



Background

As governments worldwide made efforts to reach Education for All goals by 2015, the value of working with communities, of sharing responsibility for reaching the goals, and of increasing ownership was increasingly recognised. The international community realised that more viable solutions to education challenges, including those faced by the most educationally marginalised children, could be found at local level where there was a strong understanding of the barriers that children face and knowledge of how to surmount these. Fostering community engagement and ownership was also recognised to improve sustainability of education initiatives, where communities embraced the right and importance of education for all children. As education became recognised as a critical emergency response along with other humanitarian sectors,¹ minimum standards for education in emergency² were developed, and community engagement was instated as a foundational standard cutting across all other domains and standards.³

During the COVID-19 pandemic when many countries closed schools, communities became critical to keeping in touch with students, providing important information, supporting learning, and in some cases becoming 'learning champions', leading learner circles for students themselves.⁴ With localisation of education programmes now higher than ever on the global agenda, and challenges associated with emergencies such as climate-change⁵ and pandemics rising, working with school communities in support of quality and safe education has never been more critical. The increasing promotion of community engagement and local indigenous knowledge in climate change science, education and policy is a reflection of this, and a route towards understanding, coping with, and ultimately being more resilient to climate change.⁶

“Previously, the relationship between the community and the school management was not good [...] But now, the community is taking the school as part of the community and there is mutual trust and openness in addressing different issues”

– Primary School Headteacher, Uganda

¹ Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion, Health, Nutrition, Protection, Food Security, Shelter and Settlement: Sphere Handbook, Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (2004, 2014, 2018)

² INEE (2010) Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Preparedness, Response, Recovery

³ *ibid*

⁴ EdTech Hub (2021), Community Help for Inclusive Learning and Development

⁵ Link Education International (2021), Building Resilience to Climate Change Approach Paper

⁶ UNESCO, Indigenous Knowledge and Climate Change <https://en.unesco.org/links/climatechange>

Communities contribute to education in many ways:



Mobilising community resources

Advocacy and campaigns



Supporting teachers

Repairing school buildings



Monitoring attendance

Management, accountability
and governance



Contribute local knowledge to help
solve school challenges

Supporting vulnerable or
marginalised children



About Link

Link Education is Scotland's leading international education charity, working to improve education for children and communities in some of the poorest rural areas of Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda, and helping thousands of people escape the cycle of poverty. We focus on enhancing teaching and learning in schools, as well as building life-skills and promoting inclusion for the most marginalised. Our vision is one where all children have access to good quality education, giving them hope and a strong foundation for a brighter future. We take both a top-down and bottom-up approach to transform education, supporting broad system and school-wide improvements while recognising the need for more tailored, localised support to overcome specific challenges.

Overall Approach

Link believes that community participation, ownership and agency is at the heart of improving education and schools for all children. This is reflected in project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all projects, and integral to all other Link

technical approaches.⁷ Link works closely with communities, often through community school structures such as School Improvement/Management Committees, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), Mother Groups, and in Ethiopia, village level education and training boards, to enhance their participation in school performance review and planning, in mobilising resources to support the school, and in supporting children to attend, achieve and transition.

To support school improvement planning and review processes, Link supports Headteachers and local government officers to collect school improvement data according to existing standards,⁸ to inform and enhance planning. Community-school bodies and members of the wider community are invited to engage with data collected, and through the development of school improvement and action plans, they are better able to target resources coming into the school,⁹ play a larger role in improving schools for all children, and to monitor the implementation of agreed plans. Communities monitor the implementation of the plan, and whether resources made available to schools through school grants, donations and community contributions to support the plan are used judiciously. Where school performance data indicates that children are struggling with learning, plans identify the steps that school leaders, teachers, community structures and parents can take to support, as well as identify where additional support or resources might be needed from government to meet standards.



⁷ Inclusive Education, Education in Emergency, Working with Government, Social and Emotional Learning, Girls' Education, Adaptive Management, Building Resilience to Climate Change Approach papers: www.linkeducation.org.uk

⁸ In Ethiopia 4 Policy Domains with standards: School Environment, Teaching Quality, School Leadership and Community Engagement; in Malawi the National Education Standards, in Uganda the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards Indicators for Education Institutions.

