

Fellows for Change

Empowering Education Leaders in Rural Guatemalan Communities

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Cover photo: Community B's school buildings in Aldea Sacsiguán (Department of Sololá)

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Executive Summary

In Guatemala, low schooling levels and literacy rates pose significant challenges to education, especially in rural and Indigenous communities. Indigenous people — a high proportion of the country’s population — face historical marginalization resulting from colonization and limited access to resources. Poverty, inequality, and limited infrastructure further hinder access to education, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, causing disruptions in learning.

ConnectED is a nongovernmental organization that aims to address these challenges through a bottom-up philosophy of social development. The Fellows Model uses a human-centred approach to identify local education leaders (known as “fellows”), develop their capacities, and guide them through the design,

implementation, and evaluation of a community-chosen and community-led education project in each community where ConnectED is active.

Our research identifies the elements of the Fellows Model that have the greatest impact on improving access to and the quality and relevance of education for communities in Guatemala. We conducted focus groups and interviews with teachers, parents, and fellows in four selected communities where ConnectED has supported projects.

The four communities that we visited identified technology and/or the integration of Indigenous culture as key features of relevant education. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced certain challenges, such as unequal access to educational resources and conflicting priorities between education and labour. Participants identified three distinct stakeholder groups that enabled projects to be implemented successfully: teaching staff and fellows, parents and communities, and

nongovernmental organizations. They also told us of a complex web of barriers to relevant education, including insufficient resources and infrastructure, a lack of specialist teachers, limited governmental support, parents' competing priorities, and migration.

ConnectED's model incorporated key features of self-determination and built a culture of trust that the communities had not previously experienced with other educational initiatives or the government. The projects' success created a domino effect: the successful implementation of projects helped these communities garner additional support for expansion or implementation of new projects. The four fellows and their communities took great ownership of their projects, continuing or expanding them beyond ConnectED's funding period. The model not only benefits its direct beneficiaries — its impact also reaches the broader community.

Our findings highlight five key lessons for social development, based on the model's successful elements:

1. promoting community autonomy and self-determination,
2. prioritizing community-led initiatives,
3. being flexible and human-centred,
4. enabling access to education beyond the student, and
5. fostering complementarity and collaboration.

The Fellows Model: Context and Background

Access to Education in Rural and Indigenous Guatemalan Communities

According to the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Guatemala has low schooling levels. The country's National Statistics Institute found that 59.3 per cent of men and 53.6 per cent of women in 2019 had "no schooling or at most completed elementary school." According to the Ministry of Education, 12.4 per cent of children did not complete primary school and 26.2 per cent did not complete secondary school in 2020.¹ Among countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Guatemala has the highest early school dropout rates and the highest proportion of young people who are neither studying nor working.²

The country is highly rural. Almost half of its population of around 17 million people live in rural areas.³ It is the Latin American country with the highest proportion of Indigenous people — 44 per cent of its population — including 22 Mayan groups such as the Kaqchikel and the Mam peoples, and non-Mayan Indigenous groups such as the Xinca and the Garífunda peoples. Guatemalan indigeneity is highly linked to its rurality, with 57 per cent of the rural population identifying as Indigenous.⁴

The Indigenous population has been historically marginalized, limiting their access to quality and relevant education. Indigenous students have lower performance rates than non-Indigenous.

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- 1 Evelyn Jacir de Lovo, "Brechas de acceso a la educación en Guatemala: transformación educativa para la igualdad, con énfasis en las poblaciones rurales y los pueblos indígenas (No. 48360)," ECLAC, October 2022. [↗](#)
 - 2 Eleno Castro, Ángela López, Pablo Zoido, and Raquel Fernández-Coto, "¿Cuáles son los principales retos educativos de Mesoamérica?" Nota 16, CIMA-BID, August 2019. [↗](#)
 - 3 "Population, Total — Guatemala," and "Rural Population (% of total population) — Guatemala," The World Bank, 2021. [↗](#)
 - 4 Hugo Us, Carlos Mendoza, and Vivian Guzmán, "Pueblos indígenas en Guatemala: desafíos demográficos, lingüísticos y socioeconómicos: Análisis comparativo de los censos 2002 vs 2018," Nota Técnica No. IDBTN-02396, BID, January 2022. [↗](#)

For example, just 9 per cent reach the national standards for reading compared to 31 per cent of non-Indigenous students.⁵ A complex history of colonization and civil war has left a legacy of structural racism, inequality, and social exclusion. Although education is recognized as a fundamental human right, at international, regional, and national levels, rural and Indigenous communities face many obstacles that hinder their access to efficient, high-quality, and culturally appropriate education. These barriers include, but are not limited to, high levels of poverty and inequality, limited infrastructure, and few resources allocated to education.

Poverty affects 75 per cent of the Indigenous population, compared to 36 per cent of non-Indigenous people, and chronic malnutrition affects 58 per cent of the Indigenous population, compared to 38 per cent of non-Indigenous people.⁶ Rural learners average only 3.7 years of schooling while their urban counterparts average 6.2 years.⁷ These conditions have forced many Guatemalans from rural areas to engage in migration toward *el norte* (the north) —toward Mexico, and particularly the United States.

Girls face additional obstacles to education including child or teen marriage and pregnancy, as well as traditional gender roles and stereotypes. These compounding barriers are exemplified by the fact that 37.4 per cent of women living in rural areas are illiterate, which represents the highest rate of illiteracy in any subset of the population.⁸

Access to education in rural and Indigenous Guatemala was further hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools and unequal

access to technology and connectivity disrupted learning, increased school dropout rates, and widened the educational gap between rural and urban settings.

Access to inclusive and equitable quality education is a key focus of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Education is fundamental for combatting the poverty and inequality that disproportionately affect rural and Indigenous Guatemalan communities. Despite the challenges they face, these communities also hold local capacity, valuable resources, knowledge, and human capital to address the educational issues that affect them. This has been acknowledged by ConnectED’s Fellows Model, which fosters and supports local initiatives to guarantee that “no one gets left behind” in the global pursuit for accessible quality education.

