

Intersections

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MCC invests significant resources into providing access to quality education, believing this is a key ingredient for building healthy, sustainable communities. This emphasis aligns with the call for universal primary education in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (2000) and the more recent Sustainable Development Goals (2015), which together reflect a growing consensus that access alone is not enough and a commitment instead to “inclusive and equitable *quality* education” for all.

Building on a long history of supporting education through placing MCC workers as teachers in schools and paying school fees for individual students, MCC's approach has gradually shifted toward models that focus more on strengthening local education partners. This shift grows out of an awareness that education—too often imported by colonial powers and beneficial for only a select few individuals—must be shaped and owned by local communities if it is to truly bring positive change at the community level.

This issue of *Intersections* explores the many ways community participation can make education efforts more *effective, accountable, relevant* and *sustainable*. We begin with the important question of how school staff can develop good communication and collaboration with parents and students to reduce the disconnect that often exists between schools and families. Then we dig deeper to see how formal structures like school management committees or oversight committees can give community members an active role in making decisions about school priorities, holding teachers accountable and managing financial and other resources that can be leveraged to improve student learning. We also look at one partner's experience with supporting community-led models for early childhood education and examine the importance of the community's role in child protection. Finally, we learn from a tribal school in Odisha, India, about how Indigenous community ownership at the deepest level can shape a school's ethos and identity and ultimately make the difference between education being a tool of oppression imposed by a dominant culture or the tool of community empowerment that we aspire for it to be.

Lynn Longenecker is MCC's education coordinator.

Engaging parents in the education of their students requires additional time, effort and creativity on the part of school staff. It means taking a holistic approach that considers the academic and personal lives of students, while making meaningful connections with their families.”

Learn more

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Communication between school, students and parents

“To work in education effectively and successfully, one cannot work alone,” says Esther Pierre, principal of Fondation Œcuménique pour la Paix et la Justice (FOPJ), an MCC-supported school located in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. For Pierre, success in education is the result of three key groups—school staff, students and parents—working together. “In Haiti, we have a proverb that says, ‘If you balance a pot on three rocks to cook, but one of the rocks is missing, the pot will never boil.’ This is why it is important for the school staff to work hand-in-hand with the students and their families to be successful.”

The Haitian education system faces unique challenges. With 85% of schools being run by non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations, churches and private organizations, Haitian families face high tuition costs (USAID, 2017). The average cost per student for primary school is US\$154/year, which amounts to 21% of the average GDP per capita in Haiti (World Bank, 2015). For many families in Port-au-Prince slums, this represents an insurmountable cost.

FOPJ, located in the slum of Kafou Fey on the southern outskirts of Port-au-Prince, provides primary education to local students at no cost or for a small fee, based on family income. Kafou Fey is often considered one of the most violent neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, facing high rates of gang activity. One-fourth of FOPJ’s students are classified as *restaveks* (vulnerable young children, most frequently girls, from the countryside sent to live with family in the city to perform domestic labor in return for lodging, food and school), while another half of the students are children being raised by a single parent.

Within a challenging context, Pierre and her colleagues at FOPJ have found creative ways to actively engage parents in the school, with the aim of supporting students’ academic and personal success. In Pierre’s experience, there are four primary ways to facilitate the engagement of parents and students: school committees; effective communication; personal relationships; and parent meetings.

While parents at FOPJ do not have disposable income to donate to the school, Pierre encourages them to join committees which allow them to be involved with school activities such as clean-up days, organizing special events, gardening and recruitment of new students. These committees offer parents opportunities to give back as well as see the inner workings of the school, in turn giving them more confidence in the quality of education their children are receiving. “If they have confidence in what you are doing, you can encourage them to become a part of the school,” Pierre observes. School committees have succeeded in attracting parental involvement: participating parents encourage and recruit parents of new students to join committees.

FOPJ’s director and staff have found that maintaining effective communication not only with students, but with parents as well, is vital to foster parental engagement. Communication with parents should include updates about students’ academic performance, behavior and attitude towards others. Pierre believes that by practicing open and honest communication, school administrators create a learning environment in which parents and students can share questions, concerns and needs.

“The director must learn to listen to the parents and children regarding the relationships that exist within the home, and keep that information confidential,” Pierre maintains. When parents are informed about what their children are learning and feel included in their children’s education, they are more deeply invested in seeing their child succeed and in supporting the school.

For Pierre, her job includes more than an interest in the academic success of her students. Understanding that turmoil within the personal life of a student can manifest itself through poor behavior or academic achievement, Pierre makes a point of forming personal relationships with students and parents in order to build trust and offer assistance when able. “People think that in order to have a relationship you need money or status, but if you consider everyone a person, you can have a relationship with all,” notes Pierre. “If I see that there is something troubling in the home of a student, I address it after I form a relationship with the parent and student, not before. When I am building a relationship with them, I just want to ensure that they know they have value.”

