

PlayMatters

Evidence Brief: Community Engagement and Sustainability for Learning through Play

PlayMatters Study: Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania

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In partnership with



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Introduction

The PlayMatters project, implemented in Uganda, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, aims to integrate Learning through Play (LtP) into refugee and host community schools to improve children's learning outcomes, emotional well-being, and engagement. A core component has been strengthening community participation by training and involving School/Centre Management Committees (S/CMCs) and Parent Teacher Student Associations (PTSAs) in planning, mobilization, and support of LtP activities.

Previous findings from Year 2 demonstrated that schools with active S/CMCs and PTSAs showed stronger parental involvement, teacher motivation, and improved classroom practices. This Year 3 follow-up study investigates sustainability by examining factors enabling or hindering schools' ability to maintain community engagement after direct PlayMatters support was phased out. It also identifies practices for scale-up and resource needs in diverse contexts, including refugee settings where dependency on external aid is prevalent.

Methodology

The study used a comparative, mixed-methods design to examine factors influencing the sustainability of community engagement in PlayMatters schools. 24 schools were purposively selected from previous cohorts, representing both primary and ECD levels in refugee and host communities (8 per country: 4 sustaining engagement, 4 with decline/phase-out).

Data collection included Key Informant Interviews with headteachers and S/CMCs and PTSAs, Focus Group Discussions with teachers and parents, and a review of school records and monitoring data. Thematic content analysis was used to identify trends, while ethical measures such as informed consent, confidentiality, and researcher blinding to school groupings ensured rigor and minimized bias.

Key Learnings

Overall, strong school leadership, combined with a trained functional school governance (S/CMCs and PTSAs), and parental recognition of the value of LtP, when backed by low-cost, relationship-based approaches and local innovations, collectively contribute to sustained community engagement beyond donor funding as illustrated below.

Learning Question 1: Enabling Factors for Sustainability

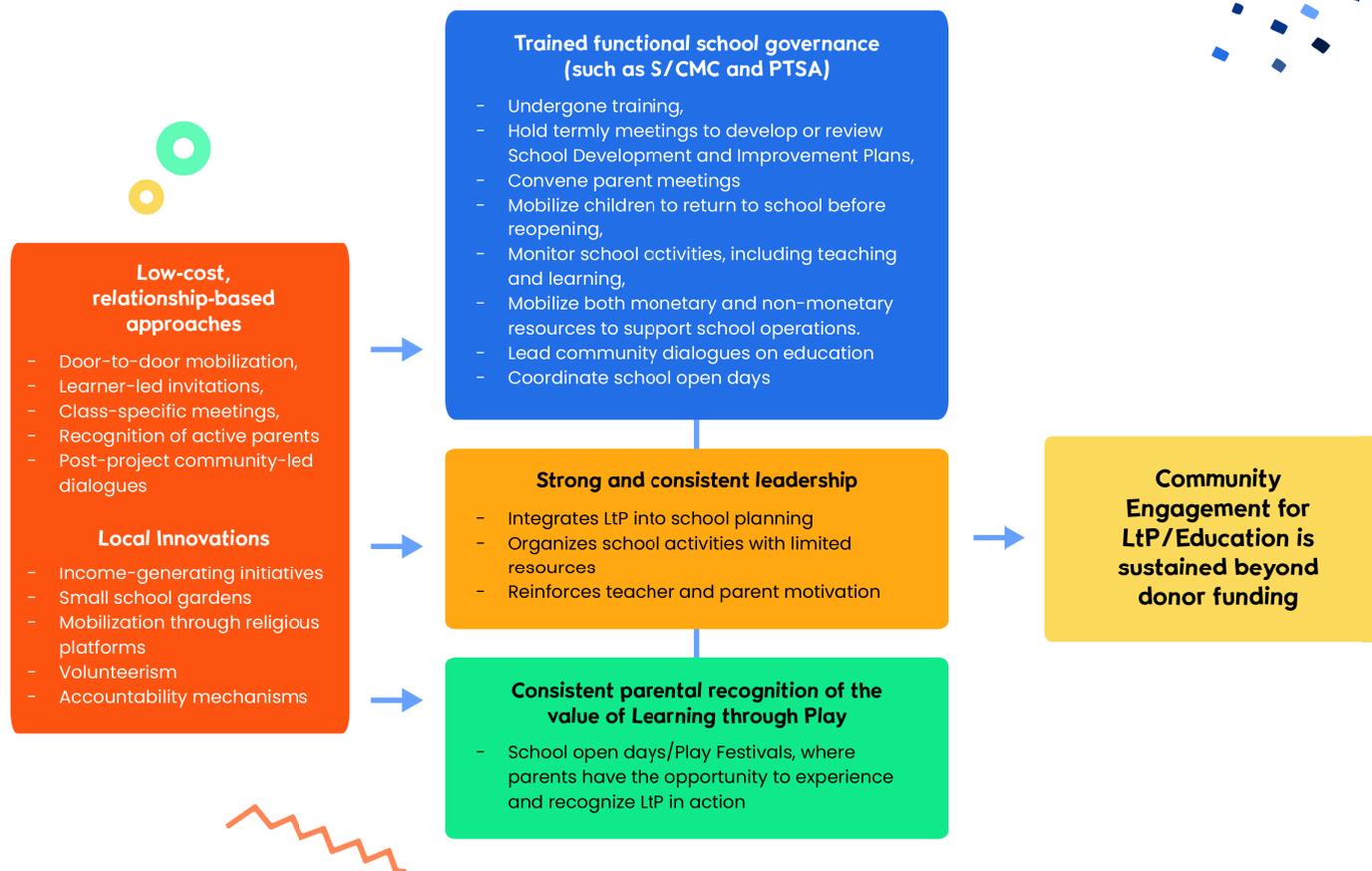
Leadership commitment has been central to sustaining community engagement, with headteachers integrating LtP into school plans, leveraging local resources such as school radios, and actively motivating both teachers and parents. Functional governance structures, including active S/CMC and PTSAs, played a vital role by regularly convening meetings, mobilizing resources, and monitoring learning progress. Parents' recognition of the value of LtP through visible improvements in children's confidence, behavior, and literacy further strengthened parental participation and financial and non-financial contributions. Schools also demonstrated community-driven innovation, using initiatives such as school gardens, storytelling activities, and religious networks to sustain engagement.

