

# Politics of participation: parental support for children's learning and school governance in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda

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## The Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary Schools (ILOPS) Project | Research report on parental participation

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# Acronyms

<b>CESCR</b>	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>CONFEMEN</b>	Conference of Ministers of Education of the Francophonie (Conférence des Ministres de l'Éducation des pays ayant le français en partage)
<b>CRC</b>	Covenant on the Rights of the Child
<b>EFA</b>	Education for All
<b>EFA-FTI</b>	Education for All – Fast Track Initiative
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>ILOPS</b>	Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary Schools Project
<b>IoE</b>	Institute of Education, University of London
<b>MAPSA</b>	Malawi Parent Association
<b>MoE</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>PA</b>	Parents' Associations
<b>PASEC</b>	Programme for Analysing Education Systems (Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Éducatifs)
<b>PC</b>	Parents' Councils
<b>PLE</b>	Primary Leaving Exam
<b>PTA</b>	Parent Teacher Association
<b>SACMEQ</b>	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
<b>SMC</b>	School Management Committee
<b>TU</b>	Teachers' Unions
<b>UPE</b>	Universal Primary Education

# Executive summary

**In 2008, ActionAid, the Institute of Education, University of London (IoE) and partners in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda undertook collaborative research to explore the role of parents and teachers in improving children's learning. The Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary Schools (ILOPS) Project was supported by the *Quality Education in Developing Countries Initiative* of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Project brought together key stakeholders – parents, teachers, teachers' unions, education coalitions, research institutes and Ministry officials – to conduct the research. It was hoped that by working together, each group's unique views would contribute to a deeper understanding of the range of learning outcomes over and above traditional test results. In turn, it was intended that the collaboration would lead to the development of practical and feasible ways to improve learning where each stakeholder has a clearly defined role.**

The ILOPS research explores the different ways in which parents participate in school, including their interaction with teachers and within communities. Research teams also examined how parents support children's learning at home. In turn, the teams set out to understand more about teachers' and pupils' views on parental involvement in school and to what extent recruitment and training policies actually encourage or support parents in actively improving the quality of education. Researchers also explored how these efforts directly or indirectly influence learning outcomes.

In total, the research teams conducted over 6,850 stakeholder interviews at the national level and across 240 schools located within two districts in each country. Once analysed and examined within country, these localised findings were compared and contrasted with current thinking on each issue, as noted in our light-touch literature and resource review (Edge et al., 2009a) and in the end-of-project evaluation (Edge et al., 2009b). This research brief summarises the ILOPS research findings on parental participation and support. The methodology (Edge et al., 2010) and teacher quality (Marphatia et al., 2010) briefs respectively share details of the participatory research approach and the outcomes of the teacher related research adopted by ILOPS.

The overall cross-national findings show that only a small minority of parents actively participate in schools. In these schools, parents may visit as frequently as nine times a year and on their own initiative. In some cases, the purpose of these visits can go beyond

financial contributions and discipline issues to observing teaching strategies and tracking students' progress. Some parents are also active in school governance matters, recognising the challenges faced by teachers. In Senegal, researchers note that active parental engagement is more prominent in higher performing schools. They also observe that these parents make particular efforts to reduce domestic chores for children at home and, where possible, take on tutors to support learning.

There is a clear need to create opportunities for sharing strategies that enable deeper parental involvement across more diverse groups of parents. By and large, the ILOPS Project data suggest that the majority of parents interact with schools in an inconsistent and unpredictable manner. Parental involvement is mostly limited to attending meetings initiated by school staff. Discussions with teachers, if they occur, are limited to enrolment or exam times. Parents do not actively influence school management nor do they work with community leaders to hold schools accountable for improving learning. The study also found that parents have limited knowledge of their children's learning requirements, other than the obvious need for basic supplies of books, pens and uniforms. There is also very little monitoring of children's performance or dialogue around teaching and learning strategies.

The ILOPS research teams found that parents are typically unaware or confused about their roles and responsibilities related to their children's education.

This is partly due to the ambiguity of the local and national education policies related to parental engagement and a lack of clear focus in official programmes designed to enhance the roles of parents and other stakeholders. The findings show that, although there is a history of capacity-building efforts in support of greater parental and community involvement in education, most have focused narrowly on sensitising parents to the importance of education, especially of girls, or on encouraging parents to contribute either in-kind or financially to schools. The teams found few initiatives aimed at building parents' awareness of their role in improving learning and teaching strategies. As such, parental engagement in schools has not been sustained over time nor has it led to a marked improvement in children's learning. Even in instances where policies have created a larger role for parents with respect to school matters (e.g. in Uganda), parents rarely feel confident in their own abilities to fulfil these requirements. This is particularly acute where parents are not literate themselves –either because they never went to school or they dropped out early.

Participation is a two-way street. The ILOPS research shows that teachers, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committee (SMC) members play a key role in both encouraging and dissuading parental involvement. Most teachers are keen to engage with parents but are wary of encouraging them to monitor teaching and learning as this gives parents too much power over them. Local power dynamics, which may make school governing

bodies appear inaccessible to parents, often do not encourage participation either. Many parents are given the impression that school governance is a technical matter that is best left to those who understand it – and that teaching and learning are the ‘business of schools and teachers’ and should not be interfered with. Territoriality, combined with a lack of transparency and accountability, intimidate parents who opt out of participating and end up playing less meaningful roles. Based on the ILOPS data, many community leaders and headteachers as well as education administrators see parents as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. Therefore, it is not surprising that parents do not feel encouraged to deepen their involvement in schools.

The fact that parents do not feel strongly linked to schools, where some of their children spend the bulk of their days and growing years, is a cause for concern. Based on ILOPS data, parents hold many divergent views about what schools should be doing. However, parents often do not openly articulate their perspectives for at least two reasons. First, they do not feel empowered to do so, and secondly, even if they did, the appropriate spaces have not been created in which they can safely share these views. During the ILOPS data collection process, many parents suggested that education falls significantly short of their expectations of creating ‘well-rounded’ individuals. This may either mean that children are not learning locally relevant skills or that schools are not paying sufficient attention to parents’ values or beliefs. Textbooks that are rarely linked to issues in the local

environment and in which local livelihoods are never touched on deepen this frustration. Often local languages or culture are largely ignored which further exacerbates frustrations. The overall effect is the alienation of parents from schools and a diminished possibility of education becoming more relevant and holistic for children. When children fail to learn basic literacy skills, it is unsurprising that parents start to question the value or importance of education overall. The ILOPS evidence demonstrates that there is an urgent need to build new bridges and involve parents more in the life of schools if this loss of communication and trust is not to create an even wider gulf between parents and education systems.

To ensure progressive and meaningful opportunities for parents to engage in schools, policy-making spaces must be opened for parents and other actors. Wider consultation on roles and responsibilities, including government obligations, must take place so policies become more representative of reality and facilitate more empowered involvement in education. A greater effort to popularise policies by making them available in more accessible formats and in local languages as well as backing them up with adequate resources and training is most important.

Schools, and particularly individual teachers, can create the frameworks to broaden parental participation in education. They can help parents to understand what happens in the classroom, share their concerns and jointly develop ideas on how children can be better supported at home, even where parents lack literacy



themselves. Teachers can also benefit from a closer connection with parents – which can inform them about other factors impacting on learning or children’s behaviour in class such as health, family context and social situation. The role of teachers’ unions in facilitating this connection is also a key issue.

The ILOPS findings provide a solid framework for follow-on activities to better support parental participation in schools, and in their children’s learning. In participating countries, following the final analysis of the ILOPS data, the multi-stakeholder research teams emphasise the importance of creating more regular opportunities for parents, teachers, communities, students, NGOs, unions and the Ministry to discuss each other’s roles and how they can work together to improve learning outcomes. Examples include adult learning opportunities for parents that combine literacy, participatory learning and community empowerment approaches. These initiatives have been coupled with a joint elaboration of a survey to monitor children’s learning outcomes, both in terms of examinations as well as holistic skills.

The ILOPS findings provide a platform to discuss what else children should be learning to make school relevant to the local community and economy, and how each stakeholder can contribute to achieving these goals. Overall, the process of engaging stakeholders to work together to improve learning is the start of a different way of working – one that, if systematically followed and regularly assessed, can minimise the gap between policy and practice.



# Context

Parents play a crucial role in nurturing their children's educational aspirations. They provide financial support, facilitate attendance and encourage achievement. For teachers, parents can serve as educational allies by assisting them in developing pupils' full academic potential and monitoring the quality of teaching and teaching strategies. Parents can not only play an important role in building relationships between schools and communities but also, in the current policy context of decentralisation, serve as decision-makers. This is particularly true with the re-emergence of community-managed education, which often promotes increased community ownership of schools. However, these perceived/expected parental contributions do not always materialise in homes, schools and communities. Research and experience demonstrates the haphazardness with which these roles are fulfilled and the inconsistency of parental engagement both in schools and the overall education process.

There appears to be discord between how parents understand and perceive their roles in schools compared to how other stakeholders interpret these very roles. Often, the policy dialogue around parental responsibilities fails to include parent representatives in the discussions, extends beyond what can be reasonably expected of parents or limits parental involvement to financial and in-kind contributions. These types of contributions have historically not automatically led to increasing parental involvement in decision-making/school governance. There is also anecdotal evidence that even where parents have been given greater decision-making powers, few are fully aware of their potential to influence their children's schools and systems. There are also some contexts where too much responsibility has been handed over to parents, leading to situations of conflict where other stakeholders are absolved of any meaningful role in education. The influence of this varied involvement on children's learning is not easy to monitor, research and/or understand.

