The Power of Information for School Governance: The HakiElimu Experience

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1. Introduction

Good governance in education is about enabling school and local leaders to be more responsive and accountable to the school community. It is also about creating a conducive environment for community members – including pupils, teachers and parents – to engage effectively in understanding and improving the school development process. People feel more confident and willing to participate in the implementation of decisions if they have participated in the decision-making process, and if they have the right to ask questions of those who make the ultimate decisions. Responsive leadership and participatory decision-making are thus two essential pillars of good governance.

A third pillar is access to information. Good decisions need to be well informed. Neither community members nor leaders can govern effectively if they are in the dark. They need information to assess how decisions may affect them, to choose between options and to make adjustments as necessary.

People require different types of information. These include:

- Information about their own school situation
- Information about their own community dynamics
- Information about community decision-making structures and processes, including the election and removal of leaders
- Information about key legal and policy issues that impact upon their situation
- Information about how other people have dealt with similar challenges as theirs

Generally, however, past experience shows that people in authority make decisions about the school with little consultation or accountability to a larger constituency. Access to information, including official policy documents and financial expenditure reports, has often been limited to a small number of people. Community members – and especially those who are poor or otherwise have low status – are often made to feel that they have no right to see the information or ask questions.

The Government is aware of these constraints, and is presently spearheading a number of reforms to make community governance both more democratic and transparent. The local government reforms emphasize power and resources being decentralized to lower levels. The role of the Central Government is now to focus on facilitating and creating an enabling environment for Local Government Authorities

[1] This is a slightly revised version of a working paper prepared for a workshop on 'School Committee Capacity Development' organized by the Tanzania Education Network (TENMET) in 2002.

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(LGAs) to provide services, develop and manage policies, monitor performance and ensure effective flow and use of resources. Making information transparent and widely available is central to this endeavour. For example, the Ministry of Finance now publishes quarterly data on precise amounts of funds made available to local councils for priority sectors in order to facilitate public scrutiny and follow-up. In turn, district authorities are expected to make public quarterly reports on revenues and expenditures.

Developments in the education sector also reflect these reforms. The Primary Education Development Plan 2002-2006 (PEDP) emphasizes community involvement through democratically elected school committees who have the responsibility for planning, implementation and supervision of all school development activities. In this respect the School Committee is recognized as a focal point for the promotion and transformation of education delivery. Consequently, under PEDP significant amount of funds are channelled directly to the school level for both infrastructure and quality learning components.

However, the success of this process requires strong capacity and ability of actors at local levels to promote effective leadership and accountability. It also requires them to be well informed, and have the means to analyze and share information. Responding to this challenge has been one of main aims of HakiElimu's Community Governance Program.

This paper is divided into four parts. Section 1 is the Introduction. Section 2 outlines some of the activities of HakiElimu's Community Governance Program. Section 3 lists several practical challenges to information sharing and communication at the community level. The final section is a brief conclusion.

2. What is HakiElimu doing?

HakiElimu's strategy is to create space for public participation in education governance, at the community, public and national policy making levels. In relation to the first level, HakiElimu presently works in Serengeti and Ukerewe districts (an additional district will be added in 2003). The main aim is to enable community members to understand and influence school decision-making, to foster democratic processes and to strengthen accountability of school management. HakiElimu works with pupils, teachers, parents, school committee members, local authorities and civil society organizations (CSOs), enabling them to use local institutions more effectively to further their own interests. The program has several interconnecting components, four of which are outlined below:

2.1 Conducting a baseline to understand community views

One of the first activities in each district involves conducting a baseline of community views on the state of education and its governance. People on the ground are often best placed to assess the impact of policies and practices. Particular emphasis is placed on learning from people whose voices are normally marginalized, including the poor, pupils and people with disabilities. Respondents describe their local situation, analysing why the problems persist and what can be done to improve them. Since the baseline period for the first two districts coincided with the introduction of

PEDP, many of the discussions focused on key aspects of PEDP as identified by community members. For example, one parent interviewed recently stated forcefully:

> "…. if the government had asked for our opinion on which children to enrol in school, we would have chosen those who are above seven years old first. These young ones you see here (pointing to a group of Standard One children) are too young to walk the long distances from where we live (*vitongoji*) to come to school every day. It is also dangerous with all the wild animals around here. We are forced to escort them every morning and when we are not able to do so, they do not go to school!"
>
> (Parent in Kebanchabancha village, Serengeti District)

In another incidence a teacher showed her concern with the policy of enrolling older children in the non-formal education program known as MEMKWA instead of formal schools:

> "We were told not to enrol these [older children aged above 8 years] and that more instructions and guidelines will come from the Ministry. Parents are consistently asking us when they (children) will start their MEMKWA classes and they are worried with the delay as their children are now going for petty trading and fishing. It frustrates me and I wish I had a chance to tell them."
>
> (A woman teacher at Bulamba Primary School, Ukerewe)

These views indicate that community members have not been consulted in policy development. Similarly, the implications of new policies appear not to have been fully thought through nor are they well understood on the ground.

