# What Community Participation in Schooling Means: Insights from Southern Ethiopia

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*Community participation is a term frequently used and often cited in international educational development. In this article, Jennifer Swift-Morgan investigates the definition and impact of community participation in schooling in rural Ethiopia. Although national governments, development agencies, and nongovernmental organizations across the developing world increasingly encourage community participation, our understanding of this term remains vague due to a lack of detailed analysis. Swift-Morgan's qualitative study examines the form and scope of community participation. She finds that in rural Ethiopia, this range is complex, but a large portion of what is characterized as community participation is monetary contributions rather than involvement in decisionmaking or teaching and learning. Swift-Morgan also shows that there are particular challenges for the participation of women and the poor, and that financial incentives and technical assistance that encourage broad-based decisionmaking create incentives for broader community participation. Swift-Morgan concludes the article with policy implications, particularly with respect to how programs that attempt to encourage community participation can be made more effective.*

Down a narrow mountain pass in the heart of Ethiopia's diverse southern region — an eroded path known only to pedestrians, mules, and the occasional motorcycle — stands the two-room Gedelo Primary School. An outsider might not recognize the structure as such. Its walls are a gaping crisscross of wooden poles partially covered by a corrugated tin roof. The same grass that feeds the mules grazing outside carpets the floor. Logs lay on the ground where the community hopes to build benches and desks soon. Yet despite this minimal infrastructure, the students who crowd the school daily, the teachers who teach them, and the community members who helped establish

the school are proud. After years of having to send their children on a daily journey of several miles and across a dangerous river to the closest primary school, parents and local leaders organized themselves and lobbied the Ministry of Education to help them establish their own school. Community members credit the dedicated school director for the accomplishment, and the director credits the community and the school's newly formed parent-teacher association for this success. Many of the students are now attending school for the first time in their lives and are simply thrilled at having the chance to learn. As one proud father said of the community's accomplishment, "We appreciate the importance of education. We built this school with the ability of the people here. We initiated it by ourselves. Education itself is development for this area."

"Community participation" is the catch phrase du jour in the field of international development. The World Bank (2000b) describes participation as "a process through which the stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them" (p. 2). The term is now peppered throughout government policy discourse, international funding agency strategic frameworks, and non-governmental organization (NGO) program plans across countries and sectors. In education, community engagement in schooling delivery and management is emerging as a "best practice" thought necessary to achieve universal primary enrollment while improving the quality and relevance of teaching and learning. In the context of global movements such as Education for All, which aims to ensure that all children have access to free quality primary education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2000), low-income countries are under increasing international and domestic pressure to meet these goals. Many, such as Ethiopia, have embraced community participation as an integral part of their education reform strategy.

But what does community participation in schooling really mean? Critics claim that mainstream initiatives have co-opted and altered community-driven movements that originated as radical and grassroots approaches to development. In this view, international institutions and governments in developing countries often use community participation to mean locally driven reform, while in reality these institutions and governments are actually garnering local support for preplanned interventions and transferring costs from the public to the private sector (see Cooke & Kothari, 2001). At the same time, some suggest that for supporters of the expansion of state-supported primary education, getting parents and other community members actively engaged — such as by advocating for greater government support or by contributing material and financial resources — may yet be an essential strategy for extending access to schooling to the world's children who are still deprived of basic education.

While many international development agencies and NGOs have concluded that community participation is important for educational access and

quality (Colletta & Perkins, 1995; Kane & Wolf, 2000; Rugh & Bossert, 1998; UNICEF, 1999), few studies offer empirical evidence to indicate how exactly parents and other community members are involved in supporting schools, and whether that support is related to school management, finance, teaching and learning, or other aspects of schooling. There is even less evidence to help us understand how such involvement might lead to increased enrollment, retention, and learning in schools. The purpose of this article is to define those actions that constitute community participation in schooling and to better understand the impact of the various forms of community participation on school access and quality.

For me, this exploration is much more than an academic exercise. As an NGO practitioner who has embraced the goals of Education for All, I have subscribed for several years to the idea that community participation can help not only to expand and improve schooling but also to democratize top-down, colonially imported education systems. Yet I wished to look beyond the project buzzwords in order to better understand the processes behind the discourse. In 2003, while studying for my master's degree, I found an opportunity as an independent researcher to collaborate with the NGO, World Learning, and explore questions of community participation related to the Basic Education Systems Overhaul (BESO) program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented in the Southern Nations', Nationalities' and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) of Ethiopia.[1]

For a number of reasons, Ethiopia is a compelling setting in which to explore the meaning of community participation in developing countries. First, the country still has far to go before all of its children are attending primary school. The estimated gross enrollment rate (GER) for primary education in Ethiopia indicates that in 2003, the number of pupils enrolled in primary school, regardless of their age, made up only 66 percent of the total population of primary school-aged children (UNESCO, 2005). Based on such low rates and slow growth in school enrollment, Ethiopia became one of the first World Bank/Education for All "Fast Track Initiative" countries (World Bank, 2002), making it eligible for concentrated and rapid assistance from international aid agencies.

Ethiopia is also a pertinent place to explore questions of community participation in schooling because it considers local-level participation in school operations to be an integral part of recent decentralization reforms and a way to increase educational access and quality (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1998, 2002). After years under a highly centralized socialist regime, Ethiopia was reorganized in the early 1990s into a federation that devolved administrative and financial authority and responsibility to regions, and from the regional governments down to subregional units of administration. Although some research indicates that decentralization could be a way to increase local-level participation in governance, decentralization is no guarantee of such participation (Brosio, 2000; World Bank, 2000a). Some re-

ports characterize the Ethiopian system as highly hierarchical, meaning that higher levels of government still made important management decisions regarding policy and resource allocation and then passed down these decisions as orders to the lower levels (Girishankar, Alemayehu, & Ahmed, 2001). In this decentralized context, I wondered what community participation in education would actually mean in practice. Would hierarchical tendencies limit local participation? Or might decentralization have created space for local community members to take part in positive reforms and support schooling in a variety of ways, without overburdening them financially or technically?

The USAID-funded BESO program offered a third reason to explore questions of community participation in schooling in Ethiopia. Launched just two years after the establishment of the new Ethiopian federation, BESO began as a major effort to support the government's decentralization reforms with the goal of increasing educational access and quality. The community participation component of the program addressed the local level of the system and aimed specifically to "stimulate parental and community involvement in primary school improvements and to provide resources directly to schools and communities to develop and implement strategies to improve the school environment" (World Learning, n.d., p. 9). After the first four years of the project, World Learning reported that the BESO efforts to promote community participation had helped to increase enrollment rates for school-aged children in target areas from 40 to 49 percent (2002). Reading these reports, I wondered if the decentralization reforms and project interventions had, in fact, helped to facilitate local participation in schooling in a way that was positively affecting schooling. At the same time, I realized that I still did not understand what the reports and government policy really meant by community participation, or how this participation may have led to the results observed.

Seeing Ethiopia and BESO's community participation projects as a ripe opportunity to explore the meaning and mechanisms behind "community participation" and its potential effects on schooling, I set out to see how community participation manifested in the SNNPR and how such involvement might lead to the results World Learning reported.