ConnectED’s Fellows Model

Founded in 2013, ConnectED is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that addresses educational inequalities that rural youth face in Central America. In 2020, after successfully implementing the Fellows Model in over 20 Nicaraguan communities, ConnectED scaled up and expanded its reach to Guatemala, where they have since supported education initiatives in more than 50 rural communities. ConnectED fellows are resident education leaders at schools in rural communities (including teachers, principals, and librarians) who are chosen for personal and professional development with the overall aim that they will utilize this mentorship to lead a project in their community that improves students’ educational

5 Manuel Orozco and Marcela Valdivia, “Educational Challenges in Guatemala and Consequences for Human Capital and Development,” *Inter-American Dialogue*, 2017.

6 Dwayne Mamo, “El Mundo Indígena 2023,” *IGWIA*, April 2023. [↗](#)

7 Susana M. Sanchez, Kinnon Scott, and J. Humberto Lopez, “Guatemala: Cerrando brechas para generar un crecimiento más inclusivo. Diagnóstico Sistemático de País,” *World Bank*. [↗](#)

8 Rubén Darío Narciso Cruz, “República de Guatemala: Compendio Estadístico de Educación 2013,” *Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala*, September 2015. [↗](#)

outcomes. Today there are 35 Guatemalan fellows, made up of past and present cohorts. Beginning with 10 fellows across the 2020–2021 period, ConnectED mentored 10 additional fellows in 2022, and 15 more in 2023. Women make up 57.1 per cent of fellows, with 91.7 per cent of female fellows identifying as Indigenous.

ConnectED’s bottom-up approach to social development empowers fellows through capacity building, resource provision, and support of locally driven solutions. ConnectED also highlights community buy-in as key for a project’s sustainability, and in most of the communities that they partner with, over 50 per cent of project funding comes from the community themselves.

The Fellows Model recognizes that local residents best understand the needs and realities of their own communities. It identifies participants from rural communities and invests in the development of their leadership, project management, and networking capabilities. Instead of leading, ConnectED guides fellows through the design, implementation, and evaluation of a community-backed education initiative. This process respects their agency and educational sovereignty. The model is implemented in seven phases (Table 1).

Fellows’ projects are designed to address three pillars of impact: access, quality, and relevance (Figure 1). These objectives form the central focus of each fellow’s initiative and are the guiding indicators by which ConnectED monitors and evaluates their model. As part of their commitments to human-centred design and continual improvement, ConnectED incorporates the voices of diverse stakeholders in the model’s evaluation. In this way they gain valuable insights to adapt and expand their model to other Central and Latin American nations. Through conversations with fellows, teachers, and parents, our research focuses on the pillar of “relevance,” including how the Fellows Model implements contextually appropriate and sustainable initiatives, and the carry-on effect this has on the

Table 1. Seven phases of ConnectED’s Fellows Model

PHASE	ACTIVITIES
1. Identify local fellows	Working with local NGOs and community contacts, ConnectED chooses fellows using selection criteria.
2. Develop fellows’ capacities	ConnectED provides training to build project management, leadership, and networking skills. This mentorship continues throughout the model and includes networking opportunities with alumni from previous cohorts.
3. Assess community needs	Fellows conduct surveys and organize meetings with parents and community members to determine the community’s most pressing educational challenges, and build local stakeholder buy-in for the selected project.
4. Generate project designs	ConnectED guides fellows in developing project plans that account for timeline, budgeting, and staffing constraints while also remaining relevant to the needs of students.
5. Implement projects	ConnectED provides fellows with a materials budget of up to USD 3,500 per project, with parents and community members often providing free labour and smaller donations of items and money. Some fellows also engage with other NGOs to further finance their projects.
6. Monitor, evaluate, and scale impact	ConnectED employs a MEAL (monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning) system to assess both the projects and their Fellows Model against their impact indicators. These findings are then used to improve the model and enable its expansion to other regions in Guatemala.
7. Elevate fellows’ voices	ConnectED establishes a network of support for fellows, including a yearly conference with current fellows and alumni, to foster knowledge exchange through training and mentorship. This network also provides opportunities for fellows to make connections with other cohorts and partner organizations that can support their community needs and capacity development beyond the initial scope of their projects.

Table source: “Fellows Model: Turning Rural Educators into Catalysts for Change,” ConnectED. [↗](#)

access to and quality of education for rural and Indigenous Guatemalan youth.

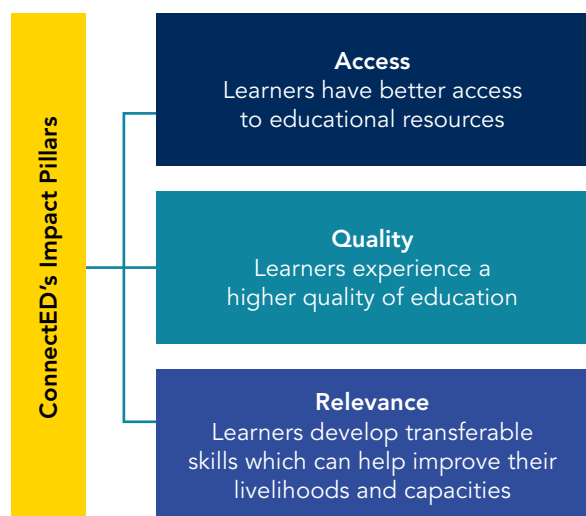


Figure 1. ConnectED’s three pillars of impact (Source: “ConnectED Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy for Fellows Program in Guatemala 2011–2025,” ConnectED internal document, 2021)

The Fellows Model’s selection criteria assess a range of characteristics to learn about a candidate’s work ethic, behaviour, values, skills, and previous work experience. Table 2 summarizes the core assessment areas.

