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# Impact of Community Level Engagement in Primary Education: A Case Study of Oyam District, Northern Uganda, Uganda, East Africa

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IMPACT OF COMMUNITY LEVEL ENGAGEMENT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: A CASE  
STUDY OF OYAM DISTRICT, NORTHERN UGANDA, UGANDA, EAST AFRICA

Benson Ocan

Advisor: Dr. Aleksandra Nesic

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in  
Sustainable Development at SIT Graduate Institute, Washington, DC, USA,

July 30, 2017

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## **Abbreviations and acronyms list**

CFI      Community Focus International

LRA      Lord's Resistance Army

MIUSA    Mobility International USA

NPA      National Planning Authority

SD       Sustainable Development

SIT      School for International Training

UBOS     Uganda Bureau of Statistics

UPE      Universal Primary Education

## **Abstract**

This study was premised on the basis that primary education is the basic building block for a good quality of life in adult life. It specifically focuses on community level engagement in primary education. The broad research question of this thesis is how can community level engagement be enhanced to improve performance in primary schools? In order to answer this question, three primary objectives of this thesis were to assess the extent which community members are involved in the educational activities focusing the education in primary schools; to ascertain how community members have been involved in various educational activities, and to propose how can community level engagement can be enhanced to improve performance in primary schools. A case study research design was used in the study, and Oyam district was chosen as the case study to represent northern Uganda. The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. Interview guides were used to generate qualitative data and questionnaires were used to generate quantitative data.

The study findings showed that the level of community involvement is low, that is, only 21.7% of the community members interviewed were involved in school activities. It was established that community level engagement in primary education could be enhanced through sensitization of the community members about the importance of being actively involved in the activities of the school.



## **Introduction**

Primary education is the basic building block for a good quality of life in adult life. Quality education and therefore quality educational outcomes are only possible through stakeholder engagement (Sharma et al, 2014). One of the most important stakeholders that were identified for this study was the community members. Before delving into the importance of this study, it is necessary to point out that according to Higgins (2009) the quality of education in the northern region of Uganda is low in comparison to other parts of the country. This has been attributed to the insecurity that was caused by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and persisted for over 20 years. The low quality of education has also been attributed to widespread poverty in the region which is above the national average (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 2014). Also, Higgins (2009) also reaffirmed the fact that northern Uganda is one of the regions that are doing poorly in various ways compared to other regions of the country and in particular poverty level is the highest in the northern region. The study used a case study research design with a specific focus on primary schools in Oyam district which is one of the northern districts that was considered.

Booth et al (2003) pointed out that research is what several people benefit from research whether it is a scientific breakthrough or a crisis in world affairs. It is therefore envisaged that the findings of this study will benefit many individuals and institutions. Whereas the researcher will be awarded a Master of Arts degree in Sustainable Development, the schools, local governments, policy makers in the Ministry responsible for education, and other researchers will be the beneficiaries. More specifically, schools may benefit from the knowledge base in the area of enhancing community engagement in primary education, and contribute towards better

educational outcomes. The findings may help them appreciate the various reforms that are required to improve community engagement in primary education.

The local governments may benefit from improvement in academic performance and the higher level of community engagement in primary education, should they implement the recommendations of this study, and further still record improved economic growth and development. This is because the study may also form the basis for future policies at the local government level and possibly at national or regional levels that favor the primary education. The study may enable the public and future scholars to use the report for future reference hence avail existing literature in the areas of community engagement in primary education.

The objectives of the study were threefold, namely; to assess the extent which community members are involved in the educational activities focusing the education in primary schools. To ascertain how community members have been involved in various educational activities, and to propose how can community level engagement be enhanced to improve performance in primary schools. The broad research question was; how can community level engagement be enhanced to improve performance in primary schools?

### **Literature Review**

The importance of parental engagement in the education of their children has been presented by several authors including Monoz (2007) and Purewed (2001). This is because the engagement of the community members in primary education affects the educational outcome. It has been argued that schools are a focal social institution that is directly linked to the community's welfare and growth (Dayaram, 2011). Public choices are believed to be at the heart of democracy (Shultz, 2002). This assumes that even community level engagement in primary education could be a matter of choice or perhaps one of the expectations of community members

from government. This raises an interesting question as to why is the level of community level engagement in primary education still low. Shultz raises many questions including where do we want government in our lives? It was, therefore, important to examine the proposals of the community members as to what could be the best approaches that can be adopted to increase their level of participation in primary educational activities in Oyam district.

A report that was submitted by the Makerere Institute for Social Research (2009) to the Ministry of Education and Sports underscored the importance of community level engagement in education. It was argued that the involvement of community members leads to better educational outcomes. This study specifically investigated the level of community engagement in primary education since it has already been established that community level engagement in education is increasing the quality of its outcome. The study further explored the educational activities in which the community members are actively involved, and these are likely to influence the outcome of education.

Furthermore, Ministry of Education and Sports (2013) showed the importance of stakeholder engagement in the promotion of education. This study was specifically aimed at assessing one of the key stakeholders who are the community members. Education cannot be delivered without the involvement of one of its major stakeholders who are the community members. It is not just about recognizing the importance of stakeholders in the promotion of education but to assess how important they are to education and how their engagement could be enhanced for better results.

