

Service Oversight and Management Committees: Parent Teacher Councils and Parent Teacher Associations in Kosovo

Between the end of World War II and the break-up of the former Soviet Union, Kosovo was an autonomous province within the former Yugoslavia. In 1989 Slobodan Milosevic, then President of Serbia, itself part of Yugoslavia, unilaterally revoked that position making Kosovo an integral part of Serbia, directly governed by the authorities in Belgrade. This led to ten years of oppressive rule and the suspension of the civil rights of the majority Albanian population, which culminated in the 1999 conflict. The war claimed 12,000 victims, 120,000 homes were burned, and over a million citizens forcibly deported.

From 1999, Kosovo was administered by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). In 2001 Kosovan authorities were established as the Provisional Institutions of Self Government and they took increasing responsibility for many areas of Government. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) was formed with overall responsibility for the formulation and implementation of education policies. Below MEST, 7 Regional Education Offices and 30 Municipal Education Directorates were established as decentralized education units.

In February 2008, Kosovo declared itself independent, although it remains under international supervision. It is one of the poorest regions in Europe, with around 45% of its people living in poverty, and 15% thought to be extremely poor¹.

1.1 Increased Accountability and Voice in the Education Sector in Kosovo

When clients are able to collectively voice their concerns and channel their recommendations to service providers and to local government, they are in a stronger position to demand accountability than through individual action. Local and municipal level service committees such as parent-teacher councils and associations, provide a forum for greater participation, voice and oversight of service providers.

Kosovo in 2001 presented a number of opportunities and challenges to improving accountability and voice in the education sector. Some key factors included:

- **The effects of conflict:** The war in Kosovo impacted the education system in a number of ways. Approximately 70% of school buildings were severely or moderately damaged in the fighting and materials, including furniture, books etc. were destroyed. Population movements also affected schools, with some losing students whilst others had to deal with influx of new people².

¹ DFID Kosovo, 2008, World Bank, Kosovo Poverty Assessment, 2007

² UNICEF Child Friendly Schools Initiative Evaluation Report, 2004

- **Parallel Education systems:** When Kosovar Albanians were marginalized by the formal education system in 1991, they responded by establishing a network of underground schools supported by local communities. By 1999 almost all Albanian Kosovar students were being educated in this parallel school system, which were run out of private homes and paid for from a well-organized system of private contributions from parents and community members. Since the end of the conflict Kosovar-Albanian students have re-entered the formal education system, with a resultant reduction in the direct involvement of parents and communities in the education sector³.

- **The 'old system':** Despite the disruptions of the conflict, the school level administrative and organisational culture established during the socialist period has remained largely intact in the formal education sector. Schools continue to be governed by a school board, a body composed of a director and three individuals appointed by the director. These structures are highly politicized. For example, the appointment of school directors is strongly influenced by party politics; it is a position that is often seen as the first rung on the ladder of a political career. Many parents have complained that political and/or ethnic considerations take precedence over educational ones in the selection of directors⁴. This has resulted in a general lack of trust between education stakeholders - parents, teachers, education authorities and civil society.

- **Legislative Framework:** In 2001, MEST developed a new curriculum framework, aimed at promoting a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. The framework aimed to foster '*consultation, school autonomy and accountability*' and ensure that '*school principals and teachers are accountable for the quality education of their pupils to pupils, parents and the community*'⁵. In order to ensure stakeholder engagement, Parent Council and Teacher Councils are required by law in every school. However, these have been poorly conceptualised, and have generally lacked any real independence or genuine engagement in school issues. Today, they are largely inactive, lacking the skills and experience to engage and represent their constituencies.

- **Poor conception of Civil Society:** Civil society and volunteerism are still largely foreign concepts. Many parents involved in Parent Teacher Councils and Associations have reported scepticism from fellow parents. As one parent commented "*other parents don't understand the concept of 'volunteer' and think that we must be receiving some money for our work*"⁶.

- **School enrolment rates and quality of education:** A long history of formal education has resulted in high levels of literacy and enrolment rates among Albanian and Serb communities, around 98 per cent and 99 per cent respectively. However, Children from non-Serb minority communities⁷ have much less chance to be, or remain, in school. From these communities, only 77 per cent

³ CRS, *Creating Partnerships, Educating Children*, 2006

⁴ CRS Parent School Partnership Program case study, 2006

⁵ New Kosovo Curriculum Framework, 2001

⁶ CRS Parent School Partnership Program Case Study, 2006

⁷ Principally Roma, Ashkalia, Egyptian, Turkish and Bosniak

of children in the age group 6 to 14 are enrolled in school. For girls this percentage is only 69 per cent⁸.

- **Lack of information:** There has been a lack of an effective education information system. This has resulted in the inability of authorities to monitor the quality of education and identify gaps in enrolment and attendance. This problem is particularly strong for girls and minorities.

