An Australian Government–funded program is strengthening education in Aceh.

Until two years ago Azhar, a villager in Baktiya, North Aceh, assumed that educating children was the business of school teachers. Like other villagers, Azhar thought parents could just send their children to school and teachers would do the rest.

Haririe, a senior official of North Aceh Education District, thought the same. He never thought communities could help improve education.

‘We have been trapped in the assumption that formal education is only the business of education authorities and schools,’ Haririe said.

Communities believe this divide stems back to the conflict over independence, which began in Aceh in 1976. An estimated 600 schools were destroyed or damaged during the conflict, affecting the education of 55,000 children. North Aceh and Bireun were among the worst–affected districts.

Although the conflict ended with the peace agreement in 2005, distrust remained between communities and the schools, often perceived as representative of the government.

This began to change more than two years ago when the Australian Government–funded Communities and Education Program in Aceh helped strengthen the role communities play in education in the districts of North Aceh and Bireun.

The program brought education authorities, schools and communities together.
Villagers talked more openly and worked together to address village issues—a crucial step towards ongoing stability and peace.

Bringing together the groups previously in conflict also helped improve the quality of education.

More than 50 public primary schools in the two districts were given grants to repair schools.

Through a socially inclusive approach, communities were taught about their important role in improving the quality of education. With a focus on transparency, accountability and zero corruption, the program trained school principals and community members to manage school budgets and prioritise children’s needs. The teachers were also trained in active learning.

The approach has built community trust in the schools and unified villagers through participation and discussion. Community members were democratically elected to school committees that worked with principals to develop transparent systems of school management, and to provide joyful learning environments for children.

People like Azhar, who was elected as one of the school committee members, are now actively involved in decision making. ‘Before, I didn’t care what was happening to these schools, but now I realise that I can help improve the quality of education for children here. This is also a good education for us, the villagers, on how to participate in the development process,’ Azhar said.

The program relied on working closely with three education authorities: the District Education Office, the District Office of Religious Affairs (which manages faith–based schools), and the District Education Council. For the first time, the program brought the three authorities to the same table to achieve education targets together.

A recent joint audit of how grants were spent between the program and the district governments found there was no corruption. Instead, communities had made many financial and in–kind contributions. ‘This rarely happens with government–assisted funding. Before, we had our own program to rehabilitate the schools, but we didn’t involve communities. The rehabilitation process often failed, unfinished with no budget remaining. The use of budget was also not transparent,’ said Haririe, who intends to adopt the program’s system in his office.

As a result of the program, targeted schools have improved facilities, management and teaching practices, and increased community participation. Two years after it began, the program finished in October 2009, leaving Azhar, Haririe and others inspired to continue to improve the quality of education for children in Aceh.

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ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: Children from the school in Baktiya, North Aceh. Photos: Lila Dwilita Sari and Bruce Bailey/AusAID