



Case Study: ConnectED

Roots of a Legacy: The Origin of ConnectED

A passion for education and a commitment to the rural communities of Nicaragua profoundly shaped the lives of two young women, Raechel and Jackie. Their dedication left an indelible mark on the Central American region, becoming a legacy that lives on today. Inspired by their love for teaching and their desire to create opportunities for children and youth, their story gave birth to a nonprofit organization that continues to expand its impact in the communities that need it most.

Initially, the program in Nicaragua allowed communities to autonomously identify their needs and create projects to address them. The vision to expand the project to other communities led to the launch of the ConnectED Fellows Program in Guatemala in mid-2019.

Based on the findings and lessons from the impact evaluation of the program in Nicaragua—and taking into account the need to adapt the model to the realities of rural communities in Guatemala—the next step was to form partnerships with organizations that would nominate candidates for the first cohort of Fellows. Thus, in January 2020, the first cohort was formed, including one of the first educational leaders in San Andrés Semetabaj, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.



The Memory of San Andrés Semetabaj

The municipality of San Andrés Semetabaj (SAS), located in the department of Sololá, is one of the oldest towns around Lake Atitlán. It is a place where diverse cultural dynamics converge, rooted in its pre-Columbian past. Its history is closely linked to archaeological evidence: the town's streets nearly border the epicenter of the archaeological site, and even the town cemetery is located within the site's main plaza. This is a place largely untouched by gentrification and the tourism typical of Lake Atitlán, allowing cultural practices and traditions to persist in the community. As a semi-urban region, community involvement in projects like the ethnobotanical garden and the Holy Week celebration featuring the *Shutío* is a vital part of SAS's cultural legacy.

San Andrés Semetabaj is home to the Semetabaj Regional Archaeological Project, the oldest known settlement around Lake Atitlán. This project has been carried out since 2012 through the collaboration of Universidad del Valle de Guatemala and Stanford University, following years of research. The site is significant not only because of its age but also due to its architectural features—terraces, residential structures, and evidence of early urban planning—which help deepen our understanding of settlement processes in the Guatemalan highlands.

Additionally, it is a noteworthy example of community archaeology, where a strong connection is fostered between the community and the archaeological team. Today, the town's buildings, including homes and streets, are located around the archaeological site, with some even built on top of ancient Maya structures. The project has benefited the Semetabaj community not only through heritage preservation but also through educational activities, temporary local employment,

participatory workshops, and the strengthening of local identity and historical belonging.

From the Colonial Era to the Present

During the colonial period, the majority of the population was Kaqchikel Maya. Records from 1689 describe the town as dependent on the Panajachel convent, with a population of 297 Indigenous people and 18 Ladinos (Alvarado Galindo et al., 2014). As a town that served as a bridge between regions, its economic wellbeing depended on the use of animals for transporting goods to Antigua, the South Coast, and the Western Highlands. The town has long been shaped by the religious syncretism that emerged after colonization. It did not fully adopt assimilationist policies, which is why its traditions remain very much alive. San Andrés Semetabaj has preserved not only its traditional *cofradías* but also its indigenous medical knowledge systems, which do not stem from biomedicine (Alvarado Galindo et al., 2014).

For example, *El Shutío* is an iconic figure during Holy Week in San Andrés Semetabaj, Sololá, and is a core part of the town's cultural traditions. The character wears a head wrap, a carved wooden mask, and a worn-out coat, torn from the many beatings received during the celebration. He carries the scent of alcohol and tobacco, symbols of his mischievous, irreverent, and popular nature. According to a local *cofrade*, the tradition of beatings by *El Shutío* dates back more than 125 years. It is believed that anyone who “fights” or receives beatings from this character for seven consecutive years will have a wish granted—though many people participate simply to keep the tradition alive (Say, 2023). During the celebration, townspeople offer gifts, prayers, or requests to *El Shutío*, treating him almost as a sacred or spiritual intermediary. This deeply symbolic and community-rooted tradition reflects the syncretic richness of Semetabaj's cultural expressions, where festivity, ritual, and communal identity intertwine.

