

# Negotiating Equity: Examining Priorities, Ownership, and Politics Shaping Ethiopia's Large-Scale Education Reforms for Equitable Learning

**Amare Asgedom, Shelby Carvalho, and Pauline Rose**

## Abstract

In 2018, the Government of Ethiopia committed to large-scale, donor-supported reforms aimed at improving equitable learning in the basic education system—the General Education Quality Improvement Program for Equity (GEQIP-E). In this paper, we examine the reform design process in the context of Ethiopia's political environment as a strong developmental state, assessing the influence of different stakeholder priorities which have led to the focus on equity within the quality reforms. Drawing on qualitative data from 81 key informant interviews with federal and regional government officials and donors, we explore the negotiation and power dynamics which have shaped the design of the reforms. We find that a legacy of moderately successful reforms, and a shared commitment to global goals, paved the way for negotiations of more complex and ambitious reforms between government actors and donors. Within government, we identify that regional governments were only tokenistically included in the reform process. Given that regions are responsible for the implementation of these reforms, their limited involvement in the design could have implications for success.



## **Negotiating Equity: Examining Priorities, Ownership, and Politics Shaping Ethiopia’s Large-Scale Education Reforms for Equitable Learning**

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## 1. Introduction

Achieving quality with equity in education systems is a complex and often challenging task, particularly in large, diverse countries. As a result, making a commitment to improving quality with equity can be logistically and politically complicated for policymakers. This may be particularly true in low-income countries with limited domestic resources, and an active international donor presence, resulting in potentially competing priorities. The aim of this paper is to examine the process of including a policy commitment to ensuring quality with equity in Ethiopia's education system. Situating our analysis in the context of Ethiopia's large-scale education reform, we draw on elite key informant interviews with federal and regional government officials and international donors in Ethiopia to examine negotiations in the design of Ethiopia's General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP-E). We adapt Swedlund's (2017; Swedlund & Lierl, 2019) framework for aid policy bargaining, to guide our analysis.

Following decades of an oppressive regime, civil war, severe drought, and famine, Ethiopia has achieved impressive economic growth and poverty reduction over the past 20 years (Clapham, 2018; Lie & Mesfin, 2018; Furtado & Smith, 2008). Between 2004 and 2014, real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by an average of more than 10% per year (Seid, Taffesse & Ali, 2016), and Ethiopia made significant strides toward many of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including impressive progress towards the universalisation of primary education (Lie & Mesfin, 2018). According to official statistics, net primary enrolment in the country increased from 21% in 1996, to 93% by 2014 (National Planning Commission & UN Ethiopia, 2015).

Education was a key government priority in Ethiopia in the 1970s under the Derg regime – albeit largely as a means of ideological 'training' and control at the time (Negash, 1990). Education remains a strong priority under the present Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government and features prominently in the government's overarching development strategy to transition to a knowledge-based economy and achieve middle-income status by 2025 (National Planning Commission, 2016). This commitment to education is reflected by sizeable investments from the central government: in 2015, Ethiopia dedicated more than 27% of total public spending to the education sector (UIS, 2019), compared to less than 17% on average in the region.

Despite ambitious goals, substantial economic progress and improvements in education access over the past twenty years, primary school completion and learning outcomes have fallen short, particularly for the most disadvantaged. Notable gaps in access persist for marginalised population groups, including pastoralists, children with disabilities, and the poorest girls, particularly in rural areas. According to 2016 Demographic and Health Survey data, only around a quarter of the poorest 20% complete primary school. By extension, very few of these children enter secondary school, and just 4% complete this cycle (WIDE database, 2018). The quality of education, as indicated by student learning outcomes, is also low (Iyer et al., 2020). Furthermore, the growing rate of youth unemployment among those who have completed school indicates a mismatch between the type and quality of skills acquired at school and the skills required by the labour market. This has led to increasing pressure on the government to improve the quality of schooling

(Krishnan and Shaorshadze, 2013; Seid, Taffesse & Ali, 2016). Reflecting these shortcomings, the World Bank's most recent education strategy for Ethiopia suggests that 'internal inefficiency, inequity, and poor education quality remain persistent challenges in the sector' (World Bank, 2017: 3).

Since 2008, Ethiopia's education reform agenda has been guided by the government's General Education Quality Improvement Programme (GEQIP). This reform effort is supported by international donors, notably the World Bank, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO, formerly the Department for International Development), the governments of Finland and Norway, and UNICEF. While the main goal of the GEQIP reforms has always been to improve education quality, the approach to addressing quality has evolved over time, moving from a focus on inputs (GEQIP I, 2008-13), to processes (GEQIP II, 2013-17) and, most recently, to a specific focus on learning outcomes along with explicit attention to equity (GEQIP-E, 2018-23). Notably, the last 'E' in GEQIP-E stands for 'equity', signaling a more direct focus on equity than previous phases of the reforms. This coincides with the Sustainable Development Goal's (SDG) emphasis on ensuring 'inclusive and equitable quality education'. Equity in GEQIP-E is largely defined in terms of access to education for specific marginalised groups, namely girls, children with disabilities, and pastoralists.

As a programme designed through close collaboration between the Government of Ethiopia and international donors, GEQIP presents an important case study of collaboration and negotiation processes between education stakeholders working toward a complex reform agenda for quality education and equity. In this paper, we draw on qualitative data from 81 key informant interviews to examine priorities related to educational quality and equity in GEQIP reforms across stakeholder groups. Through these interviews, we explore the negotiation and power dynamics which have shaped the design of the latest iteration of these reforms. Our findings add to the small but growing literature on government-donor negotiations in education reform processes. Our findings suggest that negotiations should be viewed as an on-going process in which degrees of influence may vary across actors and over time. In the Ethiopian context, we find that the strong developmental state with a commitment to education, combined with a legacy of moderately successful education reforms and a shared commitment by government and donors to global goals, have paved the way for negotiations for the design of more complex and ambitious reforms. Finally, we find that regional governments were only tokenistically included in the reform design process, with the risk that this could hinder successful implementation of the reforms.

## **2. Conceptual framework**

### *Policymaking in a dominant developmental state*

Our work seeks to examine the conditions that have facilitated Ethiopia's prioritisation of equity within large-scale education reforms, in the absence of the drivers of reform often found in other related contexts. Specifically, we examine the ways in which global and national priorities shape the content of GEQIP-E, with a focus on the bargaining process between government and donors. We find that most existing approaches to studying the political economy of education reform are

difficult to apply to the Ethiopian context. In particular, the emphasis in existing frameworks on teacher unions, collective action, and the private sector in driving education investments and priorities are not as well suited for the Ethiopian context as in some other Southern contexts. For example, due in large part due to the nature of Ethiopia's political and economic environment, it is less likely that significant pressure would arise from civil society or from the relatively small teacher's union, which are noted as important drivers of reform in other contexts (see for example, Bruns et al., 2019; Kosack, 2012; Moe & Wiborg, 2016; Williams, 2016, 2017).

