

PALESTINE: TEACHING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH SOCIAL AUDITS

CASE STUDY (SUMMARY) | BELAL FALLAH | FEBRUARY 2016

A storage room that should have been an information center. A contaminated spring, missing street lights, and a shoddily constructed stadium. These are some of the problems that Palestinian students uncovered when they conducted social audits across the West Bank, Palestine.

In much of the West Bank, and particularly in areas such as Awarta and Nablus, there are rampant problems in the funding and delivery of government services and infrastructure projects. These problems range from general mismanagement of funds to outright corruption. In response, the Teacher Creativity Centre (TCC) created a project to mobilize students to conduct social audits of public services. Integrity Action, a nonprofit organization registered in the United Kingdom, supported TCC through funding for the campaign activities, help in shaping the audit tools used by students, and by providing guidance on monitoring.

Over a period of four months, the TCC mobilized groups of students from 58 secondary schools, exposing a host of problems and advocating for their solutions. Some groups significantly improved infrastructure in their communities. Others were less successful — a lack of information and concerns about exposing too much undermined the potential of their work culminate in change.

TCC's social audit project provides many lessons about how to effectively involve young people in social accountability projects. Embedding student efforts within other institutional channels, like the Ministry of Education, can strengthen and broaden impact, including by building civic skills amongst the youth and inculcating a culture of integrity.

THE ISSUES: TRANSPARENCY PROBLEMS, BUT A COMMITTED GOVERNMENTAL PARTNER

Since its inception, The Palestinian Authority (PA) has issued a number of anti-corruption laws, but their implementation has been hampered. The PA's weak capacity and adverse political influence of the 2007 schism within the party divided the cabinet from the legislature. This left Gaza under control of Hamas and the West Bank under Fatah. According to local watchdog organizations, corruption within the PA most often takes the form of personal and political favoritism, though high-profile cases of misappropriated public funds have also been well documented. Between 2006 and 2009, the public prosecutor carried out a series of investigations, which led to the indictment of several government officials.

A teachers association tackling corruption and the mismanagement of public money may seem like an unorthodox idea. Yet TCC's campaign to mobilize students to audit community projects was largely a successful one.

TCC was established by a group of secondary school teachers in 1995. The founding members launched the organization to improve access to quality education and also ensure that education strengthened young people's confidence and instilled a sense of civic duty. Finally, they also wanted to make a contribution to the wider community.

From 2005, TCC worked with the Ministry of Education (MoE) on Project Citizen, an initiative to engage students in activities intended to improve livelihoods in their communities. One group of students began to monitor pollution levels at a hospital in Ramallah, uncovering problems related to sanitation and health services in the hospital's maternity section. Using local media to attract the attention of the local community and government officials, the students were able to contribute to a dramatic improvement in the quality of services provided by the hospital. TCC and the MoE took note of the capability of students to making a positive change in their local communities. Indeed, the MoE had already begun experimenting with involving students in the auditing of municipal and local government activities and received positive feedback from parents and the community.

While corruption and a lack of budget transparency have been an endemic problem in the West Bank, the TCC had a strong and committed governmental partner in the MoE. This was one of the main factors that contributed to the campaign's successes.

THE CAMPAIGN

In 2013, TCC and MoE jointly organized training sessions for 58 teachers from 58 schools across 16 localities in the West Bank. Economics and business administration teachers were selected because they were deemed best suited to assist with monitoring activities that dealt with financial and administrative analysis. TCC and MoE conducted similar trainings with 16 supervisors from the MoE, as well as with all of the principals of the participating schools. Trainees were introduced to basic concepts in auditing, corruption, accountability, transparency, responsibility, and the process for implementing the project.

The schools themselves were selected to emphasize social and economically disadvantaged localities: communities with high rates of poverty and illiteracy and those close to the Israeli separation barrier. Groups of four to seven 17 year old students were formed in each of the 58 schools to conduct their social audit projects. The selection process also sought to ensure that half of the participating students were female.

Each group consulted with its local municipality or village council to obtain a list of public construction projects that were either still being implemented or completed within the previous four years. Projects were selected according to their importance to the local community, student preferences, and the availability of data. The students voted for their favorite project, and the one with the most votes was eventually selected. Students in the town of Beit Fajjar, for example, chose to audit the renovation of a secondary school because that project also contained an aspect of archeological preservation that interested them. In Nablus, the student group audited the constructed of a stadium that serves 160,000 in the city and surrounding areas.

The students began to collect relevant information by interviewing project stakeholders and reviewing project documents. This included information on the project's objectives, financing, administration and management.

The auditing process also explored whether financial transactions were carried out transparently, according to contract specifications, and complied with laws and regulations.

Students were trained in the policies, laws, and regulations that govern project administration and implementation. They also learned about the managerial structure of the project and mapped the agencies involved. The social audit gave them an opportunity to actively apply this knowledge to determine whether the project complied with the relevant regulations.