In Uganda, according to National Planning Authority (NPA) (2015) technically the communities are expected to be the true owners of schools and therefore are expected to take

keen interest then regarding monitoring school activities and participating in their development. Unfortunately, community participation in primary school activities in Uganda has drastically declined since the launch of Universal Primary Education (UPE). Most communities (particularly in the rural areas) have abdicated this responsibility to Government on account of a misconception that being a publicly funded program, only government is responsible for its implementation and outcomes. However, evidence from several studies in Uganda suggests that low community level of participation is one of the major hindrances to the realization of quality primary education in the country and needs to be considered and addressed as a matter of priority.

Willis (2005) argues that development is measured based on several scales and these could extend to the individual, the local community, the regional, the national and the global. However, irrespective of which scale one opts to use, education is certainly a vital component in measuring the progress of any given community. It is certainly clear that any community is a total of its peoples' educational abilities. Primary education, in particular, represents one of the clear routes out of poverty for many poor rural communities especially during this information age where access to information can make a real difference in the lives of community members.

According to Friedman (2000), globalization is rapidly taking root, and we need a state that is strong enough to maintain fair playing field. Whereas Friedman has looked at globalization from the point of view of the best innovators and entrepreneurs winning, it is important to note that even poorly educated children from primary schools in the developing countries are part of the global economy, and they will have to survive in world where competition will be stiff as a result of free movement of labor that is gaining momentum. Quality primary education is therefore not only important in laying a foundation for citizens to compete

at national level, but to be competitive at a global level as well. It is without the doubt that education is crucial in this information age.

Parenti (2011) pointed out that climate change is happening much faster and we are already experiencing all the negative side effects. There is, therefore, a clear need to prioritize and address this emerging challenge and this will not be possible without the consideration and involvement of the so called global citizens. Primary education, in particular, lays the foundation for these global citizens to have access to information on how to protect the environment from irresponsible destruction. It is not a just global competition but also a global collaboration that will make it possible for climate change to be halted and its side effects minimized. Parenti looks at climate change as part of a new geography of violence, and he is right. Governments and communities, therefore, need to engage in the fight against climate change through the promotion of community engagement in primary education.

Accountability is a critical part of development not just for government, but for all stakeholders involved in the education sphere. Kettner et al (2008) alluded to the need to have accountability mechanisms in place especially at state and local government levels. Although this is important, it need not prevent us from holding NGOs accountability for their activities in support of education in districts such as Oyam in Northern Uganda. Kettner and colleagues put a lot of emphasis on accountability from the side of Government, however, this study specifically focused on the need to make everyone accountable including the community members who have to be fully committed to the education of their children by being actively involved in educational activities.

The need for humanitarian innovation has been explored by Obrecht and Warner (2016) who pointed out that innovations have to rise from the level of individual process to system-wide capacities. This kind of philosophy is very much in line with the condition of Oyam district which had been bedeviled by rebel activities for over twenty years. This thinking is creating a strong need to explore what is being done in Oyam district to promote community level engagement in primary education to identify any innovations that may be existing and could properly be scaled up for the benefit of other similar districts which are recovering from the long period of insurgency. It is important to facilitate learning across districts to address some of the common challenges which are faced in the delivery of social services to the poor rural communities.

A study conducted by African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) showed that parental involvement in the education of their children could have both positive and negative consequences on the education of their children (Yiga & Wandega, 2010). Children who were not treated well at home were also likely to perform poorly at school. The study focused on primary schools in Iganga district which is located in eastern Uganda. Thus, it is important to undertake further investigation of parental involvement in other parts of the country such as northern region hence the research in Oyam district.

There are various approaches which have been credited for leading to the desired social outcome in the African continent. For instance, Brown and Wyatt (2010) provide some evidence regarding the success of using design thinking in mosquito net distribution in Africa which has been widely credited with a serious reduction in malaria. Health and education are certainly closely related social services; it is perhaps possible that the provision of education and in

particular the promotion of community level engagement could be made possible through the application of design thinking. However, this kind of assertion could only be confirmed through in-depth research, and in this case, community level engagement had to be thoroughly investigated in Oyam district.

Furthermore, Sachs (2014) pointed out that investments in health and education possibly have the highest return for the poor and it is one of the best ways of addressing inequality. The northern region is one of the poorest in the Uganda (UBOS, 2014) and there would only have the best chance of transforming itself through investments in primary education. It is further argued by Sachs that the most important investment that countries can make is to invest in their children. It is therefore prudent to invest in Universal Primary Education for children to be able to have access to education. However, if other complementary investments such as community engagement are weak, it will be difficult to attain a positive educational outcome for such children. Thus, the future of our children is dependent on the engagement of all stakeholders not just government alone through the provision of Universal Primary Education. It has already been pointed out that limited investments in health and education are among the main causes of equality among citizens of a country.

The idea of supporting entrepreneurs is certainly attractive to facilitate the process of poverty reduction (Bethany & Saloner, 2009). It is certainly much harder to determine whether it would lead to more active engagement by community members in educational activities or instead it would occupy them more and deny them the opportunity to be more actively engaged in educational activities. This study focused on community level engagement in primary education without any specific focus on entrepreneurs or non-entrepreneurs. Therefore, it was not able to establish the link between community level engagement in primary education and

entrepreneurship, however, it investigated how community level engagement can be enhanced taking into account various options which could have included entrepreneurship.

