INTRODUCTION

In the book *Poverty and Famines*, Amartya Sen presents the main findings of the outstanding research he did on the causes and effects of world famines. One of the starting points of his research was observing that similar types of food crisis (in similar climate conditions, with similar bad crops) that happened in India and China in the fifties had very different consequences in the two countries: Three million people starved to death in China, while many less died in India. So, the driving question of Sen’s research was why did such big variations in the management of food crises in apparently two similar situations happen? (Sen 1983).

The main finding of his work was that, when famines happen, the important issue is not only the availability of food, but the distribution and the lack of purchasing power of the poor. However, and even more importantly for us, he also found that democratic institutions, free media and active civil society networks with the capacity to make their voices heard are determinant when it comes to avoiding the occurrence of famines. His study in India was contextualized at a time that the country had recently gained its Independence from the British Empire, and the country was trying to build a young democratic system sensitive to people’s needs. In fact, the social movements that organised themselves to mitigate the effects of the food crisis were the same that contributed to Indian independence as well. Such institutional conditions were far from those occurring in China in the same period, but also in the colonized India of the forties. As Sen himself wrote:

“Not surprisingly, while India continued to have famines under British rule right up to independence… they disappeared suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and a free press” (Sen 2001, p. 8)

On the basis of his results, Amartya Sen concluded that the state should be responsible for enacting laws that ensure food security for all, but that public action from below is equally important to put pressure on government bodies to guarantee that such laws are implemented and that, as a result, the right to food is enacted.

Sen’s research on *Poverty and Famines* represents one of the first conclusive pieces of evidence on the social benefits of a well-articulated and independent civil
society. Even though this was not his main focus, Sen’s work contributed to opening up a very important and fascinating area of inquiry on the role and impact of civil society in the warranty of the most basic of human rights. The book you have in your hands is similarly engaging with this still nascent area of inquiry and, specifically, with the role of civil society in the enactment of the right to education worldwide.

The lack of education and, specifically, the lack of relevant and quality education does not have the same dramatic and visual effects that famines produce. However, it too can also have dramatic consequences of a different nature. Lack of education deprives people from wellbeing and future opportunities, disempowers them in terms of civil and political participation and, more broadly speaking, limits their chances to enjoy a full, healthy and productive life. Fortunately, the international community is more and more aware of the important contribution of education to multiple dimensions of human and societal development. Since the nineties, and thanks to a great extent to the World Education Conferences that took place in Jomtien (1990) and Dakar (2000), governments, aid agencies and international organizations are formally committed to the right to quality Education for All (EFA) globally (World Education Forum 2000). In the context of the Dakar conference, they even signed and committed to a Global Action Framework on EFA that establishes six specific education targets that all countries in the world should achieve in the following decades (see Box 2.1 in Mundy’s chapter, this volume). In parallel, civil society networks have organized themselves to make sure that these international commitments translate into concrete practice on the ground. Among these networks, the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) stands out as the biggest and most active civil society network advocating for EFA.

The GCE was set up in the late 1990s, in the run up to the Dakar Conference, with the objective of pushing for an ambitious EFA agenda. It brought together several International NGOs (Oxfam, Action Aid, Global March for Labour) and Education International (the global federation of teachers unions). With the passage of time, the GCE evolved into a multi-scalar organization by promoting and strengthening the role of civil society advocacy coalitions operating at the national and regional level. In the context of these coalitions, very different types of organizations work together to put pressure on national governments, donors and international organizations to honour financial and political agreements to deliver high quality education to all (World Education Forum 2000). To date, the GCE counts on the participation of 76 national coalitions and three big regional coalitions (see more details in Mundy in this volume)

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The main aim of this book is to understand how and to what extent civil society coalitions are able to make the state responsible for expanding educational opportunities and improving the education experience of children in their countries. This book is the main outcome of a three-year research project that has generated a range of empirically grounded case studies on the role and impact of