The Civil War and Its Impact

The town's ethnic makeup made it particularly vulnerable during the Internal Armed Conflict, which devastated its economy and infrastructure and forced many to migrate. Many people disappeared or were harmed during the most violent years of the war. All municipal records were burned, and much of the data that could have supported the recovery of historical memory was lost, making it impossible to quantify the number of victims.

What remains evident is the war's lasting impact, which has created new forms of structural inequality—especially for young people who, due to socioeconomic hardship, have been forced to join the labor market as early as age 14. In the absence of meaningful state support, levels of extreme structural poverty continue to grow, as shown in **Figure 1**. Currently, around 89% of the population lives under this poverty threshold.

Figure 1. Source: Author's own elaboration (2025)

In San Andrés Semetabaj (SAS), the distribution of educational institutions by level and type—as seen in the 2024 data (**Figure 2**) and the trend from 2015 to 2024 (**Figure 3**)—reveals both strengths and challenges. At the primary level, there are 18 bilingual schools and only 2 monolingual ones, supporting culturally relevant education for Maya-speaking students. In pre-primary education, 14 institutions are bilingual and 8 are monolingual, providing a strong foundation in bilingual education.

However, at the lower secondary level, only 2 of the 9 schools are bilingual. At the upper secondary level, only 1 out of 3 schools is

bilingual, limiting access to education in Indigenous languages at higher levels. These schools are centralized in the main town or larger villages, often requiring transportation for students from remote hamlets—an essential aspect to improve access to education.

Figure 2. *Source: Author's own elaboration (2025)*

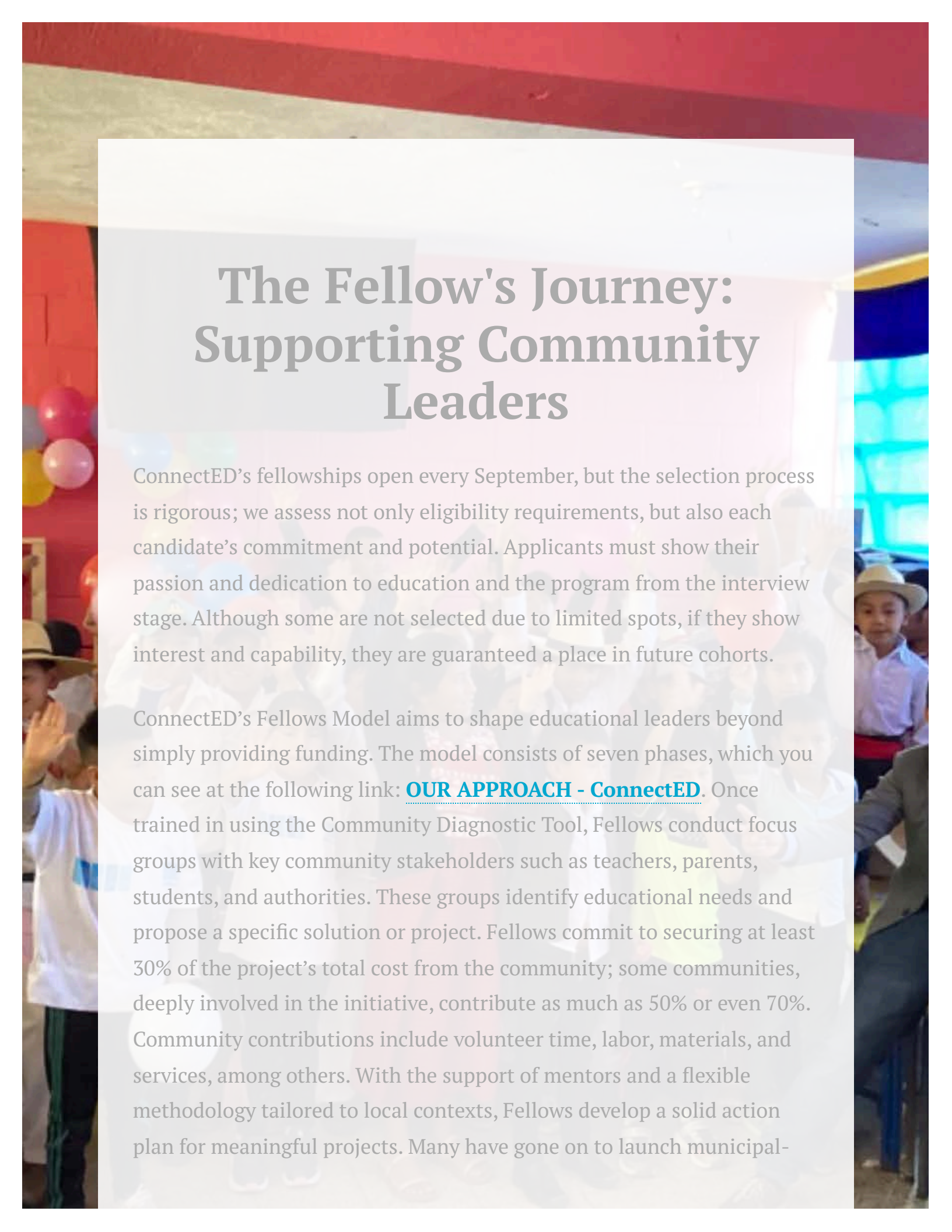
Figure 3. *Source: Author's own elaboration (2025)*