The current state of research and understanding of parental engagement, especially in developing countries, implies that there is an urgent need to better understand parental perspectives of schooling in different contexts, particularly in terms of what they think education can do for their children based on their own educational experience. It would appear that these very factors are closely linked to why primary completion and achievement rates remain so low. Based on ILOPS data, in Burundi and Uganda only 38% and 28% of children respectively complete primary school. In Malawi, the percentage is equally low: 32% of boys and 27% of girls. In Senegal, it is slightly higher, 56.5% for boys and 55% for girls.

Similarly, international assessments of literacy and numeracy achievement across the four countries highlight the need to not only understand the experience of students, parents and teachers but also the teaching and learning processes in school and at home. When exploring parental participation, it is important to understand what influences parents' decisions to invest or not in their children's education.

In order to explain the reasons for these low achievement levels, in 2008, ActionAid, the IoE and partners in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda conducted research into the roles of parents and teachers in improving children's learning outcomes in each country using a multi-stakeholder team approach. The 18-month project, *Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary Schools* (ILOPS) was supported by the Quality Education in Developing Countries Initiative of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. ILOPS aimed to provide a better understanding of the current landscape surrounding stakeholder participation by closely documenting existing roles. Researchers also sought to understand the environment in which parents and children live on a daily basis, including how income levels, working conditions and cultural factors influence parental

interaction with schools and support for children's learning. The ILOPS team also explored parents' confidence in their own ability to assist their children with their learning, interact with teachers, take part in school governance and engage in wider debates on education policy. This approach involved raising awareness for the need to create genuine space for parents to participate effectively and work together with pupils, communities, teachers, unions, coalitions and the government to improve children's learning outcomes.



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# The ILOPS participatory methodology

**In 2008, the ILOPS research effort began with the identification of partners at the national, district and local levels. The Project brought together national multi-stakeholder teams involving national and local education coalitions, national research institutes, teachers' unions, teachers, parents, pupils and, where possible, the Ministry of Education.**

### Research process

During February and March 2008, country teams exchanged ideas on the broad range of issues the research would address at both the national and local level regarding the actual state of play of parental participation, teacher quality and learning outcomes. During the initial international and national consultation, five broad areas of interest were identified: (a) how parents, community members, teachers and policy-makers contribute to the education system; (b) the roles each of the stakeholders expected each other to fulfil and areas of discord between these expectations; (c) how they could be supported to work together; (d) how they defined a good quality teacher and their expectations of teachers; and (e) how they understand what children learn, and if these outcomes meet their educational expectations.

In April 2008, a group of key national-team ILOPS members from each of the four countries attended the Sesse Island (Uganda) Workshop to launch the ILOPS project. In total, 54 people, including five partners from each country representing the national and district education coalitions, national research institutes, teachers' unions, parents' associations and ActionAid staff, gathered to build on the initial consultation about the focus of the research. During the five-day workshop, they collectively designed the research instruments and agreed upon a methodology for conducting the research in each country. The research tools were designed to collect data on the state of play of parental engagement, teacher quality and learning outcomes at the national and local levels. During the workshop, each tool was tested and refined through visits to local Bujumba and Bwendero communities and Kibanga and Kinyumara schools. Based on these pilot tests, research instruments were further adapted, tested and translated in each country in April and May.

During the following months, within each country, data on parental involvement was collected at the



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## Box 1

### Using the *Reflect* approach to involve parents in the ILOPS research

The engagement of parents in conducting the local-level research and responding to the questions was facilitated by community based organisations and *Reflect* facilitators who were supported by the national research institute. The *Reflect* approach is an innovative methodology inspired by the political philosophy of Paulo Freire. It combines adult literacy, participatory learning and action techniques with community empowerment approaches.

In the ILOPS project, the overall goal of *Reflect* was to raise parents' awareness of their roles and responsibilities in relation to schools and the education of their children. Current *Reflect* methodology was used to enable illiterate and semi-literate parents to participate in the design and collection of data, the analysis of findings and subsequent action planning. During the survey, parents and other researchers spoke with other stakeholders about their understanding of learning outcomes, what they expect their children to learn at school, what their role should be in their children's learning, how they can support the learning process and how they can participate in school management.

In *Reflect* processes adult learners develop their own learning materials by constructing maps, calendars, matrices, diagrams or use drama, story telling, songs and role plays to examine social, economic, political and cultural issues from their own environment. *Reflect* specifically works with attitudes and behaviour to foster social change. In the ILOPS Project, visual tools developed by the learners were used to structure and stimulate discussion. For example, Venn diagrams and a preferential matrix helped to identify and rank the determinants of student success by importance. These methods were used not only to elicit responses to the survey questions but also to involve parents in critical discussion about roles and responsibilities.

This participatory approach was an eye-opener for the team of partners who joined parents in doing the research. It challenged their preconceptions of participation and knowledge. During the final project evaluation, one partner explained,

*What's most interesting is that illiterate parents, through the research, were able to give their opinion... Working with teachers and parents, sometimes (those who can't read), in this participative process, that was very...very exhilarating. We realised it was possible to include lay communities in an action research process where they used their own values and their own knowledge and experience. For them to keep learning at the same time. I think that was unique.*

(Edge et al., 2009b 13)

As a result, parents are showing more interest in schools and discussing their own and other stakeholders' roles. The *Reflect* facilitators are now working with the 'Reflect circles' (the basic unit of organisation of a *Reflect* programme – a group of *Reflect* participants who meet together on a regular basis with a facilitator to carry out *Reflect* activities) to engage basic education power holders in creating responsive, participatory and accountable systems of management and governance. Links are forming between budget monitoring and tracking learning outcomes with training being provided for adult learners to effectively track school performance and outcomes. Community training manuals for *Reflect* facilitators and parents on participatory school governance were developed by Pamoja (the Africa *Reflect* network) in both Uganda and Senegal.

**For more information on *Reflect* visit the website:  
[www.reflect-action.org](http://www.reflect-action.org)**

national/district level from a total of 240 schools and surrounding communities. In-country, the selection of districts and schools was based on geography, poverty levels, achievement rates, teacher profiles and where either ActionAid or partners were already familiar with communities and schools. The following districts were included: Bururi and Karusi (Burundi); Machinga and Mchinji (Malawi); Foundiougne and Tambacounda (Senegal); and Kalangala and Masindi (Uganda). The teams in Senegal and Burundi selected their 60 schools (30 per district) based on low and high student achievement levels. Malawi picked the 60 schools according to the percentage of trained and volunteer teachers because information on the learning outcomes was not available at the national level. Uganda chose schools by location (rural and peri-urban).

In total, 6,850 stakeholders were interviewed, including: 199 headteachers; 1,591 teachers; 1,636 parents; 1,929 pupils; 604 SMC/PTA members; 808 community leaders; 38 national-level and 45 district-level decision-makers. Data collection took place in focus group discussions at home, in community settings and home visits.

Upon completion of the data collection process, national-level workshops were held to jointly analyse the national- and local-level preliminary data. In addition to the core national and local teams of researchers, Ministry officials, academics and other key partners participated in these sessions, which provided greater ownership and accountability of the findings. In turn, these sessions also facilitated the identification of activities for future policy and practice interventions and initiatives.

In November 2008, the original 54 Sesse Island Workshop participants gathered in Bujumbura, Burundi for a week-long workshop to share findings from the research, make cross-country comparisons and prepare follow-on plans for a three-year project.

After this workshop, through to June 2009, each country team also conducted several activities in which they shared the findings (in the form of research reports and policy briefs) from the research at the national, district, community and school levels. The overall goal of these discussions was to engage a broader section of civil society in discussing the results and debating potential solutions for improving learning outcomes, increasing parental involvement and teacher quality and strengthening education policy. Box 1 explains the strategies ILOPS researchers used to engage parents both as researchers and respondents.



Peterik Wigns/Panos Pictures/ActionAid

# Current knowledge on parental participation

**One of the goals of the ILOPS project was to gain deeper insight into how parents engage in schools and the potential influence this involvement has on student achievement through the available literature.<sup>1</sup> The key findings from the commissioned light-touch resource and literature review structured the data collection strategies and created the foundation for the analysis of the national and local-level findings. The themes presented within this section emerged from the review.**

## Research literature on factors influencing parental participation

The array of activities undertaken by parents in support of education in the North and South are structured around two dominant perceptions of parental participation. One strand of work separates the roles and function of the family, school and community (Epstein, 2001; Keyes, 2002; Sheldon, 2002) and the other strand views these three areas as ‘spheres of influence’ on children’s learning and development (Epstein, 2001, based on work of other scholars including Dearing et al., 2006; Driessen et al., 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Nettles et al., 2008; Waanders et al., 2007). The extent to which parents participate in their children’s education at home, in school and within the wider community is further influenced by individual and institutional beliefs and practices.

In practical and programmatic terms, these spheres of influence can be categorised into different levels of participation based in school, at home and between teachers and parents (Epstein, 2001). The literature offers examples of activities parents undertake at these levels in different regions of the world (Edge et al., 2009a). The authors of the literature review conclude that, based on the available information, studies in the USA tend to look at the role of parents within the school and at home, often focusing very closely on links to student academic development. The existing literature from the South has focused more on governance issues related to school-based management and decentralisation. In Africa, specifically, the literature places more emphasis on parental roles in financing education and participation in school-level decision-making as opposed to parental involvement with their own children’s learning.

