Madagascar: A Developmental Approach to Community-Based School Management

Over the past seven years, the Government of Madagascar has focused on involving communities in controlling their own primary schools. With the support of the World Bank, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed and implemented principles, strategies and procedures that move towards this objective. Implementation is addressed in the framework of the involvement of village communities not only in the rehabilitation, construction, and maintenance of primary schools, but also in their management and supervision.

Context

In the early 1990s, enrollment in primary education in Madagascar was declining as a result of lack of investment, deteriorating quality and demoralization of parents and teachers. Over 2,500 public primary schools were closed, mostly due to lack of teachers, and almost all 13,500 schools needed major repairs. Schools lacked educational materials and professional support. Most of all, they lacked the support of their communities. Between 1992 and 1993, despite courageous central decisions by the MOE, their actual impact was negligible. With World Bank support, and prompted by the results of an education sector study, a team of innovatory decision-makers initiated, in 1994, a pilot program centered on community- and school-based approaches. The program was initiated in two districts located in one of the six provinces, and later expanded to 20 districts (out of 111 in total) in all six provinces. The positive results prompted the government to adopt, in 1997, the basic principles of that approach and to generalize its implementation across all sub-sectors as part of the National Plan for the Development of Education. Since 1998, donors have adopted this approach which is now in use in more than half of all districts in the country.

Decentralization and the continuing role of the state

The State has a primary role in the reduction of inequality, the definition of standards and the development of a framework of policies and measures which support the major objectives of the country. Within this context, the sectoral policy for primary education in Madagascar identifies three major tasks: (a) the urgency of improving access to primary
school for all children; (b) the need to improve the quality of learning, teaching and training at all levels; and, (c) the need to mobilize a partnership with parents and communities, beneficiaries, and the private sector.

The major instrument which Madagascar chose to achieve these objectives was a community- and school-based program. The goal was to involve the community in the tasks of basic education; namely, to allow every child to acquire the basic tools of reading, writing, speaking, understanding, counting, and calculating in order to integrate into society, and to develop the ability for continued education. The realization of this goal implied an important and sustained effort at changing knowledge, attitudes and behavior, and even the way in which educational processes and partner involvement were conceived.

**Principles of the program**

Collaboration between the Government of Madagascar and the Bank was based on five key guiding principles.

*The use of existing structures.* Both the government and the Bank were convinced that the only realistic means to secure Universal and Primary Education were to use social capital and existing networks of village communities in the construction, maintenance, management and supervision of their own schools.

This strategy required the establishment of a task force within a pilot regional directorate, which was initially seen as the most appropriate – and only – locus of institutional strength to lead the innovation. From this point, an attempt was made to include the entire administrative structure at district and sub-district levels, thereby empowering and progressively involving the District Officers, the Sub-district Supervisors, the School Heads, teachers and communities. A well-established system of Parent Teacher Associations was utilized, dating back to the “école communale” which existed until the early 1960s.

This innovation was based on the strong belief that change would happen only if it were designed, internalized and mastered by the primary players. This was a major departure from the strategic choices made by other groups (e.g. NGOs or micro-projects) which selected a number of key respondents and schools, often outside the “formal” system.

*Needs are determined at the school level.* This new paradigm was based on respect for the values of the local community, broadly in line with national goals. There were clear tensions between these two, which needed to be sensitively worked through. This principle permeated many aspects of the innovation, including:

- initial visits to listen to the community about the problems encountered, their assessment of their own needs, and their preferred solutions;
- the development of attitudes — mainly listening — and their implications on behavior. At the beginning, various quarters criticized the very validity of listening to peasants who “had no education” (sic) and who could not possibly express an opinion about what was needed to make their school better;
- the ability to respond to the needs. Many projects, initiatives or programs have created enthusiasm and hope, but have failed to deliver. The innovators needed to follow through and respond quickly — although not fully and on all accounts — to local needs. A clear statement of what each partner was expected or able to contribute was required, along with a clear presentation and discussion of expectations; and,
- the ability to mediate conflicting needs or demands on limited resources.

A “systemic” view or perspective. From the beginning, a clear strategic choice was made by the authorities to work in all schools of a District, rather than in just a few schools. Thus, the approach reflected a deliberate effort on behalf of the government to improve education at the systemic level. It signaled to the District Officers that all schools in the district were equally important, and that education was not a matter of choosing one school over another, but a matter of all schools and/or communities being offered the chance to participate in the program.