How Do We Connect?

The desire to meet the needs of rural Guatemalan areas became the main goal in 2019, guiding efforts to connect with community leaders and select them with the support of partner organizations. Despite initial intentions to include educational leaders not directly working in schools in the first cohort of Fellows, it became evident that school involvement was necessary to strengthen ties with the educational community.

ConnectED's focus is not necessarily geographical. Fellow candidates are nominated by organizations or institutions that know them in their community context. As more partnerships are formed, the program expands to new departments. This network of connections has allowed former Fellows to nominate new ones, strengthening and expanding the program's reach.

Figure 4. Source: Author's own elaboration (2025)

The background of the page is a photograph of a group of young children in a classroom. They are wearing white shirts and some are wearing hats. The room has red walls and colorful balloons. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box in the center.

The Fellow's Journey: Supporting Community Leaders

ConnectED's fellowships open every September, but the selection process is rigorous; we assess not only eligibility requirements, but also each candidate's commitment and potential. Applicants must show their passion and dedication to education and the program from the interview stage. Although some are not selected due to limited spots, if they show interest and capability, they are guaranteed a place in future cohorts.

ConnectED's Fellows Model aims to shape educational leaders beyond simply providing funding. The model consists of seven phases, which you can see at the following link: [OUR APPROACH - ConnectED](#). Once trained in using the Community Diagnostic Tool, Fellows conduct focus groups with key community stakeholders such as teachers, parents, students, and authorities. These groups identify educational needs and propose a specific solution or project. Fellows commit to securing at least 30% of the project's total cost from the community; some communities, deeply involved in the initiative, contribute as much as 50% or even 70%. Community contributions include volunteer time, labor, materials, and services, among others. With the support of mentors and a flexible methodology tailored to local contexts, Fellows develop a solid action plan for meaningful projects. Many have gone on to launch municipal-

level initiatives, proving that ConnectED is a platform for the growth of both leaders and their communities.

The Value of Community Leadership

The leadership fostered by ConnectED has a profound and lasting impact on the communities it serves. Fellows not only implement relevant educational projects but also become role models and agents of social change. Their dedication inspires other community members to engage in education and work together for a better future.

Community leadership is invaluable in transforming education in rural areas of Central America. ConnectED Fellows have had an impact on over 17,000 students in the communities they serve.



Weaving Networks: The Power of Collaboration

Fellows support each other across cohorts, with senior Fellows offering advice to newcomers. The connections formed among Fellows are key to developing stronger educational projects in their communities and strengthening relationships with local and institutional actors such as COCODES and municipalities. Many young Fellows have implemented high-impact projects that are recognized even by local community councils.