## Case Context: Ethiopia and the BESO Community Participation Projects

Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent nation and its second most populous, hosting an exceptionally diverse population of more than seventy million people representing over seventy ethnicities and several religious and linguistic groups (Embassy of Ethiopia, n.d.). The vast majority of Ethiopians reside in rural areas and depend on traditional, rain-fed agriculture for subsistence. Ethiopia is one the world's poorest countries; the nation ranks seventh from the bottom in the United Nation's Human Development Index, and its per

capita annual income of $110 is well below the average for Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2005).

Many of Ethiopia's current development challenges relate to the country's political and economic history. From 1974 to 1991, Ethiopia was ruled by a Marxist military junta, called the *Derg*, which replaced the imperial government with its own brand of authoritarian rule. During this period, regional separatist groups challenged the Derg's authority, often with violent results. In this context of war and political upheaval, a devastating famine in 1984 and 1985 killed hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians and displaced thousands more through forced resettlement programs. While cyclic droughts were partly to blame for the tragedy, so too were the Derg's failed economic policies, its high military expenditures, and its use of food aid and resettlement policies to favor political supporters (Joireman, 1997; Milner, 2000).

After seventeen years of authoritarian rule and internal strife, forces of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the Derg and ushered in a period of political, economic, and social transition. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), created in 1994, consists of nine administrative regions newly demarcated along ethnic lines in an attempt to ease tensions by granting significant autonomy to the major ethnic groups. Regional conflict, however, both with neighbor Eritrea and within the country, has continued to flare up throughout the past decade.

Today the country's challenges are in sharp focus in the context of a highly contentious and increasingly violent political environment. In May 2005, Ethiopians went to the polls for the third multiparty elections in the country's history. While the opposition won a record number of seats in Parliament, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of the ruling EPRDF, once considered a leader for democratic change in Africa, retained his seat for a third five-year term. Although international observers deemed the polls largely free and fair, the opposition has charged the EPRDF with election fraud. Since May 2005 government forces killed more than eighty people in protests over the contested elections, a crackdown that took the world by surprise (Lacey, 2005). The controversy and subsequent disturbances reveal growing frustration stemming from a decade of unrealized promises of democracy and development.

Despite serious urban opposition to the Zenawi government and criticism of the ethnically divisive system, the EPRDF has traditionally enjoyed support among the rural population (Adow, 2005). This endorsement is largely based on the government's efforts to extend social services to the rural population, services that were previously unavailable or centrally controlled by the Derg. The previous regime used primary and secondary schools largely to reproduce socialist ideologies (World Learning, n.d.), and following the fall of the Derg many communities burned down their local schools in an effort to destroy these lasting symbols of oppression (Tietjen, 1998; World Learning, n.d.).

Ethiopia has made considerable progress in mass schooling since the early 1990s. Average enrollment in primary school has increased more than 15 percent since the first Education Sector Development Program (ESDP I) was launched by the Ethiopian government in 1997. The GER for the first cycle of primary schooling (grades 1–4) leapt from 54.8 percent in 1997 to 83.0 percent in 2000; rates for the second primary cycle (grades 5–8) rose from 17.9 percent to 30.8 percent (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2002).

Despite this progress, many challenges remain — as the political opposition is keen to point out. The average primary GER for girls in Ethiopia in 2000 was estimated at just 40.7 percent, much lower than for boys, indicating gender disparities relative to access to schooling, and average rates of primary grade repetition remain high at 11 percent (USAID, 2003). These challenges are exacerbated by high levels of international debt, recurring conflict with Eritrea, and a new round of devastating drought that has severely taxed the government's capacity to fully fund both ESDP I and the federal-level education program that covers 2002–07, ESDP II, and communities' ability to support their schools.

In the SNNPR, vast ethnic and linguistic diversity makes it unique from the other, largely homogenous regions. Approximately 69 percent of the country's estimated seventy-eight ethnic groups reside in this region (Embassy of Ethiopia, n.d.). In this coffee-growing area vulnerable to drought, the region's diversity translates into considerable socioeconomic disparity as ethnic hierarchies have meant that some groups have greater access to land and economic opportunity than others (Pausewang, Tronvoll, & Aalen 2002; Wondimu, 2002). In 2000, the GER for the region was estimated at 63.8 percent, below the national average (Ethiopian Ministry of Education, as cited in Wondimu, 2002).

The government's decentralization policy is one strategy to promote the rural and national development that Ethiopia desperately needs. This is a sharp departure from the Derg's central control of primary schooling. In contrast, Ethiopia's current education policy calls for greater community engagement as the final, most localized level of the decentralized system and explicitly mandates participation in school operations and management. The policy change began with the 1994 Education Sector Strategy policy of the Transitional Government, which stated:

> Schools will be strongly linked with the community, which will take responsibility in its well-being and upkeep. They will be made to be responsive to the local needs and requirements and shall act as centers for all educational activities of the community. The management of each school will be democratized and run with the participation of the community, the teachers, the students and the relevant government institutions. (Transitional Government of Ethiopia, 1994, pp. 16–17)

The FDRE's subsequent ESDP I and II Program Action Plans echo this rhetoric and further underline the role of the community in education delivery and management. The Program Action Plans of ESDP II give specific examples of ways communities can participate, including "policy formulation, project implementation and problem solving," as well as "construction of new school buildings…, school maintenance, and mobilization of parents to increase enrollment, especially that of girls" (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002, Section 6.4). ESDP II also greatly emphasizes the role of communities in helping to fund the education sector program, aiming to have "mechanisms designed so that community [sic] will voluntarily and directly contribute to the financing of education based on its capacity." This strategy also intends to "promote a sense of ownership and thereby raise [the community's] own role in the management of schools" (FDRE, 2002, Section 5.2)

USAID's BESO program has invested millions of dollars in Ethiopia's decentralization reforms in the education sector and in the country's efforts to engage communities in schooling delivery and management. World Learning implemented the first community participation component of BESO, the Community Schools Activity Project (CSAP), from 1996 to 2002 in seven hundred schools in the SNNPR. By providing technical assistance and modest community incentive grants, CSAP focused on building the capacity of school management committees (SMCs), which were composed of school staff and influential community members, and occasionally parents (World Learning, n.d.). Working through local school development agents (SDAs) that the project hired and trained, CSAP helped organize SMCs where they did not exist and provided the committees with training and ongoing technical support to plan and implement school-improvement projects, such as addressing infrastructure problems and furnishing supplies and textbooks, as well as campaigns to promote girls' education and safety.

The SMCs submitted their school action plans for funding through CSAP's incentive grant program (World Learning, n.d., 2002). The CSAP incentive grants were allocated in three phases in increasing amounts from one phase to the next. Each phase required the SMCs to meet certain criteria, and as the amount of the grants increased the criteria became increasingly rigorous and the proposed projects more complex, which required different forms of community participation in schooling (such as establishing a school resource center to create and share teaching materials).[2]

At the end of CSAP, USAID and World Learning reported that in roughly 53 percent of the seven hundred targeted schools, female repetition rates "fell below the national grade four average of 11 percent" over the five-year life of the project (USAID/Ethiopia, 2003, p. 26). Moreover, girls' primary enrollment in 2000 was found to be 3.3 percent greater in schools participating in the grants program than in non-CSAP schools. In sum, World Learning reports that community involvement in education in CSAP schools led to

a "positive and sustainable impact on the quality of teaching and learning" (2002, p. 1).

