and the MOETE's reform efforts. Although this thesis is also guided by findings from a review of literature on NGO-government relations in Egypt, there is certainly an inherent bias that paints a picture of NGO-MOETE relations from the perspective of only NGOs. Future research on this topic might seek to include MOETE perspectives on the ministry's relationship with NGOs and the successes or challenges the government has experienced in this regard. A study focusing on government perspectives would also be useful in allowing for the identification of both synergies and disconnects in the responses of NGO and MOETE representatives, providing more comprehensive data on which to base conclusions regarding the opportunities and recommendations for enhanced NGO-MOETE collaboration.

Finally, the questions asked during the interviews with study participants did not prompt participants' reflections on their experiences with the MOETE under the leadership of specific ministers. This makes it difficult to make conclusions about any changes in the MOETE's approach to working with NGOs across different administrations. Future studies should consider this in their framing of questions with NGO participants in order to produce specific findings

around the differing approaches, rhetoric, and strategies put forth by the MOETE under the leadership of different ministers. A study such as this might also reveal more about NGO perceptions of the MOETE and their efforts at attempting to build connections with the ministry according to their perceptions of the minister at the time.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: In-depth Interview Guide

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This thesis is exploring the relationship between youth-focused NGOs and the Ministry of Education and Technical Education, specifically the role that NGOs see themselves playing with regard to national reform strategies targeting the pre-university public education system in Egypt. In this interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your organization's work, its relationship with the Ministry of Education and Technical Education (MOETE), and your organization's views and/or stances with regard to the MOETE's current reform strategy. Participants are free to decline to respond to any of the questions asked during the interview.

1. How long has your NGO been in operation? / When was your NGO founded?
2. Why was your NGO founded? What is the goal of your NGO?
    1. Why did you identify education as your focus area?
    2. For organizations that offer services outside of education, why did you identify education as one of your focus areas?
3. What types of services (specify education-/youth-related for organizations that do more) do you provide?
    1. Who are your target groups and how did you identify them?
    2. What are the aims of your programs/initiatives?
4. How is your organization registered? (e.g., nonprofit, international NGO, etc.)
5. Has your organization worked directly with public schools before? If so, in what way?
6. Can you describe the relationship between your NGO and the MOETE?
    1. To what extent does your organization communicate or interact with the MOETE? Do individuals within your organization have any relationship with the MOETE?
    2. Have you worked with/collaborated them before? If so, describe the collaboration.
        1. Who instigated the collaboration?
        2. What was your experience collaborating with the MOE like? What were the challenges and successes?
        3. How were decisions made during the partnership?
        4. What was the source of funding
    3. If they have not worked with the MOE, has there ever been any attempt at collaboration?
        1. Who instigated this attempt?
7. Has your NGO been involved in policy discussions? If so, in what way?
    1. Clarify with more specific questions…
        1. Have you attended/led any policy-related events, roundtable discussions, etc.?
        2. Have any of your team members had discussions with members of the government around policy?

8. Does your organization have a media strategy? What is it/what type of content do you highlight via media? (ask about social media strategy and other outlets (e.g., newspapers, TV, etc.)
9. Are you familiar with Education 2.0 strategy?
    1. What is your opinion on the strategy and its focus areas?
    2. What areas do you see your NGO supporting?
    3. What are the challenges to implementing the strategy?
    4. What recommendations do you have for policymakers?
10. To what extent does your NGO follow conversations around education policy and Education 2.0?
    1. Were you consulted in the building of Education 2.0?
    2. How does your NGO envision itself within the Education 2.0 strategy? Which parts of the strategy does the NGO see itself as supporting?
    3. Is the NGO interested in scaling its work?
    4. Has the NGO made efforts to become involved in Education 2.0
11. Describe your relationships with other nongovernmental organizations.
    1. Which organizations have you partnered with? Which are your largest partners?
    2. Which funders have you worked with?
12. In your opinion, what are the major challenges in the K-12 education system?
    1. What are the changes you feel are needed?

Appendix B: Interviewee Consent Form

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Documentation of Informed Consent for Participation in Research Study

Project Title: Exploring Youth-focused NGOs and Their Impact on National Education Reform in Egypt

Principal Investigator: Ioanna Moriatis, Ioanna.moriatis@aucegypt.edu, +20 1014951984

*You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of the research is to explore how NGOs working with youth perceive their work in relation to the Ministry of Education and Technical Education's (MOETE) national reform strategies, and the findings may be published in the American University in Cairo's database of graduate students' The expected duration of your participation is approximately one hour.

The procedures of the research will be as follows. You will participate in an in-depth interview during which you will be asked questions about your organization's work, interest in policy discussions, and relationship with the MOETE.

*There will be certain discomforts associated with this research. Given this thesis's exploration of NGO perceptions of their relationship with the MOETE, there may be discomforts associated with participants' responses regarding any challenges they may have faced. All information interviewees provide for the purposes of this research will remain confidential so as not to put any participants at risk.

*There will not be benefits to you from this research.

*The information you provide for purposes of this research *is confidential*. You will remain anonymous in the final write-up of the thesis. Any information that may reveal your identity or the identities of people you speak about will be changed and disguised in the thesis so as to protect your anonymity.

**Questions about the research, your rights, or research-related injuries should be directed to Ioanna Moriatis at 01014951984 or ioanna.moriatis@aucegypt.edu.*

*Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or the loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature _____

Printed Name _____

Date

Appendix C: IRB Approval

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Case# 2022-2023-119

To: **Ioanna Moriatis**
Laila El Baradei
Menna Youssef

From: Heba Kotb Chair of the IRB
Date 9/2/2023

Re: IRB approval

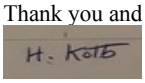
This is to inform you that I reviewed your revised research proposal entitled

"Youth-focused NGOs and Their Impact on National Education Reform in Egypt"

It required consultation with the IRB under the "expedited" category. As you are aware, there were minor revisions to the original proposal, but your new version addresses these concerns successfully. Your proposal used appropriate procedures to minimize risks to human subjects and that adequate provision was made for confidentiality and data anonymity of participants in any published record. I believe you will also make adequate provision for obtaining informed consent of the participants.
This approval letter was issued under the assumption that you have not started data collection for your research project. Any data collected before receiving this letter could not be used since this is a violation of the IRB policy.

Please note that IRB approval does not automatically ensure approval by CAPMAS, an Egyptian government agency responsible for approving some types of off-campus research. CAPMAS issues are handled at AUC by the office of the University Counsellor. The IRB is not in a position to offer any opinion on CAPMAS issues, and takes no responsibility for obtaining CAPMAS approval.
This approval is valid for only one year. In case you have not finished data collection within a year, you need to apply for an extension.

Thank you and good luck.



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