*A working contract.* There are at least two main characteristics of school-based contracts. First, all parties are expected to bring their expertise (needs-based, listening mode, everybody has the right to express opinions), their views (the image of the school in one, two or three years), their resources (commitment to send
children to school, labor, money), and their commitment to action. Second, further investment depended on initial actions by the local community. For example, the first visit to the local community resulted in an agreement on a few, practical actions for implementation by the community. At the beginning of the second visit, an assessment was made of achievements of earlier commitments, and a decision made on the pursuit of the process.

A holistic approach to problem-solving and management, coupled with an experiential mode of learning. The local "champions" of the innovation examined a wide range of decisions to be made in all dimensions of management. For example, the Director of the pilot Regional Office and his team re-structured the Regional Office to set an example and to test the feasibility of reassigning staff where they were most needed, including in the schools themselves. The program rapidly involved a broad range of decisions, including staffing, posting, assignments, supervision and inspection of schools, teacher training, and provision and distribution of educational materials.

The process of information and mobilization

Research indicates that academic success and school performance are a function of community support, thus strengthening the idea of returning the school to the local community. Indispensable to this strategy is preparation of the community, starting with distribution of information and training. Initially, the regional team visited a number of schools to test a message that was then used in on-the-job training of district and local staff. As a result, a brief presentation was developed on the process of collaboration between the authorities and each community, including the range of factors which can be included in a school contract and the roles and responsibilities of the ministry at each level.

This first phase was followed by community mobilization and of training, including meetings and workshops, visits to schools, and exchanges on information and points of view. It aimed at empowering parents, village leaders, and other responsible locals to take responsibility for education in their school.

Experience shows that such meetings focus on issues such as poor enrollment or attendance by pupils and teachers, drop-out and repetition, lack of parental involvement, accountability of teachers and local authorities, as well as other members of the administration, and poor physical condition and educational resources of the school.

Each community was invited to set up a representative School Council. Representatives included the Head Teacher, all other teachers, parents, and village members. The role of supervisors and advisors was to facilitate the mobilization of the School Council and then to help draw up a school contract. In creating such a contract, based on community needs and availability of resources, each village was encouraged to reorganize itself and to recognize the central and local authorities' role in the transformation and improvement of their school.

The school improvement plan

The school improvement plan's bottom-up approach included: (a) the construction or rehabilitation of classrooms, latrines, water points, and teacher houses; (b) the provision of classroom furniture or equipment; (c) training or professional development for staff, including members of the School Council, the Head Teacher, and teachers; (d) follow-up of the implementation of the contract; and (e) evaluation of the results, i.e. improvements in enrollment and learning of pupils.

The contract also specified the commitments of the local community to the school in the form of: (a) the provision of basic materials; (b) the payment of part of the labor costs, in kind or in money; and (c) participation in the management of the schools. Furthermore, it specified the commitments of the Head Teacher and staff, such as to respect school schedules, to prepare the necessary tests, to mark work in a fair and objective manner, and to ensure the cleanliness and maintenance of the school.

Equally, it covered the commitments of the district and regional authorities, such as to ensure a sufficient number of teachers of a given quality for the school, to provide construction materials and technical assistance for the construction or rehabilitation of the classrooms, to provide educational advisory and support services to the teachers, to ensure a regular follow-up of the functioning of the school, and to pay the teachers regularly and on time at a place which is nearest to the school.
In their task, the parties had the support of the Ministry and its local staff. The services were incorporated into a work plan for the district and sub-districts. Such programs included inter alia: (a) visits to sensitize the local community and to assist in the establishment of the school council and school contract; (b) on-the-job training for staff; (c) inspection and advisory visits, as well as training associated with the provision of textbooks and educational support materials; and, (d) evaluation visits to test the children's achievement and performance of the Head and teachers.

Approval, follow-up, and evaluation

The approval, implementation, follow-up and evaluation of the school contracts was carried out by the ministry through the services of the District Office staff. They were charged with undertaking a series of at least five visits to each school, in order to: (a) mobilize and sensitize the local community and co-ordinate the preparation, the design and the finalisation of the school contract; (b) collect and harmonize the proposed interventions, prioritize the requests for assistance in order to match them with the available budget and, if necessary, arbitrate amongst communities, revise the original contracts in consultation with the school councils and proceed to the signature of the contract; (c) support visits to the community during the beginning of the work and the preparation of the implementation schedule, as well as the detailed planning of activities; (d) ascertain the state of implementation of the contract and to supervise the site; and finally (e) through evaluation visits, collect statistics and critical details to prepare reports for the ministry.

On the basis of this feedback, the ministry prepares at the end of each school year a critical review of the strategy's effectiveness as well as a program to update and improve it, in order to improve the following year's program and approach. This review is accompanied by an estimate of the resources required for the next year's program, including both investment and recurrent expenditure, as well as human and material resources needed. The review is shared with the donors in order to enlist their support for the continuation of the government's program.

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