The issue of risk has often accompanied the idea of innovation (Antadze & Westley, 2012) and therefore managing risk is a huge part of innovation. Stakeholders need to be more innovation to increase the level of community engagement in primary education. This will certainly involve changing the attitudes of the community members as NPA (2015) had shown that their level of engagement had dropped significantly after the introduction of Universal Primary Education in Uganda. There are certain risks which are involved in adopting new approaches to increasing community level engagement, and these should not be considered as deterrents, but strategies need to be devised to address them.

The concept of shared value represents a new approach to managing (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Taking on a more grand scale the concept of shared value should be able to translate into better management of primary schools. This would presuppose that the community members are convinced that what the schools are doing is not just in the best interest of the schools but in their best interest as well. Therefore, the community level engagement would increase if the members of the community believe that their active participation in educational activities would yield good results both for the school and themselves.

Funding gap was identified as one of the challenges that are being faced by educational officials in the districts following the decentralization system of governance that is being used in Uganda (De Grauwe & Lugaz, 2008). It would certainly be important to investigate whether funding is one of the constraints that are still being faced by educational officials especially in their attempts to increase the level of community participation in primary education. These could



involve costs related to making public announcements on local radio stations or publishing in the local newspaper.

Sharma et al (2014) identified school management committees as the best means through which community participation in primary education can be enhanced. This study was conducted in India which has a similar education system to that of Uganda which is also a Commonwealth nature. However, it falls short of the detailed analysis of other aspects of community engagement, for instance, participation in school visits to review the performance of students. Also, the study was conducted in a country whose education standards is considered to be higher than that of Uganda and therefore may not provide a realistic basis for provided conclusion that can be directly applied for the improvement of primary education in the country.

Ternieden (2009) conducted a study in Ethiopia to assess community participation in primary education in three rural schools. The study showed that community participation was affected by the location of the school. However, this study focused on a specific project approach and therefore did not provide a comprehensive understanding of community participation in primary education in the absence of a project defined structured. It is clear that community participation is important, but it is important for it to be analyzed in various contexts, for instance, in the case of Universal Primary Education in Uganda.

There is further substantial evidence presented by Mulkeen and Chen (2008) which showed that community level engagement is very important for the success of education in rural areas. Oyam district is largely rural since it is one of the districts that have been created recently. The study conducted by Mulkeen and Chen covered Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda showed that once the community members are actively involved it is also beneficial

to the teachers who are then able to settle faster and deliver better. Teachers are central to better educational outcomes for primary education.

Unsicker (2013) underscores the importance of public policy and the need to undertake policy advocacy to influence public policy. This assumes that communities are well informed and have the ability to actively participate in influencing educational policies that directly affect them. It also assumes that they are rational and will support policies that force them to act in the best interest of primary education officials in their communities. This kind of assumption needs to be subjected to an investigation to ascertain whether community members are involved in influencing public policy for the betterment of primary education.

Connecting to the above, Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) (1992) underscores the importance of putting in place the right educational policies to improve the quality and outcome of education in Uganda. The government white paper identifies some reforms including stakeholder engagement to improve the quality of education in the country. It was certainly an appropriate time to investigate the kinds of reforms that have since been put in place by the government to facilitate community level engagement in primary education.

Leslie et al (2008) undertook a study of the six practices of high impact nonprofits that have created extraordinary levels of social impact. Leslie and colleagues have provided evidence that nonprofits can tremendously contribute to social transformation. However, this study focused mostly on U.S. charities and therefore did not consider charities that are working in Africa and Uganda in particular. This study specifically asked the respondents to point out the contribution of Non-Government Organizations in the promotion of community engagement in educational activities.

In addition to the above, Alvord et al (2004) explored how social entrepreneurship has been used by various stakeholders including governments and private foundations in order to solve social problems including improving educational outcomes. He further argued that the impact of such interventions has been weak both regarding effectiveness and sustainability. Therefore, any attempt to engage community members in primary education should be done while ensuring that special attention is devoted to both effectiveness and sustainability.

Martin and Osberg (2007) presented a strong case for social entrepreneurship which they believe has a high promise. They argue that social entrepreneurship needs to be differentiated from the traditional social service organizations. However, this is certainly not possible in the case of Oyam district where the same organizations that are engaged in social entrepreneurship are certainly the same ones that are engaged in the traditional social service activities. In Oyam district, for instance, Village Savings and Loans Associations have sprung up in every corner of the district mostly driven by the need to raise household income to address income poverty which is rampant among community members. Thus, it was important to undertake research to establish what the existing traditional social service organizations are currently doing in Oyam district to promote community level engagement in primary education.

### **Method**

This study applied a case study research design whose advantages were well articulated by Gary (1994) who pointed out that a case study may lead to more focus and relevant description. The study findings provide a clear description of community level involvement in primary education. Basing on the case study research design, Oyam district was chosen as the case study to represent northern Uganda. The researcher collected data using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used for

this study with the view that data collected is representative enough. The study focused on community members who were selected through simple random sampling gave the homogeneous nature of the sample and education officials who were selected through purposive sampling.

The study sample was composed of 70 respondents which included; 60 community members and 10 educational officials. Questionnaires were administered to community members. Also, key informant's interviews were conducted with education officials at various levels of the structure of the ministry responsible for education.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments and questionnaires the instruments were developed by the researcher with the help of many sample questions and presented for scrutiny and editing by the advisor who made corrective observations and recommended relevant adjustments and approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB), which were heeded to by the researcher before printing the final copy of questionnaires and interview guides that were administered to the study respondents. The instruments which included questionnaire (refer to appendix IV) and interview guide (refer to appendix V) were therefore of good quality for the researcher to generate the desired information.