Within the political settlement literature, Ethiopia's broader political and institutional context has been described as '*dominant developmental*' with cohesive intra-elite relations within the ruling coalition and strong government control over resources and decision-making (Clapham, 2018; Lavers & Hickey, 2016; Wales, Magee & Nicolai, 2016; Hickey & Hossain, 2019; Yorke et al., 2021). Despite being a federal system, the central government maintains control over policy priorities with little pressure to respond to outside constituencies. We thus position our analysis of Ethiopia's education reforms within the context of their position as a dominant developmental state. We argue that this plays a role in shaping the aid architecture within which negotiations over GEQIP reforms take place by narrowing the bargaining space between the central government and international donors, while limiting the influence or inclusion of any other constituent groups, including regional governments.

### *Ownership and influence*

This work contributes to the small, but growing volume of literature on ownership and international aid (Whitfield & Fraser, 2008a; Booth, 2012; Swedlund, 2017; Swedlund & Lierl, 2019; Menashy, 2019). While greater ownership for recipient countries over international aid is the leading fundamental principle for improving aid effectiveness in multiple international strategies and declarations,<sup>i</sup> actual levels of recipient country ownership vary in practice, due to multiple factors including state capacity and regime type. Whitfield & Fraser (2008a) argue that there are two competing, potentially contradictory, forms of recipient government ownership in the aid encounter: ownership as a commitment to donor policies ('an obligation to accept responsibility for implementing them'), and ownership as control over the process and outcome of choosing policies ('the degree of control recipient governments are able to secure over implemented policy outcomes', 2008a: 3-4). While the concepts of ownership as commitment and control are useful, these conceptualisations of ownership illustrate a zero-sum game, in which one party can claim ownership and others cannot. Swedlund & Lierl (2019) argue that aid policy should be thought of instead, as the result of sustained negotiations between governments and donors over time, in which compromises are made to maximise utility for both parties, as opposed to being thought of in terms of more absolutist ideas of ownership and control. Swedlund (2017:27) points out that while donors will always have 'the power of the purse', reform dialogue between donors and recipients need not be a zero-sum game, in which the interests of one are pursued at the expense of the other.

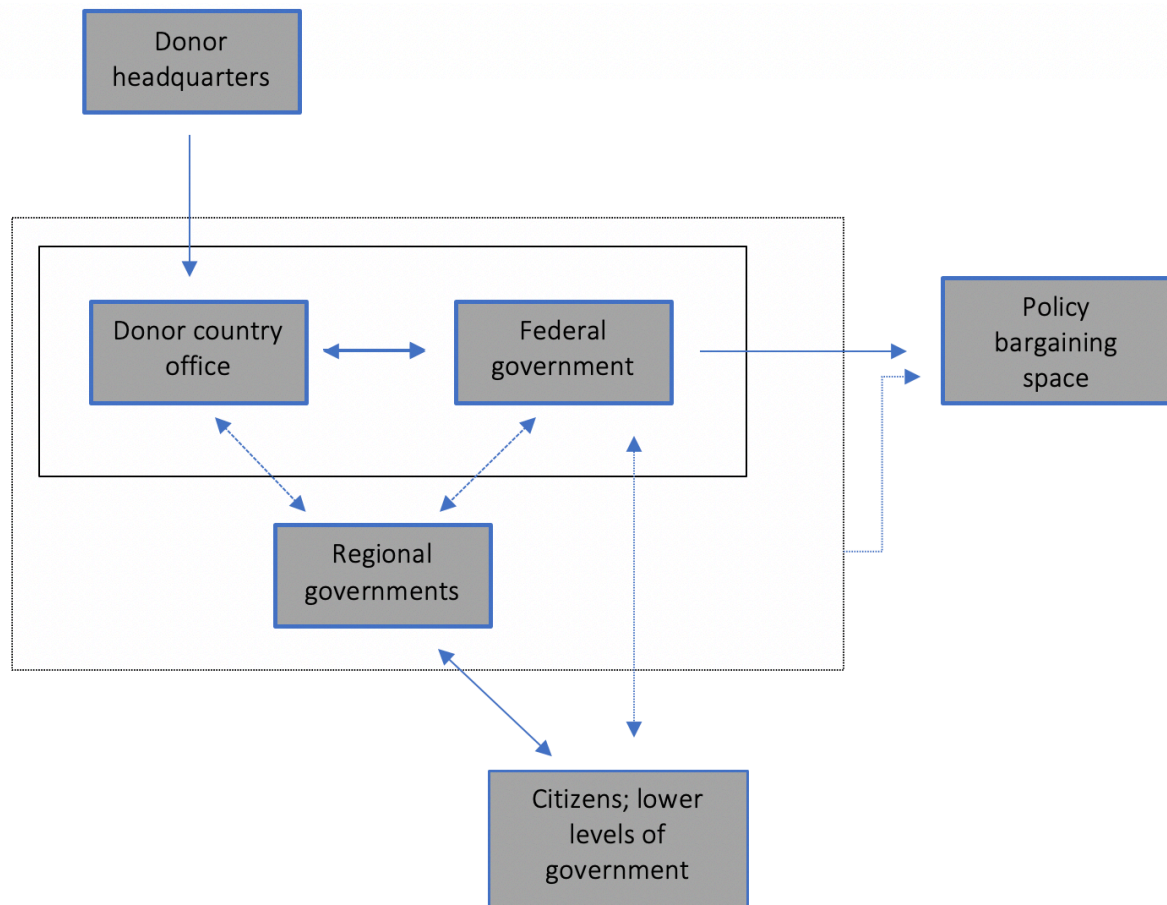
The degree to which aid recipient governments are able to exercise ownership over the policy process is partially dependent on their negotiating capital, or the leverage that a negotiator is able

to derive from the global and national economic, political, ideological and institutional contexts, within which donors and recipients define their preferences and select their strategies (Whitfield & Fraser, 2008b: 39). At the same time, donors and governments are constantly engaged in what Swedlund (2017) terms ‘the development dance’, where donors and governments each face difficulties in making credible commitments to each other, because each has their own set of priorities, roadblocks, institutions, and constituencies that must be navigated in the process of negotiation and collaboration. This potentially makes ownership more complicated than simply exercising one’s negotiating capital. In the case of a large federal system like Ethiopia, with many diverse international donors – each with their own set of priorities and constituencies to answer to – understanding the nuanced structural and political conditions which influence reform design is necessary for examining the conditions under which Ethiopia has been able to pursue a suite of reforms aimed at improving equity.

We draw on Swedlund’s (2017) framework for aid policy bargaining and compromise to explore donor-government and within-government dynamics in the design process of GEQIP-E. Figure 1 illustrates our adapted version of Swedlund’s framework for the Ethiopian education context, which shows the bidirectional flows of influence over policy decisions. We acknowledge that international donors are accountable to their broader organisational goals and incentives, but they must also adapt priorities based on country-specific goals and dynamics. This leads to a process of negotiation and bargaining between country-based international donors and national government actors. The two boxes inside the solid line are where the primary policy negotiations take place. The negotiation process is likely to differ from one context to another, depending on the nature of aid. At one end of the spectrum, traditional, project-based aid typically allocates money for specific purposes, while at the other end, aid is linked to wider government policy reforms or actions, such as through pooled funds. The latter, which is more aligned with the pooled-funding approach of GEQIP-E, can necessitate compromise between, or prioritisation of some interest groups over others, both amongst donors themselves, and between government and donors.

