

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT AND CONCEPT NOTE

Project Title: Transforming Community Schools into Open Learning
Communities : Workshop (12-16 July 1999),
Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Executing agency: UNESCO Paris - Learning Without Frontiers (LWF) Coordination Unit and the NGO Program on Literacy and Education for All, in collaboration with ActionAid (UK)

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I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Given the trend toward more open societies and global economies, we must emphasize the forms of learning and critical thinking that enable individuals to understand changing environments, create new knowledge and shape their own destinies. We must respond to new challenges by promoting learning in all aspects of life, through all institutions of society, in effect, creating environments in which living is learning.

The Amman Affirmation, 1996

In response to the challenges articulated by the Jomtien Conference and the Amman Affirmation, UNESCO's Learning Without Frontiers (LWF) Coordination Unit and the NGO Program on Literacy and Education for All, in close collaboration with ActionAid (UK), are undertaking a new initiative.

The overall aim of the Open Learning Communities (OLC) initiative is to create living examples of 'open learning communities', that is, collaborative networks of participants in community-based initiatives. The primary purpose of these collaborative networks is to make linkages between the activities of those already involved in researching, designing, implementing, funding and evaluating innovative learning opportunities, thereby enabling joint reflection to enhance such activities. The initiative thus builds on existing definitions of 'learning communities', seeking to open out discourses of learning, while clearly situating these in the self-determined needs, skills and interests of local communities.

Participants in such collaborative networks may be drawn from Community-based Organizations (CBOs), including community based schools in both formal and non-formal sectors, women's/men's work groups, religious groups, cultural associations, language and literacy committees, farmers' cooperatives, and water-use associations; practitioners in international and Southern NGOs and local government departments; policy makers in national ministries, bilaterals and multilaterals; financial partners; researchers in universities; and the media, among other relevant organizations.

As part of the larger initiative, the OLC-Community Schools Project focuses on building the capacity of existing community school projects, envisaging these as useful entry points into a process of inter-linking related community-based activities at the local level, *and* linking such activities to macro-level sectoral policy reform. These linkages will be instrumental in creating *interactive learning environments*, enabling community school projects to act as catalysts in the development of locally appropriate new learning opportunities, stressing the importance of gender equity, the use of appropriate technologies in lifelong learning, and local knowledge systems. What enabling conditions, then, are required to enhance the activities of community school projects? To answer this question, we may situate the experiences of community schools in the context of current debate on Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) approaches (Blackburn and Holland 1998).

Given the continuing global crisis in basic education - manifest in serious discrepancies in education across districts, between rural and urban areas, and for girls and women - it is crucial that PRA research, resultant policy and education development initiatives enable disadvantaged groups to analyse their learning needs, state and assert their priorities, make demands, and take action. Yet the responses of many participatory education initiatives to low enrolment rates, high drop-out rates, inappropriate curricula, and so on, are based on assumptions that ignore the complexity of such concepts as 'empowerment', 'participation' and 'community' (Mosse 1994, Slocum and Thomas-Slayter 1995).

Let us consider three key inter-related issues, bearing in mind the primacy of the following in the context of each issue: a reconceptualisation of methodologies and methods of 'learning'.

Reconceptualising 'Empowerment'. The creation of micro-macro linkages is essential in order that inevitable contradictions between smallness and effectiveness and between largeness and participatory authenticity are overcome (Gaventa 1998, Steifel and Wolfe 1994). In-service teacher-training and programmes that enhance the management skills of community leaders and other local actors may be useful mechanisms of collaboration, ensuring a balance between local and regional responsibilities. Yet many initiatives are designed by ministry or donor agency staff and are restricted to one-off, task-related, short-term cascading training programmes that end with the termination of donor funding (Archer 1994, Bebbington and Mitlin 1996, Swainson 1995). We confront the need for improved linkages that inform existing collaborative relations between government departments and other larger-scale institutions, on the one hand, and small-scale activities and groupings, on the other.

Reconceptualising 'Participation'. Current policy climates of education decentralisation, in which context community-based initiatives are more likely to spread, suggest a 'trade-off': while financial responsibilities for education shift from the state/donor agency to local communities themselves, the latter are expected to benefit from greater participation in decision-making processes through the 'scaling-up' of community-led initiatives. A central assumption here is that popular interest in formal and non-formal education continues, regardless of the perceived opportunity costs and direct private costs of borne by the learners and their families themselves (Maclure 1994). The rapid 'scaling up' of many community-based initiatives, then, often neglects or, through the abuse of PRA methodologies, manipulates local knowledge, being driven instead by goals such as an increase in the *quantity* of participation (Chambers 1997, Pretty et al, 1995). There is an urgent need for processes of institutional change, enabling development agencies to re-focus on local actors' perceptions of their own heterogeneous learning needs, in the context of added socio-economic burdens, so that the quality of such initiatives can be moved up the scale of participation, from appraisal and consultation to joint-action and self-mobilisation.

