**A Global Lesson on Educational Reform from Ten Schools in Jordan**

By Manal Quota

Zeid Bin Haritha is a school in the Jordanian village of Yarqa. In this school, you'll witness tiny overcrowded classrooms, old broken furniture and over-worked teachers. These are characteristics common across a number of schools in the Governorate of Al-Salt. But, wait! This is not a tragic story filled with heart breaking tales of under resourced schools and low achieving students…

Rather, this is a story of a community of ten schools, spread across two villages, which joined forces to address serious challenges to the delivery of educational services. This process of change began through donor led interventions that introduced guidelines and a framework for school autonomy and community engagement. Yet what this story is really about is how external interventions can be adapted and tailored by local communities to fit their existing social, political and administrative structures. It provides a valuable lesson for communities looking to adopt international best practices – rather than treating them as cookie-cutters; they can be adapted to conform to local circumstances.

**Adapting external interventions to local institutions**

Al-Salt is the heartland of tribal Jordanian society. Families here have lived together long enough to tell tales of generations that survived feuds, marriages and political gains. Community members, teachers and students are acutely aware of the shortcomings in the provision of services but have struggled with obtaining the appropriate support needed, and have to a degree, lost confidence in the ability of Ministry of Education (MoE) to provide these services quickly. "The Ministry of Education is too slow," explained Maytham (names have been changed to protect identities), a teacher from one of the ten schools, "we know we can't depend on them for all our problems."

In response to concerns over the capacity of the MOE to address service delivery challenges, a program was launched to increase school autonomy and community engagement. Under the School and District Development Program, the ten schools in Ira and Yarqa formed one education cluster that is accountable to the local Education Council (EC), which in turn reports to a Field Directorate.

In the process of setting up a school cluster and establishing the EC, community members, teachers and principals received training and support on the value and importance of working with their local schools, and the value of schools working together. Based on its diverse membership – including the school principals, as well as teacher, parent, student and community representatives – the council served as a venue for aggregating demands and debating challenges in the community. This resulted in community buy-in, transparency, and hence, greater ability to hold schools- the providers-accountable.

The success of this process however, wouldn't have been possible without total commitment and involvement from all stakeholders. So as the schools and communities embarked on a process of re-organizing the school community, the citizens, teachers and students inadvertently established a common vision.

This vision first and foremost complements the local formal and informal systems that at times, worked against each other. Here the community found its own way of navigating the existing formal and informal structures towards the common end of improved education for community children. This helped address the underlying fear among reformists that increased school autonomy and community engagement would meet with disapproval from local tribal leaders.

"We live in a rural small village. It's like a large family. We hold evening events all the time, family gatherings and the *majlis*, where issues are discussed and we hear from each other and the children about what's happening at school," explains a father of a student. This interconnectedness and ease of information flow in these villages means that formal means of communication at the school level were overlooked as teachers and principals regularly interact or see parents of students outside of school. Despite the frequency of interactions, however, discussions between parents and teachers were limited to student behavior and performance.

To encourage interaction and community involvement in matters beyond student behavior and performance, the communities worked together to elect an Education Council Chairman. The Chairman was able to outline a unified vision for the community and schools to strive towards.

Abu Muhanad, who was elected Chairman and received training through the program, embodies the local traditions and cultures of the community, while also having a forward looking vision of what the schools and citizens together can accomplish having been an educator himself for over 20 years. His knowledge of the education sector and the trust local members have in him has made it possible for him to create a sense of cohesion and purpose, to mobilize and influence local representatives and leaders and convince them of the benefits of functioning under a cluster with increased parental and community engagement. "We work as one team the local community and the school," said Abu Muhanad as he described the new attitudes towards increased school autonomy. It has also made parents more comfortable with their new role.

"Now the engagement with the community is different. Its regular, parents are involved in decision making, they oversee and support the school. They provide support to the teachers and school by their active participation," explained Hasan, teacher and former student at Zeid Bin Haritha School.

The increased interaction eventually translated into greater expectations on the part of parents, leading them to seek stronger school initiatives, activities, and standards of teaching. This in turn was reciprocated by the schools, which – having seen and, for some, harnessed the positive outcomes of community involvement – were happy to cooperate with the local community to address challenges to service delivery. This resulted in community led initiatives to raise community funds to purchase needed teaching and learning materials, printing textbooks in large print for students with eye impairments or in-kind services such as fixing gas and electric connections needed in the schools.

"I stopped solving school problems on my own," explains a principal of a girls' school. "I now wait for the LEC meeting, and share my problems and there I find multiple solutions. Principals now offer support to each other, and we come up with ideas that I would have never thought of."

**Learning from local experiences**

The problems of overcrowded classrooms and overworked teachers have not disappeared. But this story does show what can be achieved by combining international best practices with local practices. In development, the focus often tends to center on helping struggling communities by implementing external interventions at the expense of local solutions.

The challenge remains of finding ways to incorporate local knowledge and experience into an institutionalized process that offers guidance and inspiration while also increasing accountability.

This process can then be coupled with reforms from the government's side to foster an environment that further integrates local practices and makes full use of their potential benefits.