Swedlund & Lierl (2019) suggest that for both strategic and normative reasons, international donors often push for an inclusive aid bargaining process, that may involve local governments, civil society, or other relevant actors. However, this inclusivity can reduce the power of central governments in the negotiation process. As such, Swedlund & Lierl (2019) find that governments are sometimes willing to trade influence over policy priorities in exchange for reducing the demands of inclusivity during the negotiation process. We find this dynamic to be relevant to Ethiopia’s context as it relates to the limited inclusion of regional governments and other local education actors in the design phase of GEQIP-E. Overall, the national government leads the bargaining and agenda-setting process with international donors, with limited concern over potential interference from other actors, including civil society.

Figure 1: Aid policy bargaining in Ethiopia



### 3. Education policy in Ethiopia

#### *Policy and reform priorities*

To examine the multi-dimensional policy bargaining process, we begin by considering Ethiopia's education reform trajectory in the context of broader global and national agendas taking shape. Global agendas in the 1990s and early 2000s, including Education for All and the MDGs, shaped international policy dialogue, and heavily influenced national policy planning across low- and middle-income countries from 2000 to 2015 (Sachs, 2012). While these goals led to significant improvements in access around the world, including in Ethiopia, they often fell short of supporting equitable, quality education in many places (Barakat et al, 2016; Watkins, 2014; Rose, 2015; Iyer et al., 2020). Following the mixed results of the MDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2016, reflect a more explicit focus on education quality and equity across all targets. Ethiopia's national development policies have historically mirrored global agendas, although often with a stronger focus on both equity and quality than earlier global frameworks, as seen in the 1994 Education and Training Policy, and each of the associated Education Sector Development Plans (ESDPs) that have been in place since 2000 (Yorke, et al., 2021).

Aligned with Ethiopia’s education sector development plans (ESDPs), the GEQIP reforms were first introduced in 2008, with several objectives, including: 1) to coordinate donor support to the education sector; 2) to improve teaching and learning conditions in primary and secondary school; and 3) to strengthen education institutions and service delivery at federal and regional levels of the government (World Bank, 2008). Now in its third iteration, the broad principles set out in 2008 generally remain relevant although, by the time of GEQIP-E in 2018, emphasis has more explicitly shifted to learning outcomes, with particular attention to girls, children with disabilities, and pastoralist communities. The intention is that the GEQIP design occurs through a collaborative process primarily between the federal Ministry of Education, regional education bureaus (REBs), and international donors. While the GEQIP focus areas are directly linked to the overarching national education strategies set out in the ESDPs, GEQIP focuses on those which are viewed as integral for achieving quality in primary schooling and improving equity. As such, much of the GEQIP-E bargaining process centered around the ESDP priorities which could be viewed as part of the GEQIP reforms. Table 1 illustrates how GEQIP-E (2017-2022) aligns with Ethiopia’s ESDP V (2015-2020). It shows the considerable convergence between priority areas with respect to primary schooling, with the exception of information and communication technology (ICT) which is not included in GEQIP-E. In addition, cross-cutting issues beyond the school system, such as school health and nutrition, have not been included in GEQIP-E. We explore potential reasons for these divergences arising from the government-donor negotiation processes in our analysis below.<sup>ii</sup>

Table 1: Comparison of ESDP V and GEQIP-E priorities

**COMPARISON OF ESDP V AND GEQIP E PRIORITIES**

= shared ESDP V + GEQIP E priority
= ESDP V only
= GEQIP E only

**Overview:**

ESDP V PRIORITY PROGRAMMES	GEQIP E RESULT AREAS
Priority Programme 1: Capacity development for improved management	Results Area 4: System strengthening for planning, policy formulation
Priority Programme 2: General education: quality	Results Area 3: Improving quality *all interventions except Information and Communication Technology (ICT)*
Priority Programme 3: General education: access, equity and internal efficiency	Results Area 1: Improving internal efficiency Results Area 2: Improved equitable access *will not include expansion of access to secondary education*
Priority Programme 4: Adult and non-formal education	-
Priority Programme 5: Technical and Vocational Education and Training	-
Priority Programme 6: Higher education	-
‘CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES’ ACROSS THE SIX PRIORITY PROGRAMMES:	
• Gender	Results Area 2.1 Improved gender equality in upper primary education
• Special needs and inclusive education	Results Area 2.3 Inclusive education in primary and secondary schools
• Education in emergencies	-
• School health and nutrition	-
• Drug and substance abuse prevention	-
• Water, sanitation and hygiene	-
• HIV/AIDS	-
-	Results Area 2.2 Increased participation in schooling in pastoralist woredas and emerging regions



## *International aid to education in Ethiopia*

Ethiopia has been one of the largest recipients of international development aid in the world since the fall of the Derg regime in 1991 (Lie & Mesfin, 2018; Fantini & Puddu, 2016; Feyissa, 2011). Between 2007 and 2017, Ethiopia received nearly US \$3.6 billion in international aid for education, making it the largest recipient of aid for education on the continent, and among the top five in the world behind China, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.<sup>iii</sup> In education, the largest donors in 2017 were the UK (36%), World Bank (33%), US (12%), Germany (6%), France (2%), and Japan (2%). It is important to note, however, that while Ethiopia is one of the largest recipients of aid to education globally, the relative importance of aid in Ethiopia's public spending has declined in recent years. In 2002, aid comprised approximately 17% of total public spending, declining to just 7% in 2015 (Zubairi and Rose, 2018).

Although aid dependence has declined, questions remain around the extent of donor influence on the focus of reforms, including whether those related to equity would be possible without strong donor backing, given that GEQIP-E is supported by a pooled donor fund. Donors such as the World Bank, UNICEF, the governments of the United Kingdom, Finland, and Norway, and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), have made significant contributions to GEQIP reforms, which total about US \$110 million over ten years. Of this total, the funds to GEQIP comprise the majority of total aid allocated to basic education.

The Ethiopian government has often been described as a 'strong' aid recipient government, exercising greater negotiating capital with donors than many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Earlier work suggests that this in part due to a sense of 'Ethiopian exceptionalism', demonstrated by Ethiopia's record on economic development and poverty reduction, potentially giving the country greater bargaining power (Clapham, 2018; Fantini & Puddu, 2016; Furtado & Smith, 2008). Ethiopia's political environment, characterised by a strong developmental state, also shapes the government's approach to aid bargaining (Clapham, 2018). Moreover, its current role as the location of the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) give it a sense of status within the region (Lie & Mesfin, 2018; Clapham, 2018; Fantini & Puddu, 2016; Hagmann & Reyntjens, 2016).

