

Working in partnership

How Link Community Development works alongside district local government: The case of Masindi

Link Community Development

I am particularly pleased with the way LCD tackles local education challenges in partnership with stakeholders. The result is a better quality of education for children, now and long into the future.

Derek Nkata (former District Education Officer, Masindi, Uganda)

Introduction

Link Community Development's (LCD) mission is 'to work in partnership to improve the lives of children and young people in rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa'. In recent years the programme has grown to service over 800 rural schools in five African countries. This article draws on LCD's experience of its work in Masindi, Uganda since 2000, and explores the special importance of the partnership that LCD has as a service provider with district local government.

The challenge of Universal Primary Education in Uganda

Uganda is striving to realise the goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE). It has made considerable headway and the number of primary school pupils has tripled from 2.6 million to 7.4 million since the policy was initiated in 1997. However, this expansion has put the education system under severe strain and serious concerns have emerged about the quality of education offered by most government primary schools. Recent national competence tests

revealed that, after six years of primary education, only 33.5 per cent of pupils passed competency tests in literacy and only 30.5 per cent passed numeracy (as reported in *New Vision*, January 2008). While enrolment rates are quite high, at 84 per cent, the national average completion rate for both boys and girls is only 43 per cent (EMIS, 2007). If demand for education is to be sustained then quality must be improved.

In Uganda and several other countries, the drive towards UPE has coincided with a policy of decentralisation, enacted through the Local Government Act of 1997. This places responsibility for education squarely in the hands of District Education Offices. The aim is to give communities greater access to the decision-making that determines policy and the allocation of resources. Several studies have identified a lack of professional capacity at district level as a key limiting factor of decentralisation. It is for this reason that LCD has identified local government as the key partner for its rural school improvement programmes.

The case of Masindi

Masindi is an ordinary rural district in Uganda that has made extraordinary improvements in the performance of its primary schools. The district is situated about 200km to the north-west of Kampala. There are currently 180 government primary schools with a total enrolment of over 100,000 pupils (53 per cent of whom are boys and 47 per cent girls). All of these schools are supervised by just six district inspectors who are poorly funded and poorly mobilised.



In Uganda, enrolment has tripled since 1997



The district education office, Masindi



The SPR enhances a school's accountability to its community

LCD began work in Masindi in 2000, after an invitation from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) to share the experience it gained from working in South Africa and Ghana. The district education officer and his staff had direct input into the original funding proposal which was agreed by Big Lottery Fund (UK). Since 2001, LCD's work in Masindi has depended upon the long-term placement of experienced educators in the district office. These 'change agents' have largely worked within the district's own resource constraints and have focused on capacity building, improved delivery and accountability.

There is a clear memorandum of understanding between LCD and the Masindi District, which lays out the roles of each partner in the project. There are termly project steering committee meetings at which progress is reviewed and plans and reports jointly approved. LCD and district staff have worked together to deliver a programme that includes:

- School performance reviews (described below)
- Training and mentoring for inspectors and district officials
- Training and mentoring for headteachers in management skills
- Governance training for school management committees
- Training of teachers in literacy teaching methodologies
- Placing 100 British 'global teachers' on five-week placements during their summer vacation in schools, over a five-year period (2001–06)

- Linking 80 Masindi schools with partner schools in the UK to exchange correspondence and undertake shared curriculum projects.

School performance reviews

It is impossible to tease apart the impact of each of these interventions, but the cornerstone of LCD's partnerships with Masindi District has been an innovative approach to school monitoring and support called the School Performance Review (SPR). The SPR has helped the district to realise its mandate to assure the quality of service delivery in schools. It consists of an annual cycle of activities that includes the following steps.

- 1 The gathering of accurate information by a team of district data collectors, about the performance of each school in the district, and preparation of a report.
- 2 Dissemination and discussion of the report by stakeholders at school and district level through school performance appraisal meetings and a district education conference.
- 3 Preparation and implementation of school improvement plans at school, coordinating-centre and district levels, which address the specific needs and weaknesses identified at school level.
- 4 Development and delivery of targeted training and support in response to documented needs.

Since 2002, LCD has implemented the SPR successfully in all schools in Masindi. The benefits of SPR include the following.

- It provides schools with clear feedback on performance against nationally approved standards.
- It provides information by which LCD and district-led training interventions can be closely tailored to actual need.
- The meetings mobilise community and district support for education, imbue a sense of urgency and allow stakeholders to apply accountability pressure upon schools for improvement.
- The School Development Plans that result from SPR provide a common agenda for school improvement activities.

The SPR model has now been replicated in a total of 400 schools in four other Ugandan Districts. Contextualised versions have also been successfully implemented by LCD in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. SPR has already proved to be a cost-effective method of providing support to schools.

In 2005, LCD's partnership with local government on school improvement work was recognised by the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports by an invitation to take up office space within their Directorate of Education Standards. This move has ensured that the lessons gained from implementing SPR in Masindi can be integrated into national school inspection policy.

Evidence of impact

The impact of the partnership between LCD and Masindi District is now widely recognised. In 2008, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted a national impact assessment of UPE in Uganda. Their report stated that:

In Masindi, the District Office, the Education Standards Agency and the NGO LCD have worked since 2000 to improve district and school management. Examination results in these schools are approximately 50 per cent higher than the results of comparable schools.

(IOB (2008). *Primary Education in Uganda: Impact Evaluation*, p.16)

If UPE is to be achieved and sustained then the issue of how to assure quality must be addressed. SPR offers a model for how this might be achieved within realistic resource constraints.

This work would not have been possible without the close relationship that LCD has developed with Masindi and at least twelve districts like it in Uganda, Ghana, Ethiopia, Malawi and South Africa. This partnership has developed over a long period. It is based on the trust that develops when two organisations share the same challenges and constraints while striving for a common objective.

