

A successful strength-based approach in PNG Education: From strength to strength – Building on strengths to build strong school-community partnerships

Silina Tagagau and John Pettit

BEDP works with over 3000 communities in PNG to promote school-community partnerships. The project uses a strength-based approach unique to PNG in training and funding gender-equitable teams of two (an education officer and a local women leader) to conduct capacity building visits. Their training focuses on the 5D model of capacity building and includes HIV/AIDS and gender awareness.

The first visit is to engage the communities in supporting their schools, to gather data re infrastructure and governance and to help develop a School Action Plan for infrastructure maintenance. Schools subsequently receive a small annual maintenance grant. Subsequent visits update data and engage communities in a qualitative evaluation process using an adaptation of Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology. Schools are also assisted to develop an infrastructure development plan.

The project has achieved significant results in service delivery, particularly to remote school communities, and in engaging community members. It is enhancing the capacity of provincial governments to manage a program of school visits and infrastructure maintenance. Key learnings relate to the focus on a strength-based approach, an active commitment to gender equity, a reliance on evidence-based decision making and an uncompromising approach to accountability and transparency.

Introduction

This paper provides:

- A brief overview of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) context, with particular focus on factors impacting on education.
- An outline of the Basic Education Development Project (BEDP).
- A description of the approach taken in promoting community participation and the methods used to monitor it.
- An analysis of baseline data survey responses related to community participation and Board of Management (BoM) operations received to date.
- A review of the evidence from other sources, principally the Board of Management Facilitation (BoMF) Impact Stories from the first round of visits.
- A sample of Most Important Change (MIC) Stories
- Cross province observations and general findings.

Papua New Guinea Context

The Independent State of Papua New Guinea was created in 1975. It occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea and the island archipelagos to the north and east. It lies directly to the north of Australia. Its western boundary is with the Indonesian province of West Papua and its eastern border is with Solomon Islands.

Although blessed with rich and abundant resources, the country's social and economic indicators have remained static or shown a decline over recent decades.

The current population is estimated at 5.6 million, with a generalised HIV/AIDS epidemic now evident. 85% of the population live subsistence lives in rural and remote communities, with significantly reduced access to markets, infrastructure and government services. Hansen, Allen, Bourke and McCarthy 2001 p. 296 report that over half the rural population earn very low to low incomes (<K40 p.a., ie around \$US12 p.a.).

Education is one of the few indicators which have shown growth, with a doubling of children in school over the past 10 – 15 years, primarily due to the introduction of elementary education. Progression and retention rates are problematic, with many students being 'pushed out' at grade 8 or grade 10. There are few opportunities for further education or formal employment for grade 10 and 12 school leavers.

Notwithstanding this significant growth, around half the population remain illiterate. Retention and attendance rates show a significant bias against the education of girls.

Retention rates are gradually increasing but are still below half for both males and females throughout PNG.

1992 Approx average 15%

2001 Average 35.5 %

2004 Average 41% (Department of Education, 2006).

Basic Education Development Project

The Basic Education Development Project (BEDP) commenced in May 2004 and will continue to May 2008. BEDP focuses on capacity building through the development and maintenance of primary school facilities, and the development of partnerships between government and the community.

The **project goal** is: to contribute to the effective implementation of quality and equitable primary schooling in PNG.

The **purpose** of the project is: 'to establish an ongoing program of primary and community school facility development and maintenance which is being independently managed by school communities with assistance from relevant Local, Provincial and National Government departments' (Australian Agency for International Development 2003, p. 53).

The project is being implemented progressively over a four year period in all provinces. In 2004, ten provinces were involved. In 2005, five more provinces joined the project and another four provinces in 2006.

BEDP supports the National Department of Education (DoE) to collect accurate data on existing school infrastructure and to establish appropriate infrastructure standards and funding levels for the nation's schools. The DoE's policy of self reliance is being implemented by encouraging school communities to take responsibility for their schools.

