

Strengthening Community Participation in the Azeri School Governance: Lessons Learned from Some Project Experiences

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Participatory approaches that involve local communities in their own development have gained substantial support among international donor organizations over the past quarter-century.

To ensure “good governance” and participation of citizens in the development process, the main focus of the development process in the global context has been primarily on civil society organizations (CSOs) such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

An assessment of civil society in Azerbaijan indicated that traditional civil society actors such as CSOs/NGOs have been operating without a “mobilized citizenry behind them”, and which “reveal the potential for synergistic interplays between mobilized communities and formal civil society entities” (USAID, 2005).

Why is the community such a significant concept? Many definitions of community are often related to connotations of good life, quality of life. Community planners believe that the community contributes more to the quality of life than many other areas. But more important than promoting the potential of the community as a focus for improving life quality is the potential for meaningful change and improvement that exists at the community level (Lyon, 1987).

Thus, the idea of community has become an inspiration for reform and transformation of society and the efforts of civil society to make the community one of the civil society actors have relevance to Azerbaijan situation.

Community Targeting in Azerbaijani Context

In Azerbaijan, the community has become a main target in the development agenda during the last ten to fifteen years. This process began in Azerbaijan with the shift in focus by the international aid community from short-term relief to long-term development. “This is critically important, as no country will develop through external support alone; a proactive role by the community in the development and management of resources is essential” (Save the Children, 2000).

Since the 1990s, a number of reform projects in Azerbaijan targeting communities have been implemented. From 1996, UNICEF, within the framework of the Early Childhood Care

and Development Project, has initiated the establishment of the Child Development Centers (CDC) in the camps for the internally displaced people (IDP) for the purpose of ensuring early childhood education, and the development and care opportunities for the children most affected by the war in Azerbaijan and living in extremely difficult conditions (the IDP children). Another big initiative of UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Education is establishing a national parent-teacher association aimed at creating school-community partnership for quality education.

The Save the Children implemented a project funded by the USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Displaced Children's and Orphan's Fund with the goal of promoting social integration and community capacity to care for marginalized children in Azerbaijan by mobilizing the target communities in some districts where families have limited resources at their disposal since existing policies and community-based support mechanisms are viewed with suspicion. This approach also points to the overarching issue of helping communities create more appropriate care for the needs of at-risk children in order to prevent their being committed to institutions and to enhance positive coping mechanisms that promote social integration and community capacity to care for vulnerable children in Azerbaijan.

An initiative of the Open Society Institute (OSI) has been working towards the social inclusion of children with disabilities by promoting the provision of comprehensive, quality community-based services as an alternative to institutionalization. OSI envisions a society in which children with disabilities live as equal citizens, with full respect for their human rights. They and their families must have real choices regarding where and with whom to live and get education, choices in their daily lives, and real opportunities to be independent and to actively participate in their communities. Another program developed by the OSI was the Step by

Step Early Childhood Education which actively engaged families and community involvement into education. This program was based on the idea that families were the primary educators of their children.

USAID-funded programs (Central Asia Community Development Program, Azerbaijan Humanitarian Assistance Program, Social Investment Initiatives Program, Civil Society Building Assistance Project) that are managed by its umbrella international NGOs and local sub-contractors aim to decrease dependence on relief aid by creating self-reliance among the communities through their direct involvement in planning, implementation, and management of resources.

The School Grant Component within the second phase of the Education Sector Development Project of the World Bank has provided funding in three pilot districts for school projects designed and implemented by the school community (consisting of the school administrators, teachers, students, parents-teachers association (PTA) members, representatives of the local authorities and businesses, and local community leaders). Within that reform phase pilot schools received the full authority to develop and manage school budgets.

The formation and development of socially-active schools (SAS) is being considered by Eurasia Foundation as one of the significant directions of the process of improving the education system. A number of projects aimed at formation and development of SAS have been implemented in Azerbaijan during the last several years. The given model envisages availability of nine main components of SAS related with targeting and involvement of the community such as community-related curriculum, "everyone is a teacher/ a learner," community use, involvement of citizens, interagency co-operation, community issues, collegiality, facility adaptation, and sense of community.

In spite of differences in terms of funding scale, implementing and funding agencies, target needs (marginalized children, children with

special needs, ECD [Early Childhood Development] services, local infrastructural needs, etc.), all those projects were primarily focused on community involvement and participation.

Community participatory projects in Azerbaijan were mostly unsustainable, rarely focused on community-school connections, implemented on individual project-basis and have not given a valuable feedback at the policy level.

In our opinion, a “school budget formulae” developed and piloted by the WB and the Ministry of Education within the education sector reform project may be identified as an attempt to reform school budget management without reforming school governance.