From a donor perspective, there is also strategic interest in Ethiopia, due in part to its role as a 'force for stability' in an otherwise unstable region. Some donor governments view it as a 'leading partner in the global war on terror [and] a major supplier of peacekeeping forces to help control conflicts in neighbouring states' (Clapham, 2018: 1157-8; Lie & Mesfin, 2018). Strengthening regional stability is likely to be an interest shared interest by donors and the government alike.<sup>iv</sup>

Education has often been a space of convergence for donors and the government in Ethiopia, in that priorities across actors tend to align (Furtado & Smith, 2008). Illustrating this, the Global Partnership for Education's (GPE) 2008 pilot survey measuring aid effectiveness in the education sector rated 'aid alignment with national priorities' at 90%. One area of notable divergence has been the relative balance between spending on primary and tertiary education. Donors are

commonly of the view that domestic spending on tertiary education is too high, while government has continuously defended this spending (Furtado & Smith, 2008; Gruber & Kosack, 2014). Overall convergence is encouraging, although it is possible that negotiations become more complicated as reforms increase in complexity.

#### 4. Data collection and analysis

We conducted 81 semi-structured, key informant interviews during two stages of fieldwork. During stage 1, interviews with donors and federal-level stakeholders were undertaken (February 2018). During stage 2, interviews were conducted with regional-level stakeholders (Stage 2, May 2018) (see Table 2). Our sample included regional officials from seven of Ethiopia’s nine regions, excluding Gambella and Afar due to security concerns. We have focused on interviews with these stakeholders because they are potentially the most important in the design phase of GEQIP-E, given that planning occurs at the federal and regional levels.

*Table 2: Key stakeholder interviews, Stages 1 and 2*

Fieldwork Stage	Stakeholder Groups	Number of Interviews
Stage 1 February 2018	Donors	8
	Federal-level stakeholders	12
	City Administration stakeholders: Addis Ababa	7
	Regional-level stakeholders: Oromia	5
Stage 2 May 2018	Regional-level stakeholders: Amhara	10
	Regional-level stakeholders: Benishangul Gumuz	10
	Regional-level stakeholders: SNNPR	11
	Regional-level stakeholders: Somali	8
	Regional-level stakeholders: Tigray	10
		81

We adopted a multi-stage, purposive sampling strategy to select participants, beginning with an actor-mapping exercise to identify key stakeholders involved in the design and implementation phases of GEQIP II, and/or the design of GEQIP-E. The purposive strategy facilitates a ‘critical case’ analysis in which the selected participants are critical to understanding the phenomenon of interest, in this case the design of the GEQIP programme (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007: 37-38). The actor-mapping work was conducted during an initial round of interviews with donors and Ministry of Education (MoE) officials in December 2017. This enabled us to identify key informants from all stakeholder groups, namely: a) multilateral and bilateral donors who provide financial and/or technical assistance to GEQIP; b) federal stakeholders from key directorates in the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Cooperation (MoFEC); and c) regional stakeholders from REBs and Bureaus of Finance and Economic Development (BoFEDs). Our data collection coincided with the end of the second phase of GEQIP, GEQIP II, and with preparations for the implementation the third phase of the reforms, GEQIP-E. This provided an opportunity to

learn about the key individuals, institutions, and power dynamics which shaped the design and priorities of GEQIP-E.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by members of the RISE Ethiopia team.<sup>v</sup> Interview protocols were customised for each stakeholder group, to ensure that topics covered were relevant and based on each participant's area of expertise. Interviews broadly covered stakeholders' roles and responsibilities, and their perspectives on issues including: a) the design of GEQIP-E including individual and organisational involvement; b) formal and informal processes for including/excluding stakeholders' priorities; c) GEQIP II implementation including overall challenges and successes; and d) lessons from GEQIP I and II for GEQIP-E. In an attempt to ensure anonymity of interview participants, we have not identified specific donors, as this is likely to make it possible to identify individuals.<sup>vi</sup> We have also been mindful of these potential sensitivities in the way that we present the analysis.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Where interviews were conducted in a language other than English (e.g., Amharic or Afan Oromo), they were translated during transcription. We utilised both inductive and deductive approaches to qualitative analysis, in which patterns, themes and categories were identified using our conceptual framework (for example, relating to ownership of the GEQIP reforms), but attention was also paid to unanticipated themes which emerged from the data (for example, limited capacity within the system; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Coding was facilitated using NVivo software.<sup>vii</sup>

## 5. Findings

### *'Ownership' is not a zero-sum game*

Our analysis of the GEQIP-E negotiation process suggests that the design of the reforms was largely collaborative between the national government and donors, in which neither party monopolised ownership or control over the process. This is due in part to different ways in which policy influence is achieved, such as through agenda and priority setting, financial resources, and through technical expertise and support. We find that, while the national government maintains control over policy priorities and final design, international donor influence shapes specific reform features through financial commitments and technical expertise.

When different stakeholder groups were asked about ownership of the GEQIP-E design process, donor, government, and regional education bureau representatives emphasised that the federal government maintained primary ownership and strong negotiating power over the design process and the final programme. The original parameters for identifying priorities were set by the government's ESDPs, thus ensuring that any activity included as part of GEQIP would reflect government priorities. We found that in some cases, ministry officials reported a stronger sense of ownership than donors perceived them to have had in the process (see also Asgedom, et al., 2019). One donor official stressed the importance of the government's involvement, while a regional representative expressed confidence that the design process was led by the government:

The role of the Ministry is that they are the most important partner, and if they were not the most important partner [to other donor organisations], we wouldn't support it; because this is our way of working directly with the government, instead of having a bilateral agreement.

Donor representative

I know GEQIP was entirely prepared by our government. It was prepared by the MoE [under] the then-Minister of Education [...] The nation requested to [an international donor] that it has this package and needs support. Then [donor] brought [other] donors.

REB representative, Benishangul Gumuz

In comparison to previous iterations of GEQIP, one donor representative suggested that the GEQIP-E design process had involved the government to a greater degree than previous GEQIP processes:

I was not [involved] in the design of GEQIP II[...] but [during] the process of implementation I felt a little bad. There was a lot of bulldozing by [certain donors]. So I imagined that the development [of GEQIP II] was in a similar way. But it is different with GEQIP [E] [...]there was [...] joint consultations among the rest of the [donor] partners pushing back in terms of questions, pushing in terms of actually looking at [programme] documents and revising the documents and contributing to the document[s]. [...] So [I] must say that it is much better than GEQIP II.

Donor representative

While the government had a final say over the programme as a whole, we also found evidence suggesting that some donors used their relative financial power to influence specific reform components:

I think the MoE itself [was most influential]. Because eventually, they have to agree on everything. They have to approve it because we cannot shove anything down their throat at all... So the biggest influence is supposed to be them. **But we also know that the ones who dig deeper into their pockets sometimes have a real final say.**

Donor representative

Financial resources are not the only avenue through which donors shape reform design. Technical expertise can also serve as a source of comparative advantage through which donors influence policy by leveraging evidence and defining implementation possibilities. These are perhaps the kinds of roles we might expect donors to assume during reform negotiation processes and are in line with what may be considered appropriate or helpful roles for donors. However, disproportionate influence of external technical expertise can also increase donor influence over specific activities. One donor describes their role as a technical expert and with a focus on ensuring that the government is accountable to global commitments:

So when a program as big as GEQIP is designed, [the] technical expertise [...] we provide is our own input in terms of the designing of the program itself to ensure that what is designed is acceptable to the MoE framework but is also in line with what we are taking in terms of the SDGs and so forth. [...]

