

# OUR CHILDREN, THEIR EDUCATION, OUR RESPONSIBILITY!

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**Sector: Education**

## CHALLENGE

### *Taking up the Challenge*

Malalume Primary School in Bulilima District, Matabeleland South Province, was established in 1946. The district borders Botswana and relies on livestock as its main economic mainstay. The district covers nineteen (19) administrative wards and has a population of 81,984<sup>1</sup> with an average household size is 5.1 persons. 56% of the population is aged fifteen (15) years and below, with 100 females to every 83 males. This demographic pattern is due to the outward migration by the male population in search of jobs in neighbouring South Africa and Botswana. Bulilima district has 64 primary and 14 secondary schools with a total enrolment of 22,247 children in primary schools. Like most rural primary schools Malalume is facing a multiplicity of challenges that hamper access to quality and relevant education.

Malalume School has an enrolment of 557 children made up of 264 girls and 293 boys. These children come from a community of 613 households, 6 of which are child headed and 13 are led by elderly guardians. Eleven children in the community suffer from various disabilities and were not attending school. One of the biggest problems that the school/ community faced was the high and growing number of Orphan and Vulnerable Children [OVC] that made up 50% of the total

	Girls	Boys	Total
<b>Orphan<sup>2</sup></b>	72	78	150
<b>Vulnerable<sup>3</sup></b>	49	44	93
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>243</b>

school enrolment. At the beginning of 2007, 21 children had dropped out of school mainly due to inability to pay school fees. Some of these children were reported to have crossed the border to neighbouring South Africa

and Botswana in search of a decent living. As a result there was high drop out rate and cases of physical and emotional abuse of the orphan and vulnerable children increased. Over time, the number of orphan and vulnerable children has continuously grown and currently stands at 243 whilst school enrolment on the other hand increased from 557 pupils in 2007 to 563 pupils by May 2009. This could be attributed to the stabilization of the macroeconomic environment in Zimbabwe.

Upon arrival Mr. Mhlanga, undertook a familiarisation tour of the classrooms where he noted a situation where almost half the classes were seated on bricks or broken three legged chairs with a desk: pupil ratio of 1:15. Teaching and learning materials were insufficient thereby making it difficult to deliver quality education. The average book pupil ratio was 1:10. Supervision of classroom teaching and learning by the school administration was also non-existent. The economic meltdown since 2000 had resulted in a massive exodus of teachers to neighboring countries and informal trading. By January 2007 only three out of 14 trained teachers remained at the school.

The school also faced severe financial challenges. The per capita grant from Government had become insignificant to sustain any school operations due to hyper-inflation. Efforts by the school/ community to fundraise through the setting up of income generating projects were equally unsuccessful due to the prevailing hyperinflation. Discussions had also alluded to the lack of trust between the community and the school due to poor governance and management.

<sup>1</sup> 2004 National Census

<sup>2</sup> Orphan – a child who lost a father, mother or both parents.

<sup>3</sup> Vulnerable child has a disability, has terminally ill parents, has been abused, abandoned or has alcoholic parents etc.

“Upon commencement of duty at the school I decided to address the challenging realities at the school head on’, said Mr. Mhlanga. Evidently, the magnitude and diversity of challenges faced by the school could not be solved through one man’s effort. Faced with such challenges the questions that kept on resonating in my mind were: “**who** are the duty bearers, **where** are they and **how** can they be brought closer to the school to jointly address these challenges? The first thing that he got down to work on was to consult the various stakeholders involved in school development starting with the local leadership. This entailed consultations with the Headman and the Councillor to generate their commitment towards addressing these challenges. This was out of the recognition that the Councillor and the Headman are key change agents in community development. The Headman presides over 33 kraals<sup>4</sup> that make up the school community catchment area whilst the Councillor is the elected political representative. The headmaster believed that with their support he could influence the community to support plans to develop the school. This process had its own challenges though as it entailed overcoming inherent conflict between the two which was detrimental towards creating a unison of the community support towards school development. Through a series of meetings he successfully rallied in these key stakeholders. Together they embarked on his next step of soliciting community support in the collection of more accurate baseline information to confirm that 50% of the school enrolment was indeed children in difficult circumstances. A meeting was called by his 2 change agents with the School Development Committee [SDC], the Village Community Workers [VCW] and the Home Based Care Givers [HBCG]. These community informants were reliable sources of information as they were knowledgeable about the status of the households from which these children came. They successfully developed a screening mechanism for identifying children in most need.



