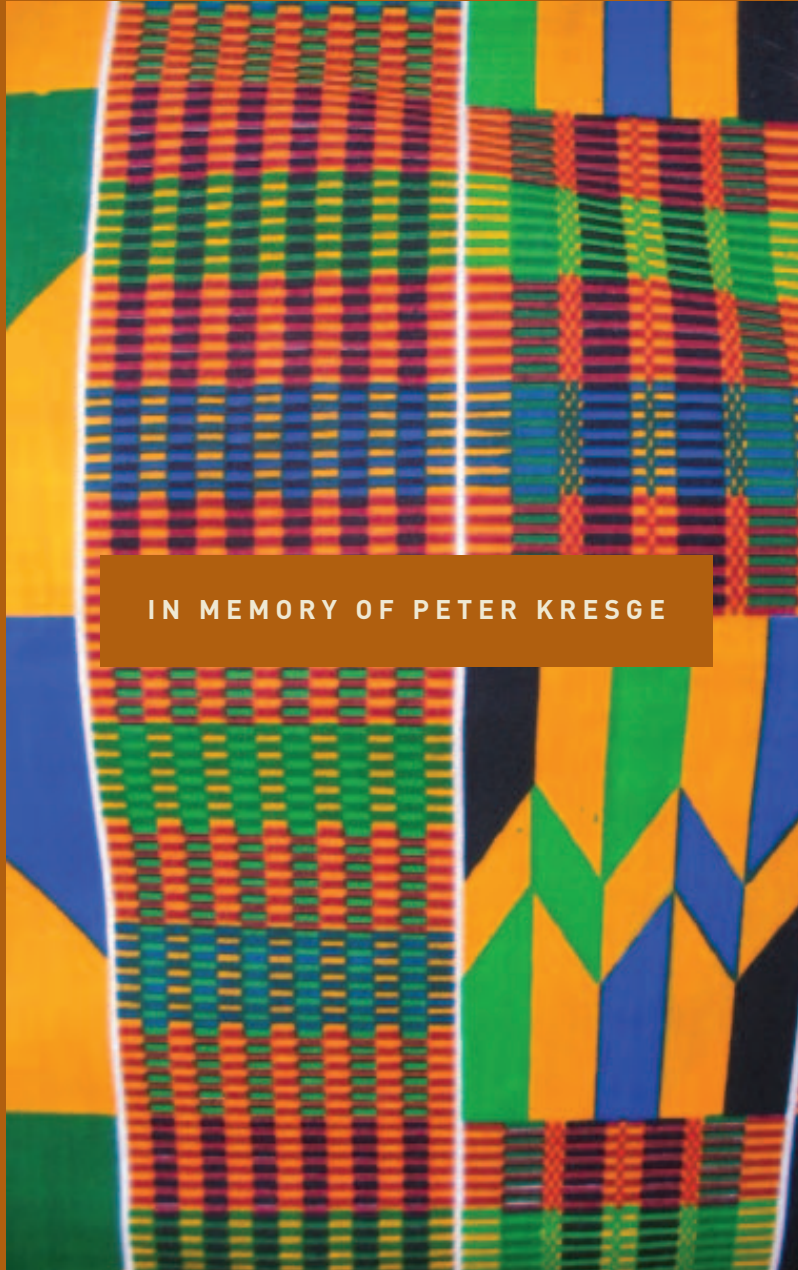


The Community School Alliances Project: Advancing the State of the Art of Community Participation in Basic Education





IN MEMORY OF PETER KRESGE

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The Community School Alliances (CSA) Project was a successful, innovative effort to strengthen the role that communities play in primary school education in Ghana. Over a six-and-a-half-year period (May 1997–August 2004), CSA worked throughout Ghana to build the capacity of communities to participate in schooling. By the time it ended, CSA had directly or indirectly influenced the quality of basic education in 1,729 Ghanaian communities and 110 districts. In addition, the project developed approaches and tools that helped advance the field of community participation in education and have potential widespread applicability to community participation work in other development sectors.

This short monograph is intended to give readers a flavor for what CSA accomplished, what the project was all about, and the contributions that CSA made to advancing the state of the art of basic education. It is divided into two sections: Part One – Technical Brief, provides readers with insights into CSA approaches, tools, and methods. Part Two - CSA, Staff and Participant Perspectives, gives readers a feel for what the project looked like on the ground.

