

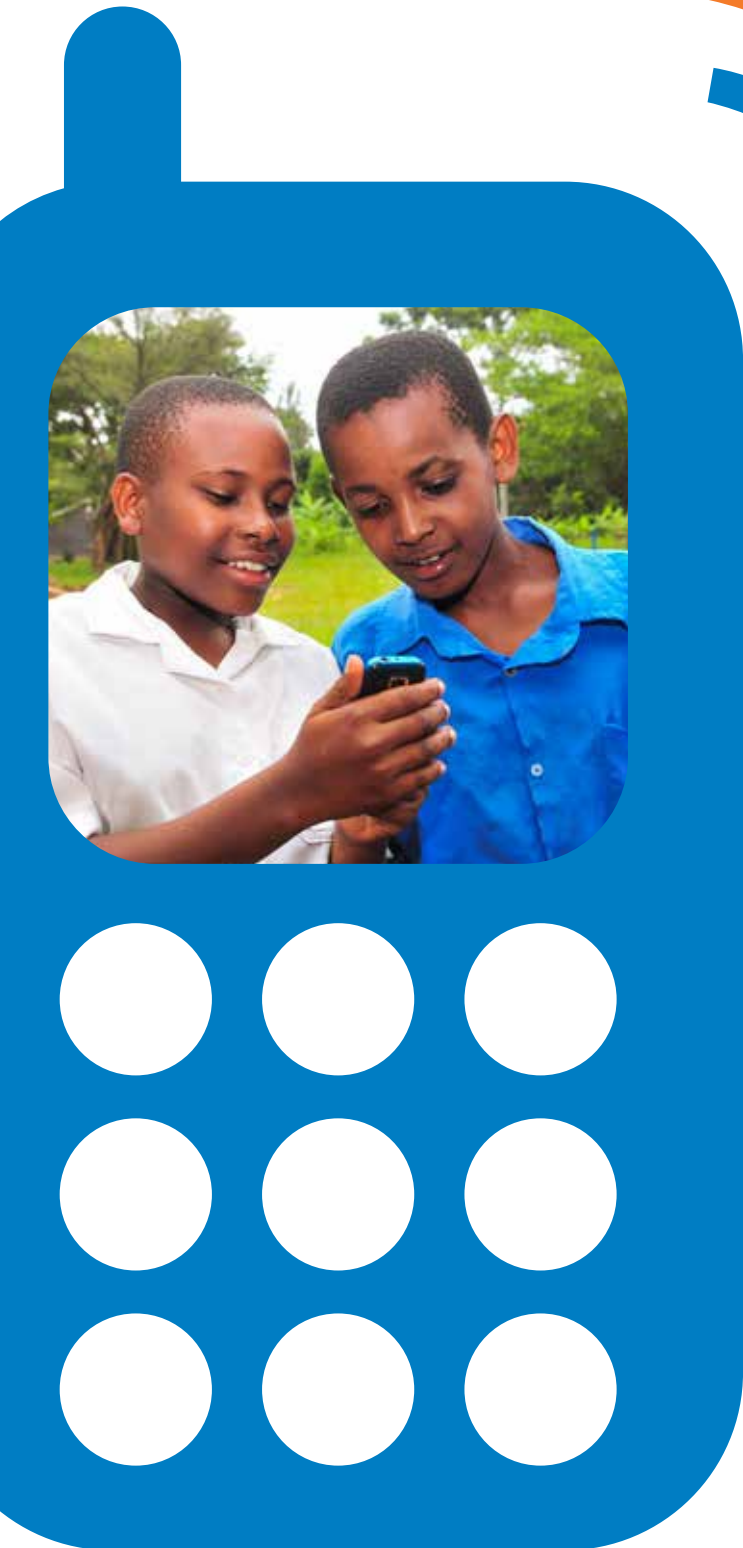
MOBILE PHONES IMPROVING SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

**PLAN UGANDA'S EXPERIENCE  
IN IMPLEMENTING ICT  
PARTICIPATORY SCHOOL  
GOVERNANCE PROJECT**



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## 4

MOBILE PHONES  
IMPROVING SCHOOL  
GOVERNANCE LESSONS  
FROM PLAN ICT  
PARTICIPATORY SCHOOL  
GOVERNANCE PROJECT

## Preamble

The use of information and communications technology (ICT) for educational purposes is a relatively new phenomenon but one with great potential for improving education delivery. The fast-changing ICT landscape in Uganda, especially the increasing functionality of mobile phone technology presents an opportunity for mobile phone ICT to increase the efficiency of the education service delivery as mobile phones are becoming an integral part of people's lives, facilitating real time, two way dialogues.

Over the last two years, Plan Uganda has been exploring the ways in which ICTs, especially mobile phone devices, could be used in an education context to transform the teaching and learning process. A project to demonstrate how mobile phones could be used to improve school governance is being implemented in the Luwero Program area. In this publication, we would like to share our experiences, emerging best practices, challenges and lessons learned under this project.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Uganda has witnessed improvements in educational indicators, such as enrolment over the last decade as a result of the introduction of universal primary and secondary education. However, significant challenges remain with regard to the delivery of quality education, particularly in rural and remote areas. In an attempt to find viable solutions to these challenges, much hope has been placed in new information and communication technologies (ICTs), mobile phones being a prime example.

