

Reversing corrupt local government leadership and creating new community leadership –

VSO's Early Childhood Education Project in Laikipia and Isiolo, Kenya

Overview of the Project and its implications

This article describes a project undertaken by the UK NGO Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in two Counties of Kenya (Laikipia and Isiolo) which are both arid and semi arid areas in the north of Kenya during 2018 and 2019.

The project is of interest because it shows how a largely passive population in these two counties was energised by a series of social accountability initiatives so that new leadership evolved amongst the citizens, and was able to change the behaviour of the existing formal local government leadership in respect of Early Childhood Education. The existing leadership was largely corrupt, interested in getting re-elected, and in accruing income for themselves from the county and national budget. Corruption is widespread in County administration in Kenya, although there are some counties (e.g. Makueni and Nyandarua) which have clean audits.

What was and is remarkable about this project (and other comparable projects in Kenya) is that it takes place in a constitutional and legal environment which is supportive of citizen's participation. Kenya, since 2013, has had a constitution which gives all citizens the right to be involved in the planning and budgeting processes of the county (the first level of local government beneath the State, numbering 64 different counties), and which has established in law a variety of consultative processes between citizens and the state which would seem to be helpful and hopeful for participatory democracy. As we will see, however, the existence of supportive mechanisms does not mean they will be used, if those in charge of delivering the entitlements are not enthusiastic about their implementation.

How County government officials "game" the system

Higher officials "game" the participatory democracy system, following the letter, but not the spirit of the law.

One example, which made the newspapers, was the Governor of Machakos County, who, in 2018, took many of his senior officials and businessmen to Dubai to look for possible investment in his county. While there he circulated a notice amongst the officials of a public consultation about Machakos's plans. He held the meeting, but only with the invited officials, and got the approval he needed. He had thus ticked the box – public meeting held, constitution followed, but there was no vestige of popular participation.

The project deals with the desire of the citizens in Laikipia and Isiolo for pre-primary schooling, referred hereafter as Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE). As we will note, the policy context in Kenya supports ECDE, seeing it as a pillar supporting Kenya's Vision 2030 to turn the country into a globally competitive and prosperous nation supported by children who will be able to be ready to take advantage of primary school when they reach enrolment age. ECDE was decided in the new 2013 Constitution to be a devolved function of government, and to be under the control and resources of the County.

Its situation was, however, less clear than this suggests: its budget comes from the County, but there has yet to be a clear provision in the Constitution that assigns the

responsibility for pre-primary education to County governments. Many government departments (Primary Education, Health and Nutrition, County Education Board, County Administration, Kenya National Union of Teachers) dispute and confuse the Early Childhood Education function, with the result in 2018 that not much was happening officially with ECDE, and what was happening was largely dependent on parents, care-givers, community members and faith based organisations.

ECDE was not seen by local government as an attractive or important sector. Not only did the County not give it much attention or resources, but it became evident that the resources which it was due by the constitution could be ignored or transferred to some other budget head which was considered more important and more profitable.

This project helped citizens realise the importance of early childhood education, helped citizens understand that it was entitled to a variety of resources, and helped citizens understand that these entitlements were not only not being provided, but were being taken for other fields. This case study shows how this was undertaken.

Once VSO intervened with its use of social accountability research, and then tools and training, citizens became much more aware of the specific gaps in the entitlements for ECDE, and what they could do to turn this around. They found, initially, few government officials who were interested, but gradually built up a groundswell of popular support for ECDE that the local government had to acknowledge, and respond to.

VSO managed this by responding to individuals, then community groups that were interested in the situation of early childhood education, and then by initiating, supporting, and training such community groups to become “Community Ward Action Groups” (CAWGs), and helping their members onto County level “Technical Working Groups” in ECDE. The concrete achievements of these CAWGs in terms of reforms in budgets, resources, training, staffing, buildings and furniture for ECDE were impressive. They not only seem sustainable in that the CAWG members have been energized by what they have achieved in ECDE, but see that this can be applicable to other sectors in which local government leadership has been weak and ineffective – like health, land, welfare.

VSO’s entry point for this project

VSO has long been known as a body which places foreign volunteers in situations where skilled personnel are in short supply. Since 2014 VSO has changed radically – it now much more frequently places local national volunteers – often young recent graduates – in situations which reflect their programme interests. One of these is Early Childhood Education, and it had placed volunteers in Laikipia and Isiolo both to reflect the interest of citizens in ECDE in these counties, and to stimulate it.

VSO had been requested by local CSOs in Laikipia and Isiolo to provide them with volunteers. Two of these CSOs, namely United Disabled People of Laikipia (UDPL), and Pastoralist Women for Health and Education for Isiolo (PWHE) were especially interested in Early Childhood Education, emphasising the position of disabled children for UDPL and remote, isolated children for PWHE. These organisations came to VSO and sought their further help with ECDE. VSO was very interested to respond,

appreciated that these CSOs were enthusiastic and potential local change agents. Understood that local citizens were being cheated of their entitlements by the county, and in particular saw this as an opportunity for social accountability skills to help the local CSOs in their relations with County Government.

