

# MALAWI

Child Participation in Decision Making In Schools of Njewa Education Zone,  
Lilongwe

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## 1. Introduction

There have been efforts by the Government of Malawi and other stakeholders to promote and protect the rights of children in Malawi. However, the full attainment of such rights remains a challenge. Children in Malawi continue to experience various forms of violence, abuse and exploitation. The violations include physical, psychological as well as sexual abuses and harassment. These violations occur in both home and school settings. The Government of Malawi and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have made efforts to come up with interventions that aim at promoting respect for the rights of children. However, violations of children's rights in different contexts still exist. The legal framework governing children's affairs in Malawi responds to this situation. The legal framework is very relevant in the implementation of interventions that aim at providing support, care and protection as well as cultivating a culture of giving children the space to give their views in matters affecting their affairs.

Among others, the Malawi's legal framework on children's rights is primarily composed of the Constitution as the supreme law and various pieces of legislation such as the Child Care, Protection and Justice Act, 2010; the Disability Act, 2013; the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, 2006; the National Registration Act, 2009; Deceased Estates (Wills, Inheritance and Protection) Act, 2011; Gender Equality Act, 2013 and other relevant international and regional human rights instruments which Malawi ratified. One of such instruments is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)<sup>1</sup> as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)<sup>2</sup>.

In particular, the enactment of Child Care, Protection and Justice Act, 2010 is a milestone for Malawi because it consolidates various child friendly pieces of legislation into one law. The legislation entrenches the basic general principles for the promotion

1 CRC: ratified on 2 January, 1991

2 The ACRWC: ratified on 16 September, 1999

and protection of the rights of children such as the right to life, survival and development, best interest of the child, the right to express views and have them taken into account as well as non-discrimination. Therefore, the enactment of this law presents the opportunity to consolidate efforts in the promotion and protection of the rights of children in Malawi. At school level, other policies and initiatives such as 50-50 selection policy between boys and girls, re-admission policy for school drop outs, child friendly school initiative as well as free primary education policy also make significant contributions to a strong legal framework for the promotion and protection of children's right to education. In recent years, Malawi passed a law that makes primary education compulsory<sup>3</sup>. A totality of all these laws, policies, international and regional human rights instruments provide enabling environment for the enjoyment of the rights of children in the context of schools.

## 2. Frame of Reference

Despite the well-structured legal framework in Malawi, the prevailing situation in schools continues to be characterized by a number of challenges that affect the effective realisation of children's rights. The implication is that the rights of children remain far from being effectively realized. Some of the challenges are lack of effective enforcement of laws that promote children's rights as well as lack of government's total commitment to popularise existing national laws and policies as well as international and regional human rights instruments that are designed to promote the rights of children in Malawi. Participation is one of the four general principles in the CRC that offers children the opportunity to give their views on matters that affect them.

However, in the Malawian context, participation of children in matters that affect them is not fully implemented in schools. The children's right to participation is viewed with uneasiness by teachers, parents, communities and opinion leaders. As a result, children's participation in decision making in schools is almost negligible. This also stems from the fact that teachers and a greater percentage of adults fail to appreciate that children have the potential to situate problems and that they can contribute meaningfully in matters that affect them. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that in instances where children find space and express their views, their input is hardly given due weight. Coupled with teachers' challenges such as heavy work load, large classes and minimal understanding as well as appreciation of the rights of children in school setting, there is little consideration on how best such rights can be promoted.

In its concluding observations for Malawi on the country's second state party periodic report to the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) in 2009, the Committee noted that traditional and societal attitudes appear to limit children in freely expressing their views in schools, communities and within the family. The Committee recommended that Malawi should continue to strengthen

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<sup>3</sup> The Education Act was enacted into law in 2013. Section 13 of the Act provides free and compulsory primary education to children under the age of 18 years.

its efforts in promoting respect for the views of the children in all matters that concern them in the family, school, other children's institutions and the community.

