

BUILDING A STRONG EDUCATION SECTOR IN ZIMBABWE

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Country: Zimbabwe

Sector: Basic Services (Education)

INTRODUCTION

School-Community Based planning is helping communities in more than 50 schools in Zimbabwe build strong relationships that contribute to school development. The school community plan is part of SNV's approach to involve the community in the local education system to play an active role in school development through infrastructural development, payment of school fees for needy children and purchase of textbooks amongst other forms of support.

Selected schools in Binga, Zaka, Hwange, Bulilima and Mangwe districts are part of a big programme involving 50 schools where SNV Zimbabwe initiated various participatory methodologies to engage the community to dialogue with the school administration through the School Development Committee (SDC). These dialogues set the platform where the school community interrogate and analyse their school development challenges to develop ways of positively contributing to the development of their school. SNV through a partnership programme with United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) sought to involve communities in running schools through a process of community based planning. This was through the Enhanced Food Security through the Empowerment of Schools Program.

CHALLENGE

Community based planning involves working with local people and school staff to identify and analyse school development challenges and agreeing on what the community can do to develop the school. The community based planning process involved training the school head, selected teacher and School Development Committee representatives, traditional leaders, councillors and relevant district stakeholders from education, social welfare and local government departments to equip them with the relevant skills.

Facing the Challenge

About 90% of the primary schools in Zimbabwe are government (local authority) owned and 10% are privately owned. In the government schools, the government works in partnership with the communities where the government provides per capita grants, teachers and stationery. The community/ parents are responsible for the infrastructural development of the schools. Existence of school development committees [SDCs] democratically elected by parents and communities on an annual basis gives voice to the parents in setting fees, implementation of school infrastructure development projects and maintenance. However community participation is nominal as community roles are mainly perceived to be financing of education without real muscles to make decisions. Schools on the other hand have been accused of making more demands on parents to educate their children whilst parents on the other hand are faced with basic livelihood challenges. School Development Committees often rubber stamp head teachers' decisions as they lack the relevant decision making capacities.

With the Government support declining over the years due to a poor performing economy, the education sector has experienced resource constraints especially teacher exodus and inadequate budgets. This meant that education authorities could not assist in providing adequate resources to ensure that quality is offered to children. Primary school education completion rates according to the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture declined from 73.18% in 1995 to 67.62% in 2004 (ZNASP 2005). Many children, especially girls, dropped out of school before graduating, while many failed their examinations.



In Binga District in the Zambezi basin, Zimbabwe, the Headmistress of Sebungwe Mouth Primary School Mrs. Judith Noko just like any other school head in rural Zimbabwe is facing serious challenges. She ponders on what to do with two hundred and sixty five children without desks and adequate infrastructure. Most of the children are orphans whose parents have died of HIV/AIDS. Her efforts to get other local people to assist in running the school have not been successful. Relations between the school and the community have never been good. Counter accusations between school authorities and parents regarding the poor performance of children at school were a regular occurrence. To this end, the school experienced high absenteeism and staff turnover and local community did not participate in solving the problems the school faced. 53% of the school enrolments consist of Orphans and other Vulnerable Children.

Similarly in Zaka District, the schools have no money to buy textbooks, stationery and furniture for both pupils and teachers. Eight or more children share a single book instead of one child per textbook. In most instances, children did not have paper or pens to do their homework making teaching and learning difficult, which showed in low pass rates. Poor relations between schools and their communities were also noted when community encroached into school grounds settling there. By creating an opportunity for dialogue between the community members, school administrators and the government officials, the Community Based Planning process revealed to the participants alternative ways of resolving school development challenges.

Celebrating the First Fruits

Community based planning process just like sowing seeds, is bearing fruits shown by the commitments the community made towards implementing the plans. The commitments have helped build strong relationships between the schools and parents for school development. Parents pledged to pay school fees for poor children, buy stationery and top up teachers' salaries. Communities and schools have established gardens, some of which are bearing produce.

The school staff, in consultation with traditional and religious leaders, parents and guardians, councillors, and civil servants working at ward and village levels, developed plans using skills learned from the training. The 50 schools produced 5 – 10 year plans to tackle priority school development challenges. Every year for the next 5 – 10 years, the schools will develop implementation plans for activities that they will undertake during that particular year.

Through the process of developing the plans, the schools and communities became aware of the various stakeholders that could support them. Funding partners such as World Vision and CADEC have met with some of the 50 schools and made inputs to school-community plans. UNICEF, FAO and JICA have helped 10 schools in Zaka district to start school gardens and invited SNV to train the headmasters, teachers and school development committees to develop their plans. By bringing them together and encouraging discussions about what the

schools need, SNV helped to build trusting relationships between the school staff and the community members.

In Zaka district, gardens that were set up by the schools and the communities two months ago are bearing fruits through such produce as carrots that are ready for harvest. The garden is part of an action taken by the parents and school authorities following a meeting to develop a school community plan to volunteer in school development work.

In addition to gardening, community members are involved in other activities around the school, such as digging pit latrines and making bricks. Community members agreed to pay levies to raise money for operational costs at these schools. The whole school-community interface has had a multiplier effect on the local people who have started their own gardens by copying the school ones. Children are learning practical subjects like agriculture and home economics. They are not only learning life skills, but are able to concentrate better in the classroom as they have fresh vegetables to eat. The guaranteed supply of food lets many spend the day on a full stomach.

The community together with schools are identifying, enrolling and assisting disadvantaged children have a good education. In addition, SNV successfully raised USD 2.4 million to assist schools and communities implement these plans in all 50 schools, and an additional 124 schools over the next 3 years (2008-2010). Implementing the plans will result in 36,000 poor children going back to 174 schools over the next 3 years. Half of these children are expected to be girls. The children will also be provided with uniforms, stationery and text books through community initiatives and externally mobilised resources. This in turn should enable more children to pass their examinations.

A Brighter Future

All these activities will result in schools being more open to parents' participation in the running of schools whilst making use of the extended family system take care of orphaned and poor children.

School community training processes have assisted in identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which were captured into school development plans to address main education challenges. The plans have sown the seeds towards access and retention of school children in the 50 schools. The plans also emphasise strong and supportive relationships between schools and their communities. The program will equip all school children between the ages of 9 and 12 with leadership and life skills in the targeted schools.

The ministries of education, social welfare and councils will be expected to complement community efforts in supporting orphans and disadvantaged children. These efforts are seen as sowing seeds for a brighter future for disadvantaged children in Sebungwe Mouth Primary School and similar schools. Lessons from these past experiences have led SNV to partner with the MoESC to improve co-ordination through establishing and supporting stakeholder platforms. Community involvement in the development of schools will also be accomplished through viable community based enterprises that in turn channel a proportion of their profits towards supporting school development. Through this work it is expected the challenges that heads like Mrs. Noko experience on a daily basis will be progressively addressed in a sustainable and collaborative way leading to increased access, improved quality and relevant education for all primary school children.