BUILDING SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS THROUGH EMPOWERMENT OF SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT Committees IN ZIMBABWE

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Country: Zimbabwe
Sector: Education

“It felt like a relationship between two people traveling together, were the Ministry had an opportunity to contribute. It was a full partnership, full cooperation amongst the ministry personnel, SNV and the two local capacity builders.”

These are the words of one of the clients Mr. P. Muzawazi, a Provincial Education director, while reflecting on a successful partnership that brought schools and communities together in Zimbabwe to improve on the quality of primary education.

Facing adversity
A rapid assessment of the 2008 teaching, learning and examination processes by SNV, UNICEF and Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) in March 2009 confirmed that 2008 was an unsuccessful academic year. It was noted that good school management and governance were critical in the improvement of educational outcomes.

In 1987 School Development Committees (SDCs) were established to decentralise the education sector. This placed parents and school administrators together in charge of schools. No formal induction into office or training was done. Focus was on the 'accounting officer', who is the head of the school. The Provincial Education Director (PED) of Manicaland found in 2005, from a quick survey in schools, where none of the pupils passed their grade 7 exams, that poor school-community relationship resulted in their poor performance. In the same light, a capacity assessment of SDCs carried out by SNV in partnership with the same PED and two Local Capacity Builders (LCBs) in 2008 and early 2009 revealed that many SDCs were not fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. Ultimately, this was a major factor to poor academic performance.

Building partnerships
SNV Zimbabwe works with the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture (MoESAC) in all 10 provinces and 72 districts in the country to build the capacity of 5,300 SDCs. This is guided by a four year Memorandum of Understanding signed in July 2009 to establish a formal framework for collaboration at all levels. The Ministry is mandated to provide primary and secondary education to over 2.5 million children in Zimbabwe and has a strategic role of providing capacity development services to improve the quality, relevance and accessibility of education in the country.
The Provincial Education Director summarized the trip: “The issue of sustainability was emphasized and the idea to use Ministry personnel at district level (DEOs) was birthed. ... The DEOs would be able to supervise and monitor the programme, bringing sustainability.”

The use of multi-stakeholder platforms that took place around the country, with one of them attended by the Permanent Secretary (a senior civil servant in the ministry) issues of deficiencies in the governance of schools came out strong. Armed with the outcomes of these meetings, SNV advocated for the development of the capacity of the SDCs. This call was not immediately heeded by the Ministry until an exchange visit to Uganda which involved one of the Education Directors took place. In Uganda a similar programme was undertaken with success and the outcomes inspired the Education Director. From then it was easier to convince the rest of the Ministry of the importance of SDC capacity development.

Back in Zimbabwe, a series of meetings between SNV, local capacity builders and the Provincial Education led to the development of training materials which are now being used for a nationwide training of SDCs in the 5,300 primary schools across the country. Pilot trainings that preceded this saw over 106 schools being trained. SNV provided facilitators whilst the community brought food and other logistics. In the words of one SNV Advisor “there was willingness and commitment by the communities to bring change to the school system”.

In typical capacity building fashion SNV mainly assisted the local capacity builders and coordinated all stakeholders in developing the SDC training services. In the words of Mr. G. Sango a member of the local capacity builder team "we went through many ‘dry runs’ (mock trainings) which involved MoESAC, SNV and us. The pilot trainings with the schools provided a good opportunity to form content and adjust it. They gave us true experiences and examples that we could use.”

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND GOOD GOVERNANCE
Despite SDC members being the only people present in the schools during the turbulent times of 2008 and early 2009, there were two other strategic reasons why the SDCs were chosen for capacity development:
1. Training SDCs and school heads, would not only address managerial and resource constraints of the sector, but also improve school-community relations and community support for schools. It would lead to increased investment in schools and improved payment of school fees by parents, who before were reluctant to pay due to lack of confidence in the financial administration of the schools. Moreover, given the little attention the SDC had received in terms of training over the years, it was a capacity gap that had never been addressed.
2. The SDC facilitates civic participation in the demand for transparency and accountability at the lowest level of the education system. Its institutionalization provides the checks and balances that are essential for good governance in the school. Given the centrality of schools in communities in Zimbabwe, training the parent representatives in the SDCs to get involved in the decision making in the school, and to make them aware of their power, would set a unprecedented example in Zimbabwe of ‘good governance’.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND UP SCALING
The formation of a Government of National Unity under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) in March 2009 saw about 11 donor agencies and embassies set up a US$52.7 million Education Transition Fund to support education in the country. While this Fund (ETF) and government provided learning resources for all the schools, it became important to augment these activities with capacity building. The exposure of SNV’s services through participation in the donor and government activities, as well as the ‘readiness’ of a tested product, which could be replicated at a larger scale, i.e. SDC handbook, SDC training materials and a mid-term evaluation report, helped UNICEF to identify SNV as a preferred partner in ETF capacity strengthening programme. At the request of UNICEF, SNV developed a proposal on the reinforcement of all 5300 SDCs.