Table 2. Selection criteria for the fellows

Connection to a school community	Must be a principal and/or teacher at a rural Indigenous school.
Values	Collaboration, inclusivity, equity, community, credibility, and perseverance.
Leadership capacity	Demonstrated passion and enthusiasm; interest in relevant areas; capacity for ideation/design; and ethical reasoning.
Community mobilizer	Understanding of community dynamic; capacity to motivate and influence others.
Locally supported	Supported and/or nominated by a partner community-based organization.
Commitment to the program	Demonstrated commitment to the process and goals of the program with understanding of projects’ self-sustainability.
Logistics	Fellow has access to a cell phone and the internet.
Geographic location	ConnectED prioritizes communities at risk for irregular migration.

Research Approach

We sought to identify the elements of the Fellows Model that have the greatest impact on improving access, quality, and relevance of education for communities in Guatemala. We aimed to understand the extent to which the model has improved educational relevance, and its impacts on accessibility to quality education. Our approach combined focus groups and semi-structured interviews. A literature review informed our culturally appropriate design and approach.

Focus Groups and Semi-structured Interviews

Together with ConnectED, we approached four fellows and members of their school communities to participate in this case study (Table 3). We visited schools in communities located in the municipalities of Huitán (Department of Quetzaltenango), Aldea Sacsiguán (Department of Sololá), San Antonio Palopó (Department of Sololá), and Tecpán (Department of Chimaltenango) (Figure 2). These communities consist mainly of Mayan Indigenous groups belonging to the Mam and Kaqchikel peoples.

Fellows were selected based on the theme of their projects, duration of their involvement with the ConnectED Fellows Model, and their gender to ensure balanced representation. We prioritized schools that were in relatively close proximity and easily accessible by road for logistical considerations. We conducted in-person focus groups and semi-structured interviews in these schools.

Two focus groups were conducted for each school, with one group for fellows, teachers, and school staff, and another group for parents of students who were involved in the project. Participants engaged in a facilitated discussion related to four prompts about the relevance of education in their communities. A total of four fellows, 16 teachers, and 17 parents participated in the focus groups (Table 3).

We conducted semi-structured interviews to gain deeper understanding of the themes that were raised during the focus groups. Interviews were held with a subset of participants who participated in the focus groups, based on their availability. Interviews with the fellows sought to provide greater understanding of their projects, including aim, design, drivers and barriers to implementation, and sustainability. Interviews with school staff and parents sought to understand their involvement in the project and their views on community impacts. A total of four



Figure 2. Location of communities we visited in (A) Huitán, (B) Aldea Sacsiguán, (C) San Antonio Palopó, and (D) Tecpán. Guatemala City is the nation's capital.



Figure 3. Parents from Community C (San Antonio Palopó, Department of Sololá) discuss relevant education in a focus group with the research team.

Table 3. Projects and participants in this study

COMMUNITY		A	B	C	D
Project theme		School computer lab	Digital reading workshop	Digital technology centre	Physical and digital library for Kaqchikel
Focus groups	Fellows (n=4)	1	1	1	1
	Teachers (n=16)	5	4	3	4
	Parents (n=17)	3	7	4	3
Interviews	Fellows (n=4)	1	1	1	1
	Teachers (n=15)	4	4	3	4
	Parents (n=10)	2	0	4	4

fellows, 15 teachers, and 10 parents participated in those interviews (Table 3).

We engaged Spanish-English interpreters during these sessions, as well as Mam-Spanish and Kaqchikel-Spanish interpreters as required. We thematically analyzed notes from these sessions to identify recurring patterns and common themes in participants' responses. ConnectED provided contextual insights and other input.

Defining Relevant Education

Participants' definitions of "relevant education" reflected the nature of the four projects and the diverse contextual circumstances of the four communities, each with differing levels of rurality and access to technology. The projects were significant for the participants, their children, and students because they directly responded to their self-identified needs and interests. Participants consistently identified the inclusion of technology and the incorporation of Mayan cultures and languages as the main pillars of relevant education.

Relevant Education Includes Technology

In all four schools, interviewees spotlighted technology as a key element that could help students enhance their capabilities and secure better jobs in the future. Given a general lack of access to technology (particularly in Communities A, B, and C), participants remarked that the inclusion of technology labs and equipment in schools — thanks to the fellows' projects — has allowed students to learn how to manage electronic devices and improve their digital literacy. Teachers also commented that students acquired new skills, improved their creative and critical thinking capabilities, and became more engaged and motivated to go to school. Increased student engagement was a particularly



Figure 4. Computer lab implemented by the fellow from Community A in Huitán (Department of Quetzaltenango)



Figure 5. Digital technology centre implemented by the fellow from Community C in San Antonio Palopó (Department of Sololá)

important benefit since participants across the four communities mentioned school dropouts as a common issue.

One teacher estimated that two to three out of every 15 students will not graduate from their primary school. In a different community, the fellow — and principal — highlighted that an average of 50 students would drop out of school each year. However, some teachers recognized that school dropouts are decreasing as a direct result of the projects. For example, the same principal argued that — thanks to the project — this year only seven students have dropped out.

Parents and teachers recognized a generational change between themselves and the children who are benefiting from the fellows' projects. One participant said, "We did not know of these machines [computers]. Nowadays, it is open to us to know and operate a machine. That makes us much stronger when we move to secondary school. Children already have some knowledge."

According to some participants, introducing technology into their schools has allowed their communities to "catch up" with urban schools that already incorporate technology into their curriculum. One teacher in Community C linked their technology project to increased accessibility to quality education because children no longer have to walk to a different village to access a computer lab. Another teacher in Community B mentioned that "rural schools are perceived as being behind," however, thanks to the project and increased access to technology, her community now "stands out."