Part 1 Technical Brief



Historical Perspective

Prior to independence, formal education in Ghana was largely provided through church schools. Communities played an active role in helping their parishes construct and maintain school buildings and seeing that their children went to school on time and did their homework.

After independence, however, education became a public sector responsibility. The government built schools, developed curricula, and supplied teachers and textbooks. Communities became passive consumers of government educational services, and gradually many Ghanaians began feeling alienated from their educational system. They saw teachers performing poorly or exhibiting inappropriate attitudes toward their students and their work; they watched as facilities languished in need of repair; and observed how there was often a lack of adequate teaching and learning materials.

The Community School Alliances Project sought to change this laissez-faire dynamic between the government and communities with regard to education. It assisted communities in understanding what they can do to improve primary school educational quality, and it helped the Ghana Education Service (GES) learn that communities do have an important role to play in education, and how to engage them in that role.

How the Project Worked

When CSA worked with a community, it would use the following process:

Raise Awareness: In the first step of a CSA activity, the project sent a trained facilitator into each community to conduct a Participatory Learning Activity (PLA). Over a four- to five-day period, the CSA facilitator would convene different village subgroups such as men, women, chiefs, elders, and teachers. These subgroups would discuss the educational needs of their community and what could be done to meet those needs. The facilitator and the communities would then organize a community-wide drama that vividly illustrated some of the key issues identified by the subgroups.

At the same time, a CSA-produced radio program helped raise community awareness about current efforts in education reform in Ghana, the role of parents in supporting their children's education, and the characteristics of a good school.

Get the Community to Set Priorities: The Participatory Learning Activity would usually result in a School Performance Improvement Plan (SPIP), which identified actions that the community agreed to undertake to improve primary school quality. The types of activities identified in SPIPs included building new facilities, monitoring teacher performance, and making sure children attended school and did their homework. At the end of each PLA, the CSA facilitator would organize a community-wide meeting for the review and approval of the proposed SPIP activities.

Assist the Community in Implementing Its Vision: CSA provided resources and technical assistance to help enable Ghanaian communities to implement their SPIPs. Each community was given a small grant (\$1,500) that it could use to cover the costs of its plan. CSA also provided training for community-based School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). The training focused on skill-building for SMCs and PTAs in such subjects as monitoring school quality, school management and finance, advocating for change at the district level, and resource mobilization.

Help the Government Become an Effective Partner: CSA also worked closely with the Ghana Education Service (GES), the operational arm of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. CSA helped persuade the GES to establish a new Community Coordinator position at the district level. This new position is intended to give district education agencies the ability to engage communities in the planning and implementation of primary school programs. CSA staff developed a training course for the new Community Coordinators on how to monitor and evaluate school-based projects.

Monitor Progress and Evaluate Impact: CSA developed a comprehensive and highly effective approach for monitoring progress and evaluating project impact. CSA's monitoring and evaluation strategy enabled the project to determine the ways in which the project strengthened the ability of communities to participate in education, the degree to which increases in community participation in schooling affected education outcomes, and the sustainability of project impacts.

Advancing the State of the Art of Monitoring and Evaluation

The project terms of reference required CSA to achieve a set of community-level project objectives: (1) increase community awareness, responsibility, and advocacy for education; (2) strengthen community school support organizations, (i.e., PTAs and SMCs); and (3) enhance community participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of school improvement efforts.

A more traditional approach to monitoring and evaluation would focus on the use of a set of quantifiable indicators that could be used for assessing whether or not the project achieved these objectives; for example, the number of PTA/SMC members trained in school management and the number of school improvement plans developed. CSA staff felt that such indicators were a necessary, but not sufficient, means of measuring the impact of their work. They utilized such indicators to report on the outputs that the project had achieved, but they also went a level deeper to better gauge the impact of their work. This next level was grounded in an understanding of best practice.

CSA staff set about to identify the best practice attributes of community participation in education. First, they determined key attributes through a review of the development literature on the subject. Then they augmented what the literature said was best practice with the views and experience of Ghanaian educators and community members of what best practice looks like in their communities. The result of this review and consultative process was the following set of nine best practice focus areas, which CSA used to measure the degree to which its interventions were successful within and across communities.

CSA's Best Practice Focus Areas

Gender: The project defined the focus area of gender by the degree to which there was support for girls' education in both the home and school. Home support was demonstrated when communities ensured girls' attendance, provided time for girls to study, provided for girls' needs, and supervised girls' out-of-school activities. Support in the school was demonstrated when teachers had positive attitudes toward girls, engaged girls in class, encouraged their participation, and exhibited high moral standards.

