

MALAWI

The Role of Community Members in the Promotion of Child Friendly Schools: The Case of Malemia and Domasi Government Primary Schools

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1. Frame of Reference

Malawi is a signatory of various United Nations conventions and protocols, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Articles 5 and 18 of the CRC observe that parents and the community at large play a crucial role in the realisation of child rights. Of these rights, Article 28 talks about child rights to education. It follows then that communities have a role to play in the child's realisation of this right (to education).

Having ratified the CRC in 1991, Malawi is doing a lot to grantee the rights of the child including right to education. To show its commitment, the government introduced Free Primary Education in the year 1994 with the aim of making sure that no child remains out of school because of fees problems. This resulted in an increase in primary school enrolment from 2 million to nearly 3 million representing a 50% rise (Policy and Investment Framework 2000).

Malawi government has gone a step further in showing its commitment to the CRC by making primary education not only free but also compulsory. A bill to this effect was passed on 31 October 2013 (Education Act 2012).

In addition, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology with support from UNICEF has introduced the concept of Child Friendly School (CFS) in primary schools just to make sure that the child enjoys the right to education in a free and friendly environment. CFS takes into account all the 3Ps namely Provision, Protection and Participation as described in the CRC articles. The CFS framework identifies five

thematic areas as necessary and mutually re-enforcing conditions for a successful school. These thematic areas are:

1. A rights based and inclusive school
2. An academically effective school
3. A self-protective and health promoting school
4. A gender responsive, equity and equality promoting school
5. School-community linkages and partnerships

The CFS guidelines observe that community participation is the “key building block” to realizing the child – friendly school goals. However, the National Strategy for Community Participation in Primary School Management (2004) observes that community participation has generally only involved helping with construction and fund raising, and not in school management. In agreement, the National Education Sector Plan (NESP 2008 – 2017) observes that there is indeed poor participation of school management committees (SMCs) and their communities in school management. In this regard, the NESP recommends that communities be mobilized to participate in “whole school development” and management. The Education Sector Performance Report (2010 – 2011) further supports the need to involve local communities and SMCs for effective school governance and management.

Johnson (2004) says that the benefit of community participation is that it sends the message that school is important and the work children do there is worthy of adult attention. In this regard, learners take school seriously and in the end, most of them will remain in school and complete their studies

This project focused on the participation of the community in making schools safe for learners in line with theme 5 of the CFS implementation strategy in Malawi. The project was conducted in Zomba District in the southern part of Malawi. This is one of the few districts where CRC projects have been conducted. However, none of the previous projects addressed community participation in the promotion of child friendly schools. The project targeted two schools. These are Malemia and Domasi Government Primary Schools. These two schools were purposefully chosen because of the differences between them. While Malemia is a typical rural school, Domasi Government is a same urban school. As such, the results of the study were representative of the situation at the wider horizon. Furthermore, the two schools were very convenient in the sense that change argents were staying close to them such that monitoring and supervision of the projects was very easy.

2. Purpose

The purpose of the study was to create an improved and safe learning environment in schools through community participation in coordination with the teachers. Both communities and the teachers were supposed to effectively contribute towards the creation of safe schools. To achieve this, the two groups (the communities and the teachers) came up with joint projects which were successfully implemented. The active participation of the communities clearly showed the passion that had developed in them as far as the safety of their children in the schools was concerned.

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the purpose of this study, a number of steps were taken. The first step was to conduct a base line study for both teachers and community members of both schools with the aim of finding out the gaps which were there in terms of understanding of their roles in making learners in school safe. Target groups in the study were head teachers, teachers, community leaders, traditional authorities and mother groups. These were all involved but were grouped into two; community members and teachers.

Having identified the gaps, training materials were developed for both groups of stakeholders. This was followed by the actual training which aimed at enlightening the groups on their roles. The trainings were in two, one for teachers and head teachers of the two schools and the other one for community members of the two schools. At the end of the training, each of the two schools drew an action plan. The teachers and the community members for each school worked together to come up with the school's action plan.