The introduction of technology has benefited teachers in many ways. It has allowed them to reduce expenses for purchasing stationery, to save time when preparing materials, and to find creative and engaging ways to deliver lessons. In the words of one teacher: "It makes it easier for me to teach the classes. I don't have to take two hours to make a drawing ... With this project, we have the projector, the television ... It is more real, it avoids expenses ... I choose the content, make my presentations and project." One of the fellows, agreed: "Relevant education is changing the traditional way of teaching and learning through the incorporation of technology as a key tool."

The four projects have fuelled the participants' eagerness and desire to further increase technological access for their children and students and to expand the reach of the projects, for example, by providing more computers and tablets for students or incorporating digital contents in Kaqchikel, as teachers in Community D mentioned. However, some participants took a more cautious

approach regarding the incorporation of technology. One parent mentioned that while technology is important for education, too much access can dilute local culture, which needs to be retained and not forgotten.



Figure 6. Kaqchikel language books procured for the school library by the fellow from Community D in Tecpán (Department of Chimaltenango)

Relevant Education Includes Mayan Cultures and Languages

Each community demonstrated a distinctive view regarding the importance of incorporating their Mayan cultures (Mam, Kaqchikel, and/or K'iche') in the schools' curriculum. Participants in schools A and B did not identify incorporating Mam (Community A) or Kaqchikel (Community B) as a key element of relevant education. In contrast, parents were more interested in their children learning Spanish and incorporating technological tools. Teachers in Community B mentioned that relevant education means "changing from traditional to modern." However, their fellow recognized the importance of pushing for the use of Kaqchikel because "a person who speaks two languages is a better thinker."

In contrast, participants from Communities C and D identified the loss of Indigenous language and culture as a challenge. A parent in Community C mentioned that most elders speak Kaqchikel,

but it is uncommon for the younger generation. One teacher shared that “Guatemala is very rich, but it’s losing this richness.” For example, as the fellow in Community D explained, children are showing less interest in learning traditional and sacred Indigenous knowledge related to the moon and certain plants because the national curriculum prioritizes the Spanish language. Teachers told us that television has also influenced children to be more attracted to other cultures.

To parents and teachers in Communities C and D, learning about Indigenous culture and speaking Kaqchikel are important and directly connected to national self-esteem and pride. One participant said, “Kaqchikel is unique to Guatemalan communities and not spoken anywhere else.” Another parent mentioned it is important to teach children about the richness of their own Indigenous culture and to analyze how they live it. Speaking Kaqchikel was also recognized as a skill that increases employability — it’s listed as a desirable skill for many local jobs.

In Community D, parents recognized that the project is showing promising results in motivating children to use and strengthen their Kaqchikel skills, which has led to a positive shift in attitude toward their traditional language compared with community members of the previous generation. One parent shared: “My girl has learned a lot through the library ... Many parents do not speak Kaqchikel anymore ... but now she wants to speak it the way her grandparents speak it.” The project has also encouraged teachers to practise and improve their own Kaqchikel.

Participants in Communities C and D highlighted how preserving tradition does not mean that schools should ignore teaching Spanish, other languages like English, or incorporating technological tools. In fact, these can be mutually reinforcing. For example, in Community D, the project incorporated QR codes in school books

to teach the correct ways to pronounce Kaqchikel words. Another participant mentioned that technology is not opposed to Indigeneity — that it’s a tool to enrich and promote her culture: “Being Indigenous does not mean that I cannot handle technology ... It [technology] may enrich our culture with more learning ... My dream is to share my culture with other worlds ... I would like my culture to be as important as learning English.”

Barriers to Relevant Education

Although the incorporation of technology and Indigenous culture are highlighted as vital to the curriculum, a complex web of barriers hinders these communities’ accessibility to relevant and quality education. These barriers not only independently hinder effective learning experiences but also interact to magnify their impact.

Insufficient Resources and Infrastructure

Inadequate facilities and resources are the main obstacles that compromise the quality of education. The problem is widespread, affecting numerous aspects of the educational environment. Some participants in Communities A and C emphasized that their computer labs needed more computers — students are currently deprived of the instruments required for digital learning. Outdated technology donated by other programs further exacerbates the issue because it’s unusable and doesn’t meet their needs. There are also insufficient books available to meet the students’ demands in libraries. Although access to the internet is increasingly essential, especially with the introduction of technology at the schools, teachers in one of the communities continue to pay for the school’s internet bills out of their own pockets.

Lack of Specialist Teachers

The need for more specialized teachers, particularly for information technology (IT) and sports, remains a significant hurdle. This scarcity restricts students' learning opportunities and skills development. Some teachers and fellows mentioned that schools also need administrators to maintain their computer labs. Specialist IT teachers are also required to teach students with computer-related tasks. In the absence of an IT specialist, the fellow from Community A is independently learning to manage computer labs, handling tasks like software installation and troubleshooting, which has proven challenging. The fellow navigates the complexities of technology management without specialized training or guidance. A teacher from Community D emphasized the need for teachers to receive additional training, especially on interactive teaching methods.

Limited Governmental Support

Participants highlighted the challenge of bridging the gap in governmental support for infrastructure, resources, and specialist staff as a pertinent issue. The present level of support does not meet anticipated expectations, and creates a significant obstacle. Consequently, teachers, community members, and NGOs are proactively working to close these gaps.

Some parents from Community B conveyed concerns regarding the discontinuation of the government's meal program following the pandemic. Prior to its discontinuation, this program provided at least one guaranteed meal during the school day. Some teachers highlighted that Guatemala's cultural diversity presents a challenge for the government in devising a curriculum that effectively accommodates the distinctive requirements of diverse cultural groups.

Migration's Impact on Education

Migration often involves undocumented and dangerous undertakings. Several participants shared insights into how migration disrupts families and creates significant hurdles for students. Families disrupted by migration experience breakdowns, leading to student dropouts and disinterest in education. Young people and families' migration to the US for informal work often separates families and leads to challenges in maintaining consistent education. One interviewee indicated links between migration and child marriage within this context (see section on gender impacts).