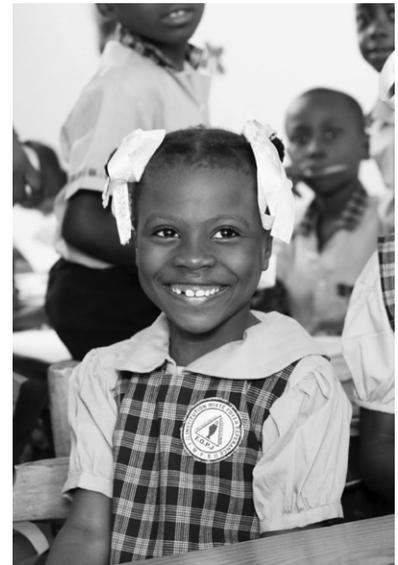
As a result of the strong relationships Pierre has formed with parents, she has found success in planning parent meetings as a way of updating the parents on school events and student activities and reinforcing the importance of their children’s education. Despite parents at FOPJ often working long hours to provide for their families, many parents still place high priority on attending the meetings. Even if a parent is unable to attend, Pierre remarks that they often pass by the school as soon as possible to receive the information shared at the meeting. These meetings require great effort from Pierre and her team, as they spend hours calling parents individually to remind them about the meetings: distributing printed schedules was not successful with the school’s parents, who are predominantly illiterate. Pierre also stresses the importance of having multiple staff and teachers present at the parent meetings. “It is important for them to see we are a team,” says Pierre. “It is not only one person who is doing this work. They need to know that whatever happens, it is the whole team who will respond.”

Engaging parents in the education of their students requires additional time, effort and creativity on the part of school staff. It means taking a holistic approach that considers the academic and personal lives of students, while making meaningful connections with their families.

Alexis Kreimer is assistant representative for MCC Haiti. Esther Pierre serves as principal of Fondation Ecumenique pour la Paix et la Justice (FOPJ) in Port-au-Prince.

Strengthening School Management Committees

With the decentralization of educational governance over the past 15 years in Nepal, community participation in school management has become a vital component of improved quality of education. The government in Nepal has begun encouraging the use of School Management Committees (SMCs) as a means of ensuring community involvement in schools’ decision-making processes. Strengthening these committees is one of the most effective ways non-governmental organizations like MCC and its partners can contribute to improving the quality of education.



According to FOPJ administrator Esther Pierre, one of the guiding principles of House of Hope is to provide students with the dignity they deserve. “We help the children to discover who they are,” she says. “They are children, who, like all children, have rights and have value. When they learn this, that they are a person like all other people, then they can have hope.” (MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht)

In Nepal, the law requires every school to form an SMC composed of nine members, at least three of whom must be female. Members are elected for three-year terms, with committees including representatives from the local community, government and education offices, intellectual and philanthropic communities, a founding member of the school and the head teacher. Government-mandated roles of SMCs in Nepal are to assess teacher performance, identify and mobilize local resources, coordinate with stakeholders who might contribute toward the school's development (donor agencies, NGOs, government offices), develop and monitor school improvement plans, oversee regular audits of the school's financial management and motivate parents and community members toward greater ownership and accountability.

In practice, MCC and its partners have found that, despite legal requirements, many schools do not yet have an SMC that actively understands and operates according to its mandate. Bal Krishna Maharjan, strategy advisor for MCC partner organization Sansthaगत Bikas Sanjal, explains that prior to implementing the organization's MCC-funded education project, the SMCs they worked with functioned only in a rudimentary way, which tended to create an environment that enabled poor accountability and teacher performance (and, in turn, poor academic results). Similarly, Suresh Adhikari, program coordinator of Sanjal's partner, the Hilly Rural Development Organization Northern Morang (HRDON), found that there was a significant lack of coordination among students, parents, SMCs and NGOs. With limited trust and accountability, students in the region where HRDON operates did not attend class regularly and expected to be promoted regardless of their performance.

Understanding the vital role of SMCs in improving quality of education for students, Sanjal and HRDON intentionally incorporated SMC capacity-building activities into the design of their rural education project. Among the strategies they found to be most effective in Nepal's context were: orienting SMC members to their roles and responsibilities; regularly coaching SMCs in the process of developing and monitoring school improvement plans; organizing joint meetings between teachers and SMC members to discuss vision and goals; helping SMCs develop guidelines for raising funds to support school improvements; and creating criteria for SMCs to carry out teachers' annual performance evaluations.

Sanjal and HRDON have found that the impact of strengthened SMCs on school and student performance is profound in several important ways. First, the participatory approaches used by SMCs have led to an increased sense of community ownership over schools. Adhikari explains that "SMC members are now actively involved in setting goals related to improving the quality of education, especially increasing the number of students and improving school infrastructure. The SMC members even contributed to the construction of a new two-room school structure by raising funds and carrying gravel from over three hours away!" Active involvement of SMCs has also increased the schools' access to educational resources and to teachers with training in specific subject areas. Maharjan explains that in his working area, SMC members began to assume an active role in building relationships with government line agencies and sending delegates to district education office meetings, all of which eventually led to much-needed financial and infrastructure support for their schools.