Community Participation Strategy and Tools

Our community participation strategy was developed with several principles in mind:

- The primary focus of the initial BEDP contact with each school community is on developing (or reinforcing) a strong, practical and relevant relationship between the community and the school.
- The Board of Management (BoM) is a service to the community, as well as the DoE, in that it represents the interests of and is accountable to the community. Effective BoMs ensure that the community's participation is well managed and the community's access to suitable education is increased.
- A strength-based or assets-based approach is used to encourage communities to locate the enthusiasm for improvement by recalling their own previous experiences of successful community participation and by identify existing competencies and capacities to bring about communally desired improvements. The community's capacities include skills, material resources, equipment, social relationships and potential sources of funds.
- Gender disaggregated activities and promotion of women's equal participation in all community analysis, planning, decision making and implementation.
- Action planning with the community that is simple, promoting full ownership and capable of immediate implementation while also being subject to national standards and complemented by government and donor subsidy.
- Data collection for a baseline and ongoing monitoring that reflects local capabilities, is capable of capturing primary information, is participative and provides the community and school with relevant information about progress.
- Our approach is grounded in key principles, particularly ownership, participation, gender and equity, sustainability, self-reliance, affordability and flexibility (SAGRIC International 2004 p12).

The Strength-Based Approach

Following an initial induction workshop and subsequent four-day training for District Women Facilitators (DWF) and another week for all members of BoMF teams, teams were funded to visit schools in the participating provinces. Some schools were either suspended or closed due to tribal fighting, weather conditions or other factors.

The first visit of the BoMF team members is designed to also build the capacity of the BoM to work more closely with the community. The strategy encourages the whole community to plan for ways in which they can

contribute to immediate needs for improvement and for longer term involvement. During this visit, the BoMF team members model an approach that encourages members of the BoM to act as facilitators of community involvement in developing an action plan and then to take responsibility for managing community participation in implementing the plan of action in the future.

This approach abandons the more traditional 'problem tree analysis' of core problems and focuses instead on previous examples of successful cooperation between the community and the school. The steps in this approach are referred to as the '5Ds'. The key components of this approach are:

1. Story telling is used as a means to collecting information from the community.
2. Discussion takes place in focus groups - women, men, youth, teachers.
3. The overall focus is on experiences when the community and the school functioned well – or functioned in a manner considered successful by the participants.
4. The starting point is designed to build the community's self esteem and locate the energy for improvement.
5. The community itself proposes a desirable future articulated in an agreed statement of vision.
6. The community documents its own available assets to be mobilised for group action.
7. Agreement is reached by voting or consensus on an action plan for community involvement in immediate and short term improvements around the school.
8. Follow up information is collected through story telling of changes considered by the community to be most significant, using a locally developed version of Most Significant Change Story (MSC) methodology (Dart and Davies 2004), referred to as Most Important Change (MIC) stories.

Action Plan

The immediate and tangible outcome of this first visit is the School Action Plan. This plan is based on an agreement between school staff, BoM and the broader community about the four most important maintenance activities that should be done in the near future and using mostly the resources of the local community. The BoM and Headteacher will consider how the Maintenance Grants to be provided through BEDP will be used to supplement the community's plan. This action plan also forms the basis of a more comprehensive Three Year Infrastructure Development Plan (SIDP).

Baseline Data Survey

A baseline survey of participating schools was developed and trialled during the inception phase (Department of Education 2004). It incorporates both infrastructure and community participation dimensions.

Surveys are distributed by Board of Management Facilitation (BoMF) Teams during their visits to schools.

BoMF teams were expected (and trained) to help school Headteachers and BoM members to complete the forms.

The Baseline Data Survey information presented in this paper is based on responses to questions that identify the existing situation in relation to the BoM, the P&C and community participation or contributions by the community to the school.

Story Telling

Story telling is a qualitative method of collecting information. It is participative in that the description of the impact of the project is provided directly by project participants.

BEDP utilises two story telling methodologies:

- Impact Stories (first visit).
- Most Important Change Stories (MIC) (second visit).