For the most part those local citizens who were keen to do something about ECDE were frustrated that the County Government was ignoring them, and repeated frustration led to passivity and apathy. This was particularly true of those in the County who had been trained in Early Childhood Education, but found few ways to practice what they had been taught, and what they considered very important for the children of the two counties. When VSO showed them some of the practices of SAcc, they could appreciate how this fitted their situation, and how they could use such tools.

Two other serendipitous things were happening at the same time:

Firstly VSO was, as a global organisation, refining its strategy that emphasised SAcc as one of the three approaches to its programme work, and, in connection with this, VSO Kenya brought out an international volunteer to train its staff and national volunteers in SAcc tools and techniques. VSO Kenya soon realised that this person, and the VSO staff that he had trained, were in a valuable position to cascade the training to the lead CSOs and CBOs in Laikipia and Isiolo..

Secondly, DAI, managing DFID funds with a “Deepening Democracy Programme”, were inviting proposals in ASAL areas (“Arid and Semi Arid”) which would use SAcc techniques. It was a match: VSO’s investment in national volunteers in the two counties had led to two local CSOs identifying the topic of Early Childhood Education as being in urgent need for reform; VSO had the possibility of securing project money from DAI to work on this issue.

VSO put in a proposal to DAI, were successful, and received UKP 353,197 for 18 months to undertake a social accountability project in these two counties in the field of Early Childhood Education working through local CSOs and local government.

Starting the Project

In order to prepare a proposal for DAI, VSO undertook a “scoping” PEA study (Political and Economic Analysis) which gave it the basic thinking about how to implement the project. Such studies take as their point of departure that the allocation of scarce resources is rarely made purely on the basis of technical criteria: political, economic and other factors also shape decision makers’ choices. This study in Laikipia and Isiolo showed that there were considerable problems with Early Childhood Education in the two Counties, but that there was considerable scope for a project which would reflect local citizens interest in ECDE, and that such a project could create room for improvement in participatory democracy, for energizing citizens. And developing local leadership.

VSO staff worked with their partner CSOs (UDPL in Liakipia and PWHE in Isiolo) who in turn started to engage with local citizens to elicit their interest in the project's ideas, and to hold meetings of such interested people to talk about early childhood education, learn more about how County government worked, and learn more about the techniques of social accountability.

At this point the project found interest amongst the following groups of people:

- Parents who were alarmed for their children at the lack of services or the poor quality of the services for early childhood education. They were well aware that an investment in early childhood education meant that their children progressed well to primary school.
- ECDE teachers who existed in the two counties but were either unemployed, or were employed on very poor terms (often only receiving a paltry honorarium with no guarantee of sustained employment).
- The general public – particularly youth and persons with disabilities (PWD) who were looking for issues with which to concern themselves.
- To a limited extent, local County government officials who gradually realised (a) there was an interest in this topic amongst the citizens of the two counties, and (b) that the County government was not providing the services it should. More far-sighted officials realised that responding to citizen's interest in this field could have a political advantage in the next County elections.

VSO this started by raising awareness in interested people through sharing information, and then helping people to learn about new tools which could facilitate change. At this time it was too early for VSO to judge that new leaders were emerging in the two counties – the structure of Community Ward Action Groups had not yet been established.

The next important step was the second and more formal PEA study by Edwine Ochieng of Move on Afrika Consulting. He inspected the small and poor 22 ECDE centres, carried out interviews with 30 stakeholders from both government and civil society, held 9 focus groups with parents and teachers, and undertook a close investigation of County budgets and expenditure. The PEA report provided:

“findings on the underlying interests and motivations of the actors and stakeholders in the ECDE sector, the types of relationships and the balance of power between them, cultural norms, sources of conflict in service delivery, resource allocation, performance and quality of ECDE services, and how marginalised and vulnerable communities accessed and utilized ECDE services in the two counties”

The production of a written report, valuable as it was as a reference document, and as a source of information for citizens who were largely ignorant of the governance and economy of the County, was made much more powerful by (a) photographs of the miserable infrastructure, and (b) the well attended and keenly followed large meeting in which the report was communicated. The preparatory work of VSO and its staff meant that all important stakeholders were at the meeting (community members and government officials), and the Consultant who presented his findings was able to

present truths, and sometimes truths unpalatable to the Local government in a way that was forward looking and energizing, rather than accusatory and blaming.