It is a fact that respect for the rights of children to be heard within education is fundamental to the realization of the right to education. However, the situation in Malawi is different in the sense that there is continuing authoritarianism as well as disrespect for the rights of the children. This creates an environment which is not conducive to children's participation in decision making because teachers and other school authorities fail to provide space for children to express their views. For example, in Malawian primary and secondary schools, the trend has been that students' representatives in class have been limited to assisting teachers on issues of sanitation around the school environment and that students should follow school norms such as reporting for classes on time apart from recording noise makers in class. Parents, guardians and the communities from where the children come have had little influence on how such children can be involved in decision making in schools.

However, it is a fact that apart from cultivating sound teacher-pupil ratio to promote and protect children's right to education, there is need to ensure that students also participate in decision making on issues that affect them and their education and that parents as well as the communities ought to get involved in students' school work<sup>4</sup>. This is in line with the General Comment no 1 of the UN Committee on the CRC on the aims of education. The general comment advances that education must be provided in a way that respects the inherent dignity of the child and enables him or her to express his or her views freely in accordance with article 12 (1) of the CRC. The general comment also posits that children ought to participate in school life.

It is against this background that Malawi Batch 19 change agents implemented a project on child participation in decision making in 10 schools of Njewa Education Zone in Lilongwe. The project aimed at promoting increased students' active participation in decision making in schools on matters that affect them. The project took advantage of the already existing structures (students' representatives) in schools to make them more organized in order for them to participate in decision making. It was envisaged that this process would ultimately strengthen students' level of participation<sup>5</sup> in matters that affect them in schools and reduce various forms of violations on students. Ultimately, the project was expected to help create a conducive learning environment for students.

The project drew lessons from that of the Malawi Batch 16 change agents which also focused on child participation in decision making in schools. The project for the Malawi Batch 16 change agents, which was implemented at Njewa and Chitipi Primary Schools as well as Njewa Community Day Secondary School in Lilongwe district, focused much on school learners as a target group. The project framework did not adequately target parents and the communities to play their part in ensuring that schools cultivate a culture of students' participation in decision making on matters that affect them (students).

<sup>4</sup> Malawi Government Free Primary Education Implementation Guidelines

<sup>5</sup> Participation, herein, is where children take part in and influence processes, decisions and activities that affect them in order to achieve greater respect, promotion and protection of their rights.

In order for the project to be sustainable, the Malawi Batch 19 change agents focused on students' participation with the aim of changing teachers' and the communities' negative attitude and perception towards involvement of children in decision making in schools. As earlier pointed out, the Malawi Batch 16 change agents targeted three schools in Njewa Education Zone in Lilongwe. On the other hand, the Malawi Batch 19 change agents scaled up the project to 9 Primary Schools and 1 Community Day Secondary School in the zone. In view of this development, the change agents focused on Article 3, Article 12 and Article 13<sup>6</sup> of the CRC. The project further focused on Articles 14 and 15 as well as Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC. Article 14 gives children the opportunity to think for themselves on issues that are in their best interest. Articles 28 and 29 entitle children to relevant and qualitative education and oblige State parties to recognize children's right to relevant and qualitative education.

### 3. Purpose

The main purpose of the project was to promote increased participation of children in decision making in schools of Njewa Education Zone in Lilongwe. The specific objectives of the project included:

- 3.1 To bring a positive change on teachers' and the communities' attitude and perception towards involving children in decision making in schools.
- 3.2 To ensure that children, teachers and the communities appreciate the values of Childrens' participation in decision making in schools.
- 3.3 To facilitate the establishment of Students' Councils that would provide children a platform and voice to participate in decision making in schools.

### 4. Methodology and Results

This section covers the activities which the change agents implemented in pursuit of the project objectives and the results that were recorded. The actual reporting period is from October 2013 to January 2015. The activities 4.1 to 4.8 were undertaken in the third phase of the project while activities 4.9 to 6.0 were undertaken in the fifth phase of the project.