Impact Stories are recounts by project implementers of their experiences and observations. As such they can be both descriptive and analytical. They have been found particularly useful in BoMF Review Workshops to promote the concept of the 'critically reflective practitioner' and also to capture in more permanent form the thoughts, observations and actions of the BoMF team members.

The Most Important Change Story approach enables community members to tell stories at the beginning of the process and progressively through the life of the project. These stories are collected, selected and reflected

back to the wider community. Because only stories that have the most meaning for project stakeholders are eventually chosen, this method provides clear and useful feedback to the beneficiaries at the local level.

Program Implementer Observation

BoMF team members are required to take short notes relating to their time in the community. These are recorded in First Visit Reports and used for monitoring. Project staff also participate in selected school visits as a means of monitoring progress.

Following all first visits, a BoMF Review workshop is held. This allows for reflection, an analysis of progress and information about community participation in the schools visited.

The second, and longer, school visit (typically 2 nights) seeks to strengthen the functions of the BoM and to assist schools develop three year School Infrastructure Development Plans, complete a second school survey and acquire the first maintenance grant. At the time of writing this report, few second school visit reports and annual surveys had been received at the BEDP office.

Process and Inputs

This approach to community participation in partnership with the school was developed in two stakeholder workshops. The first was to introduce and agree upon the strength-based model for community development and community action planning. The second was to introduce and agree upon the use of the Most Significant Change methodology as the principal method of participative community monitoring and evaluation.

Further training about the use of the MSC story telling method took place during the BoMF Review workshop prior to the second visit by BoMF teams. The term 'Most Important Change' conveyed greater meaning to community members, and hence was adopted in BEDP.

Materials produced to improve community participation have included:

- Facilitator and Participant Manuals and school visit booklets
- Laminated photographs, cartoons, drawings and aide memoires
- Laminated 1st School Visit Steps and Procedures
- Handbooks and Flip charts for community meetings.

Many materials have been translated into Tok Pisin (the local vernacular) as English literacy rates are often low, particularly in rural communities.

Information from the Database

At the time of preparing this paper, 1567 surveys from schools that had been visited by the BoMF teams had been entered into the database. This represents approximately 66% of the maximum possible total of 2387 registered schools.

Three indices have been constructed to report on the available data about community participation. Each index comprises three sub-indicators. They are:

Index	Sub-indicators
BoM Functionality	No of Meetings in last year PEB approval Women representatives on BoM
P&C Activities	Tidying the school School maintenance Fund-raising
Community Support	Provision of labour Provision of materials Fund-raising

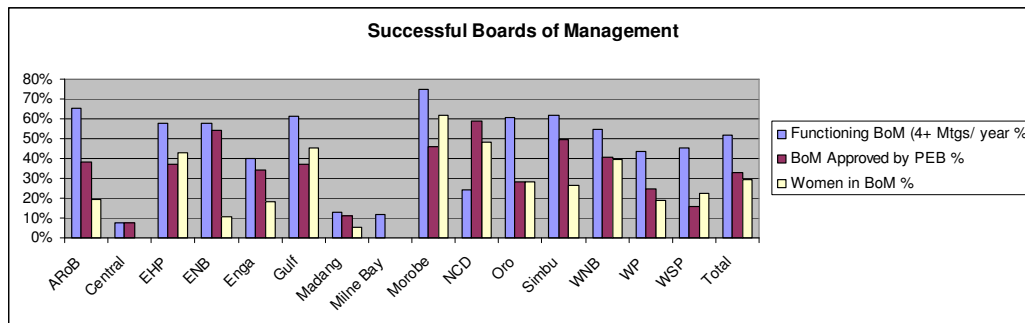
One measure was the number of times the BoM met in the previous twelve months. Four meetings per year was taken as the minimum level for an effectively functioning BoM. Of the 1567 schools that responded to this question, 809 (52%) indicated that their BoM had met at least four times in that period.

Some schools indicated that their BoM had met less frequently. Approximately 6% of schools reported that their BoM did not meet in the previous 12 months, while 10% did not respond to this question.

