

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

## Community Participation in School Governance

*An Ethnographic Study of Parent-Teacher Associations in South Sudan, 2026*

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### ABSTRACT

School governance in post-conflict contexts often faces challenges in fostering meaningful community engagement. Despite policy mandates for parental involvement, the practical dynamics and efficacy of such participation in fragile education systems remain under-researched. This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences, power dynamics, and practical outcomes of community participation through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) within the specific socio-cultural and political context of South Sudan. A six-month critical ethnographic study was conducted, employing participant observation in school governance meetings, in-depth interviews with 24 PTA members and headteachers, and documentary analysis of school records across three primary schools. Findings reveal a significant disconnect between formal PTA structures and genuine collaborative decision-making. A dominant theme was the strategic use of PTAs by school administrations primarily for resource mobilisation, with over 80% of observed meetings focused on financial contributions. Parental influence on pedagogical or staffing matters was notably circumscribed. The study concludes that while PTAs provide a vital institutional link between schools and communities, their current operation often reinforces existing hierarchies rather than enabling transformative participatory governance. It is recommended that education authorities and NGOs facilitate targeted capacity-building for PTA members on governance rights and responsibilities, and support the development of clear, mutually agreed terms of reference that delineate domains of decision-making authority. school governance, parent-teacher associations, community participation, ethnography, South Sudan, post-conflict education This paper provides a novel, empirically rich analysis of the micro-politics of PTA operations in a fragile state, demonstrating how participatory structures can be co-opted for managerialist ends rather than fostering democratic school improvement.

**Keywords:** *Post-conflict education, Community participation, School governance, Parent-Teacher Associations, Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethnographic research, Educational decentralisation*

#### Article Highlights

- Formal PTA structures show disconnect from genuine collaborative decision-making
- School administrations primarily use PTAs for resource mobilization purposes
- Parental influence on pedagogical or staffing matters is notably limited
- Current PTA operations often reinforce existing hierarchies

#### Key Recommendation

Education authorities should facilitate capacity-building for PTA members on governance rights and support development of clear terms of reference for decision-making domains.

*This study reveals how participatory structures can be co-opted for managerialist ends in fragile education systems.*

rather than transform governance	
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