⁹ E.g. school grants, block grants, donations, community resources including time/funds

To support the school improvement planning process, Link works with district education supervisors and experts at the middle tier of management to collect data, and with school leaders to lead the school improvement planning process, engaging the community at each step. Existing training modalities for School Improvement/Management Committees and other community-school bodies are strengthened around roles and responsibilities including participation in the school improvement planning process, gender, inclusion, and safeguarding.

According to girls in schools which are supported by Link, community support is critical to whether they attend school, remain in school, and learn whilst there.¹⁰ Without support from the wider community girls state that they are more likely to think of dropping out of school early.¹¹ This kind of evidence will help Link to continually shape and adapt approaches to community engagement going forward. During the COVID-19 pandemic school closures, Link's existing approach to working with communities provided a strong foundation for maintaining support to children's learning, their wellbeing, health and safety.

Link will continue to engage with school communities on the real education challenges that their children face and it is likely that climate change will increasingly feature more prominently amongst these challenges. Link is positioning itself to provide relevant support, based on the science, evidence of best practice, and through valuing existing indigenous knowledge on how to cope and adapt, and build resilience through education.

Experience

UGANDA



Link Uganda embarked on a project with an accountability focus, recognising that citizen-demand, in addition to system strengthening, is a route towards school improvement. Link recognised the challenge for parents and community members with low levels of literacy to express their concerns about education and hold those responsible for education service delivery to account. Over a period of 12 months, Link partnered with District Education Officers and Inspectors to facilitate community awareness-raising via radio programmes, on the status of education in their districts, and the role that the community can play in accountability. Link Uganda provided training to community facilitators on how to track the spending of resources allocated to education service delivery, and in collaboration with the local Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group mobilised 400 community-based monitors across 20 sub-counties and town councils in Buliisa, Hoima and Kikuube Districts. These activities complemented training PTA's on their role in supporting their school alongside murals on external school walls which remind the community of their responsibilities. Link learned that capacity development is essential in empowering communities to bring their concerns to decision-makers, based on evidence, and with a strong voice.

¹⁰ School to School International (2021), STAGES Midline-1 Evaluation Report

¹¹ *ibid*

ETHIOPIA



In Ethiopia, through our Girls' Education Challenge-Transition project STAGES, which reaches 61,345 girls in rural Wolaita Zone, 12,000 community stakeholders participated in annual school performance appraisal meetings linked to school improvement planning and performance. During one meeting, it was recognised that girls in the school were broadly under-performing, and participants identified the burden of domestic chores on girls to be a major cause. To address the issue, parents committed to reducing household workloads for girls and to providing more fuel for lamps to enable them to complete homework. School managers agreed to provide extra study sessions and to meet regularly with school governors to follow-up. These collaborative efforts brought about significant improvements in girls' school attendance and attainment.¹²

During school closures as a result of COVID-19 in 2020, and following a Rapid Assessment to determine the status of project girls, Link Ethiopia adapted its way of working with school communities. An 'ecosystem' of support to girls was created to keep in contact with them, provide safeguarding and hygiene information, follow-up on safeguarding reports, and encourage girls to continue to study. Local government staff and Mother and Father Groups played particularly key roles in identifying needs, mapping local services, and providing support. An active listening approach was particularly effective to address child safeguarding issues where community-led family interventions enabled 90% of girls who had been married during school closures to return to school.

MALAWI



Before the pandemic, TEAM Girl Malawi worked with Learning Centre Management Committees (LCMCs) to supply learning resources, monitor Facilitator (the instructor) timekeeping, and support food distribution. These committees were made up of community-based volunteers such as village leaders and those interested in education. In response to learning centre closures, the project put in place a distance learning programme. However, it was not easy to know if learning was taking place, so the LCMC was tasked to support Facilitators to monitor whether learning was happening and encourage distance/ home learning. This expanded the role of the LCMC to close the information gap and manage learning. The consequence of this closer engagement with the LCMC was a greater understanding of learner needs, such as negotiating time and space to study at home, which has informed learning centres on reopening. This closer relationship is being maintained moving forward, enhancing communities' capacity to advocate for an educational future that speaks for all.

¹² GEC-1 Endline Report