An illustration of citizen agency and public accountability: Asha and Juma’s story

Asha and Juma were pleased that their three children went to school, and worked hard to provide for uniforms and extra coaching from the teachers. This is until they heard a person on the radio say ‘Do you know what your children are learning in school? Why don’t you sit with them and find out?’ Asha and Juma did just that, and were shocked to find out that their oldest son in grade 4 could not read. They could not understand – the children had been going to school everyday but still could not read?! They had seen a national CSO, HakiElimu’s, adverts on TV at the local hall, and sent them an SMS to get help. A few weeks later HakiElimu sent an envelope full of information (through the bus service) about the government education plan, what it was meant to achieve, the amount of money that was to reach schools, and how everyone had a right to be involved through the local school committee.

The envelope also included a tool to find out what was going in school, and a contact of ‘Friend of Education’ in a nearby town who could help with how to use it. After consulting that Friend Asha and Juma got together with two other parents and a teacher to use the tool at school. At first the Head-teacher was reluctant, but was eventually persuaded after the Friend explained how it had been used in the next ward, and shared a copy of a newspaper article in which President Kikwete encouraged people to monitor what was going on with basic social services.

The monitoring involved using a simple form to record information. They found out a lot about the school in about two hours, including that the school had received only one quarter of the money they ought to have received, that the teachers were often not in the classroom, that there was no library, and the few books that were there were often locked up in cupboards for safekeeping. They saw how all this made it difficult for their son to learn to read.

So they asked to see the school committee, and asked the Chairman to put this on the next meeting agenda. One of the parents who had done the monitoring was afraid and dropped out, but the Head-teacher became an ally. This led to a public meeting in which these concerns were discussed. The teachers said it was hard to teach without proper materials; others sympathized but said that they felt that some teachers were lazy and using the poor working conditions as an excuse. There was great debate about the problems, but people did not know what to do to solve the problem. So it was agreed that a team comprising Asha, the Head-teacher, the leader of the local chapter of the teachers’ trade union, and an influential local entrepreneur would work on finding solutions.

The local entrepreneur was a busy woman, so the team had efficient meetings that focused on solutions. Borrowing ideas from a handbook, their own experience and what they had heard through the media – the team did several things. They asked a local FM station to do a story on their issue and then organize a discussion on it, where people called in using cell phones. They helped the Head-teacher write to the district education officer (DEO), and the teachers’ union leader got a resolution passed at their annual meeting asking all teachers to monitor funds received. The entrepreneur helped organize the school accounts better so it was easy to know what was going on.

Six months later, many parents were much more aware of what was going on at the school. The school received more money as a result if the letter written by the Head-teacher (even though the school still did not reach the full amount promised in the policy). The funds enabled the school to buy more books and send a teacher on training. The DEO told the school head informally that his letter had helped him make the case for more funds with the Ministry. The teacher trade unionist became a bit of a local hero. Many teachers across the country – not yet monitoring school funds themselves - asked him to come to their districts to teach them how to do it. Already the Prime Minister, acting under pressure from the teachers’ union, had promised to resolve this issue.

Asha and Juma felt good because of all this, and because they knew they had been part of making this change happen. But quality of teaching and learning was still a problem—their son was still not reading as well. A plan was put in place for a retired teacher from a neighboring village to come for two weeks to help the younger teachers – they were hopeful but not certain if it would help. But they knew that they would keep trying, because they had experienced the power of making change, and now there was no stopping them.