The ConnectED model is built on leveraging and strengthening pre-existing community networks in contexts like San Andrés Semetabaj, a region with a strong Kaqchikel identity and socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and limited access to educational resources.

Fellow 2025 illustrates how these networks of trust among local leaders laid the foundation for projects: “It was another principal. He said, ‘Ms. Favio, I want to nominate you. Because he’s seen everything we’ve been doing.’” This peer recognition allowed ConnectED to channel collective efforts toward shared goals. As ***Fellow 2025*** expressed:

“My idea when joining ConnectED was to strengthen, to make needs become reality. So that students can grow.”

The 70/30 model, which requires a minimum 30% community contribution toward the total project cost, encourages local agency and motivates participation. Communication plays a key role in aligning goals: “Through communication, we reach agreements, right? So that the goal is the same and we don’t lose focus, allowing the project to succeed.”

In some cases, municipalities contributed “almost 60% of the project,” showing how ConnectED’s initial support acts as a catalyst for additional resource mobilization.

Other Fellows reinforce this collaborative dynamic. **Fellow 2020–2021** explains how leaders share knowledge within the ConnectED network: “We were there sharing some experiences, right? [...] Like how to manage the project and share documents. Some files she needed to broaden her knowledge on nutrition.” This collaboration strengthens Fellows’ capacities and builds a network of collective and collaborative learning.

Fellow 2022 recalls being connected to ConnectED through a trust-based network: “What happened was that in 2021, I had a computer project with an institution in Santiago Atitlán. [...] And from there, one of their members recommended me to ConnectED.” This experience highlights how pre-existing networks are key to identifying community leaders.

Fellow 2023 emphasizes the impact of the 70/30 model and ConnectED’s training: “I think the most important thing is the support that has served as motivation to continue the work. [...] I give my share, but you can also continue supporting. I think the ultimate goal of ConnectED isn’t just to say, ‘Here’s a thousand dollars, that’s our contribution.’ No. What I feel it does is provide funding *and* the training to continue implementing. Whether it’s a strategic plan, project structure, logical framework, or diagnostic.” This approach not only ensures sustainability but also empowers communities to lead future projects.