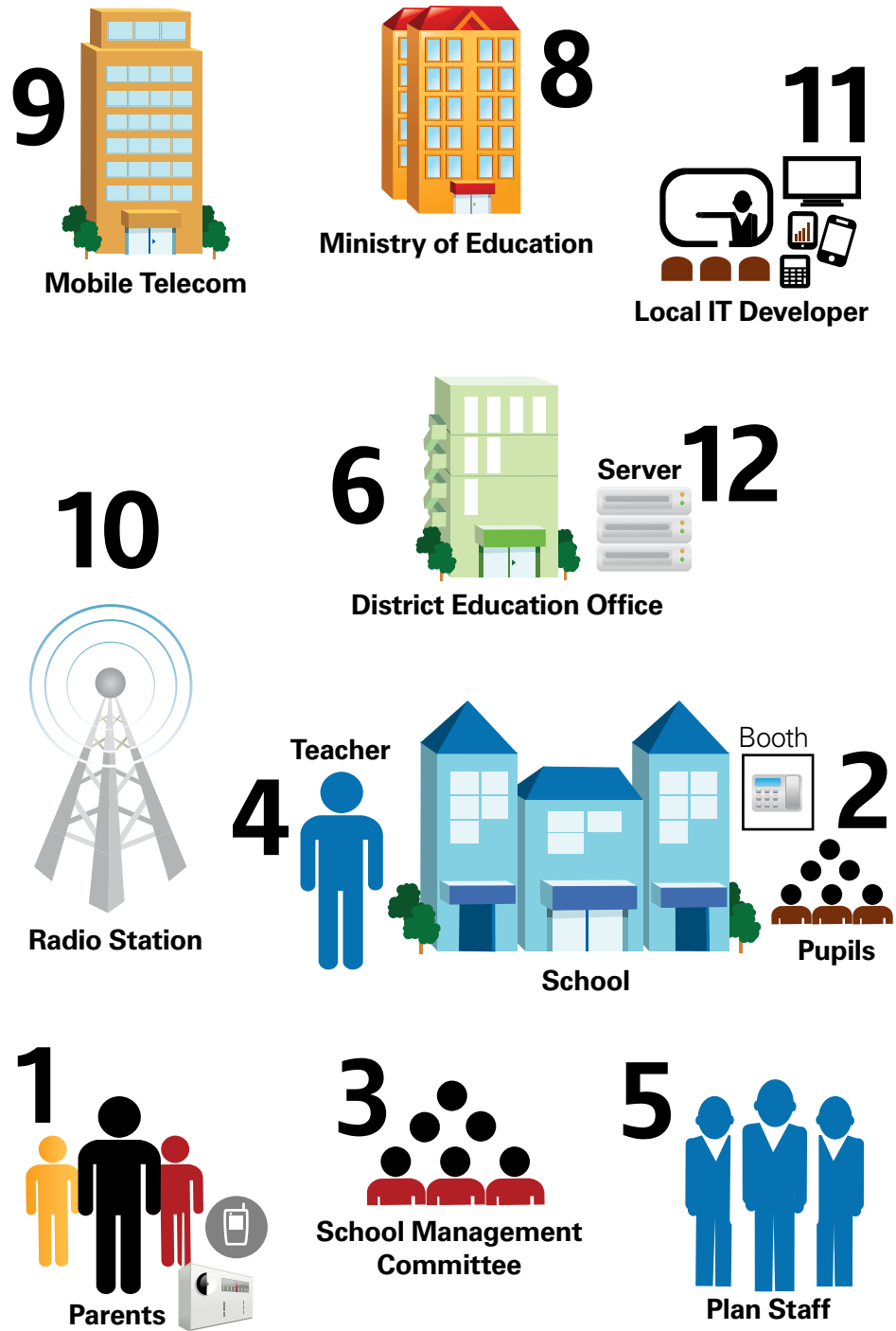
Plan, in partnership with Nokia, is implementing an ICT – school governance project in Luwero district. The project contributes towards the realization EFA and MDG goals on basic education by mobilizing education stakeholders – including children, parents and communities along with political leaders and education professionals – to take an active role in school governance and to demand the fulfillment of children’s right to education.

Plan has developed a robust web-based ICT platform for engagement and for facilitating systematic school governance information flow among the education stakeholders. Interface with the system is conducted through **Short Messaging Services (SMS) via a short code (7200)**. School governance issues identified through the system are further discussed by the general public via program radios discussions, creating more synergy among the mobile phone and radio technologies. Through this, the project provides a platform for conversation to resolve differences, create common interpretations, and shared understanding of what goes on in schools.





Figure 1: Information flows among education stakeholders





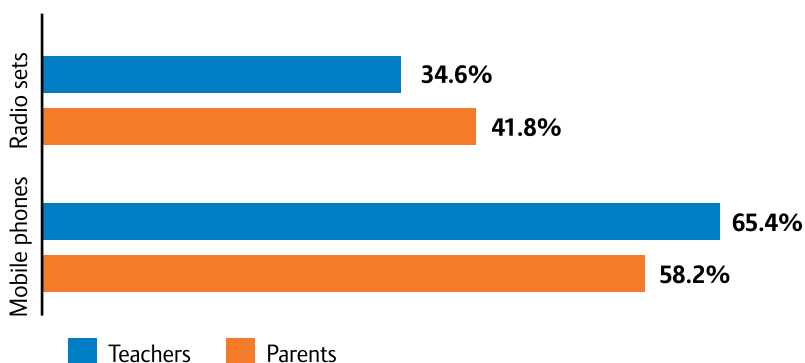
## BASIS FOR CHOOSING SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Plan Uganda's field experience has revealed weak school governance and a lack of accountability among education stakeholders - two major challenges standing in the way of effective delivery of quality basic education in Uganda. School governance is perceived to be the responsibility of government and teachers with parents and community members believing they have no role, nor competence, in it, a belief that results in a lack of effective parental and community involvement in their children's education. The Ministry of Education and Sports Annual Education Sector - Performance Review (ESR) 2008/2009, and the Aide Memoire of 2010/2011 identified gaps in community participation in school governance and recommended districts to engage pupils and parents in annual school appraisals in a joint national education evaluation system. Thus, the choice for improving school governance was informed by the felt need to provide an enabling environment for achieving the educational goals set out in the Uganda Education Act 2008, and the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP).