Students visited project sites and took photos to compare the actual services provided by the contractors with the plans. They also surveyed local residents to get a sense of their satisfaction with the project and its impact. Questions that were designed to assess the project's overall integrity, which focused on accountability, professionalism, and control of corruption, guided how the students analyzed the information they collected.

Through this process, students in Beit Fajjar discovered that maintenance activities at the secondary school had not been implemented as planned. A room intended to serve as an information center was instead being used for storage, and the municipal archiving system had several problems, resulting in missing documents. In Nablus, they found a stadium that was being constructed was not completed as contracted. Stadium lighting, for instance, had not been installed.

Few student groups encountered difficulties in accessing information. When additional information or documentation was needed, or documents were missing, principals stepped in to communicate with local councils, using their credibility to win cooperation. When this failed, the MoE worked through the Ministry of Local Government to intervene.

Communicating the findings of the social audit to local communities and public officials was an integral part of the process. These efforts to build citizen awareness could have the greatest impact on future processes, and stand to improve the transparency of budgetary oversight at all levels of government. After devising appropriate solutions to the problems they identified, each group of students came up with a plan to communicate them to the community and public officials. They conducted public hearings and used both local media and social media to reach those most affected by the projects.

Students were creative in their outreach strategies. One group, monitoring the paving of a road and construction of sidewalks in Qabatiya, publicized their findings in three ways. First, they used social media to create a social audit group. Second, they were live guests on a well-known radio talk show, talking about the problems they had found and relating personal experiences of the dangers of failing to install traffic signals. Finally, the students arranged for a public hearing with the mayor and representatives from the local community.

TACTICS FOR CONDUCTING A STUDENT-LED AUDIT OF PUBLIC CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

- Partnering with the Ministry of Education.
- Selecting schools to target marginalized communities, and ensuring a gender balance for participating student groups
- Training teachers, principals and Ministry of Education officials to ensure effective cooperation.
- Student-led efforts to collect project data through interviews and documentary review.

- Student-led audit to verify whether financial transactions were transparent and according to contractual specifications.
- Site visits to check actual construction against contractual plans.
- A questionnaire survey of a sample of local residents.

CHANGES DUE TO THE CAMPAIGN

The students accomplished impressive changes. In Nablus (the site of the stadium), the Anti-Corruption Commission responded to the student-led public hearing by opening an investigation into the misconduct of the municipality's engineering department. Construction of the stadium was fully completed, with missing fixtures and other deficiencies were resolved.

In Qabatiya, the poorly constructed roads and sidewalks were improved significantly. Telephone poles and wires were moved, traffic lights and pedestrian crossings installed, storm drains were widened and cleared of rubbish, and street lights were erected in response to the students' recommendation.

At times, students faced social pressure to halt their auditing activities or to ignore certain findings. One supervising teacher altered the students' findings because she feared that the allegations would spark unrest within the community. Another group chose not to report suspected financial corruption for a similar reason.

The impact of some of the audits was limited by the fact that most of the audited projects were completed before the students started their monitoring. In such cases, there was little chance to close the accountability loop, either because it is hard to fix deficiencies in already completed projects or because no more funds were available. In general, groups that succeeded in driving change audited projects that were still in progress or only recently completed.

Though it is difficult to assess, one of the most valuable contributions of the students' participation in the audits might be the promotion of values of accountability and integrity in the local communities and the strengthening of a culture of freedom to information and responsiveness at public institutions. A more thorough impact evaluation of this or similar projects could usefully explore this potential benefit.

OUTCOMES RELATED TO THE CAMPAIGN

- The Palestinian Authority and a contractor cleaned a contaminated spring and installed a pump and filtration system to send clean water from the spring to the local water network.
- The Anti-Corruption Commission opened an investigation into misconduct by the municipality in Nablus, and several problems with a new stadium, including missing light fixtures, were resolved.
- Measures were taken to improve the safety of children during the delivery of water by large water tank trucks in Faqoua.
- Many improvements were made to a new street and sidewalk in Qabatiya, including the installation of traffic lights and street lights.
- Students inspired a group of teachers and residents in Idhna to form a committee to oversee the services given at a rehabilitation center for people with disabilities.
- The social audits provided a hand-on learning experience for the students, building their knowledge, confidence and sense of civic duty.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the TCC was satisfied with the project. They also learned a number of lessons about making student-led social audits both valuable for the students and effective for the community.

Partnering with a government agency was essential for securing access to information and responsiveness from local authorities. This partnership could be strengthened further by better addressing the problem of time restrictions. For example, a mechanism could have been put in place for MoE officials to follow up on the observations made by the student audits. In that sense, the project highlighted the potential for integrating student-led audits into a larger process of accountability.

Finally, the broader benefits of such a project should be considered, beyond just the success the audits achieve in prompting government action. The campaign also succeeded in promoting participation among Palestinian youth, giving them a sense of responsibility and enhancing their self-esteem. As an educational experience, it was almost certainly more powerful than a civics course taught in a classroom. Although more research is needed, student-led social audits show a great deal of potential to achieve a cultural impact: promoting civic values and positive attitudes in the community.