In 2002, USAID and World Learning launched the Community Government Partnerships Project (CGPP), which runs through 2006. Like CSAP, CGPP aims to promote community participation in support of educational access and quality, but it focuses more directly on strengthening government capacity to support Ethiopia's new parent teacher associations (PTAs), which have replaced the SMCs and are comprised of teachers and parents instead of nonparent community members.

## Community Participation in Education: Conceptual Background

Before presenting my empirical data within this case context, I will review the literature on community participation in education to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the theories of participation. Many have made the case that community participation is an important means of improving educational relevancy, quality, and access. Others have developed theoretical typologies and continua to describe and categorize different forms of community participation. Together, the theoretical frameworks offer guidance as to what to look for when examining what constitutes community participation on the ground, in terms of the ways state and community actors relate to one another around schooling.

### Community-State Partnership Models for Schooling

Many current theories regarding the relationship between community involvement and increased school efficiency and student learning are based on the premise that in traditional society, the community is the primary provider of children's education (Bray, 2000; Williams, 1997). A number of scholars contend that trends toward centralized state control of education, while responsible for the expansion of educational opportunity in developing countries, impedes understanding of local needs and has a limited ability to distribute resources in a way that favorably influences school outcomes (Cummings, 1997; Williams, 1997). According to this theory, the limitations of the centralized model have stalled education expansion and quality improvements in many developing countries as state actions fail to reach marginalized populations.

In response to the limitations of the highly centralized state, practitioners and policymakers are reintroducing various forms of community involvement into education development, delivery, and management. The primary model of community-school partnerships that is emerging, like that represented by Bray (2000), is one in which education provision and decisionmaking are shared between the government and the community. Other partnership models, such as Williams's (1997), emphasize that the relative power of these partners can vary greatly, as can the roles each partner plays. Partnership ar-

rangements range from the division of labor between partners (e.g., governments provide the teachers, the communities provide the teacher housing) to nearly complete community responsibility for the delivery and management of schooling (community provision of school buildings and teacher salaries, government provision of curriculum).

Each of these analytic models depicts the community as a willing and able partner to the state in schooling, and they offer two key principles. First, when communities have the space and opportunity to enter into a dialogue with the state, education interventions are likely to take local contexts into consideration, making them more effective. Second, while contributing supplemental material resources can be an important part of a community's role in supporting schooling, the most effective partnerships retain strong state financial support for key schooling inputs and strike a balance between community and state ownership of the school with regard to both finance and decisionmaking.

*Domains of Community Participation*

The basic partnership models, however, are limited in that they do not seek to demonstrate the education *domains* in which the community may be involved. The question of domains of action is critical to understanding the process through which community participation might actually effect positive change in school efficiency and school-based teaching and learning.

A survey of the literature reveals at least three models to explain the different areas in which communities can become partners in the provision of education. While Jiménez (2002) emphasizes the community's role in school management and administration, Muskin (2001) and the Guinean Ministry of Education (2002)[3] extend the concept of participation to school curriculum and lesson delivery. These models include six domains for community participation in schooling: infrastructure and maintenance, management and administration, teacher support and supervision, pedagogy and classroom support, student supervision, and student recruitment. Muskin (2001) and the Guinean Ministry of Education (2002) posit that for communities to have a true effect on school efficiency and student learning, their involvement needs to reach into each of the possible domains.

*Scale of Community Participation*

In addition to studying the domains of participation, several theorists have developed schemas categorizing the extent to which communities are involved in education. Shaeffer (1994) describes that range as a ladder with seven rungs, the lowest of which represents the weakest form of community involvement in education, the mere use of a service such as a school. The highest rung represents true responsibility and power, described as participation in real decisionmaking at every stage, such as problem identification, feasibility study, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Taking Schaeffer's schema one step further, Williams's continuum (1997) describes an extreme of

community participation that leaves the community with all the responsibility without having the means to provide education.

The scale of participation is also a question of who in a community is participating. In his continuum, Williams (1997) makes an important distinction between the participation of the local elite and of ordinary citizens, emphasizing the different levels of participation that are possible *within* a community. Is a "community" participating if only its officials are involved? If only men have contact with the school? If only the rich have the clout, time, and means to participate?

Theoretical questions of partnership, domain and, scale have important implications for decentralization reforms such as those in Ethiopia. Centralized management systems have often been criticized for the fact that their rigid, hierarchical structures constrain community involvement in decisionmaking (Cummings, 1997; Raina, 2002). McGinn (1992) contends that while decentralization efforts purport to transfer decisionmaking power and resources to a wide popular base at the community level, they often also place additional responsibility for finance and service delivery at the local level.

## Methodology

The conceptual literature led me to two questions: (1) What constitutes community participation in schooling? and (2) What is the impact of these various forms of participation on educational quality and access? In the hope of finding answers to these questions, I conducted research in eight rural communities[4] in the SNNPR, facilitated in part by World Learning/Ethiopia. I held in-depth discussions with many different education stakeholders. Each one shared his or her unique perspective and personal experiences with parental and community involvement in schooling.

For comparison, we included four school communities that had fully completed the three phases of CSAP grants and programming; two schools that had just begun the first phase of the new BESO-II CGPP project; and two schools that had not received support from World Learning or any other external, nongovernmental initiative. To account for differences in governmental education offices, we selected four schools from each of two zones in the region, Sidama and Kembata Tembaro, and two schools, one CSAP and one non-CSAP school, from each of two *woredas* (districts) in each zone (see Table 1). These communities included populations of varying religions, including Ethiopian Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims, as well as a variety of linguistic groups.[5]

In order to gain diverse perspectives on community participation in schooling, I organized five different stakeholder groups at each school: teachers and administrators, male community members/parents, female community members/parents, primary school students, and members of SMCs or PTAs. In addition to these groups, I interviewed the Woreda Education Officers (WEO)

TABLE 1   *Sample School Communities*

| Region | Zone | Woreda | School | Locale |
|--------|------|--------|--------|--------|
| SNNPR | Sidama | Awassa | CSAP Phase III | Semi-urban |
| | | | CGPP | Rural |
| | | Aleta Wondo | CSAP Phase III | Rural |
| | | | Nonproject | Semi-urban |
| | Kembata Tembaro | Kedida Gamela | CSAP Phase III | Rural |
| | | | CGPP | Semi-urban |
| | | Angacha | CSAP Phase III | Semi-urban |
| | | | Nonproject | Rural |

who head the education office for each *woreda*. In total, I met with over two hundred people, and I was accompanied by a locally hired field assistant/ translator. In order to create an environment conducive to candid exchanges, my field assistant and I conducted each focus group away from other people and we held separate community member discussions for women and men.[6]

I depended on school staff and local leaders to help mobilize the focus group participants. We conducted our discussions primarily during the day, therefore the people who attended the meetings were those who were able to leave their work. While the vast majority of parent discussants self-identified as farmers (men) and homemakers (women), it is possible that in some cases, especially in the semi-urban schools, the focus groups did not include poorer community members or those who lived the furthest from the schools.