The second measure of functionality relates to the existence of a legal BoM, ie one that had been approved by the Provincial Education Board (PEB). Only legal BoMs are authorised to receive and spend public monies. 33% of responding schools indicated that their BoM was legally constituted.

The third measure of functionality is the extent to which women are represented on the BoM. Overall, only 29% of schools reported having any women on the BoM. A small number of schools reported women in executive positions on their BoM. Six reported a female chairperson; 35 a female deputy chairperson; 84 reported a female treasurer and 143 reported a female BoM secretary. Only 28 schools reported having two or more females in BoM executive positions. Typically, female representation (where it exists) is on subcommittees.

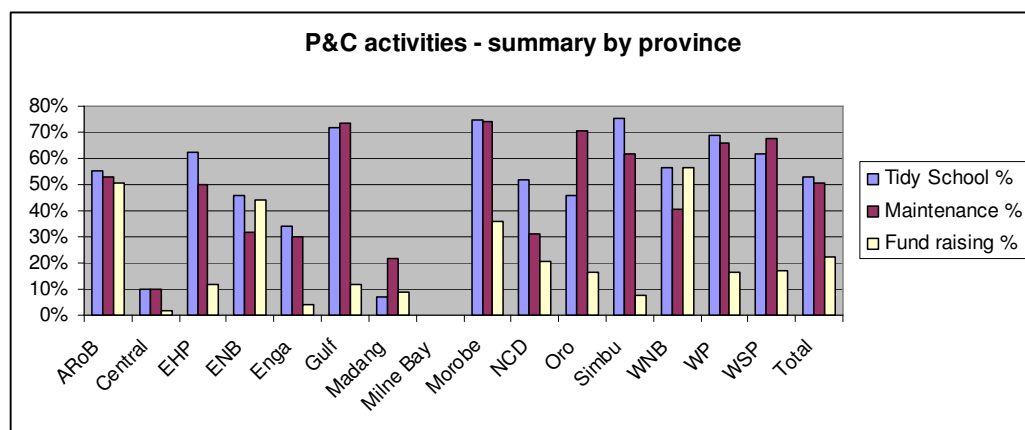
The following chart illustrates the provincial variation on each sub-indicator, as a percentage of total responses.



The Baseline survey asked schools to identify the ways in which their P&C contributed to the school.

Just over half the responding schools (53%) indicated that their P&C played an active part in keeping the school grounds tidy. Slightly over half the schools (51%) reported that the P&C was active in school maintenance. Only one in five schools (22%) reported that their P&C played an active role in raising funds for the school.

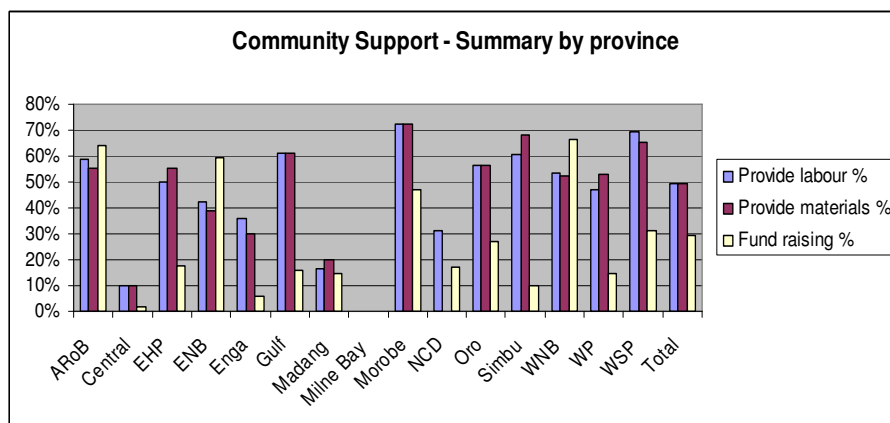
The following chart illustrates the provincial variation on each sub-indicator, as a percentage of total responses.



The Baseline survey asked schools to identify the ways in which the broader community contributed to the school.