School Quality: Support for quality was demonstrated when the community pushed for evidence of achievement in reading and writing, and provided resources for teaching and learning materials. Best practice in support of quality also was seen when parents regularly visited the school to check on children's progress, inquired about school issues, and monitored student and teacher attendance and pupils' homework.

Trust: Best practice related to trust in teachers was demonstrated when community members regularly attended school functions and meetings, visited school, and discussed issues with teachers openly and freely. Trust in the school system was demonstrated when parents enrolled their children in school, provided all necessary school supplies, paid school fees, and believed that children were well supervised at school.

Empowerment: Best practice in the area of empowerment was achieved when community members were actively involved in the school decision-making process and felt confident to act. It also was reflected by the degree to which teachers respected the views of community members, and the degree to which the PTA and SMC met regularly and worked collaboratively with school personnel to improve school facilities and teaching and learning.

Partnerships: The best practice area of partnerships was measured by the degree to which the community established productive relationships with both government and external agencies. Such relationships were reflected in the degree to which communities regularly interacted with the District Education Office (DEO), the extent to which the DEO responded to community requests, and the extent to which communities received support for education-related activities from donor agencies.

Management: This best practice focus area was defined by the presence of strong school management structures (SMCs and PTAs) and community leadership and ownership. Strong and active SMCs and PTAs demonstrated commitment to education, knew their roles and responsibilities, met frequently, made and implemented meaningful decisions, kept records of their meetings, and had fair representation of women in leadership positions.

Participation: The best practice focus area of participation was defined by the degree to which community leaders were actively involved in school projects and put school issues to the community for discussion, the extent to which community members had a high level of involvement and met to discuss school issues of concern, and the degree to which community-based institutions initiated actions to address school concerns.

Resources: This best practice area was defined by the degree to which communities were able to mobilize resources for education and the ways in which resources were allocated in a culturally appropriate way. The mobilization of local resources was demonstrated when a community identified school needs and mobilized local and district resources to meet these needs. The use of resources in a culturally sensitive way was reflected when there was a high level of



community context reflected in decisions affecting the school; a flexible school schedule that recognized festivals, occupational demands, and other local concerns; a school curriculum that reflected community context and involved use of community resource people; and a flexible school fee payment schedule.

Transparency: The best practice area of transparency referred to community monitoring of both school performance and finances and assets. Monitoring of school performance was demonstrated when the community was interested in the performance of pupils and teachers, and freely expressed their feelings at school meetings. Communities that monitored school finances and assets asked for accountability from school principals and district education offices.

Monitoring and Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis

CSA used four different monitoring and evaluation instruments to collect and analyze information related to the project's ability to promote best practices in the nine focus areas described above:

Baseline Assessment: Before embarking on work in a community, CSA conducted a baseline survey to develop a best practice profile of that community. The survey consisted of extensive interviews with representatives of six community subgroups: chiefs and elders, SMC/PTA members, teachers, parents of P1–P3 students, parents of P4–P6 students, and non-parents. Results of the survey were translated into a performance index for each of the nine best practice focus areas in each community. Thus, CSA was able to establish a profile of the status of community participation in each community before the start of project interventions.

Ongoing Monitoring: CSA utilized a variety of approaches to monitor the impact its activities were having on the achievement of best practices. For example, each SMC/PTA was given a self-appraisal instrument to use to measure its own progress. Each SMC/PTA also was required to submit regular reports on progress being made to implement its School Performance Improvement Plan. In addition, to gauge project sustainability CSA facilitators were asked to compile quarterly reports on progress being made in each community toward achieving five of the nine best practices—participation, empowerment, partnerships, transparency, and resource mobilization.

Impact Assessment: CSA collected impact assessment data by compiling end-of-project community profiles on best practices, by re-administering the baseline assessment instrument to enable communities to assess their own performance, and by looking at the data on school demographics in CSA communities (i.e., enrollment, retention, student achievement).



Results, Outcomes, and Lessons Learned

CSA had a positive, lasting impact on increasing community participation in education in Ghana. Table 1 below reflects the impact of the project on the 347 communities that received project funds to support their SPIPs. These communities were grouped into six cohorts, with each cohort being actively engaged in the project for a two-year period and then observed for a longer period of time to see if project efforts were being sustained.