The findings highlight a range of factors that influence parental decisions and their ability to engage in school, making it necessary to understand the context within which parents live and work. This is one area in which the literature, which is primarily Northern-based, needs to be substantiated from a ‘Southern’ perspective and where the ILOPS Project intended to make a contribution. The research shows that parental participation is linked to socioeconomic status (Seymour, 2007). The environment in which parents and children live, including their income levels, working conditions and cultural factors all tend to influence how much time is available to parents and thus their levels of contribution. These factors, when combined with parental literacy levels (Waanders et al., 2007) and their knowledge, skills and attitudes, further influence their decision and ability to participate (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Factors that influence parental participation include: parents’ own attitudes towards schools and education (Lawson, 2003) and the cultural differences between home and schools and the cultural and emotional politics of teacher–parent interactions (Lasky, 2000).

<sup>1</sup> This and all other references in this paper are cited from the literature review by Edge et al. (2009a). The full review, which is published alongside the four comparative briefs, summarised 100 (out of a total of 573 identified) relevant articles on the factors that make parents decide to participate in their children’s schools, and the influence of this participation on student learning outcomes.

**Confidence in one's ability influences levels of interaction.**

The literature review revealed that parents' personal perceptions of their own efficacy regarding their ability to support their children or engage in schools play a significant part in determining the level or extent of their involvement both within schools and at home (Weiss et al., 2003; Waanders et al., 2007). This 'sense of efficacy' refers to a belief in one's ability to act in ways that will produce desired results (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parental confidence in their ability to contribute was highlighted as one of the underlying reasons behind parental motivation and any eventual decision to participate in their children's education. In other words, if parents are confident about their abilities and think they have a positive role to play in their children's education, they will act on it. Parental attitudes and perceptions of themselves and their own capacity to engage partly influence and determine the kinds of actions they undertake (Lawson, 2003). This sense of value related to their contribution also seems to be linked to parental beliefs about their roles in relation to their children's education.

**Clarifying roles and encouraging other stakeholders enhances participation.**

Parental lack of awareness of the roles expected of them, and their obligations towards education can be attributed to weak policy frameworks and poor communication of these expectations. In both cases, these factors can negatively influence their ability to engage in a positive and rewarding way (Sheldon, 2002). When attempting to engage in their schools, recurring setbacks can possibly lead to a sense of frustration in parents, producing a feeling of powerlessness. This is especially true for parents who are illiterate, have low education levels or have had bad experiences in schools (Hoover-Dempsey, 1997).

The research literature highlights that social networks associated with schools and the wider community are important influences that can either limit or encourage parental participation. For instance, Sheldon (2002) found that the size of the social network and support from community leaders predicated the degree to which parents are involved at home and in school. Similarly, positive encouragement by teachers and a desire by headteachers to build close relationships with parents tends to lead to more active involvement of parents (Jeynes, 2005).

The literature also shows that teachers have the largest effect on parental involvement at home, in school and in parent-teacher associations (Anderson and Minke, 2007; Feuerstein, 2000). However, the extent to which teachers encourage parental participation also depends on how they view their own roles (Pang and Watkins,

2000). For example, Lawson (2003) found that teachers and parents differ in their perceptions and expectations of each other. While both groups agree on the support their collaboration can lend to children's learning, Bhering's Brazilian study (2002) found that teachers do not necessarily encourage parents to implicate themselves in teaching and learning processes.

**Influence of parental participation on children's learning outcomes.**

Research generally supports the positive correlation between parental involvement and children's learning outcomes. However, many of the positive associations found in the studies are purely correlational and causal links cannot be assumed. Moreover, as stated earlier, most of this research has been conducted in semi-urban settings in the USA and other western jurisdictions where more supportive structures often exist to facilitate parental participation. Some studies show positive associations between parental involvement and support for children's academic achievement both at school and within the home (Jeynes, 2005).

When parents are involved in schools, however, research shows how children's literacy improves regardless of the limitations posed by parent's own (low) educational achievement and thus their ability to help their children learn (Dearing et al., 2006). There are many strategies used to engage parents with low levels of literacy and there is a need to test, evaluate and, in turn, systematise those who show real potential in developing countries. In particular, the literature highlights the need to recognise that the pedagogical processes suitable for adults (sometimes called androgogy) need to be used to educate and support parents if they are to better understand and engage in the learning processes of their own children.

**Implications of the literature review on the ILOPS research**

The ILOPS research adopted the three spheres of influence highlighted in the literature to organise the data collection. Data collection sought to gather information on (a) how parents and the home environment influence learning; (b) how parents contribute to schools; and (c) how parents work. This structure enabled the ILOPS team to identify the links or areas of influence between these efforts, potential areas of discord and opportunities for increasing parental participation so children's learning improves. The evidence from the ILOPS Project is intended to contribute to a better understanding of why and for what reasons parents decide to participate or abstain from engaging in schools.



## SECTION 2

# The role of national policy frameworks in promoting parental participation

**This section summarises the data collected during the parental participation strand of the national-level research in each of the four ILOPS countries. The research explored current national policy and the trends and patterns in parental participation within and across each country.**

### National policy frameworks on parental participation in education

A clear definition on the roles that parents fulfil with respect to education is difficult to find in the available literature. International human rights law, to which these four governments are signatory, stipulates that governments and parents have different obligations, which, when combined, can achieve children's right to quality education. Governmental obligations are defined and revolve around providing the various inputs and processes required to achieve a good quality education, often defined by the '4As': availability; accessibility; acceptability; and adaptability.<sup>2</sup>

Further details on how parents should contribute to education are largely left to national policy-makers and decision-makers. In turn, often the information on parental participation is limited and remains inaccessible to parents as it rests within national-level paperwork discussing parental roles. One role that is not always pronounced in these documents, but which is recognised in international law, is the right that parents and communities have to hold the state and schools accountable for ensuring that education policies, systems and structures respond to the 4As. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights says that '*States parties are obliged to establish "minimum educational standards" to which all*

*educational institutions established in accordance with article 13 (3) and (4) are required to conform. They must also maintain a transparent and effective system to monitor such standards'* (CESCR General Comment 13, para 54). With regard to accessing information about legislation and obligations, the Covenant on the Rights of the Child says, '*State parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Covenant widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike'* (CRC art. 42). The CRC further states, '*In this respect, the Committee emphasizes the role of national-level monitoring which seeks to ensure that children, parents and teachers can have an input in decisions relevant to education'* (General Comment 1, para 22).

The four ILOPS countries vary considerably in policy pronouncements on parental involvement in education. At the national level, the constitution and/or education policy defines or establishes parameters around the level and extent of parental participation in schools, which is partly determined by the history, policy (political) environment and cultural context of each country. Ideally, national and district education policies should provide incentives, guide and support parental involvement in schools. A sample of the parental participation policies and expectations from the ILOPS countries is presented in Table 1. Overall, this information shows that in practice these international stipulations are not systematically implemented.

Table 1

**National and district policies addressing parental participation in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda**

Country	National Education Policy and Constitutional Articles on Parental Participation	Enforceable?
<b>BURUNDI</b>	<p>Sectorial Plan for the Development of Education and Training – PSDEF (efforts to finalise a 10-year plan were underway in 2009 and would facilitate endorsement from the Education for All-Fast Track Initiative):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legislation 1/10 and Constitution articles 19, 52 and 53 recognise the right to education but do not specify it to be free nor who is responsible for its implementation</li> <li>• Education Sector Plans of 1995, 1999 and 2002 aimed for full enrolment by 2010 and the 2006 plan envisions universal education by 2015</li> <li>• In 2005, elimination of primary school fees and parental role in constructing schools formalised</li> <li>• In 2009, a new policy transferring funds directly to schools stipulates that any fees asked by headteachers of parents should be reimbursed</li> <li>• Parents are still expected to make financial and in-kind contributions for school building, maintenance and to support personnel salaries. Parents seen to have a larger role in school management and oversight of funds</li> <li>• State encourages parent councils and school-level parent committees. Education Sector Plan encourages a ‘General Assembly of Parents’ and SMCs to define school needs, determine allocation of funds and provide oversight of school treasury, fundraise, connect schools and parents, and maintain/build schools. State does not provide training or orientation to parents to assume these roles</li> <li>• National Association of Parents elected by parent committees. They advise the government when asked. They do not have any links with local parents’ associations or school councils</li> <li>• District education committees are supposed to bring the above Committees together but are not functional, with most major decisions are still made by the MoE.</li> </ul>	No, there is no ‘education policy’ or ‘law’ holding the state accountable
<b>MALAWI</b>	<p>National Education Policy: primary education is free and mandatory  <i>District level:</i> Free and not mandatory            National Strategy for Community Participation in Primary School Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocates for sustainable participation beyond provision of bricks, towards whole school development and management of children’s education</li> <li>• Aims to create enabling environment and coordinated support mechanisms for parental involvement in provision and management of educational services but creates no forum for interaction with district and national-level policy-makers</li> <li>• Government in consultation with relevant stakeholders to establish guidelines for the working relationship between PTAs, TUs and SMCs.</li> </ul>	No, as education is not ‘compulsory’
<b>SENEGAL</b>	<p>Decennial Plan for Education and Training (PDEF, 2000)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2002, PDEF decree (no. 2002–652) mandated formation of SMC</li> <li>• In 2004, a new article 3a under legislation 2004–37 further obligates the state to provide free education mandatory for all children aged 6 to 16. This is termed as ‘progressive realisation’ through necessary resources before 2010</li> <li>• Parents ‘obligated’ to ensure children attend school until the age of 16. Includes covering indirect costs of schooling</li> <li>• Several organised bodies to facilitate parental participation exist but none has access to policy-making spaces: National Association of Parents; local parents’ associations; local Association of Mothers of School Children.</li> </ul>	<p>Only where an offer of public education exists within reasonable distance from home</p> <p>In practice this legislation is not reinforced</p>