Powerful picture of toilet facilities in ECDE centre in Isiolo presented at public meeting showing results of PEA survey

The findings were that :

- There was a lack of coherence about who was responsible for ECDE centres between the County and the Ministry of Education, as a result of which very little was done
- There were few resources allocated towards improving ECDE infrastructure and investing in health and nutrition through feeding programmes. Both Counties were allocating less than 0.05% of their country budgets in the sector with zero allocation for feeding and sanitation.
- Conditions of service and hiring for ECDE teachers were in a mess with the County not wanting to pay salaries.
- A lack of community participation in monitoring service delivery in ECDE, with very little involvement of the citizens in the processes of planning, participation and resource allocation in the context of the devolved governance system – which actually gave citizens the legal and constitutional authority to be involved.
- Sub-standard buildings which were dangerous for children to use.

- Exclusion of extremely marginalised groups e.g. PWDs and nomadic communities, together with cultural exclusion of their children from pre-primary education through child marriage, FGM, and goat herding
- Profit oriented ECDE centres which catered only for the wealthy few
- Little evidence that politicians were interested in the ECDE sector

The use of photos in the public PEA report meeting were very effective as a shock to all – citizens and government officials alike – which revealed how little was being done in the ECDE sector, and what deficiencies needed to be made up.

What was the money budgeted for ECDE actually used for?

It is not easy to get details of the corruption that is endemic in Kenya’s local government. Often it involved transferring budgets to fields in which there was room for graft. In Laikipia and Isiolo budgets were actually spent on:

- Bursaries for secondary schools and universities. This was discretionary and was used to court popularity
- Building secondary school classrooms, which was not the mandate of the County, but provided opportunities for kickbacks through favoured contractors

Implementing the Project

VSO staff, working with local partner CSOs, now had the task of consolidating the interest that had been shown by citizens (and a few local officials), and showing people how they could learn more about their rights and entitlements, and what they could do to reform the present situation. The PEA report and its public presentation was a good start, but many local community members were pessimistic that they could do anything to change the status quo. And when VSO introduced and suggested ways in which citizens could make a change, citizens were not optimistic that these channels would work.

Although opportunities existed in the constitution and the law for citizens to get involved in participatory democracy, and to present their ideas to the local power structure, corrupt practices were found to be endemic. While VSO provided training for the practices of social accountability, it took a long time for citizens to actually have an influence and make the changes that they wanted.

VSO introduced the idea of Community Ward Action Groups for ECDE – a new idea which created a forum for interested citizens to meet, learn, discuss, and decide together what they wanted to achieve in that field. VSO also helped interested members of the CAWGs to attend County Technical Working Committees on ECDE. At no time were there organised or formal interruptions

Making the system work

The social accountability workshops would often follow a path like this:

“Do you know that you are allowed (indeed encouraged) to attend formal meetings and put your points of view to the local government structure?”

“Yes”

Have you ever attended such meetings and put your point of view?”

“No”

“Why not?”

“We are never told when such meetings are taking place, they are often far away from where we live, and they take place in English, and they require us to read a lot of materials (in English) if we are going to take part”

or blockages to citizen's participation in improving the situation of ECDE: the problems were that:

- (a) local citizens did not try to do so because they did not think they could have any impact, and
- (b) local government officials did not encourage such participation.



Ward Action Group in Isiolo in discussion on budgets

In some cases the local bureaucracy was unhelpful, and this, once clarified, was a barrier to overcome. For instance, the person with the mandate on ECDE service delivery, including resources, at the County Level, is an employee of the Teachers Service Commission, not the County.

VSO received many complaints from the citizens about the difficulties of getting anything done when faced with the entrenched endemic corruption:

Citizens are not pro-active in participating in budget planning meetings, even when they are held at Ward level. Reasons attributed to this is that even if they attend the meetings and share their concerns, the politicians will still go ahead and allocate money to projects that put money in their pocket or allocate money to projects based on nepotism, tribalism and favouritism, so there is no need for them to waste their time attending meetings whose outcome is already predetermined.

FGD respondent in Isiolo reported in 2nd PEA report

Citizens lack understanding on the budget process as no arm of county government has taken it upon itself to conduct civic education on the importance of participating in county decision making. There is also low trust between the political leadership and the citizens. The majority view their leaders as corrupt, intolerable, and selfish. Communities who feel that they have been marginalised for a long time are

unsupportive of county government agendas, and are rarely willing to be engaged in monitoring service delivery by the county government

Key respondent, Isiolo County reported in 2nd PEA report.

The response from VSO and its CSO partners was to help citizens understand the way that County Government worked, particularly in respect of ECDE, learn what their rights and entitlements were, build solidarity and group cohesion, meet government officials and clarify with them that they knew their rights and entitlements and were determined to get them implemented, and use the results of such meetings to feed-back government responses to their CAWGs, using this to further energise them about the reforms they were demanding in Early Childhood Development.

There were no clashes or battles – it seemed that Government officials, once they were aware of the informed, organised, and cohesive nature of citizen's demands, found ways of accommodating them. The citizens frequently complained of delays by the County officials, but they were energised by their incremental successes. An important element here is that the County officials were vulnerable. They appreciated that their handling of Early Childhood Education left much to be desired.