Overall, 50% of schools reported that the broader community supported the school by providing labour for maintenance of existing, and for construction or new, infrastructure. A similar number of schools (50%) reported that maintenance and infrastructure materials were provided by the broader community. Less than one school in three (29%) reported that the broader community actively raised funds for the school.

The following chart illustrates the provincial variation on each sub-indicator, as a percentage of total responses.



Information from BoMF Review Workshop and School Visit Reports

The action plans drawn up by the community have already led to considerable improvements in school infrastructure and in governance by BoMs, as well as a greater focus on equity and access for women and girls.

Examples of the improvements that have occurred after the first visits include:

Infrastructure changes:

- Repair of furniture
- Improvements in class rooms
- Building new classrooms with bush materials
- Building new, and improving existing, teachers' houses
- Toilets repaired or built
- School fencing improved or built
- Lawns cut and gardens planted.

Women continue to take a lead in organising improvements around the school that immediately affect female students, such as separate toilets.

Improvements carried out by community continue to progress. At Sakarina Primary school in Oro province, 2 new double classrooms were built with local timbers and local contractors. Solar power for four teacher's houses was provided. An elementary bush material building was built by several villages from the area. One village was responsible for the walls, one for rafters for the roof, and one for furniture. This school has now been selected to receive an infrastructure grant.

In Madang, Seven Community School was set up in the late 1990s by communities because their children had to walk hours to the (then) nearest school. Women sold goods at the market to earn money for a teacher's salary. The school was finally registered two years ago and the teacher is now on government salary.

Governance:

- Women invited to participate on the BoM and an increasing number of women elected as chairpersons or executives of school boards and committees,
- Women asked to provide inservice training on gender equity for teachers,
- Women previously excluded from community meetings invited to participate (or taking the courage to participate), because of the central role of the DWF as a BoMF member,
- BoM motivated to ask for more teachers,
- Community and BoM meeting to consider how they can arrange to re-open a school,

- BoM providing a financial report to the community for the first time ever,
- Level of parents' fee compliance increased.

Some of the BoMF team members have reported the surprising finding that the involvement of youth in the community action planning process has led to a substantial increase by young people in shaping the future of the school and how they can make the sort of improvements which they had wanted while at school.

Indirect benefits:

- DWF invited to assist a women's group to plan their annual activity using the 5D process.
- DWF using the project initiative to settle a major tribal fight in Enga.
- DWF church leaders mobilising women in their church circuit using the Strength Based Approach.
- Several DWFs now intending to go into politics after gaining confidence through this project.
- DWFs asked to implement literacy programs across a whole District.

Perhaps the most significant initial benefit arising from the first school visits has been a change in communities' attitude toward their school. This is because it is becoming obvious that the ideas, knowledge and practices of the BEDP community participation approach have been internalised both by the community and the BoMF teams. School BoMs appreciate understanding their roles and responsibilities which gives them power that was usually absent in the past to make informed decisions. Communities are more positive towards supporting their schools. BoMF members are taking it on as individual personal development. One of the BoMF team member's personal assessments after the 2nd visit recorded:

The world outside awaited for me. Meanwhile BEDP happily carried out its training (project). The time came and BEDP introduced me into the world. As years went, by BEDP gently and faithfully nurtured me and taught me the many basics of life. BEDP groomed and moulded my character to what I am today. Growing up as a DWF in last couple of years, I saw the world through a positive way. I observe and learn about society's unfairness about women's role in the society and I learned to demonstrate (as a women) courage and determination. BEDP provided me the road to success and brought the best out of me. BEDP was my guide and my shining star. A personal role model. (Lily Graham, Gumini, Simbu province).

Behavioural and attitude change is the ultimate aim when dealing with communities in PNG. From such comments, we are confident that BEDP can enhance community ownership and self mobilisation in school management in PNG. The Strength Based Approach enhances these changes to happen.

Almost all BoMF members reported high level of participation during their visits. Schools that were visited for the first time after 10-15 years shared their disappointment with the lack of previous government presence, eg:

In Oriropetan community school, attendance was really good and the community responded well through their eagerness and expressed support for this project. Good discussions held and community requested for consistency in awareness because the school was last visited in 1990. (Peter Oa and Margaret Paike- Kairiku, Central.)