*Continued over the page*

Table 1 (continued)

Country	National Education Policy and Constitutional Articles on Parental Participation	Enforceable?
UGANDA	<p>Education is a public service, free and mandatory at the primary and secondary levels. Universal Primary Education Policy (1997) describes parents' roles at home, in schools, in the community and in support of children's learning:</p> <p><i>School</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial and in-kind contributions for school improvement permitted</li> <li>• Monitor, hold schools accountable for income and expenditures</li> <li>• Develop relationships with teachers and participate in PTAs</li> <li>• Monitor attendance and performance of children</li> <li>• Participate in school programmes, mobilisation efforts.</li> </ul> <p><i>Home</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents to provide basic requirements and survival needs such as food, health care, clothing, learning materials, transport</li> <li>• Create safe, nurturing, disciplined environment in support of children's affective, emotional and physical development</li> <li>• Balance home responsibilities with time for studying and support learning at home.</li> </ul> <p><i>Community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage local chairperson to support school programmes.</li> </ul>	<p>Yes, it is 'illegal' for parents to pay school and PTA fees</p>

Source: ActionAid Burundi (2009); ActionAid Malawi (2009); ActionAid Senegal (2009a); and ActionAid Uganda (2009b)

### The role of national policies in encouraging parental participation

ILOPS national research teams shared the policy pronouncements in Table 1 with parents and communities to determine how familiar they were with these expectations and to seek their perspectives on how realistically they could fulfil these roles.

**Parental awareness of policies and mandated roles.** Across all four countries, parents demonstrated a consistent lack of awareness of the full content of education policies. For example, while parents are aware of education being free and mandatory (and therefore they no longer need to provide school fees), they remain unaware of the roles and responsibilities that the policies formally ascribe to them with respect to school-level engagement and governance issues. This trend may partially explain the general confusion or contradiction in mandated responsibilities and actions.

Albeit narrow by definition, school governance policies do provide a starting point for parental engagement

across each country – with respect to a small number of parents at the school level at least. However, in most countries, parental responsibilities and their relationship to other stakeholders (e.g. teachers) are not clearly outlined nor are the policies and practices of their involvement in actual decision-making in schools. The value of parental engagement in governance is more likely to be recognised and accepted if stakeholders are made aware of their mandated roles and are actively encouraged to participate as representatives of their peers. It is also important that their participation be facilitated in a meaningful and productive way.

Based on the ILOPS data, the notion of 'free education' was found to be a misnomer within the local context of schools (see Box 2). For example, in Senegal, while primary school fees no longer exist, other charges (e.g. PTA, school improvement, exam fees, etc.) and expenses (e.g. uniform, textbooks) continue to provide challenges and disincentives for parents to send their children to school. This often forces poor families to make choices on how many of their children can attend school.

## Box 2

### Senegal's 'free' education policy costs households and fails to grant great decision-making in schools

(ActionAid Senegal, 2009a)

In Senegal, 40% of the state's operational budget (equivalent to 28% of total budget) is allocated to the education sector. Despite this commitment, as the table below shows, parents continue to be important financial contributors, third after the technical and financial partners, and well ahead of local governments. However, researchers note that this financial contribution from parents does not gain them greater access to decision-making processes or pedagogical activities in schools. The ILOPS research shows that parental roles are confined to the maintenance of school buildings, building houses for teachers, collecting membership fees, etc.

Table 2

Evolution of spending on education in Senegal (millions CFA)

	2003	2004	2005	2006
	%	%	%	%
<b>Central government</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Local Government</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Households</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Technical and financial partners</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>% of GDP</b>	<b>4.68</b>	<b>5.53</b>	<b>6.13</b>	<b>6.30</b>

Source: Budget général 2007, Direction Générale des Finances (DGF, 2007)

*Misinterpretation of policies.* Based on the ILOPS data, in some communities, policies are misinterpreted by parents and have been known to cause controversy related to which roles and responsibilities should be allocated to parents and which should remain with the state. For example, the ILOPS research shows that in Malawi, Burundi and Uganda, providing food in schools seems to be an area of contention, with both parents and governments thinking it is the other's responsibility. As a result, children get caught in the policy/practice crossfire, often not eating throughout the school day and eventually dropping out of school because their feelings of weakness and inability to concentrate influence their performance. Students often feel that neither parents nor governments are supporting them to stay in school.

Another example comes from Uganda (see Box 3, page 20), where researchers found that parents perceive that the 'free education' policy blocks their involvement in schools. This interpretation of the policy raises a potentially more fundamental issue – that parents are uncertain of how to be involved beyond financial contributions.

#### **Policy vision for parental involvement in education.**

If the policies are ill-constructed or not well communicated to parents, they provide little incentive or opportunity for parents to engage. In other words, parents do not participate because they are unaware or misinformed of their mandated roles and also because the spaces for this type of dialogue are rarely accessible to individual parents. When there is space for

### Box 3

#### **'Free schooling' a double-edged sword in Uganda**

(ActionAid Uganda, 2009b: 13)

In Uganda, following the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy which abolished school and PTA fees, a landmark policy created opportunities for parents to participate in the education system in different ways. Despite these efforts, based on ILOPS evidence, parents are not actively participating beyond the provision of the basic requirements such as learning materials and food. Parents often still disagree on these inputs. Part of this confusion stems from the misrepresentation of the UPE policy, which has created an interesting dynamic where policy-makers are seen to have 'absolved' parents from making financial contributions but in such a way that it seems to have blocked any further involvement in schools. A parent from Masindi explained, *'For us when the President visited Masindi, he directed that no person or head teacher is allowed to levy any fees from the parents in regard to primary education. Everything is paid by the government. Whoever is found charging money shall be imprisoned.'* As a result, many parents are unclear as to what role they can legitimately play if it's not contributing financially. This raises the need to build awareness of parental roles in education.

participation, ILOPS research teams found that it tends to be accessible primarily to formally constructed and funded education group members (such as coalitions), rather than individual parents. Furthermore, there has been little opportunity to truly measure the degree of parental participation and resulting influence of that participation on schools and student achievement.

The ambiguity of parental roles in decision-making raises the underlying question: do governments genuinely want parents to take part in decision-making? Within the four ILOPS countries, the policy infrastructure tends to deny parents the legal responsibility to fulfil their legitimate role in education. The following quote from a researcher during the end-of-project evaluation explains that there is little space for parental engagement in decision-making at all:

*I didn't know that although they [parents] want to take part in the educational system, they're not quite consulted. It's a peripheral association, whereby they're told, for instance, okay, you're included in the regional, departmental or local development plan; they are there, but in fact they're only there to hear the decisions, their viewpoints aren't taken into account. Anyway they can't have consequential viewpoints, because they lack the means to argue, give evidence...they accept everything they're told.*

(Edge et al., 2009a: 10)

This is equally true for Uganda, where the education policy provides the most detailed expectations of parental support for education within the home, school and community but lacks the structures to facilitate or

promote this type of involvement. The following quote from a Ugandan national-level researcher summarises the evidence emerging from their study:

*There is inadequate space for community and parent involvement in basic education governance and promoting desirable learning outcomes from the provision. The key obstacles are that the community and parents are disempowered by the power holders and are insufficiently conscious of their roles and responsibilities.*

(ActionAid Uganda, 2009a: 5)

In Senegal, the government's vision of parental participation is not so much a partnership where each stakeholder has a role to play, but rather a functional or instrumental one. National policy and practice focuses on the physical and financial inputs required of parents, as and when defined by the state. In Burundi, parents are not involved in policy-making and do not have access to funding nor do they have the power to hold the government accountable. However, parents are frequently called upon by the government during teacher strikes to help encourage teachers to return to school. These activities send a clear signal to parents to participate only when invited.

In summary, the evidence collected across the four countries clearly supports the need for formal opportunities to be created in which individual parents, and groups, from the different regions in each country, can explain their experiences, inform policy and challenge governments to improve education policy and clarify roles and responsibilities.

## SECTION 4

# Parental participation in schools

**This section draws on ILOPS local-level research to identify the trends and emerging issues related to why and how parents engage in activities that enhance student learning. The goal during this phase of the research was to collect a robust and significant evidence-base on parental participation by questioning parents about how they participated in their children's education and how they interpreted the landscape that supported their engagement. More specifically, it was important to find out how parents feel they should be participating in schools and in their homes to support their children's learning and achievement outcomes. In the end, these factors were combined to determine parental attitudes, behaviour and levels of engagement in education. The central ILOPS assumption was that by better understanding the underlying factors motivating parental participation, it would be possible to shape future interventions more effectively.**

### Current state of parental involvement in schools

The ILOPS findings show that parents participate in similar activities, including visiting schools, providing learning materials and financial or in-kind contributions such as materials and labour to build or maintain the school building. In Senegal, parents in Foundiougne and Tambacounda also ensure the school environment is safe, and a small percentage (17%) of parents in Masindi District, Uganda, provide school meals. Overall, the ILOPS data show that there is a need to sensitise parents about going beyond these basic contributions to activities that also support learning:

*Overall, parents are not actively participating in the education of their children. There is a need to sensitise parents about their roles in the education of their children through the provision of learning support both at home and school.*

(ActionAid Uganda, 2009b: 3)

**Frequency and purpose of visiting schools.** In each country, the actual engagement levels were measured by using proxies – the frequency of visits and the purpose of visits. Discussions with parents highlight that although they do visit schools, their visits are infrequent and irregular. Parents visit schools on average between nought and three times a term, usually at the time of inscription and to obtain exam results. For example, of the 390 parents from Masindi District, Uganda, participating in the research, 30% say they visit schools three or more times during a term, 26% once, 24% twice and 10% say they have never visited the school. When asked their reasons for visiting, 63% say they visit when invited; another 30% go on their own initiative but only to make 'courtesy calls'. In Burundi's Bururi District, parents say they visit schools between four and nine times a year either to follow their children's progress or for disciplinary reasons. Across the four countries, parents who do not visit schools say it is either because they have no time

or do not see a reason to, considering education to be the responsibility of teachers and other school staff.