The first output of the study was awareness of the roles of the community members in making schools safe for learners. The training aimed at sensitizing the community members on their roles (activity 1a). The action plan constituted activity 1b; strategizing points of action to be done by community members at the school. The second output of the study was school- community coordination towards making schools safe for learners. To achieve this output, the activity to be carried out was to redefine roles of community and partnerships with the school in line with Malawi's Child – Friendly Schools' principles. The third output was to strengthen links between the school and the community. This was to be achieved through two activities namely;

- a) identifying areas to strengthen links between the school and the community
- b) working out strategies to strengthen the links between the school and the community

While the forgoing outputs and activities all looked at the community, the following addressed the head teachers and teachers. The first output was awareness of staff on the expected provisions the school is supposed to give children for their safety. This would be realized using two activities namely;

- a) analyzing the provisions that ensure safety of learners
- b) identifying strategies to enhance safety of learners in accordance with provisions.

4. Results

The base line study had two sets of data. The first one was for teachers and head teachers of the two schools, while the second one was for community leaders. Since the trend was almost the same, only the data collected from the teachers and head teachers is discussed below. This data was analysed using SPSS computer software. All the items (48) were entered and analysed. The analysis was done according to the five themes of CFS that Malawi adopted. The following were the reflections from the findings.

Theme 1: A rights-based and inclusive school

Despite the claims that the two schools place high value on understanding and respect of children's rights, there was still a contradiction from the other responses on the same. This showed there was still lack of understanding of the whole concept of child rights as regards this theme.

Theme 2: Academically effective school

Lack of a clear pattern from the responses also showed a lack of understanding of what an academically effective school should be. For example, responses on "lack of materials affecting the implementation of the curriculum" and on "students have the materials they need to learn" showed clear contradiction as the majority in both cases indicated that they strongly agree.

Theme 3: A safe, protective and healthy promoting school

The responses indicated that there was a good relationship among teachers at both schools and are able to respect and help each other. However, on the safety of learners, the data showed that at both schools safety was not guaranteed. For example, more than 40% indicated that schools were highly affected by crime and violence, and about 60% indicated that health issues kept learners from learning.

Theme 4: A gender responsive, equity and equality promoting school

Under this theme, two items were put forward for teachers to determine how well their school was promoting gender equity and equality. It was discovered that about half believed that learners were not treated differently. The responses also showed a fifty-fifty % on equal opportunities to succeed between boys and girls.

Theme 5: School – community linkages and partnerships

Despite the fact that some responses were showing that communities supported schools in terms of making decisions that affect learners, there were also responses indicating low involvement of parents in the education of their children. There were also some contradictions on the responses. For example, inclusion of parents in school events and overcoming cultural barriers seemed to be problematic as well. If parents were well involved in school events, it should not have been problematic to overcome cultural barriers that affected learners' education.

It was hoped that by the end of the study, community participation in the promotion of child friendly schools would be strengthened. To achieve this, each and every stakeholder would know their role and would do what was expected of them.

5. Project Implementation

As a way forward, it was initially envisaged that each group for each school come up with an action plan on one issue which the group identified. This action plan would be monitored by the change agents and upon completion; the group would develop another action plan. However, it was later changed slightly in order to accommodate observations made by fellow change agents in Vietnam. In this regard, instead of having separate activities as teachers and community members, each school came up with one project to be done collaboratively between teachers and community members.

The revised action plans were therefore as follows for the two schools:

Action plan for Domasi Government primary school:

Issue: Unfriendly steps on classroom blocks creating problems for young learners and those with disabilities

OUTCOME	STRATEGIES	RESPONSIBLE OFFICERS	RESOURCES	TIME FRAME	INDICATORS
By The end of July 2014 we shall have constructed friendly passages on 4 classroom blocks	Meeting with stakeholders	Head teachers senior school staff	Flip charts	End of October	Minutes
	Mobilizing resources	School management committee Head teacher Senior school staff	sand bricks cement	End of October	Availability of materials
	Construction of friendly passages at standard 1 and standard 8 classrooms	School management committee Headteacher Senior school staff	sand bricks cement	December to February	Constructed friendly passages
	Meeting with stakeholders	Headteacher School management committee Parent Teachers Association	None	Early March	Minutes
	Construction of friendly passages at standard 7A and standard 7B classrooms	Headteacher School management committee Senior school staff	sand bricks cement	March to May	Constructed friendly passages
	Construction of friendly passages at standard 6A and standard 6B classrooms	Headteacher School management committee Senior school staff	sand bricks cement	June to July	Constructed friendly passages
	Meeting with stakeholders	Head teacher School management committee Parent Teachers Association	None	End of July	Minutes

Action plan for Malemia primary school, Issue: Lack of adequate and safe rubbish pits at the schools to improve sanitation