Table 1: Percentage of Communities with High Performance at Impact

Focus Area	Cohort One/Two	Cohort Three	Cohort Four	Cohort Five	Cohort Six	Aggregate
Participation	86.7	87.0	87.8	57.1	95.0	83.2
Empowerment	80.0	85.2	75.6	57.1	95.0	77.7
Gender	88.9	92.6	76.2	52.4	85.0	77.6
Partnerships	66.7	57.4	81.0	71.4	90.0	75.3
Management	82.2	88.9	69.0	52.4	80.0	72.7
Resources	48.9	70.4	64.3	47.6	95.0	65.5
Quality	68.9	81.5	59.5	33.3	75.0	62.1
Trust	75.6	70.4	42.9	61.9	80.0	61.2
Transparency	53.3	55.6	45.2	28.6	75.0	50.0
Sustainability Index	.56	.59	.65	.52	.90	.65

The results in Table 1 indicate that aggregate community performance was highest in the areas of participation, empowerment, gender, and partnerships, where more than three-quarters of communities achieved high performance. Almost two-thirds of communities demonstrated high performance in the areas of management and resources. In all nine focus areas, at least half of the CSA communities achieved high performance.

CSA calculated a sustainability index for each community at impact to serve as a predictor of the potential of performance levels being sustained. The sustainability index, which was calculated based on performance on critical focus areas, illustrates that the highest levels of performance at the time of impact assessment were observed in Cohort Six, while the lowest were observed in Cohort Five. With the exception of Cohort Five, results steadily improved with the addition of each cohort, indicating that ongoing project modifications were responsive to problem areas and improved results.

Lower performance in Cohort Five was attributed to the fact that this cohort had a shorter planned implementation cycle than the previous cohorts. Cohort Five also represented the first cohort where a majority of the responsibility for implementation was transferred to the Ghana Education Service (GES) to increase sustainability. However, once the impact data had been collected and analyzed and shortfalls were identified, CSA returned to Cohort Five with targeted interventions, and gains in performance were subsequently observed.

Part 2 CSA-Staff and Participant Perspectives



A six-room schoolhouse sits near the center of the large fishing community of Moree on the coast of Ghana. The school is surrounded by a health clinic, a post office, and a public toilet. Despite its central location, the school hasn't always been embraced by the community. Parents rarely visited the school, and students regularly skipped class to spend the day scrambling for fish on the beach. Communication between the School Management Committee and government officials charged with overseeing the school was minimal. To the village elders in Moree, the school was not a source of pride; they saw it as offering substandard education compared to other schools in the region.

Unfortunately, the situation in Moree was representative of many communities in Ghana in the 1980s and 1990s, when deep rifts developed between parents and teachers, and between school districts and government agencies. Traditionally, most Ghanaian schools were products of their communities. Many schools were founded by churches and missionaries, and parents and community leaders played a strong role in their operations. But in the previous three decades, the government of Ghana had taken over most of the nation's schools, and the relationships between communities and schools steadily deteriorated.

"There was a disconnect between schools and communities," says A. Addae-Boahene, Deputy Director of CSA, in describing the situation in the 1980s and 1990s. "The community perception was that schools belonged to the government. It was the government's role to manage schools and to improve the quality of schools. As a result, the community tended to sit back and to not get involved in schools in any way. They didn't see the schools as creating a future for their children. And the schools had become run down very radically."

In 1997, the CSA project was formed to stop this downward cycle and overcome the barriers that had grown up between schools and communities, parents and teachers and students, educators and government workers. CSA was the community mobilization component of USAID's Quality Improvement in Public Schools (QUIPS) project, a large-scale effort to support the Government of Ghana's Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) program. Launched in 1996, FCUBE had three primary components: improve the quality of teaching and learning, improve efficiency in management, and increase access and participation (e.g., raising attendance levels by all students, girls in particular, and increasing parental involvement in schools).

The CSA methodology drew from a range of strategies that had proven successful in bringing various groups together for community-based decision-making. "Our role in the CSA project was to motivate the communities to get involved in schools, to show them that they have an interest in improving schools, and to help them see the need to work with the government agencies that are mandated to run the schools," says Addae-Boahene. "At the same time, we worked with the agencies to get them to see that they needed to work with the communities."

