



Campaigning for *baraza* leadership positions in Shinyanga district, Tanzania. Credit: Michael Shija/Oxfam

RAISING STUDENTS' VOICES

School councils in Tanzania supporting young people to claim their education rights

In Tanzania, working within the formal school system enabled My Rights, My Voice (MRMV) to transform school governance and bring about real improvements in students' confidence and voice, and the quality of their education.

MRMV recognised that working within the *barazas* (student councils) in rural Tanzania would be an effective way to engage a large number of young people who had little understanding of their rights or access to other forms of social organisation.

Barazas are a statutory requirement in every school in Tanzania, but student leaders are usually appointed by teachers and do not effectively represent the interests of students. Girls tend not to be given leadership positions or participate equally with boys. MRMV aimed to develop *barazas* in 80 schools to ensure they became gender-sensitive and democratic, enabling students to speak out and tackle some of the barriers to their education. For example, schools in Tanzania often lack basic infrastructure and equipment, and the motivation of teachers and pupils is often low.

In the first year, MRMV did a lot of groundwork to engage students, teaching them about their own rights and responsibilities as pupils as well as those of their teachers, and training them on how to organise an effective student council – including running leadership elections, organising meetings and engaging with

school management. Girls were given additional mentoring and support to develop their confidence and leadership skills. Awareness-raising sessions were held with parents and the community, and the *barazas* chose their own community champions and mentor teachers to support their work. Within a year *barazas* were operating successfully in most schools.

In *baraza* schools, students' confidence has now significantly increased, with both girls and boys standing for leadership positions and becoming effective leaders as well as council members. The *barazas* have engaged successfully with schools and communities to express students' concerns and put forward proposals for change. For example, student *baraza* members successfully advocated for the placement of suggestion boxes in every MRMV school. These ensure anonymity for students, particularly those from marginalised groups or who are less willing to speak out, and provide a platform for students to raise concerns about serious and sensitive issues such as teacher misconduct.

Practical training on advocacy has also been vital to the development of the *barazas*. Working with students to allow them to think through what are practical 'asks', who has the power to make change and how to communicate with those in power, provides them with the framework to move from problem to solution, which they can employ to address barriers in advocacy plans.

**MY RIGHTS
MY VOICE**



As a result of their advocacy, *barazas* have secured funding from duty-bearers (often local authorities) for new equipment and infrastructure in many schools, including books and desks, as well as toilets and dormitories for girl students and female teachers. Through constructive dialogue with teachers and school managers, they have also been able to hold teachers to account, ensuring that they turn up for class and carry out their teaching duties effectively. In fact, the opportunity for constructive engagement between students and teachers has transformed their relationship from one of fear and hostility to one of trust and co-operation. As a result, educational attainment has increased and there is much less disruption in school.

A particularly notable achievement has been the campaign around corporal punishment. Corporal punishment had often been extremely harshly administered, and was greatly resented by students. After advocacy training, students themselves decided that they wanted to bring about change on this issue. Despite this not being in the original programme plan, the MRMV team recognised the importance of students' concerns and gave them the space and support to create a campaign. Students initially took the issue of corporal punishment to school leaders, but when they were reluctant to act they enlisted the support of district education officers to exert pressure at district level, recognising that local authorities had the power to influence schools. Heavy and illegal corporal punishment has now been eliminated from all MRMV schools, a significant achievement for students.

Overall, the *barazas* have been so successful that the local authorities have extended the approach to a further 60 schools, and some schools have committed to doing *baraza* business within core school hours in recognition of their positive contribution to school life.

MY CITY, MY VOICE

Despite the success of the *barazas*, MRMV realised that the model only allowed it to engage with in-school, educated youth in a rural context. The programme therefore secured funding to develop a pilot project in urban Mwanza: 'My City, My Voice'. This project worked with both in-school and out-of-school youth to engage duty-bearers on issues affecting their access to health and education.

MRMV found that duty-bearers were more willing to engage with the project in the city than in rural areas, and that they quickly made commitments towards regular meetings and interaction with the young people involved. The pilot clearly demonstrated the value of working with both educated and less-educated youth, who have many interests in common and much to share with and learn from each other. It also helped Oxfam to develop its approach to working with youth in urban contexts, which will become increasingly important as the population of the Tanzania becomes increasingly urban.



Encouraging support for girl student leaders among School Committee Members in Shinyanga district, Tanzania. Credit: Michael Shija/Oxfam

"I gathered the confidence to stand for the position of deputy-head prefect in the *baraza*. I put forward my name and urged other students to vote for me – and I won. Before MRMV, girls were afraid to lead in school because we did not have the confidence to do so. Now I am very proud that we currently have a girl as our head prefect. I have benefited a lot from the programme and have undergone a complete change. The programme has given me great courage and confidence, and I am grateful to it for this. MRMV has been particularly successful and important in empowering girls."

Elizabeth, MRMV *baraza* leader, Tanzania

KEY LEARNING

- Working within the statutory school system, and making links with both the community and with local authorities, helped MRMV in Mali to reach a large number of young people, engage duty-bearers at all levels to achieve change, and ensure sustainability.
- Advocacy training with students was key, and provided them with the tools to develop their own initiatives and to influence power-holders without adult support.
- Building the confidence and leadership of girls and young women required concerted training, mentoring and capacity-building – as well as attention to gender dynamics within the *barazas*.

"Teachers used to treat the students unfairly, but now students know about their rights and they can all sit down and discuss their issues together."

Jane, headteacher, Tanzania

MY RIGHTS MY VOICE

My Rights, My Voice is a four-year programme which engages marginalised children and youth in their rights to health and education services. The programme has been implemented through our local partners in eight countries - Afghanistan, Georgia, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, Tanzania and Vietnam - primarily funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). To find out more about the programme, please email us at mrmv@oxfam.org.uk or visit us at www.oxfam.org.uk/myrightsmymyvoice