OBJECTIVES	STRATEGIES	RESOURCES	LEAD PERSON	TIMEFRAME	INDICATORS
By end of June 2014, five rubbish pits will be dug to improve sanitation at the school	Meeting with stakeholders	None	Headteacher and sanitation officer	January 2014	Minutes of the meeting
	Mobilizing funds	Poles, shovels, hoes, nails	SMC committee and sanitation officer	February-March 2014	Availability of funds
	Constructing rubbish pits	Poles, shovels, hoes, nails	SMC committee and sanitation officer	April – May 2014	5 complete rubbish pits available

6. Results of the Project Implementation

The project implementation has been successful at both schools and has achieved the intended objectives. The project has improved collaboration between schools and their communities in providing safe environment for the learners in both schools. At Malemia School, five rubbish pits with protective fences have been put in place. Four of the rubbish pits were done in collaboration between the school and community members and the fifth pit was constructed by community members only.



Pic 1. Rubbish dumping before intervention at Malemia School.



Pic 2. One of the five protected rubbish dumps

In addition to the expected results; five fenced rubbish pits, Malemia Primary School achieved an unexpected result. The community members went a step further to initiate a project to construct washrooms to cater for girls who had problems to come to school when they were experiencing monthly periods. Most of them stayed out of school during such days. It was the wish of community members to encourage them to come to school and attend lessons and use this facility while at school. This facility makes the school even more child friendly for the girls.

At Domasi Government School, teachers and members of school community managed to raise money and construct ramps to all classrooms which had steps which were

unfriendly to young children and disabled learners. This was after observing that young learners and disabled learners used to have difficulties to access the classrooms.



Pic 1. Domasi School steps before intervention.



Pic 2. One of the ramps to improve access to classrooms.

Through this joint project between community members and teachers, more collaboration emerged. Just like at Malemia School, community members at Domasi Government also initiated a project to construct a washroom for girls to use during menstruation. In addition, teachers and community members also initiated a project to construct a teachers' staffroom and a school library for learners.

Another success of the project is the methodology which was used to implement the project. Teachers and community members at both schools developed action plans as a guide, indicating explicitly the objectives, strategies, resources needed, lead person and indicators of implementation. This is an innovation which will be used in other projects.



Mentor; dr. Ulf Leo, Change agents, teachers and community members of Malemia

7. Discussion and Reflection

The project has been a great success in the sense that the ideas for the project came from the teachers and community members themselves, different from what change agents initially had during baseline study. Change agents had different ideas to be implemented in the project as shown in the initial project report but community members and teachers on the ground had other things as priorities; the ones they implemented. Although the project achievements at the two schools may seem small, their impact is big. The collaboration that has been achieved in implementing the two projects has opened eyes for the two teams to see the need to work together even on small issues such as construction of rubbish pits and making of ramps to improve access to classrooms. This collaboration is likely to grow for the benefit of the learners in the two schools.

Summary of successes achieved by the two projects are:

- Improved collaboration between teachers and community members towards creating a safe environment for learners in their schools. More collaboration has also been seen among community members such as Mother Groups and PTA/SMC members and community leaders. Mother groups were more active but now their efforts are appreciated and supported by the rest of the community members including community leaders. The proposal to construct washrooms at both schools came from Mother Group members and all the community members support the idea.
- The project has led to more successes in the two schools besides the intended expected outcomes. The proposal to have washrooms at both schools was not in the original plan but came out as a need from community members.
- There has been improved sanitation at both schools. Having constructed the five rubbish pits at Malemia School and the ramps at Domasi Government primary school, the two schools have intensified the outlook of the two schools through cleanliness to match with the projects accomplished.

Summary of challenges experienced in the implementation of the projects –

- The main challenge is the fact that some of the ideas which change agents had wanted to initiate for implementation at the two schools were changed. As indicated earlier, the projects are those that were initiated by the schools and community members. Also the approach to have different projects done by schools and community members were changed to have one project for both school and community members at each school. This was of course the right approach in line with the objectives of the project.

8. Way Forward

The two schools will continue with various projects using the methodology of action planning. Already at hand are the projects on washrooms for girls at both schools, and a staffroom and library at Domasi Government School. During the mentor visit to Malawi, change agents collaborated with two NGOs who were willing to support the two schools in their endeavour to create safe and friendly environments for learners through community participation. The two NGOs are Creative Centre for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM) and Youth Net and Counselling (YONECO). There will be need to continue supporting the schools activities to collaborate with the two NGOs and as the two schools continue with their various projects.

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