We believe that school reform should start with reform of school governance and community involvement. Our belief on democratic school governance became the reason for a small project on this issue.

Project experience and problem statement

Experts, researchers, school officials, and parents all confirm that students perform at a higher educational level when there is an evidence of parent involvement in schools. Involvement of the parents/community and youth in the decision-making process also gives them a sense of ownership.

Through ownership and empowerment, school communities develop the ability to act, and ultimately, to influence and make changes. The current national school governance system described in the education laws has only the school principal as the main decision-maker and school pedagogical councils mostly deal with everyday teaching process, not overall school problems, and without the involvement of the families and community.

Community participation approach was selected to try to solve the problem of parents’ informal payments in schools. Parents making informal payments in schools have become widespread practice within the national pub-

lic education system during the last decade. The public in general see informal payments as among the biggest social problems of the national public education system that block the way to good school governance, quality education and democracy.

Project implementers have assumed that the lack of community participation in the school governance is among the main reasons for corruption in schools. These observations indicate that:

- There are no good school governance mechanisms at practice and policy levels
- Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) are mostly formal entities not having a decision-making power at school level
- Community, families and students are not involved in the solution of school problems and do not participate in the school governance.

The Center for Innovations in Education (CIE) decided to design and implement a project that would encourage the school and the community around it to work out and pilot a Transparent and Accountable School model, and develop policy recommendations to the state agencies such as the Ministry of Education and the State Commission on Anti-Corruption for further analysis and institutionalization.

Achieving good governance in schools, through partnership with PTAs and school management councils, student participation and/or other forms of citizen engagement, is supposed to be a very effective foundation for wider work on improving governance and democratic decision-making. It may not be immediately obvious, but addressing the alienation between schools and families/community can be an essential means of deepening democracy in education.

We believe that this approach is in compliance with the human rights concept and the main human rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms..., without distinction of any kind, such as ... other opinion...” (Article 2), and that “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State” (Article 16), why could family not have a right and freedom to express its opinion on the education of their children? If “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression...” (Article 19) why should community members not have a right to express their opinion about schools located in their community?

The provision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that “Everyone has the right to peaceful assembly and association” (Article 20) means that the community members have the right to establish an association that promotes societal welfare through lawful activities such as participating in the decision-making process on school-related problems. Following the UDHR provision that “In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law” there should not be limitations for community participation in a school governance. Such a community participation in school governance can be also considered as a kind of protection and assistance to the families in a community around the school in accordance with Article 10 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which confirms that the “widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family... particularly for its establishment and while it is responsible for the care and education of dependent children.”

A specific difficulty for the development and implementation of the community participatory school governance model is the fact that the national education law does not clearly identify the role of families and community in school functioning and does not give decision-making power to the community in school life.

Parents’ and community’s rights in education are reflected neither in existing Education Law nor in the draft Education Bill being discussed in the Parliament. The Education Law declares that schools have to have a democratic governance system (Article 31), but legal mechanisms on how to establish this system are not defined. There is also contradiction in the law. For instance, while schools have a right to establish governance and self-governance bodies, the highest governing body is the so-called pedagogical council comprising of the school administrators and teachers only. The relations between the pedagogical council and other governance bodies are not defined. In Article 34 of the law about rights of the education process participants, parents are mainly considered as school clients and not real stakeholders. They have a right to be informed by the school about the education of their children instead of being participants in the education process; they have a right to participate in the school governance but without clear mechanisms on how to implement this right; parents’ right to choose a school is merely declared; and finally the rights of parents of children with disabilities are not mentioned at all.

These gaps in the law constituted the context of the CIE agreement with the Ministry of Education allowing the piloting of the new school governance model with community participation.

Democratic school governance project

CIE started the project called “Towards Transparency and Accountability in Azeri Schools” in 2006 and funded by the Democracy Small Grant Commission of the United States Embassy.

This project aimed to develop a more democratic school governance model with active community involvement into decision-making process on school-related issues including school finances.

The project staff expected that a comparison of all models (including those of the WB and Eurasia) especially the outcomes of their implementation in terms of school practices could give a valuable input to the education policy agenda and might promote further institutionalization of the community participatory school governance model.

The project had the following specific objectives:

1. To involve the community in school governance and school development;
2. To create a transparent system of school finances through community participation and monitoring.

The main project components were the following:

1. School Governance
 - School-community council selection
 - School council's capacity building
2. School-Community Actions
 - School Actions design based on all school discussion on the best ideas for actions
 - School Actions implementation.