## **Results**

The study assessed the extent which community members are involved in the educational activities focusing the education in primary schools, ascertained how community members had been involved in various educational activities and have proposed how can community level engagement be enhanced to improve performance in primary schools. The results are presented through the use of tables and narratives. The findings in tables have been computed based on the

responses from the community members, and most of the findings presented in the narratives are those generated through interviews with various educational officials.

It was established that there are four main kinds of primary schools in Oyam district. The first category are schools which were established by the government, the second category are schools which are founded by the community members, the third category of schools are those founded by religious organizations or NGOs, and the fourth category is schools that founded by private individuals or companies. From the interview with one of the head teachers, it was established that the school had been established by the community members although it was later handed over to the government since the community members did not have the capacity to run the school effectively. The study investigated whether community members had any children in the community primary school and the results are presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Whether the community members have children studying in community primary school**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	53	88.3
No	7	11.7
Total	60	100

Table 1 shows that majority of the community members had either a child or children in the community primary school. This implies that majority of the community members (88.3%) rely on the community primary school to educate their children. In an interview with one of the educational officials, he pointed out that most parents could not afford to pay school fees for their children and that is why the government introduced Universal Primary Education in 1997.

He further pointed out that UPE was introduced to increase access to primary education, especially among the poor rural Ugandan communities. Also, the community members were asked how many children they had in the community primary school, and the findings are presented in table 2.

**Table 2: Number of children community members have in the community primary school**

Number of children	Frequency	Percentage
1	5	9.4
2	16	30.2
3	17	32.1
4	8	15.1
More than 4	7	13.2
Total	53	100

Results in table 2 demonstrate that majority of the community members (90.6%) have more than one child in the community primary school. This shows that community members are heavily dependent on the community primary school for the education of their children. Therefore, their active involvement is very important for the development of the school and the education of their children. One of the education officials from the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, and Technology pointed out that birth rate is high in Uganda, so it is not surprising to find a parent having many children in the same school which is considered to be both accessible and affordable to them. Furthermore, the study looked at the involvement of community members in educational activities, and the results are presented in table 3.

**Table 3: The level of community involvement in school activities**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	13	21.7
No	47	78.3
Total	60	100

Table 3 shows that the level of community involvement is low, that is, only 21.7% of the community members interviewed were involved in school activities. According to educational officials, it was evident that the level of community engagement has declined drastically following the introduction of Universal Primary Education in 1997. The majority of the education officials who were interviewed pointed out the fact that parents consider the responsibility for the promotion of primary education to be that of the Government. It was observed that most of the school management committees are not fully functional and they do not meet regularly to discuss issues that are affecting the schools.

The study also showed that level of community engagement in public and private schools vary. Education officials who were interviewed pointed out that in public school parents tend to surrender their responsibility to Government including feeding the students, however, in private schools, parents tend to be more active as required by the school officials. They are also required to pay school fees as compared to government schools where no school fees are paid. This perhaps explains the low level of performance in government schools which was decried by the education officials. The community members who were further asked how often they participate in educational activities and the results are presented in table 4.

**Table 4: How often community members participate in educational activities**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Regularly	7	11.7
Once in a while	6	10.0
Not at all	47	78.3
Total	60	100

Findings in Table 4 show that only 11.7% of the community members regularly participate in educational activities. This was also confirmed by educational officials who pointed out that due to weak supervision, the majority of the parents do not regularly participate in educational activities. However, they pointed out that the level of participation in educational activities in private schools is relatively high given the fact that parents are sometimes forced to pay fines if they do not participate in educational activities. It is disappointing to note that majority of the community members (78.3%) do not participate in educational activities. This fact notwithstanding, the study further asked the community members to rate their level of participation and the findings are presented in table 5.

**Table 5: Rating of the level of participation in educational activities**

Rating	Frequency	Percentage
Very strong	6	10.0
Strong	5	8.3
Fair	1	1.7
Weak	1	1.7



Very weak	47	78.3
Total	60	100

Table 5 shows that majority of the community members rate their level of participation in educational activities as very weak (78.3%). This was further confirmed by the educational officials who were interviewed; they pointed out that many of the children go to school without school uniforms and even some go without scholastic materials or very limited quantities that negatively affect the children’s level of participation in school activities. The study further explored how community members have been involved in various educational activities, and it was done by asking them several questions. These include among others, “have you been involved in any educational activity this term?” and the results are presented in table 6.

**Table 6: Involvement in education activity during the term**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	13	21.7
No	47	78.3
Total	60	100

Findings in Table 6 confirm the results presented in table 3 which shows that there is a low level of community involvement in educational activities. It was not any different in the current term where only 21.7% of the community members had participated in educational activities during the term. This was also confirmed by the educational officials especially those in the district who reaffirmed that head teachers complain about the limited involvement of the

parents in the education of their children. The educational officials pointed out that school head teachers have asked for the government to increase funding to UPE schools since parents are no longer contributing anything to facilitate the running of the schools. The study also investigated the various educational activities that community members were involved in and the results are displayed in table 7.

