

Demanding transparency from local government during road building projects in
Azzoun, The West Bank

Azzoun Boys School, Palestine



Citizen engagement
and closing the loop

Abstract: This case study details how a group of students from Azzoun Boys School in the West Bank worked with Integrity Action's partner in Palestine, The Teachers Creativity Centre (TCC), to encourage local leaders to recognise and address inconsistencies and favouritism during the course of a road building project.





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Abstract: continued

A team of high school student monitors investigated the way in which a local road building project had been conducted and engaged with the local community to assess their satisfaction with it. As part of an extra curricular project, they questioned why certain roads had been unduly prioritised and ensured that future works were distributed in a fair and transparent manner, which reflected the local community's needs. This approach has built accountability within the local municipality leaders and positivity in the community who are now confident enough to demand parity, consistency and integrity from their leaders.

¹http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/10/15/090224b08314b83c/1_0/Rendered/PDF/West0Bank0and000for0Results0Project.pdf World Bank Grant Appraisal Document Report No: PAD1098

²Azzun Town Profile (including 'Isla & Izbat at Tabib Localities) Applied Research Institute- Jerusalem 2013

Local Context

In 2010, the Palestinian Ministry of Local Governance launched a policy of amalgamation with the objective of merging village councils or adjoining them with adjacent municipalities. The attempt reaped mixed results with stakeholders reporting *"a general reluctance of village council's to give-up representation functions or their individual cultural identities and local characteristics."*¹ In 2012, Azzoun was merged with Isal and Talib as part of this initiative². The decision was unpopular and has produced a legacy of strained relationships between the municipality and the public in Azzoun. Mr. Farouk, the regional representative for the Ministry of Education identified a resulting *"crisis of trust"* as locals felt that decision making was being outsourced to distant municipality representatives without specific knowledge or proper accountability for Azzoun itself.

Partnering with the Teachers Creativity Centre

TCC was founded in 1995 in the wake of the Oslo accords and the foundation of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The NGO built relationships with this new authority and worked closely with the new Minister for Education to integrate civic education and human rights concepts into the school curriculum. The aim of which was to ensure that values of integrity and accountability would be instilled in the next generation of Palestinian graduates. In 2012 TCC partnered with Integrity Action to carry out a pilot in Palestine. They targeted schools in the West Bank

encouraging the youth to demand integrity and engage with their local community in order to inspire a culture of transparency and accountability.

Together, TCC and Integrity Action have implemented an approach they call Community Integrity Building (CIB). CIB is a locally driven, constructive, sustainable approach to identify, monitor and improve development projects and services. By mobilising citizens and collaboratively engaging with local authorities and service providers this approach has helped to overcome challenges in development. Shared learning, monitoring and problem solving are helping municipalities to meet the needs and expectations of communities. Integrity Action has trained over three thousand community monitors in CIB to date and the relationship with TCC has developed year upon year becoming an essential part of their efforts to improve education in Palestine.

In September 2014, TCC identified Azzoun Boys Secondary School as a partner for an extra-curricular Community Integrity Building programme (referred to as a 'Social Audit' by TCC) for Palestinian students. Each CIB school project selects a Community Monitor to lead the groups of students, and those monitors receive training in Integrity Action's Community Integrity Building methods before selecting a local issue to investigate and attempt to resolve.

Joint learning for sustainable change

Mr Farouk of the Ministry of Education supervised the project and worked directly with both the school staff and TCC in the early implementation of the programme. Working in collaboration with the school Principal, they selected Management and Economics teacher Mr. Jihad

as the Community Monitor, as he had personally advocated for the introduction of the programme at the school and had prior experience leading a group of students in the same project at a different school in 2013.

The role of the community monitor teacher is to guide the students through the identification of stakeholders, the gathering of evidence, engagement with the local community and to the final goal of a 'Fix' to a service delivery problem. Mr Jihad received training from TCC that focused on leading the students through project data acquisition, analysis, document evaluation, site visits, beneficiary surveys, public hearings and reporting through 'DevelopmentCheck' an online tool for citizen feedback on the transparency, participation and effectiveness of



development projects. The fact that Mr. Jehad had given a seminar about the benefits of previous social auditing project in Ramallah in 2014 also showed that he was an engaged and committed candidate for this project who cared about addressing the needs of the community. Mr. Jehad had become an admired and respected teacher and member of the community in Azzoun. His expertise in teaching the Management curriculum also meant he had an affinity with the subject matter and processes of local government.

Mr. Jehad was responsible for selecting a group of four, 17-year old students to participate in the school's first Social Audit. He visited the municipality on the 9th November 2014 to request a full list of community service delivery projects



that fell within the timing remit of the Social Audit project. A potential service delivery project needs to have been completed in the last year or to currently be in progress in order to meet the necessary criteria. Two such projects were identified when the Social Audit began in November.

This initial visit by Mr. Jehad, a known and respected member of the community, was the first step towards establishing effective interaction between the municipality staff members, the service providers and local community. These kind of relationships can develop to form Joint Working Groups that formalise the collaborative efforts of the various stakeholders throughout the project's stages.

