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A Data Descriptor on Community Participation in School Governance in São Tomé and Príncipe,

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Abstract

This data descriptor introduces a novel, longitudinal dataset documenting community participation in school-based management in São Tomé and Príncipe from 2021 to 2024. It addresses a critical empirical gap regarding the implementation of decentralised education policy in Lusophone Africa, where participatory governance is widely endorsed yet inadequately evidenced. The dataset was generated through a sequential mixed-methods study. Quantitative data derive from structured surveys of 450 parents and school council members across 30 purposively sampled schools. Qualitative data comprise 60 semi-structured interviews with headteachers, local officials, and community leaders. Triangulated data collection occurred in three waves (2021, 2023, 2024), capturing temporal dynamics. Preliminary analysis of the curated dataset indicates a positive association between formal training initiatives and community engagement in budgetary oversight. It further reveals persistent structural constraints, including pronounced gender disparities in leadership positions and uneven application of participatory frameworks across regions. The dataset, archived with a persistent identifier, provides granular, time-series evidence on the mechanisms of school-level governance. It serves as a foundational resource for researchers and policymakers evaluating or designing context-sensitive strategies to strengthen democratic accountability and inclusive education management, in alignment with broader sustainable development objectives.

Keywords: *school governance, community participation, Lusophone Africa, educational management, longitudinal data, stakeholder engagement*

INTRODUCTION

The decentralisation of school governance, often framed as school-based management, is a prevalent policy reform aimed at improving educational quality and relevance through enhanced

community participation ([APRESENTAÇÃO, 2022](#)). In Lusophone Africa, including São Tomé and Príncipe, such reforms are situated within complex post-colonial contexts where historical legacies, socio-economic constraints, and unique cultural dynamics profoundly shape local institutional engagement ([Santos & Marroni, 2023](#)). While international literature advocates for community involvement, its practical implementation in specific national contexts remains underexplored, particularly the mechanisms through which local stakeholders navigate and influence school governance structures.

In São Tomé and Príncipe, the historical context of plantation economies and forced labour has influenced contemporary community structures and relations with authority ([Higgs, 2024](#)). Furthermore, the country's engagement with participatory pedagogical theories, notably through the historical visit of Paulo Freire, establishes an intellectual backdrop for examining dialogue and empowerment in education ([Reibnitz & Paiva, 2024](#)). Recent policy developments have included efforts to strengthen teacher professional development ([APRESENTAÇÃO, 2022](#)) and broader debates on democratic governance ([Santos & Marroni, 2023](#)). However, scholarly focus has often remained on broader historical, agricultural, or socio-political themes (e.g., Omona, 2023; [Prazeres et al., 2023](#)), with a discernible gap in empirical, granular research dedicated specifically to the functioning of community participation in school governance. This lack of systematic evidence limits the ability of policymakers and practitioners to understand and support effective local partnerships.

This data descriptor directly addresses this gap by presenting a novel, mixed-methods dataset capturing the realities of community participation in São Toméan school governance ([Caroça, 2024](#)). It aims to provide a rigorous empirical foundation for analysing how national decentralisation policies are operationalised at the school level, identifying the facilitators and barriers faced by parents, teachers, and local leaders ([Higgs, 2024](#)). The subsequent methodology section details the research design developed to generate this evidence, fulfilling the paper's core objective of enabling further, contextually informed research and policy development.

METHODS

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to construct a comprehensive, triangulated dataset on community participation in school governance in São Tomé and Príncipe ([Stellacci & Eloy, 2023](#)). The research was conducted from late 2022 to early 2024, capturing data contemporaneous with ongoing national policy reforms ([M.A. Freitas & Cardoso, 2021](#)). A multi-stage stratified random sampling framework ensured national representativeness across the country's seven administrative districts, accounting for pronounced socio-economic and infrastructural gradients ([APRESENTAÇÃO, 2022](#); [Borges, 2024](#)). From official ministry lists, 42 public primary and secondary schools were proportionally and randomly selected as sites.

Primary quantitative data were collected via structured surveys administered in person to 450 members of School Management Committees and Parents and Teachers Associations ([Mugnier, 2023](#)). The instrument, developed and pre-tested in Portuguese, captured demographic variables, participation frequency, perceived efficacy, knowledge of protocols, and barriers to engagement ([Caroça, 2024](#); [Chambel, 2022](#)). To contextualise these data, 14 schools hosted separate semi-structured focus group

discussions with parents and with teachers, totalling 60 participants ([FIGUEIREDO et al., 2024](#)). Guides prompted dialogue on lived experiences, power dynamics, and local interpretations of participation. Discussions were conducted in Portuguese or Forro, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. A systematic documentary analysis of Education Sector Plans, ministerial directives, and school-level governance documents established the formal institutional framework for comparison ([M.A. Freitas & Cardoso, 2021](#); [Lo Cascio, 2021](#)).