## TECHNOLOGICAL CHOICE – WHY MOBILE PHONES

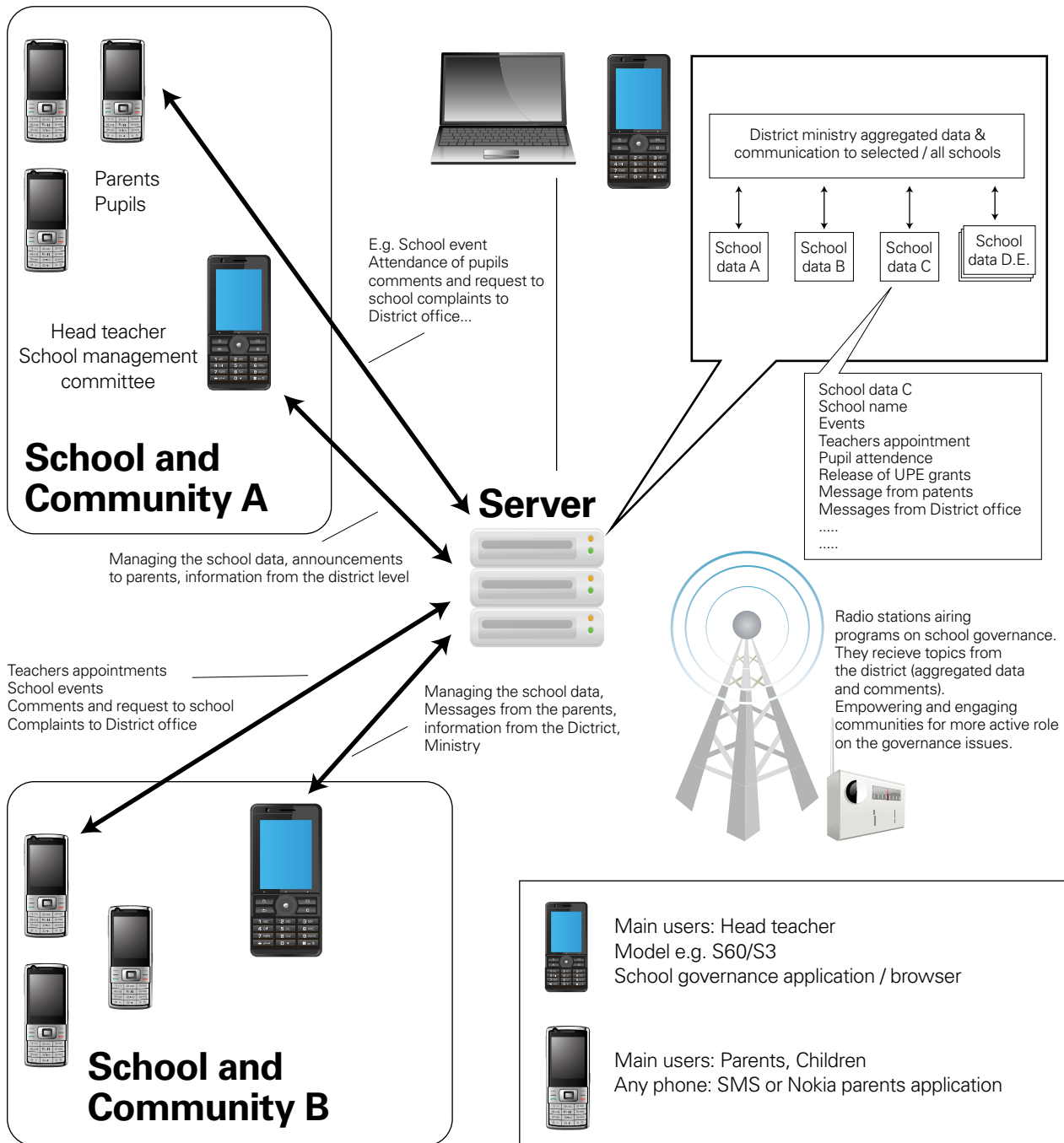
We wanted to get very simple technology accessible to the majority of the population. In 2011, we conducted a baseline survey that revealed mobile phones as the most prevalent technology used by parents and teachers in Luwero, with accessibility rate of 65.2%. The mobile phone is the 1st computer accessible to majority people especially in the rural areas.