 **Strengthening these committees is one of the most effective ways non-governmental organizations like MCC and its partners can contribute to improving the quality of education... The most effective strategy to strengthen SMCs is simply regular and systematic coaching from NGO staff."**

Teachers now also feel a greater sense of accountability to their schools and to SMCs. With SMCs requiring annual evaluations on teacher performance, teachers are compelled to attend classes regularly, participate in professional development opportunities and meet basic teaching standards. SMC members have also become engaged in student enrollment campaigns, parental counseling and advocacy for local peace and justice initiatives. In HRDON's working area, SMC members became actively involved in supporting schools' "child clubs" to create awareness around the harmful impacts of child marriage, offer counseling to parents and students and support students who had run away to re-enroll in school. Beyond promoting academic performance, SMCs can thus play a significant role in engaging young people and parents in a variety of relevant social issues.

While significant improvements to school management committee capacity have been made, there remain several challenges and obstacles. While SMCs in Nepal have a mandate to carry out annual performance evaluations, they do not currently have adequate authority to take action against poor teacher performance. Consequently, teacher performance continues to hinder change in schools to a certain extent. In addition, in geographic areas characterized by difficult terrain and long walks to and from school, it is challenging for SMC members to find time to meet regularly.

Among the biggest learnings around the promotion of SMCs by MCC Nepal and its partners is the acknowledgment that building the capacity of SMCs should be an integral component of any education project. Both Sanjal and HRDON have found that the most effective strategy to strengthen SMCs is simply regular and systematic coaching from NGO staff. With adequate SMC support, schools are able to comply with government regulations while also creating a flourishing and transparent community in which administrators, teachers, parents and students can collectively thrive.

Juliana Yonzon (program coordinator) and Daphne Hollinger Fowler (representative) serve with MCC Nepal.

Oversight committees help hold schools accountable

In Honduras, like in many other countries around the world, the right to quality education is protected by the constitution. In practice, however, most children do not reach satisfactory levels of learning in the educational system. The 2017 National Academic Performance Report showed that across grades 1 to 9, 60% of students scored "needs improvement" or "unsatisfactory" in the core subjects of mathematics and Spanish. Is this a failure of the Honduran state educational system alone? Or are there other actors that can contribute to ensuring a quality education for children and adolescents?

In our experience, community participation in "Comités de Veedores" (Oversight Committees) has helped improve the quality of education. [Veeduría can also be translated as monitoring, observation, inspection or supervision.] These committees, made up of community members, watch over their local schools and advocate for better educational quality by monitoring the performance of teachers and the level of student learning.

 **School Management Committee members began to assume an active role in building relationships with government line agencies and sending delegates to district education office meetings, all of which eventually led to much-needed financial and infrastructure support for their schools.**



Learn
more

Website for the Association for a More Just Society. Available at <http://asjhonduras.com/webhn/transformemos-honduras/> (Spanish).

“ One concrete result of the introduction of school oversight committees has been a noticeable increase in the number of days schools are open. School oversight committees have been successful in pressing for and monitoring school progress in key areas. So, for example, oversight committees have undertaken daily monitoring exercises that have tracked when schools are open, monitoring schools’ commitment to fulfilling the 200 days of school required by law.”

One concrete result has been a noticeable increase in the number of days schools are open, with students saying, “Now we don’t lose class time!” For example, one oversight committee identified an educational center which, during a 40-day period, had suspended classes on 20 days for different reasons. After implementing the oversight process, the same school successfully provided 99% of the class days required by law the following year.

This initiative emerged from a series of meetings organized by *Transformemos Honduras* (“Let’s Transform Honduras”). These meetings, called *tarde de café con sabor a esperanza* (“conversations flavored with hope”), brought together various community leaders around a common goal, namely, that their communities would have educational centers that provide high-quality education. These leaders carried out a community diagnosis which examined the reality faced by each of the schools, including their specific strengths and weaknesses, and the process led to a decision to systematically monitor the schools’ activities and ensure that the services they provided met higher quality standards.

This important community decision propelled the implementation of community watchdog processes across the education sector, resulting in meetings with local authorities as well as the highest educational authorities in the country. Training was developed for local community members on social oversight and about legal regulations concerning citizens’ rights and duties. Then they coordinated with the educational authorities at different levels, including school principals, to proceed with the implementation of the school oversight committees. Reaching out to these decision makers was critical in explaining that the oversight process is intended as an opportunity to improve the school’s quality and ultimately to benefit the children.

Oversight committee meetings became spaces of learning and citizen empowerment, since at the beginning the members had many fears of approaching the teachers. Historically, there has been a vertical relationship between teachers and community members. In some cases, the same teachers had taught these committee members when they were children, so visiting the teachers now as adults in an oversight role became a huge challenge. The constant technical support the project provided to the committees in the early stages of their implementation was a critical element for the achievement of the positive results enjoyed today.

