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Senegal Upgrades Its Koranic Schools

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AFTER 10 years at the Koranic school in Malika, a half-hour drive north of Dakar, Senegal, 19-year-old Sidy Diarra is proud of his accomplishments and enthusiastic about his dream of opening a chicken farm.

"I have learned so much here : agriculture, poultry farming and carpentry, and I can write in Arabic, Wolof and French," says Mr Diarra, adding, "In Malika I have also learned to get along with everybody."

Here, as customary in a Koranic school, or 'daara, which educates boys and girls up to 18 years old, the priority lessons for the talibes, or students, are Arabic and the Koran. However, the well-tended garden, the hen house, the wood shop and the art room show that this daara has greater ambitions than most. In addition to giving students nutritious food and clean lodgings, the school teaches them reading and writing in French and Wolof, the national language, as well as other subjects that will help them continue their education and find jobs. Some of its students have gone on to formal high schools and college; others have opened businesses.

The daara in Malika stands out among Senegal's Koranic schools. With 70 resident male students as young as 5 and 32 female day students, the school was created 14 years ago by a group of women who were distressed by the poor conditions of most daaras. Determined to improve the lives of talibes, they began a fund-raising campaign. They won approval from the President of Senegal for their efforts.

Not all daaras can promise their students an education equal to Malika's. Bargny is a small town an hour east of Dakar. Twenty young talibes from 5 to 14 years old live in the daara, sleeping on the dirt floor of a small room. They have no sheets or blankets, and they study in a roofless room under a scorching sun. Their only water comes from a stagnant pond surrounded by garbage.

Their teacher, or marabout, is just back from a 20-day trip. During his absence, his students were left without supervision, and one died of malaria. The neighbours are now caring for the children.

Talibes are a fixture of life in Senegal, where 40 per cent of students go to Koranic schools. Before colonization, these schools taught the traditionally oral population how to read and write in Arabic. Koranic schools were supported by local communities, which paid the instructors and gave good to students. To receive their rations, students went from hosue to house reciting the Koran. Their public recitation of the holy text gave families an opportunity to judge the quality of their children's studies.

But first colonization, then urbanization and today the economic crisis have changed the social contract. During the dry season, more and more marabouts take students from their villages to live in the city, where the teachers can make a better living by selling talismans and sending the boys out to beg.

Nine out of 10 talibes, whose average age is 10 come from rural areas, and 85 per cent are from the poorest families. In the city, their conditions are usually appalling. Malaria, gastroenteritis, conjuctivitis and scabies are widespread. They also frequently fall prey to street accidents. Thirst and hunger are ever-present.

There are 50,000 to 100,000 beggar talibes in Senegal. They cluster near every traffic light in the cities — little boys dressed in filthy rags to inspire pity and teach them humility, a large tomato-paste can strapped to their shoulder for collecting the sugar, rice or coins for which they beg for up to 10 hours a day. Most receive a minimal Koranic education.

Many talibes brought up in the street began to beg as soon as they could walk. Others were left by their parents in the care of a marabout and had to beg for food and many to pay for their education.

Now, though, the effort begun by the concerned women of Malika is having wide-reaching effects. In 1992, UNICEF and the Government of Senegal launched a five-year programme to improve the living conditions and instruction of these young students. Called Rehabilitation of the Rights of the Talibes, it has targeted 30,000 children — about a third to a half of all talibes who are in especially difficult cirumstances. UNICEF has provided close to US$ 1 million and has earmarked an additional $1.4 million for 1995 for the programme, which also relies on the participation of the Senegalese Ministry of Health as well as grassroots groups and NGOs.

The first of its kind in Senegal, the programme aims to make the daaras an integral part of their communities so the residents have a stake in the school's success. It focuses on restoring the talibes' basic rights, providing them with better food and lodging as well as access to clean water and educational opportunities.

In the long run, it will help change the harmful attitudes of the marabouts and parents, stem the talibes' migration to cities, keep children with their families and increase the self-financing of the daaras. The project has, for example, provided funds to women to invest in income-generating activities that will support the daaras.

"The women are the most involved the most active," says Mamadou Wane, who directs UNICEF's efforts on behalf of children in especially difficult cirumstances in Senegal. "The villages the migrant talibes come from have been targeted by the programme, and 40 community daaras have already been opened. They are supervised by local committees."

The programme is beginning to pay off. In the huge daara in Coki, for example, 2,690 talibes now have regular access to clean water. In the daara of Medina-Baye, each student receives 300 grams of rice a day — and no one has to beg for it. Throughout Senegal, more than 6,000 talibes have gained free access to health centres and 45 have been trained as health assistants.

Local participation is crucial. The rehabilitation programme, which is being closely studied by neighbouring Mali, will end in 1996. It may be renewed for another five years, but eventually the future of the 'community daaras' will be in the villagers' hands.

It take further economic development and better rural schooling to eradicate the 'migrant talibe' problem, but Ndioro Ndiaye, Senegal's Minister of Women, Children and Family, already sees a change in society. "The community is reacting positively," she says. "I see fewer and fewer people giving seven sugar cubes to the talibes as their daily absolution. They are starting to understand that they have to give something more important, something that is really useful."

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— UNICEF Feature