2.2 Facilitating Access to Information and Space for Communication

HakiElimu facilitates the dissemination and sharing of information at community levels to spur greater understanding and action. Areas covered include:

- *Policy and legal Information.* While the Government has the responsibility of disseminating policy and legal information throughout the country, it is not always able to do so in a timely manner. HakiElimu therefore reproduces and shares copies of PEDP and its key annexes to district and ward level authorities, and increasingly to school committees and head teachers. Information on other education policy aspects, and on government reform processes relevant to education, is also shared. In addition to formal documents HakiElimu distributes public education materials that communicate key policy aspects in simple terms. The HakiElimu 2002 calendar, which communicates one key message from each one of PEDP's four main components, is a case in point.
- *Community concerns about education.* HakiElimu facilitates dialogue in schools and villages to enable community members to discuss issues of interest or concern in relation to education. Recently, in cooperation with district and ward level education officers and school committees, HakiElimu has begun to facilitate forums to debate the relevance of national policies in their local context. Some of the key issues emerging include questions on the quality of teaching, the age of enrolment, the levels, use and monitoring of education funds and how financial accountability could be improved. Practical ideas for good management practice in delivering quality education are often generated in these sessions. In addition, we hold periodic 'competitions' to elicit public views on key issues, such as "What is a

Good School?". Outcomes from such initiatives are channelled to appropriate authorities for action (for instance local governments, MOEC, PO-RALG).

- *Community media*. Sharing information is a major challenge in rural areas where communication facilities are rudimentary. HakiElimu encourages communities to use simple technologies such as notice boards, murals and wall poster magazines to share information about their own work and situation. These are located in public places such as schools, markets and local government buildings. HakiElimu will shortly train and equip (e.g. with stationery, a camera and transport support) community 'journalists' to investigate, document and share both key concerns and success stories in education using these same technologies. The use of community debate through popular theatre (for example the popular rap singers *Wagosi wa Kaya* with their releases such *Walimu* and *Ndiyo Mzee*) is also encouraged.

2.3 Enhancing local networking and learning

HakiElimu intends to promote learning and networking between the districts involved in the Community Governance Program. This will include facilitating schools and communities to establish closer networking and cooperation among stakeholders on common challenges, good practices and experiences of how to overcome persistent obstacles. The exchange will involve both government education leaders as well as members of school committees, parents, teachers and pupils. Particular support will be provided to these constituencies to form or strengthen their own associations and clubs. Potential activities include having a small group from one community visit a school with especially effective school management, or to have a person with innovative ideas visit several communities. These visits may also lead to regular communication and shared learning between the communities. Modalities of exchange visits and sharing learning/lessons with other stakeholders are being developed.

2.4 Documenting and sharing lessons nationwide

National policies often exert enormous impact at the community level, but they are usually made without adequate information about the realities on the ground. Information flows are all too often top-down, and community members lack the mechanisms to be heard by policymakers. HakiElimu will work to bridge this gap in two main ways: by creating opportunities for ordinary people and local organizations to access decision makers and decision making processes, and by documenting and widely disseminating lessons learned to the Government, CSOs and donors. Particular emphasis will be placed on channelling information to the Basic Education Development Committee (BEDC) Process and to members of the Tanzania education Network (TEN/MET).

HakiElimu's district based community facilitators and/or a key local CSO partner will play a critical role in this work. They will help identify local groups that have concerns and ideas they wish to communicate to authorities. They will also systematically record observations and lessons in their localities, and with the help of a professional writer compile these in a creative and accessible format for nationwide dissemination. The media will be also actively involved in the dissemination process.

3. Challenges

Enabling communities to access critical information and to channel their own information to authorities poses several practical challenges. Some of these include:

3.1 *High communication costs.* Reproduction facilities such as photocopying and stationeries are very expensive, and in some cases completely unavailable. In Nansio, Ukerewe, for example, it costs Tshs 200/= to photocopy one page! Telephone services are limited to urban areas only (district headquarters) and found only among government offices and business people.