In most instances, parents tend to visit schools when they are invited to attend and/or to discuss specific issues. For example, in Malawi and Burundi parents discuss disciplinary actions and disputes during their visits. Only very rarely do they seek to find out why children are not learning or to discuss teachers' need/shortage.

There is nevertheless a small minority of parents who do visit schools more often, primarily on their own initiative. For these parents, issues related to teaching and learning are important, including: high pupil-teacher ratios; lack of learning resources; and the absence of food for students within schools. For example, in Masindi and Kalangala Districts in Uganda, 56% of the parents who visit schools also measure their children's progress by checking books, while 24% look at school reports, 15% observe pupil behaviour and 10% judge the ability of pupils to communicate as an indicator of accomplishment.

#### ***The importance of school-level encouragement.***

The research team in Malawi found that the frequency of parental school visits hinges on how parents perceive the type of relationships that exist between the school and its community. If the relationship is viewed as good and the school is seen to encourage participation, parents feel free to speak to teachers about school matters. There is an added complexity in Burundi where parents are reluctant to raise their concerns with teachers in case they are misunderstood and their interaction results in negative consequences for their children in the classroom.

#### **Expectations of educational outcomes**

The achievement rates of children also seem to impact on parents' motivation to engage in school. Parents of poorly performing children seem to lose what little commitment they have to stay involved in their children's education. The ILOPS research found that in Malawi, pass rates stayed more or less constant between 2002 and 2006, at 69% for girls and 79% for boys (ActionAid Malawi, 2009). In Senegal, 60% of students successfully passed the Primary Leaving Exam (PLE) in 2006 (ActionAid Senegal, 2009a). In Uganda less than 50% of students passed the PLE (ActionAid Uganda, 2009b).

International assessments also highlight the low levels of achievement in primary school. The 2002 Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational

### Box 4

#### **How language impacts learning outcomes**

(ActionAid Burundi, 2009)

**The issue of language of instruction is a concern to education actors and an important determinant of learning outcomes across the four countries. In Burundi, for example, the mother tongue of the vast majority of pupils, like the rest of the population, is Kirundi. However, French is used as the main language of instruction, a consequence of the country's colonial history with Belgium. Despite low achievement levels in French, the instruction of Mathematics still switches from Kirundi to French in the fifth grade. This leads to a drop in achievement rates in Maths. The recent introduction of two other languages to the curriculum – Kiswahili and English – illustrates a desire to respond to regional and global needs. However, this also overloads the teaching programme.**

Quality (SACMEQ) shows that in Malawi (Chimombo et al., 2005) only 0.1% of girls and 0.5% of boys reached the desired achievement levels. In Uganda the percentage of girls achieving the desired levels is 10.6% and 9.5% for boys (Byamugisha and Ssenabulya, 2005). The 2007 Programme for Analysing Education Systems (PASEC) in Senegal also shows that just 40.6% of fifth graders tested achieved the desired levels (CONFEMEN, 2007). Comparable international assessments are not available for Burundi nor are test results compiled at the national level. However, information available at the provincial level show that in 2007, the percentage of students in sixth grade in Bujumbura municipality achieving a 50% passing score in French was 29.1% and in Mathematics 10.3% (ActionAid Burundi, 2009). The language of instruction partly explains these low achievement rates in Burundi (Box 4).

It is generally accepted that test results do not always adequately represent learning achievement. However, it is this very point that seems to be the deciding factor for parents on whether or not to send their children to school and engage in their education.

Across all four countries, parents express their deep-rooted concern about the narrow focus on literacy and numeracy, and the emphasis on mass testing. In

Burundi, both pupils and parents say they are 'traumatised' by examinations. Moreover, parents would like other subjects, such as vocational skills (carpentry, tailoring or bricklaying) to be taught in school so children can realistically improve their chances of being employed. Parents also feel schools do not create well-rounded individuals because they either exclude subjects such as art, sports, leadership skills and spiritual education or put little emphasis on the importance of these as they are not 'testable' subjects.

This broader definition of 'learning' is also provided by the Covenant on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which states, *'Every child has the right to receive an education of good quality which in turn requires a focus on the quality of the learning environment, of teaching and learning processes and materials, and of learning outputs'* (CRC, General Comment 1, para 22). The 'learning outputs' go beyond exam scores and are defined by *'...the need for education to be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering...to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence. "Education" in this context goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually, and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society'* (CRC General Comment 1, para 2).

Overall, the perception that schools are not forming well-rounded, empowered individuals with skills to enter the formal labour market explains why, despite having a positive view of education in general, the ILOPS researchers found that many parents question the value of sending their children, especially girls, to school because they feel what is offered is too oriented towards testing and not practical or relevant enough to improve livelihoods and form rounded individuals. Few parents feel they have a key role in improving outcomes, partly because there is little space for their engagement (as the next sections show), but also because the school curriculum is not always seen to be relevant to everyday life and, as such, worthy of their investment.



Sarah Elliot/ActionAid



## SECTION 5

# Parental participation in school governance

**Another component of the ILOPS research involved understanding how well SMCs, PTAs and parents' associations or councils (PAs) offer a means for parents to engage with schools.**

### Types of governance structures linking parents to schools

The ILOPS research shows that SMCs, PTAs and PAs exist in different forms across all four countries. As Table 3 shows, these structures vary in their composition, membership selection rules, overall purpose and nature of participation.

Table 3  
Description of structures linking schools and communities

	<i>Parent Associations (Councils)</i>	<i>Parent Teacher Associations</i>	<i>School Management Committees (Councils)</i>	<b>National-level structures</b>
<b>Country</b>	Burundi and Senegal	Malawi, Senegal and Uganda	Burundi, Malawi, and Senegal	Malawi, Burundi
<b>Membership</b>	Parents or only mothers  At times elected	Parents and teachers, chairperson, treasurer  Elected by head teachers	Administrative structure, local government, headteacher, PTA or PA  Elected or nominated	Parents from different districts or from different areas within one district  Elected
<b>Organisation type</b>	Voluntary	Voluntary statutory bodies	Government-created	Voluntary
<b>Purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain, construct school, teacher lodgings</li> <li>• Ensure girls' attendance</li> <li>• Not involved in pedagogical or policy discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilise community</li> <li>• Hold SMC accountable</li> <li>• Manage/maintain infrastructure</li> <li>• Discipline teachers and students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical management of schools for government</li> <li>• Accountability of public funds</li> <li>• Quality of schooling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unite parents' associations</li> <li>• Discuss roles and responsibilities of parents and schools</li> </ul>

Source: ActionAid Burundi (2009); ActionAid Malawi (2009); ActionAid Senegal (2009a); ActionAid Uganda (2009a); ActionAid Uganda (2009b)

## Encouraging greater parental involvement in school

Overall, the ILOPS teams found that the existence of these formal structures does not always mean parents will want to participate. In the Machinga and Mchinji Districts in Malawi, researchers explained that most parents do not think they have a role to play in school governance, '*...the majority of the parents indicated that they felt that it was not their responsibility to assist in the management of the schools as it is the responsibility of the SMCs and PTAs*' (ActionAid Malawi, 2009: 10). This is reinforced by the fact that parents are only consulted once decisions have been reached and are awaiting implementation.

Other reasons for the lack of parental participation range from a lack of precise knowledge about the mandates of these structures and how they differ from one another, to the actual appointment of members, which was found to be largely undemocratic.

**Openness of SMCs to involve parents.** According to the ILOPS researchers in the Kalangala and Masindi Districts of Uganda, the SMCs are largely closed, elite structures that are very reticent to involve parents in school management. Only the elected few tend to participate, with the large majority of parents being involved only when invited to meetings. In Burundi, the 10 members of the National Association of Parents are supposed to be elected by local parents' associations. In practice, however, the group is not representative of provincial- or community-level structures. Lacking any identity or mandate, the group is completely unable to assert itself or fulfil its role. The government tends to rely upon this group in times of teacher strikes but does not encourage a wider role.

**Frequency of meeting.** The number of times meetings are held also influences levels of members' engagement and the relative success of activities undertaken by the SMCs. For example, of the 12 SMCs interviewed in Masindi District in Uganda, 25% hold meetings three times a year, another 17% twice a year and 33% only once a year. A quarter of SMCs do not meet at all during the year. This may partially explain why the few parents (14%) who do participate in the SMC express disappointment that decisions are not being implemented.