Using Social Accountability

Since Social Accountability is rarely precisely described, let us examine the aspects of SAcc that VSO and its partners implemented with the citizens of Laikipia and Isiolo:¹

1. Political Economy Analysis:

VSO employed smart consultants from outside the two counties to undertake this work. Not only did the process of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) produce insightful and instructive understanding about the culture and economy of the two counties, but those who participated were themselves energised by the process. Furthermore the consultant strongly researched the records of county budgets and expenditures, exposed the iniquities and handed this information to VSO and its partners who made sure that this information was made available to the citizenry. There were two other products of the PEA report which were very valuable:

- a. The results of field visits to physical infrastructure with their accompanying photographs. Attempts by government officials to downplay PEA findings were countered by the clear evidence of very squalid conditions
- b. The research into the Constitutional and Legal context for ECDE – what was meant to happen, who was meant to be responsible, and what were the citizens entitlements - was not only undertaken and written up in populist style, but was handed to the citizenry as their ammunition when confronting the government.

It was common for government officials to demean the knowledge and information of the citizens (and it was common for citizens to accept this and apologise for their lack of knowledge), but once such information was made available and

¹ Social Accountability exercises can be found in publications by the World Bank, Action Aid, UNDP, CIVICUS, CARE

explained to citizens, they could hold their own in discussions with government. A common element of relations between citizens and government in Kenya is that citizens believe that what they receive from government is a favour to them based on benevolence of government officials. The work of the PEA clarified what were their rights or entitlements, and these were not favours.

2. Community Score Cards

The exercise of Community Score Cards is a satisfying way to clarify understanding between different actors at the community level on a particular issue. The basis is a readiness for both sides to meet and discuss, and a competent moderator who can manage the ensuing discussion. In the case of ECDE, parents on the one hand, and those responsible for ECDE services on the other, are asked, separately, to list on large sheets of paper the problems as to why pre-school children are not being well prepared for primary school. In the meeting each side deliberates and then lists the problems that are preventing good pre-primary education taking place, and scores them, separately, as to their seriousness. One after the other each side presents their findings to the combined group, and goes through them, explaining the reasons for their choice and for the score that they have been given.

The moderator then asks each side, after the other, what are their responses to these stated problems? Do they accept them as legitimate problems, or do they deny them? Exciting discussions ensue.

Once a general level of agreement about each side's problems exists, the moderator asks whether the group, as one group (not separate sides) can suggest ways in which these problems can be overcome, and, if so, what actions need to be done by named individuals or institutions to bring this about.

This is not a short operation, but it brings out into the open many issues that have been previously not communicated, or not communicated well. Citizens understand each other's concerns, and possibly understand each other's commitments to improve the situation. Citizens in Laikipia and Isiolo found these exercises very valuable to overcome gossip and malicious misinformation.

Sometimes a resolution of the problems surfaced requires the involvement of others outside the community, and this leads to the next tool – Petitions

3. Petitions

Kenya is well acquainted with petitions – citizens are quite prepared to draft them and sign them, and officials are quite prepared to receive them. They are not seen, as in other East African countries, as an aggressive instrument. Government officials may, or may not, however, respond to them.

The preparation work of gaining understanding of the PEA report, and the further understanding of different citizen's perspectives that comes from Community Score Cards, allowed citizens to think through the information, action, or resolutions that they wanted. The act of making a petition was also a means of building solidarity between people who in general think alike, but are by no means a disciplined force.

The other important element of managing a petition is deciding to whom it should be directed. Most citizens would suggest petitions should always be sent to the

Governor, but others target them more to specific people within the local government hierarchy. In Laikipia and Isiolo these were often directed to the relevant MCA (Member of the County Assembly).

4. Interface Forums (also called Public Hearings)

Following Community Score Cards, or as a result of discussions that derived from the PEA report, and further research, citizens sometimes felt the need for a formal meeting with the government structures – particularly if there was an issue that they saw as urgent, but seemed to have been allowed to drift by the government. In such cases, VSO advised citizens not just on the content of the discussion that they wanted to hold, but also on the dynamics and protocol of inviting officials to a meeting and then of holding such a meeting.

When dealing with government officials in a formal setting, there are strong possibilities of causing friction or bad feelings which can jeopardize the actual purpose of the meeting. It is possible that government officials can take offense at the comments of the citizens to the detriment of not only the issue at hand, but also the relations between citizens and government in the future. Such issues often were created by accusations of tribalism – which may well be true, but which had the possibility of wrecking an attempt at conflict resolution.