3.2 *Poor documentation.* The consistency and quality of record keeping and other forms of documentation are often poor at the community level, due to the lack of materials and limited experience. Some school committees, for example, do not keep a record or minutes of issues discussed. Most school notice boards are for recording pupils' daily attendance only and no other information is provided for public review. Basic display and storage facilities, such as notice boards and cupboards, are also lacking in many areas. Another problem is the lack of ownership among those who are charged with keeping records. They provide information to their superiors without using it themselves. These factors combine to hamper public access to key information.

3.3 *Poor quality of information materials.* Communities often do not see the value of the information materials produced by the Government or CSOs. In many cases brochures, fliers and guidebooks use inaccessible language and unattractive, sometimes boring formats. The information is often of limited practical relevance, tending to 'preach' obvious information instead of responding to the questions that communities care about. For example, the PEDP information materials produced by the Government were assessed by community members as having failed to clarify issues that were of greatest concern to them.

3.4 *Poor government distribution systems.* The limited information available at district and community level is often 'hoarded'. It is common to find pamphlets and reports with information needed for implementation piled on shelves while officials complain that they do not have any information! Due to transport difficulties and poor management, information materials meant for communities often do not get beyond district headquarters. As a case in point, materials distributed by both the Government and HakiElimu on PEDP, and by the Vice President's Office/Hakikazi Catalyst on the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), have been observed to be lying in district offices. Even when materials are distributed, lack of clarity about their use can be a problem. The following account is illustrative:

> "… we have just received these [PEDP IEC] materials from the Ward Executive Officer, but we do not know what they are to be used for…" (A teacher at Busagami Primary School).

Another problem is that available materials are often not used, in part because there appears to be limited institutional motivation to uncover, learn and share new information.

3.5 *Lack of space for communities to air their concerns.* There is very limited opportunity for ordinary people to air their concerns and have them taken seriously. Even public meetings, such as those of the village council or school committee, are too often used by leaders to issue instructions and advice from above. In such meetings participants are provided little room to give their

analytical views or other feedback. Many representatives in such institutions are unresponsive or not accountable to their constituencies. For example, echoing the sentiment of others, one parent in Busagami Village, Ukerewe district recently remarked:

> "…our representatives in the school committee have never told us what they discuss in the meetings. We are only told and ordered to contribute money or to work during construction. I like to contribute to the school but also want to know why they set the amount and ask us to contribute by force…" (A parent in Busagami Village)

3.6 *Resistance to transparency and fear of being exposed.* Accessing information from government departments can be difficult due to management bureaucracy and an institutional culture that is not used to being open to the public. In some cases, high government officials are not keen to allow space for criticism, in part out of fear of being exposed. A typical evasive response is to be told " *Mimi siyo msemaji wa idara*" or *"I am not the spokesperson for the department*". Many government officials are also uncertain of how to deal with CSOs that play an advocacy role.

4. Conclusion

As the old adage goes, information is power. People at the community level cannot assess their situation and improve education if they do not have critical information and the opportunity to debate it. Decision makers cannot make sound policies if their work is not continually informed and critiqued by perspectives and lessons from the ground.

This is why information is essential for democratic governance in education, and why HakiElimu seeks to facilitate its access and communication. We seek to stimulate and support formally organized CSOs and informal associations to use information to democratize and transform schools. Working together, we hope to show that access to information about education and its wide communication is just as important as classroom construction, teacher training, book provision and other widely known components of education delivery.

Perhaps a day will come when every child in school and every parent will have the opportunity to know the school budget and ask questions about it, when the school committee will be seen as a forum for ordinary people to openly debate issues and solve problems, and when District Education Officers will see two-way communication with schools as central to their job description. Perhaps a day will also come when policymakers will not dare to make national decisions without adequately consulting with people at community level, and when they will all welcome people who bring them truthful information even when it is highly critical. This will be a day when the citizens of Tanzania will have the power to transform their schools to provide quality education for all.

HakiElimu

HakiElimu works to realize equity, quality, human rights and democracy in education by facilitating communities to transform schools and influence policy making, stimulating imaginative public dialogue and organizing for change, conducting critical research, policy analysis and advocacy and collaborating with partners to advance common interests and social justice.

The Working Paper Series

HakiElimu has established the Working Paper Series (WPS) in order to reproduce meaningful analyses in an accessible format. The Series is expected to contribute to public debate on education and democracy issues.

WPS includes reports and papers written by staff and members of HakiElimu, along with partner individuals and organizations. Some have been written specifically for the series, whereas others are reproductions of previous work. Most of the papers are works in progress and not meant to be definitive.

The views expressed herein are of the author(s), and do not necessarily represent those of HakiElimu or any other organization.

Our aim is to publish short, concise papers of about seven to ten pages. However, papers of up to twenty pages in length will also be considered. Submissions are highly welcome. They should be provided to us in hard print copy and in electronic format and addressed below:

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