**Confusion related to roles within different structures.** Parental roles can neither be ascribed nor fulfilled if there is no agreement as to what these roles

should be. In Uganda, the UPE policy stipulates that SMCs should do school planning; supervise/monitor school programmes; advise the headteacher on management' and mobilise parents to take part in school programmes. However, when SMC members in Masindi were asked what they thought their roles were, they all came up with different answers. For example, 33% of respondents think they should monitor school activities; 33% feel they should motivate and retain teachers; 16% believe their roles to be around planning and budgeting; and only 8% feel they should be sensitising communities and raising awareness of UPE or making decisions in schools. Data from parents communicates another message: the SMCs' primary role should be to mobilise and sensitise communities (63%), followed by the planning and development of schools (31%).

National- and local-level ILOPS data also show that when parallel structures exist (e.g. SMC and PTA), roles and mandates are often unclear. This almost always leads to confusion, less than active engagement and ineffectiveness. In Uganda, 90% of respondents are aware of the existence of PTAs and SMCs. Despite this, they do not actively participate in either of these bodies, both of which are viewed to be largely 'ineffective'. In fact, 29% of respondents do not understand the relationship between the SMCs and PTAs.

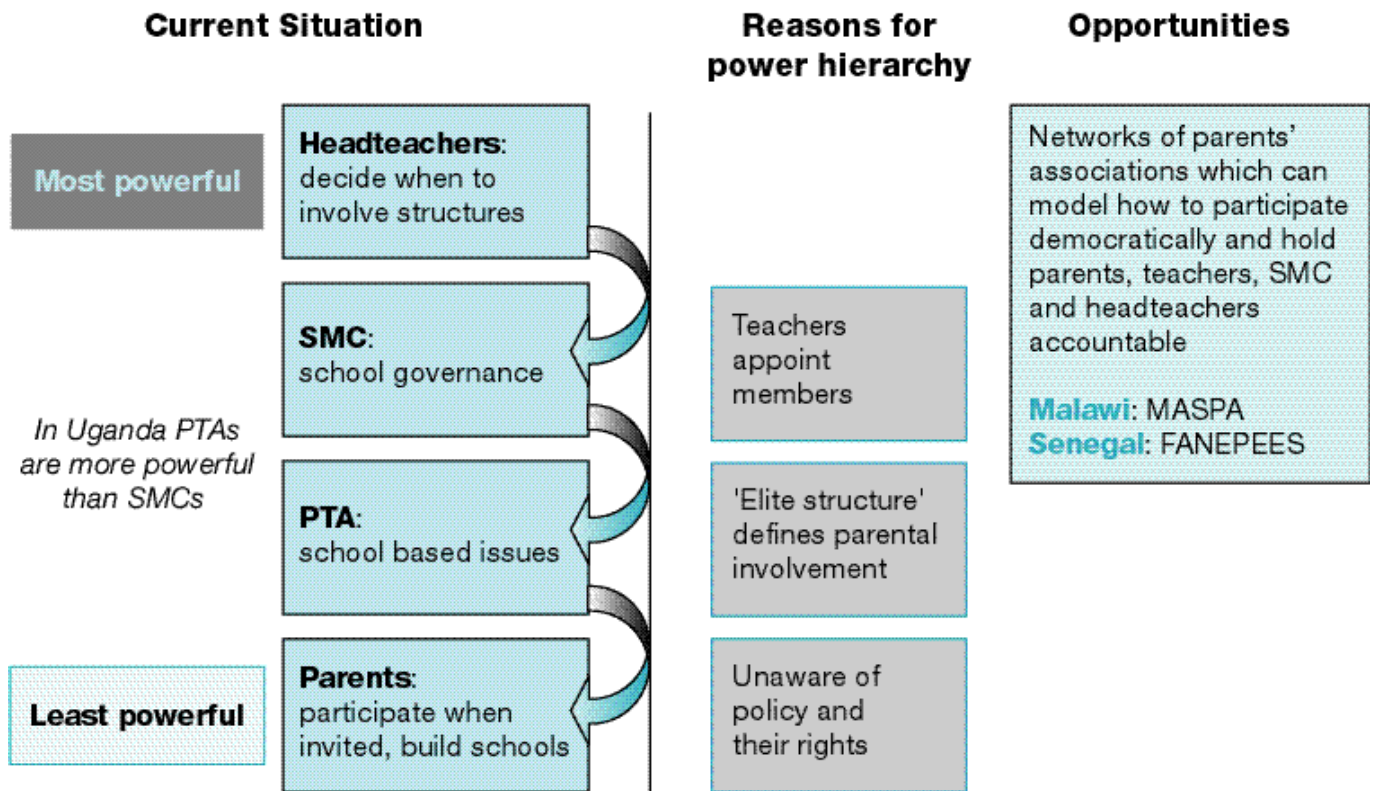
## Power and influence in and between SMCs and PTAs

Based on ILOPS data from the four countries, the following model (Diagram 1) was developed to illustrate the current context of parental participation. Parents are the least powerful and have the least amount of information and access to decision-making forums in schools and around education policy. Yet they contribute the most in terms of financial and in-kind support to schools. However, there was also concern over which parents participated – most respondents explained that those who took part were limited to a small, elite segment of the community.

Headteachers hold the most power in schools and are often solely responsible for deciding how and when to involve the different structures. In Malawi, headteachers also nominate SMC members, which, in some cases, made them largely unaccountable. This general lack of transparency in administrative and financial management also leads to parental mistrust of the people handling the financial resources for schools. The Uganda report explains that far too many structures

disempower parents, especially those that are not literate. Increasingly schools have become isolated centres for a few ‘powerful’ members of school management committees, teachers, school heads and educational technocrats. (ActionAid Uganda, 2009a).

Diagram 1  
Participation is power



**Opportunities for increasing involvement of parents**

Based on ILOPS data, these structures have the potential to engage parents in meaningful activities to improve schools and learning. In one school in Mchinji District, parents even reported teacher misconduct to PTAs and SMCs. National structures, such as the Malawi Schools Parents Association (MASPA), also provide opportunities for increasing participation beyond school to policy issues. The association trains SMCs and PTAs on their roles and responsibilities in managing, governing, developing and ownership of schools. For these types of examples to spread, SMCs and PTAs must first become democratic and egalitarian themselves before they will gain the credibility and legitimacy needed to fully engage in school governance issues.

# Engagement of parents at home

**Across the four countries, the ILOPS researchers visited students' homes to interview both parents/guardians and children in order to find out whether or not children have enabling and supportive environments conducive to learning. They sought to determine how supportive parents are of their children's attendance, and how interested they are in their academic success. They also recorded the obstacles parents face in trying to be more involved in this process.**

## How parents support their children's education at home

Parents are generally shown to provide the typical care of children that adequately contributes to their ability to learn such as providing food, health care, clothes and candles/lanterns. Across all countries, most parents feel that they should allow children time and space to do homework. Many admit that girls have more chores to do such as fetching water, caring for siblings, cooking and cleaning both before and after school. When supplies (e.g. candles) are low, parents prioritise the son's learning/homework as they feel this is a better investment. This dynamic around roles and expectations, coupled with the divergent levels of engagement and investment between boys and girls' education, often determines relative success rates across gender (Kirk, 2006). This in turn becomes a cross-generational issue: biased behaviour is more than likely to be reproduced by the son (and possibly daughter) when they grow up and have their own families.

## ***Parental attitudes or expectations for children's educational outcomes.***

Parental outlook on children's education has been substantiated as a predictor of successful achievement, especially for girls, and, in turn, parental expectation can also be shaped by student achievement. Within the ILOPS research, parents explained how they support attendance, school completion and encourage hard work. The findings generally show that they encourage their children to like school and do their best to limit absence. In Burundi, many parents said they advise children not to 'indulge in immoral activities' and not to play at school. Some said they especially try not to disappoint their children before they go to school so they are not affected psychologically. Others said they provide 'incentives' to children who perform well at school.

## ***Parental support of homework.***

The ILOPS data show that there are parents in every school who support their children's homework, and that parental desire to help their children achieve by supporting their homework is high. For example, in Burundi, 100% of the parents in Bururi District and 83% in Karusi feel they should help improve learning outcomes, but what they actually are able to do in practice depends on how confident they feel about their own knowledge and skills. Children shared that they while they do receive support with their homework, it is mostly from siblings and friends rather than their parents. Half of the parents in Bururi said they do help their children with homework. In the Karusi District, however, only 4% of parents support their children's homework. Where finances permit, parents in all four countries hire tutors or pay for mock exams to help their children with lessons.

Though many shared that their own level of literacy limits the extent of support they can provide for learning, some parents explained how they get around this by using different strategies to monitor homework. They often verify if their children are learning by asking them to do something specific or checking notebooks for completed work and grades.

In some cases, what parents think they should do and what they want to do is different than what they actually manage to get done. In Uganda's Kalangala District, 44% of parents think they should provide more time at home for studies. Another 32% of parents agree that correcting mistakes and providing general academic guidance is important. However, in practice, only 25% of parents are actually able to provide time for their children to do homework. Of the parents interviewed, in reality 75% do not supervise homework.

### **Challenges parents face in supporting children's learning at home**

Parents in all four countries are keen to support children with their learning, though what is understood by 'support' varies. As shown in the results above, most feel that the provision of material, time and space to study is sufficient. The notion of 'responsibility' – and indeed obligation – among parents to be more involved in supporting learning remains unfulfilled.