VSO therefore trained people in protocol and the management of a meeting, as well as practising presenting their arguments with good evidence and personal testimonials. Dealing with senior government officials is something that all Kenyans have experience of – part of the new skills needed were those of holding firm, but politely, on issues where rights and entitlements were concerned and demanding, again politely, a resolution of long standing issues. Participants were trained to require commitments from government officials which could be followed up in subsequent meetings.

Depending on the sector and the government officials involved, public hearings could be seen as reminders to government officials of the concerns of the community. If the measures for community participation in the plans and budgets of the County were not working, it is quite possible that the County officials were unaware of the nature and the depth of the community feelings, and these needed to be communicated.

Oloruka ECD Centre Negotiations (Laikipia West)

After the first meeting of the CAWG in Oloruka the members (mostly women) invited their member of the County Assembly to a meeting to discuss ECD issues. To their amazement he accepted their invitation and they had a useful meeting. They had never believed before that a member of the County Assembly could be called to a meeting by women. The women are now more confident about themselves and that their leaders will listen to their demands. The community is now aware of county budgetary processes and allocations made for ECD and other services, and this allows them to hold the government to account.

They are also aware of the sometimes dubious good deeds that County Assembly members flaunt about their administration, and the MCA members are aware of this as well.

5. Charters:

Arising from public hearings or other negotiations between citizens and government officials, citizens sometimes felt the need to solidify discussions and give them the force, if not of law, then at least of strongly felt formal community pressure. In some cases this meant publicising documents about school

administration (costs, entry requirements, teacher attendance): in other cases the results and commitments from a Public Hearing would be written up and widely distributed to remind all concerned that decisions had been made and were expected to be followed up.

General:

There are many Social accountability tools that have been written up and tried in many places in Kenya, as well as other places in the world. What was interesting in this case study of Laikipia and Isiolo were the following points:

- While the topic of early childhood education is one that naturally seems to attract the interest of women, and while women were certainly very active in the CAWGs, men did not abrogate their responsibilities for children, nor did they try to dominate the discussions
- Social accountability can be subverted by certain communities attempting to get favours by special appeals to government officials based on ethnicity, political deal making, or promises of voting for them. Social Accountability's purpose is to educate and train citizens to know their rights and entitlements and make demands based on these, not on personal favours. This seems, in general, to have taken place in Laikipia and Isiolo.
- In general social accountability deals with attempts to implement rights and entitlements that already exist – rather than advocate for changes in law or practice or for new versions of laws. In Kenya there was confusion in administrative practice about who was responsible for the situation of ECDE workers - employment, supervision, payments. Part of the work of the CAWGs involved sorting this out so that there were sufficient ECDE teachers with their own rights and contracts.
- Social accountability is a structure for understanding rights and entitlements, but such understanding will not necessarily deliver results without persistence and perseverance, and aggressive follow up.

Proactively track and document “what works”

Interviews with communities during field visits suggested that a proposal on resource allocation towards a sector is likely to get priority and an allocated budget if communities are aggressive in making follow up with their elected leaders. An example was given where the school benefitted from an ECDE classroom because the Head Teacher persistently called on the Member of the County Assembly (MCA) to honour the pledge he made to the people during his election campaign.

What successes were achieved?

The project in Laikipia and Isiolo identified members of communities there who were interested in having better facilities and better services in the field of early childhood development and education, but found themselves in a situation where the County authorities did not prioritise this sector very highly and seemed uninterested in trying to improve the situation. The project sought to energise local people who were interested in better services in ECDE so that they would put pressure on the County authorities to reform the situation, and take leadership in doing this. They were well aware that they were being cheated of their entitlements for ECDE, and were prepared to combat this through a series of pro-active social development exercises. Local

people were prepared to take the initiative to improve the lives of their children, appreciating that the existing leadership at the County level was failing them.

And to a large extent this was achieved. With the assistance of VSO, pertinent funds were brought to bear on this set of challenges, and these, linked to a readiness of local people to take the lead, have resulted in achievements which are:

- (a) satisfying and gratifying to local people,
- (b) have re-worked and increased contributions to ECDE from local government without resulting in their opposition, and
- (c) have encouraged more contributions from local people to supplement their entitlements from the County.

In order to ascertain what were the impacts of the project, VSO, in Sept 2019, contracted Samson Kigera Mungai and its associates to carry out an “Outcome Harvesting Report”. It started by recognizing that the situation in 2017 was characterized by:

- late and low enrolment rates
- high drop out rates
- poor learning and developmental outcomes for learners
- low uptake of services in the two counties

The Report provides considerable detail about the nature of the achievements. It was guided by the objectives:

- what changes (positive and negative) have taken place as a result of the project interventions
- the extent to which the observable changes in individuals, community members and institutions are likely to last over time,
- what was being done differently as a result of the project interventions, and how the project contributed to this change

The report considered that the project performed well considering its time frame and the nature of the interventions which attempted to influence practices and actions that can take a long time to be understood and modified.