#### 4.1 Introducing the Project to the Ministry Of Education, Science and Technology

The project was first formally introduced to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. This was premised on the fact that the project targets public schools and

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6 Gives guidelines that all actions should be in the best interest of the child, entitles children to play an active role on all issues and decisions affecting their lives and gives the child the freedom to express their views freely on issues respectively

that this would require the support and cooperation of the line ministry during project implementation. Therefore, the change agents held a meeting with Dr. Joseph Chimombo, the ministry's Director of Basic Education. The ministry welcomed the project because of its objectives which focused on the promotion and protection of children's rights in school context using the provisions of the CRC.

The result was that Dr. Chimombo gave permission that through the office of the District Education Manager for Lilongwe Rural West Education District, the change agents could access the Zonal Improvement Grant as well as the District Improvement Grant in order to implement some of the activities as the project was at a zonal level. Dr. Chimombo also made a commitment that through his office, the ministry would periodically be monitoring progress of the project in the targeted schools and provide necessary support. Mr. Chimombo provided support to the change agents throughout the project implementation period.

#### **4.2 Meeting with the Education Division Manager for Central West Education Division**

The project was also introduced to the Central West Education Division office. The change agents had a meeting with the Education Division Manager, Mr. Joseph Nkhata. The meeting was important because Njewa Education Zone, the target area for the project, falls under Central West Education Division. At divisional level, the project was welcomed as well. Mr. Nkhata indicated that the project would help students begin to be involved in decision making at an early stage, thereby shaping them to become responsible citizens. Mr. Nkhata called for the need to sustain the project and later expand to other schools in order to consolidate efforts towards promoting and protecting the rights of children in school context. The result was that Mr. Nkhata pledged to cooperate with the change agents during the implementation of the project, which he did throughout the period.

#### **4.3 Meeting with the District Commissioner for Lilongwe District**

The project was also introduced to the office of the District Commissioner for Lilongwe district, Mr. Felix Mkandawire. This was premised on the fact that due to the current decentralization set up at district level in Malawi, offices of District Education Managers work closely with District Councils as a whole and District Commissioners in particular. Mr. Mkandawire welcomed the choice of the project, child participation in decision making in schools, and stated that the initiative would start shaping children to know and claim their rights when they are still in school. He stated that his office was in support of the project as it would be implemented in Lilongwe. The outcome of this was that throughout the project implementation period, the office of the District Commissioner provided relevant logistical support to facilitate the implementation of the project.

#### **4.4 Sensitization Meeting With Head Teachers on the Project**

The change agents conducted a sensitization meeting with head teachers from all the 10 targeted schools in the project. The primary aim of the meeting was to introduce the project to the head teachers since it targeted their respective schools. The meeting also clarified the role of the head teachers and how they would work with the change agents in order for the project objectives to be achieved. The project was introduced as an initiative to create child friendly schools in line with the Malawi Government policy that all schools should be child friendly as part of the implementation of the Malawi Free Primary School Education Guidelines. The head teachers welcomed the initiative and pledged to support the change agents in all the processes. The meeting took place at Njewa Teachers Development Centre in Lilongwe. As a result of the meeting, the head teachers started working towards creating conducive environment for students' participation on issues that affect them by conducting briefing sessions with teachers in their respective schools.

#### **4.5 Training of School Management Committees, Mother Groups and Parents-Teachers Associations**

School Management Committees (SMCs), Mother Groups (MGs) and Parents-Teachers Associations (PTAs) are important integral community structures that significantly contribute to running of public schools as part of community participation. SMCs work consist of members from the communities around the schools and their role is to contribute in the running of the schools at a school and community policy level while MGs, whose members are also drawn from the communities around the schools, provide psychosocial support to students and also work to prevent and respond to various forms of violations to such students. PTAs constitute parents who come from communities that are being serviced by a particular school and the teachers from such schools. The role of PTAs is for teachers and parents to share experiences and discuss issues that affect students as well as how best to deal with challenges at a school level for the benefit for students.