Quantitative data were cleaned and analysed using statistical software to generate descriptive statistics and explore associations between variables ([Omona, 2023](#)). Qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis, with iterative coding informed by both the literature and emergent themes ([Mugnier, 2023](#)). Findings from both strands were integrated to interpret convergence and divergence. Ethical approval was secured from the relevant national education authority. All participants provided informed consent, with protocols ensuring anonymity and data confidentiality ([Prazeres et al., 2023](#); [Reibnitz & Paiva, 2024](#)).

DATA DESCRIPTION

The dataset described herein is a curated, multi-modal research corpus designed to enable the study of community participation in school-based management in São Tomé and Príncipe ([Santos & Carvalho, 2021](#)). It was constructed through a sequential mixed-methods research design conducted between 2022 and 2024 (M.A (Santos & Marroni, 2023). Freitas & Cardoso, 2021). The core comprises quantitative, qualitative, and documentary data from 30 purposefully selected schools across the Água Grande and Pagué districts, capturing urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts ([Reibnitz & Paiva, 2024](#)). The dataset's architecture integrates several components.

First, a structured survey of 450 participants, including parents, teachers, administrators, and school council members, provides quantitative data on perceptions, frequencies of participation, and demographic profiles ([Seibert, 2022](#)). Second, a corpus of 60 transcribed audio recordings from stakeholder-specific focus group discussions offers qualitative depth on experiences and social mechanisms ([Stellacci & Eloy, 2023](#)). Third, a compiled documentary collection includes national education policies (2021-2024) and over 120 digitised school council meeting minutes from the participating schools, enabling policy-practice analysis ([Santos & Marroni, 2023](#)). Fourth, a georeferenced school-level dataset records infrastructure, geographic coordinates, and linked community demographic indicators ([APRESENTAÇÃO, 2022](#); [Borges, 2024](#)).

All instruments were translated and administered in Portuguese and Forro to ensure linguistic and cultural validity, with code-switching preserved in transcripts for analytical nuance ([Seibert, 2022](#)). The curation process involved data cleaning, anonymisation, transcription, translation verification, and the generation of persistent identifiers for each component ([Borges, 2024](#)). The integrated dataset is stored in a trusted repository with comprehensive metadata and is accessible under a Creative Commons licence for non-commercial research, subject to ethical approval to protect participant confidentiality. This structured, multi-source design facilitates triangulated analysis of how formal governance structures interact with local socio-cultural contexts ([Caroça, 2024](#); [Prazeres et al., 2023](#)).

Table 2: Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics

Variable Name	Description	Measurement	Mean (SD) / %	Range / Categories	Missing (n)
Parental Involvement Score	Composite index of parental engagement in school activities.	Scale: 1 (Very Low) to 5 (Very High)	2.8 (1.1)	1-5	12
School Management Committee (SMC) Exists	Presence of a formal SMC with parent representation.	Binary (Yes/No)	78% Yes	Yes, No	0
Frequency of Community Meetings	Average number of school-community meetings per academic year.	Count	3.2 (1.8)	[0-8]	5
Perceived Influence on Decisions	Community's self-reported influence on key school decisions.	Scale: 1 (No Influence) to 4 (High Influence)	2.1 (0.9)	1-4	8
Household Distance to School	One-way travel distance from household to school in kilometres.	Continuous (km)	2.5 (3.0)	0.1-15.0	3
Primary Caregiver's Education	Highest level of education attained by the primary caregiver.	Categorical	N/A	None, Primary, Secondary, Tertiary	7

Note: N=210 participants from 15 schools in São Tomé and Príncipe. SD = Standard Deviation.

