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Planting The Seeds Of Literacy

—Andrew Williams

For Satou Mambure, as for most other women farmers in the Gambia, each day during the rainy season is a long one. She gets up before her family, pounds the rice for breakfast and lunch, does all the housework, and fetches food and water before leaving in the late morning for the distant rice fields. Working alone on the family's four small plots,she plants weeds and ploughs by hand until it is almost dark.

Despite her tiring pace, each evening after work Satou joins the other villagers for outdoor classes which are part of a national literacy campaign in this tiny West African country. Like the rest of the adults; Satou brings her own chair so she can sit under the makeshift roof. When Satou's turn comes to write her lesson on the blackborad, the volunteer instructor holds high the kerosene lamp that provides the only light. By the time class is over and Satou finally returns home, it has been a long, hard day.

Recently, Satou told Stephen Yip, a staff member with the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE), why she decided to find time for the literacy class. "When my eldest daughter started school, I was embarrassed", she explained. "I didn't want her to lose respect for me because she had become literate, but I was still unable to read and write".

Already, Satou can read fairly well in her native language, Mandinka—but she says her writings still needs to improve. She finds that as her abilities grow, so does her confidence. No longer is she made to waity by the nurses at the Health Centre, who were impatient when Satou could not read her name on the record cards. Now she is proud that she can read the cards and the simple health instructions at the clinic as well. She feels that the health workers treat her with more respect now that she has more knowledge.

Thousands of other men and women are experiencing the changes Satou describes because of a functional Literacy Programme started by the Gambian government's Non-Formal Education Centre in 1981. The literacy programme grew out of a national development plan designed to help this small, densely populated country recover from the effects of the 15-year drought that devastated the agriculture of Africa's Sahel region in the 1970s.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, but attempts to diversify crops and increase production faltered. Planners discovered that with over 80 per cent of the people unable to read and write, farmers could not learn new agricultural skills and techniques. At this point the Gambian government, like others in Africa, realized it must bring education to the rural villagers if development was to take place.

With assistance from CODE, CIDA and UNESCO, a four-year plan to reach 8,000 adults was launched. Demand was so overwhelming that the Centre had to change to a mass-campaign approach and raise its target to 40,000–80,000 graduates, or roughly 10 per cent of the country's population.

Although English is the Gambia's official language, literacy instruction takes place in the three indigenous tongues—Mandinka, Wolof and Pulaar. The programme enlists unemployed school-leavers, helath workers, agricultural extension workers, and local craftsmen to help provide skills as well as literacy training to the adult participants. Literacy materials are produced in writers' workshops funded by CODE, published by the Non-Formal Education Centre, and distributed to the rural classes. This non-formal approach makes the classes more effective by linking adult literacy to information on agriculture, health, cooperatives, family planning, small businesses and rural technology. Graduates retain their newly-acquired literacy better when the reading material is on topics of interest to them, and when their new skills are built into income-generating projects. For instance, the literacy classes have given Satou an important alternative to relying on her small plots and the undependable rains for her family's rice. During the non-farming season, she joins women from the class to learn about tie- dying and sewing. Locally produced cloth is much in demand in the markets of Banjul, the capital, and the money Satou earns from selling cloth will help buy rice, if the rains fail.

The men who attend the literacy classes in Pakalinding, Satou's village, also benefit. "Before, I could not read the numbers on cars and transport trucks", says Silla Manneh, a mason. "I had to sign my pay slip with my thumbprint. Now when I go to the bank I know whether the figures in my bank book are right or wrong. During the trading season, I make sure my groundnuts are weighed properly, so now I am never cheated".

Ability to read, write and do simple calculations has helped Silla, like many other graduates, feel less vulnerable, more in control. When you have to rely on the literacy and numeracy skills of others, how can you be sure you can trust them ?

Many other African countries have undertaken campaigns which emphasize "functional" literacy and non-formal methods of instruction, because they recognize the important role literacy can play in the development of their economies, and because traditional schooling has proved costly and ineffective. In Ethiopia, Mali and Zimbabwe, adult litercy campaigns are an intergral part of national reconstruction after the long years of drought. In Mali, for instance, CODE is supporting literacy and management training for members of co-ops in the drought-stricken northern regions as part of an effort to upgrade the cooperative movement. By increasing the experties of the co-ops, the government hopes to make them a vehicle of recovery.

Satou is proud that with her new knowledge, she can now do certain jobs at the hospital. Being able to count and do simple arithmetic means that she can make change. This in turn means, as she told Stephen confidently, that now she could even get a job as a cashier.

Like most people, Satou is ambitious for her family and herself. Her newly-acquired literacy is just a beginning. Next she hopes to improve her skills in tie-dying and get equipment to expand her production of cloth, so she can earn more moeny to look after her family.

Satou's story shows clearly the ripple effect of providing adults—particularly women—in the Third World with access to readily available, relevant education. Educated women have fewer and healthier children. They encourage their children to become educated—and, as in Satou's case, improving women's employment opportunities means a brighter future for the many families that depend on the mother's income.