

Jordan: Strong Community Commitment ... and a School Principal with Veterinarian Skills

*By Hannah Linnemann**

The blog reports our findings and discoveries from field site visits to schools in Jordan that were conducted from March 17 – March 21 as part of the World Bank Group's regional engagement on governance in social service delivery in the Middle East and North Africa Region. The team consisted of Jumana Alaref (MNSSP), Hannah Linnemann (MNSHH), Manal Quota (MNSHE), and Michael Woolcock (DECPI).

“No, I don’t think the Parent-Teacher Association’s governance body is pluralistic enough... That’s because its members are elected, of course!” The principal shrugs and laughs a little, seemingly amused by our question and our puzzled faces. The PTA of his school, Zeid Bin Haritha School for boys in rural Jordan, comprises a rather unusual group: parents, but also retired teachers, parents whose children have long graduated from school and young practicing teachers are its members.

How did this happen? “It’s easy”, principal Hatim [\[1\]](#) explains, when asked to elaborate further. “We are a community of families. And the candidates from the largest, most influential families naturally receive the most votes in the PTA election – just because their family size outnumbers the others.”

During our four-day field visits to the rural Al-Salt region in Jordan, the influence of powerful local groups was only one of the many problems that principals, teachers and parents were facing regarding their children’s education. The team had come to the villages of Ira and Yarqa to observe the range of innovative practices residents themselves had devised to respond constructively to these challenges; more broadly, we were interested in learning about how schools were governed at the local level and identifying successful cases of increased community engagement. Jordan schools take part in the Multi-Donor Reform for a Knowledge Economy Program (ERfKE) [\[2\]](#). Under phase II of ERfKE, particular attention is given to the preparation of a National School-Based Development System, which has as its central task the improvement of student learning outcomes and supporting advancements in student-centered pedagogical styles.

Using the program as a platform to bring all stakeholders together through a Local Education Council, the local community in Ira and Yarqa leveraged existing social and informal ties to foster collaboration. 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.

Perhaps the most impressive example of inter-community cooperation was the response to a fire at one of the schools last summer, which damaged several classrooms and destroyed the school’s archives. The perpetrators of the fire remain at large, though it is suspected that youths were responsible. That “no one knows” who committed the crime seems implausible in a small community, not least because certain aspects of how the fire was spread appear quite strategic as only specific areas of the school were affected. However, the community focused on the future of the school and took its rebuilding into its own hands. When the Ministry of Education expressed

its doubt that the damaged school would open its doors in time for the next academic year, the PTA of a neighboring school met urgently in order to secure the schools' timely restoration, provide financial support, temporarily accommodate students in neighboring schools, and restore some of the archives. This support ensured that the damaged school was indeed able to open on time, and the school today is the pride of the community.

While informal networks were positively leveraged in this instance, in other cases in this area of rural Jordan powerful tribal elites have presented a challenge, especially if change meant threatening the status-quo to which they have long been accustomed. The principal at the Zeid Bin Harith Boys School, looking to achieve a participatory approach and to give all stakeholders a voice in the children's learning process, adopted an innovative strategy to achieve these aims without seemingly challenging the local leaders' authority. One example was that he organized veterinary medicine supplies for the kettle herds in the community; even though this had nothing to do with education, it helped him gain recognition in the community. Once he was a trusted figure, he initiated a "Friends of the School Council", a council separate to the PTA (which, as described, was captured by influential local figures) consisting of one member of each family in the village to ensure that everyone had a say in school's decisions. By creating a separate body, with no formal leadership structure, the principal was able to elicit the information he needed and secure equitable community buy-in to reform processes without letting the formal PTA meetings become a venue at which select community leaders felt challenged or only advocated for their own interests. The "Friends of the School Council" was then again made part of the formal structures through participating in decision-making processes at the school level in the context of the ERfKE program.

We saw that the community that we visited had found its own way of navigating the existing formal and informal structures towards the common end of improved education for the children of the community. The external intervention was adapted in the local context of Ira and Yarqa, leveraging existing social and informal ties.

In our daily development practice, the focus often tends to center on helping struggling communities by implementing external interventions; local solutions, like those in Jordan outlined above, are often overlooked but yet can create part of the answers if only we take the time to seek them. The challenge remains of finding ways to incorporate local knowledge and experience into an institutionalized process that offers others guidance and inspiration, while also and establishing accountability. These can then be coupled with reforms from the government's side to foster an environment that enables local practices to succeed even further.

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[1] Names in this blog have been changed to protect the identity of the people described.

[2] The Government of Jordan partnered with various international donors to undertake ERfKE to address educational challenges via a comprehensive and holistic approach.