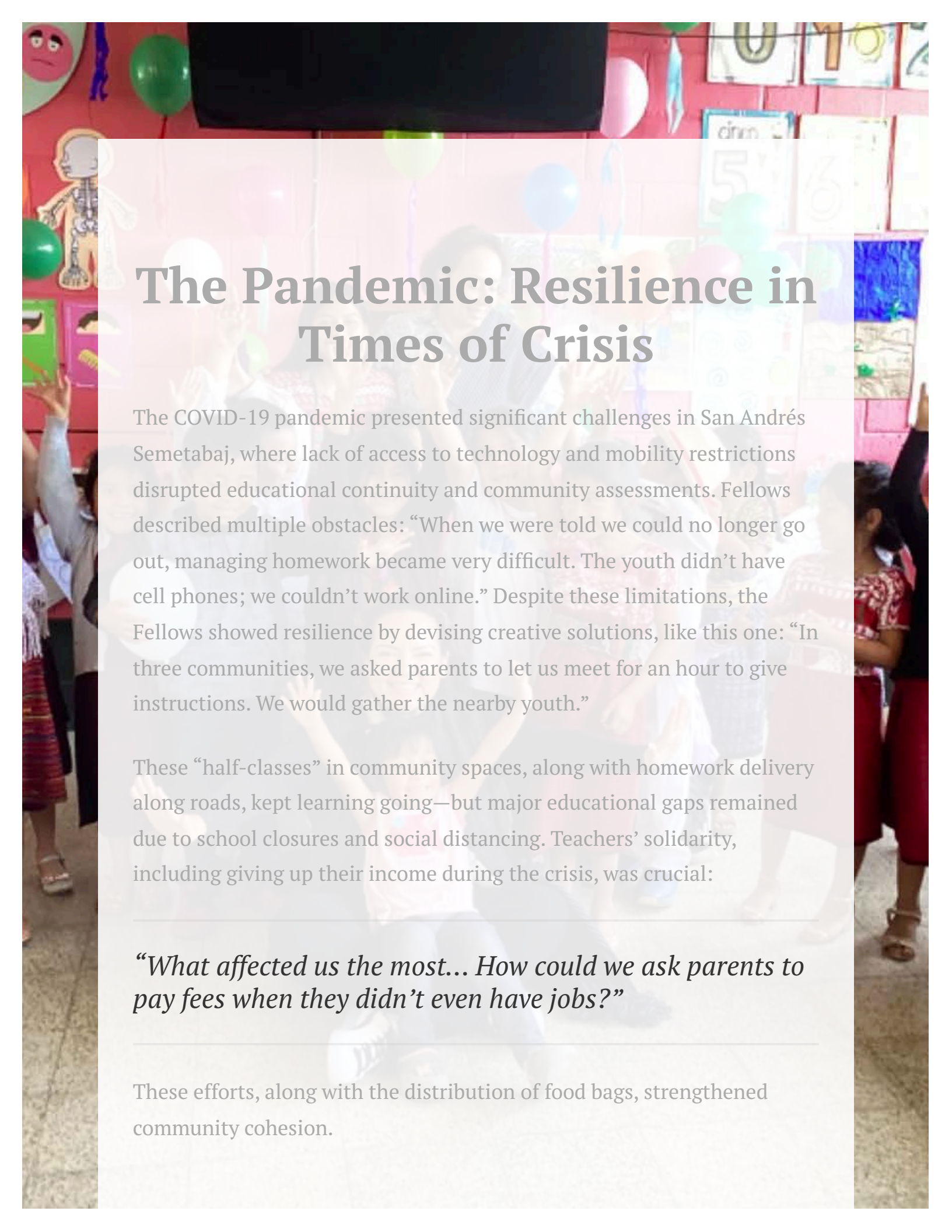
Fellow 2023 also highlights community contributions from parents, students, authorities, and even donors and external organizations: “Parents do help. [...] They participate in workdays, contribute unskilled labor, right? [...] Even if it’s just a cup of coffee and a piece of toast, they’re always there helping.”

Additionally, prior leadership among participants and nominees facilitates collaboration:

“I feel the leadership I already had with the women has been very important. That’s why the community is supporting my ConnectED project.”

Fellow 2025

Fellow 2025 adds: “Many school teachers are leaders, so they motivate the community to welcome new projects and commit to carrying them out.” These dynamics show how ConnectED builds on the social fabric—where community leadership and reciprocity are core values—to weave networks that transform schools into hubs of collective action, involving COCODES, municipalities, parents, and students in a joint effort for educational development.