Employing intensive qualitative methods with a very small sample of schools and communities in one region of the country, I did not intend this study to yield statistically significant results from which generalizations could be made to the SNNPR or the national Ethiopian context. I hoped to provide an outlet for the often unheard voices of local actors in Ethiopia — students, teachers, women, and school system administrators — in order to better understand how community members are engaged in their schools, how they could be involved, and the impact of this engagement.

## Findings

Hours of complex multilingual conversations rewarded me with mounds of data and insight into what community participation actually means in the SNNPR. Through my research, I discovered a wide range of actions that constitute community participation in schooling, who participates and in what ways, factors that affect participation, and the impact of different forms of participation on schooling.

## What Is Community Participation?

When asked to describe the ways parents and community members are currently involved in schooling, focus group discussants in BESO and non-BESO schools described an extensive range of activity that included twenty different actions. In Table 2, I enumerate the types of parental and community engagement reported.

### *Monetary Contributions*

All subject groups in all schools, without exception, listed monetary payment as the first example of ways that parents and (sometimes) other community members contribute to schooling. While public primary education in Ethiopia is officially free, in reality the government usually only covers teacher salaries, and these payments are often late or do not constitute a living wage. Parents often are required to make per-student cash payments to the school in order to cover operational supplies and infrastructure improvements, and occasionally to supplement salaries for teachers and other personnel. In most cases reported in this study, the amount paid is proposed by the school director and negotiated with the PTA, sometimes, but not always, with the input of the general assembly of parents.

Nearly all parents recognized that the school needed financial resources, and they wanted to support the schools, as one father explained, by giving them "whatever they [the school staff] need." Parents and school staff, however, described such contributions explicitly in terms of mandatory "fees" that proved problematic even in BESO schools when no or few parents had a say in how much they were required to pay, and when required payments limited children's access to schooling. One group of students described a dynamic heard often: "Sometimes teachers ask us to contribute money, and if we don't bring the money they kick us out of class." According to more than one report, students often are asked to leave school until they can pay, and sometimes they never return.

Parents confirmed such reports, explaining that regardless of how much they valued education, sometimes they simply did not have the money to pay. They spoke of increased financial pressures due to both recent droughts and government inability to keep up with the demand for schooling. As one father explained, "We were expecting money from the government [as drought assistance], but instead they are asking us to pay money." Another father lamented openly that "since last year, the payment has been ten birr per child. . . . I cannot afford that for five children, and for this reason I kept them all at home in order not to have to send one without the others." A third father drew attention to the additional, indirect costs of schooling, explaining that "it's not just the student school fees, but also the pens, pencils, exercise books, clothes — all the things that you need to buy to fulfill the needs of all the children. We need our children to get education, but the problem is that we are very poor."

TABLE 2    *Types of Parental and Community Involvement in the Schooling Process Cited in Focus Group Discussions*

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*Unanimous: Cited by all subject groups in all schools*
  • Contribute cash (for capital improvement, teacher salaries, supplies, etc.)
  • Contribute labor and materials for infrastructure projects

*Most common: Cited by several subject groups in all schools*
  • Monitor student attendance
  • Respond to teacher requests for meetings regarding monetary contribution or student behavior

*Common: Cited by more than one subject group and in most schools*
  • Monitor and/or support study outside of the classroom
  • Meet with school staff to share ideas in general about school reform
  • Participate in community meetings about improving the school

*Less common: Cited mostly by SMC/PTA members in some schools*
  • Advocate for the needs of the school to government and NGO actors
  • Elect members of the PTA
  • Meet with teachers regarding student academic performance
  • Organize to enroll and keep girls in school

*Uncommon: Cited by subjects in only one or two schools, or only by Woreda Education Officers*
  • Hire and pay teacher salaries
  • Conduct/manage income generation projects
  • Help protect the school against intruders
  • Evaluate and fire teachers
  • Visit the school to check on progress of improvement projects
  • Support teachers by providing residences near the school

*Proposed forms of engagement for the future*
  • Participate in more meetings and ongoing dialogue with school staff on issues of enrollment, academic performance, and school improvement in general
  • Participate in awareness-raising activities such as community presentations on HIV/AIDS
  • Assist with teaching, e.g., on topics such as Ethiopian culture (idea protested by others)

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Despite the problems related to cash contributions, some discussants credited parental monetary contributions with helping to build a sense of community ownership of schools. This feeling of ownership was most often expressed in relation to CSAP schools, where the project reportedly helps to "create an understanding and love for the school" and inspires parents to "contribute money for the good of the school," as one WEO stated. In one CSAP school, a father stated that parents and community members recognize that they make contributions because "the school must have an owner" if their children are to have access to education.

Overall, parents often expressed that while they fully understand the importance of education, the material needs of the school, and their respon-

sibility to contribute, they simply cannot support the school on their own. They expressed a desire for *co*-ownership of the school in partnership with the government, especially with regard to state provision of teachers. As one father explained, "When the students aren't able to pay the fees, the teachers aren't able to get their salary, and for this reason the teachers are not happy to come and give a good lesson. And this prevents us from having a quality school." "If the government were to provide teachers," a PTA member in another school argued, "we could then use the extra money for school improvements." A parent in one CSAP community testified to the change resulting from increased state investment: "Before, we were completely a community school without any support from the government. . . . Now that the government has taken over and pays for the teachers, there is no fee and there are many more children enrolled than in the past."

A small number of discussants reported strategies schools and communities are using to try to relieve parents' financial burden, as in the case of one CGPP school that proposed income-generation activities to cover school operating expenses. In Gedelo, a non-BESO school, the school director reported that the school and community together agreed that every family should contribute "according to their ability," which included paying after receiving income from the harvest or making in-kind payments instead of cash.

*In-Kind Contributions*

Second in emphasis to monetary contribution, all focus groups in all schools noted that the community participates by providing labor and materials for infrastructure projects, such as building new desks or repairing classrooms. This effort included the collection and transport of building materials, the actual process of construction, and the provision and preparation of food and coffee to nourish the laborers. As with monetary contributions, most parents and students reported that the school director directly requested these in-kind contributions, whereas few discussants reported that the school and community decided together on the priorities to address and courses of action to take.

In all cases, parents' and community members' willingness to contribute in kind was significantly greater than their ability to contribute cash. "The school always asks us to contribute money, but it would be better if the school asked us to give what we have, such as labor and materials, since we can't always contribute by giving money," one parent explained. Another father echoed this sentiment, reflecting the opinion of many other parents and community members: "We are very willing to give whatever we can to support the school — we are very poor, but can lend our labor and materials."

*Parental Monitoring of Students*

After contributions of money, materials, and labor, focus group discussants initially often had difficulty citing other ways parents and community mem-

bers were involved in school. In many cases, discussants offered additional examples only after they were given time to think about other types of participation; at other times I prompted them explicitly to consider "involvement" in broader terms, including areas beyond material and labor. Upon reflection, most groups added that parents also monitor students' school attendance and study time. Parents themselves were most likely to report that they participate in schooling by "seeing to it" that their children go to school every day. This did not usually mean that parents visited the school on a regular basis, but rather that they made sure their children left for school in the morning and impressed upon their children the importance of regular attendance.

