

SCHOOL BUILDING FUND PROVIDES LESSONS ON COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION IN UGANDA

Nearly ten years ago, the government of Uganda established the Universal Primary Education Program, designed to boost classroom attendance and increase literacy and education rates throughout the country. In less than a decade, the policy generated dramatic results, more than doubling the number of students enrolled in primary schools from 2.9 million to 6.3 million children.

“Consequently, there was a shortage of classrooms,” reports Zie Gariyo of the Uganda Debt Network (UDN), a civil society organization that monitors local spending programs. “[S]ome pupils were studying under trees or in unfinished buildings!”

To accommodate this growing demand for classrooms, a School Facilities Grant was established in the national budget, providing each district with funds equivalent to U.S. \$600,000 to build new schools and classrooms.

However, many community-level officials lacked the expertise to oversee such an ambitious building program, and managing the construction and financial oversight turned into an educational process of its own. The potential for fraud was particularly troubling as rumors began to spread of graft, corrupt local politicians, and unsafe buildings.

In 2002, the Uganda Debt Network launched a network of community monitoring groups in districts outside of the capital to monitor the new spending on schools, as well as other government services. The network organized citizens, empowering them to ask local officials for information on expenditures and to monitor the quality of construction and new services. Community groups used the information at public hearings sponsored by the network to raise concerns about poor quality renovation work, disappearing equipment and supplies, and other misspending.

“The Uganda Debt Network received information...that a building contractor in Katakwi District in North Eastern Uganda had completed construction of three classroom blocks for primary schools without going through the normal tendering process and was demanding payment,” Gariyo recalls.

Local community groups investigated the project and found that the construction quality was sub-standard. Since the contractor did not go through the proper procedures, the possibility of corruption could not be ruled out. The Uganda Debt Network petitioned the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Education and Sports to conduct an investigation of the company’s work, and a report concluded that the work was indeed sub-standard, revealing that the company had been involved in corruption with local government officials. UDN proved its case, and payment to the contractor was denied.

“When resources are not properly monitored,” Gariyo explains, “the results can lead to government corruption, roofs being blown off the schools by storms, incomplete classrooms, and buildings with cracks in the walls and floors.”

When UDN began its efforts, many local officials were resistant to providing community groups with spending information, and were slow or unwilling to act on the concerns brought to their attention. But the work of the community groups has resulted in practices like displaying financial information on public notice boards, restitution by government officials for misappropriated supplies and property, decreased teacher absenteeism, and improved quality of school buildings. At the national level, the information provided by the community groups also allowed UDN to effectively advocate for strengthened procurement procedures and other measures to improve service delivery.

The Uganda Debt Network has continued to work with communities to monitor the performance of local governments in order to ensure that resources are allocated and used properly and that corruption is quickly detected and stopped. Gariyo proudly reports, “UDN’s Community Based Monitoring Evaluation System is the first of its kind in the country through which members of the community can comment publicly on the quality and delivery of public services.”

Created in 1996 as part of the Uganda campaign for debt relief, the Uganda Debt Network focuses on improving governance and reducing poverty in Uganda by monitoring budget implementation at local levels of government.

UDN plans to use the results of the International Budget Project’s *Open Budget Index 2006* to increase awareness among government officials, Parliament, and the public about the importance of budget transparency.

The *Open Budget Index* is available at: <http://www.openbudgetindex.org>