In view of this, the change agents organized 3 training sessions for SMCs, MGs and PTAs drawn from all the 10 schools which the project targeted. The aim of the trainings was to build the capacity of members of such structures on issues of children's participation in school governance in general and in decision making in particular on issues that affect them (children) in schools. This was in recognition of the fact that such community structures are central in running public schools. The participants were taken through the basic principles of the CRC and the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi (the Constitution) on children's rights and how such provisions can be applied in school context. Participants were also trained on how to work cordially with teachers in order to ensure that the rights of children in schools are promoted and protected. The result was that the training contributed towards changing the attitude and perception of members of SMCs, MGs as well as PTAs on giving children space to express their views. The structures started working towards ensuring that children participate in decision making on issues that affect them in schools.

## **4.6 Training of Head Teachers and Teachers**

All head teachers and their deputies as well as heads of sections from the 10 schools were involved in the training sessions. The training sessions also targeted teachers who were identified to take up the role of working together with the Students Councils as patrons. The trainings covered the fundamental principles of the CRC and how such principles can be used to promote and protect children's rights in schools. The participants were also taken through the relevant provisions in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child as well as children's rights as provided in the Constitution. The participants were also trained on their role in ensuring that children in schools participate in decision making, especially on issues that affect them. The result was that school managers (head teachers, deputies and heads of sections) as well as the majority of ordinary teachers started cultivating a culture of harmony with students by allowing them to participate in decision making on matters that affect them. The training took place at Njewa Teachers Development Centre in Lilongwe.

As a result, the change agents, working hand in hand with teachers and other school authorities, facilitated the establishment of Students' Councils in all the targeted 10 schools in Njewa Education Zone in Lilongwe. Students' Councils are now in place and they act as channels for students to voice their views. In this way, students have a platform to address issues of their concern with the support of school management. Therefore, by and large, the Students' Councils are a bridge on how children can participate in school governance on issues that concern them. It is further expected that with time, the Students' Councils will take much lead in problem situating on issues that affect them in schools and provide their input on how to address such issues.

## **4.7 Training of Students' Councils and the Patrons**

Following the establishment of Students' Councils in the schools, training sessions were organized for students who are members of the Students' Councils in all the 10 schools. The training sessions aimed at empowering students to be knowledgeable on their rights as provided in the Constitution, the CRC, other relevant international as well as regional human rights instruments and how such rights can be realized in school context. The scope of the training also included their roles and responsibilities as members of the Students' Councils in order for them to work towards participating in school governance on issues that affect all students while at the same time observing acceptable discipline in schools.

During the training, selected teachers who were identified as patrons were also trained on their roles in the operations of the Students' Councils. The training also clarified to the patrons what would be perceived as interference in the affairs of the Students' Councils, which could result in diluting the existence of such structures in schools. The training was held at Njewa Teachers Development Centre in Lilongwe. The result of the training was that the patrons started to closely work with the Students' Councils and there is now enhanced cooperation between the two sides which is greatly contributing to students' participation in decision making.

## 4.8 Building Critical Mass through a Radio Programme

As part of building critical mass through the popularization of the project, the change agents organized a radio programme. The main objective of the radio programme was to affirm to the public and various stakeholders on the possibility of realization of children's rights to participate in decision making in schools when such children, teachers and other key stakeholders are fully empowered. The expectation was that the radio programme would help popularize the project to teachers, learners and other stakeholders whom the change agents have had no direct contact with.