The involvement of women in this project is effectively having an impact on women making decisions for the benefit of their children's basic needs in education. Women's participation in school activities was limited to doing general cleaning up, fundraising etc. They were never given consideration to make informed decisions due to cultural and traditional values and practices. Through the DWFs' involvement, people are seeing gender from a different perspective, eg:

In Vunuamai community school women were prepared to put things into action after developing a school action plan and deciding their priority activity. Men lack the support and we hope to see males' attitude change in our next visit. (Christine Ikupu and Rose Harima, Central)

These short comments illustrate the interest generated and the desire to bring about changes in their schools for the benefit of present and future generations.

Information from Stories of BoMF

The impact stories told and written by BoMF team members during the BoMF reviews illustrate substantial evidence of community support and participation with the BoMF team during their first school visit. Examples of the many stories received to date are:

Story 1. In Milne Bay Province, women in their grass skirts attending the meeting were too shy to speak out because their customs could not allow this. After the BoMF took them through the community development process and the importance of women's participation, they realised that women are not there to only cook for

them during the meetings but to also have a part in the overall decision making and management of the school. They also realised that the school belongs to them and not to the government because their children go to this school.

Story 2. In Central province, an education officer reported that the communities decided to mobilise themselves to assist because for the first time, a women representative (DWF) from their community energised them to do so. The community willingly support the project because women are now taking the leading role to organise and facilitate the school activities in their local communities.

Story 3. Ron Staples, an independent assessor, visited Iobunakaupa and Kuria primary schools in Central Province. He reported that, 'It is early days as entry to schools under the BED project is only one year old. However, entry for community mobilisation, which is most difficult, appears to have been very successful' (Staples 2006 p.2)

BEDP continues to show positive outcomes. In Central province it was reported as creating a major revolution in community mobilisation to be independent and self-reliant in helping themselves to develop their community and especially their schools. Communities finally realised that all these years they have been waiting for basic services to come to them but today that is not the case anymore. Ownership and self-reliance in managing their schools is the way forward. This has been a very important message for those schools that have not been visited for 10- 25 years.

The BEDP Strengths Based approach is becoming a recognised and user friendly approach that fits in well to community development in PNG. BEDP's presentation to a Community Development Expo in Lae, (Tagagau 2006) generated interest and discussions from various community development organisations, especially Non Government Organisations (NGO) and community development agencies recognising that building on strengths is preferable to counteracting problems.

This BEDP approach is having an impact, not only in BoMs and the management of schools, but in many kinds of community developmental activities that communities wish to engage in.

Information from School Action Plans

The type of maintenance being undertaken includes furniture (such as desks and library shelves), toilets, classrooms, teachers' houses, water supply or tanks, school fences, administration buildings and teachers' offices. Others include little things like chalk and black boards needing replacing, while others started with beautifying the school by planning for a general cleanup and setting up school flower gardens. Looking at bigger infrastructure, plans have been developed for equipment such as lawn mowers, solar panels and transport, generator sets, plus new infrastructure that includes new double classrooms, new teachers' houses etc.

Classrooms are the highest priority (26%), followed by teachers' houses (14%) and toilets & shower and water supply, both with 11%.

The work plans also shows that all the actions are planned to be carried out by the BoM, community members (men, women, and youth) and or P&C, and village contractors themselves.

Local contributions from almost all school communities include local labour, local materials such as timber, sand, rafters etc. and local expertise such as carpentry and plumbing.

This clearly illustrates that the communities are being energised and motivated to participate in the implementation of their own plans. Thus the self-reliance concept is taking effect in the commitments put towards their participation in school management and responsibilities of their school infrastructure.

Program Implementer Observation

DWF Capacity Building

A lot of positive and very encouraging feedback came from the review workshops that indicated increasing participation during and after the first school visit.

The following general observations recorded during review workshops are indicative of ongoing positive outcomes. These include:

- Individual women's confidence levels have been raised or boosted, enabling them to speak freely and participate more willingly amongst men.
- Women are strengthened to go into school communities and face whatever hardship that may come with the job.