Students also noted that their parents often encouraged them not to skip class or be late to school, and parents and students in all but one community noted that parents also encouraged their children to study, leaving them time at home to do school work and asking if they had completed assignments. As one father remarked, "I myself am thirsty for knowledge, and so I always ask my students what they learn in the classroom." In one women's group, several mothers explained that even though they themselves had not been to school, they make a point of discussing school with their children. As one woman reported, "I ask 'What did you learn, how was class?'. . . because I want to tell my children the importance of education."

*Meetings at the School*

In all schools visited, teachers, parents, students, and PTA members commonly noted that parents, and usually fathers or other male relatives in particular, also participate in the school by meeting with teachers about their children. In nearly all reported cases, teachers initiate meetings, most commonly to collect money or confer about misbehavior, and occasionally to discuss irregular attendance or academic performance. As one mother in a CGPP school explained, "When students disturb class, teachers call us and we discuss, because this is one responsibility of families."

In more than one community, parents and students reported that visits between parents and teachers could be problematic. In one non-BESO school in particular, discussions revealed a pervasive dynamic of poor communication between school and community actors. According to one group of students, teachers sometimes do not show "proper respect" to parents. "Sometimes when a student makes a mistake he is sent to call his parents, but when the parents come, no one pays attention to them and they wait two to three hours to see the teacher," reported one fourth-grader. "Because of this," another student contended, "there are bad relations between teachers and parents." Such negative interactions were not limited to non-BESO schools, however. A student in one CSAP school reported that "our parents are only called to school when we make mistakes, or when the school needs a contribution of money. Otherwise, they don't call parents." Overall, teachers appeared minimally aware of how their attitudes might affect parents' participation, and

some corroborated the reports of students and parents. As a teacher in one CGPP school noted, "We meet with parents when we need to collect money, otherwise we don't meet with them much."

In addition to teacher conferences, a small number of students, teachers, and parents noted that parents and other community members participate in meetings called by the school director to discuss the state of the school or student achievement in general. However, these meetings are infrequent and rarely address ways to improve the school, aside from infrastructure repair. While some BESO schools held decisionmaking meetings where many parents and other community members participated, parents in only one school reported explicitly that general assembly meetings served as forums for discussion of school planning and reform.

*Emerging and Potential Forms of Participation*

In addition to the more commonly reported forms of participation discussed above, participants reported a number of other, less frequent ways some parents and other community members are currently involved in schooling, as presented in Table 2. These activities included helping to create and implement a school income generation plan; collaborating with teachers to plant trees around the school compound; and participating in awareness-raising activities at the school, such as community theater presentations that address HIV/AIDS.

Discussants reported community advocacy work with the government infrequently, but with particular pride in their accomplishments. In one non-BESO school, a father recounted how "parents were the ones who went to the WEO and initiated [asking] the government to construct the new building" for additional classrooms. In a CSAP school, a community representative of the SMC explained that "when there is a shortage of something at school, we are the ones that go to the government and ask that they [the school staff] receive these things." In another CSAP school, a teacher reported that the community had successfully advocated for the opening of an additional grade. In the non-BESO community of Gedelo, discussants of all kinds proudly recounted the story of how the director, PTA, and community members came together to advocate for the authority to open a new school of their own.

The most contentious types of participation included forays into the domains of teaching, teacher evaluation, and school management, and often related to the roles of the new PTAs. No one reported any existing community-school collaboration in the area of lesson development or instruction and, on the contrary, many teachers and parents flatly objected to the idea. "There is no viable role for parents in the classroom," said one teacher. "Because parents are not educated," voiced another group of teachers, "they have nothing to contribute to the teaching and learning process. Parental involvement in the classroom would provide no advantage." As one community PTA member similarly asserted, "The PTA need not be involved in the classroom —

that's what the teachers and department heads are for." Only one teacher suggested that school-community collaboration could be good for teaching and learning. He argued adamantly that parents have an important contribution to make in this area, suggesting that community members could help teach Ethiopian culture in the classroom. His fellow staff members, however, protested this idea. Parents who discussed this topic agreed with the majority of school staff, characterizing the realm within the classroom as the exclusive territory of the teacher and beyond the purview of their knowledge and responsibilities. "We should not be involved in the technical part of teaching," one father explained. "That is not our job."

The new PTAs have the power to help evaluate teachers and even play a role in their dismissal if they fail to perform. As a result, teachers at one school noted that this is a way parents will soon be able to participate in the affairs of the school. These teachers were unanimous that "the giving of this authority is very bad because most of the PTA members are uneducated and very poor. The educated cannot be evaluated by the uneducated." However, defenders of the policy to allow parents on the PTA to evaluate teachers asserted that community members do have the ability to determine whether teachers are regular and punctual, offer enough support and time with students, and behave appropriately.

Discussants also debated the community's role in school management more generally. While most PTA members and many parents and students were confident that a joint community-school committee could effectively plan and manage school affairs, others did not agree. One teacher contended that the community has neither the financial nor the technical capacity to manage the school effectively, and that the head teacher and government agents should be solely responsible for school management. Another teacher expressed his fear that even "if the money [is given] to the community, they will feel like they are very superior and will have a boss-like feeling toward [the teachers]. They won't even listen to the director." Others, however, thought that if PTAs had greater resources and training and involved more parents and others from the greater community, they would be able to use resources wisely. As one WEO concluded, parents and other community members should do more overall to monitor the work of the PTA, school director, teachers, and their own students. "If this happens," he said, "the community will be contributing great things to the school."

## Who Participates?

While discussants often spoke in general terms of "parental" and "community" participation, the discussions revealed that participation in reality is often limited to certain people. Generally, it is the parents or relatives of children currently enrolled in school who participate most regularly in children's schooling. Parents participate by making monetary contributions to schools,

attending teacher conferences, and monitoring their children's studies and school attendance. In addition, only parents of current primary school students are allowed to join teachers as officers of the new PTAs, in accordance with the recent restructuring, and in contrast to the past, when influential community members and resource persons served on the SMCs. Many discussants welcomed this change, noting that other community members were still welcome to take part in general assembly meetings. However, as a teacher and a WEO said, ensuring that parents serve on the association with teachers created a new venue for positive teacher-parent collaboration.

There were a small number of notable exceptions to parent-only participation. While the vast majority of people who attend general assembly and other meetings at the school are indeed parents, other community members such as village chiefs, religious leaders, elders, local association members, health workers, youths, and others also participate in such gatherings. This was especially apparent in CSAP schools where the project had encouraged the school staff and SMCs to involve as many potential school allies as possible, and in the non-BESO school of Gedelo where the community at large had rallied around the effort to establish a new school for the village. School infrastructure projects also reportedly draw a wide base of community participation, as local craftsmen, youth, and other nonparents often volunteer their labor and materials. Efforts to increase and protect girls' education, as in the case of the communities that monitor girls' safety to and from school, also appeared to galvanize a wider base of participation.

In addition, it appears that parents on the PTA are more active in school management and wield greater decisionmaking power than parents who are not on the PTA. This is logical, given their mandate to represent the larger community. However, reports indicated that school-community collaboration occasionally begins and ends with the parent PTA officers who do not regularly consult with other parents and community members, keep others informed of school management decisions, or find ways to engage others more actively in additional domains of participation, such as teaching and learning. As a fourth-grade student in one CSAP school noted, "Only the PTA members come to the school, not parents in general." A father in the same school also reported that "after having elected our PTA, we don't come to the school in relation to student behavior, because now they take care of that — it's their responsibility."