**CLIENTS**

*Forging the links*

Beyond the micro level partnerships that had been established between the school and the community, Malalume Primary School was fortunate enough by that time to be recommended by the Local Authority with 20 other schools to participate in the National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children [NAP for OVC] program in Bulilima district. This is an on – going program with partnerships at national level between SNV and the Ministry of Labour and Social Services and UNICEF with the objective of ensuring access to education for 36 000 OVC in 5 districts.

Consummation of the partnership at national level paved way for the establishment of meso level partnerships amongst Local Authorities, SNV, Ministry of Education, the Department of Social Services and a selected LCB in each of the 5 districts. The primary purpose of the multi – stakeholder partnership at district level is to ensure that all children are in school and have access to quality and relevant education. Specifically, the Local Authorities provide an enabling policy environment, directing interventions for better co-ordinated development, linking development partners to sub district community structures and monitoring. The Department of Social Services on the other hand is responsible for ensuring implementation of NAP for OVC program as per government policy and the Ministry of Education as the point of entry into the schools and for adherence education standards. The LCBs are directly responsible for programme implementation on a day to day basis and are accountable to the constellation of partners. SNV’s role is to formalize and strengthen the partnership towards

<sup>4</sup> Traditional leadership consist the Chief who is the paramount leader. He has jurisdiction over a given geographical space divided into Kraals. Each kraal has a leader called a Kraal Head who reports to the Headman who in turn reports to the Chief.

## METHOD / SNV INTERVENTION

attainment of program targets, role clarification, capacity development support for partners towards improving schools governance systems, strategic and management planning, child protection, database establishment, sharing lessons, monitoring and reporting.

### *Sowing the seeds*

Through the programme Malalume school has received material resources and technical support in addressing the diversity of school and community development challenges. After extensive consultations by Ministry of Education and the responsible school authority; Bulilima Rural District Council and the school/ community there was consensus on the need to bring the communities closer to the schools in the management of school affairs to improve the community trust and participation. The take off point was to undertake a joint planning process between relevant school and community stakeholders for the identification of school challenges, diagnosis of their underlying causes and development of effective strategies for implementation.

An awareness raising process on school/ community based planning was done with close involvement of school staff, the school development committee, parents' assembly, traditional leadership [kraal head presiding over 33 kraals] and the local councillor. It entailed identification of school development challenges, development of strategies to drive school development with participation of all stakeholders. This culminated in the development of a 10 point plan. SNV's role in this process was the development of the Community Based Planning [CBP] training manual, Training of trainers on CBP with two pilots for later roll out to the rest of the 173 schools in 5 districts. In addition to this SNV provided technical backstopping support through plan review and finalisation. An annual program development exercise continues to be undertaken by the school/ community.

## OUTCOME

### *Reaping the fruits*



The coming together of the community as a united force helped ensure access to quality and relevant education for all children under the theme; **our children, their education, our responsibility.** The community began to realise their responsibility at Malalume and reached a

consensus towards creating a child friendly learning environment and also ensured that all children of school going age are re – enrolled regardless of status. The headmen with the help of his kraal heads, the councillor, Home Based Care Givers [HBCG] and the Village Community Workers [VCW], undertook an intensive "back to school" campaign with the support of the LCB, Tjinyunyi Babili Trust [TBT] to bring back all children to school particularly orphans and vulnerable children. The school community also provided a transparent platform for screening vulnerability ensuring those in actual and most need are selected. To address acute teacher shortage the school development committee hires and pays seven local school teachers through school levy payments. School development levies are also used to purchase stationery for both teachers and children. These efforts have enabled the school to repair all broken furniture [desk pupil ratio now 1:1], repair classrooms and roofs blown off by the windstorms, moulding and the supply of building materials for the construction of ten squat hole toilets by local

builders. The community has also agreed to introduce a stationery levy to purchase teaching materials and assist children who cannot afford exercise books.

The SDC decided to diversify from the tuck-shop business into indigenous poultry rearing to contribute towards educational assistance for orphans and vulnerable children. To date the school/ community has supported a total of 243 orphan and vulnerable children [of those enrolled 1 is a mentally challenged girl, 3 are physically disabled, seven children have hearing impairments and 1 is an abandoned child] with school fees payment, provision of stationery and text books through education bloc grants arrangement from UNICEF.