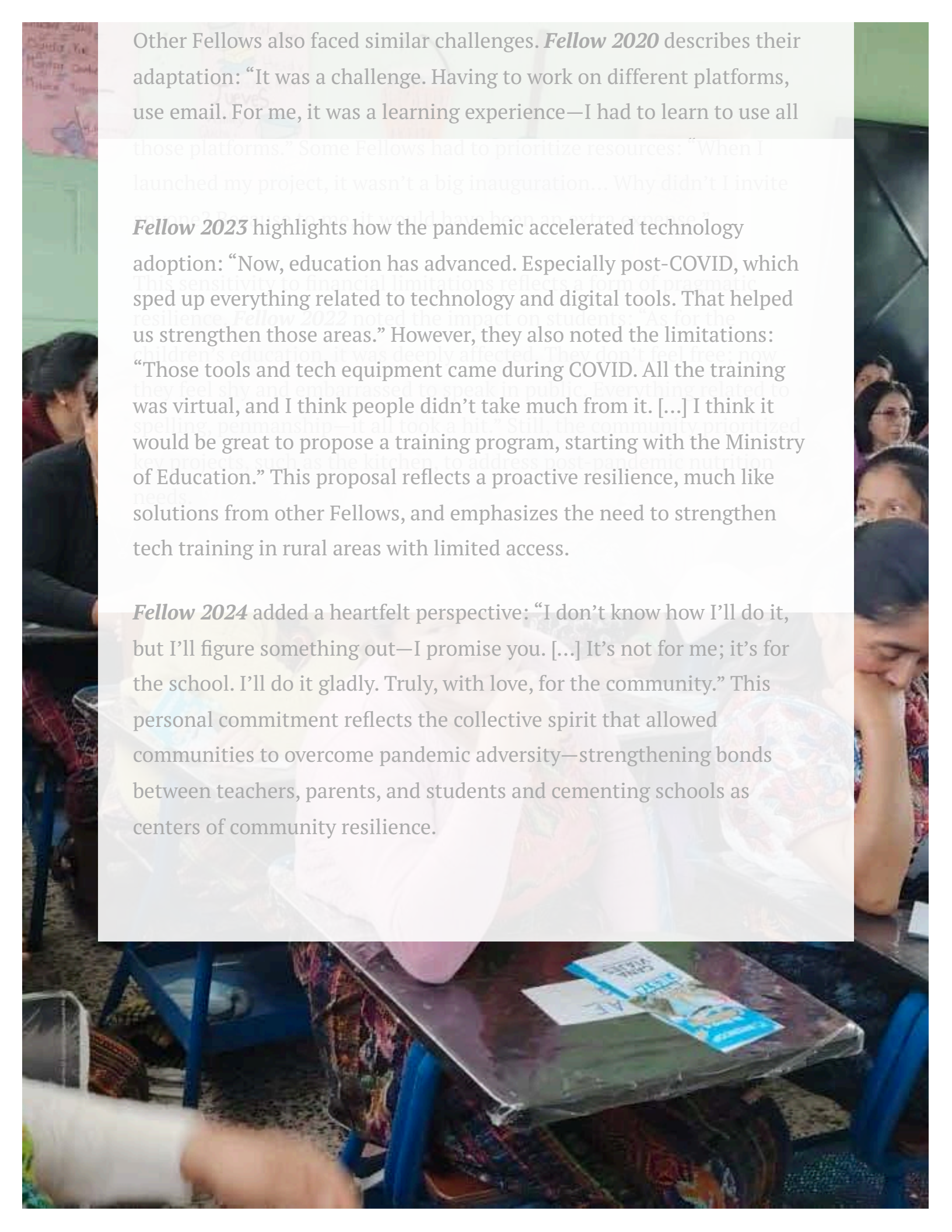
The Pandemic: Resilience in Times of Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges in San Andrés Semetabaj, where lack of access to technology and mobility restrictions disrupted educational continuity and community assessments. Fellows described multiple obstacles: “When we were told we could no longer go out, managing homework became very difficult. The youth didn’t have cell phones; we couldn’t work online.” Despite these limitations, the Fellows showed resilience by devising creative solutions, like this one: “In three communities, we asked parents to let us meet for an hour to give instructions. We would gather the nearby youth.”

These “half-classes” in community spaces, along with homework delivery along roads, kept learning going—but major educational gaps remained due to school closures and social distancing. Teachers’ solidarity, including giving up their income during the crisis, was crucial:

“What affected us the most... How could we ask parents to pay fees when they didn’t even have jobs?”

These efforts, along with the distribution of food bags, strengthened community cohesion.

The background image shows a classroom setting. In the foreground, there's a desk with a blue chair. A teacher, a woman with dark hair, is partially visible on the left, looking towards the students. Several students are seated at desks, some looking towards the camera and others looking down. The classroom has green walls and a bulletin board with various papers and drawings. The overall atmosphere is that of a typical school environment.

Other Fellows also faced similar challenges. **Fellow 2020** describes their adaptation: “It was a challenge. Having to work on different platforms, use email. For me, it was a learning experience—I had to learn to use all those platforms.” Some Fellows had to prioritize resources: “When I launched my project, it wasn’t a big inauguration... Why didn’t I invite

Fellow 2023 highlights how the pandemic accelerated technology adoption: “Now, education has advanced. Especially post-COVID, which sped up everything related to technology and digital tools. That helped us strengthen those areas.” However, they also noted the limitations: “Those tools and tech equipment came during COVID. All the training was virtual, and I think people didn’t take much from it. [...] I think it would be great to propose a training program, starting with the Ministry of Education.” This proposal reflects a proactive resilience, much like solutions from other Fellows, and emphasizes the need to strengthen tech training in rural areas with limited access.