1.2 The Parent-School Partnership Program

The Parent-School Partnership Program (PSP) was a civil society development initiative, operated by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and funded by UNICEF (through the Child Friendly Schools Initiative). It sought to promote civic engagement in education through the creation of **Parent Teacher Councils (PTC)** in primary schools throughout Kosovo. The intended results were greater community participation in the education sector, leading to the development of **accountable local, municipal and national level education institutions.**

Schools were selected for participation in the PSP program based on initial interviews by CRS staff with the school director and relevant school officials, aimed at identifying schools where the leadership would be supportive. Once a school was identified, a series of meetings were held with community members to explain the program and mobilize interested people. Volunteers were then sought to make up the PTC in each school. PTCs were made up of 9 parents (one with a child in each grade) and 9 teachers (one from each primary school grade). Two student representatives were also elected, one boy and one girl from the 9th grade⁹. At least 30% of participants were required to be women.

PTCs were tasked with involving parents and communities in planning and management of school activities, **including identifying community needs for education as well as priority areas for school improvements.** In the initial phase of the program, CRS program staff actively participated in, including leading, council meetings, progressively handing over responsibilities to the PTC members themselves. This process allowed CRS program staff and PTC members to jointly identify capacity needs, and design a suitable training package. The training schedule was designed to **lead and complement the maturation process of the councils,** moving from basic organisational skills at the start, to higher-level strategic training, on topics such as advocacy, towards the end.

CRS actively tried to foster **networking and collaboration among the PTCs.** This took a couple of different forms. Joint trainings and seminars were held for PTCs from the same or nearby communities. CRS also hosted **regional and national PTC conferences** with the explicit aim of identifying common experiences and sharing techniques, strategies and lessons learned. It was from these networking meetings that the PTCs began to form themselves into regional **Parent Teacher Associations (PTA)** with the aim of translating their local experiences up in the education system.

⁸ World bank, Kosovo Brief, 2008

⁹ Student representatives do not have voting rights, but are consulted on all decisions.

These municipal level PTAs act as umbrella groups providing **support to multiple school level PTCs** that fall within its jurisdiction. A PTA comprises at least one member from each PTC in the area. Support to individual PTCs consists of **training for members** in strategic planning and organizational development, as well as fundraising for school reconstruction projects, and assistance with conflict resolution in schools and communities with mixed Serb and Albanian populations. Municipal PTAs also serve a **watchdog role**, representing individual PTCs before municipal authorities and advocating for individual school needs.

From 2003 onward, CRS moved away from the direct creation of PTCs and instead focused increasingly on the support and capacity building of these regional associations. CRS program staff have provided support and advise to PTAs, including encouraging and helping them to them to **register as official non-governmental organizations (NGO)**.

1.3 Results and Impact

Linkages have been formed between local, municipal and national level education institutions and PTAs. The registration of PTAs as NGOs has played an important part in building these links. Legal recognition has formalised their status as official organizations as opposed to ad hoc collections of interested individuals. This in turn as granted them access to MEST and individual school administrators that they were not previously able to achieve, as education institutions are obliged to consult with civil society groups. As a result of these links, the role of PTAs have been recognized by education institutions. For example, PTAs in Lypjan and Ferizaj have been invited to formally participate in the selection process for new school principals in their municipalities. This is a significant accomplishment given parents' historical exclusion from government decisions.

"There is a positive relationship with the Ministry because they realise the value of the PTA in getting real information from the ground. The PTAs often have better information on the school than the Ministry. At first, the MEST looked at us as rivals; they thought the PTC was a rival to their Parent Council. Not now; now they see the benefit of the PTC"

Member of municipal PTA

The project has been aided by the development of institutional linkages between government and PTAs. During the process of transferring power to a MEST in 2001, the PVP lobbied for the development of a division within MEST that would be responsible for coordinating stakeholder engagement in education policy development, and ensuring civil society participation. As a result, the Division of Community Involvement in Education was established, and CRS invited to train members of the two-person unit in community engagement and citizen participation.

A key challenge has been over coming scepticism within MEST that PTAs and PTCs might duplicate the work of government sanctioned School Boards and the Parent Councils. However, as linkages developed, municipal education authorities and MEST began to appreciate the benefits of working with PTAs and PTCs. For example, PTAs and PTCs have acted as an important mechanism for improving communication and gathering information at the local level, and have advocated for the rights of marginalized communities and issues. This has allowed them to be more responsive to the needs of communities.

Box: PTAs and MEST interacting to Addressing Drop-Out Rates in Girls

PTAs have been successful in lobbying MEST to adopt an action plan to address the issue of drop out rates amongst girls. MEST were initially reluctant to acknowledge the problem, partly due to a lack of reliable information. However, following advocacy from PTAs, MEST agreed to join a working group to investigate further. This allowed the scale of the problem to be identified, and an action plan was jointly devised. As a result, over 300 children have been re-enrolled in the last two years, and dropout rates have been reduced.

MEST have recognised the importance of PTCs as a mechanism for ensuring community involvement in education. Funding has now been allocated from the government to support the establishment and training of new PTCs throughout Kosovo. After CRS initially set up 25 PTCs, with support of MEST, over 100 are now operating.

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