OUTCOME

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CHANGES IN GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS

While the first training of 5,300 primary schools in Zimbabwe ends in September 2010, evidence, from an evaluation carried out on over 100 schools involved in the pilot trainings, show that SDC training has contributed to more transparency and greater accountability in schools:

- 55% of the schools in the Eastern Region and 84% of the schools in the Western Region have realised the need for, and changed their financial practices;
- Compared to previous years, 19% of the schools were reportedly receiving more support from the community in the Eastern Region, while 67% of the schools in the Western Region reported an improved community involvement;
- 90% of the heads and chairpersons in the Eastern and 84% in the Western Regions reported that the relations in the SDC had improved;
- 75% of the schools in the Eastern and 100% in the Western Regions are now using the relevant Statutory Instruments in their work with the SDC. This finding is also evident in the increased use of the legal statutes in the election and governance of the SDCs.
- Training staff within MoESAC to facilitate country-wide training gave early indications that the programme can be sustained. The Ministry has capacity to carry out follow-up SDC trainings and other capacity development activities. PED, Mr. Muzawazi, whose province alone has 1,231 schools, said "such a programme has never been carried out in such a short space of time and I am confident that it can be an annual training. The schools can finance the cost of the workshop while the Ministry funds the Transport and Subsistence for its staff, and after these trainings the communities would surely contribute. We have the materials and capacity to do it!"

UNITY OF PURPOSE

Across the country, schools and communities are working together to improve school infrastructure, accommodation and other support to teachers as well as finding alternative sources of financial support for schools. At Ruda primary school in Mutasa District of Manicaland, the SDC mobilised the community to repair classroom blocks and build new ones for early childhood education.

While improvements in school-community relations are manifesting, the real impact of the SDC trainings will be evident when improvements in academic performance of the students are monitored. Key officials of MoESAC and stakeholders in the education, concur that the combined strength of the office of school head and the parents in the SDC is an important determinant of a quality in the education sector. Education, Sport, Arts and Culture Deputy Minister, Lazarus Dokora¹ says "It (training) seeks to sensitise school authorities of parents’ role in development and avoid unnecessary conflicts in the school community". The training is expected to narrow the gap between school authorities and development committees that has been affecting the running of schools. "It is meant to give insights in the management of resources in the school environment as both (headmaster and elected members) handle resources", Mr. Dokora emphasised.

¹Herald National Newspaper, 8 August, 2010

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While all stakeholders indicate that they have learnt a lot from the programme the most notable for SNV include:

- Thorough analysis is critical to identify the real capacity needs of an organisation and also determine the niche for SNV services. Once determined, there was motivation among stakeholders to make the utmost contribution to the programme.
- Patience and determination are important in developing sustainable interventions. The search for quick results and impact often leads to activities that address the symptoms and not the causes of problems. SNV Advisors were very persistent yet patient and managed to pull stakeholders along to develop and implement a nationwide programme.
- It is important to build partnerships based on need, trust and respect for each other. SNV and the Ministry worked together on the basis of these values and had the space to challenge and give feedback to each other throughout the development of the SDC training manuals and handbook and the roll out of the programme.
- There is need to try and test products ready for up-scaling. By the time UNICEF requested a proposal from SNV they were already convinced about the quality of the pilot programme already undertaken and documented.
- Ability to work as a team and in partnership was crucial in the success of the SDC programme. Given the size and capacity of SNV it would have been impossible to roll out the programme without the partnership of other organisations such as UNICEF, Save the Children (UK and Norway) and local capacity builders.

SNV has worked on a programme for next year with UNICEF. It will support the next phase of the SDC training programme, which will extend it to all secondary schools and also consolidate the gains made in the primary schools. Also the training has revealed other issues in the education sector such as supervision, which need to be tackled in tandem with the SDC trainings. These are being discussed already in a multi stakeholder setting. We hope to develop concrete programmes to address these together with the stakeholders.

The capacity building of School Development Committees, which involves training, coaching and follow-up at a later stage together with support for the head teachers and supervisors, tackles essentially 2 major G4E issues: accountability & transparency and participation & voice. The first level is to address governance and managerial constraints in the school governing bodies. The second level is to give a platform in the communities for people to participate in decision making processes. This is within context that has in recent years been politically volatile.

<table>
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<th>MoU</th>
<th>MoESAC Province</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>July 2009 – June 2013</th>
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<tr>
<td>Composition of the Team</td>
<td>Advisory Staff</td>
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<td>743 ppdays</td>
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<td>Intern</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>250 ppdays</td>
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<td>LCBs</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3699 ppdays</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcome Measurement</td>
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² Data on MoU, team composition, partnerships and ppdays reflects the ‘School Development Re-enforcement Programme for 5300 primary schools’ programme in 2010 and excludes the assignments in 2009 and 2008 that were instrumental for the 2010 programme.

³ Ppdays include salary, transport and accommodation costs.