Furthermore, while focus group discussants often spoke in general terms about how parents and community members participate, reports from school directors and teachers suggested that poorer community members who could not easily leave their fields and wage-earning jobs were less likely to attend general assemblies and other school meetings. It also appeared that parents and other community members with more education and more time to spare were more likely to be elected to the PTA and to wield decisionmaking power. One striking example of this dynamic was the case of one PTA that decided

to raise the amount of regular contributions required from each student in order to supplement a BESO grant for a school infrastructure project. In this case, the PTA officials were relatively wealthy town professionals, while the school itself served a wider population that included low wage-earning laborers and poor subsistence farmers. Several parent and student discussants in this school recounted the story, reporting that the new sum was more than the poorer parents could afford. While the amount was eventually lowered, some families still struggled to contribute this fee and the school director reportedly "chased" their children from the school, telling the children to stay at home until the amount was paid.

Finally, even in locales where many people responded to the call for focus groups and where the WEO, BESO agents, school staff, PTA members, students, and fathers produced evidence that the "community" was very active in schooling, women's involvement outside the home was consistently limited across these populations. Some mothers and other women in the community appeared actively engaged in providing time for children to study at home, monitoring work at home and school attendance, and occasionally supporting collective community-school improvement efforts. Outside the home, however, women were much less visible in their relations with the school. Students typically reported that teachers normally call their fathers or other male relatives to school in case of student absence, and few mothers serve on PTAs or participate in school planning meetings. In one particularly active CSAP community where the PTA had successfully led an income-generation project to fund infrastructure renovations, participants in the mothers' focus group revealed that they had never before been invited or encouraged to visit the school or take part in community-school meetings. "Today is a very big change, that we are participating in this way [by taking part in this discussion]," said one woman. The others agreed. "We are deprived of the right to speak when discussions are held with men," explained another discussant.

Despite exclusion from school affairs, these women and others insisted that they have an important contribution to make in addition to their support at home. For instance, the woman in the same active CSAP community gave the example of training they had received from the Ministry of Agriculture for effectively growing coffee and acacia trees. They reasoned that they could apply these skills to help the men improve the income-generating projects underway at the school. Women in another BESO school argued that they could become more involved in committees to support girls' education if the men welcomed their involvement. This sentiment was reflected in discussions with other women who, despite limited public involvement and recognition of their roles, expressed a clear devotion to their children's education and an ability to articulate their visions of quality schooling. One woman who had participated in meetings explained, "I participate . . . for the importance of my children, for myself, and for my community. For the development of my children, it is very, very important that I should come to the meetings."

## Factors Affecting Participation

In addition to describing the varying ways parents and communities participate in schooling, the people with whom I met also shared reasons why people participate. Parents in all group discussions declared that they become involved in schooling — when they have a choice — because of their belief in formal education and their desire to see their children succeed and prosper. "We are very much interested in educating our children," said one mother. "We don't want them to remain just like us." As another father explained, parents are motivated to contribute their time and resources to the school because "education itself is sunshine. It is light. After [students] have improved themselves, they will be able to help their local community."

Parents and nonparent community members also said that they feel compelled to become involved because they believe that by themselves, the school staff and government are incapable of ensuring that their children receive sufficient, quality schooling. Such was the case in one CSAP school where the government had stopped supplying books and other materials and parents ultimately agreed to a per-student levy to cover the costs. While many parents were reportedly upset at having to pay, one PTA member explained that "in the end people said, 'What else can we do? Do you take your children out of school and bring them home?'"

Discussants in nearly all groups also noted that while most people believe that community engagement could improve children's education, there are many factors that influence the extent of participation. These factors are both economic and social, and stem from relations within a school community as well as between the school and community and the government or other external actors.

Parents, teachers, SMC/PTA members, students, and WEOs all reported that the single biggest constraint to community participation in schooling is that often "people are simply too poor" to do more for the school. "I don't see that the community ever refuses when asked to contribute or do something for the school," said one WEO, "but the biggest problem is that the communities are very poor." One father corroborated this view, expressing a typical attitude among community members: "Families and parents would very much like to be involved in the school, but because of the economic situation, we have not been able to respond to the needs of our school to a full degree."

The fact that many discussants cited poverty as a principal constraint to participation was another indication that people commonly defined community participation in terms of monetary and material contributions. However, some discussants recognized that because parents and community members participate in other ways, this engagement need not be limited by financial means. "Although communities are very poor," reflected a WEO, "they won't retreat and refuse to participate." Table 3 presents the most common factors

TABLE 3   *Factors that Encourage Parental and Community Engagement in School, as Cited by Focus Group Discussants*

1. Encouragement from school staff to welcome and motivate parents to participate.
2. School staff expressing their respect for parents and the value of different community contributions to schooling.
3. More meetings among school staff, PTA, parents, and other community members.
4. Granting a small amount of financial resources to support school expenses and improvement projects.
5. Technical assistance to help PTAs manage schools better and facilitate parental/community involvement in activities such as the Girls Advisory Committee.

that influence community engagement, regardless of economic hardship, as cited by discussants.

Noting a disconnect, or "poor relations" that sometimes exist between school staff and community members, both parents and students claimed that teacher attitudes can have a significant influence on a parent's perceptions of whether participation is possible or worthwhile. Many parents contended that more appreciative attitudes would make community members more likely to become involved. One father summed it up this way: "The school has to encourage parents by using magic words such as 'you are important.' These compliments will help to conjure up good feeling towards the school."

Parents and others also noted that more meetings between the school staff, the PTA, and, crucially, with "ordinary" community members would improve relations between the different actors, increase parental and community understanding of schooling issues, and foster interest in participating in school improvement and support for children's studies. In one non-BESO school, one mother suggested that "the school needs to have meetings at least two to three times a year to transmit important issues and to give encouragement to parents — this will stimulate parent understanding and involvement." In a CGPP school, a PTA member testified that newly established monthly meetings in his school "have motivated the community to help the PTA to work more."

A number of discussants asserted that external financial assistance could be an important factor in stimulating parental and community engagement in schooling. In BESO sites, parents and teachers alike contended that even the small amount of the project's "incentive grants" was effective in eliciting feelings of ownership and increasing the community's engagement. As PTA discussants in one school reported, "When BESO gives a little money, it makes people participate. When the community participates, they think that the school belongs to them." One WEO explained that "CSAP ignites the engines, and then the community keeps on driving."

Speaking to the importance of leadership and technical assistance, a PTA member in one CSAP school contended that "it's not only the money, but

also various advice and comments" provided by the CSAP school development agents that lead to observed improvements. A teacher in another CSAP school explained that the SDA's ongoing support "helped teachers and parents come together, and it motivates us to take more action." In the non-BESO community of Gedelo, parents and other community members credited the director with helping to galvanize the population into action, resulting in the creation of a new school. Now, as one Gedelo PTA member said, "we make decisions with the director, and we invite the people to the school to discuss with us."

## Impact on Schooling Attributed to Parental and Community Engagement

In addition to reporting the actions, actors, and factors behind community participation, the people with whom I met described the current and potential effects of this engagement on schooling (Table 4).