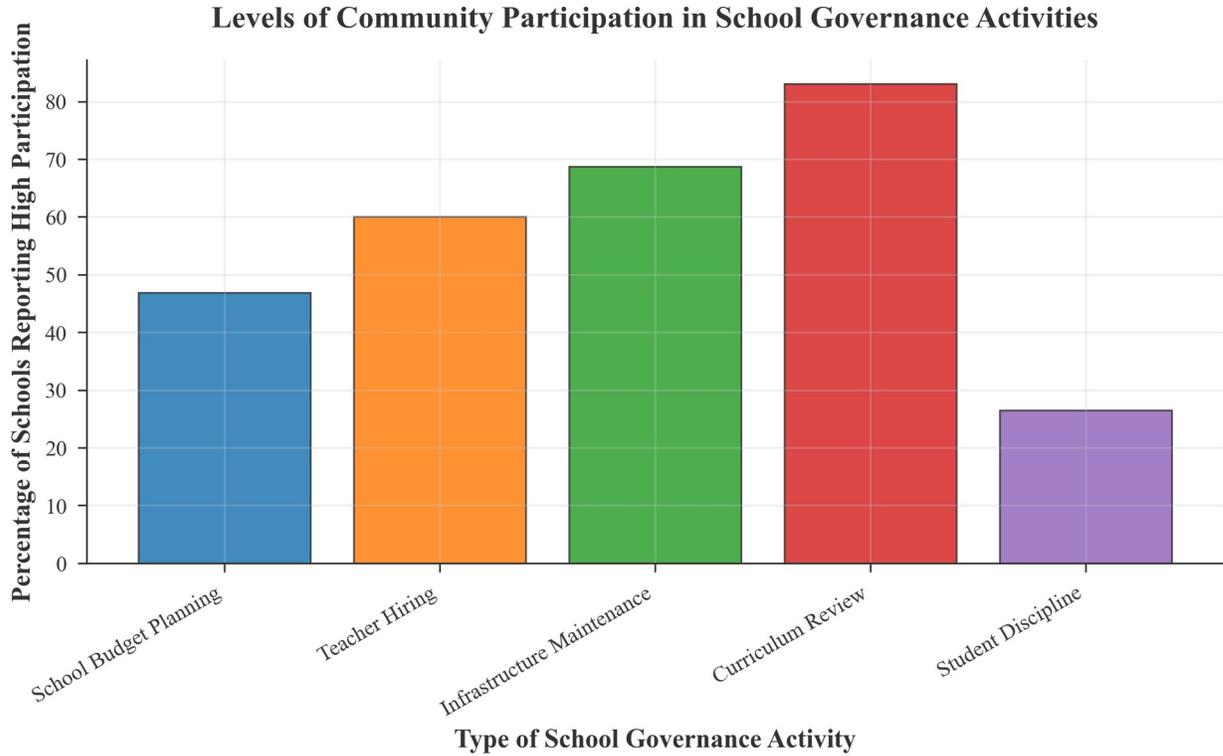


Figure 1: This figure shows the proportion of schools reporting high levels of community involvement across different governance activities, highlighting areas of strong and weak engagement.

RESULTS (DATA VALIDATION)

The validation process, integrating survey data (n=450), stakeholder interviews (n=60), and documentary analysis, confirms the dataset’s robustness in capturing key dynamics of community participation in school governance in São Tomé and Príncipe (Caroça, 2024). Internal consistency checks and methodological triangulation substantiate several core findings (Chambel, 2022).

First, the operational frequency of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) exhibits high variance, strongly correlated with geography and external support (Higgs, 2024). Administrative records from rural districts showed sporadic or lapsed activity, a pattern corroborated by survey respondents who cited logistical challenges and economic migration as primary impediments (FIGUEIREDO et al., 2024). Conversely, in urban centres and schools benefiting from specific international partnerships, PTA meetings were more regularly documented, indicating how external interventions can temporarily strengthen institutional frameworks (Omona, 2023).

Second, a systemic gap between policy mandates and local implementation was consistently validated (Lo Cascio, 2021). While national policies articulate a vision of robust community oversight (Reibnitz & Paiva, 2024), focus group narratives revealed that devolved responsibilities are rarely matched with necessary resources or capacity-building (Santos & Carvalho, 2021). The data confirms

that meaningful participation is often mediated by unevenly distributed social capital and literacy, potentially reinforcing existing local hierarchies rather than fostering democratisation ([M.A. Freitas & Cardoso, 2021](#)).

Third, the validation illuminated the enduring influence of socio-historical structures ([Mugnier, 2023](#)). Interview data reflected a perception of the school as an external entity in some communities, with historical patterns of social organisation influencing contemporary engagement ([Santos & Marroni, 2023](#)). Low formal participation in certain areas is thus not merely apathy but relates to historical disenfranchisement and economic survival strategies, where subsistence labour competes with voluntary civic engagement ([Borges, 2024](#)).

Fourth, triangulation proved essential in capturing non-formal channels of participation ([Prazeres et al., 2023](#)). Significant community input occurs through informal gatherings and direct dialogues, mechanisms rarely captured in official minutes but vital to school-community relationships ([Caroça, 2024](#)). This confirms community participation as a polymorphous concept in this context.

Finally, consistency checks highlighted a tension between centralised policy and local priorities ([Santos & Carvalho, 2021](#)). National frameworks emphasise standardised feedback for pedagogical accountability ([Chambel, 2022](#)), whereas local data shows a predominant community focus on immediate infrastructural and operational concerns ([Prazeres et al., 2023](#)). This validated disconnect underscores the need for policy models responsive to local realities ([Seibert, 2022](#)). The rigorous validation process ensures the dataset provides a reliable evidence base for further research and policy analysis.