We are in the meetings to ensure that what is said is applicable to the partners of the MoE but also at the international level, you know, that you are driving the same agenda. The Ministry is responding to the pledges that it is making in the international scene.

Donor representative

The lion's share of the policy negotiation process takes place between donors and governments in which both parties strive to maximise influence and resources dedicated to priority areas (Swedlund 2017). Overall, ownership over the design for GEQIP-E cannot be attributed to one set of actors over another, but should rather be understood as a process through which actors leveraged different negotiating strengths – political, financial, and technical – to shape the final outcome. The extent to which this form of ownership was viewed as satisfactory, however, varied across actors. For example, an education official from one of the emerging regions expresses frustration over the level of influence donors exercised over the reform:

Yes I [...] participated in the design of GEQIP-E. We met together and aligned GEQIP along with ESDP V. To my dismay [...] I noticed the concept note that compares and analyses the implementation of GEQIP II with the upcoming GEQIP-E was prepared by [a donor]. [The donor] took the leading [sic] in the design of GEQIP-E. I strongly believe that this [should] be entirely done by MoE, for it is the major sector and owner of GEQIP.

REB representative, Benishangul Gumuz

#### *Local aid architecture and multi-layered negotiations in a pooled fund*

In the section above, we discuss donors as a single interest group to allow for examination of negotiations between donors collectively and government. GEQIP's pooled-fund approach means that negotiations take place between the government and a collective body of donors, rather than bilaterally through individual donor-government arrangements. This can be beneficial as it has the potential to strengthen efficiency and align donor funding behind common priorities. At the same time, it can complicate negotiation processes where individual donors need to answer to their respective headquarter organisations and, in the case of bilateral donors, their tax-payer bases, thus at times leading to conflicting priorities across donors. While global agendas like the SDGs and national priorities of the recipient country can help to align donors behind common goals, the specific priorities of individual donors can vary considerably. This dynamic can lead to a multi-layered negotiation process in which donors must negotiate both with the government and with each other to find consensus on policy priorities. Illustrating this, an MoE representative reflected on the implications of competing priorities among donors for the Ethiopian government:

Every [donor] country has its own assistance strategy and every penny is a taxpayer's payment. And if it is not behind, you know, the country assistance strategy, it is not good way of spending money. For Ethiopia you cannot say, "I don't want [the] World Bank, I want DFID". You have to address all issues, I mean, very diplomatically, because we are [...] [a] very poor country. We need [every] single pennies [sic] to be used for the intended purpose. So we accept all, as [a] government. That has to be handled as, you know [...] the Ministry of Education is co-chairing the [Education Technical] Working Group, and has to balance the intervention[s] coming from the World Bank, DFID and other donors.

MoE representative

This MoE representative highlights the competing interests to which both donors and recipient governments must respond. He acknowledges the pressures on international donors to justify how they spend taxpayer funds on international aid, but also characterises Ethiopia's position as a disadvantageous one due to its status as a 'very poor country' which needs every single penny on offer from donors, thus putting the government in a position of having to balance often competing donor demands.

Donors recognise this dynamic as well. As one donor representative discusses, different donors push for priorities that reflect their own interests as part of the reform design process:

[Donor One] for instance wants to focus on special needs education. [Donor Two] [wants to focus on] gender, I mean, there are also interests in other result areas. Donor Three, in addition to everything they want to focus on [...] the teacher profession in our programme design [...] Donors have their own interests, but you cannot really include everything they ask, we have to really come together at some point.

Donor representative

This is perhaps a feature of the aid architecture of pooled funds, with, in principle, non-hierarchical structures between donors and government, but where donors remain heavily involved in the policy design process in reality. As shown in the quote from the government official above, MoE officials described a process in which the government has little choice but to make sometimes difficult compromises between competing agendas from multiple donors, as well as its own constituents including diverse regional governments, because of the overall economic situation of the country. This suggests that while the government maintains high-level ownership over the overall design process, negotiations over specific details often take place between individual donors in which the government adopts a more mediative than direct bargaining role.

In the face of multiple competing priorities, donors use their relative negotiating capital to push for influence over reform details. One form of capital is, of course, financial. Throughout our interviews, participants noted that larger donors often tried to exercise disproportionate influence over the design process.

The issue is that, this is a donor pool fund [and] the lion's share comes from [certain donors] and [on] the capacity of negotiating of the Ministry and the region, particularly the Ministry of Education, I do have some reservation[s]. Sometimes donors will come with their own agenda and try to enforce.

Donor representative

I think there was also ganging up on certain things and pushing the agenda forwards. Some of the partners felt that the [dominant donors] were not listening there were focus that would come together and agree on positions and push that position until the [dominant donors] listen and include the ideas that were coming up and even take direction that was being suggested.

Donor representative

This is also implied in an earlier quotation from a donor representative who says, ‘you cannot really include everything they [the other donors] ask’. This subtle statement characterises the power dynamics in which donor partners are able to submit requests, but more dominant donors make the final decisions, due in large part to their greater financial contributions. Donor representative #1’s earlier claim that ‘the ones who dig deeper into their pockets sometimes have a real final say’ highlights the undeniable role of financial capital in the bargaining and negotiation process, even in a dominant developmental state like Ethiopia in which we might expect the government to assume a consistent authoritative role in the design process.

Though financial resources certainly matter, smaller donors also leverage other forms of negotiating capital including close working relationships and shared priorities with the government. For example, we found evidence that some financially smaller donors had become influential and developed negotiating capital, because they had established a track record of leadership in education sector coordinating activities; particular areas of expertise; and, in some cases, direct contact/relationships with regional stakeholders. In addition, some smaller donors also had long-term engagement on specific issues, such as disability and early childhood education. These stable, close partnerships added to the donor’s ability to act as a credible and trusted partner of the government, as well as giving them a voice with other donors. This in turn strengthened their negotiating capital in the policy design process, despite comparatively smaller financial contributions to the overall fund. One such donor discussed their role co-chairing a taskforce which focused on services for people with disabilities, spanning government, donor, and NGO partners. This sustained and cross-sectoral involvement in one thematic area helped lend the donor greater credibility to push for disability as a priority in the education sector as well. In another example, one donor representative described how they were able to maintain influence during negotiations despite their comparatively smaller financial contributions to GEQIP-E:

It is crudely saying it is, but it’s buying a place on the table... So, everybody recognises our technical importance. But we also need to put on the litmus. Our money is very little. We contribute the least. But because we sit on the table and we have the technical capacity, we bring in much more than the money can buy. That brought us on the table. Right now on GEQIP-E we feel we are contributing a lot on the quality component; on the equity component in terms of the program that we have managed to influence. That decision was a conscious decision. We had a challenge at the beginning.