**Table 7: Various educational activities that community members are involved in**

Educational activity	Frequency	Percentage
School management committee meetings	13	12.5
Parent teachers' association activities	13	12.5
Board of governors' meetings	5	4.8
School visitation days	13	12.5
Social events organized by the schools	13	12.5
None	47	45.2
Total	104	100

Results in table 7 shows that community members are engaged in various educational activities and these include; school management committee meetings (12.5%), parent teachers' association activities (12.5%), and board of governors' meetings (5.8%), school visitation days (12.5%), social events organized by the schools (12.5%), and none of the activities (45.2%). It is evident that community members who are active in attending school activities are nearly involved in all of them. The educational officials also pointed out that the few parents who are actively involved in school activities tend to come regularly whenever they are asked to come for any activity. According to some educational officials despite the low level of community

involvement in primary education, there are specific activities where they are engaged and these include; the school management committee meetings, parent teachers’ association activities, the board of governors’ meetings, school visitation days and social events organized by the schools. The participation of community members in these activities although was low. The study findings showed that less than 20% of the parents were regularly attending the meetings and participating in other school activities.

The school activity which received the most attention was the board of governors meeting which had a small number of community members who had volunteered to participate based on the time that they were willing to commit to it. This perhaps can also be attributed to the fact that few meetings are held by the board of governors. The respondents were also asked to specify the educational activities that they were most active in, and the results are presented in table 8.

**Table 8: Educational activities that parents are most active in**

Educational activity	Frequency	Percentage
School management committee meetings	1	1.7
Parent teachers’ association activities	3	5.0
Board of governors’ meetings	5	8.3
School visitation days	2	5.0
Social events organized by the schools	1	1.7
None	48	78.3
Total	60	100

Findings in Table 8 indicates that community members are mostly engaged in various educational activities as follows; school management committee meetings (1.7%), parent teachers' association activities (5.0%), and board of governors' meetings (8.3%), school visitation days (5.0%), social events organized by the schools (1.7%), and none of the activities (78.3%). Thus, it is evident that board of governors' meetings (8.3%) is the one which is the most attended by the community members, although the majority (78.3%) did not participate in any activity. During interviews with some of the educational officials, they also pointed out that most of the primary schools have a strong board of governors since they are carefully selected from the community members. The study assessed how community level engagement could be enhanced to improve performance in primary schools. This process was started by examining whether community involvement in primary educational activities could be improved and the findings are presented in table 9.

**Table 9: Whether community involvement in primary educational activities could be improved**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	58	96.7
No	2	3.3
Total	60	100

Table 9 shows that majority of the community members (96.7%) believe their involvement in educational activities could be improved. This was supported by the educational officials who were also interviewed about this issue. One of the educational officials pointed out that community members need to be sensitized that UPE does not imply that the government has taken over all educational responsibilities. Furthermore, the respondents were asked about that

what the primary schools have done to improve the level of community involvement in educational activities, and the results are presented in table 10.

**Table 10: What the primary schools have done to improve the level of community involvement in educational activities**

Action taken	Frequency	Percentage
Using radio announcements	43	19.5
Putting notices in public places	59	26.7
Sending letters to parents	59	26.7
Organizing sports activities	60	27.1
Total	221	100

Results in table 10 illustrate that there are various ways through which schools are trying to increase the level of community participation in educational activities, and these include; using radio announcements (19.5%), putting notices in public places (26.7%), sending letters to parents (26.7%), and organizing sports activities (27.1%). During the interview with educational officials, it was also established that the schools periodically holds the meeting with community leaders to update them on the activities which are being undertaken in the school. The educational officials pointed out that the participation of community members is essential for the success of the school.

One of the school head teachers who were interviewed pointed out that it is very expensive to put announcement on local radio stations or in the local newspapers since they receive very limited funding from the government so they always tend to rely on sending the pupils with either letters or through verbal communication so that they can invite their parents to come for school

activities. The study also looked at how have NGOs helped primary schools to improve the level of community participation in educational activities, and the findings are displayed in table 11.

**Table 11: How NGOs have helped to improve the level of community participation in educational activities**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Using radio announcements	33	15.7
Putting notices in public places	37	17.5
Sending letters to parents	14	6.6
Organizing sports activities	56	26.4
Talking to parents	50	23.6
Working with local leaders	22	10.4
Total	212	100

Findings in Table 11 shows that there are various ways through which NGOs have helped to increase the level of community participation in educational activities and these include; using radio announcements (15.7%), putting notices in public places (17.5%), sending letters to parents (6.6%), organizing sports activities (26.4%), talking to parents (23.6%) and working with local leaders (10.4%). Through interviews with educational officials, it was established that both local and international NGOs are working with community members to improve their participation in educational activities, but a lot remains to be done. The study also examined the measures that can be used by the primary schools to increase participation of community members in education activities, and the results are displayed in table 12.

**Table 12: Measures to increase participation in educational activities**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Using radio announcements	51	17.1
Putting notices in public places	56	18.8
Sending letters to parents	55	18.5
Organizing sports activities	44	14.8
Introducing fines for nonattendance of school activities	57	19.1
Working with local leaders	35	11.7
Total	298	100

Findings in Table 12 show that majority of the community members (19.1%) believed that their participation in educational activities could be increased through introducing fines for nonattendance of schools' activities. The educational officials who were interviewed suggested that community level engagement in primary education can be enhanced through sensitization of the community members about the importance of being actively involved in the activities of the school. Education officials pointed out that the level of engagement declined with the introduction of UPE due to the ignorance of parents who thought their main role was to pay school fees and since the government had taken over this responsibility they did not have much to do.