- It has given the existing women's representatives a helping hand and is proof to other women who were not that exposed to see for themselves what gender equity was all about, to stand up for their rights and work hard.
- Women as part of BoMF have provided a totally new trend of work that most men may not have experienced all their work lives. Men are therefore beginning to accept the change that has come about and are willingly looking forward to working with their female counterparts.
- It is evident that this new partnership between men and women will contribute towards a certain degree of change in the lives of the men or inspectors involved. They in turn become sensitised and will no doubt apply the principles of gender equity in their work in all areas which will see a tide of gender movement taking place country wide in schools and homes.
- Male gender champions are currently increasing within the BoMF circles, in the offices and filtering down to the community levels.

BoMF Capacity Building

The sequence of learning modules clearly brings out the importance of facilitation, the central role of the community, the need to listen to the whole range of community voices and the application of the 5 Ds strength-based approach.

The information provided through the BoMF workshops is tailored to the specific requirements of the school visits, thus reducing information overload and providing the opportunity for repeated practice in application.

The sessions are increasingly delivered by Education and Community Development Department personnel with support from Project Advisers.

Observations about the attitude and willingness of the community to work with schools as a result of the school visits include:

- The communities felt more involved in the school's planning and development and changed their attitude towards the school.
- Communities felt for the first time that they can co-exist with the school and can benefit from the school in return, eg they can use the school facilities for meetings or other community activities.
- The presence of the BoMF team was taken to mean that the government was, at long last, interested in the school and the community. This presence motivated the community.

Community and BoM Capacity Building:

Reports and stories indicate that the community's ability to work cooperatively with their BoM and with the school has been improved. The process of working within focus groups and using BoMF team members' facilitation skills encourages community participation in discussion and decision making.

These include:

- Recognition that they have to do something tangible for their children's education.
- Willing participation in action planning, including prioritisation of work to be done and self-reliant and immediate implementation.
- Community mobilisation of natural resources, offer of free use of equipment, fund raising.
- Requiring greater accountability from the BoM.
- Acceptance of role of women on the BoM and evidence of appreciation of women's participation.

Conclusion

BEDP trains and funds teams of an education officer and a volunteer woman leader living in each local area to visit all the schools in that part of the province. After training they travel to each community and encourage school communities to recognise and celebrate what they have already achieved, and to realise what they can achieve for themselves using their own skills and resources. The teams have encouraged women, men and youths to participate in the meetings and to take ownership of the school. This strength-based approach has resulted in enthusiastic involvement of people and immediate action to improve school infrastructure. The teams also offer advice on how Boards of Management should operate and the need for Gender Equity. Through working with provincial education departments, BEDP is helping to build the capacity of education officers to manage and monitor school infrastructure.

This paper summarises key quantitative and qualitative data about the extent to which communities are actively participating in, and contributing to, the life of their school.

The quantitative data collected via the School Baseline Surveys reports the position essentially before or at the commencement of BEDP. The qualitative data both reinforces and interprets this, and highlights some of the immediate changes that have occurred as a result of project implementers' initial engagement with local community members and school staff.

Small maintenance grants combined with the communities' resources have brought about great changes – from provision of adequate water and sanitation to building of new classrooms. Anecdotal evidence from the teams indicates that there have been wide ranging changes in attitudes with more women elected to the BoMs and youths taking more responsibility for care of the schools. The data also provides strong initial validation of the approach taken by the project in promoting community participation and the methods used to monitor it.

It is evident that much success and outstanding positive progress can be achieved in communities through the involvement and participation of all community groups (focus groups). When everyone is involved and participates together in discussions and decision making, they feel they own the initiative and have the pride that they are able to do it.

The activity's extensive benefits include increased information sharing and understanding of HIV/AIDS amongst school communities, increased confidence of women to take a role in school boards and increased accountability of School Boards of Management in funds management. The activity has increased transparency in school operations and is clearly very popular amongst school communities.

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