Additionally, community engagement for LtP activities contributed to social cohesion, helping to bridge divides between refugee and host children and promoting a culture of cooperation and inclusive participation.

Learning Question 2: Effective Practices

Low-cost mobilization strategies such as door-to-door visits, learner-led invitations, and class-specific meetings proved highly effective in building strong relationships and encouraging community engagement. Peer learning also played an important role, with parent champions

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and role models fostering trust and accountability within their communities. Recognition efforts, including certificates and awards for actively engaged parents and volunteers, further reinforced motivation and commitment. Feedback platforms, such as suggestion boxes and parent forums gave parents and learners a voice in decision making and helped strengthen a sense of shared ownership over school activities.

However, several barriers and challenges remain. Refugee schools, in particular, struggled with sustainability, as heavy reliance on partner-provided incentives led to a decline in activities once support was reduced. Leadership and staff turnover further disrupted continuity, with the departure of trained teachers and committee members weakening institutional memory. Persistent resource gaps, including limited logistics, refreshments, and mobilization tools, continued to hinder effective engagement.

Additionally, popular, large-scale events such as play festivals proved resource-intensive and difficult to maintain after project funding ended.

Learning Question 3: Financial and Non-Financial Resource Investments Needed

Non-financial investments were central to sustaining community engagement. Parents, teachers, and school governance structures such as S/CMCs and PTAs consistently contributed their time, labour, and skills to activities like mobilization, play exhibitions, and home visits. Strong leadership presence and initiative from headteachers also played a critical role, with proactive leaders convening meetings, organizing events, and personally bridging resource gaps to ensure continuity after the project. Learners themselves became effective mobilizers by extending invitations, offering reminders, and participating in performances that kept parents engaged and motivated.

Trust built during implementation, along with the use of religious networks and community

leaders, further anchored participation without heavy resource requirements. Much of this engagement was driven by intrinsic motivation, as parents' commitment deepened when they observed tangible improvements in their children's confidence, learning outcomes, and social skills.

Financial investments such as minimal funding was used to cover essential mobilization costs such as transport for mobilisers, refreshments for meetings. Affordable outreach equipment, such as megaphones and printed guides, supported efficient communication and group mobilization. Seed funding for small income-generating activities, including school gardens or community-managed forests, provided resources to offset expenses for open days and exhibitions.

In some schools in Ethiopia, households themselves contributed small amounts, such as 300 Birr per family, to support initiatives like back-to-school campaigns, demonstrating a willingness to share costs when value was clear.

Recommendations for Scale-Up

The findings highlight the importance of embedding LtP community engagement activities into school routines, strengthening school leadership and governance, and promoting low-cost, locally driven community engagement practices.

The study recommends;

- Institutionalize Learning through Play through School Management Committees by embedding LtP principles and activities within school development and improvement plans and linking them to teacher professional development initiatives. This can be achieved through a dual approach; strengthening policy frameworks that formally recognize SMCs' roles in promoting LtP, and supporting programmatic capacity-building to help committees plan, budget for, and monitor LtP-related actions at school level.
- Develop and implement a clear strategy on how to motivate communities (especially the refugee ones where aid dependency emerged as a key barrier) without financial incentives. This could be through behavior change communication tapping into intrinsic motivators and use of non-monetary incentives.
- Strengthening S/CMC/PTSA capacity to lead in organizing LtP exhibitions and community mobilization to improve school environment for LtP implementation
- Encouraging cost-sharing and in-kind contributions from communities.
- Using peer learning and child-led mobilization of parents as scalable, cost-effective strategies.
- Integrating community engagement into district-level supervision and support mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sustainability of community engagement for LtP activities depends less on external funding and more on leadership, parental trust, and culturally rooted innovations. Schools that maintained engagement successfully embedded community engagement for LtP practices into their routines, used relational approaches for mobilization, and leveraged social capital over material incentives. However, refugee schools' higher dependency highlights the need for tailored strategies to build capacity and ownership.

Scaling up these lessons offers a roadmap for designing cost-effective, community-led engagement models that strengthen both education quality and social cohesion in fragile and displacement-affected settings. With leadership investment, peer learning, and system-level integration, community engagement can remain a sustainable, transformative approach for years to come.