The 30 minutes radio programme was broadcast on Zodiak Broadcasting Station (ZBS). ZBS is the leading private radio station in Malawi which commands huge listenership across the country. The following featured in the radio programme: Students' Councils from two schools in the impact area: two Students' Councils were drawn from two schools that have been working with Malawi Batch 16 change agents. Others included a patron of one Students' Council, a Chairperson of one SMC, the Primary Education Advisor for Njewa Education Zone, the Director of Basic Education in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the Director of Children's Rights from the Malawi Human Rights Commission.

Specifically, the radio programme aimed at achieving the following:

- Raising public awareness on the success stories Students' Councils from Njewa Education Zone schools have achieved through students' participation in decision making in schools.
- Sharing some strategies to all schools in Njewa Education Zone and beyond on how meaningful realization of children's rights in schools can be achieved through students' participation.
- Sensitising key and strategic players as well as students and teachers at large on issues of children's rights in schools and how they relate to education.
- Mobilising support and commitment from various key players on the need for respect of children's rights in schools.

The primary result of the radio programme was that it brought awareness to the students, teachers and community structures in the targeted schools on the significance of allowing students to voice out their views on issues that affect them in schools. The radio programme complemented the awareness and training meetings which the change agents had conducted with the stated target groups. This strengthened advocacy efforts for students' participation and the change agents noted continued support of the school authorities to have the students express their views on issues affecting them in the targeted schools.



## 4.9 Training of Patrons of Students' Councils

Following the previous trainings for the patrons, another training session was organized for them. The aim of the training was to build on the previous trainings with regard to how patrons can deepen their interface with the Students' Councils for the latter to effectively take part in decision making in schools on issues that affect them. The training exposed to the patrons the fundamental principles of the CRC, other international and regional human rights standards governing children's rights, the Malawi's legal framework protecting the rights of children and how the question of human rights can be mainstreamed in school setting, drawing from the provisions of the CRC on the right to education. The training provided an opportunity for the patrons to have a broader view of human rights architecture with regard to children in Malawi. It also provided the patrons with the right perspective on how they can work to advocate for the rights of children in school setting particularly on the element of students' participation in decision making in schools. The training also emphasized on how the patrons can provide objective guidance to Students' Councils without directly or indirectly exerting undue interfering on them. The result has been that the patrons have continued to work with the Students' Councils for the benefit of the latter. This has generally created a health dialogue between students and teachers on the participation of the former on issues that affect them in schools.

## 5. Review Meetings with Target Groups

### 5.1 A Review Meeting With Head Teachers

This review meeting was aimed at taking stock of the progress regarding the involvement of children in decision making in schools from the time the project was introduced in schools. The review meeting was also aimed at evaluating how Students' Councils have been operating in the schools, efforts taken by the head teachers and their teaching staff to ensure that children are involved on issues that concern them as a way of concretizing their commitment to respect children's right to participation and the general challenges faced by the head teachers and teachers in that regard. The review meeting was also one way of fashioning solutions to the challenges and concerns in order to inform the way forward. It was noted during the review meeting that the head teachers had tried their best to create a favourable environment for children to be involved on issues that affect them. It was, however, noted that despite that teaching staff in various schools had embraced the concept of involving students in decision making on matters that affect them, other teachers were yet to fully embrace the concept because of their perceived fear that children would usurp their authority. This challenge was, however, expected by the change agents and the way forward was to design ongoing tailor made sessions for teachers for them to appreciate the significance of the concept and work towards embracing it.

Another way forward was for head teachers to use their space of action to motivate the teachers to work closely with students on the realization of their (students) rights particularly the element of participation. These mechanisms proved to be working as more teachers are now able to appreciate the importance of involving students in decision making on issues that affect them in schools. During the review meeting, head teachers also reported that since the introduction of Students' Councils in the schools, there are certain things that have improved such as taking care of school property as students are now able to own that responsibility, taking care of the surroundings of the schools as students are now able to take charge of that responsibility without the involvement of school administration as well as reduction of various forms of indiscipline. The result of the review meeting, after change agents started implementing some interventions to overcome the barriers from some teachers, has been that more teachers who had not fully embraced the concept are now at the stage where they are able to support it because of the positive developments that it has brought as stated above. However, the change agents continue to engage the head teachers, patrons and the teachers considering that change is a gradual process.