The following were the key outcomes of the project:

1. Increased budgetary allocation for infrastructural development

During the public hearing sessions, the community demanded fast tracking of the implementation of the 2018/9 development budget, especially the construction of 15 ECDE classrooms in Laikipia. Previously the County Government allocated funds for the construction of 6 ECDE classrooms per year. Based on sustained pressure and engagement , this has been increased from 6 to 15 per year.



After and before ECDE centres in Isiolo

2. Better terms for ECDE teachers

The PEA in Sept 2017 revealed a background of poor employment terms for ECDE teachers with only some “token” stipends paid to the teachers who were willing to work voluntarily. The community pushed for more teachers and on better terms: they got the ratio of teachers to students reduced from 1:50 to 1:40 in Isiolo. 264 ECDE teachers and 10 ECDE coordinators were employed on permanent and pensionable terms. Teachers were highly motivated.

3. Enhanced responsiveness and public engagement in ECDE development

The County Director of ECDE re-examined the legal status of the confused situation between primary education (a national Ministry of Education responsibility) and ECDE (a County responsibility), and got approval (backed by the Governor in Isiolo) for a clear legislative mandate.

Citizens involved in CAWGs and technical working groups drafted petitions and memoranda to County Government and held consultative meetings with county assembly and executive budget committees. As a result of which the budgets and expenditures for ECDE increased 3 times over three years (see diagram below)

Growth in Expenditure for ECDE in Laikipia resulting from project (in Kenya Shillings)			
Laikipia	Total Development Budget	ECDE Expenditure	ECDE expenditure as % of Budget
2017/18	2,135,000	10,675	0.02%
2018/19	1,105,000	34,523	2.94%
2019/20	1,351,000	40,208	3.36%

4. Enhanced quality of teaching

The citizens persuaded the ECDE duty bearers to provide quality learning materials and methodologies. The project included the training of teachers and parents on basic curricula and use of learning materials.

5..Increased citizen participation and monitoring of the delivery of quality ECDE services

The project supported public hearings in both counties with key duty bearers including area members of the County Assembly (MCA) and the ECD director in attendance to respond to the community enquiries. Such sessions were very interactive and gave citizens the opportunity to demand explanations on a number of issues – see box.

Quality Control by Citizens

The Chairlady of a group of ECDE parents in Oloruko ward in Isiolo stated that “we reject poor quality building blocks that had been delivered to the new ECDE centre by the contractor”. She stood her ground forcing the contractor to take back the blocks and later delivered the right quality of building blocks ensuring that the classroom was built to good quality standards.

6. Enhanced awareness by citizens of planning and budget tracking services

The power and will of organised community members to influence resource allocation by duty bearers has improved in the two counties. The project effectively built the capacity of selected community groups to participate in the public hearings and independent budget analysis sessions. They strongly lobbied for segmenting the ECDE budgets so that they can be itemised for easier tracking and greater transparency.

7. Strengthened support for ECDE school feeding programmes

The first and second PEAs identified weak and irregular feeding programmes as key inhibitors to access and quality of ECDE delivery in both Counties. Strong lobbying by CAWGs with the full apparatus of petitions and memoranda succeeded in 100% increases in the school feeding programmes.

The Influence of External Actors in the project (VSO and DFID/DAI)

VSO – as mentioned earlier in this document, VSO has moved from being an agency whose primary purpose is placing foreign volunteers in situations where their technical skills are needed. In Kenya they are much more driven by national Kenyan volunteers who are young and highly motivated to be development practitioners. They are also very savvy about how the development is administered by the government, and very aware of the endemic corruption in the country as a whole, but particularly in the government structures. Such volunteers are most frequently experienced and knowledgeable about the nature of local government and the delivery of public services through such structures.

One of the most important contributions that VSO, through its use of national volunteers, made to this project was to identify people who care strongly about the needs of poor and marginalised people, and who care about reforming the corrupt practices that are so often part of the government bureaucracy. It is possible that the enthusiastic volunteers could endanger the citizens and community members that they work with by taking up too combative a posture, but the VSO staff members, and the pragmatic realism of the citizens was able to modify this.

Another important contribution from VSO is that it has identified Social Accountability as one of its three approaches to its development programmes (the others being “Social Inclusion and Gender” and “Resilience”). It is constantly reviewing its work to

see how social accountability can be integrated into its programmes, and it is prepared to invest in training its staff, volunteers and partners in the methodology.

Another contribution from VSO is to find, and to employ smart and committed people to carry out its Political and Economic Analyses – people who are prepared to look at the objective situation carefully, and to engage with both citizens and government to try and ascertain what are the factors that affect their ways of working.

VSO was also useful as an intermediary between citizens and the donor. A foreign funded project is a difficult structure for a local CSO to manage, and it is most likely that it needs an intermediary organisation which is “on its own wavelength” as well as understanding the jargon and the formats of the donor.

