

## Education Diplomacy for Improving Learning of Vulnerable Children in Community Schools in Zambia

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### Abstract

Communities and governments can learn from each other to provide access to education and meet the learning needs of their most vulnerable children. Education diplomacy can be used to prioritize education challenges, build mutual understanding, and shape consensus toward solutions that are supported by empowered parents/guardians, teachers, school leaders, civil society, and local and central governments committed to inclusive learning for all children. A case study from Zambia shows how this can be done in practice.

In the early 1990s, many communities throughout Zambia became concerned about the large number of children not attending school due to the lack of accessible public schools and the high school fees that families could not afford. Responding to the need for an alternative, communities began establishing their own schools. These Community Schools played an important role in providing access to education for some of the country's most vulnerable children who were not in school—including girls and orphans.

These Community Schools were staffed by local volunteers, most of whom were not trained teachers. As the popularity of the schools grew, support from local and international non-governmental organizations increased as well. In 1998, the Zambian government acknowledged Community Schools as entities contributing to education and these have since then grown into a national movement with about 3,000 Community Schools now providing basic education to 565,000 children.

In 2002, the government of Zambia implemented new policies that provided free basic education for all children in hopes of increasing enrollment in the public schools. Many experts believed that these new policies would draw students away from the Community Schools and into the public schools. However, the opposite happened—public school students began enrolling in Community Schools. While surprising to many, this outcome is understandable considering some key factors that the government schools failed to address in the new policies. While primary education is nominally free, certain expenses remain out of reach for many families, such as fees to the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and uniform and textbook fees. In addition, students in Community Schools do not have to travel the distances often necessary to attend public schools, they serve students who are over-age for their grade, and they provide the additional care needed for vulnerable children.

The Community Schools were eventually recognized by the Zambian government. While this was an important move, bringing them under the Ministry of General Education and ensuring improved government funding and support, implementation had been slow. Beginning in 2013, two organizations—the local non-profit Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS) and the international education development non-profit VVOB—began working with the government to understand the diplomatic challenges affecting Community Schools to be addressed in order to bring all the stakeholders together to find a solution.

### **Understanding the Challenges**

From the beginning of the program, the Ministry of General Education recognized its role in supporting Community Schools. However, it soon became clear that lack of information sharing created

challenges at the local level. At the implementation levels (provincial, district, and zonal<sup>1</sup>), administrators did not fully understand how many Community Schools were in their catchment areas, how many students and teachers were represented, or what the quality of teaching was.

Another key issue concerned the lack of understanding among Community School management teams and teaching staff about government standards and policies regarding funding. The staff needed to be trained in these standards and policies in order to receive support from the government for their schools.

For Community Schools that had begun receiving support, unintended tensions arose between the local staff and the government paid teachers. These tensions arose because the Community Schools did not understand the government school structure, on the one hand, and the government teachers did not have training in or knowledge of Community School structure and community involvement, on the other hand.

As the government increasingly supports Community Schools, more teachers earning government salaries are being assigned to these schools. This has substantial advantages. The presence of a government employee enables schools to access the grants provided by district education offices. The government teachers are often designated as head teachers or “teachers in charge,” providing technical leadership to the school.

However, the presence of government teachers in a Community School can also create challenges. Often, school management committees and volunteer teachers are unclear about the roles and expectations of government teachers. This can undercut community involvement in the school. In many cases, volunteer teachers, who were involved in founding the school and acted as head teachers for years, find their positions suddenly taken over by a government teacher and may even be completely displaced. Furthermore, government teachers tend to change the Parent Community School Committees (PCSC) structures into PTAs, which often results in disengagement of community support for the school.

### **Building Mutual Understanding**

VVOB and ZOCS worked to bring more attention to Community Schools and their role in education provision. They did so through a series of meetings with the Directorate of Teacher Education, seminars, and presentation of fact sheets on Community Schools at various assemblies, including Parliamentarians. At a national symposium, the Minister of Education made a landmark statement

concerning a budget allocation earmarked for Community Schools to pay a stipend to the most committed and best performing teachers, with the objective of reaching the others over time. This measure was implemented and represented a major step forward in terms of recognizing Community Schools as providers of education.

At decentralized level, VVOB and ZOCS worked to advocate educational leadership at the district level to implement the policy that stipulates 30% of grant funding for schools should go to Community Schools. This policy was not being implemented and even funding to government schools was inconsistent and largely insufficient. Exercising education diplomacy, VVOB and ZOCS engaged policy implementers at the district level to set aside funding for the schools and to include them in their support visits. By the end of the campaign, funding and technical support provided at district and zonal levels included not only government schools, but also Community Schools.

Within the schools, VVOB and ZOCS supported management committee<sup>2</sup> efforts to improve their management of the schools, not only in terms of income generation and engagement with local authorities and communities, but also in terms of teacher retention and supervision, helping them pay more attention to the quality of teaching by monitoring such aspects as lesson plans and student attendance. Parents were also encouraged to support teachers and the management committees by taking an interest in their children's homework, holding the committees accountable, and appreciating their role in their children's education.

### **Creating Change Through Consensus**

According to two independent external evaluations, the project effectively responded to the needs of untrained teachers, school leaders, and management committees. These needs were related to training and instructional materials, infrastructure, performance and progression rates, opportunities for learners with special needs and for girls, and leadership. Strategies such as capacity development of teacher resource centers, advocacy, training of management committees, and targeting of rural beneficiaries were all found to be appropriate.