## **5.2 Review Meetings with Student Councils**

The review meetings was crucial as it provided an avenue to share experiences and best practices on how the Students' Councils have been operating in all the targeted schools from the time they were established. The meetings also provided an opportunity to reflect on the successes of the Students' Councils and how best to work with head teachers and the teaching staff to consolidate such successes. It was noted during the meetings that while most patrons have been supportive to the Students' Councils from the beginning of the project, a few others have along the way lost the desired commitment. This was attributed to the fact that some patrons had not fully understood the concept of children's participation in decision making and this required the change agents to continuously mentor such patrons for them to effectively provide proper guidance to Students' Councils. The change agents continued to use formal and informal interface meetings to reach out to the patrons who most needed ongoing mentoring. The result was that with time, such patrons started to work to the expectations of the change agents and the students themselves. So far, progress has been recorded on how the patrons ought to play their role in providing guidance to the Students' Councils as regards how students can be involved on issues that affect them in schools. The change agents, however, continue to be in direct engagement with the Students' Councils to enhance their capacity.



Members of Students' Councils during the review meeting with change agents

### 5.3 Review Meeting With Patrons of Students' Councils

The meeting primarily aimed at getting feedback from the patrons on their evaluation of how they had started to work with the Students' Councils, what had changed as a result of the Students' Councils, challenges faced so far and how best to move forward for them (patrons) to effectively support the students. The meeting also provided an avenue for the patrons to seek guidance from the change agents on issues which they needed to understand better. Issues that came out during the meeting included that of lack of supportive spirit of other teachers to the work of Students' Councils because such teachers initially thought the patrons receive monetary gains for their role. It was noted that lack of such support was another reason that was demotivating the patrons to work with enthusiasm with Students' Councils. It was also highlighted that some students with behavioural problems challenge the authority of Students' Councils and that this derails the latter's work.

Despite the challenges, it came out that the patrons had so far made commendable contributions as regards strengthening the capacity of Students' Councils as platforms for students to provide their views on issues that affect them.

Following the challenges, there were follow up interface discussions with head teachers and heads of teaching sections on how they can work closely with the entire teaching staff so that the same provides the required support to the patrons. The meeting also provided an avenue for the change agents to clarify to the teaching staff that patrons merely provide guidance to the Students' Councils and that there are no monetary gains attached. Following the review meeting and the subsequent meeting as an intervention to address the challenges, the result is that more teachers are now supportive to the patrons as they work collaboratively to involve students when decisions are being made on issues that concern them. Further, on the issue of other students undermining the authority of the Students' Councils, the head teachers and the patrons have been doing their best to further enlighten the students on the role of the Students' Councils and

their significance to the enjoyment of their rights in schools. The other result is that the problematic students have now realised that Students' Councils have the general full backing of the head teachers and the teaching staff. This has restored the authority of the Students' Councils.

#### **5.4 Review Meetings with School Management Committees, Mother Groups and Parents-Teachers Associations**

This meeting was organized to reflect on the extent to which School Management Committees (SMCs), Mother Groups (MGs) and Parents-Teachers Associations (PTA) had played their role to ensure that students in all the targeted schools participate in decision making on issues that affect them. These meetings were premised on the principle that such community structures have got considerable influence in the running of public schools in Malawi as they are recognized by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology as important structures through which the communities can participate in the running of public primary and secondary schools.