Also, the educational officials pointed out that sanctions should also be introduced for non-attendance of important school meetings which are geared towards improving the performance of the pupils. Educational officials also pointed out that community level engagement can also be

made possible through deliberately ensuring that parents attend school meetings by informing them that they would be made to pay fines for non-attendance.

Educational officials who were interviewed also pointed out that the parent teachers' association plays a strong role in enhancing the level of community engagement in primary education.

Therefore, most of the educational officials observed that it is good to strengthen the parents' teachers' association to ensure that the level of community engagement in primary school activities is enhanced.

One of the education officials from the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, and Technology pointed out that “we need to have educational policies that address the issue of parental involvement in education.” He argued that at the moment it is at the discretion of the parents to either come for school activities or to absent themselves and there are no consequences. He pointed that it is impossible to expect poor, illiterate parents to concentrate on educational activities within some level of pressure being put on them especially through appropriate legislation.

### **Discussion**

Primary education is the main building block in the learning cycle in Uganda. This implies that if primary education is not functioning properly, the entire education system would be seriously affected. Therefore, it is important to raise the level of community engagement in primary education to ensure that the outcome of primary education is up to the expectation of parents, local community politicians, the private sector, educational officials and other stakeholders.



The findings revealed that the level of community engagement had declined drastically following the introduction of Universal Primary Education in 1997. This is in agreement with the findings of NPA (2015) which had established that UPE had affected community participation negatively. This, therefore, shows that there was a serious misconception of UPE by the various stakeholders especially the parents who saw this as the government taking over their responsibility in primary education. It is therefore important to undertake community sensitization to ensure that parents and other stakeholders understand their responsibilities in this new dispensation.

The decline in community level engagement is worrying trend which needs to be halted if the quality of primary education is to improve especially in Northern Uganda which is already lagging behind as a result of the over twenty years of insecurity that was experienced as a result of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). It is not possible to improve the quality of primary education if the community members are not actively involved in school activities and in supporting their children to perform better. Community members should be made to feel as part of the school system, especially through the parents-teachers' Association.

Furthermore, it was established that level of community engagement in private primary schools was better compared to those of public primary schools. This has been largely attributed to the attitude of the parents which has been greatly influenced by UPE. This perhaps could also be linked to a limited understanding on the part of the community for the benefit of primary education and its contribution to community development. This is supported by Dayaram (2011) who highlighted the fact the development of the community is directly linked to its primary education.

Free education has its downside especially among poor rural communities who view it not just as a relief from paying school fees, but as a relief from their educational obligations. It is important to sensitize such parents and community members for them to appreciate the need for them to be actively involved and participate in the education of their children. The fact that these parents are keener to be involved in the activities of the schools where they are paying school fees implies that there is a connection between payment of school fees and the level of commitment of the parents to the school activities. Also, private schools usually impose sanctions on parents who do not actively participate in school activities, and such strategies can act as deterrents to parents who may want to absent themselves.

The absence of community members from school activities can have a spillover effect on both the learners and the teachers. When parents are involved, they can raise some questions and propose solutions to teachers who are directly involved in the education of their children. Also, the children are less likely to misbehave if they are aware that their parents will check on their performance while at school. This would act as a motivator for the children who would work harder to please their parents through better performance.

It was established that both local and international NGOs are working with community members to improve their participation in educational activities, but a lot remains to be done. This supported by the views of Alvord et al (2004) who argued that the impact of interventions by NGOs has been weak both regarding effectiveness and sustainability. This perhaps explains why despite the existence of several NGOs in the area community members' involvement in primary education is still weak.

In relation to the foregoing facts, it is evident that NGOs do not have the desired impact which is to increase the level of community engagement in primary education among other issues that need to be addressed. This could be attributed to the fact that NGOs tend to focus on other aspects of education and they tend to concentrate on working with the schools while putting the little effort in supporting the parents and helping in changing the attitude of the community members towards the education of their children which requires active involvement for better results. NGOs need to undertake research in the communities to establish realistic strategies for increasing community level engagement in primary education.

Results also showed that community participation in educational activities is very important to the success of the school. This is in line with the views of Ternieden (2009) who conducted a study in three primary schools in Ethiopia, and the study also underscored the importance of community participation in primary education. Therefore, to improve primary education in Oyam district, it is important to improve the level of community participation which is extremely low and as such requires urgent attention. This can also be done by experimenting with different approaches in different countries to be able to establish the best approaches to adopt to enhance community level engagement in primary education.

Community level engagement in primary education may seem obvious, but the reality is that community participation in educational activities in Oyam district has been low. This puts the district at a great disadvantage regarding the promotion of primary education. Base on previous studies community level engagement is certainly vital to the success of primary education in any given community. Therefore, local leaders should work closely with the school authorities to ensure that bylaws are put in place to foster community engagement in primary

education. This is because relying on national laws may not be easily forthcoming especially in the short run since national laws tend to take much longer to enact.

However, coercion should only be used as the last resort, and community dialogue should be adopted as the first strategy that can be used to bring community members back to school. This is because studies have shown that the level of community engagement has been declining. It is important to under thorough investigation to find out why parents are not active in school programs. This will enable the local leaders and the education officials to devise strategies that can be used to encourage community members to be more actively engaged in primary education. From the interview with one of the head teachers, it was established that the school had been established by the community members although it was later handed over to the government and this shows that the community members are committed to supporting primary education in their area.