Parental Attitudes Beyond Education

Some parents did not have the opportunity to complete primary or secondary schooling, which influenced how they perceive education. Some believe that education provides minimal tangible benefits in life. This perspective decreases their interest in and support of their children's education. Fellows explained that parents' opinions are shaped by their experiences and situations.

Although parents' support is crucial for students to continue their education, parents who face financial distress often decide to prioritize their family's urgent needs by having children earn money instead of continuing their schooling. A few students did not return to school following the pandemic because their parents migrated or needed them to start working on farms.

The Pandemic's Educational Impacts

In addition to these educational barriers, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected all four communities, worsening the impacts of existing

prepandemic stressors such as poverty, food insecurity, and poor health outcomes. Like many other countries, Guatemala mandated nationwide school closures, directing all institutions to move to remote learning. Although the intent was to mitigate the spread of the virus, parents and teachers noted that the guidance and implementation support for remote learning was limited. A teacher in Community D commented that these measures, “paralyzed education” because schools in rural and low socioeconomic areas were already suffering from a lack of resource provisions.

Increased Relevance but Unequal Access

In Communities A, B, and C, which were implementing technology-based projects, the pandemic brought into sharp relief the difficulties in providing both relevant and accessible education, given the existing economic barriers and resource deficiencies in these communities. Remote learning was possible for only students whose families either already owned, or were able to purchase, the devices and internet plans needed to virtually attend classes. Even though parents acknowledged the importance of technology in education and improving students’ digital literacy, many faced difficulties in acquiring the adequate technological infrastructure required to facilitate their children’s schooling during the pandemic.

One teacher in Community A recalled that some families could not even afford electricity. Parents in Community B, who work in agriculture, told us that the government lockdowns limited their working hours, and a parent in Community C said the lack of steady income meant they had to prioritize their family’s basic survival needs over getting an internet connection. A teacher in Community

D also mentioned that in households with many children, it was difficult to procure enough devices so older children’s education was often prioritized while their younger siblings fell further behind.

While the parents of Community D, which was implementing a library project with some technology elements, echoed the resourcing difficulties highlighted by parents of other communities, they spoke more about the importance of constant communication between themselves and teachers during the pandemic. Parents were able to visit the school every fortnight to pick up their children’s work, and teachers even travelled to their homes when parents were unable to visit the school. This coordination was also possible in Community C, where teachers used the library’s projector to instruct small groups of students in short intervals before giving them homework. These strategies, a hybrid of remote and in-school learning, helped alleviate some of the financial and resourcing burdens that parents in these communities faced.

Work’s Relevance

During the pandemic many parents felt that working in the fields to provide immediate economic support to their families was more important for children than pursuing a formal education. This was especially true in families where either the primary breadwinner was unable to work, or where parents simply could not afford the technological tools required for virtual learning. Consequently, many students dropped out of school, and did not return even after in-person classes resumed. The teachers of Communities B and C estimated a dropout rate of between 8 and 10 per cent. However, dropouts were not consistent across all classrooms. One teacher in Community B told us that all their students returned to school after the pandemic.

Relevance Goes Beyond the Classroom

Interviewees from all communities spoke about parents' difficulties in having to step into the role of teachers, especially given the fact that many of them are either illiterate or have not completed a formal education beyond the early years of primary school. Although these parents struggled, many of them also commented that their children are now much more proficient in using technology and are in fact helping improve their parents' and older siblings' digital literacy, facilitating intergenerational learning that benefits all members of the community. As one parent in Community B recounted, "Although I did not know how to answer all of their questions ... I would pick up the homework, study with them, and teach them ... I got closer with my girls."

Drivers of Relevant Education

Despite the barriers that were exacerbated during the pandemic, all four communities displayed traits of collectivism and attributed the success of educational projects to factors such as collaboration, cooperative efforts, and unity. All projects were selected through community assessment. Parents, teachers, and other community stakeholders deliberated over the project options then reached a consensus about what the school needs and should prioritize. This helped to create community buy-in — most parents we interviewed showed their support and enthusiasm for the projects at the schools.

Three distinct stakeholder groups drove relevant education in all four communities: teaching staff and fellows, parents and community, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).



Figure 7. The fellow from Community D leads the research team on a tour of her classroom, introducing her students.

Teaching Staff and Fellows

The fellows' leadership and the teachers' and principals' adaptability and commitment significantly contributed to project success. Fellows reported a mostly supportive environment from other teachers and the school principal, despite some initial resistance and period of adjustment as they transitioned away from traditional teaching methods.

Many teachers reported teaching themselves computer skills as well as learning from other teachers at the school, which exemplified their willingness to learn and improve themselves to provide better learning experiences for their students. For example, in Community A, the fellow and teachers learned how to install computer programs and perform maintenance on the computers since they lacked the resources to outsource these responsibilities to a specialist teacher.

Parents and Community

Many parents provided labour, financial support, and engagement in the school's activities. Community D reported that parents have

shown even greater support after the pandemic through collectively paying for a janitor to take pressure off the students (who were responsible for cleaning the school prior to the pandemic). Several parents described how they themselves had limited schooling, so want their children to complete school for improved access to further educational and career opportunities.

They also highlighted the contribution of remittances from community members and school alumni who have migrated to the US. For example, the school in Community A had been destroyed in a mudslide and remittances from alumni were the primary source of funding to rebuild. The cooperative spirit in these communities — with group resilience, determination, and interdependence in the face of challenges — extended beyond geographical borders.

Nongovernmental Organizations

The communities have greatly benefited from financial support and other resources provided by other international NGOs that compensate for lack of sufficient government funding or supplement the existing but limited governmental funds that the schools receive. For example, Community C received routers for internet connection and Community B was able to create an arts playroom (Figure 8) supported by one of these other NGOs. The communities' ongoing collaboration with ConnectED has led to successful project implementation at the schools. In addition to the Fellows Model, all communities mentioned involvement from other NGOs that provided financial or in-kind support to the school.

