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Community Participation

Their Village, Their School, Their Teacher

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Mali's village schools bank on the wholehearted commitment of the communities involved from building the classrooms to paying the teachers and ensuring their children's attendance.

GUARANTEEING a democratic way of life, says Alpha Oumar Konare, Mali's first democratically-elected president, "means improving and expanding basic education."

The figures in Mali, one of the world's poorest countries, are grim. Although a quarter of the national budget is spent on education, the illiteracy rate is nearly 70 per cent, less than a fifth of school-age children go to school and of those who do, more than four-fifths dropout of primary school and only 30 per cent of those who make it to secondary school manage to graduate.

And even after all this, and despite the best efforts of children and parents, the choice is often just between unemployment or moving to the town. What's needed says a government document, is "to look into new ways to educate, and especially non-formal education." Things are already moving that way.

When the US section of Save the Children started a development project in 1987 in the Kolondieba District (9,000 sq kms, 140,000 people 140 villages), it quickly ran into a big problem. The high illiteracy rate meant the population couldn't make the best use of the things being done to improve water resources, farming, health or banking. The role of schols, even over the long term, was limited by an average attendance rate of only 14 per cent.

Save the Childen chose to back the traditional methods, but quickly saw they were inadequate and far to slow for the urgent needs waiting to be met. So, using new methods pioneered in Bangladesh, it was figured there was an unfulfilled demand for education, that villages were ready to take responsibility for most of it and that they had the means to do so.

Discussion showed five villages were ready to go. Each would build its own village school and Save The Children would supply building materials and equipment at a thirteith of the price the government would have charged. They would send their children to the school — girls as well as boys — and pay a small tuition fee. They would pick a literate villager to be trained as a teacher and collect enough money to pay her or him. Save The Children would provide what the village couldn't — training for the teacher, suitable school books and general supervision.

At the beginning, each school offered a three-year course (since extended to six years) for two classes of 30 children each. School lasts two or three hours a day, six days a week and six and a half months a year, arranged around the farming calendar. One of the classes is for six to 10-year-old, some of whom can then go on to a traditional school. The other is for children from 11 to 15 who will mostly stay on in the village to work. The school is run by a school board made up of village officials, parents of pupils and at least one literate person.

The results have been good. At the end of the first year, 87 per cent of pupils knew their ABCs, could do sums and were ready to move up to the next class.

"The childen have changed," says one mother. "They keep themselves clean and they've rediscovered old-fashioned politeness. They ask you for money to buy exercise books and pencils, not sweets. The village school has revived traditional education."

This is probably one of the reasons why villages think of these schools — because they respond to real needs — as being very much their own, to the point that they're envied by neighbouring villages. Twenty-two schools were set up in 1993-1994 and about 50 more are planned for the next school year. A Save the Children official predicts that by the year 2000, each village in Kolondieba will have its own school.

A Clear Commitment : This success got the ministry of basic education thinking. It began to adopt the same process of negotiation with the community with the same goals — a clear commitment by villagers to pay a teacher's salary, build the school and then run it. The first 20 educational centres for development were opened in 1993-94 in the Koulikoro region. They target children from 9-15 who are either dropouts or who've never been to school and offer them three years of schooling in basic subjects and French, as well as training in fields related to local needs.

The teachers are drawn from the local population and have eight years of formal education themselves. There are also young graduates without a job and retired teachers or officials. Despite the improvements still needed, mainly in teacher training, the unbalanced girl-boy ratio the age limit for pupils and the working of the school boards, the ministry wants to open 200 such schools.

Is this education on the cheap ? Or is it the opposite — giving a minimum of education to those who have no hope of any ? Only an in-depth enquiry can decide. But it shouldn't stop at just education. Changing mentalities is very important too. As one teacher says : "The trust we are given is both an honour and a burden. You have to do really well to deserve it. Failure isn't allowed."

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