The project activities were implemented in three schools in Baku, Sumgayit and Lankaran cities. The selection of the pilot schools was not accidental. The project schools and CIE have had long-term partnership relations through the implementation of innovative teaching approaches; participation in the various CIE projects related with the improvement of quality and raising civic issues in education, and school's staff professional development. All three schools have parent-teachers associations (PTAs) that were not registered as legal entities [and were established according to the decision of school's pedagogical council] and were thus well-prepared to implement the specific projected activities.

The selected schools also have a well-established reputation within the education system which would assist in promoting the

project goals and ideas at the level of education policy.

The **target group** of the project was represented by the selected school communities - school youth, teachers, administrators and PTA members, representatives of the local authorities and businesses, and local community leaders.

The project was implemented for twelve months starting October 2006.

A new legally and financially grounded model of transparent decision-making process in school was developed, with details for implementation prescribed by legal and finance consultants. Taking into account the not-so successful experience of the PTAs in country, the school governance model of the project focused on school councils with the participation of all the educational stakeholders in the community. The most active school PTA members were expected to take a part in those councils.

The new school governance model was tested in each of three pilot schools.

The initial stage of project implementation indicated a huge enthusiasm among the members of the school community to the idea of participatory governance. This enthusiasm was reflected in the results of a survey conducted among the members of the school community. School Councils were elected in each school and were able to gain the cooperation of the schools' PTAs and Student Parliaments. According to the developed criteria, school councils (with a maximum of nine members) should be comprised of teachers, members of PTAs, other community members, representatives of local education department, local municipalities, local businesses and school youth. The school director is deliberately not invited to become a school council member but given an advisory role at the council. School councils were elected with the participation of all members of the school community.

A sample School Board Charter was developed and circulated to the school councils. The sample charter includes the procedures for establishment and operation of school councils;

criteria for school council membership; duties and responsibilities of school councils; and internal regulations for school council's operations. A school fund model, developed with the assistance of a finance consultant, provides the procedures for fund management. School council members actively participated in all these activities since the beginning of the project.

Further professional development of members of the school councils was recognized as necessary and constituted an important direction to take.

Invited experts, professionally dealing with school governance and finance issues, gave presentations to the project's school councils and representatives of the school PTAs. Experts from CIE, Transparency Azerbaijan, State Commission on Anti-Corruption and Economic Research Center gave presentations on the foundations and principles of transparent, accountable and community participatory school governance. The experts drew attention to the necessity of collaboration of all the stakeholders and clients in education to work towards more democratic and transparent school governance. CIE provided training for school council members and representatives of the school PTAs on various school governance models, decentralization, community participation, school governance improvement practices, budget literacy, transparent school budget, and procedures that promote transparency in schools.

A special resource package for school councils and PTAs was prepared and disseminated. The resource package included carefully selected materials on ethics and corruption in education presented at the international workshop held by the CIE in partnership with Institute for Educational Planning/UNESCO, results of the national researches on private tutoring and informal payments in Azerbaijani schools, selected case studies on good school governance and budgeting presented by the members of the international networks of CIE, and other relevant materials such as local mass media materials. Resource packages were prepared

by CIE experts to educate school councils and PTAs and were distributed to the school council members and project school libraries to make them available to all readers interested in knowing the foundations of good governance in education.

Quarterly school council reports were provided to the school and stakeholders on the results of the quarterly governance decisions and spending. All the legal and financial procedures and regulations were reflected in the recommendations on revision of the pilot school charters to provide involvement of more stakeholders in the decision-making process, and to make school governance legally more transparent and accountable towards direct beneficiaries-students, and parents and community members.

The election of school councils and their operation set the stage for the implementation of joint actions directed at school improvement. These actions were expected to be good exercise for school councils, and the best way to implement a pilot governance model.

The ideas for school action plans were received through school referendum. The most important features of school action plans was not their content (renovation of school roof, creating a school sports yard, establishing students' self-governance, creating students' discussion club, etc.), but the transparency in making managerial decisions and the accountability to the stakeholders in both designing and implementation of the action plans.

Based on the information received during the training session and on the framework provided by the projects' experts, the school councils developed the school action plans. A special school action fund was established and was managed by the school council in each pilot school.

From the perspective of CIE, the design and implementation of the school action plans should depend on the nature and needs of the schools. For these action plans to become effective, they should be developed and implemented

by the whole school community. CIE sees better understanding and support for the implementation of the school action plans to occur when representatives of students and PTAs together with other stakeholders in preparing the plans are involved.

The varying concepts of community were used frequently in the discussions between the project staff and school councils on the problems and in project proposals to address them.

The project implementation made necessary the analysis of the community concept and the analysis of the potential for creating viable and meaningful community in Azeri schools.

The project implementation experience provided some lessons learned.