The Model's Impactful Features

In addition to the key stakeholder groups driving projects, the model itself has had several positive

impacts on the communities' access to relevant and quality education.

Material Support

Teachers and fellows in Communities C and D highlighted how the model provides access to material resources in a way that the government is unable to. (The Ministry of Education limits resource allocation.) To an extent, the model fills a systemic gap between governmental support and community needs. However, it's not a permanent solution and projects still require ongoing support — whether from the communities and/or other NGOs — to remain sustainable.

Self-determination

Unlike aid provided by other NGOs, ConnectED supports its fellows and communities to undertake an assessment process of brainstorming and elimination, which aligns with phase 3 of the model. As one fellow mentioned, “[ConnectED] gave us the opportunity to decide what was actually important for us.” Communities decide on the most pressing educational issues that they need to solve, rather than being told by external entities what issues they should focus on.

In determining their own needs, all four communities identified technology as a key feature of education that was lacking. ConnectED enabled these communities to adopt technological projects in the varied ways that they wished. While technology was the common theme, one school adopted a computer lab to teach information technology skills to students (Community A); another school adopted a combined physical and digital library to support the teaching of Kaqchikel (Community D). One fellow highlighted that it remains uncommon to find schools in rural areas equipped with new technology. Another mentioned that some organizations donate old equipment that is incompatible with new software, rendering it

dysfunctional. With ConnectED's support, the fellows' projects incorporated usable technology into their schools.

Culture of Trust

Several fellows and teachers praised ConnectED's ability to deliver on their promises. In the past, communities had negative experiences with governments being unable to keep their commitments. Some teachers also noted that proposals had been submitted to the government but met with inaction, while others highlighted ingrained corruption, a culture of distrust toward the government, and inadequate governmental support as other challenges they have previously faced. One community noted that a local government leader had tried to claim a successful fellow's project as their own.

A Domino Effect of Increased Influence

While the communities were previously unsuccessful in securing government funding through grant proposals, the fellows program has created a "domino effect," where its effective program implementation has led to greater success in garnering additional support from governments and other NGOs. Leveraging the positive impacts of their project, one community has successfully secured additional funding from their local government to provide internet access to their school, a cost that was previously borne through crowdfunding among teachers. This community is also in discussions with the local government and other NGOs to continue expanding their project.



Figure 8. Arts playroom implemented by fellow from Community B in Aldea Sacsiguán (Department of Sololá) after the success of the digital reading workshop.

Gender Impacts

The impact of ConnectED's model has benefited girls differently than boys for several reasons. According to some participants, mainly teachers, the projects have been relevant for how they address the context of *machismo*, particularly with the introduction of technology in schools.⁹

Participants identified how girls experience additional challenges that affect their access to education. These included traditional gender roles and stereotypes, early marriage, child or teen pregnancy, and gender-based violence. One teacher told the story of a girl who dropped out of school: "There is a case of a 13-year-old girl who did not show up. I went to her house. The mother told me she was engaged ... She then migrated to the US with her husband."

Another teacher mentioned that both inside and outside her community *machismo* translates into traditional gender roles and gender-based violence, exacerbated by migration: "They think

⁹ *Machismo* is prevalent in Latin American societies as a form of masculinity characterized by the glorification of aggressive and dominant behaviours to justify male superiority. José Moral de la Rubia, and Sandra Ramos Basurto, "Machismo, victimización y perpetración en mujeres y hombres mexicanos," *Estudios sobre las Culturas Contemporáneas* 22, no. 43 (2016): 37–66.

girls were born for the husband ... If they leave the community, they are exposed to danger. They can get raped and get exposed to crime." Another teacher from a different community was devastated that a girl who had been studying in the primary school was murdered in the city of Chimaltenango.

Teachers identified that the fellows' projects have contributed to transforming and contesting the traditional ideas and beliefs that limit girls and their studies. By making learning more engaging, the projects contribute to retaining girls in school. For example, one teacher identified that their project "has opened a window for girls to see what's out there," and elaborated how the use of technology has allowed them to realize that they are not limited to being housewives and mothers and that they have the right to study. According to this teacher, thanks to ConnectED's project, girls' dropout numbers have decreased, with only one girl dropping out of the school of 120 total students, compared to three to four in previous years. By contrast, a fellow from another community did not observe a difference in school dropouts between genders.

Even though there is still resistance from many parents, some teachers mentioned that the technological projects have contributed to changing parents' traditional ideas, making them realize that their daughters need to continue studying. In this process, many parents, teachers, and fellows have advocated and actively pushed for girls to continue attending school. For example, one father mentioned that he wants to "pave the way" for the people in the village, so that other parents support girls' higher education. Another teacher shared how she was recently able to secure 10 scholarships for girls in her school so they can continue with their studies. The fellow in Community B has been advocating for parents to invest in their daughters' education because he believes that "the uneducated woman will have to put up with her husband's machismo because she will not

have a job." Female fellows also serve as powerful role models — they break stereotypes, and inspire girls to pursue education with confidence.

The Projects' Sustainability

Sustainability is the extent to which a project continues operating beyond a fellow's formal involvement with ConnectED. It is a crucial feature of the model, ensuring that communities can benefit long term, and widely, from the positive impacts of their projects.

Taking Ownership

The four projects were part of the Fellows Model in 2021–2022, meaning that ConnectED's active support had stopped for one to two years prior to our study. All four projects continue to run in the schools, and some communities are actively taking steps to further expand their projects by securing financial support from governments and other NGOs. Community A plans to construct a building that will include an expansion of the existing computer lab. Community B plans to expand their digital technology centre to other areas of the school, such as in their arts playroom.