Donor representative

Thus, for some donors, the ability to influence GEQIP-E was driven more by long-standing, credible commitment; a continued country presence; technical engagement; and a relationship with the government, rather than the financial resources they provided.

### *Global agendas and past credible commitments shape reform negotiations*

The ability to pursue equity and quality-focused reforms in the education sector requires more than government interest, financial resources, and technical expertise. Without common frameworks for approaching quality with equity, and shared confidence between actors that each will follow through on their commitments, such reforms are not possible. We find that global agendas including the SDGs provide a mutual framework from which donors and governments can

begin policy dialogues, while past experiences with reform efforts engender confidence across actors that it is possible to pursue more complex reforms, such as those aiming to improve equity.

Policy negotiations between international donors and national governments do not take place in a vacuum. The education SDG, agreed in 2015, includes emphasis on equitable learning outcomes; and interviews similarly showed that donors and federal and regional government officials identified that equity was an important starting point and priority for GEQIP-E (see also Asgedom et al., 2019). When asked about the key factors influencing the shift from a focus on inputs in GEQIP I, to a focus on quality linked to learning outcomes with equity in GEQIP-E, donor and government representatives indicated that these elements of GEQIP-E at least partly reflect the shared interest of the Ethiopian government and international donors in aligning national programmes with international priorities:

I mean ultimately GEQIP is aligned with the SDGs [which are] very universal, talking about equitable quality education [...] so there is no [difference], I mean, [between] emerging and developed regions [...] And it is also not going to be like [an] MDG donor-recipient country [relationship]. This is [a] partnership which highly encouraged domestic finance for education to be used progressively. [...] So there is no way that Ethiopia would say no, no, no this is not my priority, this is the [donor], because this is what Ethiopia as a nation signed as member states signed, when SDG was endorsed.

MoE representative

The SDGs alone, however, are often not enough to pave the way for large-scale, equity-focused education reform efforts. The process of negotiation for a new reform is foregrounded by the credibility of past commitments. In order to examine this, we consider where donors and the government align in their assessment of successes and weaknesses of previous reforms. Thus, GEQIP-E is able to build on the positive processes established in previous efforts in order to set more challenging goals. Evidence from stakeholder interviews suggest that the conditions for effective donor-government coordination during GEQIP-E were established in earlier phases of the GEQIP reforms. These conditions facilitated further collaboration during the GEQIP-E design phase, in support of a new, more complex goal of achieving equitable learning for all. At the same time, shortcomings of earlier iterations of the GEQIP programme have helped shape the terms and priorities of reform efforts across actors.

Across iterations, the stated aim of GEQIP has been to strengthen the quality of education service delivery in Ethiopia (World Bank, 2008, 2013), but the specific approach to improving quality has evolved over time. The main aim of GEQIP I was to create the conditions for learning within the Ethiopian education system, primarily through an inputs-based approach. GEQIP II built on GEQIP I and introduced a focus on 'serving the most under-served regions' (World Bank, 2013:8), but stopped short of setting equity-focused learning targets. Overall, there is a general consensus among stakeholders that the inputs focus of GEQIPs I and II filled a critical need in the education system, and that the reforms – specifically through the reliable flow of financial resources directly



to schools through the school grant component – had the potential to strengthen the quality of education by providing resources that schools had the discretion to allocate according to their needs. Some regional stakeholders attributed improvements in student learning outcomes to these changes in inputs, including teacher quality, textbooks, and better classrooms:

Teachers' quality has been improved and some resources like textbooks have been given to the students and that supports students to improve their learning outcomes. So, these two things have a positive impact for the learning outcomes of the students. For example, if teachers have the quality to teach students, then students will get enough knowledge to improve their learning. Also, if they get some other resources like textbooks, reference books and laboratory equipment, this will also be supported to improve their skills and learning.

REB representative, Somali

By contrast, other regional stakeholders questioned the relationship between improvements in the quality of inputs and student learning outcomes:

As you know the government has taken a number of interventions using GEQIP II money in terms of revising the curriculum materials, provision of trainings for teachers, production of textbooks and teacher guide. However, the changes reported in the learning outcomes of students are not still promising - this has been confirmed by the EGRA [Early Grade Reading Assessment] results. This shows that there is a missing link [between interventions and learning outcomes].

REB representative, Oromia

I am the expert of learning assessment and I did four types of learning assessments earl[ier] this year. When I evaluate the [learning] outcomes there is no change [...] GEQIP has not brought about changes in learning outcomes.

REB representative, Tigray

These concerns are consistent with evidence of low levels of learning in Ethiopia (Iyer et al., 2020), and suggest that while earlier GEQIP reform efforts have built a viable mechanism for policy collaboration between donors and the MoE, the results have been far from perfect. Concerns about the quality and pace of outcomes have led donors to push for the introduction of a payment-for-results (PFR) funding modality for GEQIP-E, in part to strengthen the credibility of the government's commitment to achieving results. This further illustrates degrees of influence of donors, in which the government is held accountable for results through donor-managed instruments.

### *Bureaucratic hierarchies in the developmental state*

Bureaucratic hierarchies in a developmental state come with tradeoffs in the reform negotiation process. On one hand, this political environment can simplify negotiations by limiting the

bargaining space to donors and a relatively unconstrained central government. On the other hand, it can result in the exclusion of actors responsible for the implementation, and ultimately the success of the reform. Swedlund & Lierl's (2019) theoretical framework assumes that national governments prefer less inclusive negotiation processes in order to maximise their own negotiating power, and it predicts that international donors accept less inclusive processes in exchange for greater influence themselves. Swedlund & Lierl (2019) find evidence of this phenomenon through a study of aid policy bargaining in Rwanda and Tanzania. In the context of GEQIP-E, the central government negotiates with donors largely independently from other domestic actors, including regional government officials. While this is likely to have simplified the design process, it has also contributed to a sense of exclusion among regional officials, and so could have further policy consequences in the future.

The sense of exclusion felt by regional officials is further illustrated in related work by Asgedom et al., (2019), and was reflected in interviews in May 2018, in which regional education officials expressed concern over their limited awareness of the GEQIP-E reforms just four months before implementation was due to begin. Those who were more aware of GEQIP-E – typically specific individuals working in regional GEQIP coordination offices – were notably critical of the design process, and in particular, the failure to adapt the programme's design according to regional priorities:

I realised that in GEQIP-E, donor interest prevailed. I do not think GEQIP-E was designed taking into consideration the real problems on the ground.

REB representative, Addis Ababa

While participatory, consultation workshops were held for regional and local governments to contribute to the design of GEQIP-E, many felt that these activities were ceremonial in nature, while real, substantive engagement in the policy process took place primarily between donors and the MoE. In addition, officials from emerging regions expressed frustration over disproportionate exclusion compared to other wealthier regions.