The study established that although the low level of community involvement in primary education, there are specific activities where they are engaged and these include; the school management committee meetings, parent teachers' association activities, the board of governors' meetings, school visitation days and social events organized by the schools. These activities are similar to those pointed out by Sharma et al (2014). These activities could substantially transform primary education if the community members are actively involved in them. Therefore, specific attention should be devoted towards increasing community level engagement in the identified activities.

The kind of activities which were identified implies that the primary schools still have room to introduce new activities or combine existing ones to ensure that community members

are actively involved in the education of their children. For instance, specific sessions could be introduced to facilitate engagement between community members and the teachers for them to be able to track the performance of their children and to discuss some of the challenges that the children are facing. It would also be a good opportunity for the parents to jointly guide their children with the teachers at the same time and to devise the best way of supporting the children to do much better.

Unsicker (2013) underscores the importance of public policy and the need to undertake policy advocacy to influence public policy which would lead to better outcomes. However, despite the fact that influencing public policy is one of the sure ways of improving service delivery, it was not identified by the community members as one of the strategies that were being used to improve their engagement in primary educational activities. This implies that NGOs and other stakeholders should actively engage in public policy dialogue to promote the interest of the community members. There is already substantial evidence which can be used to engage the government on a number vital policy issues including those that had been highlighted in the government white paper of 1992 (MOES, 1992) and they are yet to be implemented.

Public policy is certainly one of the clear routes to increase the level of community engagement in primary education. Parents tend to respond well if they know they will be sanctioned in case they do not actively participate in school activities. However, sensitization of community members and awarding prizes to community members who actively engage in school activities may be a better approach that can enhance community level engagement in primary education. It is much better to positively motivate community members to actively participate in educational activities rather than to coerce them to do so. A partnership approach would yield

better results in increasing the level of community engagement in primary education in Oyam district.

The study findings were in agreement with the views of Leslie et al (2008) whose study showed that nonprofits had created extraordinary levels of social impact. It was clear that NGOs have contributed positively to enhancing community engagement in primary education although a lot remains to do to ensure that educational outcomes are improved substantially to address poverty as one of the sure ways of improving the standard of living of the poor rural communities. It is important to look at the impact of NGO engagement in education, not just the activities that they are undertaking with the community members. This is because in most cases NGOs in Northern Uganda tend not to undertake impact evaluation of their activities due to limited funding as they tend to prioritize implementation of other activities rather than research.

It is therefore important for NGOs to assess the various approaches that they are using to promote primary education in Oyam district. There is substantial evidence to suggest that the current approaches which are being used are not yielding the required results in the promotion of community level of engagement in primary education. Whereas a significant proportion of the community members were aware of the activities of NGOs, they could not directly relate the activities of NGOs with increasing community level engagement in primary education. This also implies that NGOs should deliberately strengthen their partnership with the community members while targeting increasing the level of community engagement in primary education in Oyam district.

### **Brief reflection on Sustainable Development**

Education is a central tool for the promotion of sustainable development since it is capable of transforming entire communities to become agents of environmental protection. A lot of dangerous practices that destroy the environment are driven largely by ignorance among the key stakeholders who are expected to protect the environment. Primary education, in particular, lays the foundation upon which understanding on the need to preserve the environment and to use it sustainably can be built. By directly involving community members in primary education, the quality of education can be enhanced, and community members can have the opportunity to replicate the lessons of sustainable development that are taught in schools to actual practice.

Sustainable development can only be promoted when the community members including its next generation of leaders appreciate its importance, and this is only possible through education which increases their knowledge, shapes their values, changes their attitudes and equips them with the right skills for environmental protection. This study focused on the community level engagement in primary education, and it helped to identify appropriate strategies that can be adopted to enhance community engagement. This will contribute towards making sustainable development a reality if active community level engagement is realized.

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## Annexes

### Annex I: Consent for Participation in Interview Research- Community members

The purpose of this study has been fully explained to me by the researcher Mr. Benson Ocan. I understand that this is an academic research project that is focusing on community level engagement in primary education. This research is to be submitted as partial fulfilment for the award of Master of Arts in Sustainable Development: International Policy and Management. The interview will be conducted with sixty community members and I am one of them. I also know that five government officials and five community leaders will also be interviewed.

1. I understand that there is no financial reward for my participation in this study. I am therefore at liberty to withdraw my participation at any point if I want to do so at any time. In case I choose to withdraw no one will be notified about it and I will also not be penalized because of my withdrawal.
2. The interview will take 20 to 40 minutes to complete and will rely on my personal views.
3. The researcher will not identify me by name in any reports that shall be produced from this interview and therefore the information that I have provided will remain anonymous.
4. I agree to participate in this study by filling the questionnaire that has been provided. I have read the questions provided and I am comfortable to answer all of them as required.
5. I fully understand that my participation in this study is purely voluntary. I therefore declare that I was not coerced to participate in this study.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

.....(initial) I agree to

..... (initial) I do not agree to

..... Name of Community member (printed) and Signature	..... Date
..... Name of Person Obtaining Community Member Permission	..... Date

**Annex II: Consent for Participation in Interview Research- Government Officials**

The purpose of this study has been fully explained to me by the researcher Mr. Benson Ocan. I understand that this is an academic research project that is focusing on community level engagement in primary education. This research is to be submitted as partial fulfilment for the award of Master of Arts in Sustainable Development: International Policy and Management. The interview will be conducted with five government officials and I am one of them. I also know that five community Leaders and sixty community members will also be interviewed.