By responding to the identified needs of Community Schools, VVOB and ZOCS appropriately and effectively addressed poor and underserved children. The emphasis on imparting pedagogical skills, providing resource material support, and improving school leadership, led to significant improvements in the quality of teaching and learning at Community Schools. The impact of pedagogical training on teaching quality was particularly impressive. In addition to improvements in teaching and learning, the campaign resulted in the inclusion of Community Schools in capacity development efforts by the

Ministry, increased enrollment and high pass rates in Community Schools targeted by the project, and children with special educational needs and girls increasingly being recognized by teachers as having special requirements.

Broad partnerships were fostered at all stages (design and inception, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and learning). These partnerships required thoughtful and respectful engagement with major stakeholders in education provision, service providers, the communities themselves, parents, and local authorities. While this approach required additional resources and time to reach consensus, it also ensured commitment and ownership of the projects at all levels and influenced changes in policy and practice. VVOB and ZOCS believe that the following skills and dispositions of Education Diplomacy were key to the success of these efforts and should be carefully considered in the future design and team composition of similar initiatives: reflection, intellectual flexibility, ethics, appreciative inquiry, negotiation, mediation, cultural sensitivity, systems thinking, and creating shared values.

### **The Future of Community Schools in Zambia**

As indicated in the Education for All 2015 National Review: *“The relief that Community Schools have provided is temporary because the infrastructure and learning conditions are not ideal. Even the selfless commitment of volunteer Community School teachers cannot be sustained forever.”* How, then, can the government gradually take over Community Schools without losing their positive aspects, such as teachers’ commitment, high accountability and parents’ participation? Addressing this question will require many more years of constructive engagement with the government at all levels, with Community Schools, and with the diverse stakeholders. Education Diplomacy can offer a useful framework to guide such initiatives.

The vision of VVOB and ZOCS is that vulnerable children in Community Schools should have access to the same quality of education as their more fortunate counterparts in regular government and private schools. We also believe that the system of Community Schools should be further institutionalized within the government education system. The involvement of the Ministry of General Education, particularly during the transition period, will be critical in empowering the community, holding government teachers accountable, and orienting them to appropriately engage the community.

### **Community Schools Meeting the Needs of Their Communities**

Community Schools throughout Zambia vary greatly, related to the support the schools get from their community and organizations, which has an impact on teachers and teacher development, infrastructure, parent support, and funding. Despite the differences in access to resources, all of these

schools have one common thread—community. These schools would not be successful without the help of different stakeholders coming together to achieve a common goal to provide access to education for all children throughout Zambia. Through the years, stakeholders have worked together to develop an innovative solution to challenges affecting education and to work with the government to make their vision reality.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Zones are the lowest decentralized level of the education system in Zambia. The Ministry of General Education is decentralized at provincial, district, and zone levels. Each zone caters to an average of 8 schools. The role of the zone is to support all schools with continuous professional development.

<sup>2</sup> Community Schools are managed by a Parents Community School Committee, whose role is to raise funds, recruit teachers, and manage the day-to-day affairs of the schools.



*Picture 1 © SchoolLinks: Classrooms at Buyantanshi Open Christian Community School*



*Picture 2: Paradise Community School*



*Picture 3 © 2012, Dream Factory Zambia: Computer class at Buyantanshi Community School*



*Picture 4: Head teacher's office at Paradise Community School*

*Pictures: There is a wide variety in infrastructure of Community Schools. To illustrate: Buyantanshi Open Christian Community School and Buyantanshi Community School (left) and Paradise Community School (right).*



*Picture 5: Professional development of Community School teachers is important in improving the quality of education*

#### SUPPLEMENTARY BOX (stakeholder descriptions)

##### Community School Stakeholders and Education Diplomats

The Community School model has been developed through the hard work and dedication of several groups. Using the skills of diplomacy, these stakeholders came together to understand the problem and create a dynamic solution that has grown into a national movement, which has not only increased the number of children enrolled in school, but also the care and support they need to thrive.

##### **Parents' Participation in Community Schools**

Parents' participation in Community Schools is generally much higher than in government schools. Parents have an important role within the school and have a wide range of responsibilities, including: finding resources, determining a location, and building infrastructure for the schools. They are also primarily responsible for recruiting teachers and school leadership, paying their stipends and monitoring and supervising the teachers. Most importantly, they work with the community to enroll students and educate parents on the importance of sending all their children to school—especially girls.



### **Volunteer Teachers in Community Schools**

Volunteer teachers are typically recruited locally; their levels of dedication are often quite high, as well as their understanding of the local language and local needs. Many volunteer teachers are willing to work for a small salary because they feel they are investing in their communities and supporting children who are part of their own communities. Only few teachers in Community Schools have received formal training at a teacher training college.

### **The Ministry of General Education and Community Schools**

Seeing the success of the Community Schools model, the Ministry of General Education has assumed a stronger role in supporting these schools. Currently, the government is responsible for ensuring that Community Schools are provided technical support and professional development, and for monitoring and evaluating the teaching and learning in the schools. In addition to these services, the government is working to integrate the Community Schools into the education system by providing trained teachers, providing financial assistance for materials and infrastructure, and connecting Community Schools to the nearest government schools.

### **VVOB and ZOCS and Community Schools**

VVOB's programming approach has a strong focus on equity. VVOB does this through teacher and school leadership development initiatives that impact children from underprivileged backgrounds. They use a variety of approaches, including partnering with numerous stakeholders, and a multitude of strategies to bring about sustained policy change and implementation. The varied nature of Community Schools and the challenges they face means that their needs are immense and require multi-disciplinary partnerships.