### *Student Attendance and Learning*

As seen in Table 4, the most common benefits attributed to the involvement of parents and community members, beyond materials and infrastructure, relate to student preparedness for school and their motivation to learn. Many parents and students asserted that parental monitoring motivated students to study harder and take school more seriously. As one fourth-grade boy reported, "After my father came to school to see if I was there, I won't skip class now. Instead … I'll follow the teachers attentively." As another student said, "Parents should have to come to school in order to communicate with teachers regarding the problems of education and behavior of their students. If parents were to do that for us, it would be very good for the progress of the students." One woman explained the results of mothers' contributions by monitoring and providing moral support for their children's studies, reporting that "first, the students didn't have any knowledge or understanding, and now they saw that we help them to grasp some knowledge, and they see what they learned."

Additionally, teachers noted that they can teach more effectively when parents are more involved in monitoring their children's studies and visit the school more regularly. "When they come to school and see what we're up against," said one teacher, referring to a lack of materials and overcrowding in dilapidated classrooms, "they will understand our problems and will help to try to improve things." And when students are better behaved in the classroom because they know their parents are following their studies, school staff take their own job more seriously. "When students are more attentive," one teacher explained, "teachers are more motivated to follow the students' progress."

TABLE 4   *Perceived Real and Potential Positive Impact of Parental and Community Engagement in Schooling*

| Direct Impact Attributed to Engagement | Discussants Cited |
|---|---|
| *More Common Responses* | |
| When parents and other community members contribute money, materials, and labor, the school has basic supplies like chalk and better infrastructure, and sometimes more teachers | All discussants |
| When/if parents monitor their children's attendance and studying, students will try to do better at school | Primarily parents and students in nearly all schools |
| When/if parents consult with teachers, students will behave better and will not skip class | Teachers, students, SMC/PTA members |
| When/if parents and the community are involved, more girls are enrolled and staying in school | Students (especially girls), SMC/PTA members |
| When/if parents come to school, they will see the reality of the teaching-learning process, will understand the challenges teachers face, and will be able to identify problems and find solutions | Primarily teachers; also parents and students |
| *Less Common Responses* | |
| When parents monitor students more closely, the students are more attentive in class, and in turn the teachers teach them more carefully | Teachers |
| When/if members of the SMC/PTA visit the school regularly, they will be able to help discipline students | Parents |
| Parents will be able to make useful suggestions to the school director on what needs to be done to improve school quality (such as supplying enough text books or providing a recreation area) | Parents |
| When/if parents are called to the school, they will see the reality and then we will ask them to contribute money to make repairs | Head teacher |
| When/if parents come and participate in the ceremony for the closing of school, they will build good relations with the school | Students |
| When parents give labor and materials, they are also showing their moral support for the success of the school, which also helps improve it | Parents |

*Impact on Girls*

Discussants also noted that collaboration between parents and teachers can have a particular impact on girls with regard to enrollment and regular attendance. These collaborations can ensure greater safety traveling to and from school, which has been a problem in areas prone to abduction of girls for marriage. In one BESO school with an active PTA/Community Girls' Committee, school staff and community members successfully rescued one abducted girl, prosecuted the perpetrator, and helped the victim return to her studies. In another school, PTA members reported that "now parents understand the importance of schooling for girls, and as a result the number of girl students has gone up this year." This assertion was corroborated by students, including one girl who claimed to have benefited from the project's technical assistance in creating a school Female Affairs Committee. "At the beginning of the year, I had dropped out," the fourth grader reported, "but now since BESO's arrival, I started again. This is because my father participated in a meeting where they discussed the importance of sending girls to school."
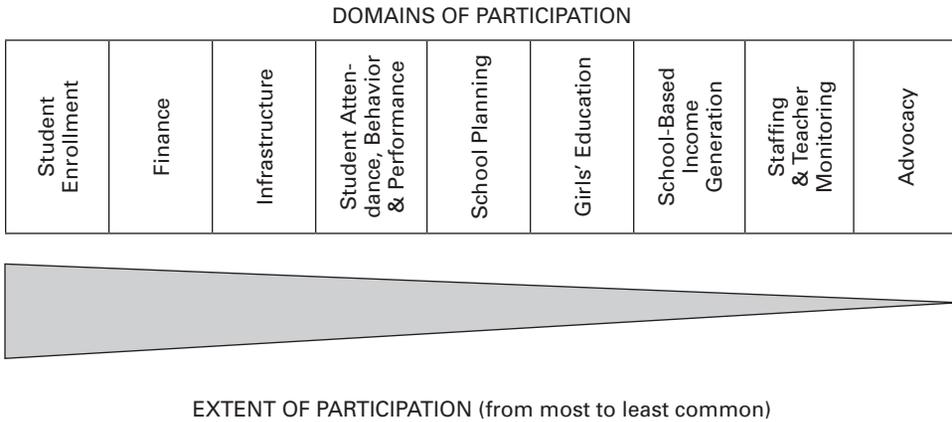
*Additional Benefits*

Other benefits of the involvement of parents and community members relate to their ability to help school staff formulate strategies to help improve schooling. For instance, parents in one community noted that in addition to, or in lieu of, contributing money, increased dialogue with school staff could help them determine together what needs to be done to improve school quality and how to take action to make these improvements. Students, who in all schools were eager to share their unique perspective on both teachers and parents, noted that parental participation in school meetings and ceremonies would build "good relations" between the community and the school, and that this was an important factor in itself.

## Discussion

My discussions with the communities in the SNNPR clearly indicate that while governments, NGOs, and funding agencies often employ the term "community participation" to refer to local engagement that benefits schooling access and quality, the definition in practice is more complex. When comparing the empirical evidence from the focus groups to the conceptual background for community participation, we see that participation is multifaceted. In Figure 1, I categorize the different domains of participation and illustrate the extent of participation in each of these domains as reported by discussants.

The findings regarding community participation have five implications for policy. Given that the most common form of participation is parental contributions of money and materials to the school, the first implication is that Ethiopian policy must take into account the differing abilities of parents and

FIGURE 1   *Relative Prevalence of Participation in Different Domains*

DOMAINS OF PARTICIPATION

| Student Enrollment | Finance | Infrastructure | Student Atten- dance, Behavior & Performance | School Planning | Girls' Education | School-Based Income Generation | Staffing & Teacher Monitoring | Advocacy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | |

EXTENT OF PARTICIPATION (from most to least common)

others to contribute materially. As focus group discussants and Woreda Education Officers noted, monetary and material contributions provide much needed resources for education while giving parents and community donors a sense of ownership of the school. Though the Ethiopian policy intends that such contributions be voluntary, commensurate with each community's means, and linked to democratic forms of school management that allow parents to have greater say in how their contributions are used (FDRE, 2002), the reality is often quite different.

The second implication is that more conscious, concerted effort is necessary if community participation is to consistently go beyond finance and infrastructure improvements. If governments, aid agencies, and NGOs wish to see participation in more domains, school staff and education officials need to respect parents and community members and expand their roles in school governance. In return, the findings suggest that if parents and community members are to become more involved in management and decisionmaking, especially around teacher hiring and evaluation practices, they must also show respect for instructors' technical expertise. In addition, safeguards are needed to ensure that decisionmaking is fair and transparent. Cases such as the Gedelo community suggest a strong correlation between open communication among all local education stakeholders and more extensive and positive participation.