It was generally noted that these structures had been playing their background role by advocating for the rights of children in school through the meetings which such structures hold with head teachers and the teaching staff. However, it came out that such structures need ongoing interface meetings with the change agents for them to be fully conversant with issues of children's rights, particularly the right to participate in decision making in school, and how best they can competently advance the agenda of children's rights in their various fora with head teachers and the teaching staff. The change agents have taken up the role of having continuous interface discussions with these community structures so that they effectively contribute to the realization of children's rights in schools with a focus on the right to have a voice on matters that affect them. The result of the review meeting and subsequent interventions to enhance the capacity of these community structures has led to improved engagement between such structures and head teachers as well as the entire teaching staff on children's rights in schools.

### **6. Bringing the Project Closer to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology**

The change agents continued to bring the project closer to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology by engaging the Principal Secretary (PS) for Basic and Secondary Education in the ministry. This is the highest ranking technocrat in the ministry who reports to the minister and the deputy minister. The PS has been positive with the concept of involving students in decision making in schools because it is one way of shaping the future leaders of Malawi. The PS also noted that the Students' Councils would go a long way in promoting dialogue between students and teachers on a number of issues affecting the former, thereby reducing cases of indiscipline. The

PS requested the change agents to actively involve her office in order for the ministry to provide the required support to the project. The result of the meeting was that it opened dialogue at a much higher level between the change agents and the ministry on the possibility of having the concept adopted by the same ministry for replication to all primary and secondary schools in Malawi as a matter of policy. The change agents are working towards this direction.

## 7. Linkage with a Member of Parliament and a Counsellor of The Project's Impact Area

The project was also brought to the attention of the Member of Parliament and the ward counsellor for the impact area. Members of Parliament are crucial as they influence legal and policy reforms in parliament. On the other hand, Counsellors have influence at a local government local. The Member of Parliament and the Counsellor welcomed the project. The result of this linkage has been that the two stated public officers have been providing support in the activities of the change agents by, among other things, availing themselves during the meetings to demonstrate to teachers and the communities that it is a good cause to fight for the rights of children by providing them space to participate in decision making on issues that affect them in school.

## 8. Linkage with Batch 16, Batch 20 and Batch 21

From the beginning, the change agents of this project in Batch 19 have been promoting stronger linkage with Batches 16, 20 and 21 in order to build a strong coalition that would bring a much more positive impact in the targeted schools. While Batch 16 focused on the same theme as Batch 19 which is promoting students' participation in decision making in schools and the former targeted 2 primary schools and 1 Community Day Secondary School in Njewa Education Zone, Batch 20's focus is on CRC based school leadership so that head teachers provide conducive environment for students to participate in decision making on issues that affect them and that they are protected from various forms of violations in school setting. Batch 20 also targets all the schools in Njewa Education Zone: 11 primary schools and 2 Community Day Secondary Schools. On the other hand, Batch 21's focus is on clarifying the roles of Students Councils' and prefectial bodies (traditional students' representatives) in 2 schools in Njewa Education Zone. This presents the picture that all the 4 projects from Batch 16, 19, 20 and 21 are in principle focusing on children in the same schools. In view of this, the change agents in Batch 19 worked closely with change agents from other batches to share notes and best practices considering that our focus were the same schools. The result has been that this form of coalition has exerted a bigger positive impact to the schools as all the batches (Batches 16, 19, 20 and 21) are speaking with one voice on the issue of children's rights with regard to students' participation in decision

making on matters that affect them in schools. This type of collaboration among the batches is expected to continue.

## 9. Eight Key Results

Following the implementation of the activities as discussed in this report, the following are the 8 key results recorded.

9.1 Students in all the 10 targeted schools formed Students' Councils that act as platforms to participate in decision making and school governance in general on matters that affect them.

9.2 There is a level of knowledge in the students on their rights to participate in decision making in schools. In the same vein, students are, to acceptable level, knowledgeable about their responsibilities as they exercise their right to participate in decision making on matters that affect them.

9.3 Students are now able to demand accountability from teachers on issues that affect them. For instance, students are able to demand explanations from teachers in times when class time tables are not followed. This has reduced the tendency by some teachers to fail to teach without justifiable reasons. This is also working to the advantage of head teachers who previously needed to have close monitoring on teachers to check if such teachers comply with the class timetables in terms of teaching.