Lastly, VSO realised that in the project it was engaged in something that was capable of much wider use by other NGOs in Kenya and so early on invited other NGOs interested in social accountability to form a “SAcc Platform” in which VSO could report on its work, and hear from others that had different approaches.

DFID/DAI

DFID is one of the regular and longstanding donors to VSO, but in recent years has reduced its core contributions, and asked VSO to apply for its funds through projects which it usually manages through large consulting organisations. In many cases such a way of working only provides opportunities for large NGOs, and VSO would find it hard to bid.

In this case, however, DFID is managing its democracy funding through DAI (Development Alternatives Inc) which has created a programme called “Deepening Democracy”. This programme has been operational in Kenya for 3-4 years and understands very well the strengths and limitations of Kenyan NGOs as well as the development context in which they operate. Most pertinently they understood the value and importance of Social Accountability and specifically offered a receptive ear to project proposals which showed an interest in practising that methodology. They were also supportive to the project as it developed and keen to discuss its development.

DFID and DAI were both keen to support work in the ASAL areas of Kenya (Arid and Semi-Arid) and this fitted VSO which had placed volunteers in Laikipia and Isiolo before.

The biggest problem in respect of working with DFID/DAI on this project was that DAI’s administrative systems only allowed it to be an 18 month project. Experience elsewhere suggests that social accountability projects need to be at least two and a half years to be effective if they are involved with a government budget cycle. There needs to be 6 months for the research, PEA work, and learning about the Government’s budget cycle, 6-9 months for the training and implementation which will reveal the key points of entry to effect change in the annual budget cycle, and then a full year to put the changes into effect, see that they have the expected impact, or make further modifications.

DAI and DFID were impressed with the project, and accepted the favourable “Outcome Harvesting Report”, but their systems did not allow for an extension to the project. It is possible that they might offer another opportunity to VSO, but this would involve larger decisions inside both organisations.

Can this be replicated and sustained?

An important element of the project was the growing understanding amongst community members, particularly parents, that they had a duty and an obligation to hold the government responsible and accountable for what was agreed in the constitution and the laws. Citizens understood that if they did not hold them accountable, then the self-interest of the government officials would continue, and citizens would find that they would lose their entitlements, and would have no one to blame but themselves. The realisation that they could not rely on the laws and regulations to be observed unless they were active in holding the government officials responsible was a very important part of the project. Citizens realised that they had to work from their side to make the state operate as it should, not simply vote and assume that the votes would translate into needed public services and resource transfers – in short, the citizens had to think and act politically.

At the same time, few active citizens in the project, the “new leaders” which the project encouraged, were interested in becoming politicians, or in competing for political office. If the existing politicians had felt that the project was grooming political rivals, it might well have encountered greater opposition. What the citizens wanted was that the administration of the county dealt with their grievances, which were, with a little popular pressure, recognized as legitimate. No politicians in Laikipia and Isiolo were prepared (or indeed wanted) to oppose ECDE – they simply accommodated what they could see as a popular movement for reform in the services for early childhood education, and realised that they would get popular support from doing so.

The formation of the CAWGs and the involvement of citizens (and members of the CAWGs) into the Technical Working Groups was specific to the ECDE objectives. If these two initiatives expanded and took on a larger role in challenging the development strategies of the County, there could perhaps have been more push back from the government. As they stand, the CAWGs and the TWGs have established themselves as important actors in the ECDE agenda, and are likely to be sustained as long as there is continued citizens interest in early childhood education. If, on the other hand, citizens started to see a role for themselves in the fields more important to the existing power structure and its income (like roads, secondary schools, or bursaries) they would have to think whether they were prepared to challenge those in power, and become political challengers. This would need much tighter and more organised local mobilisation, and may well not appeal to citizens whose main concern was their children’s education.

The future of the project in Oloruka Ward, Isiolo County

Margaret, the leader of the ECDE centre, said:

“Though the classroom has been constructed, the children still lack proper toilets, a proper school feeding programme, and clean and safe water. Our eyes are opened – even if VSO goes, we will engage our leaders on issues affecting the learning of our children”

It was suggested by the Evaluation that the CAWGs would be more effective if they were formally registered and institutionalised – this would allow them to be more proactive with groups which were more reluctant – such as PWDs or the more remote semi-literate populations.

It was also suggested by the evaluation that tools and training materials developed by the project did not comprehensively cover the needs of these two groups (PWDs and semi-literate groups). Once the project had finished, and there were no more funds,

then it would be unlikely that VSO could do such further work, unless there was an extension. Most citizens felt, however, that the materials and the training that they had received, were sufficient for them to carry on, and make sure that the government did not backslide.

Another insight from the Evaluation is that the project had put in place a group of people whose self-interest was likely to make sure the state did not backslide – namely the new and formally appointed ECDE teachers.