Fellow 2024 added a heartfelt perspective: “I don’t know how I’ll do it, but I’ll figure something out—I promise you. [...] It’s not for me; it’s for the school. I’ll do it gladly. Truly, with love, for the community.” This personal commitment reflects the collective spirit that allowed communities to overcome pandemic adversity—strengthening bonds between teachers, parents, and students and cementing schools as centers of community resilience.

Lasting Impact: Transforming Communities

ConnectED's success lies in its structured yet flexible approach that combines community diagnostics, continuous monitoring, and adaptation to local contexts.

“ConnectED works because they follow through. Also, because they require your input. And they monitor... There's continuity, there's evaluation.”

This model ensures project completion and empowers Fellows to develop new initiatives, like expanding classrooms in some schools: “If another opportunity came up, we'd go for the classrooms, to expand them more.” These projects have transformed community dynamics: “The youth are excited... we've held fundraisers, we've united more to make the project happen.”

Fellow 2023 noted the transformative impact: “Well, changes in the students—I'd summarize it like this. One, having a more attractive classroom, you could say. More motivating, because now it has tools, right? And I think the learning too... The learning became more interesting because of having tools that allow them to study and interact with new materials.” This student enthusiasm is echoed by other Fellows.

Fellow 2025 emphasized ConnectED's motivational role: “ConnectED was the motivation, the pillar that pushed us to dream.” **Fellow 2022** illustrated the participatory process: “We did it through focus groups. We

held meetings with parents. [...] From there, we prioritized the project—and what was most urgent was that.” The resulting kitchen created collective pride and sparked children’s interest in specific careers: “I have photos of us making tostadas with the kids. [...] They made their chef hats and aprons.”

Fellow 2025 highlighted the role of ConnectED’s reputation: “There was a big advantage because the municipality already knew ConnectED. [...] Then the mayor said, ‘Oh, great! We already know how they work—we’re ready to support them.’” This reputation enables future collaborations and solidifies ConnectED’s lasting impact.

Fellow 2024 added: “The community contributes in every situation, every upcoming project. We’ve held raffles, cultural events. Everything is focused on reaching the goals.” These efforts show how ConnectED fosters a sense of collective ownership, turning schools into spaces of cultural and educational innovation.



Looking Ahead: Expanding the Legacy

The ConnectED Fellows do not see themselves as individual agents, but rather as facilitators of a broader community vision that transcends the educational sphere and turns schools into community hubs. “We’ve become more united, that’s the word. All together.” The projects have sparked enthusiasm and inspired future growth: “We have the vision. We’re already promoting that we have our own computer lab. They’ll say, ‘Oh great, now they have computers, so my child can go there.’” This impact extends to collaboration with COCODES and municipalities, strengthening social cohesion in a context where reciprocity is a fundamental Kaqchikel value.

Fellow 2025 highlights how ConnectED opened doors: “The mayor decided to take it on as a community project, and he also asked me to present another proposal specifically in education.” This reflects the potential of the projects to inspire future initiatives. **Fellow 2020** adds, “You know, I’m coordinating this with some Americans. [...] This has allowed me to open more spaces and improve communication, or seek other means to develop projects.” This expansion of international networks amplifies ConnectED’s legacy.

Fellow 2022 offers a broader vision for where ConnectED could expand its support: “I would like ConnectED, if they’re willing, not only to help in education. But also to help groups that help. [...] Here in San Andrés, there’s a group that supports youth dealing with drugs and alcoholism.” This idea of addressing social issues such as addiction and supporting single mothers reflects a legacy that goes beyond education. **Fellow 2022**

also suggests, “And for schools that already have a project with ConnectED, there should be orientation, visits, something like that. So that they never lose contact with the institution,” emphasizing sustainability. **Fellow 2024** reinforces the role of schools as community centers: “Here in the community, the only place available to read a book or look something up is the school.” This approach transforms schools into nodes of holistic development, supporting the vision of wide-reaching impact.