Continued support from parents and other community members is crucial for these projects' sustainability beyond ConnectED's funding period. A teacher from Community D told us that:

The school has grown, and it has been thanks to the collaboration of the parents, and to the initiative of the teachers who have looked for projects. In other years we did not have a basketball court, it was just dirt ... but these things have been overcome. We always try to promote [the importance of education] with the parents — we have to open the parents' minds.

All fellows continue to demonstrate strong leadership and initiative to seek opportunities

to develop their projects further and implement new projects. This is a clear demonstration of the model's success in developing fellows' capacities, which is the focus of its phase 2.

Benefiting the Wider Community

Fellows inspire their colleagues and communities. Teachers in Communities B and C, where there was an initial resistance to adopt these projects, highlighted how the fellows' passion and determination led to the project's increased support from both teachers and parents. One teacher in Community C said, "the most important aspect is [the fellow's] willingness and attitude to make all this happen." In Community D, fellows and teachers acted as role models in adopting Kaqchikel for daily conversations, thereby inspiring their students and parents to do the same both within the school and externally.

In Community A, teachers welcome and support school alumni to use their computer lab. This improves not just their own school children's educational experience but also that of other children in the community. Fellows, teachers, and parents in all communities resoundingly voiced that the projects have reintroduced relevance and excitement for learning, which help retain students in school to complete their education.

Lessons Learned

The four projects have been highly successful in the communities, with participants showing high levels of gratitude toward the fellows and ConnectED, and eagerness to expand the reach of the benefits and access to relevant and quality education. Five elements are key to the success of ConnectED's Fellows Model (Figure 9).

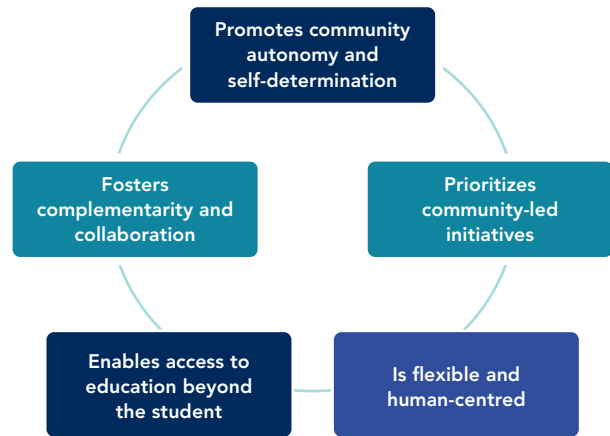


Figure 9. The five main elements underpinning the model's success

The Model Promotes Community Autonomy and Self-determination

ConnectED recognizes that communities know what is best for them and that they are best positioned to address the educational challenges that they face. It acknowledges that fellows, school staff, and other community members are agents of change who hold valuable ideas, resources, and skills to promote their own projects in their schools. In other words, the model promotes autonomy and self-determination, with fellows and community members determining what should be their school's path toward increasing access to quality and relevant education. This allows fellows and communities to be the leaders of their own projects, while ConnectED complements these efforts by providing support and access to resources such as training and capital.

Instead of perceiving community members as passive recipients of an external intervention, the model recognizes and leverages the communities' strengths and existing resources. Some strengths include the fellows' leadership skills and high levels of social capital and communitarian values. This could be seen in their capacity for self-organization and strong community support and

participation from teaching staff, parents, and family, and even community members outside Guatemala. Community support includes, for example, direct labour in the implementation of projects and maintenance of the school, local monetary resources and remittances to fund school needs, and high flexibility and involvement of parents and teachers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prioritizing autonomy and self-determination led fellows, teachers, and parents to develop a strong sense of ownership and high levels of acceptance and satisfaction with the projects, as well as a relationship of trust with ConnectED. This autonomous and self-determining approach has been beneficial in increasing access to education in rural Guatemalan communities, while enabling project ownership and sustainability.

The Model Prioritizes Community-led Initiatives

Conducting community-led needs assessments is crucial because each community has its own distinct history, needs, and interests. Acknowledging these differences is essential to ensure that the project is tailored to address local needs. The intersection of Indigenous identity and rural residence introduces layers of complexity, rendering each community's situation distinct.

By prioritizing community-driven needs identification, projects became centred on technology and culture. This approach emerged as a direct outcome of community needs assessments conducted by fellows, thereby shifting away from ConnectED's imposition on projects. Such a community-led initiative aligns education harmoniously with each community's unique needs and dynamics, adapting current educational methods and content to meet these groups' individual contexts.

The Model Is Flexible and Human Centred

The model has successfully supported the introduction of educational initiatives addressing a variety of issues, including technology-related resource deficiencies, lack of cultural preservation, and illiteracy. Even the importance of technology, a recurring theme in our interviews, manifested distinctively in each community based on the self-identified priorities of its members, and led to projects with diverse goals. The model is adaptable to different contexts. This is not circumstantial, but intentional, and underpinned by a simple yet powerful lesson for social development: you must invest in people before you invest in projects.

Phase 1 of the model selects fellows who will benefit most from ConnectED's training program. What might be seen as stringent selection criteria may in fact balance the operational constraints of a small NGO with the reality of working in some low- and middle-income countries. In the Guatemalan context, this means that the ongoing and multiple educational disparities that rural and Indigenous Mayan communities face, stemming from the country's long and complex history of colonization, cannot all be undone by a single social initiative. Therefore, the most efficient use of ConnectED's limited funding is to invest in fellows who are best placed to lead their communities in successfully implementing and sustaining a project that addresses the community's most pressing educational concern.

In phase 2, ConnectED further invests in fellows by allocating training resources to build their project management, networking, and leadership capabilities. This is vital for establishing relevance in phase 3 and building local buy-in during phase 4. We saw evidence of phase 2's successful influence on later phases when teachers and parents in all four communities commented on their trust in

the fellows and admiration for the way they led project development and implementation.