"Teachers often come from other places and sometimes they didn't adapt well to the local community," explains Addae-Boahene. "For example, when there is a funeral, we expect everyone in the community to show up. It's an important communal event. But sometimes teachers would not show up to the funeral. Or a new teacher would come to a community and would not visit the chief for an introduction."

For many parents, the main concern was that the teachers weren't doing a consistently good job in the classroom. "We worked a lot with the teachers," says CSA Project Director Kay Leherr, "not to train them on teaching techniques, but to improve their behavior and performance—to show up for class and to be punctual and ready to teach."

Leherr adds that the teachers' attitudes were, in many cases, a reaction to the attitudes the parents had toward them: "We also worked with the communities to improve their treatment of teachers—to provide more financial support to the school and to help make the teachers' living conditions more comfortable. Many communities also provided land for the teachers so that they could grow a garden and raise some of their own food." Emphasizing those reciprocal relationships was key to the CSA approach and its success. CSA broke down the "blame dialogue" by helping various stakeholders find common ground.

In the fishing village of Moree, the results have been tangible. The SMC chairman now attends almost all school meetings, visits the school often to see how teachers and pupils are faring, and organizes communal labor in support of school projects. The head teacher encourages her students to inform parents of the PTA meetings and urges their attendance. The PTA meetings are more frequent, and teachers are keeping parents informed about children's attendance. The community has also come together to improve the school facility and increase access to supplies—including purchasing a typewriter that the teachers can use to prepare examinations. Finally, the community has set up a watchdog committee to patrol the beaches during school hours and make sure students are in class rather than fishing.

The successes in Moree have been replicated in dozens of CSA communities throughout Ghana. In statements sent to the CSA project, teachers from other communities described the CSA process and the results they've seen in their schools. Here is one such statement:

"There have been lots of changes since the introduction of the QUIPS programme. Communal spirit towards work in the school has increased and parents now pay regular visits to the school. Parents now ensure that children stay in-doors by 7:00 p.m. to study or complete their homework. As a result of this, the pupils are able to do their homework before they report to school. Teachers also organise extra classes for pupils without charging any fee. Parents have started buying textbooks and other learning needs for their wards.

"The drama performed by the community has further increased the awareness of the community to support the school. As a result of the issues raised in the drama the community has reinforced the ban on videowatching and pupil selling at night [children working at night in family businesses]. We intentionally included a school drop-out in the drama, and after the performance the boy has re-enrolled. He is regular and punctual at school.

"The training workshop organized by the CSA team for SMC/PTA executives has increased their knowledge in the day-to-day running of the school. This will enable them to play their roles effectively as partners in the education of their children."

~Dominic Afoakwa—P2 Teacher, Ampunyase R/C Primary

Students, too, have noticed the changes, as evidenced by this letter from John Okoto, a sixth grade student at the R/C Primary School in Yilo Krobo:

“I am John Okoto, the school prefect of Trawa Roman Catholic Primary. Since the beginning of the CSA/QUIPS programme in my school, I have seen so many changes. Among the changes are: the school has stopped making us do odd jobs, there is regularity and punctuality among my fellow pupils and our examination questions are now being printed. I am very sure that after the two years programme, our primary school will be a true model for the villages in and around Moree.”



The CSA Legacy

CSA enabled Ghanaians to play a more informed and effective role in the education of their children. This outcome was achieved as a result of project approaches, instruments, and materials that empowered Ghanaians to be able to participate more actively in supporting their children's learning needs and the management of their schools.

In addition to its legacy to Ghana, CSA made a very important contribution to advancing the worldwide state of the art of basic education. The project developed a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) strategy that enabled it to capture in a robust way the impact that interventions which promote community participation in education can have on school improvement and learning. Although prior to CSA many basic education programs had included community participation activities, few, if any, had been able to document the impact of these activities in a meaningful way.

Although many people and institutions made important contributions to the success of CSA, EDC would like to thank the following individuals whose leadership and support meant so much: From USAID/Ghana, Peter Kresge, Kish Odum, Lisa Franchett, and Elsie Menorkpor, who served as Technical Officers for the Project; and from EDC, Jerry Boardman and Kay Leherr, who served as Chief of Party; and three senior staff members, who were the major reasons why CSA was so successful in the field, Kingsley Arkorful, Deputy Director, Programs; Akwesi Addae-Boahene, Deputy Director, Programs; and Peter Gyekye, Deputy Director, Finance and Operations.

For more information, please visit CSA's website at: <http://www2.edc.org/CSA>.





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