School oversight committees have been successful in pressing for and monitoring school progress in key areas. So, for example, oversight committees have undertaken daily monitoring exercises that have tracked when schools are open, monitoring schools’ commitment to fulfilling the 200 days of school required by law. Observers from the committees are distributed to the educational centers and daily write in a notebook whether classes are in session, to verify compliance with the law.

Observers also collect information to document the use of class time in schools, by making visits to the school without prior notice to teachers. They fill in a form to collect information regarding the schedules, duration of classes, activities that interrupt classes, presence of teachers, principals and parents in the center and good practices. The results of the data are used to advocate to the authorities so that the one thousand hours of class required per year are used effectively.

The oversight committees consolidate and analyze the information they gather, generating a preliminary report on the schools in their communities, complete with findings and recommendations for improvement. This report is shared with the school principals for them to review and validate. If school principals have any observations about these reports, they can send them to the committee with supporting documentation to make the pertinent corrections. Then the revised, final report is delivered to the relevant government authorities and shared with other stakeholders, such as parents and teachers.

A commitment is obtained from the principals to consider the recommendations made in the reports and to prepare improvement plans, which include concrete actions that respond to the recommendations and improve the quality of service provided. The improvement plans are monitored by the oversight committees who use a table to track which activities are carried out and which are not. This oversight exerts healthy pressure on the schools to comply with the plans.

The challenge in making school oversight committees into truly effective bodies that strengthen school quality and foster greater accountability by schools to their surrounding communities is constant and great. Yet, as Doña Alma, an oversight committee member, observes: “Although two of my grandchildren have been killed, I believe I have a civic duty to fight for all the children of my community to have a different future. Even if some teachers don’t like it, I will continue with my work in the oversight committee because I do not lose hope that the situation in my country will improve.” It is truly everyone’s responsibility to ensure the education of our children. School oversight committees are a concrete way that communities can exercise this responsibility.

Blanca Mungía works with the Association for a More Just Society in Honduras, an MCC partner.

School Management Committees and school improvement

Education is a human right! The School Management Committee (SMC) is the driving force responsible for ensuring this right to every child in their community. An SMC has the responsibility to manage its school with a business mindset and determine the most effective way to use limited resources in order to deliver quality education services in the community the SMC represents.

School improvement and accountability movements have challenged schools and districts to develop plans for how they will produce better results. The Zimbabwean government, seeking to maintain its reputation within Africa for its high-quality schooling and to keep up the country’s high literacy rate, has devised a lot of innovations to improve the quality of education in all teaching/learning institutions in the country. One such innovation was to introduce decentralized governance of the schools, to give local communities more say in the management and administration of the schools through the formation of School Management Committees.

SMCs are typically comprised of parents, teachers and headmasters. However, MCC Zimbabwe, in consultation with school administrators and SMCs, has realized that SMCs are even stronger if they also include local leaders (e.g., chiefs, village heads, local council members, business community leaders) and students.



Grade 10 students meet outdoors for class at Mupambe secondary school in Zimbabwe. MCC partners with rural schools in Matabeleland North to address curriculum needs and inadequate infrastructure. MCC also supports community participation through school management committees which include teachers, parents and community leaders. (MCC photo/Lynn Longenecker)

SMCs have a variety of roles, but one of the most important is their role in managing the use of financial and other local resources for the improvement of the school. The committees manage funds from levies paid by the parents and small grants from the government whenever they are made available. During periodic meetings with parents and other stakeholders (including Ministry of Education officials and local leadership, such as chiefs and village heads), the vision of the community is made public for implementation by the school authorities together with the SMC. Budget plans are laid out during the meetings and then spending decisions are ultimately made by the committee's votes.

Sometimes non-governmental organizations partner with schools to pay the school levies for underprivileged students. When this happens, SMCs select the students that qualify for assistance and manage the use of the funds paid by the partner organizations.

Financial reports are shared and presented to the parents and other local stakeholders during the regular meetings which are usually held three times a year so that everyone is involved in monitoring how the accumulated funds are spent. The level of feedback and accountability is thus clear and transparent. In cases in which funds have not been used as planned, the parents as key stakeholders have the right to recall the elected members should they find that reasons for not using funds as planned are not satisfactory.

One challenge in rural Zimbabwe is that most parents struggle to pay the required school levies, hence SMCs also struggle to execute their mandate due to financial constraints. Where there are financial constraints, it is usually difficult to mobilize communities for unskilled labour as well.

Key stakeholders such as chiefs, village heads and ward councilors are important in overcoming these challenges. When these leaders spearhead the implementation, it builds confidence in communities and thereby promotes the community's positive response, perceptions and participation. These leaders are the access points for other community members to the school and hence can influence and mobilize the community to provide resources and actively participate in the school. Local leadership is very influential in the Zimbabwean context, such that local leaders bear great authority to foster positive responses.

Effective SMCs also seek to mobilize young people to contribute to the school. Young adults who are not working can be contracted to provide much-needed unskilled labor, something that in turn gives young people a sense of ownership in the school, fostering a feeling of community members being micro-donors to the school rather than waiting for funding from somewhere else.