Cultural identity also plays a central role: “With the ConnectED trainings, they also aim to strengthen the cultural aspect. [...] So that the kids can feel proud of being part of their community, their language, their way of being.” This emphasis on identity ensures that the projects are culturally relevant, strengthening ConnectED’s legacy as a catalyst for sustainable change in San Andrés Semetabaj and beyond.



Photo by ConnectED

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of ConnectED's impact across 11 rural communities, as observed in this case study, key learnings emerge that demonstrate how local leadership and community participation can drive meaningful transformation in education and the social fabric. The following are the main conclusions from this experience:

1. Educational transformation driven by local leadership

The ConnectED Fellows Model fosters the development and strengthening of educational leaders (Fellows) who, along with their communities, design and implement culturally relevant projects aligned with local priorities. This strategy promotes a sense of belonging, sustainability, and ownership of educational initiatives.

2. Perceived improvements in educational processes

According to Fellows' testimonies, there have been noticeable improvements in student motivation and participation, as well as in the teaching and practice of Indigenous languages like Kaqchikel. These experiences reflect a growing community commitment to intercultural and contextualized education.

3. Strengthening of the social and community fabric

Collaborative efforts among teachers, principals, families, and local authorities have reinforced social cohesion and created support networks that ensure the continuity and future growth of the projects. The Fellows community enables the exchange of best practices and joint innovation.

4. Adaptability and scalability potential of the model

ConnectED's adaptability has allowed for its expansion to new rural

areas, using a methodology that combines continuous training, mentorship, community co-financing, technology integration, and inter-institutional partnerships, thereby strengthening sustainable local management.

5. A model for sustainable development

The case study shows that local leadership and participation are key to advancing relevant, inclusive, and sustainable rural education. The ConnectED Fellows Model can serve as a reference point for addressing educational inequalities and as inspiration for other Latin American contexts.

6. Transformative impact on the community

Beyond academic achievements, the model brings about positive transformations at the community level. Ownership of the projects fosters active involvement from families, local leaders, and social actors, aligning efforts around educational and community goals. Additionally, Fellows have started to lead initiatives beyond education, launching projects that respond to local priorities. This comprehensive approach has a multiplying effect, enabling the expansion of new initiatives and promoting autonomy, resilience, and sustainable development in rural areas.

Notes

General notes

This product was designed, visualized, and written by the Population Council Guatemala team, with input and feedback from the ConnectED team, as part of the project *Recovering Education in Central America: Activating Networks and Associated Groups (RECARGA)*.

The images presented were taken from ConnectED's social media, shared by their team, or photographed by the Population Council Guatemala team. In external cases, the source was cited.

Methodological Notes

This study uses a case study approach, a qualitative method that enables in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context. It focuses on evaluating the impact of ConnectED, an organization committed to improving education and strengthening local leadership in rural communities.

While ConnectED Fellows are currently active in 68 rural schools across nine departments in Guatemala, this study centers on the 11 Fellows working in the Municipality of San Andrés Semetabaj. This municipality was selected because it has hosted Fellows in every cohort from 2020 to 2025 and reflects a diverse mix of men, women, and communities from both the town center and surrounding areas, making it an ideal setting to assess the organization's long-term impact.

Data was collected through 11 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviewer took detailed notes during the conversations, which were guided by four thematic blocks: (1)

Fellows' personal background and identity, (2) their motivations and initial ideas when joining ConnectED, (3) the ideas, challenges, and opportunities that arose as they carried out their projects, and (4) reflections on the influence of their work in the community, including relations with the municipality and mayor, and their vision for ConnectED's future in the region.

The analysis was developed through discussions among Population Council researchers, who collaboratively structured and refined the thematic framework to ensure a comprehensive understanding of ConnectED's role in promoting community-driven educational change.

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