Reconceptualising 'Community'. The premise that a *collective* interest in schooling exists *per se* within and between communities, flies in the face of deep-seated social and political realities. A complex network of relations make up the socio-cultural fabric of power underpinning community-based learning opportunities, suggesting conflicting interests between state and civil society, rich and poor, ethnic and religious groups, and women and men (Brock and Cammish 1996, King and Hill 1993). Moreover, a process of change, challenging the power-base of existing hierarchies, implies that conflict between individuals and groups is likely, even desirable. Yet many initiatives fail to recognise the inevitability of conflict, let alone devise and use strategies and techniques with which to address conflict (Connal 1998, Crawley 1998, Shah and Kaul Shah 1995). Clearly, we - local actors, practitioners, policy-makers and researchers - need to understand and thereby challenge deeply-entrenched barriers to learning.

II. AGENDA: Transnational Planning Meeting

In order to contribute to ways of addressing the challenges outlined above, the OLC-Community Schools Project is organizing a Transnational Planning Meeting to be held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 12-16 July 1999. The expected outcome of the Transnational Meeting is the further development of an ongoing process of reconceptualisation, resulting in a framework that will:

- strengthen linkages between practitioners, researchers and funders in ongoing community school projects, enhance a process of joint reflection and enable the identification of concrete proposals for the transformation of community schools into open learning communities.

The conceptual framework will highlight, in particular, women's abilities to identify and make collaborative inter-institutional linkages. The importance of girls' and women's understanding of local learning needs and the centrality of such understanding in terms of intra-institutional change will also be stressed. Finally, the framework will foreground women and girls' responses to conflict situations and the implications of these for the design of new learning methodologies and methods.

Output

A Meeting Report will include an analysis of workshop proceedings and a resultant conceptual framework. In addition, it will document and analyse case-studies based on participants' experiences in community school projects. The Report will be circulated among workshop participants (Appendix 1), other practitioners and CBOs, policy-making agencies and potential financial partners. The workshop findings will also be presented via seminars and international conferences and will be deposited on relevant databases.

Objectives

During the five-day meeting, participants will collaborate to attain the following objectives:

- Sharing the problems and opportunities presented by existing linkages made by participants' at the local level, and by the actual or proposed development of micro-macro linkages in different national frameworks of decentralisation. This process of joint reflection may draw on the collected 'case-studies', as outlined above.
- Critically reflecting on the conditions necessary for transforming community schools into open learning communities.
- Outlining potential activities within a flexible framework of open learning communities.

Methodological Tools

The Transnational Meeting will use a variety of methodological tools:

1. Roundtable stocktaking session

A stocktaking session will be organised to jointly reconstruct and visualise where we are with community school projects today. How may we describe the relationships between current initiatives, local government departments and the community(ies) in which the initiatives are based? In which ways do current initiatives combine local knowledge systems, latest pedagogical findings and new technologies and official learning materials? How do participants negotiate conflicting interests and learning needs in the course of their learning initiatives?

2. Interactive learning sessions

Underlying the objectives outlined above is the view that groupings of participants in the workshop may collectively constitute collaborative networks at regional and transnational levels. Accordingly, three interactive learning sessions will invite participants to critically reflect on possible conditions for the process of transforming community schools into open learning communities, identifying flexible criteria and capacities necessary for individuals and organisations to act as facilitators - OLC facilitators - of such a process.

Reconceptualising 'Empowerment': learning to make micro-macro linkages

- In view of existing linkages identified in the stocktaking session, can we identify further entry points for the strengthening of collaboration with *both* local groupings and the national formal sector?
- What mechanisms may we set in place to strengthen existing capacity-building methodologies that seek to create micro-macro linkages?
- What mechanisms may we set in place to ensure downward accountability in the process of creating micro-macro linkages, viewing, for instance, educational reform in the larger context of the emergence of more democratic forms of governance?

Reconceptualising 'Participation': the centrality of local knowledge in our views of learning

- How may we enable the participatory assessment of their own learning needs by local learners, taking into consideration the indirect and direct costs of participation in learning initiatives?
- How may new pedagogies and new learning methodologies that use appropriate technologies intersect with local knowledge systems to enrich current community-based initiatives?
- How may the intersection outlined above enhance the scaling-up of local participatory initiatives, enabling these to inform the government schooling system while remaining, at the same time, fully embedded in the local community?

Reconceptualising 'Community': responding to conflict in a changing community

- How do we analyse evident and hidden conflicts, both in terms of different incentives and sanctions in public schooling systems and conflicting modes of governance at the local level, which underpin the transformation of community schools into open learning communities?
- In which ways do we respond to inevitable conflicts among groups of learners, between learners and institutions and between smaller- and large-scale institutions?
- Which specific responses to conflicts may best stimulate inter-institutional collaboration and intra-institutional change?

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