Another challenge is the need for the capacities of SMCs to be strengthened. MCC Zimbabwe walks the SMCs through the budgeting and reporting processes for prioritizing and managing limited resources. To further support the committees in gaining confidence in managing funds, MCC Zimbabwe provides grants to the schools and the SMCs are responsible for how the grant is used. They plan, budget and purchase, with MCC staff playing an advisory role.

 **School Management Committees (SMCs) are typically comprised of parents, teachers and headmasters. However, MCC Zimbabwe, in consultation with school administrators and SMCs, has realized that SMCs are even stronger if they also include local leaders (e.g., chiefs, village heads, local council members, business community leaders) and students.”**

In Binga district, communities have undertaken massive projects such as building classroom blocks through mobilized community participation, with community members donating locally available material like stones and digging pit sand. Through SMC efforts, there have also been notable changes in the schools' learning environments. The planning has led to the efficient use of funds to purchase learning and teaching materials. Moreover, there has also been an increase in the number of learners who passed their national examinations after these improvements.

It has been observed over time that if communities are empowered and stop viewing themselves as subservient, then they begin to view their environments differently, gaining new confidence in their ability to change their status quo. For instance, many communities in rural Zimbabwe have a lot of resources around them that they can use to their advantage, but due to lack of foresight they end up waiting for an external person or entity to come to their aid. However, the establishment of SMCs in Zimbabwe has fostered development in the schools through their coordinated effort in mobilizing the communities towards set goals. SMCs have created transparency and in turn community confidence has also increased, creating a fertile education environment for the children of that community.

Timodashe Gumbo is education program officer for MCC Zimbabwe.

Community-led early childhood care and education

Samuel, four years old, initially struggled upon entering preschool. His mother, Christina, a refugee in Cairo, Egypt, had been stripped of her family support network when she fled Sudan and therefore was forced to leave him at home while she worked long hours to support the family. Samuel thus spent his first years largely isolated from human interaction, and feared people, light and the bustling streets. Despite her long hours of work, Christina could not afford childcare for Samuel—the preschools in the area were too expensive and the few free preschools were full. Community-led, holistic and sustainable programming is essential for refugee children like Samuel to access the benefits of quality early childhood care, which include cognitive, psychosocial and health effects that extend for a lifetime.

Refugee parents in Egypt must cope with disruption to family life, extreme poverty, trauma, no or insecure employment and lack of social support. Many thus struggle to provide their children with the support they need for early childhood development. Some neighborhoods in which refugees live have created affordable initiatives run by community-based organizations, with local community members as teachers, where refugee parents are comfortable leaving their children. These preschools within a community have many benefits: the preschool staff are familiar with the parents, they can conduct home visits and the parents do not have to travel long distances to drop off and pick up their children. However, the ongoing challenge of maintaining enough resources, space and trained teachers often puts these community preschools at risk of shutting down.

 **School Management Committees have a variety of roles, but one of the most important is their role in managing the use of financial and other local resources for the improvement of the school.’**



Community-led, holistic and sustainable programming is essential for refugee children to access the benefits of quality early childhood care, which include cognitive, psychosocial and health effects that extend for a lifetime.”



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St. Andrew’s Refugee Services website. <http://stars-egypt.org/>

St. Andrew’s Refugee Services (StARS), a refugee-led and run organization in Cairo that partners with MCC, was well-equipped to support communities in facing these challenges. StARS had well-established relationships in the most vulnerable neighborhoods, experience and knowledge of best practices from running two preschools of its own and a strong dedication to refugee-led work which meant that community ownership would be central to the project. From this background, StARS developed an innovative early childhood wellbeing project, founded on the three principles identified above: community at the center of programming; holistic care; and sustainable growth.

Community-led programming: In October 2017, StARS’ early childhood development team worked with the StARS community outreach program, which had already conducted extensive community mapping, to identify communities most likely to benefit from its early childhood wellbeing project. StARS then conducted focus groups with community members to understand the existing community structures for early childhood care and elicit suggestions on what might be done to strengthen them. A common concern was how to increase financial resources, as the schools could not sustain themselves through community contributions or school fees alone without making the preschools unaffordable to the communities they sought to serve.

Building upon these focus group discussions, StARS collaborated with the community-based organizations in each neighborhood to elect a management team and design a response model. Caregivers voted on the priorities to be addressed, and a tailored training package was developed. For example, unlike most preschools, some of the preschools needed to care for very young babies, and thus required appropriate space and trainings.

Later in the project, the preschools also received a small budget to invest as they saw fit. StARS’ commitment to community-led programming enabled them to provide relevant, specialized advice to teachers. So, for example, when a student drew a picture of a gun during class, StARS’ teachers, who are themselves refugees, were able to provide an intensive two-week training for teachers and caregivers in the community on how to support young learners in building positive behaviors and coping with trauma. The community teachers later reported that the students no longer exhibited aggression and that the atmosphere of the class had improved. Altogether, this community-led approach means that plans are tailored to the particularities of the communities, thus building community trust and ownership of the project while reducing cost.