**Figure 2: Phone access among parents and teachers**



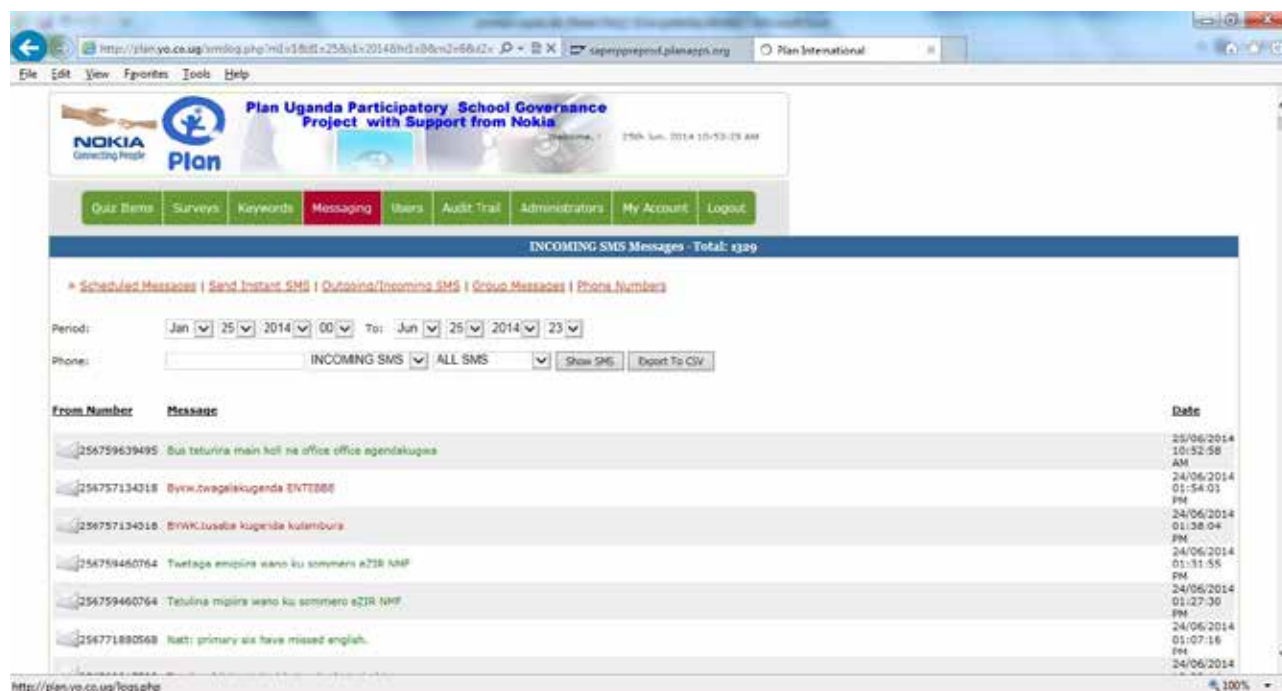
Mobile phone technology was found particularly suitable due to their high penetration rate even among the lower income groups. We chose the technology people already have - to empower education stakeholders by facilitating communication and interaction, and generally using phones as tools for transforming teaching and learning. The system is home grown based on the information needs as articulated by the stakeholders.

**Figure 3: How the ICT – school governance information system works**



- The system includes a centralized server connected to internet
- Allows only authorized teachers, parents and student representatives to exchange relevant school information via mobile devices (SMS)
- Allows auto profiling of pupils using SMS
- Info is exchanged via a short code (7200) through a Prime Rate Service Provider
- Auto analysis of messages and auto forward to relevant offices for action

**Figure 4: Snapshot of the web based system**



## COMMON USAGE OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEM

The use of mobile phone technology increases community – school connections and promotes bottom-up initiatives and accountability — through a powerful alliance of all the key primary education stakeholders. It also gives schools direct access to the expertise of its key stakeholders and facilitates collaboration in addressing some of the systems gaps such as children and teacher absenteeism, unequal treatment of boys and girls in school, discrimination of children with disabilities, low confidence of parents to participate, and low accountability among schools and teachers via participatory school-based management.

- Schools provides regular updates to parents on; children attendance, behavior and progress, school calendar events, forthcoming school management decision etc, using SMS.
- Parents use SMS to update teachers about children (for example John is sick and will not attend school today).
- District Inspector of Schools request and receive school data using SMS.
- School head teachers and teachers can seek and receive support from district via their phones.

## WHAT WORKS - EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

The ICT – school governance project demonstrates how mobile technology can help to improve education service delivery and learning outcomes in rural schools. This has been achieved through addressing the community and parental disengagement in their children’s education; the lack of systematic information flows among education stakeholders, which hinders stakeholders from supporting schools and demanding children’s rightful education; and the low community knowledge and organizational capacity to oversee the schools in their areas.

**Our success is summarized in the case studies below:**

### Improved childrens’ enrolment and performance at Kajuule Primary school

#### Introduction

Effective implementation of change requires participation and buy-in from all those involved, most importantly, students and parents. This is the case for Kajuule Primary school where the Participatory School Governance project using ICT4D (mobile phone-sms tech) was introduced two years ago. Kajuule P/S, started in the 1960’s as one of the church of Uganda founded primary schools in Kiteme Parish, Bamunanika Sub-county, Luwero district.