A people-first philosophy is also important for addressing a common issue that rural and Indigenous communities face when working with governments and NGOs: being viewed as homogenous with the assumption that what has “worked” with one community will work with another. However, Indigeneity and rurality are nuanced concepts: their interplay — and intersections with socio-political, economic and cultural factors, and global events — creates unique conditions and educational challenges in each community. The ability to respond to these everchanging circumstances is essential for an NGO to scale its reach across diverse regions and groups. The model’s human-centred approach to social development offers this flexibility by placing the voices of the community at the forefront of both defining and “solving” the problem.

The Model Enables Access to Education Beyond the Student

In addition to the direct impact that the model has on students and teachers within schools, the broader community impacts of the projects were also highlighted. For example, some schools allow and encourage alumni in the community to use their computer labs. Others want to include children who do not attend that school to also have access to its technology facilities so that they no longer need to pay for an internet café or walk to another village to use a computer. Schools wished to share the resources and tools that they had acquired to better the broader community. Such a recurring attitude of generosity exemplified these communities’ united and collaborative approach. When they spoke of not needing to pay for an internet café or walk to another village to use a computer, they were describing how access to the technology facilities addresses issues of cost and accessibility.

The model’s intergenerational and familial impacts were also highlighted in several interviews. Its effects extended beyond the students who were directly involved. Several participants reported that it was common for students to teach their older siblings, who were unable to finish their schooling, how to use computers. In Community D, many parents did not speak Kaqchikel well themselves because knowledge of the language had been declining in the community. Through the school’s language project, however, some parents’ interest in learning the language had been sparked and their children sometimes taught them words they’d learned at school. In this way, the knowledge that the children gained at school through the ConnectED projects showed impacts through a reverse educational dynamic within their close family networks — many students were eager to bring back their new learning experiences and share them with siblings and parents. This suggests that the model not only benefits enrolled students but also indirectly helps older family members gain valuable skills through knowledge-sharing practices.

The Model Fosters Complementarity and Collaboration

The model complements rather than replaces the existing curriculum. Guiding communities to self-determine their most pertinent educational issues allows for targeted improvement and enhances students’ educational experiences. While all communities recognized information technology as a common theme, each community identified different ways that it could be implemented to best suit their context. The introduction of technology in classrooms did not replace the existing curriculum, but instead enhanced how students learned Indigenous languages in one school, while it improved access to reading materials in another. The model enhanced

students' learning experiences, which improved student retention by increasing the relevance and quality of education.

The model also provides a platform for training and upskilling fellows, which guides them in designing and implementing their projects. Phase 7 of the model, which includes establishing a network between fellows, also enables knowledge exchange. We saw that all four communities successfully implemented and took ownership of their projects, while ensuring that the projects continue to run despite the conclusion of ConnectED's formal/active support. This creates a domino effect where the communities' demonstrated successes lead to increased support and leverage with governments and other NGOs, who are now more interested in providing additional and sustainable support to the schools.

The model is strong in its ability to provide training opportunities, guidance, and partial financial support for the fellows' projects. However, it fills only one piece of the puzzle in addressing long-standing educational issues. The strengths and capacities of the fellows, community members, and ConnectED can help complete this puzzle. The model has successfully laid the groundwork for tailoring education based

on individual community needs and enabled communities to forge networks with different actors to provide a sustainable solution.

Conclusion

ConnectED's Fellows Model successfully supports the implementation of community-led initiatives by responding to the interests and needs of rural and Indigenous Guatemalan communities to address contemporary challenges and enhance educational relevance. Promoting self-determination, autonomy, flexibility, and a human-centred approach in development is vital to respect local agencies, tailor solutions, and honour cultural strengths. Using ConnectED's model and the fellows' experiences as a guide, other organizations could invest in capacity building, collaborate with communities, promote sustainability, and measure impact holistically. This would enable the expansion and replicability of the Fellows Model and its seven phases, with other rural and Indigenous communities within and beyond Guatemala benefiting from increases in access to relevant and quality education. The model demonstrates that when education is rooted in local empowerment and community engagement, it becomes a powerful tool for positive change and sustainable development.

Research Team



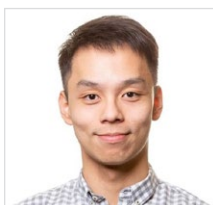
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Anggi Putri, a University of Melbourne student with a master's degree in public policy management, is a government worker and policy analyst passionate about addressing intricate policy dilemmas. She is committed to driving positive transformations and actively advocates for enhanced educational access for marginalized communities through social activism. Anggi's extensive experience in Indonesian and Canadian social projects equips her with invaluable insights for navigating diverse cultural landscapes and understanding the unique challenges that marginalized populations face. Proficient in community engagement, systematic reviews, and innovative problem solving, Anggi employs mediation to facilitate constructive dialogues among stakeholders, fostering collaborative efforts for sustainable change.



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Steve Fisher is an honorary fellow, and lecturer, in development studies at the University of Melbourne. He is the director of Community Works, an Australian-based consulting company, and Kindred, an NGO registered in Colombia and Australia. He is also the Australia director of Spring Impact, an international NGO focusing on the replication and scaling of social programs. Research is central to his work, and Steve has over three decades of experience working with NGOs and community organizations worldwide on social, health, and economic development projects, from the remote regions of Australia to several Latin American and South Asian nations.



Founded at the University of Toronto in 2015, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, the Reach Alliance has since scaled to seven other leading universities around the world. As a student-led, faculty-mentored, research and leadership initiative, Reach's unique approach uncovers how and why certain programs are successful (or not) in getting to some of the world's hardly reached populations. Research teams, comprised of top students and faculty from across disciplines, spend nine to twelve months investigating each case study. Once the data collection process is complete, teams write case reports that are published and disseminated across the Reach Alliance's diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, academics, and business leaders.

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