Holistic care: StARS’ community-led approach provides those caring for preschool-age children with a nuanced understanding of the underlying reasons for neglected early childhood development. In addition to training teachers on best practices, such as how to welcome students and create play activities, the early childhood wellbeing staff participate in weekly meetings with caregivers. This has created referral pathways to other departments within StARS (facilitating, for example, access to counseling, legal advice, education and medical micro-grants) for the parents and students. When StARS noticed that parents of children with disabilities needed assistance, they established a peer support group for the parents and created referral channels to a provider of education grants for special needs children. With this holistic approach, StARS does what it can to remove the many barriers to the children’s development.

Sustainable growth: It is not enough to train community teachers and to provide them with resources to offer early childhood education for refugee children. If these schools were to close because of lack of resources or, in order to sustain their operations, they were to increase school fees and thereby exclude the very families the project was meant to help, the schools' founding goals would not be achieved. StARS therefore entered the project with a sustainable strategy. In the short term, work with the preschool management teams to establish alternate income streams, such as providing adult language classes in the center during the hours that the preschool is closed. In the long term, connect the preschool management team with other potential funders.

By training community members as teachers and by equipping parents with positive parenting skills, the project hopes to increase the recognition of early childhood wellbeing as an essential aspect of family life, and thus increase opportunities for children more widely than the parameters of the project. Ultimately, StARS seeks to have a wide impact on community life, including improved communication between family members and strengthened community relations. Sustainable, daily childcare programming for refugee children allows refugee households, especially single parent households like Christina's, to engage in wage-earning activities while knowing that their children are being cared for in safe, development-focused, community-based spaces.

Daniel Davies is Policy and Advocacy Officer for St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) in Cairo, Egypt. Other staff running the Supporting Early Childhood Wellbeing Project also contributed to this article.

Community participation in child protection

As schools strengthen their child safeguarding efforts, they must work together with families and communities as key allies in the critical responsibility of protecting children. Sometimes family, neighbors and other community members play an obvious role in keeping children safe—for example, when a 12-year-old girl is sexually assaulted by a stranger but manages to scream, and other community members come to her rescue and eventually capture her assailant. However, just as it would be unthinkable for the community to remain silent in moments of crisis like this, it is equally important that the community be actively involved in preventing and responding to more hidden forms of abuse that unfortunately are too often perpetrated by teachers, staff or other adults in positions of trust.

The Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE) underscores that community participation is critical to the effectiveness and sustainability of education programs. As such, community members must be supported to participate actively, transparently and without discrimination in all stages of education responses (INEE Minimum Standards for Education, 2010). Community-led approaches are grounded in the idea of people power, that is, the ability of ordinary people, even under difficult circumstances, to organize themselves, define their main problems or challenges and collectively address those problems (Wessels, 2018). In that view, structured community-led forums are the best place to identify local protection issues and develop the most appropriate solutions in cooperation with schools ("Role of School Management Committees," 2016).

“Some neighborhoods in which refugees live have created affordable initiatives run by community-based organizations, with local community members as teachers, where refugee parents are comfortable leaving their children.”

“Communities must not be left out or reduced to mere rubber stamps in the day-to-day management of school-based initiatives. This is especially true when it comes to child safeguarding.”

A circular blue button with the text "Learn more" in white.

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School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) are important tools for enhancing school governance—particularly with respect to leadership, management and decision-making. These community structures are developed through a series of comprehensive social mobilization activities which encourage and guide communities in the participatory processes of managing a school. They normally consist of seven to eight members from diverse interest groups: SMCs often include a school administrator or principal, parent representatives, teachers, social workers and community elders. SMCs provide a natural and important opportunity to involve the community in making schools safe for children. SMCs and PTAs should participate in every stage of child safeguarding and protection efforts, from the development of child safeguarding policies to overseeing that these procedures are implemented, monitored and updated.

At the stage of policy development, SMCs and PTAs can help identify the risks children face and establish effective steps to reduce those risks, including reporting mechanisms that are culturally appropriate and accessible to all. They can also ensure that children’s voices are heard, through encouraging the establishment of child-led groups in the school and community and by soliciting input from children to feed into SMC discussions.

Policies only have a positive impact if they are put into practice, so SMCs and PTAs are even more important at the stage of implementation. Since SMCs and PTAs play a key role in budgeting and disbursement of funding, they should be in the forefront advocating for resources to be set aside for disseminating policies that have been translated into local and child-friendly languages. They should also ensure that both teachers and students are regularly made aware of the types of abuse children face and that the school has set up the necessary reporting and response mechanisms.

Over the past two decades, both of Kenya’s refugee camps, Kakuma (pop.188,000) and Dadaab (pop. 211,086), have witnessed growing community participation in protecting children through schools. Not only have these community structures strengthened refugee schools in numerous ways, but they have also proven to be an important tool for raising awareness about and addressing cultural norms that marginalize certain groups of children and young people—for example, highlighting and responding to the distinctive challenges facing children living with disabilities, child-headed households and child mothers in accessing education (“Good Practices,” 2015). In Kakuma, parents who undergo SMC training expressed feeling more confident in their roles and responsibilities in engaging the school in cases of child abuse.