No one has participated in the design process from this region. After [GEQIP-E] is designed we were invited to a workshop to familiarise us with GEQIP-E...but the design was already prepared by consultants and we were invited to the workshops. We gave comments on issues which are not considered in the design and which are not emphasised.

Regional Government Stakeholder

Furthermore, local level stakeholders – including *woreda* (district) education bureau officials, schools, teachers, parents and students – were identified by both donor and government stakeholders as having had the lowest level of influence in the design of GEQIP-E. In particular, teachers and parents were identified as having had extremely limited involvement (Asgedom et al., 2019). In a subsequent round of interviews we conducted in late 2019 with local officials, we found that, despite being responsible for its implementation and the achievement of results, many of them had never heard of GEQIP-E, or were not informed of critical aspects, like the fact that it included specific targets to be achieved as part of the PfR modality,. To some extent, this may be

expected in a federal system with centralised decision-making, though it can result in sub-optimal decision making to meet the needs of diverse regions. This characteristic of the policy environment and negotiation process could have important implications for the success of GEQIP reforms, as regional and local level governments are ultimately responsible for policy adoption and implementation.

Dissatisfaction with the government's role in the GEQIP-E negotiation process came most strongly from regional government officials, who felt that their top priorities were not sufficiently reflected and felt that this was perhaps because the process was donor-led. However, given the exclusion of regional government officials, few were fully informed of who was actually involved in the decisions. It is possible that central government officials allowed regional actors to channel their frustrations toward donors in order to deflect blame for a non-inclusive reform process. Several stakeholders described a consultation meeting held by a donor in late 2017 to present plans for GEQIP-E to regional representatives, at which several regional officials reportedly challenged donors on their priority areas. According to donor representatives present at this meeting, one point of disagreement related to the exclusion of an ICT component from GEQIP-E:

[One REB official] was making a very, very passionate argument about the technology: "Ethiopia cannot afford to miss out [on] technology. The fact that we are poor does not mean we cannot access technology. It is not a privilege [for] the rich", you know. [...] [REB officials were] making a demand on donors [...] in terms of what their expectation was, what they want to see in this program.

Donor representative

[The GEQIP-E proposal] was really kind of focused and selective, but they [the REB representatives] wanted more [...] There is an ICT component in GEQIP II [...]; they want[ed] [it] to be included in this programme. The resource need was huge, but what they requested and [the] offer was totally different, so we have to really discuss and come together.

Donor representative

While this may look like donor domination from the perspective of a regional official, it may in fact be a result of the federal government choosing to negotiate with donors on its own, rather than necessarily being a result of donor domination of the process. One may also take this at face value, as donors' failure to recognise and respond to the priorities of recipient stakeholders. In reality, it seems more likely to be associated with a variety of factors that affect decisions on what to include or not include in a programme like GEQIP-E, where compromises need to be made. Donor representative #5 suggests that one of the dominant donors was reluctant to invest further in ICT for schools, because there was no evidence that their investments in ICT via earlier GEQIP iterations (around \$25 million to date), had led to a positive effect on learning outcomes – thus limiting confidence that ICT would prove to be a worthwhile investment in GEQIP-E. The same donor representative asserted that the exclusion of ICT from GEQIP-E could be explained by dominant donors' opposition to further investment in the area, combined with the fact that other donors "weren't as passionate [about ICT] as they were with textbooks or school leadership". It is important to note that, in the absence of donor funding, the government could still choose to fund ICT on its own thus raising further questions about whether this is an example of donors not

adopting the priorities of the government, or of the central government not prioritising the requests of regional governments.

School feeding is another area identified as being more contentious, particularly due to its close links to improving equity for the most marginalised. In contrast to evidence of the weak links between ICT and equity or learning outcomes, the evidence on links between school feeding and equity are well documented. Interviews with the central government as well as regional education officials in Addis Ababa and Oromia suggest that stakeholders across levels of government pushed for school feeding – targeting poor families – to be included in GEQIP-E, citing evidence linking the positive effects of school feeding with encouraging enrollment of more disadvantaged students, and preventing dropouts:

Students from poor families cannot attend classes properly with an empty stomach. Therefore, economic opportunities for the families must be expanded. In GEQIP-E, school feeding programs must be taken as a primary area of intervention.

REB representative, Addis Ababa

Girls, students with various disabilities, pastoralist children, and marginalised children (rural) are mainly the disadvantaged groups in the context of our region...generally, I feel there should be special support package for addressing these marginalised groups like: establishing more ABE [adult basic education] programs or mobile schools for the pastoralist children and adults, introducing the school feeding program for children from the poor families, strengthening vernacular languages for linguistic minorities, and implementing the 'special guideline' prepared for supervisors to support girls and create adequate awareness among families to [improve] gender parity.

REB representative, Oromia

A ministry of education official further suggests that school feeding is one way to particularly attract students with intellectual disabilities, who are amongst the most disadvantaged, to school:

Intellectual disabilities are the more disadvantaged because even I have told you that when they allot money they allocate small money, but they need a lot of money because even [school] feeding is one of the methods of attraction of these children. Through [school] feeding you see first we attract them [to school] and second we teach them daily living, doing language skills, cleaning, washing, and so on you see. But support for these children is very small.

MoE representative

Donors ultimately decided that school feeding was too costly to be funded through GEQIP-E, despite this being a government priority with plausible links to improving equity. As a representative of a smaller donor suggests, this decision was driven primarily by larger donors:

The main focus is school feeding because the children need to be helped. If not, they don't learn. It is as simple as that. And addressing the emerging regions when they have specific needs is now part of GEQIP-E... [But] school feeding is absolutely not being funded by the [major donors]. I don't know why, you have

to ask [them]. Something that school feeding does is a benefit because it keeps children at school, and at least they get a good meal every day.

Donor representative

This further highlights the complexity of negotiations in which multiple diverse actors must balance each other's priorities, the priorities of their respective constituencies, existing evidence, and considerations for what is financially feasible, together with decisions about how to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged children. In light of these examples, it is also useful to remember that, as Swedlund's (2017) framework highlights, donors involved in in-country negotiations cannot operate in isolation from the mandates from headquarters. In this case, something like ICT was no longer a policy priority at the headquarter level for some of the larger donors, thus further constraining their ability to support this particular priority of the central and regional governments. In other words, regional stakeholders' views were not sufficient to ensure that ICT was included in GEQIP-E – suggesting a power imbalance between stakeholder groups, in which the priorities of donors and federal stakeholders ultimately held more weight than those of regional stakeholders in shaping the design of GEQIP-E.

This dynamic could complicate the negotiation process, particularly when some government stakeholders feel their priorities are not being taken into account, even if there are valid reasons behind this. Had regional governments, for example, had a more formal and consistent place in the reform negotiations, it is possible that their priorities would be reflected differently. At the same time, this reminds us that negotiations are a product of complex resource constraints, evidence of what works, as well as of the particular priorities of donors and governments. The extent to which the resulting priorities align with lower levels of governments and citizens, depends on the political environment, priorities, and commitments to inclusion of the negotiating parties.

