

# Youth contribution

'We give our views  
but our suggestions  
are not implemented':  
Experiences of school  
parliaments in Batu,  
Ethiopia

'Mesfin'

*In the past decade in Ethiopia, as part of efforts to promote the decentralisation of school management as well as to support the participation of students in decision-making, student parliaments have become an increasingly prominent feature of school life. A school parliament consists of a group of students who are elected to represent the views of all pupils and to improve their school. They meet with school administrators and the local kebele [community] government leaders who oversee school management to provide input on the running of schools. School parliaments present a way to raise issues facing young people in their community, such as school attrition, child marriage, and child abuse, and collaborate on strategies to address these. School parliaments can thus provide a space to foster the capacity of young people to organise, form agendas, and be heard on matters that affect them. However,*

*focus group discussions with young people aged (15–17 years) involved in a school parliament in Batu, Oromia, find that the extent to which they do this hinges on the support that young people receive from school administration, kebele leaders, and from the community itself. In this contribution, ‘Mesfin’<sup>1</sup> shares his experiences of participating in a school parliament.*

‘Meetings were recently called by the school administrators and local government at our youth centre and at the school here in Batu to explain how the School Parliament would work, what issues it would discuss, and its importance. Our first discussion focused on children, who are [the natural] resources of a country and must be able to learn and to grow. The Parliament was aiming to care for children. It helped those children who do not attend school [to enrol], or those children who are poor to get uniforms. At the meetings, school materials, clothes, and school uniforms were contributed by other students and distributed to children in need’.

‘A Parliamentary Assembly was to be established. To achieve this, the Speaker of the House had to prepare a plan. After that, the Speaker wrote a letter to five schools. A school must select at least 50 students. Civic and social science teachers were responsible for selecting outstanding students to serve in the Parliamentary Assembly’.

‘There are five committees within the Parliament. Through these committees, work is shared among the Members of the Parliament. Once they have shared out the work, the committees work together on issues to be submitted to the President. The President gives issues raised by members to the Secretary to be written up. Then the Secretary brings all the problems [in writing] to the House Speaker, who calls for a meeting and discussions to try to find solutions’.

‘We only discuss children’s affairs in the School Parliament. Beyond school, there are limited opportunities for young people to participate in discussions and meetings. Even in meetings within the community, young people are not invited to participate. Even when they call a meeting in this school, they do not call us [to participate]. We do not participate at all. For this school and for the town, it is the elders who participate but not the youth. Many people think that young people cannot give ideas like elders can; they think a young person knows nothing. They assume that young people do not have good ideas [so] they do not invite us to participate. We should not only discuss children’s affairs in the School Parliament. For example, we should discuss sanitation in our town [there is no sanitation]. If we had more regular meetings, then it would be good and our town could be clean, and children and girls could get their education’.

‘There are many children who are abused, and the law says to bring that person who harms a child before the law. However, when an attempt

**FIGURE 34.1**

A group of adolescent girls participating in the Girls Club in Ziway, Ethiopia.

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is made (by members of the School Parliament) to bring that person before law, there might be a conflict as the person who commits the crime refuses to come... saying we are not assigned by justice officials and do not have the authority. So this is what we asked for. If we could have a document that indicates that we are Members of Parliament, then that could enable us to bring children to school. If we had that documentation, we would have the right to ask. However, we do not have such papers and we do not have full rights to ask.... We had a meeting and they [the local administration] said these injustices would be corrected.... But we have not seen anything [yet]’.

‘We [assembly participants] do not implement actions. We participate in meetings and we give our ideas, but we do not engage in any work.... This is partly because we do not have any official identification, so we cannot bring a person who commits a crime before the law. Not only do we not have documentation that would help us carry out our work, but we are only called for one meeting per year. We only participate on the meeting day... and [then] we return home. We give our views but our suggestions are not implemented. We raise a number of issues and there is budget allocated but very few activities are actually carried out.... In the meetings, what we say

gets written down. But no one implements our ideas... we just talk about our issues and go and the authorities fail to advance our recommendations’.

‘Nevertheless, although the school administration does not engage with us much outside of the Parliamentary meetings, they do help children. For example, they support children who do not attend school – they buy uniforms, school materials.... This shows that some activities or work is being done – but student participants do not do anything yet. It would be better if they would discuss these issues with us.... As Members of Parliament, we explain our issues to them. They usually say ‘children have to learn and should not be harmed and the rights of children and girls must be respected’. But we do not see anything actually being done. They should plan for joint implementation. If that is not done, then we are only having a Parliament in name alone’.

## NOTE

1 Pseudonym.