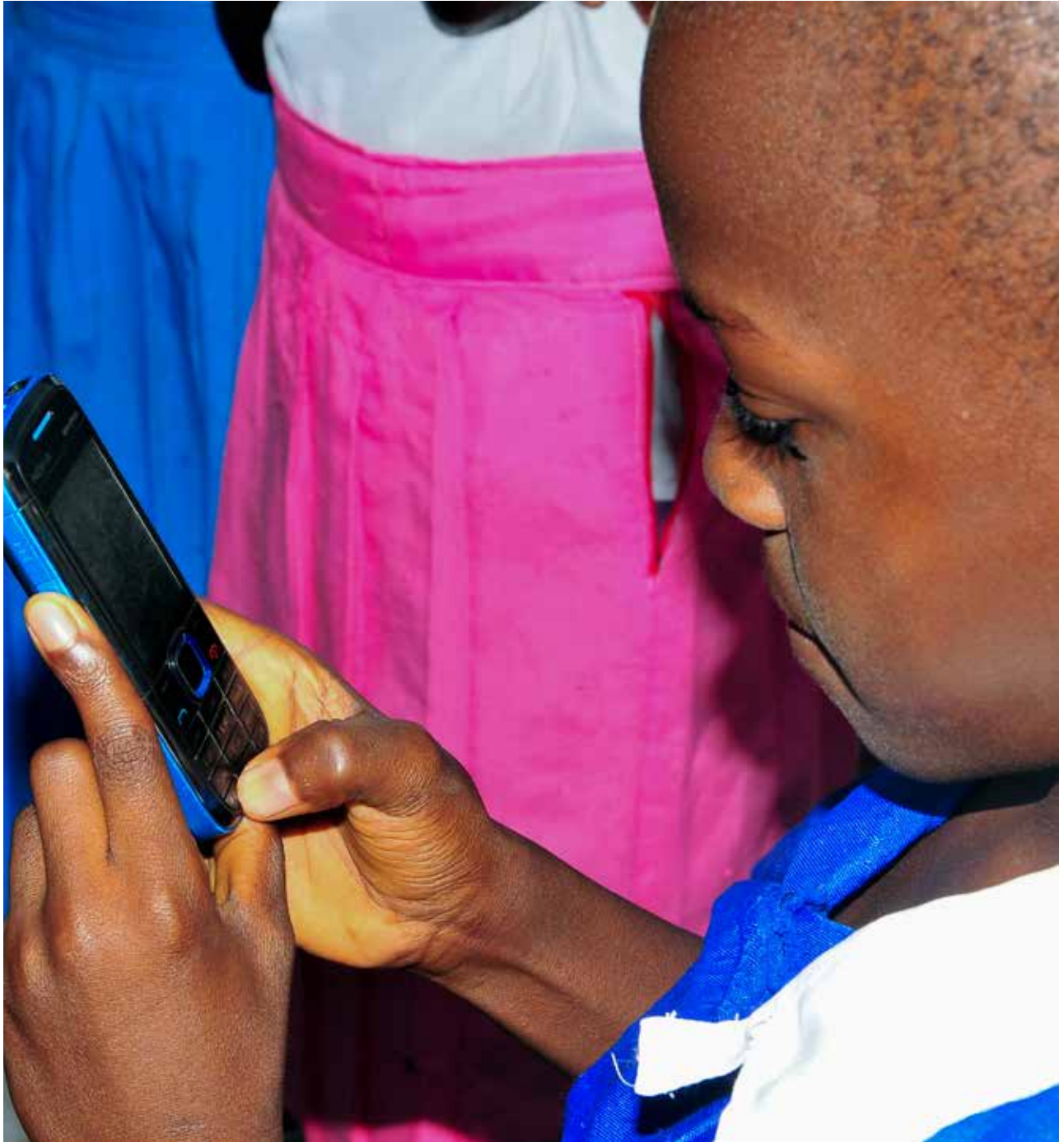
The school’s enrolment started out well with over 200 pupils. However, at the time when the project was piloted, the school’s population had dwindled to 50 pupils in the entire school. Many parents had withdrawn their children to other neighbouring schools because performance was poor. Rumors of demonic infestation were rife in the school and neighbourhood, so some parents feared sending their children to school.

Today the picture is different; during the piloting of the ICT enhanced school governance project, parents were sensitized about the importance of participating in school governance through text messages. The school management organs, i.e. the School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) were also sensitized and trained about their roles and responsibilities and the need to create spaces for different stakeholders to engage. The SMC together with the head teacher started a series of meetings with the parents, local leaders and other people within the local community.

The parents welcomed the idea of sending text messages to the school and receiving updates from the school about their children. During a stakeholders’ meeting at school one of the parents remarked that,

*“We male parents don’t dedicate time to monitoring children at school; the use of SMS will enable us to contribute to whatever goes on in school wherever we are.”*

One of the parents of Kajuule Memorial Primary school showing his phone during a



**The use of information and communications technology (ICT) for educational purposes is a relatively new phenomenon but one with great potential for improvement**





**Parents of Kajuule Memorial Primary school showing their phone during a sensitization session**

sensitization session, withdrawing children from Kajuule meant some of them had to walk long distances to the next school or go to a school that is not of the child's religious affiliation. Being a school that should have seven classes, the teachers posted there were under-utilized despite the fact that it is under the Government's Universal Primary Education Programme. Participatory school governance using ICT4D project was to enable the different stakeholders in this school exchange school related data and information in a timely and efficient manner.

### **Implementation of the Practice**

After trainings and sensitization meetings were done, Parents', teachers', SMC/PTA members' telephone numbers, children's school code numbers were hence entered into the system at Plan which enabled a linkage between the different stakeholders.

Plan staff together with officials from the district education department planned for and conducted the trainings of all stakeholders in the project on system usage, roles and responsibilities, governance and children's rights etc. Children formed students' councils which were trained on their roles and responsibilities in the school, how to engage in the existing spaces, life skills etc.





**Pupils of Nazareth Primary School sending messages**

Parents begun taking a keen interest in teacher/pupil attendance, and teachers' utilization of their time at school as exemplified in one of the messages that an SMC member sent to the system querying why a particular teacher was in the kitchen at a time when lessons are going on.

### **Results of the Practice – Outputs and Outcomes**

The project was introduced in July, 2011 when the enrolment in Kajuule P/S was low. By the June, 2012 the pupil population had more than doubled. Through community sensitization meetings, empowered communities emerged which demanded better service delivery as cited above. School management organs (SMC/PTA) started monitoring teacher presence and performance at school. One of the parents remarked that; *"even when the head teacher is absent from school these days one cannot easily notice because teachers fear being reported through the Nokia ICT system"*.

The different stakeholders are empowered to monitor the process and are able to demand for their rights from the duty bearers especially the parents. In the primary Leaving examinations done in December, 2013, two candidates passed in the first grade division to all the stakeholders' joy.