The complexity of the power dynamics at play among and between international, national, and regional stakeholders may also become more complicated as the reform moves toward implementation. In spite of the decentralised structure of the political system in Ethiopia, as noted throughout, the federal government maintains a high level of centralised control over policy design as a dominant development state, which can in turn reduce the influence of regional governments on reforms such as GEQIP (Lie & Mesfin, 2018; Furtado & Smith, 2008). At the same time, the regional governments are responsible for implementation and monitoring, thus threatening substantive disconnections between policy design and implementation.

## 6. Discussion

The design of reforms aimed at improving quality with equity in large, diverse countries requires negotiation processes governed by the local political and economic environment. In countries in which international donors play a role in the policymaking process, questions of ownership and control also become important to understanding the policy bargaining process. The political environment in which negotiations take place shapes inclusivity of the policymaking process and decides whose priorities and ideas about equity are reflected, and the pressure to reflect certain

priorities. In the case of Ethiopia, we find that the central government, operating as a strong developmental state, is able to engage in less inclusive, national negotiation processes, thus restricting the influence of lower levels of government and civil society. As discussed throughout, this approach can be a double-edged sword: On one hand, it can streamline the negotiation process between the central government and international donors; and, on the other hand, it can result in reforms which may ultimately be more difficult to implement successfully.

Based on our findings, we argue that ownership and control over the policymaking process should not be understood as an either-or concept, but rather as a dynamic process in which each party leverages comparative advantages and different forms of negotiating capital to influence reform design. We find that the central government leverages political capital by setting the parameters of possible priorities through: a) its education sector plans, determining who will be included in the negotiation process; b) brokering negotiations across donors; and c) approving final plans. Donors in turn leverage their own comparative advantages through financial resources, technical expertise, and relationships with the government. The pooled nature of GEQIP funding results in parallel horizontal negotiations occurring both between actors within the donor group as well as between donors as a collective group and the government, in which all actors try to use their respective bargaining power to shape reforms. The result is a dynamic negotiation process in which 'ownership' is collectively – though sometimes unequally – shaped by the actors involved.

Complex negotiation processes like those required to design a large, equity-focused reform like GEQIP-E, are not possible in a vacuum, and require trust and some level of shared priorities between actors. We find that global agendas like the SDGs provide a necessary but likely insufficient common starting place for conceptualising educational equity. Previous experiences in joint reform efforts through earlier iterations of GEQIP provided the building blocks and a critical sense of mutual credibility across actors, thus paving the way for more ambitious reform efforts. The positive experiences of collaboration during GEQIP I and II contributed to strengthened credibility between donors and the government, which in turn created the policy space in which more ambitious and challenging reforms – such as improving learning for some of Ethiopia's most disadvantaged groups – could be pursued. Put simply, focusing on inputs in earlier phases of GEQIP with significant success seems to have laid the technical and political building blocks for the pursuit of more ambitious education reforms, focused on equitable access and learning. As noted, however, previous reforms were far from perfect, thus shaping the extent to which certain priorities – like ICT and school feeding – were reflected in the final design of GEQIP-E.

The Government of Ethiopia's commitment to quality with equity in education reforms and learning outcomes is undoubtedly impressive, and our analysis suggests that this focus in GEQIP-E has been guided by a convergence between both donor and federal government priorities overall. While larger donors continue to hold the 'power of the purse', it does seem that the design phase of GEQIP-E was characterised by a largely collaborative process of negotiation and compromise between and amongst donors, and the federal government. The terms of the negotiation and collaboration, however, were set by the latter. As a strong developmental state, the central government manages a hierarchical bureaucracy in which they can exclude outside

actors from the policy bargaining process. While we acknowledge that limiting negotiations to the central government and donors simplifies, and perhaps makes possible, equity-focused reforms, we also caution that this could limit the success of the reforms in the long run.

As Swedlund (2017) has noted, current aid literature overwhelmingly focuses on allocation and effectiveness. However, to date, academic literature has rarely examined how donors and recipient countries engage in compromise, and the factors that drive perceptions of credibility and processes for negotiation. Swedlund argues that it is critical to understand these dynamics before we can evaluate the effectiveness or sustainability of a given approach or reform. The findings discussed in this paper address this gap by exploring the complex processes of multi-stakeholder policy and reform negotiation. Understanding and engaging with the complexity of these processes is crucial if large-scale reforms in Ethiopia and other resource-constrained education systems in low and middle-income countries are to ultimately achieve equitable access and learning for all. This analysis perhaps also raises interesting normative questions for future research, related to the concept of 'ownership' in negotiation processes between governments and donors: within the government, who is included, who is excluded, and who decides? In this case, we saw the role of regional governments minimised, yet this does not necessarily suggest a lack of country ownership over the process writ large. However, given their critical role in implementation and accountability, it raises the question of whether regional governments should have been included in more substantive ways, and if so, by whom.

Our findings also suggest that, because of the pooled nature of funds supporting GEQIP, the central government had to navigate competing demands from diverse donors, which may have contributed to the reduced influence of additional actors at the regional level. This, combined with the challenges of pursuing a complex reform striving towards achieving equitable learning across diverse regional contexts – each of which faces different challenges to varying degrees – may raise further questions as to the likely success of GEQIP-E in ensuring equitable learning outcomes in the Ethiopian education system in the absence of additional measures to build buy-in and capacity at lower levels. At the same time, we are reminded that major change, like those involved in the process of pursuing reforms for quality with equity, is a difficult undertaking that will require time, adjustment, and continuous improvement along the way.

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<sup>i</sup> This includes the Paris Declaration (2005), the Accra Agenda for Action (2008), the Busan Partnership Agreement (2011), and the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation's (GPEDC) Nairobi Outcome Document (2016)

<sup>ii</sup> Education in emergencies, including provisions for refugee students, will be added to GEQIP-E in 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> Calculated using the OECD Development Assistance Committee Credit Reporting System (DAC CRS) (2019). The amount reflects gross disbursements in constant 2016 dollars.

<sup>iv</sup> Upon completion of the final version of this paper in March 2021, Ethiopia was experiencing heightened regional instability including increasingly violent conflicts in the Tigray region. Data and analysis in this paper reflect regional conditions between late 2017 and early 2020, and may be considerably more unstable at the time of publication.

<sup>v</sup> The RISE Ethiopia team involved in this study comprises researchers from the Institute of Educational Research, Addis Ababa University, and the REAL Centre, University of Cambridge.

<sup>vi</sup> In some circumstances, it may be preferable not to anonymise elite interviews of the kind we conducted. This is in part because it can be important to know the specific position of each of the individuals for the purposes of the analysis. In addition, it can sometimes be difficult to truly anonymise data given that it may be possible to work out the identity based on information provided, and thus it could be risky to promise anonymity. However, we are aware that there are some issues that are being raised that may be considered sensitive, and so have sought to keep identities anonymous.

<sup>vii</sup> Interview protocols and the code list are available on request.