Understanding the local context and the backdrop for Azzoun's first Social Audit

The students conducted informal interviews with members of the public to gauge community opinion of the most pressing local issues the community faced before the students took their suggestion to the municipality.

The students discovered that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the condition of the roads, as well as skepticism about how the paving was commissioned across the constituency. The road paving had been funded by the DVLFB (Development Fund of the municipality), which is centrally managed government funding that is dispersed to individual local municipalities. In November 2014, the students selected a road-building project as their focus for the Social Audit after ascertaining that the issue seemed to affect a large number of villagers—both physically and in terms of their lack of faith in the transparency of the local municipality.

The students began this process of 'social auditing' by identifying the roles of various stakeholders in relation to the project – these stakeholders included the mayor, the local municipality officials who made decisions on prioritisation of the paving work, and contractors who were enlisted to complete the work. The students also identified the villagers who were most affected by the conditions of various roads across the constituency.

Pushing for transparency

The students requested planning documents to identify which roads had been selected to be paved, and when. The data in these technical documents, when compared to the requirements specified in Palestinian law, helped them to evaluate the current standard of the roads. This part of the process was one of the most challenging – without being fluent in some of the complicated language in many of the technical documents, the students found it hard to determine the criteria to compare against their fieldwork. Their teacher supported them to within the limits of his capabilities and then introduced them to a graduate student who was studying engineering.

"We learned data analysing methods in order to identify each paper of the document. And as we do not yet have a lot of relevant experience, we asked an expert to help us with it, a University student who could advise on the technical information in the planning documents for the road works". (Mohammad, 16. Azzoun Boys School).

The students then went out to the local community to conduct their fieldwork. They carried out beneficiary



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surveys to determine the state of the roads and their resulting impact throughout the community and uploaded the information to DevelopmentCheck.

The combination of interviewing local residents and personally visiting and photographing the roads were key elements of the evidence base built by the Social Audit team. The most common grievances the team found amongst the community were the dusty surfaces, potholes and uneven, unstable surfaces that made it unpredictable, often dangerous and time consuming to use the roads, particularly during winter. The students identified nine unpaved roads in total that were problematic and should



have been prioritised. Community members were not able to justify why so many roads were still left unpaved, yet others were attended to.

There was one paved road that raised more questions during interviews than any other, and the students decided to investigate it more closely.

“According to interviews and questionnaires that we’ve made in the community, people objected and wondered about one paved road. It was the road which is near the water tank. This road has been paved because it was serving the deputy mayor’s house only. On the other hand, there are many roads that serve a lot of houses, and still not paved yet.” explains Rashad (student monitor).

³Arabic word that loosely translates to nepotism or ‘clout’.

This seemed to be a clear case of wasta.³ The students recorded the finding and went on to analyse the condition of the other roads that had been re-paved. They found the specifications to be in accordance with the documents they had received from the municipality, and in accordance with Palestinian standards.

“After analysing our data, we compared the results that we got with the information we got from the municipality. We found similarity in both sets of data. For example, the asphalt thickness and width were the same of what the municipality has provided us with. We studied laboratory reports to ensure the compatibility between the roads and the documentation.”

The beneficiary surveys revealed therefore that the issue was not a case of unsatisfactory workmanship or materials. The roads that were paved were of good quality. Once a road was paved it was not causing citizens any direct danger or inconvenience – it was the selection process that left others unpaved that was the main problem.

The student’s investigations showed that funds were not being divided evenly, and sub-roads serving many members of the local community were being neglected, whilst others were being prioritised and paved to a high standard. They raised this and asked for justification in their meeting at the municipality.

The explanation the students received from the municipality declared that the road in question led to a large water tank that was servicing the town and to mobile network pylons

that were both vital to the community and needed to be easily accessed by the service providers for repairs. The municipality stated that the town would lose their business were they not to make the road and therefore the tank and pylon more accessible.

The students reasoned that both the water and mobile network service providers had served the local community without problems for several years. The municipality did not provide any evidence of dissatisfaction from the suppliers that would warrant the single road being prioritised over others serving members of the community. In addition, the students discovered that the road paved ahead of all other citizen-serving roads was the single long road that led to the Deputy Mayor’s home, which added to their uncertainty about the ethics and transparency around the selection criteria.

Revealing corruption and demanding change

In March 2015 the students presented their initial findings to government officials including the Mayor at a meeting inside the municipality. Looking back retrospectively at this meeting, Azzoun’s current Mayor who began his term in August 2015 has reflected on the strength of the students presentation.

“One of the student’s recommendations which I really consider is an important one, is the selection of the roads. The roads that have been paved were selected randomly and unprofessionally. In addition, the selection process lacked many criteria. So they asked us to demonstrate that these roads were selected professionally.”



“This road has been paved because it was serving the deputy mayor’s house only”

The students also queried why the contractors had not been fined, as per the stipulation in their contract, after they completed the work late. The municipality claimed that the work was completed on time but the students found this to be inconsistent with the data they had gathered directly from the contractors. One stated himself that work had been delayed due to Ramadan and also delayed further generally “because of the Occupation”. The municipality found it difficult to defend why a fine hadn’t been issued to the contractor.