1. I understand that there is no financial reward for my participation in this study. I am therefore at liberty to withdraw my participation at any point if I want to do so at any time. In case I choose to withdraw no one will be notified about it and I will also not be penalized because of my withdrawal.
2. The interview will take 20 to 40 minutes to complete and will rely on my personal views.
3. The researcher will not identify me by name in any reports that shall be produced from this interview and therefore the information that I have provided will remain anonymous.
4. I agree to participate in this study by answering the interview questions. I have read the questions provided and I am comfortable to answer all of them as required.
5. I fully understand that my participation in this study is purely voluntary. I therefore declare that I was not coerced to participate in this study.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

.....(initial) I agree to

..... (initial) I do not agree to

.....  
Name of government official (printed) and Signature Date

.....  
Name of Person Obtaining government official Permission Date

**Annex III: Consent for Participation in Interview Research- Community leaders**

The purpose of this study has been fully explained to me by the researcher Mr. Benson Ocan. I understand that this is an academic research project that is focusing on community level engagement in primary education. This research is to be submitted as partial fulfilment for the award of Master of Arts in Sustainable Development: International Policy and Management. The interview will be conducted with five community leaders and I am one of them. I also know that five government officials and sixty community members will also be interviewed.

1. I understand that there is no financial reward for the participation in this study. I am therefore at liberty to withdraw from participation at any point. In case I have decided to withdraw no one will be notified about it and will also not be penalized because of the withdrawal.
2. The interview will take 20 to 40 minutes to complete and will rely on the minor's personal views.
3. The researcher will not identify my name in any reports that shall be produced from this interview and therefore the information that is provided will remain anonymous.
4. I agree to participate in this study by answering the interview questions. I have read the questions provided and I am comfortable to answer all of them as required.
5. I fully understand that my participation in this study is purely voluntary. I therefore declare that I was not coerced to participate in this study.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

.....(initial) I agree to

..... (initial) I do not agree to

.....  
Name of community leader (printed) and Signature Date

.....  
Name of Person Obtaining permission from a community leader Date

## Annex IV: Questionnaire for community members

Dear respondent,

My name is Benson Ocan, a student of SIT Graduate Institute, I hereby submit these questions to you so that you can give your views about primary education. My interest in these questions is to establish impact of community level engagement on primary education, which is to be submitted as partial fulfilment for the award of Master of Arts in Sustainable Development: International Policy and Management.

Your response to these questions will be highly appreciated.

**Instruction: Tick where options are provided or fill in where blank spaces are provided**

### A). PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. Sex

Male

Female

2. Age group

18-25

26-35

36-45

46+

3. Marital status

Married

Single

Widowed

Divorced

4. Education level

None

Primary

Secondary

Tertiary level

5. Occupation

Peasant farmer

Trader

Builder

Fisherman

Civil servant

Company employee

Others..... (Specify)

**B). THE EXTEND TO WHICH COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE INVOLVED IN THE EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

6. Do you have any child (ren) in the community primary school?

Yes

No

7. If yes, how many

.....

8. Are you involved in the educational activities?

Yes

No

9. How often do participate in the educational activities?

Regularly

Once in a while

Not at all

10. How do you rate your level of participation?

Very strong

Strong

Fair

Weak

Very weak

**C). HOW COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

12. Have you been involved in any educational activity this term?

Yes

No

13. If yes, mentioned the various educational activities that you were involved in?

.....  
.....



.....  
.....

14. Which educational activities were you most active in?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**D). HOW CAN COMMUNITY LEVEL ENGAGEMENT CAN BE ENHANCED IN ORDER TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS?**

15. Do you think community involvement in primary educational activities could be improved?

Yes

No

16. What have the primary schools done to improve the level of community involvement in educational activities?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

17. How have NGOs helped primary schools to improve the level of community participation in educational activities?

.....  
.....

.....  
.....

18. What measures can be used by the primary schools to increase participation of community members in education activities?

.....  
.....  
.....

\* \*END\* \*

**Thanks a lot for your response**

## Annex V: Interview guide for education officials

Dear respondent,

My name is Benson Ocan, a student of SIT Graduate Institute, and I would like to ask you the following questions so that you can give your views about primary education. My interest in these questions is to establish the impact of community level engagement on primary education, which is to be submitted in partial fulfillment for the award of Master of Arts in Sustainable Development: International Policy and Management.

Your response to these questions will be highly appreciated.

### **A). THE EXTEND TO WHICH COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE INVOLVED IN THE EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

1. Do you have any child (ren) in the community primary school?
2. If yes, how many
3. Are you involved in the educational activities?
4. How often do participate in the educational activities?
5. How do you rate your level of participation?

### **B). HOW COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

6. Have you been involved in any educational activity this term?
7. If yes, mentioned the various educational activities that you were involved in?
8. Which educational activities were you most active in?

**C). HOW CAN COMMUNITY LEVEL ENGAGEMENT BE ENHANCED TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS?**

9. Do you think community involvement in primary educational activities could be improved?

10. What have the primary schools done to improve the level of community involvement in educational activities?

11. How have NGOs helped primary schools to improve the level of community participation in educational activities?

12. What measures can be used by the primary schools to increase participation of community members in education activities?

**\* \*END\* \***

**Thanks a lot for your response**