In their role as decision-makers, SMCs and PTAs can influence decisions about appropriate response actions when a teacher has been found culpable of abusing or exploiting children—for example, by pushing for dismissal or arrest and conviction of perpetrators in a case of serious abuse or corporal punishment of students by teachers.

Beyond school-based groups like SMCs and PTAs, community-based child protection groups are key players in ensuring children are safe not only in school but even the surrounding community (“A Common Responsibility,” 2008). Community-based child protection groups bring together volunteers who aim to improve the protection and wellbeing of children in a village, urban neighborhood or other community. They are known by a variety

of names—for example, orphan and vulnerable children committees, child protection committees, child welfare committees, community care committees and anti-trafficking committees. Despite having different names, these groups are mostly very similar, with the common aim of protecting and caring for vulnerable children. For example, such committees might mobilize adults to accompany children to prevent them from being attacked when going or returning from school. It is important for schools to also engage and collaborate with these kinds of groups, to raise awareness of key child protection issues in the community or identify children who may not be attending schools and refer them for assistance.

Communities must not be left out or reduced to mere rubber stamps in the day-to-day management of school-based initiatives. This is especially true when it comes to child safeguarding. Since communities vary enormously in each context, they must develop their own ways of working that fit their context. Schools form only a part—though a very significant one—of a holistic social reality, so they must not work in isolation from the community. Rather, they must actively involve parents and community to understand how child abuse and its prevention in the school context is related to its dynamic manifestations within the community. This will ensure that school-based safeguarding efforts are culturally sensitive, locally appropriate and as effective as possible.

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Insights from a tribal school in Odisha, India: communities, curriculum and ethos

Schooling in Indigenous communities has the potential for great good and great damage, much of which will be realized and judged only in retrospect. It is therefore imperative that everyone involved in education for Indigenous children approach the task with sensitivity and respect, humility and openness, caution and confidence. In the case of schools for Indigenous children, one must ask: Whose school is it anyway? Where does the Indigenous community figure in the equation?

The role of the community in the governance and administration of a school is a much-debated question. This includes the designing, running, monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum and educational processes of a school. In this article, we share from our experience of initiating and running an Adivasi (Indigenous) community school for the last 20 years. We will do this by describing some aspects of the school and then reflecting on lessons learned.

The school where we work, Mitra Residential School, Kachapaju (MRSK), an MCC partner organization, is in many ways a living, evolving experiment, influenced and directed through constant discussion and debate. We do not live and work in a vacuum. We cannot pretend to live in a bubble, cut off from the world around us and the systems and structures of which we are inevitably a part. But within that matrix, there is space to be different, to choose to be true to the ethos and culture of the Indigenous community. We share here some of the determinants and variables that can influence the shape of a school vis-à-vis the community.



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“Development dreaming.”
Video with Johnny Oommen.
Available at <https://vimeo.com/20119763>

“ Seeking direction from the Indigenous community itself has helped protect the soul of the school. The aspects they value could be quite different from those education administrators and urban parents pursue—such as easy and open access to their children in school, use of their mother-tongue language and use of traditional musical instruments and cultural media.”

The genesis of the school: MRSK was born out of a community dreaming session in 1997 in a tribal village called Kachapaju. The Mitra Community Health team from the nearby Christian Hospital, Bissamcuttack was seeking direction from the people. The youth dreamed of a day when their people could be government officials, teachers, doctors and engineers. The tribal elders cautioned them, saying this was an impossible dream, as the available schools hardly functioned, and those that did, destroyed the soul of the children. What emerged was a dream of a school of their own, where their language, culture and religion would be respected and nurtured and where children would grow up proud of their parents and community. What seemed like a pipe dream snowballed into reality, playing out on the platform of trust that exists between the people and Christian Hospital, Bissamcuttack. The people of 16 hill tribe villages formed an association. Two families offered land. All the villages undertook manual labour to erect the first building. The school opened in July 1998. There was no doubt about the ownership. While for statutory purposes, the school would be registered as part of Christian Hospital, Bissamcuttack, the heart, mind and soul of the school would be owned and governed by the people of 16 villages and their representatives.

Reflection: A lot of the trajectory of a school depends on how and why it started: who started it and to what purpose? Who holds the reins? Does it pursue the dreams of the community and yet allow for management processes to stay within the statutory requirements of the government? On the other hand, if education or a specific school becomes a commercial venture or an ideological tool, the curriculum will follow suit.