**Literacy levels of parents.** Across the four countries, few parents in the ILOPS districts attended school themselves and their resulting lack of confidence and, at times, knowledge now makes them unsure how to support their children's learning. The literacy rate for adults in Burundi is only 59% (52% for women). In Senegal it is 42% (33% for women) and in Uganda, 74% (66% for women). In Malawi, the national literacy rate is 72% (65% for women). However, literacy varies dramatically between and within districts, though exact figures are not always available. In Malawi, 49% of parents from Machinga are literate and 33% in Mchinji. This lack of literacy is often used as a reason to marginalise parents from the pedagogical process, but the use of the Reflect approach in the ILOPS research shows that parents can become meaningfully involved and make significant contributions when the right methods are used. These findings point to several key opportunities to support parents. Perhaps, most importantly, there is a need to offer adult literacy training– while building parents' confidence and capacity to use other skills and tools to monitor children's learning effectively, assess if their education is of good quality and discuss school matters with their children.

**Poverty and livelihoods.** Parents' livelihood activities also dictate how consistently they can support their children's education. Poverty and the need for children to supplement family income by working on farms and in small businesses is one main reason parents pull children out of school in Mchinji, Malawi,

and Masindi, Uganda. In Kalangala, Uganda, the majority of parents are nomadic/migratory fisher folk who often move and lack the time to engage. They do not think school governance is their responsibility either. Their frequent movements provide few opportunities to genuinely connect with school staff and the lack of residential housing for children makes it difficult to ensure they are able to continue their education. As such, some parents express doubts about the importance and relevance of schooling for their children, who are expected to move along with the household and later become fishermen.

**Cultural expectations.** Other traditions and cultural expectations also deter children from completing school. In Malawi's Machinga District, parents are not convinced of the importance of girls' education as it is expected that girls will be married by the age of 13. Long distances separating homes from school in Karusi District in Burundi and Masindi, Uganda, compounded with girls' inherent vulnerability to violence on the way to school also concerns many parents, who, seeing little alternative, prefer to keep their children at home.

Parents' perceptions of their roles and the value of their contribution are also linked to the expectations and space created for them by others. Section 7 explores how the behaviour of other actors and encouragement of parental participation influences the level, type and frequency of their involvement in education and children's learning.

# How stakeholders perceive parental roles and influence their participation

Parental participation is a two-way street that does not depend entirely on parents. School staff, community leaders and pupils all play an important role in either encouraging or dissuading parents to engage in schools. School staff, in particular, have a direct responsibility to involve parents in having a say about what is taking place on their own turf. Here the findings from the local ILOPS research are similar to those of other current studies that show that positive encouragement by teachers and a desire by headteachers to build close relationships with parents tend to lead to more active involvement of parents in schools. As Section 4 shows, parents repeatedly express that encouragement and invitations from teachers and leaders influence how they feel about their ability to contribute. This is especially true for those parents who do not feel confident about their ability to support their children's learning.

While there is some convergence in the different stakeholders' expectations regarding parental contributions to education, there is still a general lack of understanding as to the constraints parents face in fulfilling these roles – and what can be done to overcome these constraints. This leads us to the question: if people are not aware of their obligations or have different perceptions about what is expected of them, how can they fulfil these roles?

## Community participation in school and support for parental engagement in education

The ILOPS data demonstrate that most community leaders (local council chairpersons and native elites)<sup>3</sup> support activities centred on accessing school but few are directly involved with the teaching and learning process. Examples of a range of activities undertaken by community leaders came from Burundi, where they reported overseeing the school calendar, hiring and monitoring teacher attendance (albeit infrequently), intervening in cases of conflict, and being present at

exam results time, which in no way implies making regular visits to school. Also encouraging is how community respondents in Masindi District in Uganda said they sometimes discussed children's performance.

Surprisingly, community leaders did not discuss well-known challenges identified by pupils, parents and teachers such as the need for boarding schools in Kalangala, Uganda. However, it should be noted that the notion of 'community' is a complex issue in nomadic populations such as those of the Kalangala Islands in Uganda where people move to follow the good fishing locations. The sense of schools being owned or needing support by the community is not as strong here as it is in other places.

Other activities involve encouraging parents to send children, especially girls, orphans and those from minority groups, to school. Some leaders ask parents to provide school lunches, support school construction and distribute scholastic materials. Though important, the nature of these activities signifies that community leaders view parents more as passive receptors (or providers) rather than active agents in improving the quality of learning. Community leaders in Burundi use a more controversial approach to encouraging positive parental involvement by penalising parents who do not send children to school, and similarly discussing how to punish children who misbehave.

The ILOPS research shows that, generally speaking, community members do not consider that greater community or parental involvement would influence school effectiveness or pupil performance. Though community leaders were found to be actively mobilizing parents to send children to school, the confusion and misinterpretation of the UFE policy and their obligations and responsibilities vis a vis school created a negative attitude towards education. This is partially illuminated by the following quote from a researcher in Uganda:

<sup>3</sup> In Burundi, this refers to religious leaders and other elites who occupy high positions in the government as well as being concerned with the development of their local area.

*In Uganda there is a general apathy towards education from the community and a lack of awareness of their roles and responsibilities in managing education.*

(ActionAid Uganda, 2009b: 9)

Interestingly, this lack of clarity surrounding participatory roles and attitudes towards education seems to be a common thread connecting all groups. Like parents, if community members are themselves unclear about their own roles then this partly explains why their engagement remains focused on access rather than quality of schooling or promoting parental participation in education.

### **Teacher support for parental participation**

The ILOPS research also found that both teachers and parents fundamentally agree that their collaboration can lend valuable support to children's learning. However, since the perceptions they have of one another's role in education differ, there is often frustration over unmet expectations. Some teachers complain that parents do not share information about children's health issues or the family and social environment, which affects how well teachers can, in turn, support students. However, when probed further, teachers admitted to not asking parents to share this information but rather expecting it be volunteered. On the contrary, parents feel that rather than sharing information about their family life, it is more so the teacher's role to explain what parents are expected to do to support children at home. Parents also think that teachers are not very open about what happens in classrooms. They expect teachers to inform them about teaching methods, though parents also admit to not asking teachers directly about classroom practices either.

The relationship between teachers and parents is indeed complex. Teachers' inherent expectation that parental participation be limited to making financial contributions to schools and to attending PTAs does not provide much opportunity for parents to be involved in the learning process. Across the four countries, most teachers do not actively reach out to parents or invite them to visit other than at the beginning and end of a term or at exam times. Teachers do not necessarily encourage parents to engage in schools either, viewing regular visits to classrooms as 'interference'.

These behaviours and attitudes can be partially explained by teachers' own perceptions of how well parents understand the challenges they face as teachers. Although there are a small number of teachers who proactively share these challenges and their expectations

of parental support with parents, the majority of teachers simply 'expect' parents to understand and become frustrated when parents did not seek to support them. They do not see that their role is to share this information with parents and cannot understand how welcoming parents to their classrooms would build mutual understanding.

Further probing revealed that teachers do not always know how to better engage parents either. This includes the need for teachers to understand the barriers facing parents, including their lack of time, knowledge and language issues that prevent them from participating. It also means teachers accepting that their own attitudes may deter parental involvement. Strategies for building relationships with parents, however, are not included in pre-and in-service training courses and most teachers indicate that they receive little support from headteachers on this issue.

The following quote from a parent/leader in Senegal summarises parents' frustration stemming from their marginalisation from the learning process:

*When the parent is powerless before the teacher's choices, the decisions of school authorities, the monitoring of lessons taught, the decisions of the council of teachers, his involvement although necessary, would be meaningless and would not impact on his child's leaning achievements.*

(ActionAid Senegal, 2009a: 19)

### **Headteacher support for parental participation**

The role of headteachers in encouraging teaching staff to cultivate good relationships with parents was raised, but as the ILOPS research shows, even they do not have established relationships with parents. Based on their responses, headteachers' support for parental participation seems to be restricted to summoning parents to discuss problems of attendance and children's poor performance or to resolve conflicts rather than encouraging wider parental participation in school. In Senegal, headteachers' perceptions about parental ability also seem to influence how strongly they encourage teachers to engage with parents. In other words, most headteachers do not believe parents either have the resources or the ability to support learning at home. This prevailing attitude may potentially limit parental involvement, doing little for those parents who already lack confidence in their ability to

participate. It also suggests the necessity for headteachers to be supported in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and strategies for engaging parents in the learning process.

### Pupils' support for parental participation

Pupils across the four countries discussed their learning needs and the role their parents played in their schools and with respect to achievement. Pupils spoke frankly about the obstacles they faced in increasing parental involvement in school. Generally, pupils feel that their parents should be responsible for providing basic necessities such as lunch, scholastic materials, uniforms, textbooks, dormitories, clean water and transport to school. However, they also recognise their parents' financial constraints and therefore raise the need to have schools and communities contribute. Many pupils indicated that they would like to use their education to improve the socioeconomic situations of their parents. Poverty is a major contributor to poor school attendance for children, who cited the need to skip school in order to either contribute to household income or head the family. At home, many pupils reported that they would like their parents to reduce their chores and provide time to study. The most common response given for why parents do not help more with homework was parents' own educational limitations.

### Reflections on stakeholders' perceptions

The ILOPS field research shows that the attitudes and perspectives of other stakeholders concerning the legitimacy of parental participation in schools has a significant influence on how much energy parents will expend and what they will achieve in practice. In Uganda, as their country study showed, researchers found that, '*Currently schools treat parents more as "guests or customers". School property is never considered a community good worth the protection of parents and community members*' (ActionAid Uganda, 2009a: 19). This type of attitude and behaviour disempowers parents and limits their engagement with schools. As a result, though superficially parental participation is welcomed, the space for genuine collaboration between parents, communities and schools is clearly missing in each of the four countries. Later in the research process these different stakeholders were all brought together to contrast and compare their expectations with those of parents, enabling parents to engage in critical reflection around

their responsibilities. During these group discussions, parents were able to explain why they were not meeting the expectations others had of them, which lead to a wider debate around who should provide what in support of children's learning.