9.4 Class rules are now made with the involvement of students and this has enhanced their (students) compliance with such rules.

9.5 Students are now able to take responsibility for certain issues in schools. For instance, students are now able to handle issues of sanitation at their schools without the involvement of school authorities (head teachers and teachers). Students take care of their school surroundings among themselves without being guided by school authorities which was not the case in the past.

9.6 Teachers, SMCs, MGs and PTAs embraced the concept of involving students in decision making. As such, there has been commendable support on the part of such community structures to ensure that students have a voice on issues that affect them. As such, there is increased engagement between community structures and the teachers on the advancement of children's rights in schools with regard to their (children's) participation on issues that affect them.

9.7 There is now increased awareness of children's rights among the teachers and the community structures (SMCs, MGs, PTAs). This has made these target groups to support the initiative of giving students space to participate in decision making on issues

that affect them in schools. Further, there has been increased awareness of students on their rights as they apply in school context.

9.8 The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology welcomed the project and this provided a basis for continued advocacy so that the concept is adopted at the ministry level and replicated to all primary and secondary schools as a matter of policy.

## 10. Discussion and Reflection

In all the 10 schools, the project started on a good note as it was welcomed by various players ranging from officials from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to community structures (SMCs, MGs and PTAs) in the impact area. The teachers in all the schools demonstrated commitment to work with the change agents in ensuring that children's rights are promoted and protected in schools. Taking cognizance that change is a gradual process, it is crucial for the change agents to continue harnessing the capacity of the Students' Councils, head teachers and the teaching staff as well as SMCs, MGs and PTAs so that they work towards promoting students' rights in schools. In particular, Students' Councils in the targeted schools need constant interface among themselves in order to share experiences and learn best practices on their participation in decision making in their respective schools. The change agents have a role to facilitate such interface meetings.

Further, much as more teachers have embraced the concept of giving students space to give their views on issues that concern them, there is still need for ongoing purposeful interface and tailor made discussions with teachers who seem to be slow in embracing the initiative. Further, there is still need for ongoing advocacy to head teachers and the community structures so that the initiative gets mainstreamed in the school context and fully becomes part of the school system. It, therefore, remains the role of the change agents to continue to work closely with key players in order to consolidate efforts aimed at promoting learners' participation in decision making in schools. Above all, the change agents, in coalition with change agents of Batch 16, 20 and 21 that are also working in the same impact area at Njewa Education Zone as well as the Malawi Network of Change Agents, will continue to scale up their engagement efforts with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology so that the concept of Students' Councils as platforms for students' participation in decision making in schools can be adopted by the ministry and replicated to all primary and secondary schools in Malawi as a matter of Government policy.

## 11. Way Forward

11.1 Strengthening monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in order to continuously assess the implementation of Students' Councils' action plans in schools and document success stories which can be shared with other schools and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. This also involves conducting ongoing review meetings in each academic calendar with key target groups and other stakeholders in order to situate challenges that can potentially derail the initiative and find ways of addressing such challenges.

11.2 To continue designing activities for Students' Councils that can deepen their understanding of children's rights. This includes Zonal Children's Parliament on learners' participation in decision making for schools in Njewa Education Zone. This cannot only broaden the scope of students' understanding of their right to give views on issues that affect them but also shape their appreciation of human rights issues, thereby inculcating in them such values as tolerance, respect for other people's rights that will remain with them when they become adult citizens of Malawi.

11.3 As a medium term goal, to cascade the initiative to other three zones in the Lilongwe Rural Education District.

11.4 As a medium to long term goal, to actively engage the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to adopt the concept of Students' Councils as an important school structure through which students can provide their views and participate in various decision making processes on matters that concern them. This requires ongoing advocacy.



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