### **Lessons Learnt and applicability**

#### **What worked well**

- Piloting the project in a controlled environment is critical in identifying the anticipated challenges before rolling it out to the wider community. Using Frontlinesms application to simulate the actual project system proved vital in finding solutions to would be problems in the future project.
- The bottom-up approach of starting the project from community level to the district proved vital in securing buy-in from the wider stakeholder community and would be complicated issues were foreseen.
- The initial startup funds were adequate for project start-up.
- Hiring qualified technical staff with a resolve to succeed against all odds is very critical to the success of an ICT4D project.
- Budget flexibility without donor pressure ensured getting substantive results.

#### **What did not work well**

- Starting the baseline survey late after the project had started did not give the project good benchmarks.
- Insistence on using a software application that had not been subjected to the circumstance and the locality.
- Failure to carry out a situational analysis among the different service providers i.e. telecom companies, prime service providers to ascertain what is feasible and where need be, negotiate for special features/support systems before introducing the project at community level.
- Failure to ascertain level of preparedness and interest among the key players in this field who would prove vital to the success of the project like the government and the telecom companies.

## Conclusion

- An information exchange system has been set up against all the odds encountered that has facilitated flow of vital educational related information among the stakeholders.
- The pilot project has provided learnings to the government on how to manage education related issues which are affecting children's learning.
- ICT (use of SMS technology) has provided an interactive forum for stakeholders who would not expressly give their opinion even when their rights are violated, for example children.

This is a pilot of the governance practice using ICT as a tool to improve basic education delivery and there are not many such projects in Uganda today. It has generated immense excitement among the populace and this will enable the project to live on beyond project closure. The technology being used (SMS) is affordable, interesting and fancied by all ages. Therefore this is the *"Best practice"* of all time.

## ACCESS TO PHONES IMPROVES PERFORMANCE

*"Deputy Head teacher, thank you for displaying the statistical data of the Primary Leaving Examination performance for your school since 1997 to date. When you analyze it what is your view?"* was a remark and question from Plan Uganda's Education Specialist, Edison Nsubuga.

*"Thank you for visiting us",* was the response from the deputy Head teacher, *"the whole school community is not happy with that performance to be honest",* he continued. In the eight years (2003-2010) the school had only registered three first grades yet the school has an annual approximate population of between 500 to 900 pupils.

In the ensuing discussion it was clear many factors contributed to the poor performance. One got the feeling that all the stakeholders understood the problems in the school but lacked a forum to engage and decide on what to do.

This was in 2010, August, during a field visit to Luwero to introduce the Participatory School Governance (PSG) ICT enhanced project at Kiziba Primary School. The Education Specialist for Plan Uganda further inquired from the deputy head teacher whether he would like to see improvement in the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) results in his school.

The introduction of the PSG ICT enhanced project has today changed the performance results for Primary Leaving Examinations at Kiziba primary school. A system has been developed which utilizes a short access code (7200) for information exchange using Short Message Service (SMS) between the different stakeholders in schools. Children, parents, School Management Committee (SMC) and Parents' Teachers' Association (PTA) members, teachers and district education





Students of Kiziba primary school reading message on Nokia ICT – project on the classroom walls





officials were trained on how the system works. Children send messages to the system on a range of issues including teacher absenteeism; teachers use the system to track absentee children and later make follow ups to ascertain cause of absence from school. The head teachers use the system to broadcast messages to groups of stakeholders like parents, SMC and PTA representatives, local leaders and district education officials.

While commenting on the relevancy of the project in the school, the head teacher of Kiziba Primary school, Rev. Besweri Mulyanti, says... *“there has been improved performance in the previous two years where we got seven first grades in both years...”* He affirms that this success is to a great extent attributed to the presence of the ICT enhanced governance project and exemplifies this by saying that; *“improved school governance is very important to every success, because it leads to good attendance during meetings. Once you have successful meetings all that you do succeeds because there is oneness. This was not the case before because very few parents would attend meetings. They now get messages on their mobile phones on time...”*

There has been a positive response among all stakeholders in the school and participation is rated at a minimum of 80%.

The girl child, as observed by the Patron for the students’ council, Kirumira Samuel, has been empowered because in the children’s Council Namatovu Alikisa is the current chairperson. He continues to note that;

*“... from the time the students’ council was introduced in Kiziba Primary school, girls have been in the lead and of the numbers that excelled in the previous two years eight were girls.”*

The chairperson of the students’ council is happy about the project especially while noting that teacher absenteeism has drastically reduced, resulting in good performance and children being tracked from home to school. As she tries to switch on the phone her colleagues descend on her to see the kind of message she is typing.

- 1. Kajule primary School – Improved school governance boosts school enrolment**
- 2. Kiziba primary school – Improved academic performance –a boost from ICT school governance project**



## PROJECT IMPACT

Mobile phones have impacted educational outcomes by facilitating continued dialogue among stakeholders despite physical location and thus advancing collective participation in children’s learning. There is evidence of powerful links between the participatory school governance and children’s learning outcomes among participating schools.