Language: The people of the 16 tribal villages are predominantly from the Mal-Kondh community. Their language, Kuvi, does not have a script and has almost no written literature. Most schools in the region therefore use the medium of instruction to “mainstream” the children and make them “fit for employment,” using either the state language, Odiya, or English as the medium. MRSK chose to be a Kuvi-medium school, using the Odiya script. This was both a social statement and pragmatism at work. Education became multi-lingual, with Odiya, Hindi and English coming in as part of the curriculum over the five years of primary school, but the base being the Kuvi language. A conscious decision was made to celebrate and prioritise the Kuvi language, encouraging its use in informal and formal situations, composing songs and stories and printing books in the language written by children, teachers and community members. This has made the school unique and different, a symbol of the tribal community’s dignity and self-respect. The fact that the children also did well academically in professional courses allayed the doubts of those who feared reverse outcomes.

Reflection: Languages get stacked into a hierarchy of socio-economic value. English is considered the top dog, aspired for by all, with Hindi and Odiya next and Kuvi relegated in common thinking as a backward language. A conscious decision to place the Indigenous language of the community on the top of the value chain in a school is a radical step. It gives the children and the community ownership of the school. It allows parents and community members to fully engage with the education processes without discomfort. Language is not just a medium of communication—it is the lifeblood of society.

Holidays: MRSK being a tribal school, it was decided that the school calendar should be based on the community calendar. Sundays are therefore working days at the school, while Tuesdays are holidays, as that is the day of the local weekly market. The academic week runs from Wednesday to Monday. School holidays are scheduled around tribal festivals, when children should be with their parents, participating in the village festival and learning their tribal heritage in a hands-on experience the school cannot provide. School stops, education continues.

Reflection: In the dominant school culture, festivals are used to indoctrinate the children. Tribal children at dominant-culture schools return home with a new set of festivals alien to their parents. And these then gain ground in the villages, spread by the children trained in residential schools. Communities in India are very pluralistic, and the holidays and festivals of the dominant communities over-ride the celebrations of subaltern communities.

Curriculum innovations: The MRSK team believes that education includes knowledge, skills and values and recognizes that these must be consciously promoted and evaluated. The government-prescribed curriculum is taken as the base, and subjects appropriate to the community such as agriculture, health, arts and crafts are added on. Education includes extra-curricular activities, including music, dance, drama and nature appreciation.

Reflection: While statutory mandates must be retained, there is a lot of space for tailoring the curriculum to the needs and sensitivities of the community. One must locate and sometimes create those spaces. Where statutory control is too tight for flexibility, one encourages the real education to spill into the community, during after-school hours and holidays, too.

Teachers: The founder of the school's parent institution, Christian Hospital, Bissamcuttack, Lis Madsen of Denmark, stated in 1980 that change would come only when tribal teachers would teach tribal students. Her point was that it is not enough for the tribal community to aspire to be beneficiaries or recipients of largesse. They must become givers, leaders and teachers. This dream has come true in MRSK, where ten out of 12 staff are from the tribal community. It is important for children to know that their people are no less than anybody else, and that they are just as capable of creating standards and models.

Reflection: This factor changes the way the school sees and is seen—by the children, the community and the government. The teachers therefore need to be carefully selected and nurtured, given that the first generation will necessarily have studied in “un-tribal” schools themselves. And most students become like their teachers. So conscious effort must be taken to help them break the mold and create a new model of teachers, a model that is rooted in the ethos of the community.

Evaluation and guidance: Who should govern the school and evaluate its journey? At MRSK, representatives of the 16 villages who own the school meet about three times a year to review progress and correct direction. In 2004, when the team needed an evaluation and directional guidance, they requested tribal leaders to undertake it, rather than an education consultant. The insight they provided was unorthodox but effective.



The indicators and yardsticks we use for measurement of change can become the determinants of direction. They say far more than we recognize.”

Reflection: The indicators and yardsticks we use for measurement of change can become the determinants of direction. They say far more than we recognize. Seeking direction from the Indigenous community itself has helped protect the soul of the school. The aspects they value could be quite different from those education administrators and urban parents pursue—such as easy and open access to their children in school, use of their mother-tongue language and use of traditional musical instruments and cultural media.

Contributions and support: At MRSK, the community is very engaged and involved. The land is contributed by two families. The first building was erected through community effort by the people of the 16 member villages. Every year, parents and community members contribute a day's labour together to undertake road repairs and to complete other needed infrastructure projects. Selection for admission to grade 1 is through a lottery process, done village-wide, as an open community event. The family of each child contributes a small amount in cash or in-kind installments to contribute to the cost of running the school. The ownership of and by the community needs to be real, nurtured and celebrated. Ways must be created for participation that are meaningful and doable.

In conclusion, what are the lessons learned in the journey of MRSK over the last 20 years? We would highlight at least three:

1. The community is the primary stakeholder and strength, not a liability to be humored. Whose school is it anyway?
2. Involving communities in decision-making may cause an apparent slowing down of management, but gives a great degree of ownership and sustainability.
3. You have to become the change you want to see.

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“ A conscious decision to place the Indigenous language of the community on the top of the value chain in a school is a radical step. It gives the children and the community ownership of the school. It allows parents and community members to fully engage with the education processes without discomfort.”

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