The third implication is that greater participation depend**s** on leadership, potentially provided through an external catalyst. In the case of non-BESO Gedelo, the community was fortunate to have a school director with the leadership skills necessary to mobilize a broad-based community advocacy campaign that resulted in the opening of a new school. In BESO schools, it was the project's SDAs who helped to spark action, as most noticeably demon-

strated in the successful promotion of girls' education. These experiences suggest that some amount of leadership is necessary for parents and other community members to begin participating in non-traditional domains of school-community collaboration, such as teaching, and that this catalyst can be provided by outside facilitators when it does not already exist locally. Ministry of Education authorities at the national, regional, and local levels can help expand participation through explicit sanction of community involvement in school affairs and help school staff and community members identify more ways to work together to improve teaching and learning.[7]

Fourth, policies that promote "community participation" do not automatically translate to equal engagement of the women and the poor. On average, women and the poor appear to be less likely to participate in schooling and do so across fewer domains. The evidence that men typically participate in more public ways and to a greater extent than women should not minimize the contributions women make through actions such as monitoring their children's attendance and studies at home. School staff, PTA members, and active male community members, however, need to make a conscious effort to share information more widely with and welcome broader participation from women. This can be done through holding meetings during times that are more convenient for women (e.g., early evening between daytime and nighttime work). Similar efforts are necessary to ensure that community participation constitutes more than the engagement of a small number of parents who are often the wealthier and more influential members of the community.

Finally, education officials should consider how different types of participation may affect access to schooling and student learning. The findings suggest that not all forms of participation have a positive impact. For instance, material contributions are credited with improving and expanding infrastructure, which can ensure greater access to schooling. On the other hand, schools' insistence that parents pay school fees can limit children's access to school. Also, not all teacher-parent relationships are positive; in fact, negative interactions between teachers and parents may actually endanger children's persistence in school. The findings also reveal that some of the more subtle forms of participation, such as parental monitoring of student study at home and behavior at school, may ultimately have an equal or greater impact on student learning than more obvious forms of parental and community participation.

## Conclusion

Reports from the parents, students, teachers, and education authorities I met in southern Ethiopia clearly indicate that community participation in education is a great deal more complex than the term alone typically suggests. Forms of participation can vary widely according to both the domain and

the extent of participation, as well as in terms of *who* in the community is engaged. The evidence also suggests that community participation in schooling can indeed contribute to increasing educational access and quality, but its impact varies according to form and is not automatically positive. These conclusions have important implications for policies and programs in Ethiopia and elsewhere that aim to promote community participation, particularly in the areas of decentralization and school finance policy, girls' education, and student learning. Above all, the findings demonstrate that one cannot take the term "community participation" at face value. Governments, aid agencies, NGOs, activists and local stakeholders may all use the phrase, but without a closer look behind the discourse one cannot assume to know how community participation is currently manifested or the nature of participation being promoted.

In Ethiopia, the government explicitly and officially states that community participation is intended to cover a number of domains and lead to "local ownership" of schools. The policy documents and testimonies of local education officials, however, are also clear that this ownership is intended to translate first and foremost into cost-sharing arrangements between the state and parents of students. In countries as resource-poor as Ethiopia, where the demand for schooling greatly surpasses the current supply and basic infrastructure is a precious commodity, such strategies are understandable. The findings from this study also suggest that when parents and other community members contribute material resources, they do indeed feel a greater sense of investment and ownership over the school, and this initial kind of participation may lead to greater depth of participation in other domains. However, a danger arises when the use of community participation has the effect of conjuring up images of local empowerment and decisionmaking in schooling but instead is realized in a form that taxes the community beyond its ability, or even enables governments to shirk their responsibility and mandate to be the guarantors of public education.

Ultimately, the kind of participation that is likely to be the most sustainable and effective in increasing both educational access and quality is one based on balanced partnerships between the state and communities, as suggested by Bray (2000). The 1994 policy of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in fact reflects this idea when it called for schools to be "democratized and run with the participation of the community, the teachers, the students and the relevant government institutions" (Transitional Government of Ethiopia, 1994, pp.16–17). If such policy ultimately translates into balanced partnerships between the government and a wide array of community actors who have the space to express their views about schooling and apply their strengths and values to support it in a variety of ways, such collaboration could indeed help to improve educational access and quality in the country — regardless of the political party in power.

## Notes

1. Several people have been instrumental in the development of this study. I would like to thank Joshua Muskin, former World Learning senior education advisor, for his collaboration in the design and theoretical framework for my research. In addition, Robert Gurevich, World Learning/Ethiopia chief of party, and James Williams, director of the International Education program at George Washington University, each provided crucial feedback and support. I am also indebted to the World Learning/Ethiopia staff and my chief field assistant, Adile Legesse, who assisted and guided me during my field work. Finally, I wish to thank the school staff, education officials, and members of the Sidama and Kembata Tembaro communities that lent their invaluable time and insight to this exploration. The World Bank and the George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs sponsored a portion of this research.

2. Detailed descriptions of the project and its mechanisms can be found in Rowley (2001) and World Learning (2002).

3. These indicators were developed by a three-year, multistakeholder consultation process led by the Guinean Ministry of Education, culminating in a national consensus on the definition of a "quality school." Guinean education authorities, in collaboration with local communities, use these indicators to evaluate schools and create annual action plans. The Fundamental Quality and Equity Levels (FQEL) project (1997–2005) was sponsored by USAID.

4. "Community" is a highly complex concept with a considerable body of literature debating its meaning (see, e.g., Burkey, 1996). For the purposes of this study, I use "community" to refer to the residents of the villages served by a given sample school, roughly equivalent to the *kebele* level of Ethiopian administration. Participation of the community in this way thus refers to the full gamut of nongovernmental actors within these geographic parameters, rather than members of local-level governmental bodies such as the kebele council.

5. It is important to note that this sample does not include school-communities involved in BESO's Popular Participation in Curriculum and Instruction (PoPCI) pilot activity, which promoted collaboration between teachers and community resource people to create and deliver lessons on local trades and traditions. Had PoPCI schools been included, discussants from these communities may have reported additional forms of parental and community participation not cited in this study. While these potential additional forms of participation may have served as examples of what is possible under very unusual conditions related to the PoPCI intervention, PoPCI schools were not included in the sample because of the very small pilot nature of the project and the likelihood that these different forms would be anomalies beyond the scope of the current study.

6. Regarding translation and citations: All focus group discussions were conducted in the local language of the participants and translated simultaneously into English. I would often ask my field assistant to translate a statement back into local language for the interlocutor to confirm the accuracy. Due to the linguistic diversity in the SNNPR, it was occasionally necessary to translate questions and responses through more than one translator and language; in these cases, translations were necessarily summarized. In all cases, I attempted to transcribe translations with as much accuracy as possible but with abbreviation as necessary. While the citations I use in this article cannot be considered verbatim quotes, I nonetheless believe that they are accurate representations of the actual statements. Furthermore, I credit citations to more than one discussant (as in, "students in one school said…") in cases where the group was in general agreement.

7. The World Learning PoPCI pilot project has experimented with such collaboration.

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