### Impact on learning Outcomes

Primary schools in Luwero are largely characterized by high failure rates at national exams. For instance, in 2011 a total of 400 children – equivalent of a total population of a mid-size primary school failed with a grade of U (un-graded). However, although not entirely attributed to the project, the performance of the project schools was far much better among the project participating schools during the previous three years than before.

| Grading          | 2010 GRADES     |                 |                 |                 |    |   | 2011            |                 |                 |                 |    |    | 2012            |                 |                 |                 |    |    | 2013            |                 |                 |                 |    |    |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----|----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----|----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----|----|
|                  | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | 4 <sup>th</sup> | U  | X | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | 4 <sup>th</sup> | U  | X  | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | 4 <sup>th</sup> | U  | X  | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | 3 <sup>rd</sup> | 4 <sup>th</sup> | U  | X  |
| Nattyole P/S     | 1               | 22              | 09              | 04              | 02 | 0 | 00              | 11              | 13              | 08              | 01 | 02 | 03              | 12              | 05              | 02              | 01 | 00 | 05              | 19              | 05              | 01              | 00 | 03 |
| Nazareth         | 0               | 10              | 08              | 04              | 03 | 0 | 00              | 09              | 11              | 00              | 01 | 01 | 03              | 10              | 02              | 04              | 00 | 01 | 00              | 13              | 05              | 02              | 00 | 01 |
| Kiziba CU        |                 |                 |                 |                 |    |   | 07              | 31              | 10              | 01              | 00 | 03 | 07              | 34              | 03              | 01              | 00 | 02 | 07              | 44              | 23              | 06              | 05 | 02 |
| Bukasa P/S       | 0               | 11              | 05              | 05              | 02 | 0 | 00              | 10              | 08              | 02              | 01 | 00 | 00              | 06              | 10              | 10              | 01 | 02 | 01              | 09              | 15              | 14              | 09 | 00 |
| Kajuule Memorial | 0               | 4               | 10              | 10              | 15 | 1 | 00              | 02              | 06              | 06              | 05 | 02 | 00              | 16              | 03              | 04              | 11 | 01 | 02              | 12              | 05              | 01              | 00 | 00 |

Key: U means ungraded or failed; X means registered but were absent

### Impact on school enrolment and retention

- The demonstrated evidence of the impact of mobile phones on educational outcomes via increased access and educational governance has been commendable. For instance, at Kiziba and Nazareth SDA Primary Schools, enrolment is increasing each year especially after piloting the project. According to one parent, *“Children are now more interested in staying at school most of the time than those days...”* this means that children enjoy their time at school because teachers are present to offer assistance when required, they have time to discuss issues that affect their learning and present them to the teachers and or share out on the phones.
- Parents’ participation in school activities and events like meetings, sports days, and open days has improved and according to one head teacher, *“... it’s because they understand that they have to participate in shaping good learning out comes for their children and communities.”*
- There is reduction in dropout rates especially in the pilot schools. For instance, the head teacher of Kajuule reported that there is improvement in enrolment and the one hundred (100) children that started during the first term in 2013 completed the year without a single child dropping out of school etc.
- The project has contributed to gender transformation within the project area. The girl-child education situation is gradually changing with reduced gender disparity at school and community level. Enrolment and retention of the

girl child in primary schools within the project area has improved gradually. According to the head teacher of Nazareth SDA primary School, in 2013, enrolment of girls was highest (276) and boys (252). During the previous years the picture was the opposite.

## Impact on school accountability & teacher attendance

There has been an increased level of transparency and accountability among stakeholders due increased information flow. Teachers are now more accountable to the children and the School Management committee. According to the Head teacher of Nattyole Primary School, *"...it would be very difficult for particular teachers to complete a week or two without missing at least one day... and the reasons would be sickness of self or family members, loss of relatives, and many ore other reason... but after introduction of the production teacher absenteeism has been greatly reduced to almost no absenteeism in a month..."* and according to him this has been translated into better results.

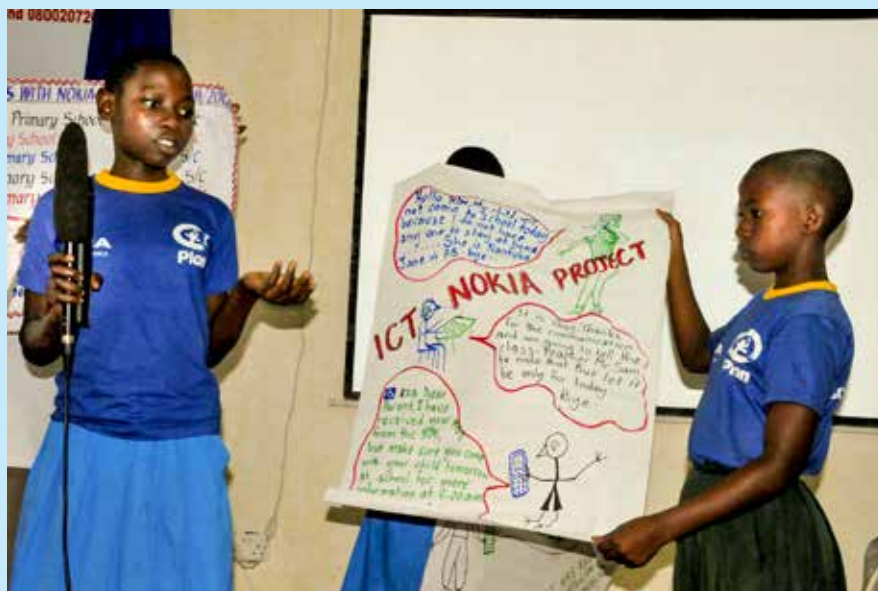
In some schools the adult dominated committees are encouraging children to participate in meetings to give their views and bring out pertinent issues that affect their learning.

**Impact on gender and inclusion** The project has contributed to gender quality — in terms of equal access to mobile phones for girls and boys, equal access to capacity-building opportunities, creating confidence and enabling more girls to attend school. Well regulated mobile phones access to all children in school empowers girls making them more connected with their parents, access education authorities, contribute to their safety from violence, and participate in school governance. Parents have also been sensitized to allow both boys and girls to access their mobile phones for education related purposes. In all, girls' performance has been outstanding as attested by Mr. Kirumira Samuel; patron of Kiziba primary Students' Council *"... from the time the students' council was introduced in Kiziba Primary school, girls have been in the lead and of the numbers that excelled in the previous two years eight were girls."* The chairperson of Kiziba students' Council attributes success to the drastic reduction in teacher and pupil absenteeism as a result of the project."