Legal Constraints

The fact that school councils did not have legal power to act on school matters was one of the main obstacles towards creating viable school-community connections. Both school councils and school principals knew that legally the latter has all the authority to act on school matters, that the former did not have. This legal constraint reflected the whole experience and mood of the school councils. School councils' actions depended on the school principals' opinion, and very often the latter's views concluded all debates among school council members. This hierarchical situation reflects the hierarchy existing in the huge public education system. The school itself has limited authority on many issues in a highly centralized national public education system.

Another factor that could legally prevent community involvement was the idea of creating a School Fund Charter, which was recommended by a legal consultant, rather than a new School Charter. A new School Charter would not be legally feasible without the necessary national legislative framework. But a School Fund Charter was a feasible model that could be implemented and sustained during the proj-

ect period. The School Fund Charter proposal was submitted to, and accepted by, the School Boards, but was never implemented.

The project sensitized the project staff on national and international legal contexts. The project staff studied education laws of other countries such as Ukraine, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Great Britain, and made a comparative analysis. Based on this analysis and project findings, recommendations related to the rights and responsibilities of schools and education process participants were made for draft bill on Education Law which was under discussion at the National Parliament. The recommendations were also presented at the public hearings on the draft bill on Education Law.

If a new Education Law is adopted incorporating the CIE's recommendations, the new school governance model (with some improvements if necessary) may be replicated by other schools.

Lack of community commitment

School Boards were not so active and to some extent were dependent on project staff recommendations and instructions. Being a member of school council meant a commitment to work for common and shared goal. The enthusiasm at the initial stages significantly decreased toward the later stages of project implementation when it was time, for instance, to adapt sample School Charter for a particular school, or to develop a School-Community Fund as a public association established to support the school. In the process of project implementation, the school council members and project staff realized that being a school council member was almost a full time job and required commitment. The community did not have well-developed administrative resources and human capacity necessary to participate in school governance or to create an association to support it. Another trend was the lack of community trust on the school. Highly bureaucratic schools with widespread corrup-

tion and authoritarian style of governance have lost credibility among community members. People could not provide the needed commitment if they did not trust the institution that should be implementing the project.

School in Azeri context

At present, schools are primarily focused on their educational function, while neglecting the community and families of the students. Azeri schools do not allow the parents to come to school during school days and limit their involvement to very few parents' conferences a year. The agenda of the parents' conferences were also mainly focused on the academic achievements of the children.

Azeri schools operate to prepare students for admission to higher education institutions, and are rated based on the number of their students going to higher education. The school has become a "collection" of professionals serving the "student-clients," rather than an extension of the community. For parents in the local community, the school is a "state institution run by professionals, in the service of the interests of the children." (C. Mertz and G.C. Furman, 1997)

Since there is no established tradition of local community control over the school it is extremely difficult to create it with one or several projects. And since there is no age-old tradition of community ownership over the school it is impossible to suddenly create it.

Community in Azeri context: can it act for a public good?

In the process of project implementation, we realized that the community was not homogenous, and was actually a very complex social construct. Since the focus of our project was creating school-community partnership it was necessary to analyze the community in Azeri context.

The Azeri context provides three different experiences of communal life.

Legally, municipalities are elected bodies in local communities with defined territorial boundaries. The empowering effect of participation in local government is expected to increase the citizen's competence to judge the performance of its representatives.

The traditional community in Azerbaijan has virtually disappeared except as a **moral community**. The pressure of collectivism during the Soviet period and the adoption of laws on municipalities during independence did not get rid of *mahallah*, a traditional community in Azerbaijan. But compared with the countries of Central Asia, *mahallah* in Azerbaijan has basically lost its meaning as moral community and became more of a neighborhood, a **community of locality**. We prefer to consider the current *mahallah* in Azerbaijan as an informal community in name rather than a real social construct.

Considering the community in terms of social networks, we suppose that in Azeri context the only living community is a **community of extended kinship relations**, an important factor in both formal and informal lives of Azeris. Families both single and extended have always been a powerful center in the lives of the Azeris that keep a hidden identity that governments attempted to erase. They are a tool to preserve individuality in the midst of the collectivity of people.

The community of extended kinship relations is a very specific social construct which usually acts not with the whole community but aloof from it. Governments can be replaced, powers can be shifted, ideologies can be changed, but individuality should survive, and support to that individual survival is the ultimate goal of the kinship community.

This brief analysis indicates that perhaps there is no community around the school that is a valuable and active social network, whose members share common goals and values and

are committed to public good. "Lacking shared values, the local community lacks a coherent voice to influence the school." (Mertz, Furman, 1997)

Addressing the alienation between schools and parents is an essential means of deepening democracy in education. The lessons learned from this project indicate a potential for the creation of viable and meaningful school-community connections, and might be a ground for further development attempts.

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