The future of the project, and the lessons that others can learn from the experience of Laikipia and Isiolo, is that where there is a specific issue or topic on which the citizenry can be mobilized, and where it can be shown that the local government structure has been seriously deficient, a project such as this can succeed, can have impact and be sustainable. Whether the strategy and the methodologies can be taken further into other sectors, like roads, health, land, water, will depend very much on the local conditions. The social accountability tools are not issue specific – they can be used for many different fields, but the politics of each different area will be different, and the enthusiasm of the new leaders that social accountability has encouraged will vary greatly. A similar project, but targeted at a reform of the health services, for example, will need its own rationale and a strategy derived from its own situation. It is noteworthy that the CAWGs have already started working in other fields than ECDE.

All this suggests that the most important aspect of a social accountability project is the Political and Economy Study – the PEA - which is a context analysis of (to quote the second PEA study again)

“a blend of study findings on underlying interests and motivations of main stakeholders and agents, the types of relationships and balance between them, cultural norms, sources of conflict in service delivery, resource allocation, performance and quality of services and how marginalised and vulnerable communities access them”.

Once a project has this information, it can plan pragmatically what needs to be done, and what it can hope to achieve.

Looking back at the most important elements in the Project

1. Could this project have taken place without VSO and without external funding?

VSO found in Laikipia and Isiolo considerable apathy and passivity amongst citizens that they would be able to effect any changes, which we have tried to show in this article. Citizens were used to having their entitlements taken from them for the enrichment of local government officials – and in many cases they were not clear what their entitlements were, leaving them with simply the feeling that they were being cheated out of what they should have. Early Childhood Education was an extreme example of such cheating.

VSO, through its placing of national volunteers with the few active and forward looking local CSOs, and through backing these volunteers and these CSOs with awareness raising about the real situation of government administration, and then following this up with sharing information on tools for reform, were able to work

against apathy and passivity, and energize people to believe that change was possible.

There is a very real limit to what awareness raising and information sharing can achieve, however. The two major partner CSOs in Laikipia and Isiolo, like many CSOs and CBOs in Kenya were always running on very limited resources. They could not afford to hold the kinds of meetings – which entailed transport expenses and income loss – which were needed for a reform movement like this.

Nor could VSO. VSO's basic budget is for the placement of national volunteers. If these volunteers were able to inspire a large project, it needed to acquire funds for this purpose. Thus DAI's funds were a necessary part of the project – funds for research, for consultants, for training sessions, for meetings, for staff time and transport etc. This may seem to suggest that every such project will need funds to keep it going. VSO's feeling, however, backed by the Evaluation, is that this is not needed. A one time investment in the project will result in trained, energized and active citizens who will be able to take the achievements further, because they now know how local government works, and how they can hold local government accountable for their entitlements

2. Will the project result in better educated children?

This is not an easy question to answer. Experts in ECD suggest that children who have been exposed to good ECDE will enter primary education better able to take advantage of it. There are of course, many problems in Kenya with primary and secondary schooling, but this project should at least enable children to receive benefits from primary education that they would not have received previously.

3. What was the role of the PEA Consultant?

Fundamentally important. Not only was the consultant able to research what was the actual situation as regards infrastructure, human resources, training and financial resources, but was able to document this, and make this documentation public. He was also able to do this without incurring aggressive renunciation by Government officials (something that might not happen in other countries). The consultant was able to be effective because he was working in a context of emerging awareness from interested citizens – local teachers and community leaders were happy to help him. In other countries (maybe in other counties in Kenya) it is quite possible that he would have been prevented from researching the financial situation of ECDE and exposing the shameful lack of funding.

4. What has been the impact on corruption in the two Counties?

With only two exceptions (Makueni and Nyandarua) it is generally agreed that local government is corrupt and has endemic structural means for local government officials to increase their income. In Laikipia and Isiolo we were informed by the PEA report that the biggest of these were to divert government budgets to paying for bursaries, and for the building of second schools (which allows for corrupt payments to contractors). The increase in payments for ECDE

must have diminished funds used for other purposes, but only marginally, and no one suggested that this had had a strong influence on corruption.

5. What social accountability tools work best?

Nearly all social accountability tools require>

- a. Agreement from different parties that coming together for a planned and organised discussion is a good idea, and they are prepared to attend
- b. A good moderator who will control sometimes fiery discussions and keep people's eyes on the prize of consultation, resolution and forward planning
- c. Commitment, when there are points and resolutions that have been agreed, that they will be implemented (and agreement of who and when these will be achieved)
- d. Control of over-emotional behaviour and violence – which is liable to encourage the involvement of the police who can rarely be considered as reformist elements.

The tool that worked best in Laikipia and Isiolo was the Public Hearing Interface Meeting. It is also difficult to manage well. Citizens have to be disciplined and organised in solidarity to bring important points to the government which will probably be eager to avoid such points, or happy to turn such meetings into political supporters clubs.

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