## Functionality of SMC/PTAs

The ICT- school governance project has made it easy for members of school management committees and parent teachers' associations to gain a clear understanding of their roles and to engage with relevant district structures and the parents. The meetings are now fruitful because the resolutions passed are implemented due to follow up action.

## CASE STUDY



Bukasa Primary school is one of the schools in Luwero where Nokia project has been implemented by Plan Uganda. The school operates under the Universal Primary Education Programme where children acquire free education but only contribute a small fee for their lunch and breakfast.

The Head teacher of Bukasa Primary school John Bosco Salabwa says, the project system gives a rural child a chance to handle a phone. *“Most of these children are from poor families with minimal chances of accessing a phone. The system has introduced them to text messaging,”*

Various groups of children from the school were trained on how to how text messages to the system. Each school was given two mobile phones which are kept by the children’s council Patron. Children use them to text messages during break and lunch time. Every morning, a roll call is done in classes to identify those absent, the number for those present and those absent per class is recoded on the school board and messages are sent to system which sends them to the parents whose children are found to be absent that day. The same applies to the teachers, when a teacher is absent; children text the message to the system then to the teacher.

In addition, the project has curbed the absenteeism. Absenteeism was a serious problem for children especially at the beginning of the term. Some children would report to school after two weeks of school opening. But

with the system, the school reminds parents by sending text messages a week before the beginning of term. This helps them to prepare themselves by buying scholastic materials on time.

Ssalabwa says, *“Before the implementation of the project, 10% of children would turn up on the first day. The number would keep increasing. But these days, we at least register more than 50% in the first week. Whenever children were asked to explain reasons for their failure to report to school on the first day, they would say lack of scholastic materials. That is why we remind them to prepare in advance.”*

*“It has awakened my parents to send children promptly to school,”* he adds.

For the teachers, absenteeism was not a serious problem but there were some few cases which have been eliminated by the system. Before the project, at least 80% could turn up on the first day but these days the school registers 100% attendance of teachers in the first week of the term.

*“They know that there is a third eye (Pupils) watching them.”*

Salabwa noted that, *“Teachers too, get problems. Sometimes, a teacher misses coming to school with a genuine reason; may be the child is sick or him/herself sick. In such cases, I allow them to take a day off. But when the children realise that teacher is not around, they just send the message.”*

The project has simplified school administration and operations such as calling for meetings. *“Whatever I want to communicate to the parents, I use the system. For example I used it to communicate the results of the Primary seven leaving Examinations.”*

Salabwa says the school has so far registered a slight improvement in the children’s performance in terms of marks gained per subject. He attributes this to teachers’ presence at school.

*“Teacher’s presence means a lot to children, not only in class but even on the side of discipline. Indiscipline cases are reduced because children are kept busy.”*

Salabwa adds that absenteeism in school escalates during the rainy season when most children stay home to support their parents in the gardens.

Stanely Mulindwa 11, debate prefect echoes the head teacher's statement by saying that

Class attendance has improved compared to the past. The teacher used not to care about children's studies. Today they insist on knowing why a given child has missed class/is absent. In school meeting, teacher also encourages parents to send their children to school on a daily basis.

Some used to stop on their way to school looking for petty jobs and eats. This made their parents to think their children were at school yet they were not there. At the same time teachers would think that they were at home when actually they were not there. But with the system this confusion was sold. "The moment a child fails to turn up, the parent is informed."

The system has addressed the issue of teachers dodging class. Some would come and go back without teaching. The children's council talked their patron and the school administration addressed it. Today, teachers are active with teaching. Before, a teacher would give a class five numbers in the morning and go back to the staff room to chat with other teachers. The time he remembers to go back to class, it lunch time.

Agness Natembo 13, P.7 says some children used to escape from school in the afternoon. *"Most children who never used to get lunch at school would escape. Every time the 3pm bell rang for games and cleaning, these children would escape to go home and eat."* These children would always miss the lessons studied after games.

Under another project (Participatory school governance of children) implemented by Plan Uganda at the school, the issue of feeding children was raised and its impact such as absenteeism and escapism. The school administration worked with the parents and agreed to serve children porridge at lunch time.

## CONCLUSION

### **How the results of the good practice benefited the population, why the intervention be considered a best practice, recommendations for those intending to adopt the best practice**

The innovative use of a mobile phone to track both teacher and pupil absenteeism goes a long way towards improving the badly needed social accountability in schools and communities. At least those that are accountable now explain why the



expected services are not delivered and follow up action is done because the ICT system is like an omnipresent factor of sorts. The radio talk shows further enlighten the populace not only about the role of ICT in development but also create an opportunity for people to discuss other issues that derail efficient delivery of basic education in Uganda. It is an interactive forum where accountability for poorly delivered services is brought into question.

The male members of society have been brought on board because they usually relegate their roles when it comes to supporting children attain basic education and they leave it to their female counterparts. This in part leads to children dropping out of school because the majority of rural women are economically dependent upon their spouses. So even if a female parent attends a meeting at school she cannot implement most of the resolutions that require financial support. But now with the system, key decisions are sent to parents in form of messages and since most male parents own phones at least they receive the information and act on it.

Finally, the independent evaluation of the first year of project implementation indicated that while there is important evidence that mobile phone technology can reduce barriers to education while attaining educational outcomes by facilitating increased access, retention and quality. However, there remain outstanding challenges such as low literacy levels among parents, technical difficulties such as mobile network, phone accessibility, and technophobia among others, need to be addressed for effective future mobile phone interventions to indeed facilitate the realization of the educational goal in Uganda.





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