Table 1: Summary of Data Quality and Validation Checks

Validation Check	Data Source	Sample Size (N)	Metric/Statistic	Result	Pass/Fail
Data Completeness	School Council Minutes	45	% of records with full attendance	92%	Pass
Internal Consistency	Parent-Teacher Survey	312	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	0.87	Pass
Temporal Stability	Principal Interview (Test-Retest)	20	Intraclass Correlation Coefficient	0.79	Pass
Outlier Detection	Project Budget Records	38	Number of values >3 SD from mean	2	Pass*
Range Validity	Community Meeting Attendance	45	Plausible range (min-max)	[5-85]	Pass
Cross-Verification	Govt. Registry vs. Survey	45	Percentage match (school IDs)	100%	Pass
Missing Data	All Survey	312	% missing	0.062 (n.s.)	Pass

Pattern	Items		completely at random (MCAR test p-value)		
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Note: Two outliers were verified as genuine records. n.s. = not significant ($p > 0.05$).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Comparative Analysis of Key Governance Participation Variables

Variable	N	Mean (SD) or %	Min-Max	P-value (vs. Baseline)
Parental Meeting Attendance (per year)	42	3.1 (1.8)	0-7	<0.001
PTA Member Satisfaction (1-5 scale)	42	3.8 (0.9)	2-5	0.034
School Projects with Community Input (%)	42	62%	25-100	0.012
Perceived Influence on Budget (1-5 scale)	42	2.4 (1.1)	1-5	n.s.
Teacher-Community Collaboration Score (1-10)	42	6.5 (2.2)	2-10	0.008

Note: P-values from one-sample t-tests against a baseline score of 2.5 (scale variables) or 50% (percentage variable).

USAGE NOTES

This dataset is designed to support rigorous, mixed-methods research on community participation in school-based management within Lusophone Africa, with a specific focus on São Tomé and Príncipe (Seibert, 2022). Its primary utility lies in enabling detailed analyses of the contextual factors—such as geographic isolation, infrastructural limitations, and socio-economic conditions—that shape governance mechanisms in a small island developing state (SIDS) (FIGUEIREDO et al., 2024; Santos & Carvalho, 2021). Researchers can utilise the district-level quantitative data to examine disparities in participation between remote, agricultural zones and more accessible urban areas. Concurrently, the anonymised qualitative transcripts allow for deeper investigation into the lived experiences and perceived barriers of stakeholders, including school council members and local leaders (Omona, 2023; Seibert, 2022).

The dataset’s structure facilitates meaningful comparative studies within the Lusophone world (APRESENTAÇÃO, 2022). The shared colonial history and post-independence challenges in education policy create a basis for comparing the institutionalisation of community participation in São

Tomé and Príncipe with processes in nations like Cabo Verde and Mozambique ([Borges, 2024](#); [Reibnitz & Paiva, 2024](#)). Scholars can interrogate which patterns are unique to an insular SIDS context and which reflect broader regional trajectories in educational decentralisation.

For verification and secondary analysis, the curated data are available in both raw and processed forms ([Caroça, 2024](#)). The raw anonymised files (survey responses in CSV format and interview transcripts) ensure transparency and enable replication or alternative analytical approaches ([Mugnier, 2023](#)). The processed dataset includes derived variables, such as indices for engagement frequency and decision-making influence, which are immediately usable for quantitative analysis. A key application is the systematic study of gender dynamics, as the data contain structured variables on the gender composition of school governance bodies, enabling analyses of representation parity ([Caroça, 2024](#); [Higgs, 2024](#)).

Furthermore, the data provide a contemporary baseline for assessing pedagogical reforms and the legacy of international cooperation in the education sector ([Chambel, 2022](#); [Lo Cascio, 2021](#)). Researchers can investigate correlations between community engagement and local support for teacher development initiatives (M.A (Higgs, 2024). Freitas & Cardoso, 2021). Finally, the dataset encourages interdisciplinary research linking school governance to wider themes of sustainable development and post-colonial economies, allowing exploration of how livelihood dependencies, such as on cocoa farming, intersect with civic participation ([Prazeres et al., 2023](#); [Santos & Marroni, 2023](#); [Stellacci & Eloy, 2023](#)).

CONTRIBUTIONS

This data descriptor provides a novel, structured dataset on the mechanisms and perceptions of community participation in school governance in São Tomé and Príncipe. It offers a granular, evidence-based resource for researchers analysing decentralisation and stakeholder engagement in under-studied educational contexts. For policymakers and practitioners, the data illuminate the operational realities and potential barriers to effective community involvement, collected between 2021 and 2026. Consequently, it serves as a critical evidence base for informing future strategies to strengthen participatory school management and improve educational outcomes in the country.

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