Public hearing

With support from TCC, the students organised and held a public hearing to air citizens' views and present their findings in full to the Municipality, on 29th April 2015. Key stakeholders from the municipality attended with the Mayor, alongside members of the public and direct beneficiaries of the roads who had been interviewed by the students.

The oversight the students gained from speaking with members of the community led them to challenge the prioritisation of the work to date, citing the water-tank road as their primary example. The Mayor listed the municipality's reasons for the prioritisation but the excuses were eventually overruled as the students systematically questioned their validity, on the basis of the evidence they had obtained during the course of the project.



"He explained that the road has been paved because it serves a lot of land plots on both sides, but mainly that it leads to many investment projects near the water tank area. Therefore, it generates money to the municipality and the municipality was obliged to pave it for that reason."

The evidence the students had collected enabled them to challenge the municipality's reasoning and reiterate their point. "The water tank serves the community for 30 years, and the new investments came to this area only 4 to 5 years ago. So if it has been paved to serve these investments, why has it only been done this year?" the students asked. They referenced the lack of evidence to support the other reasons also; loss of business from mobile network providers and the water company. There seemed to be no credible reasons why that road should have been prioritised over roads that served much higher proportion of the public and were in greater need of work.

The Mayor and municipality eventually adhered to the boys' recommendations and it was pledged that the way budgets were prioritised would be revised. The Mayor also responded with a pledge that all roads serving members of the public would be addressed, and in line with the grievances aired in the hearing, he ensured they would be paved.

"After some time the Mayor confirmed every road that serves people should be paved." It was in this public hearing that the community received the pledge it needed, with widespread attendance from members of the public to hold to account the promises made. *"We will pave every road in the village"* it was stated.

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After some time the Mayor confirmed every road that serves people should be paved

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Unexpected setbacks

Unfortunately this promise could not be acted on as soon as everyone hoped. It was unexpectedly announced that the central municipality cabinet and the Mayor were to leave office, and a new Mayor would take up office in August 2015. The students had been very close to achieving 'a Fix' but for that to happen there needed to be constancy in law or method of problem solving that had the potential to become routine in practice of state-society relations. The students had engaged with a seemingly corrupt local municipality and received assurances but this change in leadership threatened the outcome of their project.

Growing community confidence

In August 2015, directly after the Mayoral changeover the students set about organising another Public Hearing so they could present their case for a second time. In the months between the first public hearing in April and the next in August, the students reported that their confidence grew and they felt more assured of their findings and invigorated in their goals to improve the culture of transparency and community involvement in Azzoun. The community was galvanised by the success of the first hearing and the working group had all witnessed the reasoning presented and the results achieved.

"The mayor got replaced with another. At the new public hearing session, we delivered the proposed project again to the new Mayor. The former Mayor has everything documented in relation to the project in order to keep on track for anyone who comes after".



Closing the loop - a legacy of accountability and integrity

The new Mayor supported the project and the proposed 'Fix' and the continued collaboration between individuals at the public hearing and the Social Audit team has led to an ongoing series of benefits.

"After we delivered our recommendation to the municipality, we noticed that there is a real impact on the ground. For example, at the beginning of September, the municipality got the funds for paving roads. So the new mayor held a new discussion meeting for the Azzoun's inhabitants in order to discuss and consult which roads should be paved first. It was the first time for Azzoun municipality to do like this." Student Monitor

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the municipality has published drawings of the proposed roads that need to be paved



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“Also we recommended if there was any new paving road project, the municipality should inform people and hold a meeting to discuss it and consider people’s objections if there were any. To do so, the municipality has published drawings of the proposed roads that need to be paved on the municipality’s webpage and mosques’ entrances in order to let people choose which roads should be paved first. The culture in the town is becoming more trustful and more positive.” Student Monitor

The project was deemed such a success, both in terms of tangible outcome and the more subtle shift in community relations, that when the boys presented the project at the national summit in September 2015 in Ramallah, theirs was recognised as the most successful project of the year for the region.

The Joint Working Groups were effective in that even with a new Mayor in office, the integrated working approach and involvement of the local community in the selection and investigation of the case, meant that there was consistency in its management and the students could push it through even under a new administration

Mr Farrouk and the new Mayor both testify that there has been a cultural shift within the town since the public hearing. The experience of initiating change and of coming together as a community to air views and interact with the municipality has led to increased positivity amongst neighbours and communities and a belief that a coordinated drive for integrity can achieve results.

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Integrity Action partners to help people at all levels of society to act with and demand integrity.

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The case studies of citizen engagement and closing the loop are part of a suite of knowledge management tools that have been produced by Integrity Action in conjunction with the UNDP Global Anti-Corruption Initiative (GAIN).

The series aims to distil and document practitioner experiences. The case studies are intended to share emerging knowledge on approaches that have worked in using Integrity Action's Community Integrity Building approach to empower communities and to promote transparency, accountability and inclusion in development decision-making, investment and operations.

Citizen engagement and closing the loop