The school also received text books support from the European Union. The text books are not only benefitting orphan and vulnerable children but the entire school population. As a result Malalume recorded an improvement in the average book/ pupil ratio from 1:15 to 1:2 in major subjects<sup>5</sup>. Improvement in access to teaching and learning materials as well as staff development and supervision initiatives resulted in an attributable improvement in the grade 1 to 7 pass rate from an average of 58% in 2004 to 65% in 2007. Malalume school also managed to maintain a sufficiently high pass rate of 62.7% in 2008 despite the lost learning time during the industrial action by teachers that characterized 2008.

Program activities have also provided life skills instruction through the formation of AIDS Action Clubs. These clubs have assisted in the school's AIDS awareness campaigns. These campaigns are done during general meetings at both school and village level through song, dance, drama, poetry and posters. "Some of the AIDS awareness campaigns involve our local VCW and HBCG" said Mr. Mhlanga. It is now a norm in the school that no teacher shall send any child on personal errands or touch any child in an inappropriate manner. Children are aware of this, know about HIV/AIDS, can distinguish abuse from non abuse and are assertive of their rights. Enhanced ability amongst all children to assert their rights has resulted in improved attendance and reduction in drop out rates although these have not been quantified.

## IMPACT

### *Enabling Factors*

Achievements by the Malalume school/ community are a result of the commitment by the school and community as well as extensive technical support from an array of partners. Bulilima Rural District Council has played a critical role in the sensitization of stakeholders [at district and sub – district levels] in addition to this they have the overall coordination and management role in the implementation of the program. The Ministry of Education on the other hand was involved in capacity development initiatives for school head and SDCs for efficient school management. Child related assistance through the formation of child participation forums such as the Aids Action Clubs, life skills and peer education, child protection training, database establishment was provided for by Local Capacity Builders such as Matabeleland Aids Council and Tjinyunyi Babili Trust. SNV's main role centred on the provision of capacity development services to key stakeholders.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### *Harvesting Lessons*

Despite the economic challenges, Malalume school community demonstrated tremendous potential in pro – actively developing its school. The 10 point school community development plan has been the school's bible in providing a shared vision and prioritised development activities as agreed by the community. The main priorities in this plan include reduction in the book/ pupil ratio through text books procurement, reduction in desk/ pupil ratio through repairs of school furniture and education support to orphans and vulnerable children from income generating initiatives. "The Ten Point Plan keeps us focused" said Mr Mhlanga in acknowledgement.

"Through the program I have been trained to be a General Manager", quips Mr. Mhlanga. He speaks confidently on how he has been able to manage the school holistically. The success of any educational intervention relies a lot on good leadership particularly of the headmaster as the key agent of change hence the saying "a school is as good as its headmaster". This case is testimony to that.

<sup>5</sup> Major subjects are: English, Maths, Content and Ndebele [vernacular language].

Transparency in the management of school funds and resources on the part of the school management is also important for driving school development. Key to this is keeping the parents' assembly informed on any school developments as well as in other issues such as the transparency in the identification of vulnerable children. This is effective if supported by the involvement of community leadership, respect and recognition of the status and authority of traditional leaders in Orphan and Vulnerable Children care and support related issues.

Collection of baseline information on the status of school development and the plight of orphan and vulnerable children at program inception has helped in the tracking of progress on a regular basis. There has as a result been recognizable enhancement of capacity at school and community level in data management as evidenced by village health workers keeping up to date data on the plight of orphan and vulnerable children

Overall, the school management successfully worked towards creating a sense of ownership amongst both parents and the school staff as a pre – requisite for ensuring that various role bearers in school development take up their role in ensuring access to a child friendly learning environment for all children.

### **Conclusion**

"After 2years as the head of Malalume I note with a fair amount of appreciation the importance of consultation and the need to respect other people's opinions right from the school children, teachers, parents, traditional leaders and the councillor for the benefit of spearheading development and ensuring access to education. Above all, if the school is faced with challenges, don't keep them at school, share these with the parents and remember to share the successes as well." Based on the maiden success in the first two districts, the program has been up – scaled to three other districts thereby reaching out to a total of 173 other schools through three LCBs. SNV and LCBs continue to facilitate knowledge development and sharing of lessons through quarterly review meetings with LCBs, peer learning amongst stakeholders, documentation of best practices and planned annual reviews.