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## SECTION 8

# Potential influence of parental participation on children's learning outcomes

The literature reviewed in Section 2 shows that parental engagement can lead to higher performance in literacy (or language achievement scores), especially in families of low socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (Jones and White, 2000). The ILOPS research also shows that children respond positively to high parental support and engagement – even if parents cannot help with homework – citing a feeling of importance and motivation to do better. When parents support children in their homework, students reported feeling secure and more competent in their abilities to succeed. This sense of connectedness helps students internalise educational values and adopt them as their own.

Though the ILOPS research was not designed to study the influence of parental participation on enhancing teacher quality and improving learning outcomes,

anecdotal evidence points to several conclusions regarding the interconnected nature of these efforts and the eventual influence of these contributions on children's learning. In particular, Senegal's approach to the research, which studied the characteristics of parental participation and teacher quality across high and poor performing schools, provides insight into the types of inputs that can improve learning (Table 4).

In both Burundi and Senegal, parent-teacher relationships are reportedly more developed and collaborative in schools with high achievement scores than in schools with lower total student achievement scores. In Burundi, teachers also showed appreciation of parental support during strikes, possibly indicating that parents understood the reasons why they were striking and supported the need for change.

Table 4  
Influence of parental participation on schools in Senegal

SENEGAL	Overall attitude	Perception of a 'good parent'	Involvement in school governance	Key factors for improving learning outcomes
<b>High performing schools</b>	Student (achievement) at centre of concern	Follows student progress and serves as good role model	80% of parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reducing domestic chores</li> <li>Training, qualification and regular attendance of teachers</li> <li>No teacher strikes</li> <li>Parents provide learning materials</li> <li>Following student progress, repeaters</li> </ul>
<b>Poor performing schools</b>	Parents not at all involved in schools; expect state to provide everything	Follows pupil progress at home and in school	45% of parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parental participation</li> <li>Training and competency of teachers</li> <li>No teacher strikes</li> <li>Children's health</li> <li>Learning materials</li> <li>No more temporary classrooms (shed)</li> </ul>

Source: ActionAid Senegal (2009a)

Perhaps the strongest indicators of the impact of increased parental support or lack thereof in education and the corresponding effect on learning outcomes are enrolment and attendance rates. Here the ILOPS research shows that children across the four countries are not staying in school and are therefore not succeeding (Table 5).

Table 5  
**Overview of accessibility and progression in education (2007)**

	GER primary education		NER primary education		Primary completion rates (2006) *		Repetition rates **		Transition to secondary (2006)		NER secondary education	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
<b>BURUNDI</b>	110	119	80	82	27.3	44.9	32.4	31.5	24	37	N/A	N/A
<b>MALAWI</b>	119	114	97	99	13.8	22.3	20.3	21.1	71	64	23	25
<b>SENEGAL</b>	84	81	72	72	36.9	24.3	10.5	10.8	57	62	19	25
<b>UGANDA</b>	117	116	96	93	N/A		13.3	13.0	57	59	18	20

\*Senegal completion rate is from 2005; \*\*Uganda repetition rate is from 2005

Source : EFA Global Monitoring Report (2010)

The ILOPS field research suggests that while it may not be a fix-all, parental engagement can be a key factor for improving learning but only if the barriers and politics constraining parental participation are fully taken into account. In order for the positive experiences of parental influence to be reproduced in other regions, it is important to understand what parents expect their children to learn at school, what they perceive their roles to be and how these match with official policy and other stakeholders' perceptions.

# Recommendations

The ILOPS research clearly demonstrates that parents must be seen as both people with the right to be educated and as educators themselves. There is a need for open discussion around policy, expectations and perceived parental roles with all stakeholders, including government. In order for this dialogue to be equal and democratic, additional support to parents and pupils, especially women and girls, may be required. Reflect and other participatory approaches can be utilised to create space for and facilitate this type of critical reflection on the limitations of all actors. Participatory approaches to adult learning (literacy) training are practically a prerequisite for building parental confidence and developing their abilities to better support learning.

Based on the ILOPS research and experience, recommendations for improving parental involvement in their children's education are positioned in the follow-on activities below (Diagram 2). The stakeholders who united for the ILOPS research are now undertaking a multi-pronged approach to support parents' decision-making spaces at school, in the community and with policy-makers.

As other stakeholders can either encourage or dissuade parents, parallel activities are also being undertaken to discuss the responsibilities of each actor, how they can fulfil these roles and work together. The end goal of these efforts is to find a way for all actors to participate in improving student outcomes rather than simply identifying who does what, or who is not able to meet their responsibilities.

The process of engaging parents in the ILOPS research, both as researchers and participants, has already led to some changes. In Uganda, parents who participated in the research are visiting schools more frequently and showing a growing interest in their children's learning. They are making regular visits to school construction sites, raising valid concerns with

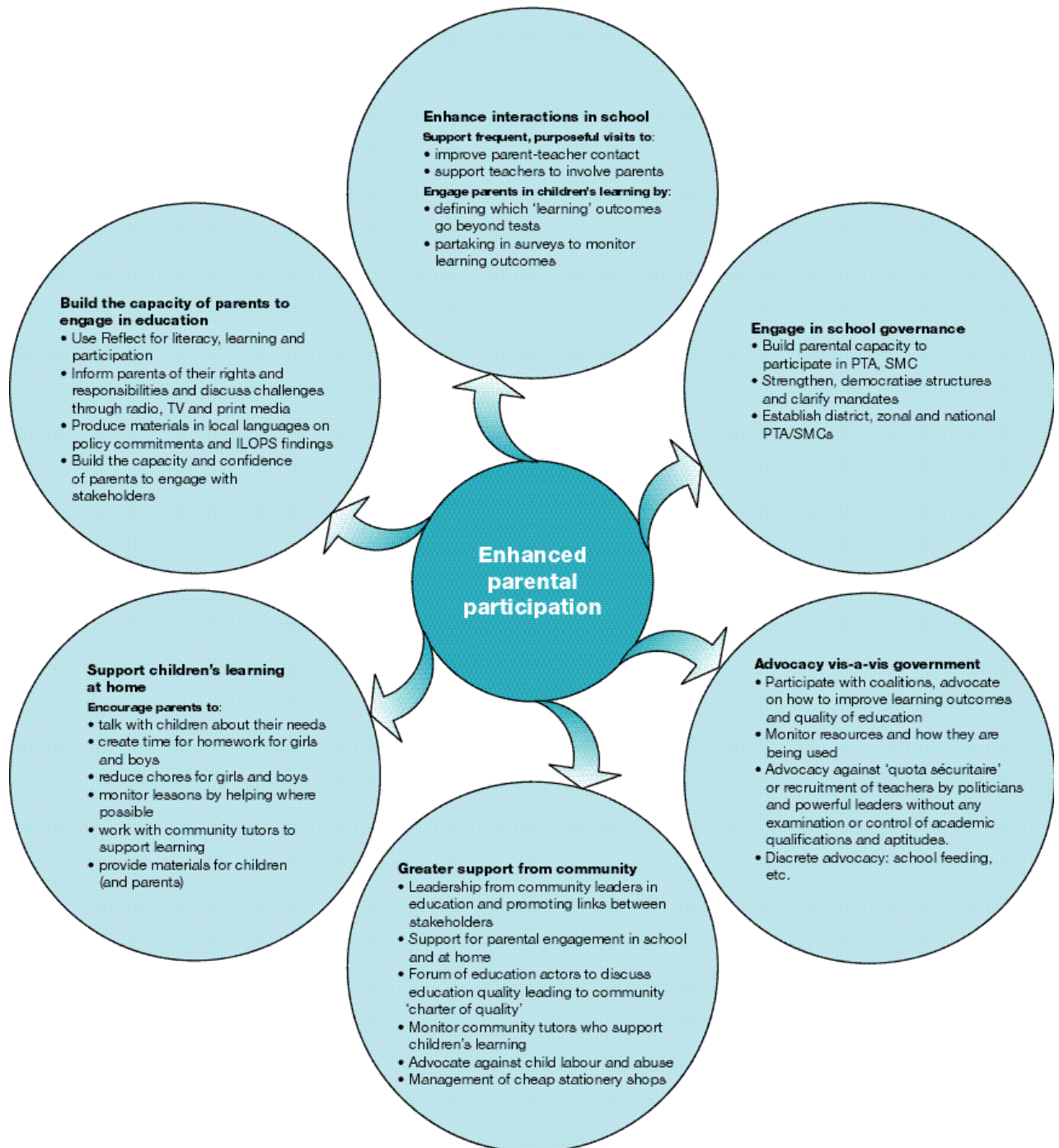
community leaders and administrators and engaging headteachers in discussions on school attendance. Parents are clearer now about their roles in school governance and how they can improve learning. They have since been involved in crucial decisions pertaining to school management and are showing a deeper sense of ownership of schools. With the help of community leaders a school feeding initiative has also started in some schools.



Gideon Mandel/Corbis/ActionAid

Diagram 2

**ILOPS follow-on activities in support of parental participation**



# Conclusion

In conclusion, the ILOPS project and follow-on activities seek to fulfil the legitimate and relevant demands of parents by promoting the meaningful role they fulfil in the pedagogical process, starting with school and the community. They aim to transform the parents' current experiences of feeling powerless and being limited to making financial contributions to school, to an experience that involves them playing a key role in supporting children's learning and contributing to improving the quality of education.



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